

## Maravall's Culture of the Baroque: Between Wölfflin, Gramsci, and Benjamin

In this essay I address José Antonio Maravall's contribution to the definition of baroque culture, and I claim for his major work on this issue, *La cultura del barroco: Análisis de una estructura histórica* (1975), the status of a classic in baroque culture studies. Maravall's study rivals Heinrich Wölfflin's *Renaissance und Barock* (1888), which is a frequent point of reference for all those who work on baroque culture. First, I show how, in presenting a broad idea of culture, Maravall draws partly on the Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony, even though he does not mention it. Then, I focus more closely on the relationships between the aesthetic definition of baroque provided by Wölfflin and the political and social one elaborated by Maravall. The two scholars seem not to have anything in common. Maravall insists that he does not consider the baroque as a style but as an historical structure, and he claims to go beyond the aesthetic and stylistic definition of the baroque. On the other hand, he cannot ignore Wölfflin's study: he quotes Wölfflin precisely because of the classic status that *Renaissance und Barock* work has acquired and because Wölfflin has created the horizon of meaning that surrounds the word *baroque* in modern culture. Whereas Wölfflin speaks of "forms," Maravall focuses on the "social history of mentalities." In this perspective the latter appears to be related to the French historians of the Annales school and with those known as historians of mentalities. I contend that Maravall's *Culture of the Baroque* allows one to go beyond Wölfflin's approach, without forgetting the importance of his analysis. On the contrary, it is still possible to take advantage of his exemplary study of the baroque style, along the lines of what Walter Benjamin has done in *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, in which he recalls Wölfflin's concept of baroque style in developing his own idea of "artistic will" as characteristic of baroque art, as opposed to classical art.

This perspective does not answer all the questions related to baroque and modern literature. It does not, for example, pay enough attention to problems of subjectivity and identity. Nevertheless, Wölfflin's analysis of baroque style and Maravall's study of the baroque as an historical structure possess enduring significance as introductions to the problematics of modern culture.

The main feature of Maravall's methodology of historical research is an emphasis on the decisive relevance of culture and mentality in human history

and in the construction of social reality. For Maravall, culture and mentality are not a simple reflection of the material basis of society; he moves away from the mechanistic distinction between structure and superstructure that can be found in some traditional versions of Marxism. For instance, in his eighteenth-century studies he underlines that the Spanish Enlightenment is related to a bourgeois spirit that can take place even in the absence of a strong bourgeois class in the economy. In this case Maravall quotes Marx's German Ideology:

Pienso en aquella atinada observación de Marx (*Ideología alemana*): antes fueron los burgueses que la burguesía. No se trata ni de los burgueses medievales, como un subgrupo estamental formalmente definido, ni de la clase de la burguesía, tal como la común conciencia de clase la hará integrarse en la sociedad industrial; sino de un grupo de burgueses que ante de empezarse, confiado en sus fuerzas, en el enfrentamiento de lucha política, se entrega a difundir los patrones de una nueva cultura que en esa fase ofrecerá como una cultura de general sentido humano, válida para toda la sociedad, y de la cual derivan nuevos modos de relaciones sociales.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, his idea of "historical structure" draws partly on Gramsci's notion of hegemony, one of the major turning-points in Marxist cultural theory. Maravall makes an indirect reference to the category of hegemony in his analysis of the origins of Absolutism and of the Modern State.

He argues that the project of the Modern State and of Absolutism is meant to repress and control the social, economical and cultural development of Europe in the seventeenth century. This project is something new in European history, even though it was imposed upon a complex of inherited circumstances. Absolutism dominates not only by repressive power but also by a cultural hegemony through the persuasive and active role of social and cultural forces involved in the integration process. Maravall develops his analysis of the Modern State not only in his historical works, such as *Estado moderno y mentalidad social: Siglos XV a XVII* and *La cultura del barroco*, but also in his analysis of the seventeenth-century theater, *Teatro y literatura en la sociedad barroca*.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, this emphasis on the hegemonic role of the modern absolutist state in cultural production tends to produce a narrow notion of baroque society and culture; on the other hand, given the history of baroque studies in which the baroque has been defined mostly in aesthetic terms, it opens up new analytical dimensions.

