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CARLOS FUENTES AND THE MODERNITY OF THE BAROQUE: A READING OF HIS ESSAYS

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Comme le Mexique veut à tout prix devenir «moderne», il a parfois tendance à rejeter ou à refuser son passé baroque. Et là, dans ce livre [*Terra Nostra*], il y avait un rappel non seulement de notre «nature» baroque, mais surtout du fait que le baroque est le signe culturel de notre naissance [...] (Fuentes quoted in Scarpetta 1990: 186)

1. Introduction

When dealing with the fundamental and foundational question of Modernity, it is important to avoid two kinds of reductionism: one that situates Modernity at the beginning of the eighteenth century and that confuses Modernity with Enlightenment and with a Eurocentric point of view, and, secondly, one that equates Modernity with a “master narrative”—whether positive or negative —, and reduces it to a homogeneous, continuous, and univocal process. Well-known advocates of these “metanarratives” of Modernity are, for instance, Jürgen Habermas (Modernity as the promise of emancipation) or the neo-Marxist Frankfurt School (Modernity as the outcome of instrumental reason). It seems therefore essential to nuance both stances: on the one hand, it is unmistakably worthwhile to retrace the emergence of Modernity in its cultural, political, and economic dimensions, but it would be a hopeless task to pinpoint the transition between the pre-modern and the modern since they appear as superposed, juxtaposed, or even contradictory discourses and practices. Furthermore, the almost exclusive focus on the dominant, colonizing center with its enlightened projects and universalizing claims deliberately ignores those alternative experiences and narratives that originated in the periphery of Europe’s Modernity.

On the other hand, it is necessary to recognize that Modernity is a complex, plural and dynamic phenomenon, which might be conceived of as a long-term historical structure whose development and depth differ from one context to another.

Both in his novels and essays, Carlos Fuentes has repeatedly explored the question of Modernity, foregrounding specific Latin American or Mexican experiences. The relation between Fuentes and Modernity has been the object of important books (Van Delden 1998) as well as of several articles (e.g. Phaf 1995, Williams 1996, Van Delden 2002). These studies have frequently laid bare a fundamental ambivalence with regard to the concept of Modernity in the work of Fuentes. Van Delden, for instance, has pointed out an unresolved tension between a sense of national identity and the construction of a democratic society, on the one hand, and the notion of Modernity, on the other, that is at the heart of Fuentes's vision. Van Delden argues that there is a fundamental tension between the discourse of national identity or self-determination as an integral part of Modernity, on the one hand, and the pre-modern, communal practices in which it is rooted, on the other. He sees Fuentes as a writer who is "engaged in the self-critique of an incomplete modernity" (1998: 144) and considers this to be a modernist trait.

In a more recent article (2002), Van Delden discerns in the discourse of Fuentes two faces of Modernity, which stem respectively from the Enlightenment and the Renaissance. This "double Modernity" can be divided into a homogenizing and rationalist Modernity, characterized by progress, capitalism, and a linear time conception; and an alternative tradition that claims values such as diversity, ambiguity, and multiplicity, and ultimately prefigures the postmodern moment. Whereas the "Enlightenment Modernity" (*la modernidad ilustrada*) is epitomized by Daniel Defoe's hero Robinson Crusoe (1719), the other face of Modernity can be traced back to Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* (1511) and Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605-1615). Even though Van Delden shows that Fuentes calls upon the work of Jean-François Lyotard on postmodernism in order to celebrate "la multiplicación de los multirrelatos del mundo policultural, más acá del dominio exclusivo de la *modernidad occidental*" ("the multiplication of 'multinarratives' coming from a multiracial and polycultural universe, beyond the exclusive dominion of *Western Modernity*"; Fuentes 1990: 25, quoted in Van Delden 2002: 84), he situates the origins of the "other Modernity" in Renaissance Europe, an epoch in which, according to Fuentes, a shift took place from the static and hierarchic order of the Middle Ages to a multidimensional, dynamic, and pluralist world.

