

# Neo-Baroque

A SIGN OF THE TIMES

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With a Foreword by UMBERTO ECO

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## Taste and Method

### SOME PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

**I**S THERE a character, a quality, a general distinctive sign that we could use to define our epoch? The answer is clearly anything but easy, since the banal simplicity of the question conceals a number of theoretical traps. Let us try to see what they are. The first hidden question: What does "epoch" mean and, above all, how can we define it as "ours"? The second implicit question: Is it acceptable to label historical periods in order to create a general (or, even worse, generic) order? The third presupposition: Why, in any case, should we search for *one* character to define an epoch? Is it acceptable to separate segments of time so sharply from one another, differentiating them according to their homogeneity or lack of it? The fourth, final, and most serious problem: Where does this "character" reside? In human psychology, in public or private behavior, in political or economic history, in social structure, in the form taken by thought, in the arts, in the sciences?

Let us now examine these problems in order, beginning with the question of "epoch." We know that this term, like all equivalent terms used to construct periodization, creates confusion among historians.<sup>1</sup> It is no accident that the term is used with extreme caution, with warnings to readers, for example, that it has been adopted for the sake of convention or simplicity. In effect, the concept of "epoch" or "age" or "period" contrasts with many traditional ways of understanding the flow of events. History would appear to be made up of chains of cause and effect, rather than of sudden, clearly identifiable breaks. To group events together according to categories that separate them from their predecessors and successors even seems para-

spread and dominant idea, it is quite possible to define a certain period of the century as one of "restoration." It is equally clear, however, that by changing our viewpoint—in terms of social group or focus—we can use something else to classify the "quality" of the epoch, such as the new intellectual spirit of romanticism. The problem, therefore, is simply to define precisely the selected viewpoint and what is pertinent to it, and to establish on which basis the criterion of coherence among the phenomena to be analyzed is to be articulated.

We have now implicitly answered the third question, regarding the uniqueness of an epoch's character. If the character depends on the viewpoint and a system of shared features, it is clear that there exist not *one* character, but many. Furthermore, these characters can exist in a variety of different ways within the same system of shared features or viewpoint. We have just said that society is a complex totality. This means that while we can consider it as a "totality" or "system" (in the manner of a biological system)<sup>6</sup> that represents, micro- or macroscopically, the same features at each stage of its articulation, we can also consider it as something constituted by competing subgroups or subsystems. Some of these emerge successfully, some are defeated, others produce further mutations in spite of defeat, and those that win are destined to a final extinction through exhaustion. In other words, culture can be seen as an organic totality, in which each element has a hierarchically ordered relationship with all the others. We can use Eco's term "encyclopedia" to define this totality.<sup>7</sup> The encyclopedia, however, with regard to each of these elements operates as a general ordering principle, a kind of overall ideal of the organization of knowledge. When we are confronted by individual concrete elements, however, it is difficult to take the *entire* encyclopedia into consideration. Although we might appeal to the postulate of its general organization, we shall only be concerned with a single region, be it large or small. We shall, in other words, be analyzing only one of its "localities."<sup>8</sup> This locality, however, is also organized according to grids of models: these grids consti-

tute the "quality" that unites certain cultural objects locally.<sup>9</sup> At a certain scale, therefore, this quality can be unique, while by changing scale it can be multiplied.

But let us return to the issue of the character of an epoch and to the corollary of our third question: whether it is acceptable to separate historical segments so distinctly from each other. The question brings to mind the conflict between, on the one hand, some of Foucault's basic ideas and, on the other, those of the "microhistorians." To sum up the discussion very briefly, we should recall that one of the most vigorously contested points in Foucault's thought (both in the past and more recently) was his idea of the "episteme."<sup>10</sup> According to Foucault, there are epochs in which a change in mentality is so radical (such as the seventeenth century) that one can justifiably speak of a rupture with the past. This is a strikingly important idea that undermines one of the principles of traditional historiography, that of causality understood as a necessary relationship between a "before" and an "after." It must be recognized, however, that there are also some risks involved in Foucault's concept. The risk, for example, of seeing a *single common denominator* in events, with a consequent twisting of local interpretations according to the logic of the frame in which they are contained.<sup>11</sup> It is obvious, however, that a "logic of culture" exists, even though it might not always be the only one, and in spite of the fact that it would be improper to circumscribe it into portions according to a rigid temporal scheme. We might even say that the feature that has distinguished natural science since Aristotle can also be seen in the history of ideas. Physics, for example, has always conducted its empirical and theoretical research according to the belief that an organizing principle exists in the universe. This can be seen in the concept of *Kulturgeschichte*: as though its logic were unitary. We probably need to reach a compromise. "Characters," "epistemes," and "mentalities" of epochs exist, and they can be recognized as grids of relations among cultural objects. Two points, however, must be made. First, we do not need to trace the precise chronologi-

