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The “Natural” Is a Sham: The Baroque and Its Contemporary Avatars.

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This article discusses three aesthetics which go against the understanding of “the natural” as the default setting of life and being: baroque, punk and camp celebrate the artificiality and made-upness of man-made worlds. Reflecting on autobiographical encounters with these styles, and using a Lacanian frame of analysis, the author discusses what makes these styles appealing to some and horrific to others, and what they effectuate in the lives of their aficionados.

My father had a profound dislike for the baroque. Whenever instances of the baroque were encountered on the road to southern holiday destinations – churches, palaces, gardens, fountains, artworks in museums – me and my brothers were instructed to see artificiality, decadence, sentimentalism and kitsch. This was most emphatically the case with baroque interventions in medieval architecture, as when an austere monastery had been donned with a baroque façade, or the solemn, heavy darkness of a Romanesque church interior turned out to contain a gilded baroque altar – all curls, cherubs, theatrically gesticulating saints and frivolous garlands. Such encounters would invariably provoke a disgusted “ugh”, followed by an indignant “baroque!”.

As I will elaborate below, my father’s dislike of the baroque had its idiosyncratic grounds, but he was certainly not the only one who felt the baroque was an insult to his sensibilities. Particularly in academia, I am confronted with very similar expressions of dislike when I discuss the baroque registers of world-making I have encountered in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil. In this old colonial capital, where my anthropological research is based, the baroque is an inescapable presence. As an aesthetic it informs not only architecture and the decorative arts, but also contemporary ways of talking and feasting; as a scholarly term it figures in studies of Bahian cultural history and the Bahian ethos. What is more, many Bahians use the term as a self-referential concept: countless times some Bahian informant would tell me “we are very *barroco*!”. Elsewhere I have discussed baroque modes of world-making in Bahia at length.¹ Here I will shift my attention to the curious reception of the baroque in my own home country, the Netherlands. Few anthropologists studying African art, Oriental architecture or Papua-New Guinean rituals will find the discussants of their work exclaiming “well, this is all very interesting, but I just can’t stand this aesthetic!”. The scholar of the baroque, however, is confronted with such comments repeatedly. Which makes one wonder, what is so provocative about the baroque? Why do people like my father, or some academics, take this aesthetic to be an insult to their sensibilities? What is at stake in their indignant rejection of the baroque?

In this essay I will argue that the baroque, and some of its contemporary avatars such as “punk” and “camp”, are denaturalising aesthetics. They question the understanding of “the natural” as

the default setting of life and being, and thus threaten the very core of a deeply cherished worldview. The object of my reflections may seem somewhat unorthodox: having been brought up to dislike the baroque, yet knowing myself to be seduced by the style, this essay ponders my own encounters and engagements with the baroque. I'm all too aware that beyond anthropology autobiographical accounts may be frowned upon in academia as they bring the limits of the objectifying gaze of the academic to our attention, and may reveal that academic reports on reality, while "often presented and read as definitive and timeless, are in fact selective and historically contingent" (Okely and Callaway 3). Within anthropology, however, the interpretative and inter-subjective nature of our particular mode of knowledge production has been broadly acknowledged. Anthropological representations of other people's life-worlds are grounded in the encounter between different modes and registers of world-making: those of the anthropologist and those of the people he or she studies. Anthropologists are therefore always alert to the ways one's own cultural frame of reference informs and possibly distorts one's perception of the Other. This is most emphatically the case where it concerns the apprehensions of reality through such tacit notions of the "natural" and the "unnatural". In other words, what may come across as self-indulgence is in fact an attempt to make the inherently comparative nature of all anthropological work explicit and an object of scholarly reflection.

Aesthetics are a fundamental dimension of a particular way of being-in-the-world.² My father was a history teacher and aficionado of medieval art and music. His heart opened to the Romanesque churches and monasteries of Burgundy; to the abbeys of rural Flanders in their apple-orchard settings; or to the ancient, lichen covered ruins of Europe's Celtic fringe. Travelling in Spain he sought traces of the Visigoth period. The slides he made during his "Grand Tour" of Italy showed a country that had been populated by Saracens, Normans, and Byzantines. Michelangelo did not figure in his series – let alone Bernini.

