



The Library as Universe in the Baroque and the Neobaroque

Caitlin Brenner



The Baroque movement in painting, architecture, and sculpture was the predominant trend in art during the seventeenth century. Its “integration of real and fictive space” sought to fuse the natural and the metaphysical, and its defining traits include verisimilitude, an affinity with the ‘passions of the soul,’ and a sense of the infinite, all created by the manipulations of time, space, and light (Martin 14). Consequently, the Baroque library did not function solely as a place to house works of literature, science, theology, and art; it became a realm of ideas in an age “which strove for an awareness of the totality of human experience ... connecting the past with the present and the future” (Rovelstad 542). This Baroque and European style library was thought to be a compendium of all knowledge, and I will explore its main characteristics of order, community, and artistic embellishment in conjunction with imaginary libraries found in New World and Neobaroque works of fiction. I want to explore aspects of the libraries found in works by Márquez, Donoso, and Borges to see how the idea of the Baroque library is warped and how that mirrors the ways in which reality itself was comprehended in each era.

Intellectual life during the Baroque flourished due to the integration of the printing press and the spread of new scientific, theological, and artistic discoveries, and scholars like Roger

Bacon had begun the attempt to “make the educated community aware of the expanding scope of knowledge” (Rovelstad 541). Libraries were competing in the community for patronage and tourism while new ways of knowledge organization were explored to establish the best ways to arrange and maintain these libraries. In Mathilde Rovelstad’s article “Two Seventeenth-Century Library Handbooks,” she examines first a work by Claude Clement (1596-1642) that is an “elaboration of an iconographic program for the architectural composition of libraries that allows libraries to compete with other public showcases of Baroque culture,” as well as a work by Gabriel Naudé (1600-1653) that “introduces necessary guidelines to build and maintain a book collection and to facilitate its profitable use by a large public” (Rovelstad 540). Libraries were “intellectual tools as well as outward signs of their owner’s learning and sophistication” and were “a visual manifestation of the power and wealth of its owner that also indicated his rank in the social hierarchy” (Rovelstad 542).

Above all, the exuberant architectural embellishments and the Aristotelian fusion of knowledge and art were employed to leave viewers with a lasting impression of this new style of knowledge presentation. The libraries were arranged with bookshelves lining the walls of the room so that all the books could be seen

immediately upon entrance. Shelves and volumes were “clearly arranged for maximum impact, and especially *initial* impact, on visitors standing at the entrance” (Garrett 46). Clement’s handbook explores the ways in which adding artistic embellishments to the library can establish harmony and how “the use of iconography to illustrate a library’s purpose” can be achieved (Rovelstad 544). Artwork would indicate where in the library one could find a certain text, eliminating any need for a library catalogue (Garrett 50). The “wall library” created a totally visible library, allowing for all knowledge to be viewed with one single glance. This “library panopticism” created access to all knowledge, and thus to the whole Baroque universe (Garrett 53).

In his Introduction to *Principles of Art History*, Heinrich Wölfflin describes the Baroque tendency from the classical principles of multiplicity and independence of parts to “a union of parts in a single theme, or by the subordination, to one unconditioned dominant, of all other elements” (15). Zamora notes that “the relation between parts and wholes is radically restructured in Baroque forms of expression” (134). New empirical methods, new cosmological systems, and new geographical discoveries were continuously being added to the once rigid and accepted structures of knowledge. As nature begins to reveal itself as fragmentary, “Baroque artists engage strategies of illusionism and indirection (allegory, emblematic and iconographic systems) to reconstruct meaningful relations among the parts” (134). In Baroque paintings, no one character, landmark, or icon can be removed from the painting or stand independently on its own. The library itself can thus be viewed in such a way that integrates the parts and the whole. Each book, an independent entity containing certain knowledge, can be removed from the shelf, and even from the library itself, but all the books together constitute

the library as a unified whole. It is here that we see the beginnings of the allegorical implications of the library as universe. The Baroque, in recognizing the fragmentation of reality and nature while noting the interrelations between individual objects, was able to conceptualize the universe as both its parts and its whole.

