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Religious Architecture

Anthropological Perspectives

Edited by

Oskar Verkaaik

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Golden Storm

The Ecstasy of the *Igreja de São Francisco* in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil

Mattijs van de Port

Without the *sacred*, the totality of the plenitude of being escapes man, he would be no longer anything but incomplete.

Georges Bataille

Although I am slightly embarrassed to admit it, there is no denying the fact that when I entered the Igreja de São Francisco in Salvador, Bahia – one of the most famous baroque churches in Brazil – I had an immediate bodily reaction: my nipples hardened. No goose bumps, no gasping for air, no shivers down my spine (bodily responses which somehow feel more admissible to open an academic discussion) but hard nipples. And mind you, it wasn't even the first time I entered this church.

'The erection of nipples,' writes the Wikipedia entry on the subject (where I hastily sought to objectify the curious response of this unruly body of mine), 'is due to the contraction of smooth muscle under the control of the autonomic nervous system.' The site also reassures me that hard nipples are

... more akin to a hair follicle standing on end than to a sexual erection. Nipple erections are a product of the pilomotor reflex which causes goose bumps. The erection of the nipple is partially due to the cylindrically arranged muscle cells found within it.

For whatever this information is worth, the important fact to note here is that an architectural space worked my 'autonomic nervous system'. A religious building made my 'cylindrically arranged muscle cells' respond, quite independent of what I deem appropriate for visiting a church or consider becoming for opening an academic inquiry. What this oddly detached encyclopedic language effectively brings to the fore, then, is that in situations where people enter religious buildings, the body is as much a medium as the church. Both are sensation-producing instruments. Rather than sticking to the sender (church)-

receiver (visitor) model, we are dealing with the intersection of two mediating systems.

In this contribution, I want to draw attention to what seems to be the sovereign power of an aesthetic formation such as a church building over (the body of) its visitors¹ – more in particular the sense of loss and disorientation that comes with it. Anthropologists have long restricted their study of architecture to the way buildings are linked to the broader patterns of world-making in a given time and place.² Churches, mosques, temples and shrines have thus been analysed as the materialisation and expression of peoples' ideas, discourses, mental maps or worldviews. Thus, Clifford Geertz, in his analysis of the 'theatre state' in Bali, wrote about the *puri*, the kingly palace:

Like so many traditional palaces the world around, and most notably like Indic ones, the *puri* was itself, in its sheer material form, a replica of the order it was constructed to celebrate ... its layout reproduced in yet another medium the deep geometry of the cosmos ... What the *padmasana* expressed sculpturally, the *lingga* metaphorically, and the cremation theatrically, the *puri* expressed architecturally: the seat of the king was the axis of the world. (Geertz 1980: 109)

Edmund Leach, in his discussion of South Indian temple architecture, similarly argued:

The members of all societies, complex as well as primitive, externalize the ideas they hold about the physical and metaphysical universes, and about the social relations within their own society, by making and manipulating artifacts. The clothes we wear, the houses we live in, the decorated structures with which we surround ourselves, the paths we construct through such human worlds, are all expressive of *human ideas*, some of which are perfectly well known at a conscious level of experience, while other are only dimly perceived and exist only as sets of relations within the artificially constructed world of culture. (Leach 1983: 243-244, italics in the original)

Regarding Brazilian baroque architecture, of which the Igreja de São Francisco is an example, art historian João Adolfo Hansen took a similar position. The only academically valid discussion of this church, Hansen argues, is a reading of it through the prism of the worldview of its eighteenth-century designers and commissioners. Hansen goes as far as to re-

ject the notion of ‘the baroque’ as a useful heuristic tool for analysis. The baroque, he argues, was only coined as a ‘style’ in the nineteenth century, and the characteristics attributed to this particular style – ‘informality, irrationalism, the pictorial, fusionism, contrast, disproportion, deformation, accumulation, excess, exuberance, dynamism, incongruity, doubt, a taste for stark oppositions, *Angst*, word plays, thematic nihilism, fear for emptiness’ (Hansen 2006: 18-19) – speak to the theoretical dispositions and ideological concerns of the nineteenth-century academy. Hansen argued that one cannot make the a priori assumption that these characteristics – and more important, the moral and psychological connotations attributed to them by nineteenth-century scholars – are revelatory of the mindset and affects of eighteenth-century Brazilians, and the term has therefore no role in the interpretation of an architectural form such as the Igreja de São Francisco.