cal definition of these grids. Second, they are never unifying features of an epoch, but only of one style of thought and life that enters into a more or less productive conflict with others. In the history of art this principle has on occasion been understood. Two books by Eugenio Battisti and Federico Zeri provide us with examples. Battisti has described the way in which two philosophies fought for supremacy during the same period, with a victor—the Renaissance—and a suppressed loser—the anti-Renaissance.<sup>12</sup> And Zeri has demonstrated in a masterly fashion how a victorious idea in the historical scene, the Renaissance, can render homogeneous less successful ideas, as in the case of what Zeri terms the “pseudo-Renaissance.”<sup>13</sup>

These final reflections, however, have brought us to the crux of the matter: the criterion for analyzing those recurrences that permit us to define an epoch’s “characters.” At this point, it must be admitted, the issue becomes complex. On the one hand, it is fair to express the need for a criterion of method. On the other hand, however, we must reject the homogenization of cultural objects by genre or type (the banalization of method).<sup>14</sup> How can these two needs be reconciled? Let us begin with method. And let us say that we can ensure control over the objects being analyzed only by interdefining the concepts that are being applied. Phenomena never speak for themselves in an evident way. They need to be “provoked.” This is equivalent to saying that we need to construct them as theoretical objects, since they have no immediate objectivity.<sup>15</sup> All that exists is the coherence of the perspective from which they are to be questioned, the viewpoint that provokes the response. This is an old problem in the scientific world. The objectivity of the system of chemical elements was established by Lavoisier using, as his criterion, the uniqueness of “weight,” the most subjective and conventional of methods.<sup>16</sup> Metaphorically we might say that it is also necessary to “weigh” elements in culture, in order to make them commensurable. Leaving metaphor to one side, these elements constitute a system only when they are related to a system of concepts. Many conceptual sys-

tems exist, and the human sciences offer a wide range. It is not my purpose here to suggest that one system might be better than another. I am simply interested in “putting one system to work.” Let us see in what way.

If we consider each cultural object as something that can be communicated, we shall immediately see that it becomes part of a communicative chain. It is created by an individual or collective subject, it is produced according to certain mechanisms of production, it manifests itself by means of certain forms and contents, it passes through certain channels, it is received by an individual or collective addressee, it determines certain forms of behavior. The relevant analyses might be carried out for each stage in this series. But this is still insufficient. Further relevant features exist that might be used to examine each polarity of the chain. For example, we might consider the physical existence of the creator in his society, in which case we would be able to reinstate him by using empirical socioeconomic analyses; or we might regard him as an apparatus of production, and thus isolate the professional and decision-making routines involved; or, finally, we might see him as an author and trace his philological and individual history. The same might be said of the receiver: it might be evaluated as the “public,” in which case the effects of certain messages can be assessed in a sociological or psychological context; or, alternatively, it might be regarded as an abstract figure, constructed according to a communicative strategy, in which case a pragmatic approach will illustrate the ways in which a text can be called into play. This is also true of the message: it can be seen as determined by other messages, thus leading once again to the production of a philological or textual critique or history; and it might be regarded as a totality of forms and contents, in which case we would apply a semiotic approach.<sup>17</sup>

Let us now come, however, to the body of objects to be examined. The principle that must be rejected is that of homogeneity of genre, type, or art form. For example, this work is not concerned (even though others might be) with verifying the ex-

istence of grids of relations of taste or mentality for objects that *are specifically produced to be homogeneous with other objects*. Obviously one can establish the existence of a cinematic, literary, or artistic taste within the confines of a story, an aesthetic, or a critical discipline. But it is far more difficult to seek out the (generally concealed) connections between objects that originate as different, rather than as already belonging to a single cultural series. The progress of ideas almost always derives from the discovery of unexpected relations, unconsidered links, and unimagined grids. A discovery of sense is usually made precisely where previously there reigned not senselessness but an absence of sense. Obviously, to operate in this way involves running risks. It means, for example, making the objects that are being analyzed say more than they actually say. But this risk, fascinating and productive as it is, is not just a question of building castles in the air. We all say more than we know or even imagine that we know. We can never understand all there is to understand in our society's culture, yet the cultural objects that we produce are sometimes capable of expressing implicitly areas of the culture that are quite distant from those that they reveal explicitly. The totality of a culture produces an individual unconscious, a collective unconscious, and even, if we choose to adopt a popular expression, "an unconscious of the work."<sup>18</sup>

