

## *Baroquemanía*: a counter-rationalist history of Italian art

Review of:

Laura Moure Cecchini, *Baroquemanía: Italian Visual Culture and The Construction of National Identity, 1898-1954*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021, 288 pp., 93 col. Plates, £ 80, ISBN 9781526153173

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In *Baroquemanía*, Laura Moure Cecchini takes her readers on a fascinating, less-travelled journey through Italian art from the fin de siècle to the end of the Second World War, the years when Italy was consolidating its position as a nation state. The book focuses on the Baroque, at a time when the main accepted aesthetic paradigms were first decadent and futurist aesthetics, and later rationalism. How did the Baroque feature within a landscape that intentionally seemed to exclude it? On which grounds – political, economic, social or aesthetic – was the Baroque marginalised from the official artistic history of the new nation state? And why could the Baroque not be an integral part of Italian national identity? These are just some of the questions that naturally arise from the book's main argument that 'by reinventing Baroque forms in their artistic and architectural practices, Italians confronted their fears about the past and imagined the future of their nation.'<sup>1</sup> The Baroque therefore becomes a tool for questioning certain fundamental aspects of the nation-forming process, including some that are not quantifiable historically, socially or economically. Moreover, investigating both the presence of Baroque art and its theorisation calls for a re-evaluation of key discussions about Italian artistic culture: the relationship between regionalism and nationalism, Italy's internationalism, and the development of modernism. In so doing, by re-inscribing the Baroque within Italy's intellectual and artistic landscapes, *Baroquemanía* challenges the alleged hegemony of the classical tradition or of 1930s rationalism in unidirectionally shaping Italian culture. Unlike the consolidated classical tradition and the solid modernity of rationalism, the anti-classical Baroque, with its complex and ambivalent visual repertoire, enabled Italians to question rather than to affirm their newly found national identity, their sense of belonging to a modern nation, and even their faith in a bright future. Or, in the author's own words: 'The afterlives of the Baroque in modern Italy, and its temporal and conceptual destabilisation, allowed Italians to work through a crisis of modernity and develop a distinctively Italian modern approach to visual culture.'<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Laura Moure Cecchini, *Baroquemanía: Italian Visual Culture and The Construction of National Identity, 1898-1954*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Cecchini, *Baroquemanía*, 3.

Modernity, modernisation, classical tradition, national identity and their assorted crises have been pivotal matters for scholars of the art and intellectual history of the first fifty years of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> Often treated as a historical problem, these *questioni* have informed most, if not all, of the scholarship on arts and power in Italy, but they have pushed the Baroque to the margins of their enquiry. Moure Cecchini's book fills this critical gap. Sandwiched between an introduction and a conclusion are six chapters, arranged thematically and united by some running threads, such as the issues of national identity, regionalism, art under the regime, rationalism and the avant-gardes. The emergence of the Baroque in Italy unfolds throughout the various phases of Italian history, starting in 1889 with Gabriele D'Annunzio's recasting of the Baroque and ending with some reflections on the aesthetics of neorealist cinema.

The introduction sets out clearly the book's theoretical underpinnings. Starting from the premise that 'constructing a shared national modern Italian narrative became urgent when what had been an "imagined community" was finally unified', Laura Moure Cecchini asks why the Baroque was sidelined in this narrative of the nation-building project.<sup>4</sup> A narrative is by necessity a deliberate and arbitrary process of inclusions and of exclusions, designed to convey a certain message to its recipients. Why, therefore, was the Baroque hidden in such a narrative, and where? Was it forgotten somewhere between the Renaissance and the Risorgimento? And is the Baroque even an Italian problem? Moure Cecchini traces a history of the use of term 'Baroque' as applied to the visual arts, and although she attributes its first, derogatory use to the art historian Francesco Milizia in 1797, she considers the seminal fin-de-siècle work *Renaissance and Baroque: An Investigation into the Nature and Origin of the Baroque Style in Italy* (1888) by art historian Heinrich Wöfflin a milestone in the nineteenth-century re-evaluation of the style. She draws this conclusion because he views the Baroque as a positive, modern force that can unite a nation and not an inane form of indulgence in eccentricity. Modernity and national identity are the central themes of this book, yet the idea of a unified national identity, even as the result of a nation-building process, is hard to uphold. Indeed, the late nineteenth-century international revival of Baroque and its simultaneous Italian appropriation provided a valid alternative to a rational explanation of the process and thus empowered Italian artists to construct 'a distinct Italian modern identity'.<sup>5</sup> The intrinsically convoluted and polymorphous nature of the Baroque, Moure Cecchini fittingly postulates, allowed a unitary yet fragmented and interconnected concept of national identity to be advanced.

