

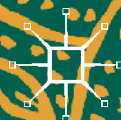
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LATIN AMERICAN NEO-BAROQUE

Senses of Distortion

Pablo Baler

Translated by
Michael McGaha



Latin American Neo-Baroque

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*To the ideal readers:
Dee Tran Montcalvo and Sheilah Wilson Serfati*

FOREWORD

From the time of its appearance, the book you have in your hand had all the markings of a classic among studies of the Latin American Neo-Baroque; and like all classics, it defies classification. While embodying meticulous research in the field of history of ideas and artistic expressions, it is also an experiment in the unexplored genre of *aesthetics-fiction*; it manages to combine conceptual playfulness and painstaking historiographical criticism. It is at once a philosophical essay, a literary treatise, a rhetorical divertissement, and even a work of academic fiction.

Latin American Neo-baroque: Senses of Distortion daringly suggests that the objective of art, exactly like that of cosmology, is to conjecture about the contents and form of the universe so that all aesthetics presuppose an epistemology, all poetics, a theory of knowledge. Is this world like a labyrinth or like an infinite hexagonal library, like an inaccessible tribunal or like a hall of infinite mirrors, a city eternally under construction or the ruins of a rigorous civilization, an impenetrable jungle or a garden of forking paths?

Capturing this world, representing it, is an expressive aspiration with profound epistemological implications. This singular focus adopted by Pablo Baler gives rise to an unexpected interplay of intriguing literary, aesthetic, and philosophical approaches. It is from this radical perspective that Baler manages to perceive the mutual echoes between Quevedo's love poetry and Huidobro's avant-garde experiments, between Góngora's intractable syntax and Borges's fantastic universe, between selfless mortification in St. Ignatius Loyola and sadomasochistic flagellation in Severo Sarduy.

Exploiting the trope of distortion of language (both literary and visual), Baler carries out an investigation on two levels. On one of those levels, he examines the aesthetic parameters of the Spanish Baroque and its turbulent processes of distortion. On the other, he researches the silent connections, unacknowledged reasons, and secret mechanisms by means of which some major twentieth-century Latin American literary works (*Altazor*, *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*, *Cobra*) appropriate that aesthetics of instability. It is noteworthy that Baler never loses sight of the fact that every meaningful connection between those two periods (the seventeenth century and the twentieth) implies taking a position with regard to the legendary debate over the universality or historicity of the Baroque. But he transcends that dichotomy thanks to a critical narrative that reconciles trans-historical constants with the restricted circumstances of the historical Baroque.

That *dramatic, contorted, gesticulating* society—as José Antonio Maravall defined the world of the Spanish Baroque—was doubtless the product of a moment of crisis marked by a critical consciousness in all spheres. That profound economic, social, scientific crisis, that technical and mental revolution articulated in a period of generalized unease and discontent that define the Baroque's paradigm changes, is naturally consistent with the twentieth century. Those affinities have been perceived from innumerable viewpoints ever since the epiphany of Rubén Darío's Modernism. Here Baler proposes a focus that emphasizes the systemic instability of *the Baroque* consistent in its freedom of expression and experiment with the essayistic freedom of continental heritage that nevertheless ranges from Eugenio D'Ors's transhistoricist trend to Mieke Bal's preposterous historicism.

With *Latin American Neo-baroque: Senses of Distortion* Baler contributes a view of soaring theoretical originality and expansive poetic range to the constantly renewed problematic of the appropriations of the Spanish baroque in Latin America. Employing the evocative power of a series of rhetorical figures (metaphor, hyperbaton, anaphora), as if he were dealing with allegorical trampolines, Baler displays an interpretive mural that transcends mere scholastic analysis and confirms not only the diversity of his interests but, and above all, an intellectual versatility that enables him to attempt with identical success both the daring creative leap and the cautious, analytical disquisition. Rather than an exercise in comparative literature, Baler offers us a rhetorico-philosophical meditation that points toward the fundamental thesis that art is in itself the *distortion* of a

never perceived, never perceptible reality. It is, therefore, understandable that this attempt to imagine an approach to the Baroque and the Neo-Baroque, inspired in the proper logic of its aesthetics, should itself be a metaphorical, hyperbatic, and heartrending project.