The criterion we shall adopt, therefore, is the following. We shall examine widely disparate cultural objects, such as literary, artistic, musical, and architectural works; films, songs, cartoons, and television; scientific and technological theories and philosophical thought. We shall consider these objects insofar as they are phenomena of communication, phenomena that are endowed with an underlying form or structure. My belief is that one can discover certain "deep forms" or common features between disparate objects that have no apparent causal relation. In other words, by considering texts deriving from a number of different fields, we shall notice the actuation of a "relapse" into underlying structures between one text and the next. The con-

cept of "relapse" has been adopted from the work of Severo Sarduy.<sup>19</sup> In his study of the baroque Sarduy has linked aspects of science and art, concluding, for example, that the form of Kepler's discovery of the elliptical orbit of planets is similar to that underlying the poetry of Góngora, Caravaggio's paintings, and the architecture of Borromini. In my opinion, analogous phenomena can be found in every epoch, including our own, and their repetition might be considered an "epochal trait," even bearing in mind all the qualifications expressed above. But I shall be even more cautious. In spite of Sarduy's clearly structuralist background (Barthes on the one hand and Lacan on the other), there still appears to be a residual trace of determinism in his work. Sarduy is secretly convinced, in fact, that the "relapse" has an orientation: that it moves from science to art. Frankly, there is no evidence for this. It might easily be true that an important scientific discovery is able, like a kind of "origin," to revolutionize the mentality of a period.<sup>20</sup> But the opposite might just as easily be the case: a taste deriving from art, literature, or mass communication might influence the body of scientific thought. Establishing before and after, cause and effect, can on occasion become unintelligible (assuming we do not think that this is *always* the case). Having discovered a circle or spiral of reciprocal connections, any single point might be considered the cause of all successive points, since this sometimes helps us to put them into perspective, and to situate them in a conceptual order. In any case, the idea of producing a formulation of relations (whether the formulation is audacious or not is insignificant) that others can then enrich with other methods and aims is already interesting. The formulation of a typical "taste" of our epoch, probably conflictual with other tastes and not necessarily dominant, can be derived from the characteristics of these connections.

A final warning. We have talked insistently about "taste" and "forms." It would be as well, then, to make clear that precisely because of our initial hypotheses, directed essentially toward the search for a substantially aesthetic "character of the epoch,"

the fundamental point of our research is not only to describe forms, but also to understand what kinds of value judgment they provoke in our society. Each society delineates more or less normative value systems by which it judges itself. Here we shall try to understand one of the recurring value systems in our own society. We shall not base our understanding on sanctions (critical or popular success, the legal system, religion, or politics) but on the *proposal of values* that each text inevitably contains. No work of art exists that does not itself suggest how it should be read and judged, that does not contain some kind of preestablished user's guide. But since we are examining primarily creative or inventive texts, our system of axiological categories will be developed directly from aesthetics, rather than from an ethical, emotional, or physical position.<sup>21</sup> In any case, it takes only a glance to realize that our present society seems to be more widely permeated by a kind of "mass aestheticization" than any previous society.<sup>22</sup>

### THE TERM "NEO-BAROQUE"

To be perfectly honest, our expressive field already possesses a catchall term that has been widely used to define a contemporary trend: the much abused "postmodern." This term has by now lost its original meaning and has become a slogan or label for a wide variety of different creative operations. The term, in fact, is simultaneously equivocal and generic. Its diffusion is effectively related to three cultural contexts that are frequently confused.

The first, essentially American, use of the term dates from the 1960s, when it referred to literature and cinema. In this context it simply meant that certain literary products existed that did not base themselves on experimentation (conceived as "modernism") but on reelaboration, pastiche, and the deconstruction of the immediately preceding literary (or cinematic) heritage.<sup>23</sup>

The second cultural context is strictly philosophical and refers to the well-known work by Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*,<sup>24</sup> originally no more than a report prepared for Quebec's Council of State dealing with advanced Western societies and the development of knowledge within them. The adjective "postmodern" was explicitly picked up by American sociologists during the 1960s, when it was adopted as a concept and reformulated into an original philosophical notion.<sup>25</sup> Lyotard himself writes: "It describes the state of a culture after transformations undergone in the rules governing science, literature, and the arts since the end of the nineteenth century. These transformations will here be related to the crisis in narrations [ . . . ]. Simplifying to the greatest possible extent, we can consider as "postmodern" our incredulity when faced by metanarrations."<sup>26</sup>

The third and final context is that of architecture and design. In this field the term has achieved success primarily in Italy and the United States. Its starting point was the famous Venice Biennale dedicated to the "Strada Novissima," whose catalogue, edited by Paolo Portoghesi, was entitled *Postmodern*.<sup>27</sup> In this sector "postmodern" begins to take on a precise ideological meaning, representing the revolt against the principles of functionalism and rationalism that characterized the Modern Movement.

