The Cut and the Conch

Aesthetics and Violence in Alejo Carpentier's *Explosion in a Cathedral*

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In the third chapter of *Fanaticism – On the Uses of an Idea* (2010), Alberto Toscano discusses how Immanuel Kant's views on the French Revolution became intrinsically linked to his nascent notion of the sublime. Toscano subsequently presents Friedrich Nietzsche's critique of Kant's moral doctrine, which Nietzsche finds to be inseparable from the universalizing character of the French Revolution. According to Nietzsche, both Kant and the Jacobins are heirs to a Christian notion of equality, and both display a fanatic fidelity to universal truths. What this critique reveals, Toscano argues, is "a contrast between two articulations of affect and truth: while the Nietzschean free spirit takes pride in his capacity to adopt and discard truths at will, the passions of

the man of conviction … are inextricable from his beliefs. That is why he is for Nietzsche a fanatic."[1] From a Nietzschean perspective, the raising of universal standards exhausts life, suppressing the sovereign operation of creating new and non-transcendent values through affirmative "active interpretation." This operation is at the core of Nietzsche's perspectivism.

In what follows, I will draw on Toscano's contrast between a Kantian revolutionary conviction and a Nietzschean perspectivism, a contrast that not only concerns affect and truth, as in Toscano's presentation, but also historical change in more general terms. More specifically, I will analyze Alejo Carpentier's canonical novel *El siglo de las luces* (1962)—translated into English as *Explosion in a Cathedral*—emphasizing how the *cut* and the *conch* (or "caracol") represent contrasting conceptions of historical change that nevertheless become dialectically interconnected. Whereas I will argue that the cut is emblematic of a sublime, revolutionary conviction that is based upon Enlightenment ideals—i.e., the universalist pretensions of the French Revolution as portrayed in the novel—the spiral-shaped conch shell is emblematic of a baroque aesthetics that explores cultural *difference* through its radical openness toward alterity. This contrast becomes acute in *Explosion in a Cathedral* as Carpentier brings colonial and cultural issues to the fore, exploring how the French Revolution sought to export "universal" values to the Caribbean region.

On a more general theoretical note, I will connect Nietzschean perspectivism to its baroque counterpart through the notion of the fold, as developed by Gilles Deleuze in *The Fold – Leibniz and the Baroque* (1988). In this work, Deleuze creates a concept of the neo-baroque that takes its cue from Gottfried Leibniz's philosophy, claiming that "the Baroque fold unfurls all the way to infinity."[2] He thus highlights a baroque ontological continuity where there is no space for cuts or discontinuities and

where transformations are "free from abrupt jerks and sudden shifts," in the words of Mario Perniola,[3] who claims that the philosophy of the fold is "both anti-nostalgic and anti-utopian."[4] The ontological continuity affects not only the question of truth, which must necessarily be of a non-transcendent nature; it also affects the basis of perspectivism itself, which in its baroque version "does not mean a dependence in respect to a pregiven or defined subject."[5] The process of subjectivation is open toward flows of time and affects, and in its radicalized neo-baroque version, it "opens on a trajectory or a spiral in expansion that moves further and further away from a center."[6]

However, Carpentier's novel also raises questions concerning revolutionary commitments: Can we really conceive of historical change without a certain revolutionary enthusiasm or conviction, without some kind of sublime politics and aesthetics? In other words: Can the baroque fold possibly replace the violent revolutionary cut and remain a sole instigator of radical change and emancipation? Or can it, at most, supplement or assuage it?

Explosion in a Cathedral

Carpentier has explored the relation between Latin America and baroque aesthetics in several fictional and non-fictional texts. In the essay "Lo barroco y lo real maravilloso" ("The Baroque and the Marvellous Real"), he concludes that Latin America is "a continent of symbiosis, of mutations, of vibrations, of *mestizajes*" which "has always been baroque,"[7] arguing that a "baroque spirit" has developed on the continent. In a later essay, "La ciudad de las columnas" ("The City of Columns"), he turns his attention specifically toward Cuba, where he finds the baroque spirit to be reflected in the heterogeneous urban space of Havana, most emblematically in the eclectic styles of

the city's columns. In fact, Carpentier's description of Havana's baroque space in this essay sets the frame for *Explosion in a Cathedral* where he, on the very first page, compares Havana to a "gigantic baroque chandelier,"[8] followed by a description of the city's hybrid character and palpable energy at the end of the eighteenth century.

In the first part of the novel, the action takes place above all in one of Havana's aristocratic mansions, the house of a merchant who is also the owner of a sugarcane plantation, and thereby part of Cuba's powerful *sugarocracy*. The mansion is described as a miniature of the city itself, with its own columns and its own eclectic selection of styles, especially in the case of the many paintings on the walls that are described as "a violent mixture of subjects and schools."[9] Being a merchant's house, it is also full of many of the same products that flourish in the city's markets. However, the novel starts with the death of this merchant, and we are introduced to Carlos and Sofia, who are now orphans living in the mansion with their cousin Esteban. Contrary to general expectations, the death of the father releases a great energy of emancipation, and they all start dreaming of travels abroad. They turn the house upside down, they are awake at night and sleep during the day, and they start reading and discussing an impressive amount of literature, searching for classical and contemporary books that are available in this epoch's bustling port of Havana. The domestic upheaval lasts for months until a strange Frenchman named Victor Hugues knocks insistingly on all the doors of the house, and in the end, he succeeds in his search "for some place where he might be able to squeeze in."[10] Although it is difficult to decide his age, he joins them as a new father figure in their upheaval, canalizing their juvenile energy into revolutionary fervor, before establishing a new order in the house. He thus foreshadows the events to come, as the year is 1789, and the French Revolution is underway.

