

Re-visioning the Spanish Baroque: The Ekphrastic Dimension of *Constancia and Other Stories for Virgins* by Carlos Fuentes

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Abstract: Carlos Fuentes's short story collection *Constancia and Other Stories for Virgins* (1989) is characterized by a strong pictorial dimension. While some stories are indebted to the fantastic imaginary of Francisco de Goya, several passages in the story "Reasonable People" can be seen as a narrative transfiguration of religious paintings by the Spanish Baroque artist Francisco de Zurbarán. More concretely, we intend to read "Reasonable People" as a narrativization of Zurbarán's portraits of martyred virgins. We will therefore read the story in constant interaction with Fuentes's essays on the Baroque and Zurbarán in particular. The analysis of this "pictorial" discourse in *Constancia* will lead us to revise the Baroque in the work of Fuentes.

Résumé: La collection de nouvelles *Constancia et autres histoires pour vierges* (1989) est caractérisée par une forte dimension picturale. Tandis que certaines nouvelles sont tributaires à l'imaginaire fantastique de Francisco de Goya, plusieurs passages de la nouvelle « Gens de raison » peuvent être considérés comme des transpositions narratives des tableaux religieux de l'artiste baroque espagnol Francisco de Zurbarán. Concrètement, nous nous proposons de lire « Gens de raison » comme une narrativisation des représentations des Vierges martyres de Zurbarán. A cet effet, nous lirons le récit parallèlement aux essais que Fuentes a consacrés au baroque et à Zurbarán en particulier. L'analyse de ce discours « pictural » dans *Constancia* nous amènera à réviser le Baroque dans l'œuvre de Fuentes.

Key-words: (Neo-)Baroque, ekphrasis, Carlos Fuentes, Francisco de Zurbarán

The volume of five novelettes *Constancia and Other Stories for Virgins* (1989) by the Mexican author Carlos Fuentes has frequently been placed in the tradition of the fantastic and Gothic novels (cf. Pérez 1997; García-Gutiérrez 2000). Most of the stories are indeed populated by ghostly, vampiric or supernatural beings. The title story “Constancia”, for instance, constitutes an explicit homage to this tradition since some characters are living dead who sleep in a coffin and feed on the energy of the living, while the protagonist’s first name Whitby contains a reference to the English seaport where Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* set foot ashore. In addition to this “Gothic” lineage, with its emphasis on the uncanny, some literary critics as well as the author himself have drawn attention to the “baroqueness” of the short story collection. In the title of his article (2002) on *Constancia*, Steven Boldy has classified the work as “a post-modern baroque”, though without clarifying in his analysis what this label actually stands for. In an interview with Julio Ortega (1990), Fuentes agrees to place his work in the tradition of the Baroque novel as defined by Bakhtin, i.e. characterized by an absolute freedom of the plot and the transgression of space and time boundaries.¹ While most literature on *Constancia* has explored the connections between the separate stories that constitute the novel as a whole or the intertextual dialogue with poets and thinkers such as Mahmoud Darweesh, Gérard de Nerval or Walter Benjamin, little attention has been paid until now to the iconic intertexts that give the work its artistic and religious resonance. This is all the more striking since Fuentes is not only regarded as a major literary critic but also as an important essayist on painting and photography. Indeed, since the 1950 he has published numerous articles of art criticism, some of which have been included in the coffee-table book *Viendo visiones* (2003).

In what follows, we will try to lay bare the pictorial influences at work in *Constancia*, particularly in the story “Reasonable People”, by focusing on the Spanish painter Francisco de Zurbarán (1598-1664). More precisely, we will read “Reasonable People” against the background of the essays that Fuentes dedicated to the oeuvre of Zurbarán. Some of the passages in his literary work indeed seem to be fictional recreations of ideas Fuentes previously put forward in his essays. With this in mind, we formulate the hypothesis that

¹ Cf. “El barroco americano es la gran concesión de la Contrarreforma al placer de los sentidos, como la música es la concesión de la Reforma a la desnudez de sus iglesias sin santos... ni vírgenes. Lo que pasa en *Constancia* es que el juego barroco está elevado, por lo menos, al cubo. El exterior barroco oculta una intriga dramática que podría corresponder a la fachada formal [...]” (Fuentes in Ortega 1990: 38-39) (The American Baroque is the great concession of the Counter-Reformation to the pleasure of the senses, as the music is the concession of the Reformation to the bareness of its churches without saints... or virgins. What happens in *Constancia* is that the Baroque play is raised, at least, to the third power. The Baroque exterior conceals a dramatic intrigue that might correspond to the formal façade.)

some scenes are ekphrastic in nature, in the sense that they can be regarded as the “verbal representation of visual representation”, to adopt the broad definition that James A. W. Heffernan proposes in his study *Museum of Words* (1993: 3).