While the interpretation of a building within its historical and cultural context is certainly a useful approach, I also deem it problematic. First of all, the reduction of architectural meaning to the interpretations that pertain to a particular locality and period eliminates all incentives to investigate the sovereign power of form itself. Keeping the example of the baroque in mind, I would like to draw attention to the fact that the expressive potential of a curl is not the same as the expressive potential of a straight line, and that this is so independent of time and place. And although the experiences provoked by either a curl or a straight line will be evaluated and interpreted in culturally and historically different ways, this does not do away with the fact that there is something intrinsic to curls and straight lines: they ‘speak differently’.

Second, giving primacy to the local fixes the understanding of a building’s meaning in a particular culture and a particular historical period and fails to register that buildings tend to survive their makers (and their culture) and thus come to mean something else in dialogue with new times and generations (and their cultures) (cf. Appadurai 1986). Thus, if we return to the example of the Igreja de São Francisco, the meaning of that church cannot be locked into the worldview of the eighteenth-century commissioners, architects, artists and craftsmen who conceived of the building and built it. As the church continues to attract new generations of Bahians – not to mention the throngs of non-Bahian visitors who visit the church today – its meaning is constantly changing. In semiotic terms, the Igreja de São Francisco cannot be taken as a single, unified object – it is, as Victor Turner (1969) would put it, ‘polysemic’.

A third problem that arises from this perspective is that primacy is given to the sense-making that the symbolic order³ allows for: in the approach advocated by Geertz, Leach and others, the culturally informed subject always already knows (even if only 'dimly perceived,' as Leach suggested above) what the church, mosque or temple is, signifies and does. They pertain, after all, to the same structures of meaning. In this line of thought, all that a religious building can ever be is an illustration, a confirmation, an expression of that cultural order, i.e. *that which is already known*. As indicated in the opening of the article, this perspective leaves no space whatsoever for the fact that *experientially* a religious building may be playing a visitor as much as the visitor is playing it, and that the way visitors are being played may well go against their very own understandings. 'When we adopt what we take to be the [artwork's] organizing principle,' says Bruce Baugh, 'and allow it to order our experience, we give the work a power over us sufficient to alter our experience of the world from its very foundations' (Baugh 1986: 481). Indeed, buildings may baffle us, derail us, shake us out of the expected, disrupt our received ways of knowing and understanding, transport us beyond the horizons of our knowing. This 'numinous,' 'sublime,' 'miraculous' or 'ecstatic' dimension of architecture, I will argue, confronts us with what I have elsewhere called 'the-rest-of-what-is' (Van de Port 2012). Following William James' adage that 'in the distinctly religious sphere of experience,' many persons possess the objects of their belief, 'not in the form of mere conceptions which their intellect accepts as true, but rather in the form of quasi-sensible realities directly apprehended' (1902), this experiential dimension cannot be neglected. Most definitely not in a study of *religious* architecture, as my reading of the interior of the Igreja de São Francisco will show.

The Igreja de São Francisco: 'Catch me, catch me, I'm falling!'

The Igreja de São Francisco is part of a Franciscan convent and was built between 1708 and 1723 to replace an earlier church destroyed by the Dutch during their invasions of Salvador. Art historians tell us that the decoration of the interior took much longer and was only finished in 1782.⁴ Seen from the outside, the church looks plain enough. Somewhat tucked away at the far end of the Terreiro de Jesus, the central square of the historical Pelourinho district, it comes across as 'yet another baroque church' (Terreiro de Jesus alone counts four huge baroque churches, the city many more). Entering the building, one first has to access the *portaria*, a spa-

cious dark entrance hall with a late-eighteenth-century – and not entirely convincing – *trompe l'oeuil* ceiling, painted by José Joaquim da Rocha. It now contains the ticket office for the many tourists who want to visit the church. The portaria gives way to an open, two-storey cloister with white-washed plastered walls reflecting the bright sunlight. The lower parts of the walls are entirely decorated with eighteenth-century white and blue *azulejos* tile panels, which were manufactured in Lisbon and depict allegorical scenes of virtuous living based on sayings by the Roman poet Horace.

To enter the church itself, one has to pass a narrow and rather uninviting corridor, which does nothing to prepare the visitor for what is coming (or indeed, adds to the shock effect): stepping into the church, one finds oneself in the midst of what João Adolfo Hansen (in his attempts to undo eighteenth-century architecture of nineteenth-century qualifications and remain 'objective') would probably describe as 'an ornately decorated space'. I would rather describe it as a 'golden storm' – an overwhelming, whirling jumble of gilded ornaments and a 'blast' to one's sensory apparatus, all the way down to one's 'cylindrically arranged muscle cells'.