As we can see, although a link between the three cultural contexts clearly exists, it is extremely tenuous. In literature the term "postmodern" signifies antiexperimentalism; in philosophy it means casting doubt on a culture founded upon narrations that then become prescriptive; in architecture it describes a return to citation from the past, to decoration, and to the surface of the object being conceived in a way that contradicts its structure or use. In short, three greatly differing results. They also remain undefined since the most disparate operations have been grouped together beneath the umbrella of overinclusive labels. The practice of citation, for example, has been considered a distinctive feature, but without explaining what type

(given that a literature or cinema or art of citation has always existed); or a concern with the surface effect of the work, without any specification being offered; or, finally, a hostility toward "modernism," without realizing that the theoretical framework (Lyotard) certainly did not deny the value of experimentation in the so-called "avant-garde." In this particular context, a very recent book by Lyotard himself, *A Child's Guide to Postmodernism*, examines seven years of postmodern fashions and refuses to accept the commonly held belief in the existence of a look or style of thought either subsequent to or in conflict with modernism.<sup>28</sup> The French philosopher denounces the attempts being made—by self-styled disciples as much as by detractors—to annul, either through praise or criticism, the experimentation that has been carried out in all fields of thought since the beginning of this century. The term "postmodern," in short, continues to be equivocal. For many people, in fact, it has taken the place of a genuine program or manifesto, whereas, according to Lyotard, it was intended to be a criterion for analysis. For many other people it has become a classificatory reference point, under whose banner movements and "-isms" such as the Transavanguardia, neo-expressionism, neo-futurism, and so on have gathered.<sup>29</sup>

But is a generic program (a reaction against modernism) sufficient to define such complex groups of artistic, scientific, and social phenomena as those existing today?<sup>30</sup> And is it enough to declare the end of the avant-garde and experimentalism as the characteristic of so-called postmodern objects? Something more is required from an interpretation. It should at the very least begin with a coherent description of what is being interpreted, and an explanation of the descriptive methods being used. This is why I intend to propose a different label for some of the cultural objects of our epoch (not necessarily those that have been described as "postmodern"). This label is "neo-baroque."

I should immediately like to make it clear that I have no particular affection for this term. It is simply a label like any other.

It does, however, sum up the specific meaning that I intend to give to it. My general thesis is that many important cultural phenomena of our time are distinguished by a specific internal "form" that recalls the baroque.

More than one objection might immediately be raised to the term that has just been suggested. The prefix "neo-," to begin with. Just as the "post-" of "postmodern" brings to mind an "after" or "against" modernism, so "neo-" might induce an idea of repetition, return, or recycling of a specific historical period, that described by the term "baroque." Naturally, the reference to baroque works by analogy, and in many cases I shall try to make the analogy clear. But this does not imply in any sense a hypothetical "recuperation" of the period. Just as the idea of development or progress within a civilization is to be rejected as overdeterministic, so the idea of cycles must be regarded as unacceptably idealistic and metahistorical. "We never step into the same river twice," in other words. What must be made clear, then, is exactly what I mean by "baroque."

In order to do this I should like to draw once more upon one of Sarduy's intuitions. He defines "baroque" not only, or not exactly, as a specific period in the history of culture, but as a general attitude and formal quality of those objects in which the attitude is expressed. In this sense, the baroque might be found in any epoch of our civilization. "Baroque" almost becomes a category of the spirit, in contrast to "classical."<sup>31</sup> Since I do not intend to arrive at a newly metahistorical approach here, however, I should like to translate Sarduy's idea in another way. For example, if we were able to demonstrate the existence in cultural phenomena of underlying forms and of their structural development, and if we were also able to demonstrate that these forms coexist in a state of conflict with others of a different nature and interior stability, we could then say, for example, that we attribute to "baroque" a certain morphological value and to "classical" a second morphological value in opposition to the first. "Baroque" and "classical" would thus no longer be categories of the spirit, but categories of form (of

expression or of content). In this sense, any phenomenon would be either classical or baroque, and the same fate would await any age or episteme in which one or the other emerged. This would not exclude the fact that manifestations at any single historical moment maintain their specificity and difference insofar as they are singular cases.