Although Zurbarán is never explicitly mentioned in *Constancia*, our reading is corroborated by the cover of the first Mexican edition, which reproduces Zurbarán’s “Immaculate Conception” (ca 1660, Prado Museum; *fig. 1*), the emblematic figure that appears in many guises throughout the short story cycle.² Our reading is also supported by more explicit iconic intertexts in the stories “Constancia”, which draws upon Paul Klee’s famous etching “Angelus Novus”, and “Viva Mi Fama”, which is a meditation on the fantastic creatures that populate the print series of the “Caprichos” and “La tauromaquia” by Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes. Whereas Fuentes confined himself in his monumental novel *Terra Nostra* (1975) to put some reflections on Baroque art into the mouth of the painter Julián/Velázquez, the influence of the visual arts reaches much further in *Constancia*, where some passages are modeled on the canvases by Zurbarán and Goya. What is more, this literary transposition seems to be the motor of the poetics that underlie *Constancia*. While the references to the Baroque paintings by Zurbarán are implicit, some story-lines of “Viva Mi Fama” are based on biographical anecdotes of Goya, who also appears as a character in the story, as is also the case of some other historical figures portrayed by him, such as the *matador* Pedro Romero. Likewise, an erotic scene in “Viva Mi Fama” is clearly inspired on the drawing “El toro mariposa”, which shows a bull being suspended by a group of grotesque butterflies. In fact, the entire collection is placed under the sign of Goya’s satirical *Caprichos* from the very beginning of the book: the character of Constancia dreams a “vast oneiric, erotic, and secret novel” (1991: 38), which corresponds to the plot of the remaining four stories, while her husband, contemplating the famous plate 43 of Goya’s etchings, remarks that “reason that never sleeps produces monsters” (1991: 3). In other words, it is no longer the suppression of reason that is harmful, but an excessive rationalism without emotions or imagination.

However different they may be one from the other, the main theme of the five short stories is the duty of memory and hospitality towards refugees and immigrants. This preoccupation has to be understood not only in a historical-political sense but also in a cultural one. In accordance with Fuentes’s humanist stance, both stories actually pay tribute to

² In an interview that was initially published in 1988 Fuentes confirmed the influence of the visual arts in the work he was writing: “Estoy terminando una serie de novelas breves que son ilegibles si no se leen sus textos gráficos: Goya, Velázquez y Zurbarán.” (republished in Hernández 1999: 123) (I am finishing a series of short novels that are unreadable without their graphic texts: Goya, Velázquez and Zurbarán.)

Spain's artistic legacy in Latin America by exhuming the "ghosts" of Goya and Zurbarán. In his article "Goya y Fuentes: los trabajos del sueño", the Mexican author Juan Villoro has interpreted *Constancia* as a kind of Baroque *Capricho*:

La España que no nos atrevemos a nombrar y sin embargo nos define, aparecerá en su obra en su aspecto ultrajado, barroco: los *Caprichos* de Goya vistos con los anteojos de Quevedo. [...] Goyesco y barroco, Fuentes alza una galería de espejos que restituye en parte la rota historia de dos mundos. (2001: 97; 102)

(The Spain that we do not dare to mention and that nevertheless defines us appears in his work in its outrageous, Baroque form: the *Caprichos* of Goya are seen through the spectacles of Quevedo. [...] Goyaesque and Baroque, Fuentes builds a mirror gallery that partly restores the broken history of two worlds.)

While Villoro's interpretation has unmistakably certain validity for the analysis of "Viva Mi Fama", our point of departure will not be the traces of Goya in *Constancia*, but those of the Spanish Baroque master Zurbarán.

Even though he may not be the most paradigmatic example of the Latin American literary "Neo-Baroque", Fuentes is greatly indebted to the Spanish literature of the seventeenth century. Like the Cuban initiators of the Neo-Baroque Alejo Carpentier and José Lezama Lima, he has commented on the Baroque in various essays, most extensively in his lecture "Elogio del barroco" (1993), and in his five-part television documentary and the richly illustrated companion book on the multicultural roots of Hispanic culture called *The Buried Mirror* (1992). The artistic references in the chapters on "The Century of Gold" and "The Baroque Culture of the New World" concern above all the paintings of Zurbarán and Velázquez, especially *Las Meninas* with its characteristic oscillation between the interior and exterior, between the painter and painted – and the syncretic and dynamic sculptures by the indigenous artists Kondori and Aleijadinho. Significantly, the section to which these chapters belong together with "The Age of Goya" is called "Children of La Mancha", stressing thus the "stained" (a word play inspired by the phonetic similarity between *manchego* and *manchada*) cultural heritage that Spain and Latin America have in common and that reaches back to Cervantes. While Zurbarán appears in Fuentes's essays as a leading figure of the Spanish Golden Age, Goya is considered as a steppingstone between the Baroque and the Enlightenment. In *The Buried Mirror* Fuentes considers his engravings as a critique of reason and the unbounded faith in progress, as evidenced by the following comment on "The Sleep

of Reason Begets Monsters”: “But perhaps reason, when it forgets its own limits and believes too uncritically in itself and its brainchild, progress, deserves this nightmare. Perhaps it is only the sleep of monsters that begets reason.” (1992: 226-228)

