

# Latin American Baroque; Cultural Bifurcation and the Meandering Line

I'd like to discuss the work I've done that constructs a connection between the baroque and Chaos Theory and then, in response to the themes of this Symposium, draw some suppositions from this connection.

It's not a literal connection, but an isomorphism generated of *appearance*. If the baroque is a scopic regime as Chaos is a scientific and mathematical theory, then this understanding allows us (as artists, architects, designers and the like) to construct a useful, and useable, definition of (what I am calling) non-linear aesthetics. Suppositions can be drawn from such "similarities", in particular that Chaos, a set of theories that evolved by, in large part, computer modelling of real-world phenomena may be but one way of describing a broader ontology not dependent on digital technology. The baroque is then, like Chaos Theory, a "technology" that can be seen in operation throughout history, throughout the "histories" of its various manifestations, and in particular, in the context of this Symposium, the colonial history of the New World. For, as the (Spanish) baroque encountered the indigenous cultures of the Americas, it fractured, and this cultural bifurcation produced something very different from it's European model.

These two things, the interior of the Wieskirche and the Mandelbrot Set do look similar, but the similarity is one that requires the viewer to construct meaning based on looking, rather than dissembling or deconstructing the image into equivalent word-sets. This is not so outrageous as it seems; constructing meaning out of what things look like is what artists do.

The baroque is not literally fractal, anymore than this image of a "fractal tree"<sup>1</sup> is either a tree or even an image of a tree. However, to say that the image looks like a tree is a useful and interesting observation. From it I might, for example, infer that trees (in the real world) have fractal organizational structure. Or, that an artist wishing to make an image of a tree may use fractal structure to do so. And, if these two pairs of similarities of appearance are put together, fractal structure can be used to make images that are both plant-like and baroque. This is what I did in the work "the Weiskirche", made from wood, resin, photographs and a set of simple operational rules: it is made up of parts, each having seven overlapping photographs, which fold (or not) at right angles, and so on. I usually install it myself, but if I were to write instructions out, they would be:

1. Choose a part, attach it to the wall.
2. Choose another, and attach it to the first and/or the wall.
3. Choose another, and attach it to either the first or the second and/or the wall.
4. Choose another, and attach it to the first, the second or the third, etc.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://diffusedproductions.net/>

5. Continue until the ceiling, at which point the next piece will attach to a prior piece and/or the ceiling.
6. Continue until the corner of the room is reached, at which point the next piece will attach to a prior piece and/or the next wall, etc.
7. Choose another and continue.

The result of following these instructions is a serial, but non-linear, meandering line (a non-linear string) that will not repeat itself from one installation to the next, as its form proceeds from the initial decision of which part to choose, from the shape and size of the walls and at each moment what choice the installer makes. While it is possible to “retrace one’s steps” and start again, the resulting installation will be different from that which it would have otherwise been. In this way the work is non-reversible, like a non-linear equation. And yet, the work is also always recognisable as the same work, at least in the four installations that I have made so far.

The artwork functions as the mechanism through which the isomorphism of Chaos Theory and the baroque is revealed. If this *untitled (pornography)* looks baroque it does so because its essential characteristics, including, most importantly, its non-linear structure, are baroque. Of course, the work also emulates surface characteristics of the baroque original, the delicate pink flesh tones of the floating *putti* in the decoration of the Weiskirche. Such emulation of seventeenth and eighteenth century baroque is the predominant reason for the inclusion of much of the art and design work in recent exhibitions and anthologies of the neo-baroque, such as Stephen Calloway’s *Baroque, baroque*. I mean works such as Vivienne Westwood’s *Crinoline dress in duchess satin, Summer 1994 collection*, or Joris Laarman’s arabesque *Heatwave radiator*. I don’t claim that these are not baroque, but that in only emulating baroque style, they fail to be strongly baroque, and thereby rather miss the point of baroque as an important scopic regime.