Victor Hugues—who was a French politician and colonial administrator during the French Revolution—is later to become the one who implements the Jacobin ideas in the Caribbean.

Sheltered in this very mansion, we also find the painting that has lent title to the English translation of *El siglo de las luces,* and that plays a pivotal role in the novel. "Explosion in a Cathedral" is thought to have been painted by François de Nomé, and the main motif reflects Havana's status as the city of columns, but here—in the cathedral—half of the columns have just been destroyed by what one would assume to be the explosion to which the title refers. The painting's allusion to the Apocalypse is evident, and in Carpentier's use of it, the painting depicts the revolution as an apocalyptic Event, not only in the form of the French Revolution, but the revolution as Idea, the moment of explosion, the threshold, before the consequences are known.

Of course, it is no coincidence that the explosion takes place in a cathedral: *El siglo de las luces*—i.e., The Enlightenment, the novel's original title—dealt a terrible blow to the status of religion. However, in this context, it is worth noting the ambiguity displayed, as the painting juxtaposes the revolutionary event *and* the columns of the old order that are still standing. Read in this light, it is striking that the only point of real dispute between Victor Hugues, who represents the French revolution, and Ogé, a black Haitian doctor (educated in Paris) who takes part in the subsequent revolution in Haiti, is about the role of religion. Whereas Hugues states clearly that "we have gone beyond the age of religion and metaphysics,"[11] the creole Ogé claims that we must take seriously age-old religious beliefs and not seek to erase them with one stroke, presumably because such an eradication would release all kinds of violent desires.

Among the three orphans, Esteban is the one obsessed with the apocalyptic explosion in the painting. In the first part of the novel, he is depicted as the utopian one among them, agreeing

entirely with his new father figure Victor Hugues on all revolutionary issues, including the question of religion. However, as he returns from the revolutionary events in Paris, one thing seems to be clear to Esteban: The French Revolution is not driven by reason but by faith, cults, contingency, desire, and crude will to power, where revolutionary ideals have decayed into a reign of terror. In Roberto González Echevarría's words: "The prime movers of European history, as well as the political practice of whites, appear to be inspired by religion, not by reason."[12] This will later prove to be even more true overseas, as Victor Hugues transports the revolution to the Caribbean, and Esteban gradually loses his faith in the revolution as a utopian event. What seems to be Esteban's prime lesson, then, is that the world is too complicated, and its signs are too ambiguous for the apocalyptic version of the revolution to make sense—the wiping clean of the slates. This is also evident as he sees the "Explosion in a Cathedral" painting again. What catches his attention now is what the revolutionary zeal had kept hidden from his eyes before: Half of the columns are still standing, "as if to prophesy resilience, endurance and a reconstruction."[13]

The Guillotine and the Sublime Event

The cut and the conch are key figures in the novel's exploration of historical change. We shall begin with the cut, which finds its principal expression in a guillotine that is described in the following terms as it is being shipped—along with Esteban, Victor, and the revolutionary law—from France to the Caribbean:

> I saw them erect the guillotine to-night.[14] It stood in the bows, like a doorway opening on to the immense sky —through which the scents of the land were already coming to us across an ocean so

> calm, so much master of its rhythm, that the ship seemed asleep, gently cradled on its course, suspended between a yesterday and a to-day which moved with us. Time stood still.[15]

The description of the guillotine is one of several references to the door and to the *threshold* throughout the novel, and the commander of the ship is Victor Hugues, who himself knocked so insistently on all the doors of the Havana mansion, and who, according to the narrator, opened doors to new worlds for the young *habaneros*. Now he returns to the Caribbean with his own door in the form of a guillotine, which already at that time symbolized revolutionary justice: equality before the law and the destruction of privileges associated with the *Ancien Régime*, which used separate forms of execution for nobility and common people. Despite its gloomy silhouette, the image of the guillotine is ambiguous, especially since the ship brings with it the "sublime Decree of the 16th Pluviose of the Year Two,"[16] which—in theory—marks the end of slavery in the French Caribbean colonies.