In the same vein, Raymond Leslie Williams has observed in *The Writings of Carlos Fuentes* (1996) that Fuentes's fiction supports Octavio Paz's affirmation that the "Enlightenment Modernity" has never been able to take root in Latin America or in the metropolis. In his reading of *Terra Nostra* (1975), Williams insists on the importance of both medieval and Renaissance Spain for the construction of a modern Hispanic culture.¹ Although Fuentes has always

stressed the importance of the non-European Other for the decentered world vision of the Renaissance, his vision of the origins of the “alternative Modernity” remains profoundly Eurocentric according to the readings of Van Delden and Williams. In what follows, I will try to demonstrate that Fuentes has repeatedly referred to this “alternative Modernity” from a more outspoken Latin-American perspective, by claiming its Baroque roots. By doing so, he is able to go beyond the diagnosis of Latin America’s “deficient” or “belated” Modernity, which is still modeled on Europe’s historical trajectory (see Kaup 2007: 224). Fuentes instead claims the Baroque as a key component of this “alternative Modernity” that is historically rooted in Latin America. Moreover, this vindication of the Baroque is a crucial element in the author’s self-representation, since it enables him to rely on the illustrious literary tradition of the Spanish Golden Age in a (pan-)Hispanist discourse and to emphasize the Latin Americanness of the Baroque without having to renounce the Iberian heritage and the indebtedness towards European culture in general.²

2. *The Modernity of the Baroque*

Despite the author’s explicit and self-conscious identification with the Baroque, the relation between Fuentes and the Baroque has not been explored yet from this point of view. This is particularly striking since it appears as an intriguing case in the debate on Modernity. On the one hand, in contemporary historiography and philosophy, the resurgence of the Baroque is invariably presented as interconnected to the critique of “Enlightenment Modernity” and instrumental reason. Traditionally, the Baroque has been regarded as a pre-modern, pre-Enlightenment aesthetic (e.g. Wölfflin 1888) or as a form that conjoins the contradictory impulses of the pre-modern and the modern (e.g. Maravall 1975). Since the 1980s, however, the return of the Baroque in contemporary culture has been connected to postmodern tendencies (e.g. Calabrese 1987; Ndaliansis 2004). Some theoreticians have drawn an explicit parallel between the birth and the crisis of Modernity, mostly disregarding the historicity of the term “Baroque” or “Neobaroque.” A previous study of this topic in Fuentes’s narrative work (Dhondt 2012) has demonstrated that Baroque and Modernity are rather compatible terms in his discourse, which might be related to Fuentes’s ambivalent relationship to Modernity altogether. In novels such as *Constancia y otras novelas para vírgenes* (1989), Fuentes’s position is comparable to the conception of the German philosopher Walter Benjamin, who argues that Modernity does not emanate from the *Aufklärung*, but from the Baroque, or to the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, who sees the Baroque as a liberating, “minor” undercurrent of Modernity’s majoritarian thought. Instead of discerning a chronological succession, these theories have rather tried to articulate Modernity and the Baroque on the same synchronic plane.

At this point, it may be useful to recall Walter Moser's basic distinction between two meanings of Modernity: first, a *utopian* Modernity, based on an optimistic vision of history and mankind, that culminates in the Enlightenment and is opposed to the Baroque;³ and, secondly, a *melancholic* Modernity, which does not look into the future like its utopian counterpart, but is unable to overcome the loss of a (transcendent) totality that is situated in a remote past instead of projected into the future. This second meaning of Modernity has been extensively explored by Benjamin, who argues in works such as *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (1928) that the Baroque is not opposed to Modernity but rather an integral part of it. To a certain extent, Moser's distinction corresponds to the traditional division of the initial phase of European Modernity into a resplendent Renaissance and a decadent Baroque. Yet this distinction fits in an exclusively European classification that does not take into account the peculiarity of the Hispanic world. In particular, it cannot explain why some of the masterworks of Hispanic culture arose in an epoch of decadence and imperial decline, or why Latin American artists self-consciously and ironically engage Baroque devices. In this sense, the case of Carlos Fuentes offers a corrective to this dichotomous model since it relies on a more utopian conception of Modernity that roots itself in the Baroque.

