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Rococo Ontology

“The victory of rocaille is the shipwreck of Reason.”¹

1. It has been several decades since scholars have thought of the Rococo style in the visual arts as comprising unimportant but pretty frivolities. Such disparagement began at the peak of the Rococo in France c. 1740 when Denis Diderot spearheaded the critique that ultimately led to the defeat of the Rococo by yet another classical revival, this time highly rationalized and mixed with the sophisticated snobbery of the later Enlightenment. Later, the modernist attitude expressed by Adolph Loos in his famous essay “The Crime of Ornament” launched a new chapter in disdainful misunderstanding of the style that had swept Europe west to east and into South America as well between 1710 or so and 1750.² Many regarded the Rococo as also too feminine – as downright queer, subversively soft. It pointed, in their unconscious, to something less brutal than the masculine force of mass society, powered by strict adherence to material causes and physical effects. For all its liveliness, Rococo objects seem, under this view, to portend chaos, which rational science and art endeavor to subjugate. And even to art historians and others better disposed toward assertive design, the Rococo looked like the decadence of the admirably rugged and grand Baroque, as if it proved that such a great notion as the Baroque must end by eating itself into cuteness, whimsy, and confusion. Where the Baroque unfolded awesome treasures, the Rococo seemed to hurl gaudiness into the world. Where the Baroque made the public world grand and pleasant, the Rococo’s intimately nified spaces close in upon themselves as a small animal nests in its home.

¹ K. Harries, *The Broken Frame. Three Lectures*, Catholic University of America Press, Washington, 1989, p. 87.

² A. Loos, “Ornament and Crime,” in *Ornament and Crime: Selected Essays*, edited by A. Opel, Ariadne Press, Riverside, CA, 1998, pp. 166-176.

And yet the better understanding of the Rococo latterly achieved by art historians is both discordant to these critiques and strangely aligned with them. It accepts their materialist ontology by analyzing the intensity of this style of craft. To this it adds both a class analysis of the patronage and trade structure without which the Rococo could not have existed or ever flourished and also a gender-critical perspective that accepts and values femininity as part of our physical lives and as opposition to masculinized society.³ The Rococo milieu in France was the first phase of Western culture that was commodified to an extent worthy of the name. The upwardly mobile in Paris made it their vogue. In Germany, Austria, Sicily, and Latin America it became for a while, at varying dates, the style for church and sometimes for government; the middle classes there also adopted it in differing degrees. Only the invention of technologies for the mass production of stylish objects for mass society in the second quarter of the nineteenth century exceeded the Rococo in affective depth, universal reach, and social power. For this approach, Rococo is a supremely materialist style because it takes an empirical approach to the richness of pattern, color, and materials harnessed to make money by coddling the rich in comfort and luxury. A great deal of truth in this approach recommends it, and the high quality of the scholarship establishing it is compelling.

Some of these scholars have built their work on the sensationalist philosophy of the time, notably that of John Locke.⁴ Because Madame de Pompadour was the instigating patroness of Rococo production, her tactile sensuality, unfolding from her as an exemplar of sexuality, can be taken to inform Rococo perception.⁵ Others have looked to Epicureanism.⁶ But other philosophically aware theorists have taken a different line altogether, with insights that command our attention and that lead to a profoundly different and heterodox view of the matter. Jacques Derrida observed that the sinuosity of Rococo design disrupts the meaning of signs and curls the viewer's sense of the natural back upon the

³ M. Hyde, *Making Up the Rococo. François Boucher and His Critics*, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, 2006; C. Sargentson, *Merchants and Luxury Markets. The Marchands Merciers of Eighteenth-Century Paris*. Victoria and Albert Museum and the J. Paul Getty Museum, London and Malibu, 1996; and K. Scott, *The Rococo Interior. Decoration and Social Spaces in Early Eighteenth-Century Paris*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1995.

⁴ N. Bryson, *Word and Image. French Painting of the Ancien Régime*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981.

⁵ E. Lajer-Burcharth, *Pompadour's Touch: Difference in Representation*, in "Representations", no. 73, 2001, pp. 54-88

⁶ T. Kavanaugh, *Painting for the Senses: Boucher and Epicurean Stoicism*, in *Rethinking Boucher*, ed. M. Hyde and M. Ledbury, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, 2006, pp. 253-268.

artificiality of the broken frames and patterns. Such scission destabilizes visual and, ultimately, verbal semantics.⁷ The phenomenologist Karsten Harries holds that Rococo artisans had no intention of arranging space and signs so as to make sense. They were, instead, representing the space of God. The fractured perspective was part of an aesthetics of devotion.⁸ Derrida and Harries see the same thing in different lights: for Derrida, this is the excision of meaning out of the prison of logic to the detriment of semantic meaning, and for Harries this is the liberation of the deeper meaningfulness of love or truth away from rationalism's repression of the irrational for the sake of order. Perhaps these two positions are not opposite at all. In any case, it is easy to see why neo-classicism rejected the Rococo either for its deconstructive tendency, or for its mystical inclination, or for both.⁹

Against the colorfulness of the socio-economic and materialist approach, I will present a quite opposite view. My thesis is a paradox. It is that this style of production – full of rich stuffs, patent erotics, intensely visual and haptic objects, and ubiquitous sensuality – expresses an idealist conception of an immaterialist ontology. This most material of styles doubts the reality of matter. Harries said that “in the rococo the baroque destroys itself.”¹⁰ Without going into the debate as to whether and to what extent the Rococo is to be differentiated from the Baroque, this observation directs us toward the way in which the Rococo transformed something in the Baroque. The metamorphosis was this: the dynamism of Baroque cosmology became the Rococo's Heraclitean world of ceaseless universal process, altering from the grandeur of cosmic architectonic to the atectonic intimacy of the human. Of course, the Baroque could be very personal and humanistic as well as oppressive, and the Rococo could favor greed and the vanity of the proud over intimacy. But regarding the Rococo arts as essentially nothing beyond consumption causes us to miss the vital motility it shows. Its socio-economic character should also present to us its vision of the interdependence of life through life's processes of reproduction. And finally, by changing solid monumentality into fluid expression, the Rococo point of view turned the superabundance of signifiers in the Baroque into an unstable visual semantics. The atelic quality of ceaseless change slid visual rhetoric toward what would become,

⁷ J. Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. G. Bennington and I. McLeod, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1987, p. 237.