To be perfectly honest, this is not the first time that the term "neo-baroque" has been employed. It was used by Gillo Dorfles, for example, in his work entitled *Baroque in Modern Architecture*, and Dorfles himself took the term from Brinckmann: even more, in Dorfles's *In Praise of Disharmony*, where, although the term itself is not used, some of the principles that will be developed in the present work are dealt with in some way. In the modern age, in fact, Dorfles identifies the abandonment (or decline) of all characteristics of order and symmetry and glimpses the advent (not always positive, although not necessarily negative either) of disharmony and asymmetry.<sup>32</sup> There are certainly many similarities between the concepts expressed by Dorfles and those developed in this work, such as the rereading in a modern key of certain interpreters (Wölfflin, D'Ors, Anceschi, Focillon). But there are also some profound differences. Dorfles is in favor of attributing a specific historical period to "neo-baroque," a period of the twentieth century that is already in the past, containing movements such as cubism, organicism, or neo-imperialism in architecture. He also claims that "postmodernism" is a later phenomenon. A similar collocation in a sort of implicit history of styles will not be entirely accepted in this work. Nor will the idea (taken up by Focillon and Wölfflin) of a historical "rhythm" or "cyclicity." Classical and baroque will be accepted as formal constants, as will their dominance in one period rather than in another. The principle of their irreversibility, however, will be rejected. In reality history does not reveal—unless it is forced to do so—an alternation of two constants (as Wölfflin and Focillon claim). Nor does it allow us to establish—without the use of unmotivated imaginative leaps—that the classical is the point at which a cul-

tural system reaches perfection and the baroque its degenerate correlative (as Focillon insists).

Another element present in Dorfles that is not considered relevant to this work is his evaluation of the baroque. Like other critics from the 1950s, as well as Sarduy, Dorfles "re-evaluates" the baroque both as a specific epoch and as a [formal constant]. In our case, it is not a question of judging but of recognizing the reemergence of this constant. Or rather, of understanding or explaining why positive or negative sanctions of taste might exist. Attributing judgment is, it seems to me, consistent with the appearance of homogeneous objects. Aesthetic judgment, in short, is as much a part of the "character of the epoch" as the objects it judges. We have only to think about this to realize how banal it is: as we have already said, every work contains its own instructions for use, even in an aesthetic sense.<sup>33</sup>

## CLASSICAL AND BAROQUE

It is obvious that any *formal* consideration of the style of an epoch immediately recalls the numerous theories of art on which formalism has been based. The first mention naturally goes to Heinrich Wölfflin. In his *Fundamental Concepts in the History of Art* Wölfflin explains exactly what is meant by the term "formal": "The present study does not analyze the beauty of a Leonardo or a Dürer, but the element in which that beauty has taken form [ . . . ] it studies the character of the artistic conception that has been at the base of figurative art for a number of centuries."<sup>34</sup> Beginning from these principles, Wölfflin elaborates his method, which we shall summarize in the following way: (a) each work or series of works is the complex and combined manifestation of certain abstract and elementary "forms"; (b) these elementary forms can be defined as a list of oppositions, since a form is not perceived in itself but only through a system of differences; (c) a "style" thus becomes a



specific way of operating with choices made between the poles of basic categories, and usually corresponds to principles of individual, collective, epochal, or even racial coherence. This is why we can define a "historical" style as a totality of the ways in which choices have taken form and been translated into *figures* during a certain period.<sup>35</sup> But, at the same time, there exists an *abstract* style that consists of the logic of both possible choices combined. This is the case of two styles that are simultaneously historical and abstract: classicism and baroque. They take form, for example, in the Renaissance and in what is known as the "historical baroque." In a more general sense, however, we might also say that classical and baroque are totalities of categorical choices that can be found, albeit with different results, throughout the history of art.

I have in a sense "rewritten" Wölfflin's basic idea, which in the course of time has been variously refuted in the name of a presumed "metaphysicism" or "metahistoricism." Perhaps it is time we treated it with the justice it deserves. Other formalists have probably run this risk, but not Wölfflin. On the contrary, if he is to be accused of anything, it would have to be an over-attachment to the idea of the historicity of style. Or rather, to an evolutionary continuity between styles so that, for example, the classical-baroque opposition of "linear"/"pictorial," "surface"/"depth," "open form"/"closed form," "multiplicity"/"unity," "absolute clarity"/"relative clarity," is conceived as a kind of historical rhythm or cadence.