In these works Maravall also makes use of the concept of ideology as a system of values expressed by a particular class interest. Nevertheless, the notions of ideology and hegemony are overshadowed by his use of the concept of "culture" as a "structure," a whole social and anthropological process, a complex to which all the characteristics of an age must be referred. For Maravall, "baroque" is not simply the ideological expression of the ruling class, but "a concept of epoch that in principle extends to all the manifestations making up this epoch's culture" (*Culture of the Baroque* 6). Maravall acknowledges that the project of the modern state is not always successful and inevitably leaves room for rebellion and dissent.<sup>3</sup> He insists, however, on underlining the hegemonic

role of the state and the "baroque" character even of the critical elements expressed by seventeenth-century opposition movements reacting against the repressive nature of Absolutism.

The idea of baroque prior Maravall's inquiry was above all an aesthetic one, developed by Heinrich Wölfflin in his seminal work *Renaissance and Baroque*, an investigation of the nature and origin of the baroque style in Italy from 1580 to 1630. Wölfflin's study remains of great importance to the understanding of Maravall's idea of baroque culture because, even though he does not simply consider the baroque in terms of style, he nevertheless puts Baroque style into a broader socio-cultural framework. He also theorizes the baroque as a culture, as an historical "structure" related to the formation of the modern absolutist state. This idea of the baroque as a concept of epoch creates the possibility of grounding the idea of baroque on precise historical conditions that existed in Europe in the first three quarters of the seventeenth century, with particular reference to the period from 1605 to 1650.

Before Maravall's *Culture of the Baroque*, the attempt to transfer the notion of the baroque from an aesthetic to a general historical category was neither well grounded nor successful. This is immediately evident when one considers a few examples. In *The Decline of the West*, Oswald Spengler suggested that baroque was the fulfillment of the "Faustian soul" of Western man and he traced the presence of the baroque from the end of the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment. The broad generic character of Spengler's definition virtually deprives the term of any critical value for dealing with European history. Carl Friedrich in *The Age of the Baroque (1610-1660)*, despite the chronological boundaries established in the title, does not reach a definite and precise idea of baroque in terms of historical context. Friedrich understands how difficult it is to extend the notion of baroque from the fine arts to politics and economy, but his approach remains unconvincing since he considers baroque to have been one of the four or five most universal form of Western art; he thus loses the opportunity to show how a specific style such as the baroque relates to a particular historical context. In this, Friedrich's study runs the same risk of overgeneralization implicit in Wölfflin's more formalist later work, *Principles of Art History*, which is concerned, not with the origin of the baroque style in Italy from 1580 to 1630, but with the baroque as a kind of universal style opposed to classicism.

Maravall's historical analysis is nurtured by a deep awareness of the methodological and epistemological problems involved in historical research. Only by grasping the complexity and the richness of Maravall's research can one appreciate the originality and historically grounded nature of his work. To understand his perspective, one must recall his 1958 study, *Teoría del saber histórico*, which considers the implications for historical study of the epistemological consequences of quantum physics and the theory of relativity (see chs. 1 and 3). The new scientific dimension forces the historian to recognize the mobile and complex nature of reality, in which the observer participates in the construction of the analytical object. He stresses that the historian must continuously refine the method of research and be aware of the complexity of the reality that he/she

attempts to reconstruct. Nevertheless, Maravall's approach does not entrap historical research in relativism. He suggests that the task of the historian is to reconstruct and to depict the comprehensive epochal design in which every single human fact fits and can be explained in relation to the others. Maravall's notion of "historical structure" combines a systematic attempt at defining the precise boundaries of an epoch with an interpretive construction of the historical narration (see "Ley, causa, y estructura en el campo de la Historia," *Teoría del saber histórico* 117-67). For this reason, it is important to consider the relationships between the historical "facts" within the historical "structure" as situational, not causal:

Estructura histórica es para nosotros la figura en que se nos muestra un conjunto de hechos dotados de una interna articulación, en la cual se sistematiza y cobra sentido la compleja red de relaciones que entre tales hechos se da. Es, por tanto, un sistema de relaciones dentro del cual cada hecho adquiere su sentido en función de todos los otros con los que se halla en conexión. Entre los hechos de una estructura se constituye, no un nexo causal, sino una relación situacional. (*Teoría del saber histórico* 155)