⁸ K. Harries, *The Bavarian Rococo Church. Between Faith and Aestheticism*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1983.

⁹ Yet another philosophical approach is partly developed by G. Deleuze, *The Fold. Leibniz and the Baroque*, translated by Tom Conley, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 1993, p. 82.

¹⁰ Harries, *Bavarian Rococo*, p. 121.

though not until after its repression by reinvigorated neo-classicism starting about 1740, possibilities of new freedom in literature and the arts that replaced the gracefulness of the Rococo itself. The core historical claim of this thesis is that Rococo atectonic effects are visual forms of the anti-materialist, idealist ontology of George Berkeley (1685-1753) and Giambattista Vico (1688-1744), published in the decades of the high tide of the Rococo.

The filiations we discern between a social order or any category of cultural production and abstract ideas as such – concepts philosophically formed – are some of the chief and most interesting work we can do in the history of ideas.¹¹ One of these issues is that of the value of historical accounts of ideas as opposed to the value of logical analysis of them – the well-known conflict of genesis and validity. In my view, because we are finite beings living in a finite, contingent, and temporal world, the circumstances in which persons develop their ideas so affect them that thoughts are fully meaningful only in light of these human circumstances, even if some of their meanings are found in disembodied and unsituated abstract versions. The transmission of ideas after their invention also changes them and informs what they actually are. The fact that human personality inspires systems of conceptions and also histories of the growth of conceptions unites intellectual history to production rather than separates it, and it also unites the historian's present to the past she studies. My account of the paradoxical idealism of Rococo sensuality is developed under a robust (and deeply considered) view of the capability of this kind of history of ideas, amidst the many theoretical questions it raises.

2. What is it like to be in the presence of a Rococo object? Whether the object is a palace, church, parade apartment, salon, console, bureau, settee, tureen, scone, wallpaper, or bibelot, one identifies the Rococo style by markers that prevail throughout the regional variations in Europe and South America.¹²

Considering them visually, in both three-dimensional objects and painted or engraved representations, they include: the famous “C-curve” in supports of all kinds, composition that draws the eye toward many small regions or details (*papollitage*), cartouches closed and broken open, ornament extended toward viewers out from the traditional visual plane,

¹¹ Filiating ideas is also fraught with difficult issues in political thought, the philosophy of history and in the general ontology of ideas, persons, and objects. I will not address these here due to the constraints of space.

¹² My method in this section is to synthesize my many observations of Rococo objects, rather than to document the objects in their locations and in secondary sources.

profuse and leafy exotic botanical forms, mirrors, unconventional and assertive lattice work, startling erumpent breakages in patterns, and an obsession with shells. The colors were glassy or strong: crocus yellow, chatoyant white, auratic gold, very bright green, and many others. The effect toggles between playfulness (more so) and the grotesque (less so), but it is bound together by *tact flou* – the light, fluttering sensual touch that can be both haptic as well as visual and even aural in the case of contemporary music – and often by exaggeration of individual elements and of large structures by means of vertiginous perspective.

Considering them affectively, in order to understand how Rococo style affects perception, observers have long noted that the Rococo disperses central monopunctual perspective and constellates parts in novel ways, juxtaposes elements by virtue of the permeability of their shapes, achieves harmony despite and by means of replacing static form with movement, is unafraid of illusions, is likewise not timid about emotions, can display genuine insolence, and yet often impresses one as being the result of leisure. The result can be stunning beauty wreathed in an air of bodily gratification. It draws viewers (and inhabitants!) into imagined, often utopian worlds, through comfort that is informal as well as intensely ornamented. Its audacious systems of decor build on a logic that suggests something new for thinking.

Finally, in considering what conceptualizations follow from these artistic practices, we come to two concepts that together form the core which all the style stems: atectonicity (a term from architecture) and *rocaille*.

Atectonicity (or atectonics) is a term borrowed from architecture. An atectonic structure has elements that do not appear to be supported so sufficiently as not to fall. It hides the true physical relation of load and bearing in such a way that the apparent relation seems impossible to sustain. As the privative of architectonic, it first means not having a roof and by extension means the appearance of not having strength (Greek *tonos*, stretching) and completeness (Greek *tecton*, builder) and appearing instead to reach rootlessly out into space. Atectonicity opposes the architectural orders, hierarchy, and the logical subordination of an idea to its roots. It bridges ruptures by fusing together elements, leaving, in turn, new ruptures.¹³ Architectural atectonic effects were adapted by other arts and crafts; by analogy, they resemble a-causal views of reality.

In the Rococo its effect is something more, however. When things reach out into space to us, or seem to do so, the line between their outwardness and our inwardness blurs. Whereas there had been things in

¹³ J. Weisgerber, *Le Rococo Beaux-Arts et littérature*, Presses universitaires de France, Paris, 2001, p. 16. Weisgerber, pp. 11-12 strongly emphasizes the central position of atectonic effect in Rococo style.

space out there, now space was placed inside us or at the very least space no longer had the depth it used to have. Distance was shorter – it was less like distance and more like mind. The Rococo effect includes flattened space with atectonicity. The oddity of so much of Rococo ornamental depiction enhanced this flatness: a scene represented atectonically is impossible unless the conditions of its existence were in the viewer's mind and not circumscribed by the “real” world of physical forces. The atectonic can make visible ontological ideas as to what is real as opposed to what is merely apparent and as to how what exists came to be created.