3. *Modernity and Baroque in the Essays of Fuentes*

In his seminal essay *La nueva novela hispanoamericana* (1969), Fuentes presents the Counterreformation as a reactionary movement that prevented Modernity from taking root in Spain and its colonies, explaining thus the survival of pre-modern tendencies in the Hispanic world.⁴ It is most revealing that he does not adopt the widespread conception of the Baroque as the dogmatic "art of the Counter-Reformation" or a propagandistic instrument in support of the absolute monarchy (see in this respect the studies undertaken respectively by Weisbach in 1921, and Maravall in 1975). On the contrary, Fuentes identifies the Baroque in later texts as a liberating aesthetic, as an exception to the rigidity of the religious or political system that considers itself immutable and everlasting. For Fuentes, ambiguity, paradox, and indeterminacy are all hallmarks of the "nueva novela," as well as of the Baroque: both convey multilayered meanings and call into question supposedly incontrovertible truths. Or as he once stated in a conference that was later published in the Mexican magazine *Siempre!*: "Somos barrocos porque carecemos de verdades seguras" (1965: VI).

Around the same time, Fuentes argues in his 1969 essay "El mundo de José Luis Cuevas" (reprinted as "La violenta identidad de José Luis Cuevas" in *Casa con dos puertas*, 1970) that only the Baroque is genuinely Latin American since it was the first style to be imported in the continent. Confronted with the lack of Gothic or Classical art forms, the modern Latin American artist is induced

to recuperate “foundational” forms of the early modern period, after having rejected every common origin with the Metropolis throughout the nineteenth century, in the decades immediately following the wars of independence. The peculiarity of the Latin American Baroque resides for Fuentes in the junction of past and future, in line with his understanding of the simultaneity of Mexican times. The Baroque enables him to discover Mexico’s Modernity without having to dismiss the tradition. Therefore he urges his fellow Latin American writers to be simultaneously modern and Baroque. Furthermore, Fuentes considers the work of the modern Baroque artists truly “authentic” as well as “universal” since it prefigures the European culture to come. In the end, Europe will become as Baroque as Latin America. The two continents have not only a shared legacy but also a common destiny:

Las normas clásicas de la cultura pasada se convierten, de este modo, en las falsas exigencias de nuestra cultura presente. Pero como ni Leonardo, ni Rafael, ni Beethoven, ni Flaubert se van a repetir ni aquí ni en el país de Cocaña, nuestros sucedáneos apenas sirven para dorar un poco el sentimiento de las insuficiencias. Sofocamos con esto la verdadera tradición latinoamericana, la que corresponde realmente a nuestra coincidencia: el barroco, idéntico a *nuestro espacio y a nuestro tiempo originales*. Nunca podemos ser, en pureza, ni clásicos ni románticos, y habría que haber sido lo primero para poder ser lo segundo. Pero *podemos ser; con plena autenticidad, barrocos modernos*. Con autenticidad y sin violencia: *la presencia de la nueva cultura universal es de signo barroco*. No hemos llegado a ser como Europa, pero Europa ha llegado a ser como nosotros. (1970: 273-274; italics mine)