Just as one needs to be able to recognize the interrelated parts of the universe and navigate among them, the Baroque library needed a way to represent all of its knowledge in a comprehensive and accessible way. Even with large amounts of books, the organization of the Baroque library was such that it “had no need to of the intermediary of the catalogue” due to its unique architectural accessibility and the iconography and emblem inclusions that Clement spoke of (Garrett 50). In the wall library, “library space simulated and mirrored knowledge space, which in turn mirrored the universe” (51). Since the library itself was to represent the universe, the books that it contained housed all knowledge and was

a piece of theological art representing the sole officially sanctioned view of the universe. Surveying the library in that single sweeping glance meant not only to take in that universe, but also to comprehend the system of the sciences, which existed in the absolute correspondence to the presumed order of the cosmos, and, of course, also to shelf order. (54)

Thus, the Baroque library/universe was comprehensible, accessible, and comprised of the ever increasing scope of knowledge.

To contrast with the panoptic organization of the seventeenth century Baroque library, I want to describe the libraries of three Neobaroque authors, Gabriel García Márquez, José Donoso, and Jorge Luis Borges. While the New World Baroque “ironizes European hegemony by

including alterity and celebrating hybridity,” the Neobaroque goes still further in manipulating the Baroque as it “subverts the foundations of Western modernity—realism, rationalism, individualism, originality, homogeneous history” (Zamora 285). The Neobaroque engages in a process of dethronement of European-style Baroque elaborateness and order, replacing it instead with culturally hybrid artifacts and systems of knowledge. In placing the historical Baroque library next to the libraries created by these Neobaroque writers, the differences in organization and inclusion of Western style libraries leads one to infer the different ways in which the Neobaroque, in its resistance to European hegemony and dedication to American authenticity, viewed the universe and its constituent knowledge.

I begin by examining the libraries found in the novels of Márquez, specifically Dr. Urbino’s office in *Love in the Time of Cholera*. The library of his office is a place of retreat; “no other room displayed the meticulous solemnity of the library, the sanctuary of Dr. Urbino” (Márquez 19). It is a room that Urbino views as separate from the rest of the house: “Unlike the other rooms, which were at the mercy of noise and foul winds from the port, the library always enjoyed the tranquility and fragrance of an abbey” (19). Like the Baroque wall libraries, the shelving “lined the walls and even the windows,” however, there exists a “demented order” to the organization of the “three thousand volumes bound in identical calfskin with his initials in gold on the spines” (19). Márquez continues the paragraph by explaining how Urbino and his wife Fermina had rejected the Caribbean tradition of leaving the doors and windows open during the day to “summon a coolness that in fact did not exist” because they “felt their hearts oppressed by enclosure” (19). They instead opt for the Roman strategy of closing the doors and windows during

the heat of the day and opening them to the cool night breezes.

Noticing that the library, with its unique atmosphere and glass doored cabinets filled with books, in direct conjunction with the ways in which Urbino closed off his home to the outside air, is important. Their home is the coolest in the neighborhood, removed from the surrounding sounds and heat, just as Urbino’s library is removed from the rest of the home. They choose the Roman technique over the Caribbean, and Urbino values his European style library over the rest of his Latin American home which is overwhelmed with cultural curiosities collected by his wife. Contrasting with the typical Baroque community based library, there is a definite reclusivity apparent in Urbino’s attachment to this space. Urbino’s initials make the books specifically *his*, and the glass doors on the cabinets further restrict access to the books. There is also a still calmness, a separation from the world and air outside that, as a member of the upper-class, Urbino values.