Rocaille is what the atectonic is shaped off of and on.¹⁴ As a motif, *rocaille* imagery is like a heap of clues and hints arranged in variations on the idea of concavity. The Rococo artist places images of rocks – painted, engraved, chased, or carved – in such a way as to create spaces of which the interior complexity is for the most part intimated and only partially exposed. It is also a hypothesized object in the world that is a deep and complex metaphor. Some art historians say that it was an imagined spongy substance that came, perhaps, from the center of the earth. When pictured, its image is rock-like magma shot and tumbled from the center of the Earth out of a volcano's cone.¹⁵ A chthonic matter, it was capable of metamorphosis into any shape an artist chose provided that it reflects its difference from other matter, its freedom from ordinary form, its meta-structural limitlessness, its grotesque in opposition to charm plus its charm in opposition to the grotesque, and its combination of ancient endurance and complete mutability at the hands of unpredictable natural forces like that of volcanoes. These elements bring us into Rococo ontology.

In the Rococo imaginary, *rocaille* is an amorphous *prima materia*. As an infinitely malleable stuff, it limitlessly floods throughout all materials, meta-structuring every natural form by its own force. From it our world gains its nervous flux and its infinite plenitude. Its power of mutability informs the nervous flux, with all the clipping and spalling, we see in Rococo objects. The structure of things reflects this. What *rocaille* requires this result because the openness, the concavity, so to speak, that is *rocaille* creates the kinetic illusions that the Rococo crafts picture. Life-force itself comes into being to animate pillars, domes, walls, furniture, and images. As *materia prima* it sits precariously but impressively in place to express deep forces and their contradictions to one another and to us.

¹⁴ The works that best explore *rocaille* are H. Bauer, *Rocaille. Zur Herkunft und zum Wesen eines Ornament-Motivs*, de Gruyter, Berlin, 1962; and P. Minguet, *Esthétique du rococo*, J. Vrin, Paris, 1966.

¹⁵ Bauer, *Rocaille*, p. 3.

We can understand the interrelationships of the elements comprising Rococo buildings and smaller objects to be different from mechanical forces and “natural” causal transfer of force because these artisans sought, in both conscious and unconscious ways, to depict change as the presence of an inner power for which *rocaille* was a metaphor. Connectivity comes through this continuous and constitutive actuality. Its impulsion is something other than the phenomenal features we perceive as magma and is invisible under the surface of the ground. What makes an event present is the un-bodied creative and altering force within. In buildings, this is expressed by atectonic structure, which is support of loads or masses that denies – that is, it hides – the causal conjunction of the former to the latter. It re-directs our attention away from the mundane to a puzzle or, sometimes, to a mystery. This enigmatic relationship of referents and signs is atectonic connectivity. Thus, a thick column, heavy with extravagant ornament, supports a slender railing; and the vault of a dome seems to float apart from a drum of bearing walls. It looks impossible; and it ruptures what gravity is supposed to fuse, leaving crazy gaps and angles as well as playful *tact flou*. At its extreme, decor flies off walls, as in the famous Rococo churches in rural Bavaria.¹⁶

Rather than being overwhelmed by power as the monumental Baroque was, the Rococo offered a point of resistance. It was also deeply ravaged into the governmental, religious, and economic power of the cultures that nourished its flourishing. But, as always, nothing is simple or lacking conflicting parts and trends into the future. The ideas I have so far briefly described and those they will lead us to in the aesthetics of the style metonymically create material things that point to the immaterial. That this is, or can be seen as, a theory about the relationship of mind and world is part of looking at the way ideas work in productive activities of human persons. This Rococo way of looking at the world observes the noetic tension between “the immobility of the soul and the movement of consciousness.”¹⁷ We see, I argue, that the Rococo style – comprised of designers, fabricators, vendors, owners, and viewers in multivalent collectives – was not alienated from the world by the power Western cultures developed to subjugate the world, diminishing nature. Rather, Rococo style sought to realize a material society that incorporated an at least somewhat different relationship of mind and world derived from and comprising a non-realist ontology. This is the basis of the deep

¹⁶ Besides Haries, *Bavarian Rococo*, see also M. Yonan, *The Wieskirche: Movement, Perception, and Salvation in the Bavarian Rococo*, in *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, vol. 41, 2012, pp. 1-25.

¹⁷ S. Caviglia-Brunel, *History, Painting, and the Seriousness of Pleasure in the Age of Louis XV*, Liverpool University Press, Oxford, 2020, p. 72.

structure of reality in Rococo ontology. Morally, awareness of the plasticity in the nature of things seems to permit new freedoms; and those working under such a theory seek happiness more than power, at least in theory. The gap over which the atectonic moves, frequently represented in Rococo objects by the inside of concavity, becomes a space in which newer connections between our inward consciousness and outward reality obtain. These connections are strange at first, but we seek them and then they grow into our philosophy, arts, and culture because they meet previously unmet needs and provide a way of looking at the world to replace one that over time people find they must reject because it is false or limited, cutting off structures we seek or need, repressing what now appears novel and unfamiliar but nonetheless gains strength as decades and centuries pass.