It would be more pertinent to criticize the conception of another formalist, Henri Focillon, for being excessively evolutionary. Focillon, in fact, compares the system of forms to a biological system (less from a scientific viewpoint than from a philosophical one, in harmony with Kant's arguments on the subject).<sup>36</sup> In his *The Life of Forms*, however, Focillon also distinguishes sharply between historically defined stylistic categories and the formal principles to which, symbolically, we attach the same names.<sup>37</sup> The famous evolutionary "stages" (experimental age, classical age, age of refinement, baroque age) are,

in fact, *morphological transformations*, valid within any historical style. We might even deduce from this that the historical "baroque" style possesses a classical period, or that historical "classicism" possesses its own baroque age. What Focillon has spotted, in other words, is an implicit *logic of morphogenesis*. This becomes clear when he considers the four most important elements of form (space, material, spirit, and time). He is primarily concerned with observing changes in individual representations rather than in styles in the general sense of the term. The specifically historic aspect of art is reduced by Focillon to the study of *moments* as clusters of different forms at different evolutionary "stages" and in competition among themselves, and is not recuperated into a history of styles according to a principle of periodization. The fact remains, however, that the logic behind the forms of Focillon is still based upon an idea of cause and effect: the predetermined formal succession of "generation"—"completion"—"perfection"—"degeneration."

Eugene D'Ors, on the other hand, completely denies historicism.<sup>38</sup> His idea of baroque is sometimes frankly metahistorical. The baroque becomes a category of the spirit, formed by constants that D'Ors has named "eons." In this way the notion can be extended to absolutely any historical art movement, independently of period and geographical location. In fact, by transforming Linnaeus's principle of classification, D'Ors treats the baroque as a genus, subdividing it into numerous species. By the end of *The Baroque* he has discovered twenty-two. The weakness of the classification, however, lies precisely in the fact that the different species are named in an inconsistent, almost casual, way. There is, in short, no homogeneity between a "macedonicus," "alexandrinus," "romanus," "buddicus" baroque and, for instance, a "vulgaris" or "officinalis" baroque (unless in fact we resort once more to the historical and geographical dimensions of the phenomenon).<sup>39</sup>

As we can see (and as Luciano Anceschi had already noticed at the end of the 1950s), formalist positions always contain an unresolved contradiction between an abstract conception of

style or artistic form and its physical location. The abandonment of historicism in favor of categorization (for example, the opposition between "classical" and "baroque") is important, but it often occurs without the establishment of any criterion for a rigorous interdefinition of concepts. Furthermore, evolutionary and biological demands oblige formalists to make a hazardous return to history. As regards criteria for coherence and the interdefinition of concepts, neither Wölfflin nor Focillon—not to mention D'Ors—is able to construct an articulated "picture." Wölfflin, for example, invents his five formal pairs by starting with the idea of the work of art as an aspect, appearance, or surface under which lie more abstract forms. He fails to explain, however, the interrelationship of concepts such as "linearity," "formal closure," "superficiality," "clarity," and so on. The result is an almost totally unworkable formalism, to which one could constantly counterpose different categorical pairs. Apart from criticizing Focillon's evident determinism, one could also reprove him for a lack of homogeneity for terms of reference such as "space," "material," "spirit," and "time." Then, in the case of D'Ors, one could attack the needless multiplication of subgroups for the genus "baroque." These subgroups become a simple, infinitely extensible list owing to the fact that practically any element of any baroque can be focused upon. Finally, as we have already seen, one must criticize the superimposition of a formal apparatus upon concrete history, demonstrated by the fact that a *philosophy of history* underlies all formalist theories.

The only attempt to solve the problem still seems to be that made by Anceschi.<sup>40</sup> In his various theoretical works, gathered together in *The Idea of the Baroque*, Anceschi follows other authors such as Francastel and Wellek when he suggests that we consider the baroque as a cultural *system* represented by various formal components, but only in the sense of beginning with a *historically* determined description.<sup>41</sup> Only after having constructed theoretically and, at the same time, historically, the borders and characteristics of the baroque can one extend its

heuristic function to other periods, movements, and cultural systems. Anceschi in fact had already clearly understood a basic principle of contemporary human sciences: that every phenomenon undergoing analysis is inevitably constructed by the analyst and can thus be transferred beyond its own spatial and temporal position. His controlling principle, however, was the definition and delimitation of the phenomenon in terms of its historical existence. Thus, in order to call a cultural event "baroque," the procedure remained that of comparing it with the historically defined event, even though the comparison might be made by means of formal principles.