The depiction of the guillotine as a sublime "doorway" to revolutionary justice is intimately connected to the etymology of the sublime itself, a concept derived from the Latin word *sublimis*, a compound of *sub-* "under; up to" and *limen*, "threshold" or "lintel" (the top piece of a door).[17] In Carpentier's description, the guillotine is a "doorway opening on to the immense sky," and the sublime character of the horizon is also evident in the description of the starry constellations, the ocean, the brightness of the full moon, and the whiteness of the Milky Way, elements that all seem to reflect positively the unlimited power and universal pretensions of the French Revolution. However, the sublime character of the scene may also serve to underscore negatively the violent character of Victor Hugues's politics, which hides a *will to nothingness* beneath its sublime façade. It becomes

increasingly clear that the guillotine/doorway is a metonymy for a revolutionary and sovereign *law* that proves to be malleable in its new Caribbean context, an unhinged law that could be attached to any kind of revolutionary idea emerging under the shifting constellations of power. As Terror intensifies both in France and the Caribbean, the revolutionary law becomes comparable to Giorgio Agamben's description of the *Führer*'s law in the nazi camp: "in this law, the formation of a rule [*normazione*] and the execution of a rule—the production of law and its application—are no longer distinguishable moments."[18] The revolutionary politics of the sublime has given birth to a new Sovereign, and its structure is described in the form of the guillotine—or *Máquina*—throughout Carpentier's novel.[19]

The guillotine became the center of public spectacles during the French Revolution, and the beheadings are said to have provoked "a sublime moment in the crowd,"[20] evidently a calculated effect by the Revolution's politics of the sublime. This also seems to be the initial effect as the guillotine is introduced to the Caribbean island of Guadeloupe, as described in *Explosion in a Cathedral*. When the guillotine is inaugurated, joyful spectators circle around it, drinking *garapiña*, but after "the knife fell in a clamour of expectation,"[21] they felt an urgent need to "release themselves from the horror that held them captives," and "to do something that affirmed Life before Death."[22] It is a scene of sublime violence that seems partially to draw on Edmund Burke's description of the French Revolution as an event of sublime theatricality, an event that causes the minds of those who gaze upon it to be suspended by astonishment. Charlotte Rogers has interpreted the ensuing party and popular dance depicted in the novel as a carnivalesque response that undermines this supreme instrument of power,[23] but I find it more striking how the whole social and economic structure of the city now develops around the scaffold as a new hub—"to the

rhythms of the cut."[24] Whereas the inauguration of the guillotine was presented as a spectacle where the onlookers could experience "the essence of Tragedy,"[25] shortly afterward "the guillotine had begun to form part of normal everyday life,"[26] and as the rhythm of the cut accelerates, the guillotine also proves to be a convenient way to get rid of the neighbor through a logic of resentment. The rhythm of the blade thus provides a deeper understanding of why the guillotine was introduced as a *Máquina* in the novel's prologue, because its function is, in fact, machinic: The politics of the sublime has created a new subjective assemblage, a new social order based on terror and a crude form of the will to power.

The ambiguity of the politics of the sublime can be addressed through Kant's writings on the French Revolution and Nietzsche's critique of them.[27] Kant contrasts the sublime with the beautiful by describing the sublime thing—or the thing that *appears* as sublime—as either formless or having a form that exceeds our capability to perceive it as such due to its size. Thus we are not able to comprehend the thing, and this frustrates our judgment and suspends our vital powers. What happens is that the faculty of the imagination is confronted with its own limit, experiencing an immensity that stretches it to the extremity of its power, producing displeasure. However, displeasure is soon substituted by pleasure and freedom, as we realize that—despite the shortcomings of the faculty of the imagination—the *rational Idea* can grasp the formless phenomenon as a totality. Thus, the failure of the senses paves the way for the "higher" faculty of Reason, which is capable of conceiving the infinite. Transcending both the shortcomings of our senses and the determinations of nature, Reason attains an idea of totality or freedom and of being unbounded. However, for Kant, the sublime idea of freedom from nature has moral implications, as it makes us aware of the purposiveness that defines us as autonomous moral agents

that live in accordance with the categorical imperative. The idea of freedom thus constitutes the freedom to act in accordance with the universal moral law.

When Kant turns his attention to the French Revolution, it is with an interest in the revolution as a rational Idea and as a sign of moral progress. For Kant, the Revolution is an Idea because "it cannot be represented as a whole by any object or experience," and this Idea is what makes the French Revolution sublime. In fact, the Idea regulates the way we gain knowledge of the world, and the idea of the Revolution seems to constitute a frame or an optic that metaphorically gives access to the "immense sky," as in the novel's description of the guillotine. The idea of the Revolution also reminds us of the impossibility of giving sensual form to supersensible ideas, and this may provoke pain as the actions stop short of turning the idea into reality. However, the *attempts* to carry out the idea—such as the burning of the Bastille—may in turn create pleasure, as they become signs of freedom that produce enthusiasm in the spectators. In the words of Alberto Toscano, they become "a sign that humanity may indeed be the agent of its own improvement, that there is such a thing as human progress in history."[28] Through his descriptions of the guillotine, Carpentier explores how complicated and enigmatic such a sign can be, as it refers to freedom and terror at the same time.

The freedom in the Kantian conception is intimately connected to the moral imperative. In his critique of Kant's "moral fanaticism,"[29] Nietzsche considers this imperative to be inseparable from the natural law of Rousseau and the universal pretensions of the French Revolution in general. Furthermore, he considers both Kant and the French Revolution as heirs to the life-denying Platonic ideas and to "eternal" Christian truths. In Nietzsche's view, the act of raising universal standards is inherently nihilistic as it denies and exhausts the affirmative *will to*

power, which is differential in character. As Toscano writes: "For Nietzsche, both Christianity and the revolution of the Rights of Man rest on notions of duty and virtue abstracted from the concrete differences between peoples, groups and individuals, between different wills and affirmations."[30] Nietzsche's solution is to raise the categories of *interpretation* and *perspectivism* as contrasts to Kant's universalism, and we shall see that these categories become key to Carpentier's search for baroque alternatives to the rhythm of the revolutionary cut, explored above all through the spiral-formed conch.