Obviously, this approach reads Rococo style “idealistically.” It imputes a para-causality to intellectual activity. But social life – productive activity and the community systems in which it is always embedded – can be understood through philosophical ideas and also can express such ideas. In these terms, the arts and crafts of the Rococo on the one hand pull away from earlier Cartesian mechanism and rationalism and on the other were in opposition to the rigid neo-classicism that later critiqued them. The Rococo was a moment between these phases, pregnant with something for later eras. My approach is also “idealist” in another sense. In some ways, Rococo style, taken to express an ontology, goes further than did the rationalist Baroque and neo-classicism. Being non-propositional, it had greater latitude in its semiotics. Its fluid and paratactic ornamental style was built in and suited to a meta-system that pointed to the transmundane – indeed, very often, to religious devotion – as well as to a Heraclitean ontology of process instead of substance. Its visual rhetoric is related to the idealism of Berkeley and Vico, both of whom published their works in the decades of the original Rococo dominance. A study of what we may call Rococo ontology provides a paradigm case of a reflection on and performance of the relationship between ideational content and material form – style and medium – by combining intellectual and craft activities. As a case of the relationship of conception and production, it features intellectual content that was not explicit in its time and that scholarship has not recognized and a material form that both intensely focused on physical matter but also questioned our “natural attitude” toward aspects of the physical structure of matter. These issues suggest that the Rococo effect may be regarded an aesthetic critique of the hegemony of the rational.

I shall not expand further on this in terms of mind-dependence and immaterialism. Instead, the more interesting, and much less traveled, ontological idea to explore is that of continuous creation.

3. We can see the frame of continuous creation for the Rococo in Berkeley, whom it is easier to address for present purposes than is Vico. Starting with *An Essay Toward a New Theory of Vision* in 1709, his first philosophical publication (and continuing through the *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* the next year and the *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* of 1713), Berkeley built a startling picture of the intimacy of human cognizers with the world in which they live. In the previous century, René Descartes (1596-1650) separated thinking subjects from the material world. For him understanding is in the mind and not through the senses; indeed, the senses do not perceive, and the mind is not taught by matter.¹⁸ The senses give us mere “indicat[ions of]...what is good or bad for the whole of which the mind is a part.”¹⁹ Where Descartes so radically separated the subject’s mind or spirit from extended matter that Nicholas Malebranche (1638-1715), in following him, denied any causal or cognitive power in the extended world to the human person apart from God’s volitions for us. Berkeley brings the external world up to us as the sphere of our consciousness. What we feel and perceive is real as feelings and perceptions. Beyond it, there is the hollow we feel to be in things, that concavity of the extended world that cannot support its real existence. He applies this to all the qualities we find in our sensations and inferences, that is, to all measurement and observation no matter how abstract and conceptual they are. Abstractions and universals are merely versions of precedent perceptions or thoughts, and not different in kind from them.

Besides leading to immaterialism, this position whacks straight at the pride of the Cartesian theory of knowledge, the grid and the graph, on which it and we map material truth. To think one sees along a grid that puts the objects we see into their correct places and aspects is not to see at all, Berkeley argues in the *New Theory*. Grid lines are fictions; those who see them or by them are as unseeing as are the blind; or rather, only the sightless perfectly see the Cartesian perspectival objective world.²⁰ The world is there, for sure. But it is a world within our sphere of consciousness, warm to us, not a congeries of frozen and distant quantified essences. It is neither the passive object of my inspection nor a simulacrum in my brain. If it were either, it would be withdrawn into its own hollowness. Instead, God connects it to us.

Berkeley’s position is founded on his analysis of vision, which is his earliest philosophical work. We see neither flat planes nor fat solids, he

¹⁸ R. Descartes, *Philosophical Writings*, “Second Meditation,” ed. E. Anscombe and P. Geach, Nelson, London, 1966, p. 75.

¹⁹ Descartes, *Philosophical Writings*, “Sixth Meditation,” p. 119.

²⁰ B. Arsić, *The Passive Eye. Gaze and Subjectivity in Berkeley*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2003, pp. 32-33.

concludes.²¹ What we see are colors, in whirling agglutinations “so variable and inconstant.”²² Throughout his work on sight he writes that human viewers grasp divine order through their vision in the world itself, where God has put it, not through an abstract geometric superstructure invented by people who imagine they can think as God thinks. We make “the habitual connexion[s] that experience has made us to observe...” that match the “information” God put within us.²³ Nature does not contain within itself these truths. We discover them by perceiving His creativity. Berkeley uses vision throughout his career to cut the ground out from substance ontology in favor of the processes of interpretation; and it is this very same vision that is our chief organ for beauty. We do not so much see as judge with the ideas God sustains in us in order to know the harmonious plenitude of Creation. “Vision is the language of the Author of nature.”²⁴

Without going into Berkeley’s account of how divine action effectuates the junction of the world and us, we can now understand one consequence of this that is important for our inquiry. If the world we perceive is not substantial but instead is noematic, then, speaking pragmatically (even nominalistically), we must say that what we perceive are signs. They are not meaningful as and in themselves – and this includes grids, graphs, and the entire domain of quantity as well as quality – but as indices to referents. Every thing is not a substance but a sign. We are really not Cartesian subjects but beings whose existence is to perceive and interpret signs. As with all semiotics, this is a relational ontology. For Berkeley, Cartesian subjects and objects are frozen and cannot relate to one another; the grid’s pretense of relating them cannot hold. We might add that this theory illuminates the entire dehumanizing rampage of *ratio* through mechanized, industrialized, and financialized societies.

An aesthetically beautiful object is the same as every other kind of being in Berkeley’s thought. It is because it is perceived. It appears in the same way in which we take in scientific observation, for example. In this process the only “aim,” or content, is

...to know what ideas are connected together, and the more a man knows of the connection of ideas, the more he is said to know of the nature of things.²⁵

²¹ G. Berkeley, *An Essay Toward New Theory of Vision*, Dodo Press, (n.d.), sec. 158.