Looking back, I am struck by just how much my father's revelling in the misty beginnings of "European" civilisation – and his rejection of the baroque – was in tune with the "alternative" lifestyle he pursued during his life. My father was a "hippy" (as far as being a hippy was possible in the catholic deep south of the Netherlands). The henna-haired feminist women with whom he had set up a communal household introduced him to organic gardening, macrobiotic cooking, homeopathic medicine and knitted sweaters of homespun wool. "Earthiness" and "the natural" dominated the design of their home - a uniform, terraced house in a middle-class suburb. They used what they called "eerlijke materialen" (honest materials): earthenware, wood, sisal, felt, burlap and unbleached cotton. "Honesty" was also the qualification that informed the overall relaxation of bodily regimes in my father's household: bras were discarded, armpits left unshaven, farts deemed "healthy" and "natural", and sex needed to be liberated from the constraints of matrimony. And indeed, these honest materials and honest relaxations helped to remind them that there was something deeply dishonest about the plastics, Lycra, fake leather and acrylics that their suburban neighbours used in dreaming up their

modern lives; just as the complaints of these neighbours about my father's un-mown lawns and proliferating weeds were considered to be dishonest: dishonest to life as it was meant to be.

This alternative, organic life merged seamlessly with my father's reveries about pre-modern times – so much so that I suspect that his embrace of this lifestyle was motivated first and foremost by the opportunities it offered him to travel back in time. The cooked spelt and parsnips that were put out on the dinner table were praised as much for being “organic” as for having been part of an earlier, pre-potato staple diet in north-western Europe. Despite entertaining communist sympathies, my father more easily identified with the struggle of the twelfth century Cathar heretics in southern France (on which he had gathered a small library) than with the struggle of the mineworkers in a nearby town after the coalmines had been closed. He was totally sincere when he sang the praises of his (not too handsome) latest girlfriend by saying that “she could have walked out of a painting by the Flemish Primitives”, and much to the distress of my brothers and myself he kept instructing the family's hairdresser to give us a haircut that he called “*pagekopje*”, which translates as a “page-boy”, and was to imitate the hairstyle of thirteenth century shield bearers. Looking at photographs from the period our rebellion was not without reason. Clearly, our hairdresser had no idea about thirteenth century shield bearers and their hairstyles: we looked like the then popular French *chansonnière* Mireille Mathieu.

Baroque aesthetics had no place in this merger of an alternative, organic lifestyle with fantasies of the pre-modern. Baroque, we were told, was mere tinsel, surface, falseness and make-believe. As a celebration of artifice, it was as dishonest as plastic, Lycra, fake leather and acrylics. It was as false as the neighbours' stiffly-groomed, Versailles-like hedges and ornamental trees. Politically, the baroque expressed the despicable *trionfantalisme* (“triumphantalism”) of the Catholic Church. Ethically, it signalled the degeneration of the purity, simplicity and clarity of medieval art; the disavowal of an original spirituality by a religious institute gone corrupt; the end of the ascetic ideal of turning inward and meditation.

In his wonderful *Metamorfose van de Barok*, *Metamorphosis of the Baroque* (1992), art historian Frank Reijnders discusses the baroque as the anti-art *par excellence*. The spirit of the baroque – which he finds to be operative in various moments in the history of the arts, not just in the historical period labelled “the baroque” – disrupts an understanding of the arts as the articulators of that which is perfect, good, true, essential and pure in the world. Hence the title of Reijnders' work: far from being a unified style, Reijnders' baroque is in a process of constant metamorphosis, continuously trying to shatter harmonious dream-worlds, whether they be of a classicist, romantic, fin-de-siècle or modernist signature. The baroque appropriates artistic vocabularies and techniques, but uses these as a crowbar with which to break open worlds of perfection, so as to bring out the lack in all artistic representations of life and being.