Sitting down on one of the hard wooden pews, taking in the jumble bit by bit, one may observe some striking facts about the interior design of the church.⁵

The most noticeable aspect of the interior is what some have called the 'horror vacui' of the baroque, its 'fear for empty spaces'. The walls around the main entrance contain some white plastered parts, but as one progresses towards the altar there are no more empty surfaces. Wherever you look, there are vines, tied bows, roses, atlantes, caryatides, seashells, acanthus leaves, hearts, ropes, grapes, birds, garlands, blazons, dragons, stylised torches aflame, bells and angels. Angels – hundreds of them, cherubs and seraphims, with and without wings, punctuating the golden shimmer with their baby-coloured skin and marzipan-pink nipples. Where there are no woodcarvings smothered in gold leaf, there are panels of azulejos, depicting the miraculous events from the life of Saint Francis, paintings of biblical scenes or statues of saintly figures. The rectangular, hexagonal, rhombic and star-shaped surfaces in between the complicated geometrical patterns of the vaults on the ceiling all contain paintings with more biblical scenes. The multi-coloured marble floor is decorated with wild, curly vegetal motives. Every single object – chandeliers, candle stands, balustrades, balconies, altars, columns, doors, holy-water fonts – seems to have spurred on the decorative zeal of the builders and become a pretext for more ornamentation.

Focusing on the ornamentations themselves, the eye soon gets lost in a labyrinth: a genuine proliferation of floral and vegetal motives that get lost in what seem to be an unstoppable movement of curling, curving and spiraling. The sensation of the 'labyrinthical' is most spectacularly evoked in the ceiling above the altar, where a white and golden geometrical pattern is running loose (plate 6).

Next to the evident preference for curls, curves and labyrinthical patterns, the interior also reveals a remarkable hostility to closure. Wherever boundaries were found, the impulse has been to break them down, negate them. The *trompe l'oeuil* ceiling of the portaria (and many other baroque churches in Salvador) is the clearest example of the preference for 'permeable frames'. With their breaking skies and flying angels, inviting the eye higher and higher up to the Light, they are a pure negation of a closed structure, promising a freedom of movement and flow between sacred and mundane domains. In the Igreja de São Francisco proper, however, the undoing of rigid boundaries is more the effect of the indulgence in ornamentation, which leads to an 'encrustation' of all clear lines, blurring all sharp divisions and leaving all forms amorphous, like a shipwreck on the bottom of the ocean. The negation of closure is also evoked by the angels. Often positioned at the margins of architectural spaces, these flying creatures lend their ephemeral nature to the boundary – negating the absoluteness of the division, connecting separate domains, inviting the spectator to cross the line.

In ocular terms, this interior exemplifies what Christine Buci-Glucksmann (1992) calls, in her study of baroque aesthetics, 'la folie du voir'. The bewildering jumble of images and ornaments provokes a restless eye, lost in curves and curls and folds, destabilised by the perpetual movement and shifting boundaries. Yet the attempt to grasp how one is being 'played' by the church in optical terms misses out on M.T.J. Mitchell's reminder that: 'Architecture, the impurest medium of all, incorporates all the other arts in a *Gesamtkunstwerk* and typically is not even "looked at" with any concentrated attention, but is perceived, as Walter Benjamin noted, in a state of distraction. Architecture is not primarily about seeing, but about dwelling and inhabiting'. The interior of the Igreja de São Francisco is better grasped in terms such as 'aisthesis' (Verrips 2006) or 'corporetics' (Pinney 2004), which underscore that *all* the senses are being addressed and played – all the way to the autonomous nervous system and pilomotor reflexes of the body. Indeed, the Igreja de São Francisco does not want you to maintain your distance so as 'to get the picture'. Its aesthetic tactic is to overwhelm you, to engulf you, to break

down the control that 'observation' allows. The sensation it seeks is to push you off track, to provoke a sensation of dizziness, of falling, of losing one's grip. There is no better illustration of what this church proposes as a 'sensational form' (Meyer 2010) than to see what it has made out of the classic columns of earlier epochs: no longer straight and erect, they have become spirals, icons of movement, negations of the very stone they are made of.

The sensation of losing one's grip, and the bodily dizziness that comes with it, continues at a semantic level as the dissolution of clear-cut architectural boundaries coincides with the dissolution of clear-cut categories that make up the symbolic order. There are transformations and metamorphoses everywhere. Decorative curls become plants, which in turn become human figures. When giving them a second, more attentive look, the acanthus leaves reveal the features of a lion's head. Human limbs, not pertaining to anybody, hold out chandeliers. Indeed, the category 'human' is not treated as a privileged category here; the limbs are mere decorative elements. Everything could well be something else. Are these angels really angels? Many offer their nakedness to the congregation as ever so many flashers. Some seem pregnant. Some have remarkably erect nipples. Some look at us as would a prostitute soliciting at a street corner. Most of them boast silly smiles and other rather idiotic facial expressions, so stupid that you can't help thinking that the slaves who did the woodcarving must have had a good laugh mocking the facial expressions of their Portuguese masters (a point that is also stressed by the black tour guides who take tourists into the church and help them 'read' the interior).