²² Berkeley, *New Theory of Vision*, sec. 157.

²³ Berkeley, *New Theory of Vision*, sec. 147.

²⁴ G. Berkeley, “The Theory of Vision or Visual Language Shewing the Immediate Presence and Providence of a Deity Vindicated and Explained,” *Works of George Berkeley*, edited by A.A. Luce, Nelson, London, 1949, vol. 1, p. 264.

²⁵ G. Berkeley, *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*, Green Integer Books, Los Angeles, 2007, pp. 137-138.

There is nothing privative in “the nature of things” as God established it and “informed” us of it. Such a “nature of things” would include features the Rococo prized, such as variety and novelty that are the harmony God reveals to cognizers through rich plenitude. By rejecting linear perspective, Berkeley’s theory of vision allows for, and opens our minds to, a universe intricate in a way we do not invent or control by our own rationalistic construction of order.²⁶ The intense experience of vivid representations relieves us of mechanistic character we impose in our habitual and apparently practical interpretation of the world, enhancing our enjoyment of God’s creation.²⁷

Berkeley’s semiotics suggests that the apparent materiality of objects points to their immateriality, just as the gold and jewels of a reliquary, though they are but dust and ashes, point to the spiritual reality to which the dead corporeal fragment within connects us. What is obvious is in truth obscure, and then again it is also a transparent window onto something else real. This paradox is a large part of what signs are. Whatever harmony obtains among signs is constituted by the nearness and farness that combine in the relations of the manifest image of our ordinary understanding and the actuality from which the manifest image emerges. (We today are somewhat familiar with this by virtue of what we know about the quantum level of reality.) Belief that is more important for grasping the meanings of signs than is real existence, and it is the interpretant’s relation to the verbal and visual discourse the signs comprise is as important as the effects of the signs upon each other. Their relations among themselves and with perceivers form a system of knowledge that, broadly idealistic in its ontology, relates persons and the world without mediation. The hollow where matter was is deleted. Representations as signs are a real presence.

But a presence of what? If matter cannot be a “stupid thoughtless nothing,” as Berkeley puts it (and Whitehead as well), what is present is the origin itself of phenomena. This is the system of knowledge and of being in which Rococo objects, by and large, silently participate. We have seen that in Rococo style the things present are *rocaille* and that their interrelations are atectonic. Yet this origin is not only past genesis but always has presence: the *rocaille* continues with and despite its acausality. The explanation of this in many periods but markedly at the turn of the

²⁶ For a “conflict between the ideas embedded within...traditional academic training – most notably the implicit geometric theory of vision presupposed by linear perspective – and the ideas articulated by Berkeley,” see C.O. O’Donnell, “Depicting Berkeleyan Idealism: a study of two portraits by John Smibert,” *Word & Image A Journal of Verbal/ Visual Enquiry*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2017, pp. 18-34.

²⁷ E. Szécsényi, “The Aesthetics of the Invisible: George Berkeley and the Modern Aesthetics,” *History of European Ideas*, vol. 48, no. 6, 2022, pp. 733 and 738.

eighteenth century is that our world is the visible aspect of God, whom we find where once we feared the hollow, the concavity that is all that is left of matter. In this sense, the Rococo visions burst open in a direction away from matter.

4. The idea of continuous creation was commonly considered by natural philosophers and metaphysicians during the European expansion of science in the latter seventeenth century and into the eighteenth. Some saw it as promising a way to reconcile a mechanical universe with an active God. His omnipotence and omnibenevolence sustained what He created by filling in the gaps of force at a distance by the non-physical necessity for a moral cosmos, lest scepticism collapse it into an abyss. Newton himself sought to fill the gap at the same time as he solidified it.²⁸ As inspiration for the visual arts, this “gap,” in the words of the art historian Michael Yonan, led to “rococo aesthetics [as] the presumption of a common material essence and a concomitant belief in spontaneous natural transformation.”²⁹ A yet more basic passion was afoot: to see that God conserved what He created as part of His creation was a spiritual need and philosophical-theological need of great antiquity. It is neo-Platonic, found by Gregory Nazianzenus on pseudo-Dionysius and then robustly theorized Duns Scottus Eriugena (c. 800 – c. 877), who brought the Greek theologians’ quasi-pantheistic sense of theophany into the Latin theology that culminated in scholasticism. Yet it remained a current sidelined by Thomistic thought. Around the turn of the eighteenth century, awareness of the power of physical nature, so intricate and inevitable as to threaten the human perspective, provoked a need to attribute to nature continuity in order to ground human cognizance and ambition. Continuous creation seemed to mollify the terrorizing sublime. This only God, greater than nature, could provide. Rococo style was, in part, a way of expressing the living force of divine energy, streaming through nature into human affairs. Even more, it was a way of producing that living web by making images of it that also were themselves objects in the continuous fabric they represented.

To hold a concept of continuous creation by the creator God was to place an unquenchable energetic renewing agency against the labile world of motorized material parts. Like the graceful *ritornello* of *da capo* song (popular in this period), everything begins anew – but the period

²⁸ See J. Ungureanu, *Newton Deified and Defied: The Many “Newtons” of the Enlightenment*, in *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith*, vol. 72, no. 4, 2020, pp. 223-235.

