

## **Krešimir Purgar**

### **Images in motion. Painting, Film and (Neo)Baroque Narration**

The issue of neobaroque is a well known fact in debates led during last two decades within the framework of liberal arts and theory. It appears as if the development of the society of spectacle and contemporary media technology has, in a certain way, been favouring a single aspect of the baroque, which admittedly had risen during the later development of that historical style, namely as its tendency towards the overemphasised movement, excess scene dynamics, illusionist effects and similar. It is not unusual that the contemporary society of mass media and hypercommunication has accepted actually those peculiarities of baroque style, since the possibilities of computer technology, internet communication, omnipresence of image and visual communication altogether invoke and renew the baroque “excesses” to a much greater degree and more convincingly than in the case of postmodern theories’ attempt of explaining a break up with modernism. In my opinion the theory of neobaroque has, for this reason, caused less controversies than most of other theories that have emerged from postmodernism and poststructuralism. I am under the impression that the talks presented at this conference have to a greater degree engaged the neobaroque problematics as opposite to the formal expressions and technological extravaganza (which still irresistibly lure us into calling them baroque). This talk will join the above-mentioned attempts and propose further arguments for comprehending the contemporary baroque in the new light, as we place the problematic and thematic focus on the issue of visibility.

The in-depth analyses of a relation between text and image – both synchronic ones, comprising comparable style periods, and those diachronic, where we are inclined to link the apparently incompatible phenomena – will yield most relevant results if *universal* phenomena are placed at the centre of analytical procedures. We believe these phenomena are permanently in the focus of interest of representational or narrative practices, including the practices capable of entwining and reshaping the latter.

Along with deepening our intermedia insights, we shall be paying attention to one of these universal phenomena – the notion of visibility. We will commence by specifying the issue of visibility in baroque painting, and then proceed with demonstrating how comparable representational paradigms can also be found in contemporary motion pictures. In my view we are, above all, obliged to demonstrate how putting the baroque style under magnifying scrutiny is not an arbitrary decision, but an essential formal-structural point that is inseparable from the notion of visibility, which we believe has been having a *recurrent* character within the art history, ever since the 17th century, and became a significant theoretical problem even within a much wider scope of the contemporary art theory.

The notion of visibility within the baroque painting is specific due to its being constituted on both narrative and structural plans, across an outstandingly wide span, ranging from very small to very large visibility. The peculiarity of an actual style should really be sought in accepting and emphasising of that span: baroque is an attribute that can be ascribed to those art objects that problematize the methods of gaze, turning both *becoming* visible and the *disappearance* of visibility into a subject of visual and film representation, as we shall see later on. Let us first consider Rembrandt's painting *An Artist in His Studio: (1)* in an empty atelier, free of any visual accent that would prove as potentially

interesting to us as painting's observers, a focus is directed at the artist's figure in the background and an easel with canvas, whose back is in the foreground. The dialectics of this painting is realized through *making* oneself *visible* as the Rembrandt's artwork, and through *disputing* the visibility of whatever makes up the painting's narrative centre, that is, through the impossibility of finding out something about the painting's content in the actual painting. The opposition between narrative and structural visibility on this painting is evolving in a similar manner: Rembrandt's brush strokes structure painting's plane as a visual association of something familiar from everyday experience of the visible world – room, easel, human figure in the background. On the other hand, a narrative plan of the object of painting's narrative is established as a permanent lack of visibility. Namely, we shall never learn what is it that the painted figure of artist sees.

Bryan Jay Wolf also claims that the dynamics of this painting does not stem solely from its mysterious narrative i.e. from the story of painter observing the canvas whose content is unknown to ourselves. Rather, the issue consists in a tension ensuing between what is given to be recognized and that which is denied to recognition: **(2)**

“The painting, in other words, makes no sense except as a performance staged for an audience separate from the events it witnesses. We are consumers of the scene before us rather than participants in its drama. The painting assumes, as the condition of its own intelligibility, an outside viewer whose scope exceeds those of the figures depicted within. The painting thus empowers (...) its viewer by subordinating its being to his or her perceptions. The viewer, in effect, is given ontological priority over the work of art.<sup>1</sup>”

