
Guest editorial

Baroque geographies: marginal preoccupations

“The baroque signifier proliferates beyond everything signified, placing language in excess of corporality. At the risk of appearing still more paradoxical, we might say that baroque reason brings into play the *infinite materiality* of images and bodies.”

Christine Buci-Glucksmann (1994, page 139, emphasis in original)

The baroque is a term that has hovered on the margins of geographic inquiry, barely mentioned in the vast swathes of geographic literature. Our intent in this theme issue is not to respond to this by bringing the baroque into the centre of our field, such that it becomes yet another correction to our spatial imagination (though, like the ‘postmodern’, the baroque is said to reappear at the end of every major stylistic transition). Nor do we wish to pin down the meaning of the baroque by scoping its key characteristics and posing these against other ideas, such as the topological (Allen, 2011; Dixon and Jones, 2015), even though one of the thematics proffered by the baroque is a twisting and turning of centres and margins, interiors and exteriors, insides and outsides. We hold, instead, that there is productive value in placing sustained attention upon the baroque’s occupation of, and preoccupation with, the *marginalia*: that is, those sites where embellishments, flourishes, doodles, and side-notes bear a sometimes critical, sometimes tenuous relationship with the main text, but nonetheless an illuminating one. Our intent, then, is not so much to ask what a baroque geography *is*, or should *be*, but what a baroque geography can *do*.

In the following we first provide a brief exegesis of the baroque that, whilst noting its emergence within particular times and spaces, yet emphasizes the fraught and questioning relationship between event and time, context and content, and reality and representation—all of which the baroque has come to indicate. It is with this fraught lineage in mind that the subsequent papers that make up this themed section, from diverse areas of geographic inquiry, can be read. Certainly, there is a great deal written in the arts and humanities on the emergence and development of the baroque as both a form wherein, for example, nature exceeds formal conventions—as with the malshaped pearls (*les perles baroques*) of 16th-century France, or the *bizzarerie* of 17th-century Italian architecture—and as an attitude denoting an unrestrained eccentricity and a perverse quest for novelty. Whilst in the 18th century such an attitude was understood as pertaining to the strange and the unusual, by the 19th century the baroque taste came to be allied with decadence and decline as religion collapsed into politics, and the superabundant detail of the Counter-Reformation, which both pleased and stupefied the senses, became a tool of policy (Hills, 2007). It is no small wonder that the baroque, as Timothy Hampton observes, has “traditionally been understood as a site inhabited by freaks from the grotesques of late sixteenth and seventeenth century architectural decoration to the extravagant linguistic constructions of Gongora and the German *Trauerspiel*” (1991, page 1).

It is in a series of late-19th-century critical essays, however, that we see the marking of the baroque as a distinct *style*, expressing the emotional tone of a particular society, but also subject to a formal analysis of key compositional elements (such as a freedom of line), and effects (such as the use of light and shade for a dramatic intensity). Indeed, the baroque was to acquire a particular lexicon, including paradox, illusion, trompe l’oeil, decoration, the flight of time, and melancholy, this despite a lack of historical or geographical precision in its articulation. In Heinrich Wölfflin’s (1888/1984) classic study, for example, the baroque “changed so much that it is difficult to think of it as a single whole” (1984, page 16); it was,

paradoxically, *both* pan-European and exclusively Roman (Hampton, 1991, page 4). In a later, influential intervention, *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe (Principles of Art History)*, toward the end of the First World War, Wölfflin (1915/1932) systematically distinguished between the classic or Renaissance style and that of baroque. His formalistic analyses (eg, linear versus painterly, closed versus open form) extended into sculpture and architecture, and were taken up in modified form and applied to national literatures in the interwar years. The baroque became not only specified, but temporalized *and* spatialized; Hatzfield (1964), for example, was to claim that Spain was the centre of Europe's baroque spirit. As an emotionally evocative baroque ensemble of forms and effects came to be distinguished from what came before and after (for example, Varriano, 1986), its style was also increasingly seen as a 'reflection' of broader societal tendencies and conflicts. These analyses built upon the work of historians such as Lewis Mumford (1961), who argued for the baroque as a spectacular expression of a 17th-century political absolutism in Europe. In similar vein, René Huyghe (1964) presented the baroque as the art of town planning—avenues and piazzas, fountains and obelisks, grand facades—all magnificently displaying to the general public a divine authority.