In “Kierkegaard en la Zona Rosa,” an essay collected in the 1971 volume *Tiempo mexicano*, Fuentes affirms that the colonial period was an anachronism that prolonged the organic, feudal order of the Middle Ages and that denied the rationalism, individualism, and mercantilism associated with European Modernity (1971: 11). Fuentes seems to imply here that Latin America did not experience Modernity except as a foreign imported form. In later works, however, he underlines the subcontinent’s search for its own Modernity, which he commonly associates with the Baroque. His own choice for the Spanish language, which after the seventeenth century became a “language of mourning” and “sterility” (1987: 227), is also an attempt to recuperate the highly prestigious Spanish Baroque literature: “Where were the threads of my tradition, where could I, writing in mid-twentieth century Latin America, find the direct link to the great living presences I was then starting to read, my lost Cervantes, my old Quevedo, dead because he could not tolerate one more winter, my Góngora, abandoned in a gulf of loneliness?” (1987: 227-228)

In some of the more essayistic passages of *Terra Nostra* (see in particular 2003: 749-750), Fuentes clearly shows his indebtedness to Alejo Carpentier’s theory of the Baroque as a transhistorical and transcultural expressive form. This

is evidently the case of his prologues to a Venezuelan edition of Carpentier's *El Siglo de las Luces* (1979) and the English translation of *Baroque Concerto* (1991), where Fuentes stresses the importance of the *mestizo* identity for the understanding of the Baroque. In texts such as "Lo barroco y lo real maravilloso" (1975), Carpentier famously defined Latin American culture by the mixture of different styles and times: "[...] toda simbiosis, todo mestizaje, engendra un barroquismo" (1987: 112). Similarly, Fuentes sees the Baroque no longer as opposed to the Renaissance or to the classical like in European art history, but as an amalgamation of different styles originating from different cultural regions and traditions that integrate what he has called "Indo-Afro-Ibero-America." Therefore both authors consider the syncretic culture of the West Indies to be the cradle of the Baroque understood as a continental hybrid identity: "[...] el Caribe nace bajo el signo del barroco. [...] el barroco es el nombre de la fundación, el acta bautismal del continente" (1979: XI). The perspective of both authors is truly transnational in the sense that the Baroque enables them to go beyond a national literary canon, as well as transhistorical in the sense that it allows them to reconcile a myth of origin with contemporary art, but Fuentes's conception of the Baroque is far from being as ontological or essentialized as the telluric Baroque of his Cuban predecessor.

Consequently, the Baroque is presented as the aesthetic correlate of an open world vision, a category to describe a plural culture shaped by multiple and conflicting principles. Instead of embodying the Enlightenment project of Modernity as a single, linear, and accumulative process that radiates from Europe to the rest of the world, the Baroque is characterized by contingency and fragmentation that cast doubt upon the legitimacy of the West's master narratives. In "José Lezama Lima: cuerpo y palabra del barroco," included in *Valiente mundo nuevo* (1990), Fuentes maintains that it is precisely the Baroque that shows how much the foundation of the New World is intertwined with the utopias of the Old World: "El barroco es uno de los nombres de nuestra fundación y la revela como un acto para siempre compartido entre Europa y América" (1990: 213). Echoing Lezama's reading, Fuentes reaffirms the persistence of the Baroque *ethos* in Latin America—notwithstanding the frequent political upheavals—and the privilege of the historical imagination above all future-oriented modernizing logic:

Pero la figura del barroco sólo se vuelve plenamente identificable y comprensible, en nuestro tiempo, gracias a su inserción dentro del concepto de las eras imaginarias propuesto por Lezama Lima en *La expresión americana*. Nadie, como él, ha visto más claramente que, si bien nuestra historia política puede ser considerada como una serie de fragmentaciones, la historia cultural presenta una continuidad llamativa. Aun cuando las pugnas políticas, en sí mismas fragmentarias, tratan de proyectar su propia ruptura en la vida cultural (negación del mundo indio por los españoles; negación de los mundos español, indio y mestizo por la modernidad independiente), el concepto de las eras imaginarias nos da la oportunidad de

restaurar la continuidad que [...] siempre supo mantenerse [...] en el sincretismo, el barroco y la constancia de la cultura popular [...]" (1990: 214-215)