Maravall presents baroque culture as a guided culture, controlled by monarchical absolutism, as "urban" and "mass" culture, which develops in European cities to integrate the people into the modern state under sovereign authority. In this sense, it is a conservative and hegemonic culture. Though focused on Spain, Maravall's approach provides an important and comprehensive perspective from which to view other European cultures. It is, for example, extremely useful in analyzing different aspects of seventeenth-century Italian literature and culture involving the fables developed as a form of aristocratic entertainment in the Italian courts (see, e.g., the works of Giambattista Basile), as well as the *Commedia dell'Arte* which emerged in sixteenth-century Italy and which flourished throughout Europe from the seventeenth through the eighteenth centuries. The *Commedia dell'Arte* represents the first emergence of commercial spectacles that anticipate the "mass" and "guided" culture described by Maravall; it created a popular form of theater, characterized by processes of standardization similar to those we are experiencing in contemporary Western societies. The role of the actor becomes crystalized in a mask, such as that of Pulcinella. The text becomes a *canovaccio*, a standard plot that loses its literary value. The comic art of this theatrical enterprise is not transgressive but in most cases vulgar and conservative. For these reasons the *Commedia dell'Arte* inaugurates the perfect art form to be appropriated by the absolutist courts. The *Comédie-Italienne* was formally established in France in 1653 and remained popular until Louis XIV expelled the Italian troupes in 1697. The Italian players were also popular in England, Spain, and Bavaria.

Maravall's concept of the baroque as an historical structure and Wölfflin's early study of the baroque as a concept of style, even though quite distant in the content of their research and in their methodological premises, share a common goal. Despite their different assumptions, each attempts to achieve a "scientific"

definition of the baroque. On the one hand, Wölfflin's *Renaissance and Baroque* and his later *Principles of Art History* have been considered pioneer works for the emergence of the formalist school (Erlich 59). On the other hand, Maravall's concept of historical structure has structuralist affinities and finds its origin in the intellectual milieu created by works such as Claude Lévi-Strauss's "Les structures élémentaires de la parenté" (1948).

When Maravall makes use of the term *structure* for the first time in his early work *Teoría del saber histórico*, structuralism had not yet attained the popularity that it did after 1960; but the key term, structure, was already present in linguistic and in anthropological research. Moreover, the three main assumptions of Ferdinand de Saussure's systematic reexamination of language (the systematic nature of language, the relational conception of the elements of language, and the arbitrary nature of linguistic elements) can be considered a source of Maravall's *Teoría del saber histórico*.<sup>4</sup> Finally, one has to recognize that these three assumptions gave rise to what Roman Jakobson called "structuralism" as early as in 1929.<sup>5</sup>

In the preface to *Culture of the Baroque*, Maravall admits that he was aware of the use of this term by Saussure and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Even though he does not identify himself with structuralism, he states that, his concern is not to defend his originality vis-à-vis structuralist analysis of culture, but to show how he carried out research of "cumulative value" (*Culture of the Baroque* xxxvii). Maravall claims that his *Culture of the Baroque* is not a "structural" study but a study of a structure. Nonetheless, he shares with the fathers of structuralism, such as Saussure, an endeavor to create a "scientific" approach to language and culture. He shares this attempt also with Wölfflin, who tried to create a science of form and of "pure visibility" as later formalism has attempted to produce a "science" of literature.

It is interesting to note that Wölfflin and Maravall describe in similar terms the baroque style and the baroque historical structure. For both, the concept of the baroque is governed by rigid principles of unity and of subordination, which are at work below the surface of an apparent extreme freedom and arbitrariness. Wölfflin writes that in the system of classical art the part is conditioned by the whole and yet does not cease to have its own life. The unity in classical art is conceived as harmony and coordination of relatively autonomous parts. The seventeenth century demands an articulation, a progress from part to part, and the unity becomes a result of the subordination of all other elements to one unconditioned dominant. In Wölfflin's terms, this new idea of unity that comes out in the seventeenth century is the consequence of a new way of seeing focused on the whole and not on the detail. Wölfflin shows this change by comparing a *Deposition* by Dürer (1471-1528) with a *Deposition* by Rembrandt (1606-1669); this example provides a pronounced opposition of a composition with individual and independent figures (Dürer) to a composition with dependent figures (Rembrandt). (See Wölfflin, *Principles* 155-58.)

Wölfflin's analysis parallels Maravall's discourse on the modern state and is useful to understand how painting, like theater, the other great art of the period,

was deeply conditioned by the absolutist ideology and strove to integrate the public into the system of values of the absolutist and aristocratic society. It is not by chance that Maravall quotes Wölfflin as a source in his work on the *Culture of the Baroque*. For instance, in the chapter on the "Fundamental Concepts of the Worldly Structure of Life," Maravall studies the prominent role of the idea of movement among the elements of a baroque world view and admits that since Wölfflin the categories of movement and change are necessary to the significance of the baroque (175-76).