Although such a procedure is perfectly correct, it might not be the only possibility. Another equally coherent proposal might be made: that we make formalism "rigorous" by avoiding both the contradiction with historicism and the weakness of casual categorial systems employed in the use of inference. This is the procedure that we shall be using in these pages. It can be summarized very briefly in the following way. *First*: to analyze cultural phenomena as *texts*, independently of a search for extratextual explanations. *Second*: to identify each text's underlying *morphologies*, articulated at varying levels of abstraction. *Third*: to distinguish the identification of these morphologies from that of the *value judgments* to which they have been subjected by different cultures. *Fourth*: to identify the axiological system of these value judgments. *Fifth*: to observe the *duration* and *dynamics* of both the morphologies and the value judgments that influence them. *Sixth*: to define a "taste" or "style" as a tendency to attach value to certain morphologies and to their dynamics, possibly by means of valorizing procedures that possess an identical morphology and dynamics to those of the phenomena being analyzed. As we can see, the historicity of the objects is restricted to an "appearing-in-history," both in terms of surface manifestation (variable within and between epochs) and of the effect produced by morphological dynamics. It is no longer a question of comparing, even formally, a series of distinct moments of historically determined facts. On the con-

trary, we must verify the various historical manifestations of morphologies belonging to the same structural plane. History is seen as the place in which difference, rather than continuity, is manifested. An empirical (rather than deductive) analysis of history allows us to rediscover general working models for cultural facts.<sup>42</sup>

### CATEGORIES OF VALUE

The clearest difference from traditional formalism lies in the fact that a style or taste is not conceived as a simple sum of forms, but as a tendency to invest value. Values, in other words, are not considered substantially as more or less *present* in this or that phenomenon, but as *attributes* either reflected by each discursive manifestation or derived externally from each valorizing metadiscourse. Furthermore, each value judgment does more than attribute value. By doing so, it brings into play a "polemical" element: the rejection of a competing attribution or competing attributions. The fact that competing value judgments exist can be seen from the term "value," which is inevitably categorial: it indicates a polarity, a difference. Nor is that all. A further "polemical" dimension is constituted by the fact that categories of value do not invest phenomena singly, but in groups. An aesthetic judgment is almost always accompanied by an ethical, emotional, or morphological one, and vice versa. Furthermore, we might even say that each individual, group, or society attributes not only single values, but also correspondences among a variety of valorizing sets of binary oppositions. From a social point of view this is extremely important. The greater or lesser rigidity of these correspondences also indicates the extent and quality of social control of individual behavior, as well as revealing the form of philosophical reflection about society and its nature. It is no accident that in the history of philosophical thought from Plato to the present day we find

constant attempts to construct taxonomies of categories of value.

This is clearly not the place to try to summarize this philosophical concern, nor to propose the addition of a further chapter. We should, however, note that every valorizing axiology is always the result of a proposition containing linguistic terms. Values are thus already contained within language, and a coherent semantic and syntactic system can therefore be articulated. Attempts made by many philosophers to propose a "system of categories," such as that of Aristotle or Kant, or the exclusively aesthetic systems of Rosenkranz or Blanché, can effectively be resolved at the level of linguistic analysis.<sup>43</sup> If we take the four most traditional contexts in which judgment is made—the good, the beautiful, the emotional, and the formal—we discover, in fact, that they are all articulated by means of *appreciative* categories, as Aristotle called them.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, these categories can be expanded by means of the principle of the semiotic square.<sup>45</sup> Emotional and morphological values also rest on apparently *constative* categories (if we continue to adopt Aristotle's terminology), in which appreciation on the part of the discourse's subject does not appear.<sup>46</sup> All valorizing terms, as Robert Blanché has in fact suggested in his *Aesthetic Categories*, derive from a combination of semantic signs produced by the expansion of categories, from the intersection of different categories, and, finally, from contextualization within a discourse.<sup>47</sup>

The theme of values thus possesses a specific semantic dimension. This can be found in types of discourse that we shall call "valorizing discourses." These are concerned not only with the production of a text, but also with its reception: value is in fact preestablished (as we have already said) in every text, just as it is in every metatext. The quality we normally refer to as "taste" is nothing more than the more or less conflicting correspondence of values present in texts and metatexts; the relation of correspondences according to specific "routes" within the

category system; and the possibility of *isomorphism* between textual forms and the forms taken by these routes.<sup>48</sup>

Let us see, in a very generic way, how this category system works. We can take the following table as an example:

<i>Category</i>	<i>Judgment Upon</i>	<i>Positive Value</i>	<i>Negative Value</i>
morphological	form	well-formed	deformed
ethical	morality	good	bad
aesthetic	taste	beautiful	ugly
emotional	emotion	euphoric	dysphoric