Although the main action of “Reasonable People” is set in the aftermaths of the 1985 earthquake that devastated Mexico City, this post-apocalyptic present-day setting is frequently interrupted by flash-backs to the mid-century and by sudden, epiphanic disclosures of the past. The story focuses primarily on the relationship between two architects involved in the reconstruction and reconversion, the twin brothers Carlos María and José María Vélez, on the one hand, and their old teacher Santiago Ferguson and his daughter Catarina, on the other. Ferguson, who has the strange sensation to be the double of the Scottish architect Charles Rennie Mackintosh in the museified house of the latter in Glasgow, constantly discusses the value of architecture and its final, ruinous destiny in the first part called “Constructions”.³ According to the humanist Ferguson, the original function of architecture is to serve as “refuge”, not only for the present inhabitants, but also for the memories of the deceased. Therefore the Vélez brothers are called to distinguish the structures that were usually not visible to the naked eye. According to the Professor, Mexico City has a “geological layering of architectural styles” (1991: 268) and it is precisely the task of the architect to preserve the historical buildings, which might appear unexpectedly “behind a lunch-stand” or “under a filling station” (1991: 268).

In “Milagros”, the second and most important part of the story, a luminous Child Jesus and a dog appear in the shack of Doña Heredad Mateos, a seamstress who is the mother of the night watchman. The initial skeptical reaction of the brothers is replaced by amazement when they notice a twelve-year old boy, dressed as if for a “costume ball”, with “wavy blond hair, false eyelashes, and a dreamy look” (1991: 280), who had just pricked his finger on a needle. Suddenly the glowing boy vanishes: “[...] he had gone into the construction site, and at the same time somewhere else, into a space we had never seen before...” (1991: 280) While looking at the excavation zone of the Eje Lázaro Cárdenas, one of the brothers sees suddenly the entrance to a subterranean convent. From that point on both narrators go their own way, telling by turns their separate stories, which converge once again in the third part of the story, “Loves”, in which Ferguson is buried in Wells Cathedral and the twins and Catarina prove to

³ On the ruins in “Reasonable people”, see my article “Melancolía y ruina en *Constancia y otras novelas para vírgenes* de Carlos Fuentes” in Marco Kunz, Dolores Phillips-López y Cristina Mondragón (eds). *Nuevas narrativas mexicanas* (forthcoming). The fascination with the body as a composite of parts in the paintings of virgin martyrs presents close analogies with Ferguson’s reflections on ruins and the dialectics between the visible and the invisible, as well as between unity and fragmentation, which is at the core of Baroque thinking according to Walter Benjamin.

be an incestuous “fraternal trinity” (1991: 339). The brothers continue to call the crowded avenue by its old name, “San Juan de Letrán” (formerly known as “Avenida Niño Perdido”), where in the 17th century a chapel was raised (at the actual emplacement of a petrol station) devoted to the veneration of the Christ-child who was lost at the age of twelve according to the Gospel (Luke, 2: 41-52). With time, the street names lost their religious references and were replaced by a reference to Cárdenas, the statesman who symbolizes Mexico’s secular Modernity.

Far from being a warning against the consequences of the secularization process, the story is first and foremost a call to revalorize the deeper, mystical dimension of everyday reality by means of the artistic imagination. While in the story “La Desdichada” the protagonists change into lifeless wooden dolls during the contemplation of a statue of the Virgin Mary in the Metropolitan Cathedral, one of the main characters of “Reasonable People” seems to step into the pictorial universe of Francisco de Zurbarán by pushing an 18th-century exterior door in the midst of the ruins.⁴ Just as in the case of the ghosts that haunt the other stories, Zurbarán is simultaneously absent and present. In the dining room Carlos María sees a woman sewing on a low chair and a child sitting next to her who has just pricked his finger with a needle. This description is clearly reminiscent of Zurbarán’s painting “Christ and the Virgin in the House at Nazareth” (ca 1640, The Cleveland Museum of Art, *fig. 2*), in which Jesus pricks his finger on a crown of thorns he is weaving, a symbolic foreshadowing of his Crucifixion. The intimate interior is described in much detail: the narrator draws up the inventory that consists of a rustic chairs of woven straw, a mahogany table, beige walls, as well as numerous objects scattered over the floor, such as cornhusks, vases of water, flowers (“the yellow dianthus of All Souls’ Day, spikenards and calla lilies, gardenias: the heavy odor of dead flowers”; 1991: 291), baskets holding thimbles, yarn, knitting needles, colored thread, a basket of eggs, a chamber pot, etc. Although they do not appear in the Bible, these scenes of Christ’s childhood became increasingly popular during the Counter-Reformation and Fuentes recurs to his definition of the Baroque as the paradoxical art of abundance based on poverty, an art of proliferation born of necessity, in order to describe the interior: “you sensed a silent conflict in this room between an exclusive, elegant refinement and a gross inclusiveness, an affirmation of the abundance of poverty” (1991: 291). In his writings on the Baroque, Fuentes frequently opposes his definition of the Catholic, Hispanic Baroque, which

⁴ As has been observed by Steven Boldy, the move between the animate and the inanimate is not uncommon in the work of Fuentes (2002: 222-223). See, for instance, “La muñeca reina” or “Chac Mool”. In this case, however, the character enters another artistic dimension without any narratorial metalepsis.