There are two more important libraries in another novel by Márquez, *Of Love and Other Demons*. The first library belongs to another doctor, Abrenuncio, which, unlike Urbino’s, seems to include the entire interior of his home and is “illuminated by the two windows open to the great sea” (Márquez 28). The room’s atmosphere, not dedicated simply to the bookshelves, “was permeated with a fragrance of balms, which encouraged belief in the efficacy of medicine” creating a more inclusive setting less closed off from its surroundings (28). Márquez writes of Abrenuncio’s home:

Most notable were the books, many of them in Latin, with ornate spines. They were behind glass doors and on open shelves, or arranged with great care on the floor, and the physician walked the narrow paper canyons

with the ease of a rhinoceros among roses.
(28)

The visiting Marquis comments that “all knowledge must be in this room.” Abrenuncio replies “with good humor” that “books are worthless...life has helped me cure the diseases that other doctors cure with their medicines” (28). The number of books is remarkable, as both the Marquis and Márquez note, and the books are far more accessible than Urbino’s as Abrenuncio allows the interior and exterior to mingle freely.

The second library in the novel belongs to the Bishop. The librarian monk Delaura views the library as “calm waters,” which, like Urbino’s, allows for a sort of escape. The library is a large windowless room in the Bishop’s home whose “walls were lined with glass-doored mahogany cabinets containing numerous books arranged in careful order” (Márquez 83). Again we are forced to note the air and atmosphere of the room, which “was in shadow and had the odor of paper at rest and the coolness and peace of a forest glade” (Márquez 84). Like Urbino’s, the room is set up as a work space. In this library, “at the back of the room [in] a locked cabinet with doors made of ordinary lumber,” we are told of a collection of forbidden books that only Delaura has access to. This “prison of forbidden books” is at once inclusive and exclusive, and contrasts distinctly with the Abrenuncio’s library, which has “forbidden” books sharing the same shelves as accepted ones (84).

The libraries in *Of Love and Other Demons* and in *Love in the Time of Cholera* are at once similar and different to the seventeenth century Baroque libraries. The cabinets, the office setting, and (excluding Abrenuncio’s) the idea of reclusivity and separation from the outside world contrast sharply with the grandness and community of the wall libraries. These European-style libraries, with European works of literature, are unable to blend seamlessly into the

hybrid Latin American landscape that is the New World Baroque. We begin to notice the failure of such European centered learning and knowledge, even as Abrenuncio comments on the uselessness of knowledge and Western medicine. In each library, Márquez brings attention, not only to the highly sensual aspects of the room, but to the order of the shelves as well. There is the “demented order” of Urbino, the books “arranged with great care” by Abrenuncio, and the “careful order” of the Bishop’s library. Yes, one feels overwhelmed when viewing these collections of volumes, but unlike the Baroque library there are no simple methods of finding the information one seeks.

The Neobaroque novel *A House in the Country* by José Donoso depicts yet another interesting library. The scene revolves around young Wenceslao and his cousin Arabela, who is intimately familiar with the library and its books and the only person who can navigate through the space. To Wenceslao’s surprise, Arabela reveals to him the illusory nature of the library as she presses on a book spine “and all along the shelves panels of tightly ranged spines sprang open like drawers, revealing that inside there was not one page, not a single printed letter” (Donoso 17). This opens an existential and epistemological “stampede” of questions in the young boy as he asks how Arabela could “get all that learning...*is it true* that she knows so much? Or do I only think so because I know so little myself, and do the grown-ups only think so when they go to consult her because it suits their purposes that she should?” (17).

Similar to the libraries in Márquez, access is restricted to the children, as well as to the entire outside world. Grandfather Ventura had been insulted by a senator for being illiterate and ignorant, and “in revenge” he compiled a list of “books and authors that would encapsulate all human knowledge” to create his “library” (17).

However, only the spines are reproduced; there are no books, as we discover along with Wenceslao, and thus, no knowledge. The illusion of knowledge and education here leads one to question where knowledge and meaning actually come from. Wenceslao questions whether or not Arabela has any knowledge at all, but up until that moment he and everyone else believed she had the knowledge contained in those books, just as their grandfather led others to believe he was educating himself. Ironically, she does have all the knowledge contained in the books, because the books contain nothing. The family's motto, "appearance is the only thing that never lies," leads to the realization that appearance can be illusory and ambiguous; the appearance of actual books is the appearance of knowledge, when, in reality, there is none. Just as the Baroque questioned the reliability of perception, the question of appearance becomes more dire and angst-filled exploration into the nature of the universe and knowledge itself.