And yet, for all the dizziness that the golden storm that is the interior of the Igreja de São Francisco provokes, a description of my impressions would not be complete without mentioning its experiential antidote. For as much as this place seeks to induce in its visitors a sensation of falling, no one actually falls when entering the church. No one loses control or goes mad. And intriguingly, it might well be again the design of the interior that brings about this sensation. For in the storm of whirling ornamentations, the statues of the saints remain calm and serene, resting points for the eye in spite of their flowing robes. More importantly, the overall structure of the interior has a theatrical set up: the corridor of the nave, flanked by dark wooden pews, and the arched aisles all draw attention to the altar, thus bringing into focus the huge statue of Saint Francis embracing Jesus on the cross.

It is in this simultaneity of 'losing one's grip' and 'being led towards the savior' that this church interior is at its most effectual: the sensation of

disorientation and instability comes hand in hand with an awe-inducing sensation that a transcendent power, capable of keeping it all together, is present in this space. One might put it this way: dizziness is produced to derail the subject, to force him out of the regular structures of the everyday, only to then grab this falling subject and lead him up to the light. Martin Jay reminds us that this, again, is as much a sensuous effect as a psychological one. 'If the eye is so deceptive and the visual scene so replete with dazzling flashes of brilliance', says Jay, 'casting light only on opaque, impenetrable surfaces, recourse to another sense for security may appear an obvious antidote to its dizzying effects' (Jay 1988: 318).

Multiple responses: What to make out of this golden storm?

Although my intent has been to keep the previous section somewhat 'descriptive', it is, of course, a very particular evocation of the interior of the Igreja de São Francisco. Every phrase, every word, every metaphor is loaded with particular qualifications, judgments and assessments as to what to make of this 'ornately decorated interior', and I am fully aware that these qualifications are relevant and appropriate to a Dutchman with a sensitive autonomous nervous system and a cultivated aversion to academic forms of world-making, visiting Bahia at the beginning of the twenty-first century – and not necessarily to other visitors of the church. An inventory of reactions to the church interior reveals that indeed the Igreja de São Francisco (and similar baroque churches in Bahia) has elicited a multiplicity of different comments as well as provoked a variety of actions.

To start with the latter, whereas this church interior struck me as a convincing example of Georges Bataille's guilt-laden confessions on the experiential proximity of the temple and the whorehouse – 'my true church is a whorehouse, the only one that gives me true satisfaction' (Bataille 1998: 100) – Talento and Hollanda (2008: 79) tell us that many of the angels and cherubs originally had genitals, but these were at some point in time cut off by Franciscan friars, presumably trying to police the boundary between ecstatic worship and erotic stimulation. They were donned with little *culottes*, which – in a continuation of the striptease act – were taken off again in later stages, for reasons I do not know (plate 7).

Luis Freire, in his interesting history of the interior reforms to which the great majority of Salvador's baroque churches were subjected in the nineteenth century (but not the Igreja de São Francisco, as the Franciscan

order could not afford such reform), minutely reports how one religious brotherhood after the other sought to reduce the 'excessive ornamentation' in the churches of their patron saint, which, under the conventions of Enlightenment thinking and the neo-classical style that was *en vogue*, now came to be understood as 'a lack of control' (Freire 2006). Curly, dizzying decorations as found in the Igreja de São Francisco were removed and replaced by a much more 'restrained' kind of interior design. Yet Freire adds, not without glee, that nineteenth-century members of religious brotherhoods could not easily shake off their baroque 'fear for empty spaces': they did introduce austere Greek columns in the altar works of their churches but kept commissioning '*many* columns'.

In scholarly debates, the Igreja de São Francisco became an example for qualifying and defining 'Bahian baroque', which in turn became a key-element of the 'culture of Brazil' and 'the psychology of the Brazilian people' (cf. Peixoto 1999; De Grammont 2008) Although this is not the place for a full-length discussion of the baroque in the imagination of 'Brazil', some examples can show us just how different culturally informed readings of Brazilian baroque may be.

Maria Lucia Montes, in her essay on the religious ethos in Brazil, states that Jesuit Catholicism in the New World sought to immerse believers in the splendour of the Divine by playing on their bodies. The pagan people were not to be persuaded by rational argumentation but by a bombardment of the senses. Baroque, in her opinion, is the immersive aesthetic *par excellence*.