encouraged the cultivation of piety through visual images and represented the religious dogma in a concrete, tangible way, to the Protestant, Anglo-Saxon Reformation, which distrusted “idolatrous” images of Mary and the saints and eventually induced a wave of iconoclasm in Europe.⁵ According to the Counter-Reformation policy, images exist for the purpose of inspiring devotion. In this sense, it is significant that Santiago Ferguson wants to be buried in an English, protestant cathedral, “an architecture without the burden of the maternal image [...], a resting place without Virgins” (1991: 338). This visual austerity is experienced as a liberation, although the façade is covered by hundreds of stone figures of angels, prophets and apostles, as well as of virgins and martyrs. According to Carlos María, the Gothic architecture of Wells therefore clearly prefigures the Baroque style, because of this desire for figuration: “[...] in Wells the inclusivity of its great entrance undermines the Gothic ideal; the Gothic of Wells is an imminent Baroque” (1991: 334). In this way, the Baroque Catholicism of the New World – whose “syncretic capacity” (1991: 324) is praised by Ferguson – dialogues with its medieval Spanish roots through the Anglo-Saxon pre-Reformation Catholicism (see Olivier 2009: 118).

In addition to its all-inclusive and syncretic character, the Baroque is characterized by Fuentes through its eruption of sensuality.⁶ As can be deduced from Bernini’s eroticized statue of Saint Teresa of Avila, with its typical mixture of spiritual and sensual pleasure, the suffering of Baroque saints and martyrs is depicted in 17th-century art as almost indistinguishable from ecstasy. According to Lois Parkinson Zamora (2006: 177-178), it is no coincidence that the Council of Trent, which initiated the Baroque period, addressed the intercessory role of the Virgin and the saints between believers and God, as well as the status of the bodily relics in Catholic worship. Parkinson Zamora claims even that explicit physical representation is in many ways an invention of Baroque art. This also stands out in “Reasonable People”, where considerable attention is paid to the visceral aberrations of the body. Carlos María follows the woman and the curly-haired boy into a rainy colonial patio where they join eight young ladies who are marching in circles in a kind of procession. Each

⁵ In “La tradición literaria latinoamericana” (1988) Fuentes describes the Baroque in the following terms: “El estilo de la abundancia nacido de la abundancia de la necesidad: la gran concesión de la Contra-Reforma Católica al mundo de los sentidos – como la música es, quizás, la gran concesión de la Reforma Protestante a la austeridad de sus iglesias desnudas.” (The style of abundance born from the abundance of the necessity: the great concession of the Catholic Counter-Reformation to the world of the senses – as the music is, perhaps, the great concession of the Protestant Reformation to the austerity of its bare churches.)

⁶ See in this respect the oppositional definition of the Baroque in *The Buried Mirror*: “The Protestant Reformation banned images from its churches, considering them to be proofs of papist idolatry. But this puritanism was overcome by a great form of sensual compensation in the glorious music of Johann Sebastian Bach. The rigid Catholic Counter-Reformation also had to make a concession to sensuality. This was the art of the Baroque [...]” (1992: 195)

of the women hold an umbrella in one hand and various objects in the other, such as a basket, a shepherd's staff, a bag full of teeth, a tray holding bread, bells, a lizard or a sprig of flowers. Thanks to these attributes the women can be identified as virgin martyrs who were tortured in an attempt to preserve their bodily chastity, such as Saint Apollonia (*fig. 3*), whose teeth were violently pulled out, Saint Agatha, whose breasts were cut off, or Saint Lucy, whose eyes were taken out with a fork. Given the reproductions of Zurbarán's portraits of Saint Lucy (1992: 32) and Saint Agatha (1992: 47) in the Spanish and English editions of *The Buried Mirror*, these pictures of virgin martyrs are very likely to have been the source of inspiration for the story itself. This is corroborated by Fuentes's reflections on saintly agonies in "Zurbarán's Theater of Martyrs", a review of a major Zurbarán exhibition that was held in 1987 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.⁷ The article includes various reproductions of (details of) "Christ and the Virgin in the House at Nazareth" (see *fig. 2*) and of Saint Apollonia. With regard to the representation of the persecuted virgins, Fuentes underlines in *The Buried Mirror* especially the painter's much appreciated skill to depict cloths and draperies:⁸

Zurbarán dressed them all, whatever the circumstances, in silk and brocades, multicolored shawls and lowing capes; they are wrapped in rose and pale green, knitted orange and fainting yellows. Zurbarán gave them peasant straw hats, pilgrim's staffs, golden tiaras, false farthingales, baskets of fruit. He also offered them the emblems of their martyrdom. (1992: 186)

Dressed in handsome gowns, the martyrs ostentatiously show the symbols of their torture. In the review of the Met exhibition, Fuentes praises particularly the "sensuous folds of the greatest of all holy robes" manufactured by "Zurbarán the Spanish tailor" (1987: 117). The portrait of Saint Apollonia illustrates Zurbarán's typical elaborately clothed female saints (see 1987: 118). Likewise, the narrator of "Reasonable People" calls attention to the sensual garb of the martyrs, who are "dressed in silks, brocades, multicolored shawls; their collective beauty is enhanced by the brilliance of pink and green, orange and pale yellow" (1991: 296).