However, Maravall insists also on his distance from Wölfflin's reduction of the baroque to an aesthetic category. In this respect Maravall's criticism of Wölfflin resembles a structuralist critique of formalism and of the formalist assumption that "style" can be legitimately isolated from other cultural phenomena. Jakobson and other structuralists such as Jan Mukarovsky and Lévi-Strauss opposed "structure" to "form" or "style" as the central concept of understanding of human culture and society. In a similar manner Maravall, in opposition to Wölfflin's formalism, studies art, literature, and theater as cultural as well as aesthetic phenomena and insists on the dynamic relational nature of the baroque as an historical structure.

One may argue about the usefulness of the notion of the baroque itself and try to deconstruct Maravall's view along the lines of Jacques Derrida's critique of Lévi-Strauss. Then, one would reach the deconstructionist conclusion (which is also an assumption) that there is no objective examination of culture or structure, because the attempt to interpret cultural structures cannot be adequately translated into precise scientific models. Finally, this would put into question all the historical structures and the notion of Renaissance and Middle Ages, among others. After all, the idea of baroque would not have been created if the idea of Renaissance and of classical art had not already been available. Nevertheless, the deconstructive move, though necessary to realize the weaknesses of each historical structure "scientifically" conceived, would leave open the question of characterizing in historical terms the different epochs and the different styles one is dealing with in teaching literature and art history. This would point back to the questions addressed by Wölfflin and Maravall and to the attempt at defining the specific features of a style and of an epoch. In returning to those questions, by way of Maravall's argument, one may find that the baroque is the starting point of modernity, and that the idea most in need of deconstruction is, as Maravall suggests, the notion of a marked break between Middle Ages and Renaissance.

I consider Maravall's and Wölfflin's works on the baroque to be the best introduction to modern culture, that is to say, to the necessary premise of what contemporary criticism calls postmodernism. In this respect, one should take into account two major factors: 1) Wölfflin's idea of renovating the traditional notion of art history by substituting the typology of artistic styles for the study of individual artists; 2) the role that Maravall assigns to seventeenth-century scientific revolution in the formation of Baroque and modern art and culture.<sup>6</sup> These two elements can work together as a necessary introduction to what Walter

Benjamin conceives as the main characteristics of modern art as opposed to classical art, namely, the loss of the aura (the atmosphere of uniqueness and luminous radiation surrounding classic art), as a consequence of the new media of reproduction and representation.

In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin explored the implications of "technical reproducibility" in film and photography for an understanding of aesthetics in general and the task of criticism. In his earlier study of the corpus of German Baroque drama, *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin pointed out some crucial similarities between baroque and the contemporary art, above all Expressionism:

The analogy between the endeavors of the baroque and those of the present and the recent past is most apparent in the use of language. Exaggeration is characteristic of both. The creations of these two literary styles do not emerge from any sense of common existence; the violence of their manner is, rather, designed to conceal the absence of widely accepted works of literature. For like expressionism, the baroque is not so much an age of genuine artistic achievement as an age possessed of an unremitting artistic will. (54-55; emphasis mine)

Benjamin was thinking primarily of Riegl's notion of "artistic will" (*Kunstwollen*) as the creative force which underlies all artistic and literary works for a particular period and civilization and goes beyond the distinction between high and low culture.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, one must recognize in Benjamin's attempt at outlining a form as such, beyond the study of the well-made individual works, the influence of Wölfflin's notion of style. One should recall at this point that Benjamin followed Wölfflin's lessons in Munich and that he is repeating here Wölfflin's inclination to compare baroque art to contemporary art and to relate some features of baroque art to modern Impressionism. For Benjamin, in baroque art (as it will happen in the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction), the "meaning" and the nature of art is no longer defined by its uniqueness and opens itself to a wider reality and to different values. One may see the emergence of these ideas precisely in the notion of artistic will developed by Benjamin in his study on baroque culture along the lines of Riegl's and Wölfflin's works.