From the earliest times of the Jesuits onwards, theatre, music, song, dance and poetry had been part and parcel of the catechistic arsenal. Simple souls had to be conquered by stunning them; they had to be elevated to the ineffable greatness of the Sacred through the work of the imagination and the senses. Later, the form in which the churches were constructed, the decorative profusion of their ceilings, the perfection of the woodcarvings that incarnated the Saints, the splendour of the gold – sparkling in the ornaments and connecting itself with the silver so as to give liturgical objects a light of their own – the singing and the oratory of the sermon: all of this contributed to the production of that magical atmosphere in which the truths of the Faith – floating on perfumed clouds of incense – impregnated the soul through the five senses (Montes 1998: 104).

For Roger Bastide, the church became a prime example of the ecstatic and mystical tendencies in Bahian religiosities. In one of his earliest works on Salvador da Bahia, the French anthropologist has left us an in-

triguing description of the way the Igreja de São Francisco played him. Sitting in the church, Bastide contemplates the striking correspondences between the ecstatic religion of Salvador's Afro-Brazilian community, the Candomblé, and the no less ecstatic environment of this baroque church interior:

When one visits churches and candomblés, an analogy imposes itself, even against one's will, between two modes of ecstasy. Down there, in that intensely green valley, between the palm trees, the banana trees, and the thick undergrowth of plants, most of which carry the names of saints and orixás – Bush-of-Ogum, Saints-wood, Carpet-of-Oxalá, Wounds-of-Saint-Sebastian – the tam-tam of the negroes penetrates one's being though the ears, through the nose, through the mouth, punching one in the stomach, imposing its rhythms on one's body and mind. Here [in the baroque churches of the upper city] it is the tam-tam of the gold and the ornaments that penetrates us, not through our ears but through our eyes. As with the other tam-tam, that of the sanctuary of the spirits, it is inescapable. Attempts to get away from the golden profusion by closing one's eyes are in vain. It is as when one has been looking into the sun for too long: luminous stains, a whirling of reds and yellows going through one's brain. Opening one's eyes again, there is no way to put one's spirit to rest. The light plays over the low columns, it nestles in a black vine, in a green leaf, a sacred bird, an angel's smile, and then leads us to yet another glittering spot, with the effect that everything seems to be dancing and whirling, a spinning sensation that soon captures our own heads. Here, all that is profane in us has left us. Here, it is impossible to link two ideas, or to coordinate a thought: we find ourselves turned over to the most terrible of adventures. (1945: 27-28)

Art historian Affonso Ávila, hinting at the 'semiotic exuberance' of the interior and 'the insertion of African elements and sensibilities', took the church to be an example of the 'Black Baroque in Bahia ... in contrast to a White Baroque in Minas Gerais, which was also tempered by a strong mulatto presence' (2001: 124). Others contrasted the 'sensuality and audacity' of the Brazilian baroque with the baroque of the Spanish colonies, with its 'abiding devotion to the ascetic' (Underwood 2001: 527), thus highlighting Brazilian sensuality. 'Brazilian Baroque', says Underwood, 'delighted in the tumescence of carnal forms, in the provocative swelling of the flesh' (ibid: 524).

A most curious reading of the interior of the Igreja de São Francisco, expressive of a nationalistic perspective that seeks to define a 'Brazilian essence' in opposition to 'the European', is the one offered by Riccardo Averini. Writing about the 'tropical baroque' of Brazil (1997: 24 ff.), this art historian resists the whole notion of the baroque as exuberance, excess, instability, chaos and complexity, which he deems a thoroughly Eurocentric understanding of this aesthetic.

The exuberance of baroque decorations in no way exceeds the impetuosity and disorderliness of tropical vegetation, but to the contrary, adapts itself perfectly, and, in its compositional schemes, offers a criterium of selection and ordering principle. In terms of intensity and variety, this baroque is a 'less', not a 'more'. The gaze that is habituated to the inextricable convulsions of the tropical forest or the picturesque cultural mixtures of the early tropical farms, where one would find next to each other gigantic tall trees and the low level vegetation of productive plants. Here corn, cacao and vegetables would grow in liberty among each other, and man would not interfere to separate and direct them (his only function being to harvest the product). The eye so connected to the disorder of nature, a disorder that is animated even further by the incredible colors of wild flowers, immediately distinguishes the distributive qualities and pacifying order of the structure, in the [retabulos] of the woodcarvings, and it also senses how this art, building forth on this nature, and imitating it, soon surpasses it, subjecting it to the discipline of calculation. (1997: 28)