Chaos Theory presents us with one model for understanding the non-linear characteristics of the baroque. Another is that *seriality*; Deleuze reads Leibniz and folds. Series proliferate, and thus Deleuze’s horizontality is a proliferation of series. Angela Ndalianis uses this to investigate contemporary entertainment media, and observes,

“The use of multiple narrative centres (multiple originals) typical of seriality requires a reconsideration of traditional perceptions of linearity and the closed narrative form. Neo-baroque seriality demands that a singular linear framework no longer dominate the whole”. (Ndalianis, 2005) p.69

Without the model presented by Chaos Theory, non-linear structure is often misinterpreted as simply chaotic. Take, for example, this description of Francois Boucher’s *Apollo Revealing his Divinity to the Shepherdess* by Art Historian Melissa Lee Hyde:

“(it) feature(s) no rectilinear forms and eschew(s) perspectival space, and there is an apparently improvisational, even haphazard, quality to the lush arrangement of objects” (Hyde, 2008)

Actually, in this painting I see a branching, bifurcating composition that may be “improvisational” in the sense that each branching is improvised on the back of that preceding it, but is not haphazard, if haphazard is

“characterized by lack of order or planning, by irregularity, or by randomness; determined by or dependent on chance; aimless”.<sup>2</sup>

I can't see any evidence of it having involved chance (in the way that Duchamp revealed “chance” in *3 Standard Stoppages*<sup>3</sup>) or even having been randomly composed. No, the painting is planned to engage the viewer emotionally, the composition creates a dynamic, turbulent movement that leads the eye upward, fracturing (or, perhaps “dissolving” is better) the “self”. It could be a diagrammatic representation of bifurcation.

Seeing and understanding the compositional mechanism by which this is achieved does nothing to dispel the “aesthetics of the sublime”, to quell the “desire, in its erotic as well as metaphysical forms, (that) courses through the baroque scopic regime”, as Martin Jay so aptly puts it (Jay, 1988), any more than seeing and understanding the emergent structure in a complex dynamical system allows the management of such a system event. Turbulence may be better understood, but it is still turbulent, still spectacular.

So, how is this constructed relationship between Chaos Theory and the baroque related to a theory of “technology”? Why is this interesting in terms of understanding technology, and how artists may use technology? What has this to do with indigenous knowledge?

A theory that depends on a particular technology (in the case of Chaos Theory, the computer and digital technology) is bound to suffer from this dependency. Understanding the history of its development, I am led to suspect Chaos Theory exhibits a kind of circularity; all the modeling Chaos Theory uses to describe phenomena in the world is only that, computer modeling. I'm not sure Chaos Theory makes sense of the world, it may only look like it does because it was made on a sensible machine. To use the example of the fractal tree, it's a construct, it really only *looks* like a tree. Writing on the use of Chaos Theory in the visual arts Vivian Sobchack identifies in it a “totalising” effect that has “fascist yearnings and a dangerous relativism”<sup>4</sup>. Artists risk creating images of the world that

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<sup>2</sup> <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/haphazard>

<sup>3</sup> Marcel Duchamp. (American, born France. 1887-1968). *3 Standard Stoppages*. Paris 1913-14. Wood box, 28.2 x 129.2 x 22.7 cm, Collection MOMA, New York.

<sup>4</sup> p.154

“represent three dimensional sites and objects in a superficially convincing way, they get the light, shadow, and texture of things uncannily “right”, but there is still something “wrong” with them. Almost all of these images, even most of the attempts at natural landscapes, look both impossibly real and really impossible. Despite or because of their detail and complexity, they lack existential vagueness”. (Sobchack, 1990) p.153