As an art historian, Reijnders limits his discussion to the arts proper, but given that aesthetics are an intrinsic dimension of all forms of being, the spirit of the baroque does not limit its work of

disruption to the realm of the arts. It penetrates the realm of the everyday, and the lifestyles that people develop to make themselves at home in the world. Following Reijnders, my father's disgusted "ugh" is exactly what the baroque seeks to provoke.

I took my father's teachings on the baroque as a denaturalising aesthetic that causes havoc in an "organic" worldview to heart; albeit – as happens all too frequently with paternal teachings – in the opposite manner to that intended by him.

When I moved to Amsterdam in the early 1980s, I found myself seduced by aesthetic styles that might well be considered avatars of the spirit of the baroque. This was the Amsterdam of punk and new wave. I lived in a squat, and as a squatter I was in the business of not being "organic" or "natural". "No apple-orchards, please", pretty much summarised the worldview I was cultivating. There was abundant coarse wooden material in the eternal building sites I inhabited with my fellow squatters. Yet this wood did not (as it did in my father's house) signify "tree" or "forest" or "the natural". It meant "under construction". Following this same logic, electrical wires and water pipes were not neatly plastered out of sight, but highlighted by being painted in screaming colours.

In our sartorial practices, we sought to be even more radically anti-natural and un-organic. Our spiked hair-dos – lustrous green, shocking blue, peroxide blond, neon pink – provoked comments from the neighbours about our having "stuck our fingers in an electrical socket", which we loudly dismissed as "petty bourgeois", while silently savouring the comparison. All we wanted was to shock the world out of its complacency. The t-shirts and sweaters we bought were immediately cut up and torn out of shape, only to be repaired and remodelled with safety pins. We pierced our earlobes and donned ourselves with Plexiglass jewellery. We got drunk on cheap beer and danced through the night in the most disharmonious kind of ways. We admired the "unnatural" movements of break-dance, chequered black-and-white ska aesthetics, and bought records by the German New Wave band *Einstürzende Neubauten*, "electro pop" band *Kraftwerk* and the then famous Belgium singer Plastic Bertrand.

The "natural", we felt, was for "old hippies". We wanted to be radical realists rather than dreamers. To be a punk was to face the artifice of man-made worlds. And to be angry about it. Unlike the historical baroque, which as a religious aesthetics highlighted the imperfection of man-made worlds to thus fuel the desire for a transcendent, divine power capable of replenishing this lack, our punk sought to live this lack. "No future", it said on the badges we wore. (Yet things were of course never that nihilistic. I now recall that the first paper I wrote for an anthropology class in those days was about the poetry of medieval troubadours and their ideal of courtly love).

My explorations of the Amsterdam gay scene, which I had frequented ever since I had arrived in the Dutch capital, brought me into contact with another avatar of the baroque: the style that is known as

“camp”. Camp could be described as a sensibility for cultural forms that are “truly false”, which is expressed in a joyful indulgence in kitsch, pathos, high drama, baroque exaggeration and over-the-top-extravaganza. As Susan Sontag wrote in her pioneering essay “Notes on ‘Camp’”: “the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration” (280).

Elsewhere I have argued that the affinity of many gay men with the celebration of falsity that is camp – the genuine appreciation of the made-up-ness of things – has everything to do with the process of self-discovery and self-definition that is popularly called “coming out of the closet” (Van de Port “Genuinely Made-Up”). The simple fact that effectively no one is brought up to be gay suggests that, however diverse histories of becoming gay may be, arguably they are all permeated with feelings of alienation. After all, the process of “coming out” implies a rupture with a self that was not only brought up to be straight, but to be *naturally* straight. As many have argued, hetero-normativity is not merely a set of ideas and norms, but is naturalised by the inscription of these norms and ideas on the body (Bourdieu; Mauss) and reified in constant performativity (Butler). To turn boys into straight men, the male body must be honed to eat, drink, walk, sit, stand, squat, gesticulate, look, make love, dance and talk in ways that are understood as masculine.