⁷ The Spanish version of this article appeared in *Viendo visions* as "El ojo casto: Zurbarán" (2003: 159-174) and contains illustrations of the "Immaculate Conception", "The Virgin of the Cartusians", "Saint Apollonia" and several still lifes. The most recent Spanish edition of *El espejo enterrado* includes reproductions of Zurbarán's "Madonna and Child", two versions of the "Immaculate Conception", as well as a portrait of a martyred Hieronymite nun.

⁸ This is a recurring theme in the literature on Zurbarán. In his travel book *Roads to Santiago* Cees Nooteboom also states that the art of Zurbarán is not about saints or monks but about the cloth and folds of their habits: "Fabric, material, stuff. What Zurbarán studied in painting after painting was matter, the plasticity of matter, the primary colors." (1997: 85)

While his brother is detained in the convent, José María takes a fetishistic interest in Catarina's former wedding dress that is being mended by Doña Heredad: "all these precious bridal gowns, which, if it's proper to think such a thing, are dresses of the wife of heaven, Holy Mary full of grace, who conceived without sin" (1991: 296). For Fuentes, Zurbarán's virgins and martyrs are among the most troubling women ever portrayed, which is mainly due to the exquisiteness of their dresses: "Zurbarán's nudes are pale and feeble. But as soon as he starts dressing his models, they become irresistible – sin and pleasure entwined" (1992: 186). In addition, Fuentes calls them "splendid figures full of sexual turbulence and passion for saintliness" (1992: 186). The ambiguous "erotic holiness" of these pious she-devils, who are both symbols of salvation and paradigms of temptation or even perdition, is at the core of Catholic faith. The dividing line between saint and demon, between physical suffering and delight is a thin one because "[...] from the beginning Spanish Catholicism bore an erotic uneasiness" (1992: 45).

In his review, Fuentes emphasizes two more features of Zurbarán's Baroque art: its ever-changing nature and its theatrical dimension. First, the saints are not only different representations of one the same figure, but they are also a homage to what Fuentes calls the "Holy Metamorphosis" (1987: 119), since a canonized figure like Saint Agatha also became patroness of bell-founders and bakers due to the resemblance between her amputated breasts and bells or breads. These powers of metamorphosis are most notable in the symbolic attributes – for instance, one of the Sisters has a chameleon clasped in her fist –, as well as in the play with *Doppelgängers* and the proteic nature of the characters of *Constancia*: the archetypal image of the Virgin for instance constantly shifts and reappears in different forms and shapes throughout the stories (from flesh and blood to plastic or a holographic projection, from the *mater dolorosa*, "La Macarena" or the Virgin of Seville to "Madreselva", "La Privada" or "La Desdichada" and the ultimate avatar Constancia).

Second, Fuentes sees Zurbarán's paintings as a "theatrical dream" in the article. It is revealing in this regard that the exhibition space is compared to a stage setting, into which the reader is introduced by the reviewer-narrator.⁹ Likewise, Carlos María feels himself a spectator in a kind of "theater of the sacred" (1991: 300).¹⁰ According to Fuentes, the Baroque

⁹ Even the *mise en scène* of the enunciation or the discursive "scenography" (D. Maingueneau) is placed under the sign of a theatrical performance: "You must imagine that you are entering not a gallery, but a theater; not the Metropolitan Museum, but the Metropolitan Opera." (1987: 116). Consequently, the last paragraph reads as follow: "The lights dim. The curtains are drawn. A tiny sob is heard from the first row. A child is there. He has just pricked his thumb with a thorn." (1987: 119)

¹⁰ Cf. "[...] you, too, feel distanced, as if you were watching yourself through opera glasses from the upper balcony of a theater, the paradise of the spectator, absent and present, seeing but seeming absent, tacitly ignored and yet represented, there and not there, part of a rite, a link in the ceremony being celebrated [...], in a theater of the sacred, which seems cruel and

artist creates a scenic illusion; therefore “Zurbarán shies away from narrative” (1987: 117). His paintings display a great sense of scenography and dynamism. The scenes painted by the Spanish master are carefully staged and illustrate, again according to Fuentes, the typical Baroque *topos* of life as a dream and a stage:

The crucifixion of Christ is less important than the premonition of a child pricking his thumbs with a thorn surrounded by sewing-objects, needles, baskets of thread: the tailor’s instruments. Between premonition and destiny, the magnificent pageant takes place. Calderón de la Barca called it *El Gran Teatro del Mundo* (The Grand Theater of the World), and on this stage of the world, as the mother dreams and the child spills his first blood, occur the great Zurbarán paintings. (1987: 119)

As we have already noted above, the entire story can be interpreted as a dream of Constanca, who personifies a sensual though deeply catholic Hispanic identity in the opening story of the volume that bears her name. In the oneiric, surrealist scene of the patio, Carlos María witnesses a ritualized spectacle or ceremony. The narrator observes that the virgins “don’t take a single step that isn’t slow and solemn, and there isn’t a single one of their gestures that isn’t deliberate.” (1991: 294) According to Julián Gállego, in his seminal study on the Spanish painting of the Golden Age, the Peninsular Baroque art is above all characterized by its theatricality.¹¹ Even the saints’ attributes are not so real, since they have primarily a symbolic and dramatic function:

En même temps que signes de reconnaissance, que référence aux activités, aux vertus ou aux souffrances du porteur, ces objets sont donc, des objets réels. Mais je ne voudrais pas employer ce mot à double tranchant: ils ne sont pas, d’ailleurs, si réels qu’ils en ont l’air. Il s’agit, souvent, d’un accessoire de théâtre, voire de procession. Ainsi les seins que Saint Agathe porte sur son plateau, tout comme les

bloody to you, the spectator, because it is caught between the style the work demands and the style the spectator provides, it is the mid-point – you stare intently at the child’s pricked finger – between the conception of the sacred and its execution.” (1991: 299-300)

¹¹ Cf. “L’amour du théâtre, dans tout cela comporta à la fois de fastueux et d’improvisé, domine l’Espagne du XVII^e siècle. [...] On a déjà signalé que le mot ‘theatro’ ou ‘teatro’ est appliqué à des œuvres qui n’ont rien de scénique [...]. Pour l’Espagne de ce siècle, tout est théâtre.” (Gállego 1968: 110-111) (The love for the theater, with all its ostentation and improvisation, dominates the Spain of the 17th century. [...] We have already pointed out that the word ‘theatro’ or ‘teatro’ is applied to works that have nothing scenic. [...] For the Spain of that century, everything is theatre.)

yeux de Sainte Lucie (Zurbarán, Musées de Montpellier et de Chartres) n'ont pas l'aspect sanguinolent qu'ils devraient offrir s'ils venaient d'être arrachés par le bourreau. (1968: 203)

(At the same time signs of recognition as well as reference to the activities, virtues or sufferings of the bearer, these objects are thus real objects. But I do not wish to use this word in a double-edged sense: besides, these objects are not so real as they seem to be. They are often used as theater or procession accessories. So the breasts that Saint Agatha bears on a her platter, as well as the eyes of Saint Lucy (Zurbarán, Museums of Montpellier and Chartres) do not appear as bloody as they should do when they are just pulled out by the tormenter.)

According to Gállego, the objects strewn over the floor, the attributes and even the costumes all point towards the theatrical quality of the scene represented.¹² Besides, Gállego constructs his book around the hypothesis that the realistic depiction of the material objects in 17th-century Spanish art, especially in the religious portraiture, refers to a transcendental idea. In this new naturalism in religious art, the visible is invested with metaphysical mystery and enigma: "L'artiste, ainsi placé sur un sujet *idéal*, doit l'exprimer de la façon la plus *réaliste*, la plus proche de ses expériences sensorielles. Mais cette *réalité visible* [...] n'est que le *signe* apparent d'une *réalité invisible* qui, tout en nous entourant, échappe à nous sens." (1968: 174) (The artist, starting from an *ideal* subject, has to express it in the most realist way, the nearest to his sensorial experiences. But this *visible reality* [...] is only the apparent *sign* of an *invisible reality* that, even though surrounding us, is not perceptible to our senses.) In other words, Baroque images are supposed to visualize a disembodied divinity. In his review, Fuentes also insists in the materiality of the daily utensils and artifacts that appear in Zurbarán's portraits and still lifes:

Zurbarán's undoubted faith – the 'servant of the Church of Rome' – anchors itself in the most concrete and worldly objects. Many of them are symbolic, [...] but their presence on the canvas is material. [...] This is the world of Zurbarán the

¹² Gállego observes that the elegance of the virgin martyrs are not only a symbol of their interior elegance, they also refer to the dresses worn during parades and occasions of ceremony: "J'ai déjà signalé dans le précédent chapitre que le luxe avec lequel la plupart des Saintes de Zurbarán sont habillées correspond, exactement, à leur élégance morale. Il faut ajouter que dans certaines de ces robes, qui oscillent entre la mode et la fantaisie, on décèle l'influence directe du théâtre et du spectacle en général, cortèges et processions compris." (1968: 206) (In the previous chapter I have already pointed out that the luxury with which most of the Saints of Zurbarán are dressed corresponds exactly to their moral elegance. One should add that some of these dresses, which vacillate between fashion and fantasy, reveal the direct influence of the theater and the show in general, parades and processions included.)

Spanish proletarian, and it echoes the wisdom of Saint Theresa a century earlier:
 ‘God lives among the kitchen-pots’. (1987: 119)

In the short story, Jesus appears in the cabin of one of the workmen on the excavation site, but this appearance proves to be the reflection of the traffic lights, while the God-child who accompanies Doña Heredad on her begging rounds turns out to be made of foam rubber. Even the floor of the refectory is “not made of ordinary red tiles but of dried blood turned to brick” (1991: 300) – or is it red paint? Fuentes’s story can be regarded as an ode to popular devotion: in contrast with the “reasonable people” such as the engineers and architects, the workmen are more susceptible to religious sentiments and mystery. Because their imagination is richer, they are able to see the invisible layers of reality, although it did not take them long to suffer a terrible “desengaño” or disillusion. At the same time the mystery of these objects is dismissed by the threat of reproduction through media and commerce: in no time the watchman’s shack attracts journalists, rows of devout and curious persons, as well as vendors who sell sweatshirts with stencils of the Child Jesus, scapulars, statues of the Good Shepherd and even condoms with the image of the Immaculate Conception (“Men, Be Prepared – Only the Virgin Conceived without Sin”; 1991: 307). This Marian doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, which was frequently represented by Zurbarán and was rejected by Protestantism, is deliberately mixed up with the virgin birth of Jesus in the story. The Virgin Mary does not give birth once but repeatedly: “a once immaculate conception, which is corrupt and sinful the second time” (1991: 337).

