

Bruce R. Burningham. *Tilting Cervantes. Baroque Reflections on Postmodern Culture*. Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 2008. 227 pp. Includes index. ISBN: 978-0-8265-1602-2 (cloth) and 978-0-8265-1603-9 (paper).

How often do the adjectives ‘audacious,’ ‘exciting,’ or ‘entertaining’ seem apt for a scholarly book? In this case, they are. *Tilting Cervantes* is a treat to read, and should help rekindle a sense of adventure in early modern Spanish studies. Between its covers, Burningham presents a series of scrupulously close readings of contemporary cultural products – fiction, autobiography, and film – in the light of Baroque literature, particularly Cervantes. These pieces do not for the most part attempt to provide new insight into *Don Quixote* or other Spanish classics; rather, they use those classics to provide insight into recent literature and film. Though arguably somewhat under-theorized, the volume puts forward the claim that current culture owes an unacknowledged debt to the Baroque, in particular the techniques and themes associated with metafiction and mirror structures. The book thus constitutes an open invitation to engage in similarly transhistorical work and to begin a dialogue about its implications, without the reader being called upon necessarily to sign on to any specific conceptual framework beforehand.

The opening chapters lay the groundwork for the sustained exploration of Cervantes’ relation to contemporary culture that occupies chapters 3-7. Chapter 1 compares John Ford’s *Stagecoach* with a history play by Lope, *Las famosas asturianas*. Both the play and the film portray the founding of the nation in confrontation with its racial other in defense of beleaguered feminine virtue. The striking parallels thereby revealed are inseparable from the function of both play and film as public spectacles: “This test of national character is nowhere better performed than on the *corral* stage and the silver screen, respectively, where the whole process can become part of a collective, national catharsis” (23). Implicitly the issue is raised of the baroque public sphere and its relation to postmodernity, but it is not much developed in the rest of the book; the interested reader will find more on such matters in Burningham’s first book, *Radical Theatricality*.

Chapter 2 is devoted to a characterization of two rock memoirs, Johnny Rotten’s *Rotten: No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs* (1994) and Marilyn Manson’s *The Long Hard Road Out of Hell* (1998), as picaresque narratives. In the discussion of *Rotten*, Burningham introduces a guiding theme of the book, the disjunction between versions of the self. As he points out, this disjunction is inherent in the picaresque genre, since there is a gap between the young *pícaro* as actor and the older narrator. After discussing the ‘self-fashioning’ of the Johnny Rotten figure, Burningham goes on to show how Marilyn Manson aka Brian Warner takes this dynamic yet further, inventing an alter ego who is a “more deliberately theatrical creation” (47). This heightened artificiality allows Burningham audaciously to assert that *Rotten* corresponds more closely to the Renaissance version of picaresque self-fashioning (*Lazarillo*), while *The Long Hard Road* is more baroque

(*Guzmán*). (53)

Beginning in the third chapter, Burningham uses Cervantes as the mirror in which to reflect upon a series of contemporary films – *Fight Club*, *Toy Story*, *Brazil*, and *The Matrix Trilogy* – and one novel, *The Moor's Last Sigh* by Salman Rushdie. (He also discusses the novel *Fight Club* by Chuck Palahniuk, on which the film is based.) *Tilting Cervantes* returns again and again to specific episodes of *Don Quixote* and other Cervantine works that involve mirroring, such as the Knight of the Mirrors from Part Two, Ginés de Pasamonte's amusing statement that his autobiography cannot be finished if his life is not, Avellaneda's parallel representations of Cervantine characters, and Cipión and Berganza's serving one another as mirror images.

Three of the five Cervantes chapters bear a family resemblance, providing a core argument for the book. Chapters 3, 6, and 7 deal with *Fight Club*, *Brazil*, and *The Matrix*, respectively. All three films take place in dystopias where the protagonists' marginality allows them to serve as symbols of resistance to the dominant order. They face up against one type or another of enforcers of that order, enforcers who in some ways resemble Inquisitors. And they all find themselves fragmented into double or multiple selves by the struggle to defeat the powers arrayed against them. This gives their 'quests' a labyrinthine character more characteristic of Part Two of *Don Quixote* (widely acknowledged to be the more baroque of the two parts). As Burningham argues in his conclusion, like Don Quixote all three are ironically reinscribed in the very system they seek to undermine, none more so than Neo, the protagonist of *The Matrix*. Indeed, in this reading, Neo is an eminently quixotic character, though the question of the utter lack of a sense of humor in the Wachowski Brothers' trilogy is not addressed. Ultimately, Neo is never represented as ridiculous, no matter how superhuman his ambitions; after all, the fate of the universe really *does* depend on him. The quixoticism of Buzz Lightyear in *Toy Story* is closer to the tone of Cervantes' original, since, given that he is just a plastic, massed-produced toy, the character's pretense of being a real space hero is merely ludicrous.

