BARROCO NOVA
Neo-Baroque Moves in Contemporary Art

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The Neo-Baroque, A Cultural Solution

TRIGGERING IMAGINATION

The more complex human life gets, the more art and culture have to offer us. The Neo-Baroque is just the name we use to describe a type of cultural solution to the problem of complexity. I say that it is "just a name" because different authors tend to collate different features under the same wrap. This semantic inaccuracy points out the difficulty of pinning down the main characteristics of a cultural response that we now find across the globe and that manifests itself in all forms of artistic expression, from videogames to cinema to digital art to social networking.

We already know that in other historical times in which we have recorded Baroque emergences, there are always two key elements that seem to conspire to increase the levels of complexity in human life: technology and human exchanges. The times we live in are no different, except at the level at which both these creators of complexity affect life on the planet. In this regard, this new level of complexity is revolutionary for human culture.

Bear in mind that culture is information that affects human behaviour. When the technology transferring that information is changed, or when information is consumed from other cultural areas, human behaviour is affected. If this happens at a scale never experienced before, then the effects on human behaviour are commensurable to that scale.

As opposed to social networks, in which relations are established directly with others, cultural networks exist thanks to the mediating role that cultural objects play in the formation of those networks. The relations among humans in a cultural network are mediated by the semantic content and the possible pathways that those cultural objects create in connection with the humans that use them. This is why we connect with creators and distant cultures through the artistic objects they create, and which are preserved by society.
Cultural networks facilitate the access to and regulate the content and flow of that information within and across human groups. This is the adaptive ability that cultural networks offer to individuals who group themselves in very tight networks called communities, but who also are able to participate in artistic experiences created on the other side of the world many centuries ago. Culture, through this mediating role of objects, offers stability because the networks that culture creates show pathways to access the information needed to harness complexity. The more complex reality becomes, the more complex those cultural pathways.

What Neo-Baroque artists propose in exhibitions such as Barroco Nova are different forms to walk those pathways, new ways to establish connections, various hints at the hidden patterns inside information networks. Triggering the imagination of the spectator to envision appropriate routes in the maze of modern life is the objective of the artist. Levering these sparks to reorganize our cultural networks and to better traverse those cultural pathways is the responsibility of the citizen in the new age of technology and communication.

There is strong evidence, in many cases throughout long periods of time and quite extended spaces, of the adaptive capabilities of culture to match environmental complexity—religious, social, ideological—with technological responses that allow for highly qualified solutions to very complex problems. By avoiding artificial reductions of the existing diversities and competing patterns of human behaviour in different settings, these technologies are excellent examples of how culture is used by human groups to collaborate in order to couple the environmental complexity with the social and organizational responses needed to harness this complexity. It is as if the efficiencies of culture prevail not only through individual cases, but when put together in a context in which the chosen solutions show both the effective exploration of the space of possibilities and the de facto multi-scale analysis that culture performs to come out with the most appropriate responses to the complexity/scale dilemma. It is a set of cultural cases of what Maturana and Varela labelled as “autopoietic” processes in living systems.

In this regard, the artists in the exhibition Barroco Nova speak of many of these cultural solutions, and their varied artworks constitute an attention call in different domains. These Neo-Baroque explorations challenge our cognitive capabilities as they relate to the improvement of our emotional and epistemic responses to the complexity and diversity we experience. As our societies grow larger we require a kind of cultural and artistic training (from drama to installations to videogames) that plays out at the level of the individual who interacts with these cultural products and that allows for new pathways to connect with ‘distant’ cultural experiences.

Our artists also play with our ethical and political flexibility. This flexibility is essential as it feeds off the kind of ambiguity that accepts an open future and has grown out of experiencing the many ways in which human life gets organized in different cultures. Do we have a large enough repertoire of ethical solutions to our dilemmas? At the institutional level, can those contradictory or incongruent political principles, yet a testimony of the richness of life, be made compatible?

At the artistic level, the Neo-Baroque strives to improve our representational ability to include in cultural objects and artworks new variations of the human experience. The confluence of this
artistic program and the societal changes provoked by communication technologies lead to the search for better ways of distributing art so that cultural reproduction and sensibility for novelty are facilitated through typical channels, such as imitation and social learning, in a global environment. Here, the Neo-Baroque calls for a more entertaining, more challenging, digitally-oriented education that forces students to solve real problems with present-day solutions.

THE NEO-BAROQUE AND MULTICULTURAL SOCIETIES

Explorations into the Neo-Baroque open up dimensions of our cultural space beyond our immediate surroundings. Are these Neo-Baroque solutions valid for a twenty-first century, technologically oriented, globally connected, socially ordered, and multicultural society like Canada?

I assume an adaptive notion of the Neo-Baroque as a set of cultural responses developed to adapt to complexity. From this position it is reasonable to think that Baroque modes of adaptation will emerge, embodied in different technologies and social processes, whenever massive re-wirings of the cultural networks that sustain the human experience at the individual and social levels occur.

Canada, as in most societies in the world, is undergoing a series of processes that increase social, economic, and cultural complexity several folds in short periods of time. These changes have to do with 'rewiring' informational networks due to global trade and travel, the fostering of controlled but massive immigration from many ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, and the exposure of most of the population, especially the younger generations, to communication models that are mostly digital and are changing social relations and cognitive patterns. Canada is home to a considerable number of artists and creators who have achieved the widest international presence in their respective fields with their Neo-Baroque creations (from Robert Lepage to Guy Laliberté to many of the Barroco Nova artists). These Canadian Neo-Baroque models have achieved the maximum distribution possible in a global society, and in some sectors of Canadian culture they have become exporters, through their creations, of Baroque artistic solutions to many different human problems.

Does this mean that Canada will embrace the Baroque as an ideology and ethos of culture as has been the case in other societies before? The simplest answer is "no." The historical and political causes behind the adoption of a Baroque ideology in another place—namely, in the Hispanic world during the first globalization—are not the same in twenty-first-century Canada. This is why we say that Neo-Baroque phenomena are happening today in social and technological contexts—from Japan and New Zealand to Peru and Canada—quite differently from those of the historical Baroque. These phenomena are provoking recognizable effects in terms of the 'baroquization' of our interconnected and mutually dependent cultures.

Elements that are fundamental to dealing with complexities in Canada, such as institutional stability, income distribution, and the constitutional program of multiculturalism, make unnecessary, sometimes even contradictory, the adoption and implementation of a Baroque
policy. However, these elements do not address one of the main challenges for human life in the new era, that is, the radical cultural condition of all changing aspects of human life due to dependence on communication.

Only a Neo-Baroque policy that would elevate culture and the arts in the hierarchy of governmental priorities would start to address the problem of complexity in twenty-first century societies.

NOTES

2 *The Hispanic Baroque Project* (www.hispanic-baroque.ca) focuses on both the historical Baroque and Neo-Baroque phenomena in the contemporary world.