Other commentators focus on the observation that this is the baroque at its most sumptuous and opulent, or, as Bahian novelist Jorge Amado put it in his famous 1942 city guide *Bahia de Todos os Santos. Guia de Ruas e Mistérios*, 'the vanity of the religious city' (2000: 112). In this framing, the church induces anger and indignation about the waste, the breach with the Franciscan pledge of poverty. 'Scholars will probably never figure out what motives lead these Franciscans, whose philosophy was one of forsaking wealth and embracing poverty, to construct such a rich church.' (Talento & Hollanda 2008: 78). Of the mere two paragraphs Jorge Amado dedicates to the Igreja de Sao Francisco in his guide to Salvador (he was still a communist in those days), one is curiously about a beggar who used to approach visitors inside the church:

A little idiot, mutilated, with staring eyes, a syrupy voice, and a stammering kind of talk, sells religious pamphlets to the visitors. He seems to have escaped from an old novel, a new Quasimodo, crippled, deformed, with a yellowish complexion, greedily taking in the nickels given to him. In the midst of the marvel of this church he is even more absurd and more impressive. (2000: 112)

Tourist blogs, to mention a last source of comments on the interior of the Igreja de São Francisco, again reveal a wide variety of comments, prohibiting single readings of ‘what this church is like’.

Today’s remaining tourist trap was an ornate church called Igreja Sao Francisco. Our guide book states the non christian slaves who were forced to build it gained their revenge by endowing the angels with prominent sexual organs. There’s something peculiar about walking around a church in a hunt for prominent sexual organs.⁶

Exuberant decoration. I’m without words.⁷

We went to see the Igreja Sao Francisco church, which is this massive baroque church. The inside was so tacky and completely covered in gold from floor to ceiling. I guess that was once considered beautiful!!!⁸

Almost every surface inside the church – the walls, pillars, vaults and ceilings – are covered by golden sculptures, gilt woodwork and paintings. The interior is one of the most beautiful pieces of religious art we’ve seen to date.⁹

A spectacular work of art ... On the altar a portrayal of the dream of Saint Francis in which he embraces Jesus, still on the cross ... I was very moved ... even more so because I was there with my husband and children ... I felt blessed ...¹⁰

And so we can go on and on and on, endless readings, convincing and appropriate within the particular frames, projects and worldviews of the people doing the reading. Yet the question of course is: are there more general lessons to be drawn from this building for an anthropology of religious architecture?

Multiplicity and coherence, derailment and redress, jouissance and plaisir

The multiplicity of responses to the interior of the Igreja de São Francisco and other similar churches blocks every attempt to produce straightforward, singular statements about ‘the meaning’ of this religious structure. In a way, the church imposes its ‘baroque’ being on its analyst. Empirically, there is no other conclusion than to say that this church is many things to many people. It is ‘multiple’. As an author, however, who owes his readers an argument, I keep searching for ways to bring coherence to these responses, for a story that might keep my readers from losing it, just as the underlying structure of the church interior keeps the visitor from falling.

The easy way out is to introduce the thinking of Alain Badiou (2003) on the Event: ecstatic derailment catapults the beholder beyond the horizons of the known, blows apart the theater of one’s own imagination, enables one to face the limitations of one’s reality definitions, and thus helps to expand possibilities of belief into the infinite rest-of-what-is. To be converted, in other words, requires this radical shake-up of one’s reality perceptions.

Yet it is here that I need to restrain my all too radical arguments and force myself to look at the less spectacular occurrences in – and reactions to – the church interior. The different and multiple responses to the church interior that were just discussed do express a recognition of this potential to shake up the canons of belief, but they are, in themselves, *moments of redress*: attempts to draw into the realm of meaning and thus colonise and exploit experiences that defy ‘meaning’.

Allow me to explore this thought a bit further. It seems to me that in most of the responses, an earlier experience of derailment – hard nipples, tears, head spinnings, feelings of bliss, or indignation – is still present in the articulation. Take this quote from a travel blog, written by an American tourist:

... they took more than 100 kilograms of gold and slathered it over every available knob and curlicue in the richly carved interior of this high-baroque church. The result could hardly be called beautiful – works of the nouveaux riches seldom are – but by God, it’s impressive. The inside fairly gleams; on nights when the doors are open it casts a yellow sheen all the way up to Terreiro de Jesus.¹¹