²⁹ M. Yonan, *Knowing the World through Rococo Ornamental Prints*, in *Organic Supplements: Bodies and Things of the Natural World, 1580-1790*, edited by M. Jacobson and J. Park, University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville, 2020, p. 187.

of renewal is not any interval of time such as we finite minds need but instead every infinitesimal instant – the eternal instant that for God always is but that we see darkly in the coming-to-be and passing-away of all that we are and that is around us. For Eriugena and for Malebranche, continuous creation is a concomitant of creation *ex nihil*. The Creation itself is eternal because original; and original, because it is eternal. Since a particular body's state of motion is internal to its concept, God's act of sustaining bodies is identical to His act of causing their motion. This is His conservation of the universe. In Malebranche's complete occasionalism, conservation left zero room for human creativity. But for Berkeley, and others, and for artists in this milieu, without their altogether knowing it, just enough of the universe must leap over all the occasions (or "gaps") through God's immediate sustaining action in which we humans, whose minds He specially furnishes with ideas, act as creators on our own volition. For them, here in this leap is history, here is human activity, here is art. The line between God's power and ours was always contested, but in general a theory of the conservation of the universe by continuous creation need not be rigid occasionalism but could instead turn into ontological idealism, in which the world depended on our creating it as well as on God's.

Continuous creation requires a conception of a cosmic substance with unbounded potential for production and a volition that productively uses this substance – that is, what is created and the creator or creative energy. It is the latter that entails the continuous temporal shape of created reality. These two elements are ontological analogues of the two aesthetic elements Yonan describes in a general way and that I here specify as *rocaille* and atectonicity. Malebranche gives us a contemporary philosophical context for the first, but in order to connect the second to Rococo creativity I will shift to a different track of this tradition.

Malebranche denies all causal power to the human mind. His case is that, however far we trace a causal chain, we end up needing one more preceding cause. The motions we attribute to things and to ourselves are therefore wholly dependent on a greater precedent force. In fact, he says, they are necessary and therefore real only as effects of that force.³⁰ Finitude being the state of this limitation and therefore of inadequacy, finite things all fail by definition, so only the infinite has the power to act. Things could be no other way, even for an omnipotent God, because God cannot transfer causal power to things inherently incapable of it. Omnipotence cannot turn into less than omnipotence, or else it never was omnipotence. Nothing but God can move itself. Further-

³⁰ N. Malebranche, *Dialogues on Metaphysics and Religion*, translated by D. Scott, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, pp. 111-112 (VII.vi).

more, keeping what He has created in existence not only can be the job of God alone but also requires His infinite goodness. God's power is good because it is God's. God therefore acts to maintain goodness by conserving his creation.³¹

All being under God's power, the character all things share is just this subjection. And this subjection is what they are, their essence. "Essence" here means the feature that abides through all change, their quiddity in God's view and therefore the truest part of their realness. *Rocaille* is not pure potentiality in the Scholastic sense. Explained through ontology, it is much closer to Malebranche's notion: actual, not potential; it is what there is rather than the nothing from which the Creation came.³² It therefore is imbued with goodness, rather than morally inert. Its causal inertness is in inverse proportion to its goodness, which is the same as its actualization of the will of God. Thus, Reason, from the continuous creator God, infests and alters the substance of all things.³³ Reason puts them through their histories of development.³⁴ Matter just is its extensions, from which "modalities," that is, potentialities, are abstractions.³⁵ This substance has no inherent or necessary shape.³⁶ And yet it is all that is created. This is the truth that *rocaille* as matter hides and then reveals to us in the hands of a creator: a substrate in eternal generation, its manifestations the plastic metonym and unfolding sign of a creative power.

God's act of sustaining bodies is identical to His act of causing their motion *ex nihilo*. All created things require conservation because, being finite entities, they are unstable. But this instability, and the extinction it leads to, is generative. Vulnerability is necessary to novelty. Atectonic design, whether of a soup tureen or a cathedral dome, signifies this, just as these and all other objects are signs of creation and the conservation of creation. But an object made by humans adds a layer of signifying to the signifying by which everything indexes divine power. In every product of human artefaction there is a truth, or an index of truth, not present in natural entities.

Yet intervention to stop things from wobbling out of existence need not occur at every instant, as Malebranche's occasionalism holds it must. A creative energy might accomplish this by permanent general laws of causality. In this case, continuous creation might start to look like another version of the mechanical universe. And if the human is taken as

³¹ N. Malebranche, *The Search After Truth*, translated by T. Lennon, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, pp. 76-77, 547.

³² Malebranche, *Dialogues*, p. 113 (VII.viii).

³³ Malebranche, *Dialogues*, p. 123 (VII.xv).

³⁴ Malebranche, *Dialogues*, p. 207 (XI.ix).

³⁵ Malebranche, *Dialogues*, p. 180-181 (X.ix).

³⁶ Malebranche, *Dialogues*, p. 182 (X.x).

ontologically other than the mechanistic, then even occasionalism itself, with its passive and unfree, though somehow intelligent, human participants begins to look mechanistic. Atectonicity would then be reducible to the phenomenal structures and efficient causality of things that we can empirically discover.

Although I cannot here enter into the complications of Berkeley's idealistic turn from occasionalism, it was something like this consideration that was among his reasons for developing his idealism. As a result, he superseded mental objects – our “ideas” – upon the inner stuff of divine creation. Again, Berkeley's notion of ideas raises questions of interpretation beyond my present scope. For understanding Rococo ontology, though, it has a singular importance: it transplants some of the divine creative force into human activity through the ideas God implanted in our minds that comprise the world for us, sustained as it is by God. Vico, similarly, regarded history as that which we know best because we make it. By counting humankind as creators of novelty in passive matter, by crediting this activity to us instead of wholly determined passivity, and by understanding persons to be creative agents, this line of thought returns to a more ancient philosophical anthropology.