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<sup>3</sup> See for instance: Walter Adamson, *Avant-Garde Florence: From Modernism to Fascism*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993; Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities. Italy, 1922-1945*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001; Francesca Billiani, *Fascist Modernism. Arts and Regimes*, London: I.B.Tauris/Bloomsbury, 2021; Emily Braun, *Mario Sironi and Italian Modernism: Art and Politics under Fascism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000; Emilio Gentile, *The Struggle for Modernity*, Westport: Praeger, 2003; Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Cecchini, *Baroquemanía*, 3.

<sup>5</sup> Cecchini, *Baroquemanía*, 14

Similarly, it is indisputable that modernity is an Italian obsession, fuelled by a constant need to rediscover the Edenic position it held during the Renaissance. But discussing this aspiration for modernity in abstract terms has not been as productive as hoped.<sup>6</sup> Conversely, the discussion of modernity grounded in the development of the country's infrastructure, a concern which was political as well as aesthetic, has enabled critics to paint a much more convincing picture of the arts' influence on the process of national unification and indeed the Fascist regime's plans to modernise the country.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, the debate on the Baroque is most productive when it touches on the relationship between arts and politics, which shaped not only the process of national unification, but more broadly the country's domestic and foreign policy and relations on its pathway to modernity during the first decades of its existence. While, as the author points out, the debate on the Baroque in Germany and in Latin American studies has flourished and reached significant conclusions about the Baroque's suitability to represent the instability of the national unification process, this gap still needs to be filled for Italy, and particularly within a well-defined historical period and with a focus on the visual arts.

The Baroque's natural fluidity and ability to circumvent rigid boundaries means it is woven into the political and artistic life of the country, something first probed by one of its earliest enthusiasts, Gabriele D'Annunzio, who was pioneering in his view of the arts as active members of the marketplace. He witnessed the growth of Italy's industrial infrastructure and the beginning of the negotiations that sought to turn the new nation into a major player in international politics, and particularly to improve its relations with Austria. The Italian Decadentists were able to adopt the Baroque as a way of representing the political and cultural tensions of their age, alongside their denial of the pervasive power of reason and their contempt for the masses, which taken altogether put them in dialogue with current European sensibilities, such as those embodied by Charles Baudelaire or Joris-Karl Huysmans. Based on these premises, chapter one focuses on how D'Annunzio, as editor of the influential and lavish magazine *Cronaca Bizantina*, inscribed the decadent Seicento into the expectations of the Roman and Italian upper classes. The decadent and hedonistic Baroque provided a suitable alternative to the moral codes of the Risorgimento and legitimised an aesthetic code, that of the Roman *palazzi* for instance, which excluded the masses of the new Italy from the very concept of the art. Rome was to be the centre of this Baroque renaissance, an anti-modern counterblast to the ethical hopes of the intellectual generation that had fought during the Risorgimento. While he was not alone in supporting the Baroque against

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<sup>6</sup> Luciano Caramel (ed.), *L'Europa dei Razionalisti. Pittura scultura architettura negli anni trenta*, Milan: Electa, 1989.

<sup>7</sup> Monica Cioli, *Il fascismo e la 'sua' arte. Dottrina e istituzioni tra futurismo e Novecento*, Florence: L. S. Olschki, 2011; Massimo De Sabbata, *Tra diplomazia e arte. Le Biennali di Antonio Maraini (1928-1942)*, Udine: Forum, 2007; and De Sabbata, *Mostre d'arte a Milano negli anni Venti: dalle origini del Novecento alle prime mostre sindacali, 1920-1929*, Turin: Allemandi, 2012; Sileno Salvagnini, *Il sistema delle arti in Italia, 1919-1943*, Bologna: Minerva, 2000.

Romanticism, D'Annunzio was probably its most visible exponent. Deftly, Laura Moure Cecchini offers her readers a plethora of often little-known examples of this trend. For instance, in 1890, Professor Adolfo Venturi, the first Italian chair of art history, supported a reappraisal (albeit a critical one) of Gian Lorenzo Bernini's Baroque work, which culminated in the celebrations of 1898 marking the third centenary of the artist's birth. A few years earlier, in 1894, literary critic Enrico Nencioni had also launched the fashion of *Barocchismo* and tried to theorise it by establishing some chronological and geographical boundaries (covering Italy and Spain) and elevating it to a way of life, an existential rather than simply an aesthetic choice.