I find this a most curious mixture of a person seeking distance from experiences imposed on him by the church (the ironic use of the verb ‘to slather’, which I associate more with food than with gold; the refusal to call the interior ‘beautiful’; the sneer at the tastelessness of the ‘nouveaux riches’) and a person who is still under the influence of the way he was being ‘played’ (the exclamation ‘by God!’, the qualification of the interior being ‘impressive’, the reference to the gleaming of the gold all the way up to the Terreiro de Jesus). Is this comment not an attempt at *redress*, an attempt to draw into the realm of meaning and thus colonise experiences that defy meaning? And, if we look at other examples presented above, are not the very references to ‘sensuality and audacity’, to ‘provocative swellings of the flesh’, to the ‘peculiarity’ of walking around a church ‘in a hunt for prominent sexual organs’ phrasings that seek to incorporate ill-classifiable bodily reactions provoked by the church into the realm of the known? To animate and vitalise the world of things we know with the thrill of the unknown? Or take Averini’s suggestion that the gaze of true Brazilians is ‘jungle-informed’, and therefore comes to rest in the ordered interior of the Igreja de São Francisco (rather than become dizzy). Is this not yet another attempt at redress: the replacement of an experience of derailment, a shocking confrontation with the collapse of meaning, with the fantasy of actually being the master of this *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*: they, the Europeans, get lost in a place like this, we Brazilians are in control of this?

These attempts to *overcome* an initial moment of derailment, *and yet allow this derailment to linger* so as to exploit its disrupting energies – as in writing an article to undo the embarrassment of the hardening of one’s nipples, and thus keeping those nipples centre stage – reminds me of the discussion initiated by Roland Barthes on the interplay between two forms of enjoyment, *plaisir* and *jouissance*.

The enjoyment that is *plaisir*, as Jane Gallop puts it, is ‘comfortable, ego-assuring, recognized and legitimated as culture’ (1984: 111). It is the pleasure of finding oneself (one’s body, one’s senses, one’s being) compatible with the scripts of culture, one’s social role or identity. It is the pleasure of experiencing that the social is a possibility, a match, rather than a straightjacket or obstacle. Moreover, says John Fiske,

Plaisir involves the recognition, confirmation, and negotiation of social identity, but this does not mean that it is necessarily a conformist, reactionary pleasure (though it may be). There are pleasures in conforming to the dominant ideology and the subjectivity it proposes when it is in our interest to do so; equally there are pleasures of opposing or

modifying that ideology and its subjectivities when they fail to meet our interests. Insofar as people are positioned complexly in society, in simultaneous relationships of conformity and opposition to the dominant ideology, so the form of plaisir that will be experienced will vary from the reactionary to the subversive. (1989: 54)

The pleasure that is *jouissance* – which might be translated as bliss, ecstasy, orgasm – is of another order. This enjoyment is *perverse*, in the sense of ‘shocking, ego-disruptive, and in conflict with the canons of culture’ (Gallop 1984: 111). Unsettling ideological assumptions and classifications, *jouissance* is the pleasure of evading the social order, to escape from ‘meaning’, a liberation from the social and the socially produced self (Fiske 1989: 50). It is beyond good and bad. Getting hard nipples when entering a church building, I feel confident to say, pertains to this enjoyment called *jouissance*.

Roland Barthes is quite clear that he did not introduce the binary of plaisir versus *jouissance* to slot the world of experiences into two distinctive halves. On the contrary, he introduced this opposition to enable himself to think about its fundamental instability. ‘The distinction will not be a source of decisive, steady classifications’, he sternly instructs his readers (quoted in Gallop 1984: 112). Thus, *jouissance* not only pertains to special, carnivalesque moments (as has often been noted) but may occur in the midst of the pleasurable activities that pertain to the notion of plaisir, empowering the identities in the making with its energies. Taking up Barthes’ famous example of the multiple pleasures that go into the act of reading, Fiske argues that *jouissance* ‘occurs in the body of the reader at the moment of reading when text and reader *erotically lose their separate identities and become a new, momentarily produced body that is theirs and theirs alone, that defies meaning or discipline*’ (1989: 51, italics mine). Gallop adds that these moments never last. *Jouissance* ‘does not endure but burns itself out in a “precocious” instant’. According to Barthes, ‘as soon as it is understood ... [it] becomes ineffective, we must go on to something else’ (1984: 112).

Coming from film studies, Vivian Sobchack’s discussion of the cinematographic experience articulates similar insights in another vocabulary: watching a movie, she writes, is too often discussed as ‘a specular and psychical process abstracted from the body and mediated through language’ (Sobchack 2011). Yet what is actually happening is a much fuzzier thing. ‘As the image becomes translated into a bodily response, body and image no longer function as discrete units, but as surfaces in contact, engaged in a constant activity of reciprocal re-alignment and inflection’

(ibid.). Watching the movies is the ‘commingling of flesh and consciousness, the human and technological sensorium, so that meaning and where it is made does not have a concrete origin in either bodies or representation but emerges from both’ (ibid.). Yet Sobchack too is aware of the follow-up of this ‘commingling’ when the lights go on, and one asks one’s friend: ‘Well, what did you think of the movie?’. There is, again, this moment of redress. Even the initial incapacity to find the right word – or rather, the realisation that whatever word one will utter will break apart the ‘commingling of flesh and consciousness’ of the cinematic experience – will inevitably give way to renewed control.