As Hampton (1991) argues, such periodizations are themselves somewhat paradoxical, in that they are predicated on the baroque as a set of representational motifs that, in their expression, reflect attention back onto the very conditions of their making. (Mustn't all marginalia, like all main texts, be forever infused with both context and recontext?) They are a means by which a given place and time 'confronts' its own representation as such, producing a sense of belonging in the spectator, certainly, but also placing them into the gap between reality and its representation. Crucially, it is precisely this focus on representation, and the disruptions that the baroque affords to the linkages between appearance and period, that allows it to become a trenchant, *anti*-historicist vehicle for social critique. For Hampton the contemporary valence of this line of critique lies in the fact that such representations demand to be recognized, and that it is "through such recognition that people become the subjects of political and social systems" (1991, page 6). The paradoxical terrain of the baroque, however, directs us not to a reassuring mirror image, but to "a complex interrelationship between an unsettled subjectivity and political power, between self-representation and the brute violence of pure force" (page 8), symbolized most clearly in the fraught architecture of the New World baroque.

Indeed, in social theory, and contra its prior denotation as a stupefying style, the baroque has become emblematic of all manner of *un*-recognitions, or delinkages, most notably in the writings of Walter Benjamin and Gilles Deleuze. For Benjamin a linear, progressive account of history, secreted in a palimpsest landscape, must be contrasted with what he calls a 'now-time', or a baroque sensibility encapsulated in the allegory wherein "we grasp the constellation which our own era has formed with an earlier one" (1969, page 263), including the repressed history of the oppressed. Benjamin's baroque draws from his interwar reinterpretation of allegory in 17th-century German tragic drama—hyperbolic displays of grief and sorrow in which the sovereign "holds the course of history in his hand like a spectre" (1977, page 65). This politics of despotic omnipotence shatters the unity of truth and law, ushering in "the endless fragmentation of allegory as frozen portrait of horror, as enactment of an ultimate difference which displays a world of ruins" (Buci-Glucksmann, 1994, page 69). Benjamin's baroque is populated by the *flâneur*, the rag-picker, the prostitute, and the gambler, who wander endlessly through a phantasmagoria of buried memories, forgotten histories, and old fears. Here, allegory, and its associated *topoi* of the ruin and the labyrinth, betray the notion of knowledge as a representation of reality, certainly, but

in so doing offer up a glimpse of the ‘truth’ of such follies. As Christine Buci-Glucksmann explains, allegory:

“consigns reality to a permanent antinomy, a game of the illusion of reality as illusion, where the world is at once valued and devalued. Hence the particular seductiveness of the baroque: the primacy of the aesthetic—of appearances and play—joins up with metaphysical wretchedness on the ground of grief or melancholy (1994, page 71).

Perhaps a similar base materiality can be seen to populate Deleuze’s own analysis of the baroque. As with Benjamin, the baroque in *Le pli: Leibniz et le baroque* (Deleuze, 1988) exceeds periodization and, whilst eschewing the notion of representation as but an inferior copy of reality, is nonetheless revealing as to the work of representation itself. As Deleuze puts it, “[t]he Baroque artists know well that hallucination does not feign presence, but that presence is hallucinatory” (1993, page 125). To work through this idea, Deleuze concerns himself with Leibniz as the philosopher of the occidental fold; here, the fold is an operative function that does not rely on centres and margins but on twists and turns ad infinitum that turn outsides into insides and vice versa. Such folds are no mere decoration; rather, they are the expression of forces that turn an object “upside down or to stand or raise it up over and again, but in every event to turn it inside out and to mould its inner surfaces” (Deleuze, 1988, page 122). Doors, windows, portals, and frames are no longer signs of passage, but are themselves subsumed by an overflowing materiality; the spaces they forbear to contain reach beyond again and again, bringing into collision blocs of sensation. Elsewhere, commenting on Michaelangelo’s (1503) painting *Doni Tondo (The Holy Family)*, Deleuze uses the *figura serpentinata* to undertake similar work: here, the alternation of convex and concave forms renders visible a ‘becoming’. “It is as if”, writes Deleuze, “the organisms were caught up in a whirling or serpentine movement that gives them a single ‘body’ or unites them in a single ‘act’, apart from any figurative or narrative connection” (2004, pages 130–131). In the writing of Deleuze, we leave behind the messianic gnosticism of Benjamin, and herald the vitalism, the poesis, of the swerve.

Unsurprisingly, it is this disruptive quality that has appealed to some writing on a history and philosophy of geography. Far from heralding decadence and decline, the baroque encapsulates a productive reworking of abundance and excess as *transgression*, and an *un*-recognition as an *interventionist* stance, wherein things and the relations between them are described anew. Akin to the recent reanimation of the ‘monster’ (Dixon and Ruddick, 2011), the baroque offers techniques for welcoming Otherness. As such, it has been used to describe the gathering and distribution of materialities (Anderson and Wylie, 2009); and, in this vein, Thrift more specifically refers to the baroque (alongside lyricality and wonder) as an involution, or, “constantly fluctuating world of the side-by-side existence of mutually exclusive realities, realities in turbulent motion forming short-lived patterns with each other—when patterns exist at all” (2004, page 125).