“Coming out” is to recognize this corporeal masculinity as a sham; it raises the awareness that the “naturalness” of straight masculinity is not a given, but is a social construct. Unsurprisingly then, many gays harbour, and often cherish, a lifelong suspicion of anything that claims to be “natural”. This is exactly what camp articulates. Camp considers the truth of that which is evidently false and artificial to be more reliable than truths which claim to be “natural truths”. It is to embrace the authenticity of drag queens, pumped-up muscles, affected gesticulations, lavishly hair-sprayed hairdos, artificial suntans, ABBA love songs, Versace sunglasses, and the chemically produced bliss of Viagra and Ecstasy. It is to develop a taste for the venomous “bitching”, the verbal duels that take place late at night, at the bar of some gay club, aimed at exposing all appearances as posturing and make-believe. It is also the dream of becoming an expert in masking and make-believe by pursuing a career in such decorative skills as hairdressing, *visagerie* or fashion design. As Philip Core put it succinctly in the title of his study of the style, camp is “the lie that tells the truth” (1999).

In the introduction to *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject* (1999), Fabio Cleto argues that camp’s constant attempts to reveal the natural itself as an invention cannot provide identities with “a substantial, stabilizing core” (6). I disagree with him on this point. Indeed, camp seeks to reveal that the natural is a social script, not the default setting of life and being to which we can return to get a sense of what is real and genuinely true. Yet camp brings in another anchor point for “the Real”: desire.

A brief exposition of Lacanian thinking on subject formation may be necessary to grasp this point. Desire, Terry Eagleton (2009) has forcefully argued, pertains to the Lacanian register of the Real. Lacan’s vision of the human subject maintains that *vis-à-vis* the fullness of life as we experience it, our representations of life and being (in a Lacanian vocabulary: the order of the symbolic) are always lacking. The order of the symbolic promises what Lacanian thinkers call “symbolic closure”,

the reassuring sense that “things are as they are and could not have been otherwise”, but fails to offer it. We are constantly confronted with events, occurrences and sense perceptions that are not accounted for in the stories we live by, and thus “could not be”. The surplus of our reality definitions constantly obstructs our sense that “subject and object, or self and world, [are] tailor-made for one another” (Eagleton, *Trouble* 10). Only in fantasy and daydreaming, so the Lacanians say, can we cover this lack in the order of the symbolic; only in fantasy, can we possess the comforting sensation that the world is “on familiar terms with us, conforming obediently to our desires and bending to our motions as obsequiously as one’s reflection in the glass” (ibid.). Yet fantasies, as we all know, do not last. And so, all we can ever do is to “[plug] our lack with one poor fantasy object after another” (Eagleton, “Enjoy” 7).

In this rather bleak sketch of the condition of the human subject, desire is our endless and impossible quest to undo the lack that the order of the symbolic produces. Eagleton defines desire as “an empty, intransitive yearning whose various targets all turn out to be arbitrary substitutes for one another”, a “nameless hankering”, an “inner unrest that is beyond representation” (“Good Dinners” 13). And yet, we all know this inner unrest all too well. Indeed, Lacanians make the argument that there is nothing more “me” than my desire. Representations of our selves – whether linguistic or extra-linguistic – always generate sensations of alienation, in the sense that we often feel that we cannot adequately communicate our feelings, and do not fit our roles. Desire, by contrast, does not easily generate such feelings of alienation. The drive that is desire, says Eagleton, is “entirely without meaning and glacially indifferent to all the objects in which it invests, which it uses simply for its own fruitless self-reproduction. [And yet, desire is that] which I can experience from the inside of my body with incomparably greater immediacy than I can know anything else” (ibid.).