The names of the categories are in the first column and the objects being judged in the second, while the third and fourth columns contain the two categorial poles. These have a "positive" or "negative" value, although in some cases the term "value" does no more than indicate a position along an axis of opposition connecting two poles. It is also true, however, that an "empty" value can become "full" if another category, that of "appreciation"/"depreciation," is positioned obliquely to those in the table. In this case, the "positive" and "negative" poles become value judgments in their own right. But all this depends on the attribution of value to its object. In other words, "positivity" and "negativity" are not fixed signs at the heads of two columns, but variables. Hence, the table presented here is *one* type of judgment, but not the only one. Let us now address a further consideration. The type of judgment expressed by the table orders, establishes correspondences, and classifies certain binary oppositions according to certain others. Seen as a totality, therefore, it is itself *one* type of axiological system, but not the only one. Other types can establish correspondences between these categorial polarities in a different way, for example, by inverting on occasion the value of single terms. A final

observation: The table proposes a list of categories. We have said that these can be related to one another in a variety of ways. But this does not always occur in the same order. The system is constructed by the discourse, a discourse that generally orders categorial terms by starting from one of them. For example, the line "he was beautiful, blond, and of gentle aspect" moves from the aesthetic category to be ratified by means of morphological and emotional categories, to which, some lines later, the ethical category will be added. The discourse, in other words, channels values by starting from a valorizing *perspective*. Different ratifications and perspectives, therefore, simultaneously permit the construction of different types of axiological systems.

We also need to remember that correspondences and perspectives do not only operate according to sets of binary oppositions. Each category can be extended by using the principle of the semiotic square to reveal the possibility of neutralization, complexification, and deixis and, finally, of *suspension*. This occurs when the terms in conflict do not receive "full" valorization compared to the "empty" valorization that, in any case, differentiates them.<sup>49</sup> These final reflections also make us realize how the various typologies produced by constructing axiologies of value clearly reveal the "social" function of such axiologies. It is no coincidence that we can underscore how socially ordered historical phases impose extremely rigid correspondences and perspectives, whereas more doubtful or permissive phases offer a contrasting liberty or laxness in making value judgments. The so-called evolution of customs shows the truth of this general assumption.<sup>50</sup>

What interests us here, however, is that in the construction of axiologies from aesthetic perspectives the mechanism works in the way that has been described above. It is on this basis that we shall be able to contrast, in the following pages, two types of taste: "baroque" and "classical." By "classical" I basically mean the categories of judgments that are strongly oriented toward stably ordered correspondences. By "baroque," on the

other hand, I mean those categories that powerfully “excite” the ordering of the system, that destabilize part of the system by creating turbulence and fluctuations within it and thus suspending its ability to decide on values. Evidently this means closing the only historical door left open to us, since the only thing that history allows us to do is verify empirically the appearance of competing classical or baroque forms, and to analyze their figures (since these really are historically determined). It never becomes in any way the *source* of an exclusive classification.

This is the final definition of the procedure that I shall be adopting in this book. The search for the “neo-baroque” will be carried out through the discovery of “figures” (i.e., historical manifestations of phenomena) and the typification of forms (morphological models in transformation). We shall thus acquire a geography of concepts that will demonstrate not only the universality of neo-baroque taste but also its historical specificity.

## Rhythm and Repetition

### REPLICANTS

THE FILM *Blade Runner* makes use of a metaphor that might be useful in the context of the observations that follow: the metaphor of the “replicant.” Replicants are created as robots that are identical to an original—man—with certain improved mechanical features (such as strength). They then become autonomous and even preferable both aesthetically and sentimentally to the original. In effect, the contrast is between “automatons” and “autonomous beings.” If we now consider the fictional products of everyday mass communication in the same way, we are confronted by the same concept. These “replicants” (film and television series, remakes, popular fiction, comic strips, cartoons, songs, and so on) are also born from mechanical repetition and a perfecting of the work process. But their own perfection produces, in a more or less involuntary way, an aesthetic: specifically, an aesthetic of repetition.

After having lived through not only idealism but also the historical avant-garde, common sense tells us that repetition and serialism should be regarded as the exact opposite of originality and the artistic. The work of art is necessarily “unrepeatable,” to the point of being actually “unsayable” (incapable, that is, of being repeated, even in a discourse based on the work itself).<sup>1</sup> When we read contemporary newspaper reviewing we too often find ourselves reading criticisms of aesthetic objects that “replicate” other objects, which are then considered to be the forerunners of a type or series. At most, a product might be approved of for being “well made.” This is permitted by the adoption of a group attitude that promotes serial products to the status of cult objects simply because, in doing so, an aes-