For Fuentes, the Baroque is an inescapable style that underlines the cultural continuity with the Iberian Peninsula. Fuentes opposes an "independent" or "exclusive" Modernity drawn from Western models to an "inclusive" Modernity that allows many ways of being modern.⁵ Interestingly, Fuentes reminds us also that the root of the European Baroque was in itself syncretic. As a result, the Baroque cannot be identified with an anti-modern "Counter-Reformation," but with the Lezamian idea of "counter-conquest." Without any doubt, Lezama Lima's seminal 1957 essay on the Latin American identity is the turning point between these two conceptions of the Baroque. Fuentes, who read the work of Lezama Lima in an early stage, sees the Baroque also as a continental artistic conscience rooted in a game of rupture and symbiosis, of fragmentation and unity. In this conception, the colonial Baroque is nothing other than the art of the counter-conquest, which nevertheless can be seen as a continuation of the multiple confluences and origins of the European Baroque, which is eventually associated with the birth of Modernity: "la contraconquista [...] no cancela, sino que extiende y potencia, la cultura del occidente mediterráneo en América" (1990: 225).

In the chapter "The Century of Gold" of *The Buried Mirror* (1992), Fuentes is clearly indebted to Foucault's analysis of the mirror effects in Velázquez' *Las Meninas* and Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, recognizing the paradox that "Cervantes invented the modern novel, in the very nation that refused Modernity," before adding that "[...] if Modernity is based on multiple points of view, these in their turn are based on a principle of uncertainty" (1992: 176-177). Fuentes thus suggests that Modernity begins with an epistemic break or paradigm shift, which he links to this "uncertainty principle"—the same principle that he develops in *Geografía de la novela* (1993) from a more postmodernist perspective.⁶ He also invokes this notion in the chapter on "The Baroque Culture of the New World," where he defines the European Baroque as "the art of a changing society swirling behind the rigid mask of orthodoxy" (1992: 195). This broad and positive definition also applies to the Latin American context, since the New World Baroque allows ambiguous identities that are trapped by colonial domination to shelter in the "art of abundance based on want and necessity, the art of proliferation based on insecurity, rapidly filling in the vacuums of our personal and social history after the conquest with anything that it found at hand" (1992: 196). The Baroque is a defense of the difference, which it protects by concealing or masking it but without assimilating it completely. Fuentes sees in the Baroque a constructive, optimistic reaction against the collapse of the Renaissance utopias, a revisionist art of proliferation that fills the voids of history, a mirror in which we can see our constantly changing identity. As a refuge of the conquered, the Baroque is a heterogeneous and heterodox art that has integrated elements of popular or indigenous culture and expresses a colonial *difference*, while at the same

time hiding it in a paradoxical manner. In other words, it is a key component in the construction of a differentiated cultural identity in the Americas, which is nonetheless indebted to colonizing models. It is obvious that the Baroque culture questions the belief in one universal subject (by definition male, white, and European) by bringing to surface Modernity's alterity (the repressed "other of European Modernity"), but at the same time Fuentes's reading partly undoes the subversive consequence for the colonizing center. Indeed, Fuentes's idea of the Baroque does not take into account the dogmatic, "state version" Baroque or the ideologically motivated forms imposed by the colonizer in the overseas territories, but it only applies to a subversive potential in seventeenth-century and modern art as such. Nevertheless, according to this vision, the discourse of the "other Modernity" was not monological, but was dialogized by the Baroque both in Europe and in the Americas.