Maravall's reflection on the influence of Galileo and the Scientific Revolution on modern painting can be related to both Wölfflin's notion of style and to Benjamin's idea of form as it is expressed in *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama* and in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." In his work on Velázquez, Maravall shows that the new and anti-Platonic vision of nature made possible by Galileo is at the origin of the new vision of nature that develops in baroque painting. Following the advent of modern rationalism, Galileo's revolution, and the introduction of the telescope and various scientific instruments of measurement, what really counts in Velázquez's paintings is not the imitation of nature or the creation of a perfect and ideal copy of it, as it was conceived by the neoplatonism of the Renaissance. What matters now is the painter's vision, the human experience of the natural object. Finally, Maravall,

following his idea of the baroque as an historical structure, shows how the two revolutions, the one introduced by Galileo and the one introduced by Velázquez, are related to the presence of a bourgeois audience no longer interested in the mythological and moral content of the painting.<sup>8</sup>

In the appendix to *Culture of Baroque* Maravall traces the "Sociopolitical Objectives of the Use of Visual Media" in terms that draw on Benjamin's studies of the role of cinema in modern art and mass culture. He points out that painting predominated among the art forms of baroque culture precisely because of the efficacy of the visual image that is typical of societies where a guided mass culture develops. Maravall alludes here, as Wölfflin and Benjamin did, to the relationships between baroque culture and contemporary culture. In this sense, one could even think of the so-called "postmodern culture" in terms of "neo-baroque culture" as Omar Calabrese has done in his *L'età neobarocca*. This move would lead one to reexamine the assumption implicit in the term "postmodernism," namely, the definitive demise of modern culture in our times.

In conclusion, I emphasize the relevance of Wölfflin's and Maravall's works not only for the study of baroque and modern culture but also for addressing contemporary cultural and aesthetic debates. We may argue about what postmodernism is but we cannot avoid studying the premises of modern and postmodern culture in the emergence of the baroque. Finally, Wölfflin's *Renaissance and Baroque* has already achieved the status of a classic work in seventeenth-century studies and in any serious attempt at defining modern culture and neo-baroque aesthetics. Wölfflin's idea of style leads to a philosophy of art that has been utilized even in recent attempts at rethinking baroque philosophy, such as Gilles Deleuze's *Le pli: Leibniz et le baroque*. Because of the relevance of its analyses and still unexplored insights, the time has come to read also Maravall's *Culture of the Baroque* in terms of a classic and seminal work on modern culture.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Maravall (*Estudios de historia* 250). The entire chapter on "Espíritu burgués y principio de interés personal en la Ilustración española" (245-68) is useful.

<sup>2</sup> "Pero nos dicen también que los resortes de la simple fuerza física no bastan para resolver las tensiones que surgen, sino que hay que acudir a recursos de persuasión. El repertorio de estos últimos constituye la cultura del barroco con que los príncipes montan la propaganda de los nuevos regímenes de dominación social, con fines de integración" (*Teatro y literatura en la sociedad barroca* 10). In Gramscian terms this means that the modern state needs to develop a cultural hegemony in order to govern and maintain its power. Gramsci describes hegemony as a combination of force and persuasion, for example, in his notes on *Machiavelli and the Modern Prince* in his *Quaderni del carcere* (1636-38).

<sup>3</sup> He has studied the seventeenth-century political movements which opposed Absolutism in an essay, "Esquema de las tendencias de oposición hasta mediados del siglo XVII." In *Teatro y literatura en la sociedad barroca* he writes about the repressive project of the modern state: "Pero esos fines a que acabamos de aludir, ni se logran siempre ni en todas partes por igual, ni provocan las mismas respuestas en quienes, de alguna manera —positivamente, o, tal vez, negativamente—se

ven implicados en esa experiencia político-cultural. Dejando aparte los casos de rebeldía declarada o, por lo menos, de oposición política directa, hay quienes nos descubren en pleno XVII una inequívoca actitud de discrepancia, como puede observarse en el análisis de una literatura crítica cuya extremada gesticulación barroca proviene del aherrojamiento que sienten sobre sí, en sus impulsos individuales y sociales, ciertos grupos" (10-11). He is referring here particularly to the picaresque novel.

<sup>4</sup> In this work Maravall is aware of the use of the term *structure* in different scientific disciplines and pays attention particularly to the use of this term in linguistics (*Teoría del saber histórico* 156-57).

<sup>5</sup> See Jakobson. The term *structuralism* is conceived by Jakobson as able to comprise the leading idea of present-day science in its most various manifestations, because "any set of phenomena examined by contemporary science is treated not as a mechanical agglomeration but as a structural whole" (711).

<sup>6</sup> Maravall develops this idea in his work on *Velázquez y el espíritu de la Modernidad*.

<sup>7</sup> For the *Kunstwollen* in late Roman art industry, see Riegl.

<sup>8</sup> Maravall's source here is Arnold Hauser who speaks of the development of a public for art in baroque society. This public is constituted by connoisseurs and people interested in art from widely differing classes of society (Hauser 2: 200-07).

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