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<sup>1</sup> Bryan Jay Wolf, *Vermeer and the Invention of Seeing*, Chicago University Press, 2001, pg. 4

Could we say that the large part of contemporary art, from Duchamp until the present time, provides ontological priority to an actual viewer, rather than to an artwork? Wolf's claim leads us to a following conclusion: either it is the radical decontextualization of Rembrandt's painting, or it is the *recurring* visual ontology, which surpasses the style and epochs and perhaps goes beyond the restriction to merely some art media? Though it appears somewhat caricatured to say so, *An Artist in His Studio* introduces us to the modern painting epistemology, suggesting that seeing is primarily an issue of knowledge, both knowledge that we have already adopted and which enables us perceptual discernment, as well as new knowledge that is created through the impossibility of momentary discernment of scene's meaning.

Michael Haneke's film *Hidden* and Rembrandt's painting share the same kind of narrative and structural problematizing of visibility, that can be termed as *neobaroque* only tentatively. Why do we claim that Haneke's psychological thriller is merely provisionally neobaroque, when we readily proclaim it to be homogenous as the Dutch master's painting? The reason is that the French film possesses recurring characteristics of the baroque as a style outside of space and time, rather than the renovation of a particular style characteristic. This thesis demands some serious further clarification. In Haneke's *Hidden*, a neat life of Georges and Anne, members of the French higher middle class, suddenly gets disrupted when someone starts leaving tape recordings of their own home, on their doorstep, day after day. These tapes are recorded during both day and night, they are lengthy, possess accentuated static and we can assume that the camera used to shoot them was on a stand. "Nothing" happens on the tapes except from the radicalization of presumed gaze of an unknown individual, who becomes identified with a film viewer via actual director's insistence on long frames. (3)

In their apartment, Georges and Anne search through the tapes, in a futile attempt of discovering any narrative detail that would lead them towards resolving the enigma. The author of tapes eventually offers a solution by intentionally revealing, in one of the tapes, the address to be visited.

*Hidden* is seemingly burdened by ethical dilemmas to a degree significantly exceeding that of the visual dilemmas. However, if the film is read in a key of the invisibility issue, its congeniality with baroque optical extremes becomes much more obvious. At the narrative level, the entire first third of film deals with the unsuccessful attempts of main characters to discover who is observing them and from which point. Also, disputes amongst characters are motivated by their discomfort, arising as a consequence of being exposed to an unknown and incomprehensible gaze. The baroque character of film's narrative level consists in a fact of characters being exposed to an unknown gaze and simultaneously discussing it. As they search through the tapes, they problematize the procedure that makes them visible, becoming the object of their own theory of visibility. Within the actual film, their observation of themselves on the tape possesses, as Bryan Jay Wolf would put it, "ontological priority" in relation to what they see on those same tapes. On the other hand, at the structural level, this priority belongs to the director because he applies editing tools to directly manipulate not only his characters but the film viewers as well. (4)

We are talking about the manipulative procedure that is tightly linked to the visibility issue. Particular film sequences show scenes recorded on the video tape, while we listen to Georges' and Anna's voices in off. Yet, in this moment, we do not know that we are watching the tape, convinced that we are seeing a subjective frame of main characters who attempt to assume a point-of-view of the tapes' phantom author. Just a bit later, when the tape is fast-forwarded or re-

winded, we realize that we, as viewers, were manipulated to the same extent as the film characters. In her study on Haneke, Catherine Wheatley notices how in *Hidden* the Austrian director uses the element of hyperrealism to introduce “disturbance” into the order of reality, both in the film and outside of it.

When Georges and Anne review tapes on their TV set, the frame occupies the entire cinematographic screen. Before *Hidden*, Haneke already employed similar style means of inserting previously recorded material into a main diegetic film line. However, difference between those was always clearly established, as his films used very grainy, amateur VHS recordings, unskilfully edited, etc. Since *Hidden* shows tapes recorded in HD resolution, a film viewer has no possibility of making distinction between film diegesis and the inserted phantom “film within film”.