This vocation of the Baroque artist – to make visible or present what is in reality invisible or absent – is not only the one that is pursued by Santiago Ferguson in his architecture, but it is also one of the goals that Fuentes aimed for with this book.¹³ Due to his insistence on the role of the beholder/reader, Fuentes’s conception is closer to the widespread misinterpretation of Zurbarán’s self-attributed qualification of “pintor de ymaginaria” as “painter of the imagination” instead of a painter who depicts the religious and the mystical.¹⁴ In his description of the subterranean convent, the narrator focuses alternately on concrete details and the invisible realm of the spiritual, on eroticism and sacredness. But Fuentes’s

¹³ See in this respect Fuentes’s comments on *Constancia* in his “Cronología personal”: “Quién sabe si lo logré, pero en estas historias [de *Constancia*] me propuse darle a la ficción el valor de hacer visible lo invisible, predecir la ausencia y apostar a que, en la novela, es más importante lo que se ignora que lo que se sabe.” (Fuentes in Ortega 1995: 114) (Who knows if I have succeeded, but in these stories [of *Constancia*] I decided to give to the fiction the value to make the invisible visible, to predict the absence and to assume that, in the novel, it is more important what one ignores than what one knows.)

¹⁴ See for instance Cees Nooteboom’s *Road to Santiago*: “Francisco de Zurbarán, who called himself *pintor de ymaginaria*. [...] Painter of the imagination, indeed.” (1997: 90)

recreation of Zurbarán's universe is deliberately parodic, hyperbolic and even carnivalesque. The typical combination of otherworldliness or spiritual transcendence, on the one hand, and erotic experience, on the other, is stretched here to the limit: the divine joy is exposed as mere worldly pleasures and the sacred is constantly desecrated. The physical vicissitudes of the saints are no longer considered as vehicles of spiritual transcendence. The nine inhabitants of the convent ask Carlos María if he is a carpenter because they want to "repeat the miracle" (1991: 299) in order to escape the circularity of the religious calendar. While the birth was a miracle the first time, it turned out to be a venial sin the second time: "How come it's a miracle to give birth without sin the first time and a crime the second?" (1991: 313) The nuns want indeed a "new sacrificial child" (1991: 317) so that he can take the place of the Infant Jesus, who will thus be able to go on living: "Mother, it doesn't matter who fucks you as long as I'm reborn!" (1991: 312) In this sense, the date line "Easter 1987 – Easter 1988" at the end of the story is most revealing.

Throughout the novel a relation of analogy is established between architecture, literature and painting, which are considered helpful instruments to unravel reality: "Were we looking at the visible that had become visible, its separate elements organized little by little in our heads, through concentration or nostalgia, as Ferguson the architect had wanted?" (1991: 281), the twins ask themselves. This "ekphrastic" dimension shows that the arts are interconnected, and that the historical epochs communicate with each other: the imaginary of the 17th century continues to affect the present era, although the outcome is constantly renewed. Indeed, the "contemporary Baroque" does not literally repeat or reproduce the "historical Baroque": the writing of Fuentes is not dominated by a nostalgia for bygone times, but by a playful, inventive recuperation of certain elements of Spanish Baroque culture, which still is latent in contemporary Latin American culture. Like the character of Santiago Ferguson, who rejects the enshrined and immobile "world of look-but-don't-touch" (1991: 284) of the Mackintosh residence inside a Glasgow art gallery, Fuentes clearly dismisses a sterile preservation or "museification" of the past by breathing new life into Zurbarán's portraits and inanimate *bodegones*.

In this respect, it is important to recall that Francisco de Zurbarán is usually considered by art critics as a painter who is representative of the rigid Catholic Counter-Reformation. However, the way in which this religious, subterranean universe is represented in "Reasonable People" is anything but dogmatic or reverent. By desacralizing Zurbarán's *tableaux* of continent martyrs and saints, by intermingling the chaste mysticism with sexual and even scatological allusions, Fuentes criticizes the European Baroque in its orthodox form.

Although the martyred virgins show their organs outside their body, their representation is quite detached and virtuous in the work of Zurbarán. This image of Zurbarán as a “chaste Caravaggio” (1987: 116) is confirmed in Fuentes’s article. Although he also stresses the latent eroticism in the portraits of Zurbarán in his essay, Fuentes reinterprets Zurbarán’s universe in a very hyperbolic way in “Reasonable People”. The child drags along his chamber pot, which he empties among the objects in the room (“The shit is hard, the shit is golden, the shit is gold. Miracle! Miracle!”; 1991: 299), and constantly urges Carlos María to fornicate with one of the nuns in order to escape from the ritual calendar. Carlos María also realizes that the boy wears makeup that seems to enlarge his eyes and that he has “artificially waved hair, but he is not as blond” (1991: 310).