David William Foster
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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Latin American Neobaroque: Senses of Distortion revolves around a well-defined premise: crucial moments of the visual and literary production of the twentieth century in Latin America are characterized by a logic of instability that could be further illuminated and reevaluated when seen from the perspective of the aesthetics of distortion that typify the seventeenth century.

Thus, with a theoretical introduction to this elusive concept of distortion, the book is organized into four chapters, each examining specific instances of reappropriation of baroque aesthetics during the twentieth century in Latin America. Chapter 2 develops the notion of *ineffability* through a contrast between the exasperated metaphor in Vicente Huidobro and the particular use of “retruécano” in Francisco de Quevedo. Chapter 3 considers themes related to the conjectural nature of reality through an exploration of the ontological “plasticity” of Borges’ universe in relation to the speculative quality of Gongora’s hiperbatic language in *Las soledades*. Finally, Chapter 4, studies the perpetually displaced search for sense as articulated in Severo Sarduy’s literary and physical masochism in connection to Ignacio de Loyola’s self-flagellating writing.

In general terms, however, I think of these moments of reappropriation of the baroque not only as heightened manifestations of the representational crisis that define the “epistemic shift” of modernity but also as stages where the more complex issue of aesthetic historicity (i.e., the dialectics of aesthetic transformation) is being played out. In that sense, this book attempts to offer a more specific formulation of the uniqueness of twentieth-century Latin American visual arts and literature while thriving

for a more comprehensive evaluation of the scope of its historical impact, both going forward and backward, in the general context of modernity.

If this essay has achieved any level of appreciation in its original Spanish edition, I owe it to a series of conversations that were essential for some inchoate ideas about problems of aesthetics, to see the light of thought with a certain air of dignity. Among those conversations, I still cherish with particular affection, those I had in Berkeley with Tony Cascardi, Julio Ramos, Emilie Bergman, Mieke Bal, Michael Iarocci, Stanley Brandes, and Matt Losada.

This new English translation would not have been possible but for my unexpected yet timely friendship with Dee Tran Montealvo and Sheilah Wilson Serfaty, who were also kind enough to introduce me to Michael McGaha. Michael, now, also my dear friend, not only did a superb translation of this book but seemed to have resorted to some magical powers to make the translation sound not only better but also more authentic than the original.

I offer this book with my humble gratitude to all of them and to my first editor in *Corregidor*, María Fernanda Pampín, as well as to my new and talented editors at Palgrave Macmillan, Brigitte Shull and Paloma Yannakakis, and of course to you, the fearless reader of this wonderful English edition.

Pablo Baler
Los Angeles, USA, 2016

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Introduction: Senses of Distortion

Abstract The introduction is devoted to a critical historiography of the conflict between Albertian perspective and the typically baroque genre of anamorphosis as a telling contrast between two opposing views of representation manifested in the concepts of “sharpness” and “distortion”. Thus, three instances of *distortion* to be explored in Chaps. 2, 3, and 4 (metaphor, hyperbaton, and anaphora) are framed not just rhetorically but also in connection to the history of ideas and sensibilities. In the final analysis, the concept of *distortion* points to an epistemological problem that includes all others: perspectivism, skepticism, the limits of identity, the trustworthiness of the senses, and the efficacy of language. And it is this epistemological vein that the following chapters will attempt to articulate.

Keywords Albertian perspective • Renaissance • Baroque • Mannerism • Anamorphosis • Distortion

A SIGN OF IMBALANCE

The subtitle of this book might lead one to believe that *distortion* constitutes an aesthetic category whose meanings can be rigorously defined. However, a particularly perplexing aspect of this concept is the fact that it only acquires meaning in relation to another equally fantastic parameter: *clarity*; for distortion, as a stylistic device, raises the issue of the limits of