In his 1992 conference "Elogio del barroco," Fuentes repeats his layered definition of the New World Baroque. This "Barroco fundador" (1993a: 408) enables him to lay bare the common history of Spain and Latin America: "la cultura del Barroco como lazo de unión original de Europa y el Nuevo Mundo, el Barroco como fundación de la cultura común de España y las Américas, y como amparo americano de los componentes étnicos de nuestra novedad" (1993a: 388). Interestingly, the Baroque does not only constitute a critique of the grand narratives of Modernity, but it is also an expression of Modernity itself, which in its turn is conflictive and far from consistent. The Baroque can thus be understood as a negation of (enlightened) Modernity from within Modernity:

Nuestras ciudades modernas, esforzándose por ser cosmopolitas e industrializadas, *no han superado las contradicciones del barroco*, sus extremos de necesidad disfrazados por un barniz de opulencia, el choque de sus componentes raciales y culturales, o la exigencia de crear una civilización a partir de esta energía y de estos contrastes nuestros de cada día. Muy bien: *nuestras conflictivas modernidades han puesto al día la continuidad del barroco*: la distancia entre ideales y realidades, el mundo transitivo de la gloria, y transido de dolor, la compensación sensual de las carencias materiales, y la compensación imaginativa de los fracasos históricos, que distinguieron al barroco europeo; más el refugio de la identidad multirracial y mestiza, la protección de la vulnerable realidad policultural, la salvación de los linajes y las paternidades amenazadas, propios del barroco de Nuevo Mundo. (1993a: 407; italics mine)

Because of the distance between the utopian ideal and the daily experience of reality, Fuentes calls the contemporary societies of Latin America "Baroque," positing thus a continuity from the colonial Baroque to the *barock'n'roll* ("del Barroco al Barrocanrol"; 1993a: 407). The current relevance of the Baroque consists, according to Fuentes, in recalling the importance of art and imagination in order to fill the material emptiness (*horror vacui* as the underlying mechanism of "the abundance of poverty"),⁷ the promises of a multicultural society, and

the necessity of the cultural continuity against the background of economic and political misfortunes: “El barroco sigue siendo pertinente para nosotros porque su lección consiste en recordarnos que, igual que ayer, debemos darle respuesta cultural a nuestra vida diaria, económica y política” (1993a: 407). In the conference “Educar para el siglo XXI” (1998), Fuentes convincingly argues that the Baroque allows us to span the gap between the pre-Columbian past and the present moment, assigning a bridging function to the colonial culture:

Cada etapa de nuestra historia continúa y enriquece el pasado, haciéndolo presente. La cultura colonial no es desechable por el hecho de serlo, ¿cómo va a serlo si constituye el puente barroco entre nuestros pretéritos indígenas, europeos y africanos, y nuestra modernidad? Ese núcleo de identidad que crean la poeta sor Juana Inés de la Cruz en México, el inca Garcilaso de la Vega y el arquitecto Kondori en el Perú, el escultor y arquitecto Aleijadinho en Brasil, nos permite entender la conexión entre la pirámide maya y el conjunto urbano moderno. (1998: xviii)

Finally, in his latest collection of criticism entitled *La gran novela latinoamericana* (2011: 58), Fuentes sees the Hispanic Baroque as a reconciliation of a series of contradictions: between Renaissance humanism and absolute monarchy, between the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, between the puritanism of the North and the sensuality of the South, between the European conquest of America and the Indo-Afro-American counter-conquest of Europe. The European as well as the Latin American Baroque offer a way out of the oppressive universe of colonialism: “El barroco europeo salva al Sur católico de la continencia dogmática y le ofrece una salida voluptuosa. El barroco americano salva al mundo conquistado del silencio y le ofrece una salida sincrética y sensual” (2011: 58). On a poetical level, the Baroque is not a servile imitation of European forms, but it can be regarded as a process of deformation or a creative recycling of those forms: “[...] sustituir los lenguajes, dándole cabida, en el castellano, al silencio indígena y a la salmodia negra, a la cópula de Quetzalcóatl con Cristo y de Tonantzin con Guadalupe. Parodia de la historia de vencedores y vencidos con máscaras blancas y sonrientes sobre rostros oscuros y tristes. Canibalizar y carnavalizar la historia, convirtiendo el dolor en fiesta, creando formas literarias y artísticas intrusas [...]” (2011: 57). Unlike the Enlightenment tradition of Latin America, which aims to forget the indigenous and Hispanic past, the Baroque devours other traditions by incorporating them. Hence the importance of the masquerade and the theme of the subaltern’s cannibalization of European ideas and forms to create difference. In addition, Fuentes’s definition of the Baroque promotes the appropriation of different cultural elements without maintaining the hierarchical models of model-copy and of center-periphery. By invoking Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of carnivalization, which seeks to describe the desacralization of established aesthetic modes, and the idea of cannibalization as expressed in the *Manifesto*