What these moments do, I would say, is to infuse reality, that is, the definitions of reality with actuality. What such discussions help us to see is what the vacillation between derailment and redress, between plaisir and jouissance, between flesh and consciousness produces: a renewed sense of mastery, of regaining control, of having been lost in the vortex yet having refound oneself anew as some-one: believer, anthropologist, man-of-words, Brazilian, communist, world-weary-tourist, mother-of-one’s-children-and-wife-to-one’s-husband.

Conclusion

So what lesson might be drawn from this for an anthropological study of religious architecture? My discussion of the experiential dimension of the Igreja de São Francisco – its capacity to derail us, shake us out of the expected, disrupt our received ways of knowing and understanding – sought to open a perspective in which religious buildings cease to be mere human representations of the divine, maps of the world, or replicas of the cosmos. Religious buildings have a power of their own that is not illustrative of religious knowledge already in place, but that one might call ‘ecstatic’, in the basic meaning of *ek-stasis* – outside-of-itself.

The vacillation between plaisir and jouissance, consciousness and flesh, a body of religious knowledge and the-rest-of-what-is is characteristic of many mystical traditions and techniques. What my discussion has made clear is that experiential incursions into the realm of the numinous – which produces experiences that are subsequently to be ‘made sense of’ – are not restricted to the practices of a neatly compartmentalised ‘mystical’ sub-division of a religious community. It is in aesthetics – the ‘process of en- and disabling sense impressions and a tuning and streamlining of the senses’ (Meyer 2010: 754-755) – that mystics, believers and

mere-visitors-of-a-religious-building alike are made aware of the rest-of-what-is.

As William James made clear in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), religions cannot do without such experiences. 'Our impulse belief is always what sets up the original body of truth, and our articulately verbalized philosophy is but a showy translation into formulas' (James 1902). And: 'The unreasoned and immediate assurance is the deep thing in us, the reasoned argument is but the surface exhibition ... Instinct leads, intelligence does but follow' (ibid.). Geertz phrases it somewhat differently, but his point about how the ethos strengthens the persuasiveness of the worldview (and the other way around) is similar:

The ethos is made intellectually reasonable by being shown to represent a way of life implied by the actual state of affairs which the world-view describes, and the world-view is made emotionally acceptable by being presented as an image of an actual state of affairs of which such a way of life is an authentic expression. (Geertz 1993: 89-90)

This, I would say, is what architectural spaces accomplish. They 'play' the visual, olfactory, auditory and tactile capacities of the visitor, and the encounter of the senses with the sensational form produces an experience that comes to inform an embodied understanding of the divine.

Notes

- 1 I opt for the term 'visitor' here to underscore that in the present day and age, a religious building such as the Igreja de São Francisco is frequented by religious and non-religious people, users and tourists, worshippers and sceptics, and that I see no reason to privilege religious responses to the building.
- 2 I take world-making to be the way people go about the task of carving meaningful worlds to inhabit out of the plenum of existence.
- 3 In my thinking, which builds forth on the insights of 'Lacanian' scholars such as Slavoj Žižek, Terry Eagleton and Yannis Stavrakakis, the symbolic order is but one of the three registers through which world-making comes about: it works with the register of the imaginary and is set off against the forces of the Real (cf. Van de Port 2011).
- 4 Biaggio Talento and Helenita Hollanda, 2008, *Basílicas & Capelinhas: Um estudo sobre a história, arquitetura e arte de 42 igrejas de Salvador*. Salvador: Bureau.

- 5 A fantastic ‘virtual tour’ of the interior, using sophisticated 360° photography that allows you to scan every single detail of the church, is available on the internet: <http://www.onzeonze.com.br/blog360/toursaofrancisco/index.html>
- 6 Read more at: <http://blog.travelpod.com/travel-blog-entries/davidbowmaker/worldwide2005/1127169780/tpod.html#ixzz1lbK76omy>
- 7 <http://moleskineletronico.blogspot.com/2011/06/igreja-de-sao-francisco-salvador-ba.html>
- 8 Read more at: http://blog.travelpod.com/travel-blog-entries/vmcelani/s_america_-_08/1203894000/tpod.html#ixzz1lbKnEcOt
- 9 Read more at: http://blog.travelpod.com/travel-blog-entries/dhruve_anjali/11301288768/tpod.html#ixzz1lbLtC5jX
- 10 <http://www.flickr.com/photos/tudocomfuxicos/5992078680/>
- 11 Read more at: <http://www.frommers.com/destinations/salvador/A31021.html#ixzz1lbJZSHku>

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