Catherine Wheatley claims that "in this way, the director formally achieves the maturity of the metalinguistic style that he has long been developing and which makes the image itself a central character of his films."<sup>2</sup>

An interesting point here is that, when defining the relation of Georges and Anne with the tapes' author, Wheatley's thesis is almost identical to Bryan Jay Wolf's description of the ontological priority of Rembrandt's painting viewer in relation to what has (not) been shown in the painting.

Wheatley says that Georges and Anne "take the role of the spectator, while whoever is creating the unknown tapes assumes the position of the artist, or

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<sup>2</sup> Catherine Wheatley, *Michael Haneke's Cinema. The Ethic of the Image*. Berghan Books, New York, 2009, pp. 160-161

director, attempting to prompt their 'audience' into a realisation of their own responsibility through the use of images.“<sup>3</sup>

Rembrandt's and Haneke's strategies do not consist in simply hiding from the view (both from the film characters, and a film's or painting's viewer) but in directing us to search for the riddle's solution outside the realities of film and painting, for example in ourselves (with Rembrandt), or in the ethical complex of guilt and victim (with Haneke). In both cases, the painter and the director place narrative and structural emphasis on the authorial manipulative nature of art media, through the concept of visibility.

We have demonstrated that the relational dynamics between visible and invisible is present in Rembrandt's painting *An Artist in His Studio* to the same extent as in Haneke's film *Hidden*. This is not necessarily termed as baroque dynamics due to a fact that the baroque style offers a multitude of examples of the above-mentioned dialectics and because we are talking about the first systematic problematizing of the phenomena of visibility. That said, by exposing forthcoming examples we shall nevertheless incline toward a proposed thesis. The visibility issue with Caravaggio and, in particular, his specific relating of light and shadow, more known as *stile tenebroso*, seems as a theme that was digested long time ago. However, let's recall some of the canonical descriptions by Rudolf Wittkower, in order to eventually redirect contemporary baroque aspects onto a new course. Speaking of Caravaggio's so called "Roman style" in his famous book *Art and Architecture in Italy*, Wittkower says the following: **(5)**

„Figures are now cast in semi-darkness, but strong light falls on them, models them, and gives them a robust three-dimensional quality. (...) The Impressionists

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

discovered that light creates atmosphere, but theirs is a light without darkness and therefore without magic. With Caravaggio light isolates; it creates neither space nor atmosphere. Darkness in his pictures is something negative; darkness is where light is not, and it is for this reason that light strikes upon his figures and objects as upon solid, impenetrable forms and does not dissolve them, as happens in the work of Titian, Tintoretto, or Rembrandt.”<sup>4</sup>

However, even with radical Caravaggio’s *chiaroscuro* we can discern narrative i.e. symbolic use of the light as opposed to the structural use, as one that makes up style in its narrower sense. For example, upon observing paintings *The Calling of St Matthew* and *The Martyrdom of Saint Matthew*, both dating from 1600,<sup>5</sup> we shall see that the visibility issue is crucial to both paintings, yet the artist applied it to achieve different narrative and structural goals. In *The Calling*, (6) a ray of light possesses a descriptive character, revealing an interior and aiding the dramatic establishing of narrative succession. The light provides a narrative with an almost causal logic of cause and effect, of before and after. In *The Martyrdom* light merely separates characters from an unidentified space. It shapes characters and does not establish hierarchy between them. Here Caravaggio used light in a structural fashion, as a formative principle, and not to tell a story as in the case of *The Calling of St Matthew*. The latter painting (7) narrativizes a scene, emphasizing Christ as he addresses St Matthew. In this talk, however, we shall be most concerned in answering whether this principle is contradictory and why did Caravaggio use light in such different manner on two paintings that are so close regarding their style.

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<sup>4</sup> Rudolf Wittkower, *Art and Architecture in Italy 1600-1750, I. Early Baroque*, Yale University Press, 1958-1999, pp. 20-26

<sup>5</sup> It is interesting that both paintings have been made for the same commissioner and can be found at the same location, at Contarelli Chapel in Roman church of S. Luigi de' Francesi.