The final library we will look at is the famous *Library of Babel* created by Borges. While Borges is a master of abstract illusion and infinity, the subject of this paper requires me to narrow my coverage of the *Library*. The narrator of the story begins by describing that "the universe (which others call the Library) is composed of an indefinite and perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries" that are filled with bookcases containing every possible book of 410 pages (Borges 51-2). The narrator notes that "the formless and chaotic nature of almost all the books" and their lack of order causes despair in the librarians as they struggle to find meaning in the printed pages and shelves (Borges 53). Although the library must contain every coherent and useful book ever written, it also contains countless variations of those books, as well as countless other books of pure incomprehension. The definiteness of the hexagonal rooms, their definite number of

shelves, definite number of books, and definite number of pages means nothing to the "indefinite and perhaps infinite number" of such rooms, especially considering the inability to glean any real knowledge from the contents.

Because of the glut of "knowledge" and "information" in the library, those librarians who have not committed suicide in despair follow strange cults in order to search for meaning among the stacks of shelves. One such group believes that there exists "a book which is the formula and perfect compendium of *all the rest*" that would allow them to navigate the library (Borges 56). Like the Venturas' library, Borges' library calls into question the ability of a library to stand as a representation of worldly knowledge. The narrator acknowledges that one could argue that the library contains all knowledge, since all books "can no doubt be justified in a cryptographical or allegorical manner," or that it conversely contains no knowledge at all (Borges 57). In this *horror vacui*-gone-bad is expressed the existential angst of being lost in the universe without the ability to understand it. The narrator's only hope is that somehow a unifying and comprehensive order exists as the library becomes just another one of Borges' "handful of metaphors."

Superficially, the libraries of Márquez, Donoso, and Borges differ from those of the Baroque as iconic fusions of knowledge and art. There is very little, if any, artwork in the libraries, and, instead, the books are shelved behind cabinet doors. Although Abrenuncio's books have ornately decorated spines, the focus is on the books themselves.

The communal aspect is missing from the Neobaroque library as well. Rovelstad notes that "the primary reason to establish libraries is to share books and ideas with other scholars, a concept that dates back to antiquity and was revived during the Renaissance" (Rovelstad

545). The increasing subjectivity of these characters in relation to their libraries seems to stem from the rejection of certain Baroque beliefs that it is possible for an individual to actually know and connect with nature.

The ornate decorations and emblematic indicators of organization are lacking in the Neobaroque works; this lack of the ability to navigate without a catalogue is important, as we will see. The Baroque wall library's goal was "to present the vast mass of library information in a way that makes it mentally and emotionally manageable for individual users" (Garrett 45). The libraries we have read consist of no such manageability; their vast numbers of disordered books help us realize that abundance is not necessarily sufficiency. The large and public Baroque libraries, commissioned to establish social standing of its upper-class creator, strive to represent the grandeur of the owner's reputation, while the more private libraries of the Neobaroque show a disjointedness in the owners' selfhoods, and the inability for the contents of the library to actually *mean* anything in an unsuperficial way. The illusoriness of meaning and knowledge in these Neobaroque works contrasts with Baroque illusionism, whose purpose is "that of transferring the mind of the viewer from material to eternal things" (Martin 14). Illusion is used very differently in the Neobaroque. For example, Borges' "illusionism is occasioned not by the cosmic anxieties of the seventeenth century, of course, but by his own skepticism about knowing and representing" (Zamora 241). As the Neobaroque reconsiders cultural values inherited from the European Enlightenment, its adherents are "always engaged in a project of recuperation and revision" in what Lezama Lima calls "counterconquest" (Zamora 294).