In the following essays contributors expand upon these deployments while also asking what else the baroque can do. We begin with Thomas Puleo’s analysis of the Sicilian baroque which, as with the Italian peninsula to the north, was to play a role in the Counter-Reformation’s spectacular portrayal of absolute power. In addition to striking a new balance between respect for and ridicule of religious and state institutions, however, the decorative elements of the Sicilian baroque, in the aftermath of the 1693 earthquake, were also to encapsulate the fraught relationship between populace and the earth beneath them. This is a baroque that rises from torn landscapes produced by the intrusion of the wild earth into built spaces (Puleo, 2014) and is manifest, for example, in an intensified and repetitive use of diamond and spiral motifs, each registering as “*forme rassicuranti di maniera*” (forms of a reassuring manner) (Restuccia, 1997, page 80). For Puleo, the crumbling edges of the Sicilian baroque facade have much to say in regard to the experience of trauma, certainly, as well as to the mixture and reconciliation of the human and the inhuman.

The dramaturgy of Carl Lavery, Deborah Dixon, and Lee Hassall, which hinges on the baroque conceit of a stylistic excess that exhausts good reason and sense, performs a contrast with the above. Here, the decayed, polluted, and abandoned island of Hashima, once the most densely populated space on earth, is rendered as both ruin and labyrinth. Inspired by Benjamin's account of the German *Trauerspiel*, or baroque mourning play, and with undertones of Lovecraftian horror, Lavery and Dixon tell an allegorical tale in which the concrete blocks, slithering dust, and toxic atmospheres of the island point future-ward and past-ward in the same restless motion, infecting all who come near. This is a Hashima devoid of myth, yet mired in the collapse of history into nature. In his own embrace of this blasted landscape, their determinedly anti-Romantic comrade, Hassall, strives to sink into the labyrinth of Hashima, to become Minotaur. For these authors, whilst the baroque responds to the trauma of this place, it offers a nonsentimental accounting of our engagements with a postindustrial nature, as well as a reimagining of the geopolitical subject as a necessarily monstrous one.

The pervasive yet marginal baroque techniques noted above become the remit of art in Martin Jones's paper on Kapoorian geographies. Contra Lavery et al, it is Deleuze's commentary on the baroque as an 'architecture of vision' that is expanded upon here; that is, Jones emphasizes the mobility of the spectatorial position, and the complex, thought-provoking scenes this affords. Indeed, for Jones it is important that such a baroque sensibility is grounded in a specific project, such as Anish Kapoor's 2008 sculpture/installation *Memory*, such that we can appreciate how to proceed methodologically in our interrogations of the making of space. Whilst exegeses of relationality, materiality, and so on abound, Jones argues, we need be cognizant of how to "find and read traces of where space is institutionalized through particular struggles and becomes identified as discrete shapes" (Jones, 2014, page 2587). The following account of how a polycentric logic 'becomes', via spectating *Memory* from myriad vantage points, is illustrative, then, of how geographic inquiry can itself unfold.

Finally, Gail Davies's paper on patented, regulated, and commodified fluorescent zebrafish, or GloFish®, takes the baroque as a useful imaginary for conceiving of a distributed ontology in-the-making, characterized by sensibilities and spatialities, practices and responsibilities. What makes the baroque appealing in this context is, first, its preoccupation with a rich, visual repertoire of embellishment and overabundance that mobilizes particular affective responses, albeit cognized differently as such, in the networked spaces of scientific laboratories, pet shops, and art galleries. As with Martin Jones's paper, there is a methodological lesson to be learned here, but it is one where, "empirical practices [confront] a complex experience of presence and absence, ubiquity and erasure, richness and banality, possibility and failure" (Davies, 2014, page 2608). Second, the baroque, in its ceaseless shifting and sorting of periods, allows for reflection upon such natured artefacts as both a sign of the times and as harbingers of a world to come.

As a collection, then, the essays in this theme section together affirm the baroque as operative marginalia, rather than essence. As Deleuze, in one of his assessments of the baroque's relationship to the Leibnizian fold, explains:

"The finest inventors, the finest commentators of the Baroque, dismayed by the way that, despite them, the notion threatened to extend arbitrarily, have had doubts about its consistency. The Baroque was thus restricted to a single genre (architecture), or to an increasingly restrictive determination of periods and locations, or even to a radical denial. The Baroque never existed. Still, it is odd to deny the existence of the Baroque in the same way as one denies the existence of unicorns or pink elephants. For in the latter case the concept is already a given, while in the case of the Baroque it is a question of knowing whether one can invent a concept capable (or not) of giving it existence" (1991, page 240).

A geography preoccupied with the baroque thus confronts, with Deleuze, fold upon fold: the infinite receptivity and spontaneity of exterior and interior; the shadow that is neither light nor dark; the indiscernibility between “textures of matter” and the “fold of the soul” (1991, page 243). That these might be leveraged alongside the baroque’s “status as power of thought and political force” (1991, page 247) is one of its promises, lack of essence notwithstanding.

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