Antropófago (1928) of the Brazilian modernist Oswald de Andrade, Fuentes proposes a playful and parodic Baroque that ultimately leads to what he has called a “lectura multinarrativa más allá de Occidente” (Fuentes quoted in Hernández 1999: 185). From this perspective, the Baroque is no longer a Eurocentric style or theme, but a truly dynamic and decolonizing function, a metaphor of the permanent process of formation and transformation of Latin American culture.

4. Conclusions

According to Walter Mignolo in *The Idea of Latin America* (2009: xiii), Modernity is the name of the historical process in which European nations began their progress toward world hegemony. The discovery of the Americas and the development of the Atlantic triangular trade are in this sense constitutive of a Modernity that originates not in the European Enlightenment, but in early colonialism in the sixteenth century. By means of the Baroque, Fuentes includes what Mignolo has called “the hidden face” or “darker side” of Modernity, that is to say the colonial experience that arose at the periphery of the old empires. In this sense, the Baroque can be seen as the resurgence of a peculiar sensibility that had been repressed by the practices and narratives of a Eurocentric Modernity. By tracing the Baroque genealogy of Latin America’s Modernity, Fuentes articulates a site-specific, hybrid Modernity as opposed to a supposedly “global” or “universal” Modernity. For Fuentes, the Baroque culture of Latin America arises precisely from the shock of different civilizations. By integrating these multicultural sources, the Latin American Baroque deviates from the metropolitan prototype, giving birth to a Modernity that is different from the European paradigm. Moreover, the all-inclusiveness of the Baroque as a counter-hegemonic strategy in both Europe and Latin America prevents Fuentes from falling into the trap of projecting a Eurocentric vision upon a foreign reality. It is precisely this incorporating capacity of the Latin American Baroque that leads to a critical revision of Modernity. Moreover, it is important to notice that the Baroque is for Fuentes an essentially positive answer, characterized by an open-endedness and a constructive potential. On more than one occasion, Fuentes has diagnosed *desengaño* or disillusionment not only in the abyss between the utopian ideal and historical reality, but also between the image of the noble savage and the horrors of slavery and abuse, as well as between the old “idols” and the new religion. All these distances between the promises and realities of the Renaissance create a desperate feeling of emptiness that in the end is filled by a utopian Baroque. Likewise, the gap between *engaño* and *desengaño*, between appearance and reality, between an indigenous pre-Modernity and a the West’s homogenizing Modernity is filled by a Baroque, prolific oeuvre that synchronizes and juxtaposes the cultural times and spaces of both Europe and the Americas.⁸ In short, the paradoxical art of

the Baroque as defined by Fuentes allows contraries to coexist – the Baroque conceit of *coincidentia oppositorum* that does neither homogenize nor destroy differences – and defies thus a monolithic conception of Modernity.

NOTES

1 Cf. “Fuentes’ [sic] dual project of *Terra Nostra* and *Cervantes or the Critique of Reading* tacitly agrees with Paz’s assertion about Spain’s lack of an Enlightenment and Modernity. Fuentes, however, recognizes a pre-Enlightenment culture in Spain that offered cultural alternatives as potentially liberating as those of the Enlightenment. [...] With his discovery of El Escorial and Foucault in 1967, and with his rereading of Américo Castro and Ortega y Gasset, Fuentes initiated a search for Mexican and Latin American identity, turning directly to the roots of Hispanic culture in medieval and Renaissance Spain” (1996: 106-107).