In some of these cases, there is still order to be found in the disorder. However, it is an order

only discernable by those expressly and intimately familiar with the shelves. Imagine modern libraries, with their call numbers and intricate cataloguing systems. The information is findable, but in no way is it as accessible as a Baroque wall library. Arabela, Abrenuncio, Urbino, and Delaura are the only ones who can navigate through their libraries, and in Borges, there is no one who can sift through the countless volumes, even those librarians who have dedicated their lives to such an endeavor. For the Baroque library, organization relies on the accompanying artwork and architecture, for the Neobaroque, the organization lies in the subject's mind. If the library is to function as a model of the universe and the knowledge that the universe contains, these authors seem to be implying that the universe can only be known in subjective or disordered ways.

Borges agrees that "the (frustrated) impulse to embrace the universe is characteristically Baroque, as are its self-reflexive, parodic strategies," and Sarduy notes that "Neobaroque reality is...artifice artfully engaged, simulation with parodic intent" (Zamora 240, 263). By appropriating the Western style Baroque library for its own use, the Neobaroque is removing the European library/universe and placing it within its own New World culture. The library is now a representation of the *Western* universe, containing *Western* knowledge and standing in glaring contrast to the American authenticity surrounding it. The libraries of Urbino and the Bishop are solitary and removed, an attempt of these upper-class hopefuls to cling to a universe that cannot possibly exist in their culture. The Ventura library, comprised of "a list of books and authors that would encapsulate all human knowledge" does not contain any of these books, but rather a representation of them (Donoso 17). In a passage from Zamora, she notes that the Neobaroque writers

challenge the ahistoricism and elitism of European modernism, and in their critical reassessment of those materials, they challenge postmodernism's pessimism about the possibility of meaning...[the Neobaroque] places cultural fragments (texts, traditions, objects, historical figures) in dynamic relation in order to reimagine histories and cultures. (Zamora 295)

The real universe of Latin America, if we perhaps imagine it as Urbino's home, contains only one room that stands for what the European universe *was*. There are those who cling to such Eurocentric manners of imagining the world, and there are those like Abrenuncio who embrace attempts to know the world, while rejecting the confining belief that the universe only consists of Western thought. The Neobaroque universe is the library of Borges: "the Library will endure: illuminated, solitary, infinite, perfectly motionless, equipped with precious volumes, useless, incorruptible, secret" (Borges 58).

To comprehend how any culture creates allegories for the universe and for its accepted cannon of knowledge is to comprehend how that culture views reality. In true Baroque fashion, I have ironically isolated these passages containing the libraries from the larger context of the works they are found in, in order to make assumptions about the universe as a whole. The Baroque recognizes how fragmentation and compartmentalization can lead to an understanding of the whole picture, and the Neobaroque attempts to adhere to that recognition, while at the same time undermining it in a process of vision and revision, "aspiring at once to rupture and renovate" (Zamora 295).

Works Cited

- Borges, Jorge Luis. "The Library of Babel." *Labrynths*. Eds. Donald A. Yates, James E. Irby. New York: New Directions, 1964. 51-58. Print
- Donoso, José. *A House in the Country*. Trans. David Pritchard, Suzanne Jill Levine. London: Allen Lane, 1983. Print.
- Garrett, Jeffrey. "The Legacy of the Baroque in Virtual Representation of Library Space." *The Library Quarterly* 74.1 (2004):42-62. JSTOR.
- Márquez, Gabriel García. *Of Love and Other Demons*. Trans. Edith Grossman. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995. Print.
- Love in the Time of Cholera*. Trans. Edith Grossman. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988. Print.
- Martin, John Rupert. *Baroque*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1977. Print.
- Rovelstad, Mathilde V. "Two Seventeenth-Century Library Handbooks: Two Different Library Theories." *Libraries & Culture* 35.1 (2000): 540-556. JSTOR.
- Wölfflin, Heinrich. *Principles of Art History*. Trans. M. D. Hottinger. Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 1950. Print.
- Zamora, Lois Parkinson. *The Inordinate Eye: New World Baroque and Latin American Fiction*. Chicago: U Chicago P, 2006. Print.