As we read in chapter two, at the turn of the century the new nation entered a new historical phase, marked by the 'Jubilee of the Fatherland' in 1911. In this particularly insightful chapter, Moure Cecchini discusses the Baroque's revenge over the previous century by dissecting its presence at the national exhibitions held that year in the country's first and final capitals, Turin and Rome. By comparing these two major events and evaluating them in light of Italy's political history, we see how the Baroque was taken to embody a perhaps Benjaminesque Italian modernity, looking both to the future and the past. The universal exhibitions in Paris and London, along with less exclusive events, were supposed to showcase the new era and its advancement, and the Italian ones were no different. But what the Italian exhibitions showcased instead was the freedom the Baroque gave artists to experiment without renouncing their artistic and cultural heritage. Furthermore, as Moure Cecchini shows us, the Baroque was not a monolithically constructed concept; there was a Turin and a Roman version of it, which envisaged modernity and innovation in response to their own artistic traditions and regional identities. This is a turning point in the book, since it introduces the concept of regionalism as pivotal in understanding the specifically Italian process of national unification with its internal fractures and divisions, concluding that the 'fictional character of the Italian unity put on display in Turin and Rome created a fleeting consensus, and tested the imperialist dreams of the young nation'.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, if taken as a political and not simply an aesthetic moment, the Baroque was at that point an Italian problem on a par with other attempts at modernity, most notably the Novecento movement patronised by Margherita Sarfatti, who wanted Italian artists to be modern, or rather international, while clearly looking back to the Quattrocento.

The Baroque's political side emerges even more strongly in chapters three and four, dedicated respectively to the Futurists and to the artists calling for the return-to-order of the 1920s. Provocatively titled 'Baroque Futurism', chapter three draws a parallel between seventeenth-century art and the Italian avant-garde. In 1913, the future leading art critic Roberto Longhi, a doctoral student at the time, drew some connections between the theoretical premises of Futurist art and those of the Baroque. Longhi found formal similarities between the art produced during the first wave of Futurism and Baroque art, both of which involved rendering movement through experimentation with forms. In both cases, unlike Cubism, objects coexist by creating rhythmic patterns, such as those visible in Umberto

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<sup>8</sup> Cecchini, *Baroquemanía*, 82.

Boccioni's landmark sculpture 'Synthesis of Human Dynamism', where the essence of the object itself is nurtured by its movement. Moreover, according to Longhi, Futurism was not born simply as a reaction to traditional art; rather, in view of its tendency to see movement as paramount for artistic creation, it was born out of the great tradition of seventeenth-century painting upheld by Rembrandt and Rubens. The Baroque, Longhi argued, was therefore seminal in the conception of modernity. Longhi's new genealogy deems Futurism and the Baroque as intrinsically Italian artistic forms to be recalled when trying to forge a brand of national unity, although imbued with a certain amount of cosmopolitanism.

Far from being an exclusive appropriation operation engineered by the avant-gardes, the Baroque also had to tackle the opposing, defining camp of the 1920s: a return to the order of the classically composed aesthetic forms. How could the Baroque, as a hybrid form, respond to the urgent need for compositional order after the initial turmoil of the first wave of Futurism? Firstly, according to Moure Cecchini, the Baroque's restoration was the result of a market choice, of its 'bourgeois recuperation' by a group of influential scholars and critics (Matteo Marangoni, Giuseppe Raimondi and Ugo Ojetti). For them, the Baroque of the likes of Caravaggio and Mattia Preti was part of an intrinsic Italian tradition, which ran unbroken from the Primitives to Antonio Canova, thereby guaranteeing once more a safe sense of both national unity and international appeal. A classical sense of balance and harmony – which Giorgio de Chirico saw as following Michelangelo's example – and a tendency not to provoke audiences ensured Italian art remained attractive over the centuries.<sup>9</sup> The debate on how to reinscribe the Baroque within the national tradition and to weave it into its main artistic trends took place at this juncture in the preeminent magazine edited by De Chirico, *Valori plastici*, which in 1922 published a variety of responses on the matter. No consensus was reached, of course, but this debate, together with the coeval grand exhibition at the Palazzo Pitti in Florence, whose organisers included art critic Ugo Ojetti, and the Fiorentina Primavera exhibition paved the way for the inclusion of the Seicento within the art of the Italians Edmondo Bacci, Amedeo Spadini, Carlo Socrate, Francesco Trombadori and Cipriano Efisio Oppo. This inclusion was justified by the Baroque's longstanding solid engagement with the materiality of objects and its attention to the needs of the assorted variety of national audiences it addressed.

