



(Neo-)Baroque Aesthetics in Literature: Visuality, Ekphrasis and Frame-Breaking

International Conference; HHU Duesseldorf, 13.10.2023

Baroque, literally referencing an irregular pearl, is obsessed with excess, materiality and disorder; it is fascinated with objects, knowledge, and perceptions that trouble existing classifications and that put pressure on conventional distinctions between reality and illusion. Colonial endeavors, including the so-called discovery of new global spaces, confronted Europe with a captivating, yet unsettling array of material, sensual and epistemic novelties, which could hardly be integrated within established visual regimes and orders of knowledge. Together with a number of technological innovations, such as the telescope, these novelties indeed led to a “heightened perception of the world as spectacle” (Lyons 2019) and introduced new scales of vision. Concomitantly, they also spurred ever new attempts to establish a sense of order and to master the unknown and excessive.

In literature, the period’s preoccupation with excess, spectacle and irregularity manifests in a complex and multi-layered engagement with visuality and vision. This engagement displays an acute awareness of how materiality and embodiment enable vision. Ekphrases, the simultaneous presence of words and images (such as in the emblem), radical reworkings of perspectives as well as experiments with frames pervade many Baroque literary texts. As a deeply relational form, literary visuality affectively appeals to readers’ senses and affords unusual as well as unexpected imaginative possibilities. Many of these visual devices can also be found in Neo-Baroque literatures, as amply illustrated by the texts of, e.g., Djuna Barnes, Michael Ondaatje, Salman Rushdie, José Donoso, Diamela Eltit, etc. Yet, to a greater extent than their Baroque predecessors, Neo-Baroque literatures draw attention to the invisibilities that are inherent in the production of visibility, gesturing towards what lies outside the frame and escapes established regimes of seeing.

The conference is dedicated to exploring the pronounced visuality that is a formative, yet understudied element of the (Neo-)Baroque aesthetics. We invite contributions that examine Baroque and Neo-Baroque literature’s fascination with vision, visuality, images, frames, spectacle as well as other verbal-visual configurations. We are particularly interested in theorizing verbal-visual configurations as an integral part of a locally and temporally specific (Neo-)Baroque aesthetics, while also seeking to trace transcultural and transhistorical forms of (ex-)change. Moreover, we seek to initiate a dialogue about the aesthetic categories that are suited to capturing some of Baroque’s and Neo-Baroque’s specificities. Last but not least, the conference aims to do justice to the affective potential of literary visuality and to reveal the interplay between form and matter.

The conference is part of a larger CHLEL project; selected papers will be published. For more information see:

<https://www.uantwerpen.be/en/projects/chlel/>

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