Naturally, this is not a contradiction but a unique approach to the issue of visibility which, as a universal and recurring character of baroque style, is being used to the present time, regarding both narrative and structure. By saying this we do not mean that the visibility in contemporary media images is primarily constituted through a relation of light and shadow, but that the relation between visible and invisible is an important formative principle of modern representations that we can call baroque. Of course, the contemporary baroque has at its disposal the sophisticated, primarily film techniques of visibility. Let us turn our attention to *Enter the Void*, the most recent film by Gaspar Noe. Observing the film – especially its first part – through a prism of formal realization, we can be easily misled into proclaiming its formal extravagance to be baroque. Just at the very beginning of the movie, the author makes us believe that attack on all senses will be his major concern in this film. **(8)** But it is not just this, so to say, baroque formalism that Gaspar Noe is interested in. He is about to show us some more extraordinary way to foster the problems of subjectivization and visibility.

At the beginning of *Enter the Void*, its main character Oscar ingests a very strong hallucinogenic drug and for next several minutes we are watching a kaleidoscopic painting phantasm of countless colours and forms, suggesting the visualization of Oscar's mind as it completely surrenders to a hallucinogenic trip. **(9)** We could probably claim these sequences are baroque, at least for the reason that one phantasmal reality (like one in *trompe l'oeil* fresco painting) imposes itself to the other, originating reality. However, as we have already said, we shall not take interest in the renovation of late baroque illusionism in a form of cinematographic phantasmagoria, but in operationalization of the strategy of visibility/invisibility in what we potentially proclaim to be the contemporary baroque.

A peculiar novelty in Gaspar Noe's film is the radicalization of the main character's point of view. In the film's first part, while Oscar is still alive, we follow all of his steps in two ways: either as clean *point-of-view shots* or through a position of camera placed immediately behind his shoulders. We need to emphasize how this procedure has been implemented with much more style consistence by Robert Montgomery, in his 1947 film *Lady in the Lake* where, during the entire film, we are watching a subjective frame of detective Phillip Marlowe. **(10)**

This early attempt should be primarily regarded as experimental questioning of the possibilities of film media, rather than as a style determinant in its narrower sense. On the other hand, the baroque character of Noe's film consists in revealing the techniques of film subjectivization and their use for creative purposes. Since camera is always behind the main character or identified with his point of view, the film's first part has a function of adapting the viewer's gaze to the Oscar's. As opposed to *Lady in the Lake*, this identification does not wish to be absolute. *Enter the Void* does not attempt to abolish the film illusion that would turn the film into a new reality, but rather to draw a film viewer into a debate on possibilities of seeing. During the film's first part we are watching together with Oscar as a living person in a clear point-of-view-shot; in the second part, when Oscar is already dead, but his soul is still within him, we see him in over-the-shoulder shots. In the third part we (as spectators of the movie) are watching through him as a ghost that floats several meters above the real world. **(11) i (12)**

The above examples implicate that the intermedia connecting of disparate epochs and media means cannot be realized by searching for formal resemblances, but primarily by discerning homogenous conceptual motifs, provided, of course, that we allow the possibility of such temporal and media

leaps in the first place. The essence of intermedia narratology altogether, as well as of the specific issue of baroque in diachronic view, is discernment between the *universal* issue of narrative and visualization, realized through *specific* media means. It seems that intermedia narratology, as well as the visual studies as a whole, search for what Paolo Bertetto calls "eidetic images", borrowing the term from cognitive psychology. These images achieve a union between the configuration of visible and some universal idea, between most diverse forms, visions and concepts, independent of their particular formal peculiarities. This "immagine-idea", as Bertetto calls it, is a sort of "structure of visible world filled up with specific intellectual content." It is an image outside of a domain of pure visibility, inasmuch as it unifies all that can be seen or cognized in some other way. With the eidetic image, an idea is not inserted into a visible form (film, photography or oil on canvas), nor is it added to a painting like, for example, a style characteristic, but together with a painting makes up an inseparable whole.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Paolo Bertetto, *Lo specchio e il simulacro. Il cinema nel mondo diventato favola*. Bompiani, Milan, 2007, pp. 156-181