Chapters five and six move onto the years of the Fascist dictatorship and re-evaluate the Baroque's presence in architecture and in sculpture. Fascist architecture especially has been seen as dominated indisputably by rationalism, a beacon of modernity and the main apparatus for modernising the country. Yet, as Moure Cecchini argues, the role played by the Baroque in Fascist Italy demands more attention. Baroque architectural solutions, she contends, were adopted to legitimise the use of the past in the building of a new Italy, as seen in the architecture of Vincenzo Fasolo, Armando Brasini and Giuseppe Capponi. A key example in this respect is Fasolo's construction of the elite school Liceo Terenzio Mamiani in the Prati district of Rome. It was built according to the rules of Baroque architectural language, strongly attuned to the history of the place (both in its structures and

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<sup>9</sup> Cecchini, *Baroquemanía*, 122

materials), and therefore able to make young Italians feel close to their own national and artistic tradition. Other architectural projects of the period followed a similar logic: in 1929, Armando Brasini, newly appointed as a member of the Royal Academy of Italy, was commissioned to design two buildings, the publicly sponsored INAIL and the private Convento del Buon Pastore (Convent of the Good Shepherd), and in both instances he 'spoke' in a Baroque architectural language. The two buildings defied rationalism's rules for visualising modernity, instead embracing a 'spectacular' concept of it. In both buildings, the architectural language chosen sought to impress the viewer either by offering them something unexpected, as in the case of rationalism, or something mesmerising, as with the Baroque, yet both languages served the regime's goals of using architecture to build consensus and appreciation amongst the Italian people. The modernity of the Baroque employed here in architecture clearly illustrates the idea of an alternative modernity to that of rationalism. While rationalism had a clear-cut view of the future as progress, the Baroque envisaged it as convoluted and conflicted. Both were focused on the present and contemporary dilemmas: rationalism faced them with unquestionable faith, while the Baroque met them with scepticism, causing it to be marginalised by a regime hostile to doubt.

The book's final chapter is centred on the sculptors Luciano Fontana and Adolfo Wildt. Wildt's portraits (for example of Margherita Sarfatti or Mussolini) provide another fine example of how the Italian take on the Baroque meant intersections with other artistic forms. Moreover, Wildt and Fontana believed in a close relationship between the arts and power, and their sculptures reflected these tensions. Wildt did not opt for avant-garde rationalism in his portraits, instead using Baroque-inspired tense and powerful lines to represent the contradictions of his time. Fontana too used the Baroque to 'signify anarchy and restlessness' and, as Moure Cecchini rightly observes, to highlight his connection not necessarily with Italy but with his South American roots.<sup>10</sup> In both cases, the Baroque was a failed attempt to control the subject matter, unlike the aspirations voiced by rationalists' far more reassuring take on the arts.

*Baroquemanía* ends with a short chapter that touches briefly on neorealist cinema and Roberto Rossellini's 1945 film *Rome, Open City* because of their desire to represent an unfiltered reality, just like Fascist realism of the 1930s. In Italy, since the end of the nineteenth century, the Baroque had provided a way of filtering reality, of transforming it to show its contradictions, to argue for an alternative lineage to that of rationalism, the avant-gardes and classicism, in order to propose 'new ways of constructing regional and national aesthetics and identities'.<sup>11</sup> This book's great merit is that it allows for multiplicity: in the concepts of tradition, identity, aesthetics, and a sense of nationhood. By exploring the subtext of what ought to be perceived according to mainstream interpretations, for instance Futurism as modernity and rationalism as order, *Baroquemanía* proposes a more syncretic way of looking at Italy's artistic and cultural history: not made of continuities alone but of continuities and ruptures, which, if taken together, can

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<sup>10</sup> Cecchini, *Baroquemanía*, 225.

<sup>11</sup> Cecchini, *Baroquemanía*, 237

provide a sense of unity. Critics and scholars did not deliberately marginalise the Baroque; they ignored it and therefore made it occupy a marginal zone. Moure Cecchini does not argue for a shift in power relations between artistic traditions, but rather for a more integrated view that can answer key questions pertaining to patterns of national identity with more depth. If there is a criticism to make, it is perhaps the need for clearer contextualisation and definitions of some of the key terms used in the discussion. I would have liked a more up-to-date discussion about the idea of national identity, of national tradition or even of modernity. Having said that, the richness of the material and its varied presentation potentially makes such discussions redundant.

This is a very well-written and extremely well-researched book on a fascinating topic. It is certainly essential reading for anyone interested in contemporary Italian art.

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