The line of descent from the neo-Platonist influence of pseudo-Dionysius runs through Eriugena, as I mentioned above. In his fascinating metaphysics, God multiplies himself into all things “genera and species to infinity,” not reserving Himself because of His unbruisable unity.³⁷ His creation is unceasing but complete. It follows that each and every thing that is, is a theophany. There are no gaps, no nothings, that God must pretermit or catwalk over in order to conserve the universe.³⁸ Instead, “divine brilliance” informs everything, although it is at the same time incomprehensible.³⁹ If the universe is atectonic, it simply reflects the fact that God is grounded on no-thing. This is because God is so overfull, so complete, that there can be nothing “behind” Him.⁴⁰ And “in front” of him all creation is so overfull of Him that meaningfulness has been transferred into it and is not kept to God alone. Here Eriugena says something truly singular and startling. He says that in creating creation God creates Himself, since He is the real being of everything. In Eriugena's language, this is the “superessential” quality of being. Humankind is part of this reality (which Eriugena calls *natura*), fully integrated into it and therefore

³⁷ John Scottus Eriugena, *Perisypheon (Division of Nature)*, translated by J. Sheldon-Williams, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, 1987, pp. 303-304 (III.367C).

³⁸ Eriugena, *Perisypheon*, pp. 302-303 (III.677D), p. 304 (III.678A), pp. 305-306 (III.678C-679B).

³⁹ Eriugena, *Perisypheon*, pp. 307-308 (III.680D-681C).

⁴⁰ Eriugena, *Perisypheon*, pp. 208-209 (II.599d).

bearing meaningfulness and creativity. Then Eriugena comes to the singularity of the human relation to existence: our “higher nature” includes reason, the virtues, and “the memory of the eternal and divine things.”⁴¹ This is simultaneously animal and other than animal, just as God is both present and inaccessible through theophany. Theophany gives humans a particular spiritual ability to reflect on the complex universe that they face. Therefore, we too are creators, parts of God’s continuous creation of himself in and as the universe.

5. The *diacosmesis* of the pre-Socratics, especially of Parmenides, has passed through the intermediaries I have named but also submerged in the Aristotelian floodtide of Latin philosophical theology. Eriugena’s conversion of it into a theo-philosophical anthropology flashes up in the succeeding millennium and charges new movements, often liberatory, in Western culture. A great deal of Rococo art represents this species of the idealist discovery of the effects of human intelligence on the external world in ways both afforded and constrained by the social, material, and psychic needs of its era. Rococo artists and artisans participated in the primal creativity this combination of malleable substance and ceaselessly spiraling and swirling creativity echoes and signify it by the lineaments of their style. Making thing that are deep as well as pretty is difficult but all the more impressive when an absolute need for patronage controls the work, as it did the work of Rococo artisans. They were subject to a market that included on the one hand the great political authorities of the day but also, to a degree that had never previously obtained anywhere in Europe, the middle classes. Rococo style was widely published in well illustrated, cheap, and widely distributed pattern books and other advertisements.⁴² Thus, we have the thought-provoking sight of one of the most mystical strains of Western thought blinking through one of the most commercialized material forms of life in an early self-consciously modern era.

Resistance to this paradoxical conclusion comes from over-emphasizing (as well as misunderstanding) the flamboyant Rococo adopted by the French ruling and middle classes. In southern Germany and Austria, in Sicily and the Italian south, in Spain and Portugal and spectacularly in their New World colonies, much of the Rococo was religious. A large body of religious literature and oratory supported its style of devotion. It shaped some of the most beautiful churches in the world because it was

⁴¹ Eriugena, *Perisypheon*, p. 393 (IV.752C) and pp. 393-394 (IV.753A).

⁴² M. Percival, “A Butterfly Supporting an Elephant”: *chinoiserie, fantaisie and “the luxuriance of fancy,”* in “Fancy” in *Eighteenth-century European Visual Culture*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2020, pp. 137-152.

“a fully realized religious style” that registered happiness, even pleasure, as sacred to humankind.⁴³ In its burst spatial boundaries, multiple vertiginous perspectives, and unexpected vanishing points, it toggled between reality and illusion. Atectonic unfolding of *rocaille* claimed a place for the soft and serendipitous amidst the masculine and the determined. Sentiment matched logic, as the two struggled with each other throughout the eighteenth century.

By disabling the then current conventions of representation through playful sensual beauty, Rococo style expressed something deeply important about the value of human well-being. For along with the widespread interest in continuous creation – an idea that returned in the nineteenth-century interest in deep historical structures and had its most marked influence in Darwin – philosophers of the time engaged the issues of personal identity and personhood in general. Hobbes proximally revived the problem, and from there philosophical anthropology grew in the work of Locke, then Hume, the French materialists, finally in Kant and then onward through modern philosophy. The Rococo view, to characterize it in words, saw structure as connections rather than limitations, placed the unlimited referentiality of signs above boundaries, and valued the unbounded creativity we share with the heart of reality; realized that the real value of our perspectives and presence and of the human creativity they produce is due to their being real entities integrated into the world as well as meta-objects; and believed that the open-ended changefulness in nature brings forward, and not merely includes, our performances and productions as we seek to understand and control our mere human powers amidst the massive sublime processes of universal becoming.

In the Rococo decades – varying among nations within Europe and in their American colonies – the ontological structures described here cohabited with the social forces of production in the consciousness of the times. One of the ways in which we can see this movement in the cultures within the Occidental sphere of influence, larger and deeper than the individual arts or domains of thought, were accepted, extended, varied, and forwarded as a whole, is by seeing that the most abstract concepts of the age reflect the arts, crafts, and letters in one tightened conspectus, as if in a concave mirror. These emerging emotions and beliefs about reality used conceptions that were kalogenic because they brought together currents of feelings into spectacular and beautiful responses to the desires of many people. The makers and the market both took and returned these ideas.