In the classic iconography, as well as in Zurbarán’s series of saints, martyrs are usually shown holding (besides their instruments of torture or their detached body parts) a palm frond as a general attribute, which represents the victory of the spirit over the flesh (see *fig. 3*). In the case of the women who walk in Indian file in the patio, the palms are replaced by an umbrella. While in Catholicism martyrs are usually venerated as the untouched brides of Jesus who want to preserve their sanctity at all costs, Carlos María is confronted with their intimacy, the odor of their menstrual blood, their saliva in his ears. Pressed up against the bodies of the eight women, the architect smells the “patched, urine-drenched, sweaty clothes of the group of nuns” (1991: 309), as well as the heavy fragrance of dried flowers. The mutilated nuns are systematically called whores by the bad-mannered and perverse child, who never stops laughing at them. He humiliates them by describing the gums of Saint Apollonia as “ideal for cocksucking (he laughed harder and harder, a second vagina, the toothless mouth of the dentifrical saint” (1991: 298), while the sight of Saint Agatha inspires the following commentary: “Look at the rolls on her plate: do they resemble tits? Agatha, show the gentleman, entertain our illustrious guest. [...] the tintinnabulation of toasted tits, get it?” (1991: 298) As for Saint Lucy, she took refuge in the convent because she “just won’t fuck”: “[...] you preferred being blinded to being screwed, didn’t you? So now you chew your eyes, served up like fried eggs on your plate...” (1991: 298) This grotesque physicality is also present in “Viva Mi Fama”, although the mockery is less corrosive. In this story the virgin martyrs merely illustrate the “sacred fetishism of Spain” (2001: 230), but in the enumeration of the martyrs’ body parts also appears the leg of Santa Anna, the Mexican *caudillo* whose amputated leg was buried with full military honors in the 1830s.

In “Reasonable People”, Fuentes basically follows his interpretation of the European Baroque as a sensual sublimation of the Counter-Reformation, but at the same time the story

fits with his definition of the Latin American Baroque as the parodic art of the Counter-Conquest, which he described in an essay on José Lezama Lima as “Canibalizar y carnavalizar la historia, convirtiendo el dolor en fiesta, creando formas literarias y artísticas intrusas, entrometidas unas en las otras [...]” (1990: 259) (Cannibalize and carnivalize history, transform the pain in feast, create literary and artistic intrusive forms, which interfere with each other). While Fuentes mainly stresses the erotic and theatrical dimension of the Zurbarán’s paintings, seeing in the virgin martyrs a “premonition of Goya’s Maja” (1987: 118) and of other profane female portraits, he also raises the question of the reception of Zurbarán in the overseas territories. In the 17th century there was actually a vast demand for Catholic images in the Spanish colonies:

He [Zurbarán] obviously despised the Indies and sent them his worst clichés. But in the Indies, were not the Indians themselves, conquered and converted, seeing the same sets of gravures as Zurbarán – which Zurbarán’s own monks gave them and told them to copy – and then erecting on this dissimulation a magnificent Baroque Latin American art, the excuse for a heterogeneous experience that is at the root of the culture of the New World: Christian themes masking pagan sensuality and shattered cosmogonies? Is this dream, this deceit, what you share with Zurbarán? There is no link but this one between Zurbarán and the Latin American Baroque. (1987: 116)

While Villoro argues that *Constancia* as a whole is a recreation of Goyaesque scenes through Baroque spectacles, our reading of “Reasonable People” demonstrates that Fuentes re-visions the Spanish Baroque paintings of Zurbarán through the parodic gaze of Goya. Villoro conceives the Baroque in an a-historical way, as a mere synonym for exaggeration and deformation, but he does not acknowledge Fuentes’s indebtedness to the historical Baroque. Yet Fuentes’s work is to be situated in the vein of the 16th-century New World Baroque artists who self-consciously engage and subvert Baroque conventions. The indigenous artisans in New Spain recuperated the European models and subverted them in one way or another in order to articulate a trans-culturated identity, which Fuentes terms a “heterogeneous experience”. By placing cultural fragments in dynamic and parodic relations to each other, Fuentes tries to re-imagine Spain and Latin America as a world with a shared cultural heritage, thus unsettling the “orthodox” view of their relationships (empire-colony) and carrying out a conscious artistic labor as a cultural “counter-conquistador”.

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Figures

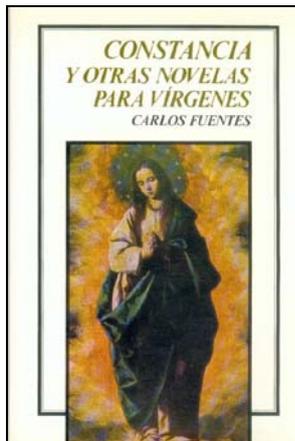


Fig. 1: Cover of the first Mexican edition (Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1990), representing Zurbarán's "Immaculate Conception" (ca 1660, oil on canvas, Prado Museum)



Fig. 2: Francisco de Zurbarán, "Christ and the Virgin in the House at Nazareth" (ca 1640, oil on canvas, The Cleveland Museum of Art)



Fig. 3: Francisco de Zurbarán, “Saint Apollonia” (1636, oil on canvas, Louvre Museum)

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