The Conch as Baroque Figure

Esteban's return to his native Caribbean is a liminal experience, with the description of the boat—"suspended between a yesterday and a to-day which moved with us"[31]—underscoring the liminal character of the scene. The suspension of time seems to be connected to the image of the unhinged door as well, as the revolutionary time is by definition a *time out of joint*. However, the suspension of time is also a baroque topic, linked to an epistemological crisis which is emblematically expressed through the famous words of Hamlet. The boat as a revolutionary suspension of time thus finds its counterpart in the baroque suspension, and if the *Máquina* or guillotine dominates the atmosphere of the boat, the conch or *caracol* is its baroque counterpart as attention shifts from the boat to the sea:

> [H]e became absorbed in the contemplation of a conch—a single conch—which stood like a monument, level with his eyes, blotting out the horizon. This conch was the mediator between evanescent, fugitive, lawless, measureless fluidity, and the land, with its crystallisations, its structure, its morphology, where

> everything could be grasped and weighed. Out of a sea at the mercy of lunar cycles—fickle, furious or generous—curling and dilating, forever ignorant of modules, theorems and equations—there appeared these surprising shells, symbolising in number and proportion exactly what the Mother lacked, concrete examples of linear development, of the laws of convolution, of a wonderfully precise conical architecture, of masses in equilibrium, of tangible arabesques which hinted at all the baroquisms to come. Contemplating a conch shell—a single conch shell—Esteban reflected on how, for millennium upon millennium, the spiral had been present to the everyday gaze of maritime races, who were still incapable of understanding it, or of even grasping the reality of its presence... Contemplate a conch—a single conch. *Te deum*.[32]

In this passage, the conch appears as a *singular* mediator between the known and the unknown, the self and alterity or, in the words of Roberto González Echevarría, "between the formlessness of water and hardened shapes of earth."[33] In this sense, the conch serves as a "lawless" contrast to the guillotine, this metonymy for a revolution that likewise gives access to the unknown and to infinity but with violence inscribed in its negative sublime experience.

The role of the baroque conch is of a different nature, first of all, because it does not aim toward a "City of the Future"[34] conceived through a utopian clean cut but toward the past. In contrast to the empty doorway of the guillotine, the conch is a house, it is specifically situated in the Caribbean, and Carpentier's narrator also refers to the fact that the conch was used as a musical instrument by the originary Taíno population. Through the explicitly protobaroque form of the spiral, Esteban is furthermore led to contemplate the conch as an expression of compressed time, a contemplation that brings him back

through "millennium upon millennium." The spiral structure of the conch leads him through history's "revolutions"—from Latin *revolutio*, "a turn around"—toward civilizations that were not able to understand this temporal structure. Being historical and Orphic at the same time, the scene thus adopts a character that takes *time* as its primary matter, extracting an ontological essence from the exploration of the Caribbean archive. It is simultaneously open to the whole variety of life forms and constellations that Carpentier describes on these pages:

> Carried into a world of symbiosis ..., Esteban marvelled to realise how the language of these islands had made use of agglutination, verbal amalgams and metaphors to convey the formal ambiguity of things which participated in several essences at once. Just as certain trees were called "acacia-bracelets", "pineapple-porcelain", "wood-rib" ... many marine creatures had received names which established verbal equivocations in order to describe them accurately.[35]

Some critics have viewed this scene as emblematic of Carpentier's own description of Latin America as the world of the "marvellous real," such a Luis Duno-Gottberg,[36] but in my view, this "world of symbiosis" points to a baroque aesthetics in a more general sense. The hyphens in the quote announce the juxtaposition of separate fields that defines the baroque metaphor referred to in this passage, a Gongoresque trait that became crucial for the poetics of Carpentier and other members of the Hispanic avantgarde. The reference to the metaphor is significant because Esteban's contribution to the French revolution is as a translator of revolutionary pamphlets, and as such he has fought with "the formal ambiguity of things which participated in several essences at once," such as: How is it possible to translate the ideas of the Enlightenment to a Hispanic audience which has a

different conception of absolute monarchy and generally a stronger catholic faith than the French had? How can a translator be faithful to a revolutionary idea which necessarily needs to be translated into another language? In short, what form should the *metapherein* or transfer take? Gavin Arnall has pointed out that "although Esteban agrees to modify French texts in a way that contradicts their ideal of liberty, he does so with the ultimate goal of extending the ideal and contributing to its universalization."[37]

The question of translation is key to the inauguration of the guillotine in Guadeloupe, for whereas the spectacle of executions had a sublime effect, Victor Hugues's speech certainly did not:

> For all his eloquence and vigor, the Word failed to harmonize with the mood of these people, who had congregated here in a festive spirit, and were amusing themselves with games of brushing against the opposite sex, and making small effort to understand a language which differed greatly—especially with that southern accent which Victor flaunted like a coat of arms—from their homely local patois.[38]

Convinced of the transparency of the Idea of the Revolution, Hugues ignores the need for translation. The linguistic aspect has a philosophical underpinning: As he is being "faithful to the verge of fanaticism"[39] to the men who had invested him his authority and to the rhythm of the cut, Hugues also ignores Nietzschean values of interpretation in a broader sense. In fact, he ends up endorsing Robespierre's Idea of the Supreme Being, "a God without a past" that "had not been made flesh, nor had he lived among us,"[40] in Esteban's words. Conceived as a replacement for the Christian god, the Supreme Being was a pure idea lacking a body or a history that could connect man's experience to that of a revolutionary faith in transcendence.[41] Esteban had previously

been in favor of an uncompromising suppression of Catholicism, but now he comes to endorse the Haitian revolutionary Ogé's conviction that revolutionary upheaval must be based on people's desire toward "the imitation of Christ,"[42] because the Crucified "belonged to him by hereditary right" and "formed part of the patrimony of his race."[43] The failure of the Supreme Being reflects the failure of the revolutionary ideals in the Caribbean in general, according to Esteban, who claims that "the weakness of a revolution which had so stunned the world" was "its lack of convincing gods."[44] In short, it was an idea that failed to translate, as it lacked a specific house, a body, or a material context.

As he returns to the Caribbean from France, Esteban's reflections on the "Idea of the Sea"[45] also appear in contrast to that of Robespierre's Supreme Being. Carpentier's use of capital letters seems to indicate a philosophical importance, perhaps even a connection or contrast to Kant's own Idea of the French Revolution. In any case, the Idea of the Sea seems to be based upon a baroque fluidity, which creates what Homi Bhabha would call an "in-between space" for Esteban as a translator, and which encapsulates difference as such.[46] Accordingly, in *Explosion in a Cathedral,* the (neo)baroque return to the archive does not imply a return to some secret or hidden essence, but rather to a possibility of (re)interpreting, unfolding, or reactualizing ignored potentials, the ruins of time. The novel unfolds a series of revolutionary events, but instead of repeating each other, they create a spiral of new beginnings that are nevertheless folds of the same continuous fabric of time. In this sense, the very form of the spiral of the conch is revealing of the baroque aesthetics and thought: Contrary to the cut or fissure, the neobaroque revolution is produced through repetition, difference, and translation, a fact that is highlighted by the fate of Esteban's own translations. After being piled up and stocked away for years, the translations are suddenly saved from oblivion and read widely in

the Hispanic world where they contribute to revolutionary mobilizations. They had failed in their immediate effect as enforced Jacobin ideas, but now they are folded into local narratives, serving the call for liberty on the people's own conditions, thus confirming the novel's epigraph from the *Zohar*: "The words do not fall in emptiness."[47]

The Baroque Fold

The baroque spiral of the conch in Carpentier's scene echoes Deleuze's claim that the "fold that unfurls to infinity" is the defining character of the baroque function. Taking his cue from Nietzsche, Deleuze raises *difference* as a contrast to the Kantian respect for "knowledge, morality, reflection and faith [that are] supposed to correspond to natural interests of reason, and [that] are never themselves called into question."[48] In *Nietzsche and Philosophy,* he shows how the concepts of the *eternal return* and the *will to power* are coined in contrast to the Kantian synthesis, and on this basis, in *Kant's Critical Philosophy*, Deleuze develops his own critique of Kant.[49] When commenting upon his *Critique of Judgment*, he starts by giving Kant credit for revealing a liberating disharmony between the faculties. Through the dissension between imagination and reason that is provoked by the sublime experience, a combined communication and struggle develops between faculties that are pushing each other to their ultimate limit. What is valuable to Deleuze in this context is how, in *Critique of Judgment*, the ensuing harmony between the faculties—or what Deleuze calls the synthetical *common sense*—is *engendered* through discord, in contrast to the Cartesian cogito's *a priori* unification of them in a *sensus communis*.

The difference between the Cartesian and Kantian versions of common sense is highly significant for Deleuze, as the sensible

is valid in itself in Kant's case, unfolding in a *pathos* beyond all logic,[50] and portraying a disruptive antagonism within the subject. From a Deleuzian perspective, Kant nevertheless wastes the opportunity of a radical opening, as harmony—although discordant—is reestablished under the reign of Reason and the Subject. Furthermore, the pleasure created by the rational idea of the infinite prepares for the advent of the moral law,[51] which is not called into question by Kant.

Although Kant derives a number of ideas from Leibniz, one of their differences resides in the notion of the infinite. "The infinite present in the finite self is exactly the position of Baroque equilibrium or disequilibrium,"[52] writes Deleuze, before explaining what such a notion of infinity implies by contrasting Leibniz to Kant. In doing so, he presents the *baroque house*, which takes the form of a baroque cathedral. The house has two floors, and the reasonable souls are on the second floor. There are no windows on this floor, no direct access to the outside. Reason is like a canvas that is folded according to the "pleats of matter"[53] that dominate the first floor, where there *are* windows to the outside. Every fold of reason and all individuality are thus determined by the openings to the external world on the first floor. However, the first floor is not unified, but consists of a multiplicity—an *infinity*—of souls (or *monads*) that form such minute and complicated constellations with other souls that the light of reason cannot possibly register all the details. What we experience as an event, a becoming, or even an Idea in the Deleuzian sense, is necessarily formed at a level that escapes reason.