2 It might be useful to recall that several Hispanists have dismissed in the first half of the past century the very existence of a Spanish Renaissance, foregrounding the baroque-ness of the Spanish culture. See for instance Victor Klemperer, “Gibt es eine Spanische Renaissance?” (1927), and Helmut Hatzfeld, “El predominio del espíritu español en las literaturas del siglo XVII” (1941).

3 In his article on “Résurgences baroques,” Moser distinguishes these two manifestations of the Baroque in the following terms: “Cette modernité connaît son moment d’élaboration forte à l’âge des Lumières et s’oppose donc, terme par terme, au Baroque qui l’aura précédée: vision pessimiste du monde, irrationalité faite de religiosité et de passion. Logiquement, le baroque vient à se situer dans la pré-modernité” (2000: 670).

4 Cf. “[...] nuestro lenguaje ha sido el producto de una conquista y de una colonización ininterrumpidas; conquista y colonización cuyo lenguaje revelaba un orden jerárquico y opresor. La contrarreforma destruyó la oportunidad moderna, no sólo para España, sino para sus colonias. La nueva novela hispanoamericana se presenta como una nueva fundación del lenguaje contra los prolongamientos calcificados de nuestra falsa y feudal fundación de origen y su lenguaje igualmente falso y anacrónico” (1969: 40-41).

5 See in particular *Nuevo tiempo mexicano* (1995: 123) and the book-length essay *Por un progreso incluyente*: “El carácter policultural del país nos pide que no sacrifiquemos ningún aspecto de la gran creatividad acumulada por los mexicanos a lo largo de los siglos. Nuestra modernidad no puede ser ciega, puramente imitativa; simple acto reflejo. Debe ser una modernidad inclusiva, que admita las múltiples maneras de ser actuales” (1997: 123).

6 This Heisenberg principle of the uncertainty of perception and reality is one of the cornerstones of postmodernism’s skepticism about universal values and truth. The epistemological implications of this principle are also thematized in Fuentes’s

novel *Cristóbal Nonato* (1987), in which the narrator evokes the figure of the German physicist. In his essays, Fuentes refers repeatedly to this principle, most notably in his texts on Cervantes and in “Elogio del barroco”: “Esta violencia, esta incertidumbre, y esta desilusión, llevan a los grandes artistas de la época a establecer una tradición moderna, que es la de la narrativa, verbal o visual, indeterminada, abierta a múltiples puntos de vista, como en el *Quijote* o *Las Meninas*, supremas y acaso insuperables afirmaciones de la capacidad del arte para definir a la realidad, ya que no en términos de la política, en términos de la imaginación. Pues el barroco, como lo afirma Umberto Eco, es un asalto contra las jerarquías del privilegio fundado en un orden inmutable” (1993a: 392).

7 The dominating, constitutive paradox of the New World Baroque is that it is an art of abundance, practically drowning in its own proliferation, and at the same time, it is the art of those who have nothing else, except their unbridled imagination: “[...] muchas de las lecciones del barroco resultan necesarias para unas sociedades que, como aquéllas, deben aprender otra vez a vivir con el otro, el extraño, el hombre y la mujer de raza, credo y cultura diferentes, deben aprender a colmar los vacíos entre los ideales de la época y sus negaciones prácticas, y hacerlo con lo que el barroco tuvo en abundancia: la imaginación humana que transforma la experiencia en conocimiento y éste, con suerte, en destino” (1993a: 389).

8 Fuentes does not use the term “Neobaroque” because it loses the link with the seventeenth-century Baroque. For the same reason, he dismisses the term “barroco de Indias” (“Baroque of the Indies”), since it functions within an oppositional logic with regard to the metropolis. For Fuentes, the Baroque is nonetheless a distinctive, specifically Latin American expression.

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