Sobchack uses Heidegger’s notion of “the Enframing” to understand why these images are “wrong”. The computer “enframes the world by making it absolutely available and manageable... a philosophical picture of a “world” deprived of meaning”<sup>5</sup>. I acknowledge there have been developments since 1990 when this was written, particularly in digital game space. John Lanchester identifies one of the strengths of video games as being to do with the “sense of agency” in which “the player is free to act and choose” (Lanchester, 2009). Whether this is a consequence of the non-linearity of the digital domain, or simply leads to non-linear playing experiences, I’m not sure. But, as Lanchester writes,

“you aren’t watching this, but playing it. The person moving down the darkened hallway, listening to the sinister creaking noise coming from behind the wall, is you. The best of these games use sound to great effect; the interiors are underlit, and the monsters, when they arrive, genuinely feel as if they are coming to get you – not the you watching the story, but the you inside the story”. (Lanchester, 2009)

So, if the (historical) baroque is a manifestation of the same underlying ontology as the (contemporary) Chaos Theory, a pairing of implications arises. Firstly, it is a misunderstanding to see the baroque as an historical style and the baroque has an ongoing use to artists, designers and architects. There is no need for “neo-baroque”. Secondly, and more speculatively, by turning the pairing round, Chaos Theory, by sharing the same ontology as the baroque, ceases to be absolutely beholden to digital technology. Chaos and emergent structure has always been there, waiting for the computer to reveal it. Furthermore, artists can “pick’n’mix” the baroque and Chaos Theory, because they are, essentially, the same thing. It’s useful to name things, so I’ve coined the term “non-linear aesthetics” to denote the field.

As a pre-cursor to expanding a definition of non-linear aesthetics I’ve been looking at other manifestations of the baroque, in particular, Latin American baroque.

In reproduction the Latin American baroque is overwhelming, dizzyingly rich in structure and detail. But when I first saw these buildings in the landscape, I thought of nothing so much as roadside billboards; the visual impact of, for example, the Iglesia de San Francisco Acatepec is, as a sculptural object, almost all façade. It functions, like a billboard, to signal the “product”. It is

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<sup>5</sup> p 153

designed to draw one into the interior, a space in which one is carried away from the earthly, deliriously, to the heavens, to contemplate the might and majesty of God, the Roman Catholic Church and imperial Spain.

The devices used to deliver this effect are not precisely the same as those of “classical” European baroque. I don’t see here in the Iglesia de Santa Maria, Tonantzintla, the open, cloud filled sky of the Wieskirche, but a glorious, “jungle” of brachiating abstracted foliage motifs and figurative images. The dense encrustations of decoration on the columns, walls and ceiling dissolve the architectural boundaries between vertical and horizontal, and solid surfaces become visually transparent. This is typical of baroque spectacle. And, amongst the decoration one finds images of the people who built this church, the Indian craftsmen who populated it in their own image. The baroque has been consumed by the local, subsumed and lineated, for between the lines of the Spanish architect’s design, the locals have improvised based on their own suppressed culture(s). César Augusto Salgado in writing a history of interpretation of the baroque in the Americas, notes the

“emergence of an idiosyncratic “New World Baroque” would point to an ironic reversal of the Spanish imperial project, one in which, through hybridizing strategies, the colonial subject took advantage of the baroque elements in the dominant discourse to create sites and terms for cultural resistance and survival” (Salgado, 1999) p.317

The profusion of the baroque into the New World has resulted in a cultural bifurcation, the hybridization causing (or “being”) a boundary event. This hybridisation of cultures, this profoundly non-linear meandering of the baroque, is still going on. It has been argued that contemporary Mexico is, still, baroque (Fulton, 2008), and if I see this anywhere, it is in the anachronous mixing of materials and imagery in the on-going use of colonial-era church buildings, such as in the Templo de Pardo, Guanajuato.

So, although Aoteroa has no “indigenous” baroque history, it is possible that the isomorphic pairing of the baroque and Chaos Theory, or non-linear aesthetics, is a useful model for the “bringing together of peoples”. We don’t have a baroque past, but maybe we have a baroque present.

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