Camp offers many examples to illustrate the suggestion that it is in fact a production site of desire. For all of its efforts to expose the artificiality in human behaviour, camp can never be equated with mere cynicism or irony. Camp’s declaration that the fake is the greater truth never fully mitigates a sentimental yearning for that which is “naturally” true, and fosters a keenness to register possible signs of that truth. Thus, a camp sensibility revels in the grotesque artificiality of Tom of Finland’s famous renditions of “horse-hung” and pumped-up male bodies.³ Yet a camp sensibility will always juxtapose the *mindful* knowing that such males only exist in the exaggerations of fantasy with a *body* that is not affected by such knowing, and might well become aroused over these pictures. Laughing over “Muscle Marys” cannot undo the desiring body:⁴ indeed, I would suggest that camp invokes that desiring body to produce the “substantial, stabilizing core” which it finds missing in the order of the symbolic. Similarly, tears shed over tearjerkers, over the drunken sobbing of Chavela Vargas songs, or over Maria Callas’ larger-than-life-emotions bring “nature” back into camp celebrations of over-the-topness. Whatever provoked these tears, they are warm, salty, bodily fluids; “natural symbols”, as Mary Douglas (1976) would call them. It is thus that one of the masters of camp, filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar, lets one of his characters in *All About my Mother*, the transgender Agrado, explain that she “adores” farewells and goodbyes, as these provide her with an opportunity “to cry her eyes out”. Paradoxically, then, a camp celebration of falseness may well be understood as an attempt to open the

gates to the realm of the “natural”. Yet in camp the “natural” becomes an impossible object of desire, rather than the default setting of life-and-being.

I have argued that the historical “baroque” – of church architecture, of Bernini sculptures, of French gardens – is but a particular manifestation of an aesthetic impulse that can be found in many epochs and places (cf. Calabrese 1992). Following Lacanian insights, one could argue that this aesthetic impulse keeps drawing attention to the lack that is at the heart of all representational practices. It reveals that the “natural”, the “organic”, the “harmonious”, the “seamless unity of the world and our imaginations of it” are fantasy formations, objects of desire that are never fully within reach. It is an aesthetic impulse that highlights the ultimate failure and impossibility of representation as such, and does not provide us with alternative forms of representation that might bring about “symbolic closure”.

Fierce rejections of the baroque are thus cast in another light. Far from being merely a matter of taste, the denaturalising aesthetics I have discussed question the “natural” as the basis for our definitions of reality; they unsettle the ground from which these definitions obtain their quality of being taken for granted. Highlighting the artifice and contingency of the worlds of meaning we inhabit, baroque aesthetics portray the human condition as a never-ending search for an immanent connection between the world and our imaginations of it - and they qualify this search as doomed to fail.

What these denaturalising aesthetics produce, however, is desire: the energy or drive to keep on acting, making, creating, pursuing that connection. I have shown that the way this desire is played out differs from time to time, and from place to place. Thus, the colonial baroque of Salvador da Bahia, Brazil sought to channel this desire toward an omnipotent God, whose interventions might bring the *harmonia mundi* Bahians crave for, but are incapable of producing. In the contemporary avatars of the baroque discussed here this energy seems less purposefully channelled towards a transcendent, redemptive, harmonising force. Punk produced the energy of anger, but in my recollections it did not produce a utopian alternative to the social order it sought to denaturalise. Rather, it embraced the force of this anger in the here and now. Camp has a more melancholic stance towards the “natural” from which its performers have been exiled. Yet here too, the energy of the libidinous, desiring body is embraced as an irrefutable experiential core that lends stability to gay identifications. Last but not least, for those unwilling to give up on the idea that the “natural” is the default setting of life and being – people such as my father, or those academics who vented their “personal” dislike of the style I am exploring in Bahia – denaturalising aesthetics produce the energy to fortify a cherished worldview by uttering a disgusted “ugh” and an indignant “baroque!”.

Notes

1. See Van de Port *Ecstatic Encounters*; “Genuinely Made-Up”.
2. Following Birgit Meyer, I take aesthetics to be “our total sensory experience of the world and our sensitive knowledge of it” (Meyer 6). Taking aesthetics into account in the study of other people’s life-worlds implies paying attention to “the affective power of images, sounds, and texts over their beholders” (ibid.).
3. Tom of Finland, a pseudonym of Touko Laaksonen (1920-1991) was a Finnish artist, whose homoerotic drawings circulate widely in the global gay scene.
4. In gay slang, a ‘muscle Mary’ is a gay man who shows off his pumped up muscles in gay venues.

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