According to Deleuze, "Kant turns the upper floor into something empty or uninhabited, and he isolates the two floors such that in his own way he refashions two worlds, one now having nothing more than a regulatory value."[54] Whereas for Leibniz, the two floors remain inseparable, making it impossible to know where the sensible ends and the intelligible

begins, Kant raises the second floor—Reason—to the position of judge. Whereas the struggle between the faculties is thus cut short by the "tribunal of Reason"[55] in Kant's description of the sublime, this struggle has become truly infinite in the neobaroque philosophy of Deleuze, inherited from Leibniz. Through the fold that unfurls all the way to infinity, a *becoming* and a plane of immanence are made possible, and the power to affect and become affected is increased, not through negativity but through a life-enhancing intensity. This explains what Deleuze considers to be the "sublime form" of Italian sculptor Giovanni Bernini's baroque art, as "it bears to infinity folds that cannot be explained by the body, but by a spiritual adventure that can set the body ablaze."[56] The sublime effect is that of a radical desubjectification, of becoming.

If we consider the conch as a prototype of neobaroque aesthetics, it echoes, on the one hand, the Leibnizian house or cathedral, and on the other hand Deleuze and Guattari's idea that art starts with "the animal that carves out a territory and constructs a house":[57]

> But if nature is like art, this is always because it combines these two living elements in every way: House and Universe, Heimlich and Unheimlich, territory and deterritorialization, finite melodic compounds and the great infinite plane of composition, the small and large refrain. Art begins not with flesh but with the house. That is why architecture is the first of the arts.[58]

The house initiates and sustains art for both Carpentier and Deleuze, constituting a territory into which nature, chaos, and the infinite may be folded. In this way, the house is traversed by immanent forces that release us from established (and repressive) truths. Rather than a Heideggerian house of being, the neobaroque house is a field of becoming.

The neobaroque house casts new light upon Esteban's sublime experience of the Caribbean sea as a field of becoming and as what he refers to as "Mother." Although a reference to the sea, it also serves as an allusion to Sofia, who assumed the role of a substitute mother during his asthmatic attacks, and who is the object of Esteban's desire from the beginning to the end of the novel. In several scenes, she appears as a mythological and feminine hinterland, but it is worth noting that Sofia felt that "the ancestral house" that was situated in "the vast baroque chandelier which was the city [Havana]," was "clinging to her body like a shell."[59] The image not only reveals how the emblematic Havana mansion is connected to the equally emblematic conch but also how Sofia herself is associated with the conch. Read in this light, it is striking that she experiences the baroque city and house as a confinement, which leads her to join Victor Hugues as a lover on his Caribbean adventures, before leaving him and ending up in Madrid. Sofia stands forth as a revolutionary, a woman of action and of conviction, not of baroque contemplation.

The Passion of Christ

If Esteban has become a baroque intellectual observer of the fold, Sofia is the pure revolutionary will to power, having overcome the corrupted deviation of her lover *and* father figure Victor Hugues, in a kind of revolutionary transcendence. Sofia's zeal is displayed in the last part of the novel, which takes the form of a patchwork of testimonies that Sofia's brother Carlos gathers as he arrives at the Madrid mansion after Sofia and Esteban have died in the streets on May 2, 1808, during the popular revolt against the invasion of Napoleon Bonaparte. Carlos learns that, having watched the revolts and the subsequent repression through their window, Sofia had urged them to join the insurgents:

> "And who are you going to fight for?"
> "For the people who've run into the streets," cried Sofia. "We've got to do something."
> "What?"
> "Anything!"[60]

Sofia has become a representative of the revolutionary cut as she joins the revolt while symbolically "snatching down swords and daggers from the collection on the wall."[61] As Sofia and Esteban join forces, however, it is not to serve any imported revolutionary idea or abstract imperative but to serve the will of the people, who now bring with them "anything that would cut or explode" to the streets, with all the revolutionary resonance that these weapons contain in this context. And what characterized the will of the Spanish people as they fought to expulse the French invaders? Luís Madureira makes poignant remarks about the novel's conclusion:

> May 2nd remains a disarticulated collective resistance, lacking both the strategic linkages and the process of codification that would enable it to expand into a full-fledged revolution. One would therefore be hard pressed to decipher the Idea it presumably sets out to realize or embody … As a political event, May 2nd is on the order of the sublime. And like the sublime, what "determines" it is its indeterminacy, its formlessness, precisely the impetuosity and excitement, the enthusiasm that appears to overtake Sofia in her final hour.[62]

