
Lois Parkinson Zamora. *The Inordinate Eye: New World Baroque and Latin American Fiction*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006. 420p.

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From time to time an original and well-researched work surfaces in the field of cultural studies. Lois Parkinson Zamora has provided a rare moment for those becoming fatigued by a constant profusion of “new” research into a saturated field. Refreshingly, *The Inordinate Eye* avoids an enthusiastic susceptibility—evident in a great deal of postcolonial criticism—to over-politicizing the subject. Zamora’s approach is, to use the unfortunate phrase, “Fair and Balanced,” though not from any underlying agenda but from a dogged insistence on grounded research. Zamora’s erudition provides a solid foundation for a relatively innovative argument.

The Inordinate Eye examines the cultural analogues between art and fiction. Zamora is careful always to provide concrete examples of indigenous art and its European counterparts. The first two chapters build an image of the “transcultural energies” (xv) that are evident in the interaction of symbols, between pre-conquest, Mesoamerican art, and colonial expressions of Catholic syncretism. In every case, Zamora supplies an abundance of visual evidence—in the form of countless figures and plates—each demonstrating the intentional blending of cultural expressions (European and Mesoamerican) that defines the Latin American experience.

Zamora confesses her interest “in asymmetrical cultural relations in New World contexts” (xvi); yet, throughout the book, asymmetry describes more the observable reality of negotiated cultural situations in the New World, than the “domination” of European centers on New World peripheries. *The Inordinate Eye* stresses the role of “transculturation” in creating the “Latin American historical experience” (116), an experience that gives rise to a particular *spirit*, called New World Baroque.

In chapter three, Zamora explores the poetic theory of Cuban writer, Alejo Carpentier. Carpentier is, according to Zamora, the first to canonize the idea of a New World Baroque, which, she argues, actively denies the inclination to categorize “Baroque” as a historical style. New World Baroque is, for Carpentier, “an ideology and aesthetics of cultural difference” (116). Taking Mexico as his model, Carpentier constructs a theory of the Baroque, as “an instrument of *contraconquista* (counter-conquest)...by means of which Latin American artists might define themselves *against* colonizing structures” (120). The act of *contraconquista* is, however, one of interactions. Carpentier imagines New World Baroque as the dynamic continuation of culture in a non-linear, non-spatial context. The Baroque artist negotiates the ideas

and styles of different times and different places, mingling heterogeneity in hybrid and “inordinate” forms. The underlying idea for Carpentier (and for Zamora) is that the Baroque reflects an inherent quality of New World existence, which is “the awareness of being Other, of being new, of being symbiotic, of being a *criollo*; and the *criollo* spirit is itself a Baroque spirit” (128). New World Baroque points to a process of “displacement and exchange” (154) in the interactions between Europe and the New World.

The highpoint of Zamora’s analysis centers in her assertion that the New World Baroque expresses a tendency to “accumulate” and “accommodate” (157). The idea that Latin American existence is defined by a process of accumulation *and* accommodation is problematic for some critics and historians, who focus on the obvious asymmetry of power structures in the colonial period, without recognizing the power of the Baroque “impulse” to encompass “opposites without destroying difference” (157).

Again, Zamora points to examples of Latin American art to stress the extent to which syncretic forms dominate the New World imagination. The result of the Baroque impulse is the creation of new systems, through multiple accumulations of symbols and accommodations of opposites. In chapter four, Zamora finds evidence of these negotiations in the art of Frida Khalo, and the fiction of Gabriel García Márquez (among others). In chapter five, she extends her analysis to a new category: the contemporary Latin American Baroque, or the Neobaroque, epitomized by the fiction of Jorge Luis Borges. Borges, Zamora argues, amplifies the dependence on the artist on the interactions between his own time and place, and that of another. As an act of accumulation and accommodation, “Borges’s ironic intertextuality aspires to revivify occluded texts and traditions” (300). Borges’ fiction is a “self-conscious” hybrid-form, crossing “boundaries between generations and cultures” (300).

Zamora concludes by emphasizing that the Neobaroque is, like the New World Baroque, an inclusive impulse. Both are concerned primarily with the dynamic process of intercultural exchange and displacement. This process is “open-ended” and historically continuous. Neobaroque represents, however, a new movement of the same Baroque *spirit*, as Latin America continues to negotiate its identity in response to the Modern world. She comments: “the Neobaroque is countermodern, not postmodern, in its critical reception and reinterpretation of Western modernity. It violates aesthetic and ideological norms in ways that revitalize them; this is the meaning of ‘counterconquest’—revitalization by means of revision” (294-295).

The Inordinate Eye is a welcome addition to the field of cultural or postcolonial studies. Zamora deftly traverses the distances between Europe and its colonial counterparts. The greatest contribution of her scholarship rests in the attempt to

bring together “visual and verbal structures in a single, sustained thought” (xix). Zamora’s ability to merge theories of art and literature gives *The Inordinate Eye* a sense of proportion that would have been impossible if one genre only were examined. This kind of scholarship demands a wide range of knowledge, and Zamora is very capable. ✱