⁴³ G. Bailey, *The Spiritual Rococo: Decor and Divinity From the Salons of Paris to the Missions of Patagonia*, Ashgate, Burlington, 2014, pp. 109, 258.

Berkeley was like so many others of his day in his feeling for such beauty, though with the disposition of a philosopher. He counseled

in perusing the volume of nature, it seems beneath the dignity of the mind to affect an exactness in reducing each particular phenomenon to general rules, or showing how it follows from them. We should propose to ourselves nobler views, namely, to recreate and exalt the mind with a prospect of the beauty, order, extent, and variety of natural things: hence, by proper inferences, to enlarge our notions of the grandeur, wisdom, and beneficence of the Creator; and lastly, to make the several parts of the creation, so far as in us lies, subservient to the ends they were designed for, God's glory, and the sustentation and comfort of ourselves and fellow-creatures.⁴⁴

We know that he enjoyed the “richly incrustated” beauty of Baroque architecture so abundant in Lecce and elsewhere in southern Italy; he admired cheerfulness in art; and, above all, he judged the abundance of visual signs that others think useless to be the real presence of providence and an aid to our understanding of the ends to which God intended His Creation. Berkeley at times seem to enjoy dense ornament and at other times to find it “surfeit.” But were he to comment on the theory of the Rococo as presented in this essay, he might say that the vivid plenitude of Rococo arts serves is a moral recreation that delights us and benefits our humanity in our civic responsibilities.⁴⁵

In Rococo design frames and cartouches frequently replace columns. This move emphasizes our construction of knowledge in place of its self-standing objectivity – and, ultimately the historicity of perspectives, theories, and forms of life. By challenging stability, coherence, and consequence, atectonicity fuses ornament with fundament in such a way as to reveal structures different from those established by preceding conceptual conventions. This is part of the reason by which Rococo can simultaneously be chthonic and trivial. The Rococo effect is to move our creativity and that of nature out of subjugated inclusion in objectified material relations. This is an example of steering ontology away from both the extreme anti-naturalism of occasionalism and, on the other hand, an eventually positivist causal realism.

That large-bore ontological developments, such as the long-term trend from substantialism to process can be presaged, reflected or echoed, and read or seen in the details of culture, including architecture and design, is one of the insights that the history of ideas, fraught though it is, offers

⁴⁴ G. Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, Dover, Mineola (NY), 2003, sec. 109, page 84.

⁴⁵ See T. Jones, “Berkeley and the Values of the Arts,” *1650-1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era*, vol. 21, 2014, pp. 89-108.

to our self-understanding. Some of Berkeley's work (and much of Vico's as well) labors to explain the capacity of non-propositional thought to produce forms of meaning other than those produced by empirical study and mathematics. Rococo arts also point in this direction. Rococo style also makes continuous creation essential to representation. At base, what makes this possible is the moral and social context in human affairs. Idealist ontologies, like other ontologies, appeal to us because they picture human history, relations, goals, and potential in ways we desire and approve of as an ethics for well-being or flourishing. We find reasons to accept or to reject ontologies because they do or do not make sense of the world in ways that satisfy moral intuitions. Some see this as a limitation imposed by a rejection of logic. The Rococo's rejection of rectilinear, two-value logic, created the opportunity for artefacting a way of living that reflects the living nature and instills awareness of the creativity in the world. This, in turn, arouses human interest and activity. To see all this as irrational amounts to a kind of pessimism. The pessimist, of course, usually claims to be realistic; and some (though not all) pessimists claim that true ontology requires that we confine ourselves to the structural logics of scientism, utility, and control. But, to the contrary, this fact (for fact it is) assures us that ontology is meaningful in so far as any ontology can say: what is real to our senses matches what is real to our hearts.

Ontologia rococò

Lo stile rococò nell'arte, nell'architettura e nelle arti decorative viene spesso interpretato alla luce del contesto socio-economico in cui si inserisce. Esso presenta tuttavia un altro aspetto: pur essendo uno stile materialistico, esprime in modo centrale elementi di idealismo ontologico. Questo saggio esamina il *rocaille*, la sostanza fondamentale dell'universo rococò, e l'atectonicità, uno dei concetti fondamentali in tutto il design rococò, come espressioni di una soggettività non cartesiana e di una natura non confinata alla causalità meccanicistica, come si vede nell'opera di Malebranche e Berkeley. Il rococò utilizza un concetto di creazione continua che risale al neoplatonismo dello Pseudo-Dionigi, mediato da Eriugena. La presenza dell'ontologia nell'arte non discorsiva getta della luce su cosa sia l'ontologia e su come essa si relazioni allo stile e al modo.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Berkeley, creazione continua, Eriugena, idealismo, Malebranche, personalità

Rococo Ontology

Rococo style in art, architecture, and the decorative arts, is frequently understood through its socio-economic milieu. It has, however, another side: although a materialistic style, it centrally expresses elements of ontological idealism. Focusing on *rocaille*, the basic substance in the Rococo universe, and atectonicity, one of the basic concepts in all Rococo design, this essay examines them as expressions of non-Cartesian subjectivity and of nature not confined to mechanistic causality, seen in the contemporary work of Malebranche and Berkeley. Rococo uses a concept of continuous creation that stretches back to the neo-Platonism of pseudo-Dionysius as mediated by Eriugena. The presence of ontology in non-verbal art sheds some light on what ontology is and how it relates to style and manner.

KEYWORDS: Berkeley; continuous creation; Eriugena; idealism; Malebranche; personhood