May 2 is defined by its formlessness, and its sublime character is further developed through the crucial role that Carpentier gives to Spanish painter Francisco de Goya. All of the novel's epigraphs are by Goya, with the notable exception of the first chapter (introduced through a quote from the *Zohar*) and the

last, which is the one depicting May 2 and 3. The latter exception—or omission—brings attention to the hidden "truth" of the entire novel, expressed through Goya's portrayal of the Spanish people's heroic resistance in his May 2 and 3 paintings. The latter bears the mark of the baroque *chiaroscuro*, a play with light and shadows which, from a Deleuzian perspective, may seem to confront the light of Reason with its repressed *other*, most notably represented by popular faith in Carpentier's case. The roles are now inverted, as the one who is executed by Spanish soldiers in Goya's painting is obviously a Christological figure, appearing as the *real* light in Goya's version. Furthermore, his arms are raised in the shape of a crucifix, and his hands are wounded as an unmistakable allusion to Jesus Christ, surrounded by common people in a pool of blood. The sublime event is thus of a Christological character, and the revolutionary conviction is based on popular faith, in contrast to Robespierre's Supreme Being and the abstract principles of the French Revolution.[63]

The epigraph of the chapter depicting the death of Sofia and Esteban is from the book of Job: "And behold, there came a great wind from the wilderness, and smote the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young men and they are dead; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee."[64] Given the importance of the house in this novel, the quote obviously marks a closure but also a new beginning through Carlos. In this novel of repetitions, it is significant that the final scene starts with Carlos knocking as insistingly on the doors of the Madrid mansion as Victor Hugues had once done on the doors of the Havana mansion, thus alluding to Carlos's potentially revolutionary character.[65] "The wind from the wilderness" is of a sublime nature, and both the Madrid uprising and Hugues himself are compared to cyclones, the latter during his stay in Havana, thus personifying the revolutionary fervor.[66] Carlos is the witness, and like Job, he

must maintain his fidelity and his (revolutionary) faith in order to bring about a new people.

The union of Esteban and Sofia is the enigma that Carlos has to decipher. It is not, as González Echevarría asserts, "the redemptive marriage of nature and knowledge"[67] that is at stake, but the union of the cut of conviction and the baroque fold. Sofia is pure revolutionary enthusiasm but serving the masses' fight for freedom instead of an abstract, universal, and preconceived idea of a Revolution. When Carlos shuts the last door of the novel, the "Explosion in a Cathedral" painting is left behind but not forgotten. Its ambiguity is not only the emblem of the novel but also of the inseparable unity of the *real* revolution: the unity of Sofia and Esteban, the cut and the conch, the explosion of the event and the columns of resistance in the baroque cathedral. González Echevarría has linked Sofia's urge to "do something" to Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy of engagement,[68] and the union of Sofia and Esteban could be regarded as Carpentier's attempt to combine a Sartrean and a baroque logic of emancipation. What would seem to be an "incompossible" unity in Deleuze's Leibnizian sense appear as the two pillars of Carpentier's own stance.

In this novel of spirals, revolutions, and dialectical overcomings, two aspects are left as constants of radical change, facing each other as counterparts of the real: the cut and the fold. None of them can confer radical and lasting emancipatory change without the other. Can the baroque fold then replace the violent revolutionary cut and remain a sole instigator of radical change and emancipation? No, it cannot, but neither can the revolutionary event be truly emancipatory without the fold or the conch, without a continuous openness toward diversity, the archive, and the will of the people.

Notes

1. Alberto Toscano, *Fanaticism – On the Uses of an Idea* (London & New York: Verso, 2010), 134.
2. Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold – Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (London: Continuum, 2011), 3.
3. Mario Perniola, *Enigmas – The Egyptian Moment in Society and Art*, trans. Christopher Woodall (London & New York: Verso, 1995), 7.
4. Perniola, *Enigmas*, 9.
5. Deleuze, *The Fold*, 21.
6. Deleuze, *The Fold*, 157.
7. Alejo Carpentier, *Lo barroco y lo real-maravilloso*, in *Ensayos selectos* (Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 2003), 138.
8. Alejo Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, trans. John Sturrock (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 11.
9. Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 18.
10. Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 29.
11. Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 70.
12. Roberto González Echevarría, *Celestina's Brood. Continuities of the Baroque in Spanish and Latin American Literature* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1977), 177.
13. Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 188.
14. In the Spanish original the opening sentence reads as follows: "Esta noche he visto alzarse la Máquina nuevamente." Alejo Carpentier, *El siglo de las luces* (La Habana: Letras Cubanas, 2009), 23. The mention of the *Máquina* has been omitted from the English translation, and I will return to this reference later in the chapter.
15. Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 7.
16. Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 152.
17. "Sublime", Online Etymology Dictionary, accessed September 23, 2020, https://www.etymonline.com/word/sublime.
18. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (California: Stanford University Press, 1998), 173.
19. According to Jean-François Lyotard, the Holocaust is the supreme example of a politics of the sublime, where the spectator is rendered "dumb, immobilized, [and] as good as dead." Quoted

in Philip Shaw, *The Sublime* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006), 126.

20. In this context, Charlotte Rogers refers to Daniel Arasse's book *La guillotine de la Terreur* (1987), as she writes: "Arasse argues that, in the revolutionary France, the action of the guillotine and the shock provoked by watching the beheadings, led to a sublime moment in the crowd." Charlotte Rogers, "Guillotina y fiesta en 'El siglo de las luces'" (*Modern Language Notes* 128, no. 2, Hispanic Issue, (March 2013), 342 (my trans.). It should be noted that the use of the guillotine was also a means to control outbursts of spontaneous violence.
21. Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 150.
22. Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 176. I've used Charlotte Rogers's translation, since this passage has been omitted from the English translation of the novel (see note 20).
23. Rogers, "Guillotina y fiesta," 344.
24. In the Spanish original, the words are "el ritmo de los tajos," whereas the English translation is "the tempo of the blade." As this translation doesn't capture the important repetition of the *cut* and the *rhythm*, I've decided to present my own translation of the passage.
25. Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 150.
26. Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 152.
27. My presentation of Kant's concept of the sublime is indebted to Philip Shaw's synthesis of it in *The Sublime* and Deleuze's book *Kant's Critical Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson & Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).
28. Toscano, *Fanaticism*, 135.
29. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann & R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 64.
30. Toscano, *Fanaticism*, 135.
31. Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 7.
32. Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 180.
33. Roberto González Echevarría, *Alejo Carpentier: The Pilgrim at Home* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1977), 247.
34. Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 72.
35. Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 178.
36. Luis Duno-Gottberg, *Solventando las diferencias. La ideología del mestizaje en Cuba* (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2003), 193.

37. Gavin Arnall, "Alejo Carpentier's *El siglo de las luces*: The Translation of Politics and the Politics of Translation," *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 21, no.1 (2012), 90.
38. Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 142.
39. Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 145.
40. Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 223.
41. As Hannah Arendt has shown, such a detachment from common experience was an important part of Robespierre's strategic conception of the supreme being, as "in terms of the French Revolution, [Robespierre] needed an ever-present transcendent source of authority that could not be identified with the general will of either the nation or the Revolution itself, so that an absolute Sovereignty ... might bestow sovereignty upon the nation, that an absolute Immortality might guarantee, if not immortality, then at least some permanence and stability to the republic." In Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking, 1963), 185.
42. Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 72.
43. Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 224.
44. Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 223.
45. Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 177.
46. Roberto González Echevarría makes a similar point when stating that "the shape of these fish, of these creatures, is not given by the second term in the hyphenated word, but by the very process of changing one into another, by the hyphen itself" (*Celestina's Brood*, 186). González Echevarría claims that this "process of transforming something into something else" appears to Esteban as characteristic of the Caribbean (*Celestina's Brood*, 185). However, he does not discuss the relation to the archive or history, and I also think that Esteban's reflection is more directed toward a baroque understanding of history than what González Echevarría admits in this particular case.
47. The epigraph is left untranslated in the English version of the novel. The original is: "Las palabras no caen en el vacío."
48. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London & New York: Continuum, 2004), 173.
49. Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche et la philosophie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1991), 58–59.
50. Deleuze, *Kant's Critical Philosophy*, xii.

51. Deleuze, *Kant's Critical Philosophy*, 52.
52. Deleuze, *The Fold*, 102.
53. Deleuze, *The Fold*, 4.
54. Deleuze, *The Fold*, 136. Translation modified, since "inhabité" was incorrectly translated as "inhabited."
55. Deleuze, *The Fold*, 78.
56. Deleuze, *The Fold*, 139–140.
57. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson & Graham Burchell (London: Verso, 1994), 183.
58. Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?,* 186.
59. Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 290.
60. Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 348.
61. Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 347.
62. Luís Madureira, *Cannibal Modernities: Postcoloniality and the Avant-Garde in Caribbean and Brazilian Literature* (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 2005), 210.
63. However, I disagree with Claude Dumas who concludes that the human being's need for a religion is an essential topic of the novel: "Lo esencial del tema parece ser la búsqueda alrededor de la necesidad de una religión en el hombre" ("*El siglo de las luces*, de Alejo Carpentier," in *Homenaje a Alejo Carpentier*, ed. Helmy F. Giacoman. New York: Las Américas Publishing, 1970, 340). In my reading, I've emphasized the need to fold the *actual* popular will and faith into a virtual field of revolutionary becoming.
64. Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, 339.
65. As González Echevarría has pointed out, it is significant that Carlos is the one who brings the novel to an end, and who will carry on what Sofia and Esteban had begun, symbolically paving the way for Carlos Manuel de Céspedes. Céspedes was a member of the sugarocracy who in 1868 declared his slaves free and marched against the Spaniards in Cuba, thus starting the Cuban war of independence (Echevarría, *The Pilgrim at Home*, 232).
66. Dominique Chancé makes this connection while also connecting it to the form of the spiral: "On comprend alors que, plus qu'un homme historique, soit décrit comme un cyclone, tournant autour de cette maison bien fermée don't il fera céder la porte, et que la révolution soit elle-même un cyclone, un tourbillon. La foule revoltée de Madrilènes est également un moment de la spirale:

"tout à coup la houle humaine sembla s'immobiliser, comme confondue par ses propres tourbillons" (Chancé, *Poétique baroque de la Caraïbe*. Paris: Karthala 2001, 40).

67. Echevarría, *The Pilgrim at Home*, 231.
68. Echevarría, *The Pilgrim at home*, 234.

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