As Burningham shows, *Brazil* offers clear parallels to the Don Quixote-Alonso Quijano and Dulcinea-Aldonza pairing, and Terry Gilliam's subsequent work includes two overtly Cervantine projects, *The Fisher King* and the failed attempt to make a version of *Don Quixote*, which led to the documentary *Loſt in La Mancha*. But of all the works treated in *Tilting Cervantes*, only *The Moor's Last Sigh* contains any direct allusions to Cervantes. The protagonist of Rushdie's novel narrates his tale from a town in Andalusia called Benengeli, named, of course, for the mysterious Moorish historian who wrote the manuscript found in Toledo. After a useful catalogue of allusions to Cervantes in Rushdie's earlier works, Burningham reconstructs the textual 'shards' of Cervantine allusions in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, a patient labor that reveals "a patterned exploration of the interplay between captivity and narrativity, and more importantly, between

madness and reading” (108). This thematic is plausibly tied to Rushdie’s personal experience of a kind of captivity and maddening isolation as a result of the *fatwa* declared against him by the Ayatollah Khomeini. Remarkably, Rushdie finds his greatest ally in Cervantes, a former captive whose most famed creation is a madman who tries to save himself from his mediocre surroundings through literature.

An important question that cannot be entirely resolved within the volume itself is that of the status of these readings. As noted, the baroque connections teased out by the critic are not for the most part overtly present in the texts and films themselves. Burningham focuses more on providing a richly detailed mapping of the texts onto one another than on accounting theoretically for the affinities he uncovers. The theorist most in evidence is Baudrillard, whose notion of the simulacrum holds that in our postmodern age the ontological distinction between representation and represented has collapsed, leaving nothing but a play of mirror images, none of them privileged as ‘originary’. This theoretical model is appropriate for a discussion linking baroque and postmodern cultures, yet it still begs the question of what gives rise to this crisis of mimesis, then and now. Broadly, the conclusion suggests that such alternative reflections can be seen as forms of underground resistance to the hegemonic power of empires old and new. But Burningham immediately follows up with a partial disavowal, acknowledging that these readings are “the distinct product of my own contemporary effort to understand the present through a particular rereading of the past as I currently understand it” (179).

One historical explanation to which he has recourse is to consider baroque Spain and the postmodern United States as ‘bookends’ of Western modernity/colonial expansion (3). In this regard it is worth considering the antecedent provided by Baltasar Gracián to our current practice of self-definition through mirroring. The subject in Gracián is without depth, a mask operating in front of a mirror. We always hide some part of ourselves and show another, and we know that our interlocutor is doing the same; there is no question of some aspect of the self being more ‘authentic’. Such reciprocal duplicity is particularly notable in a widespread cultural practice of our own day: the creation of alter egos in virtual games involving multiple players online, who manipulate their personalities and appearance at will, disguising themselves, vicariously pretending to be what they can never be in reality, and interacting constantly with others who are doing the same. Although Burningham does not discuss online avatars, Angelina Ndalianis, to whose work on neo-baroque qualities of contemporary culture he refers, considers the virtual spaces they allow us to explore as a crucial example of the neo-baroque (*Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment*, 2004). Gamers ‘discover’ and ‘explore’ new territory in much the same way, Ndalianis affirms, as European colonizers did the territory of the New World several centuries ago. Made with no mention of the terrifying consequences of the Conquest for indigenous peoples of those lands, however, such an analogy repeats the ha-

bitual Eurocentric gesture of forgetting the role of imperialism in the birth of (post)modernity. Similarly, Ndalianis seems oblivious to the fact that the seemingly limitless plasticity of baroque subjectivity was only possible at a time when the stability and autonomy of the bourgeois subject had not yet been achieved. The resurgence of a baroque sense of self implies not only the freedom to adopt and abandon roles at will, but as its flip side a loss of that autonomous self to the self of networks. The optimistic Ndalianis never acknowledges the resulting fragmentation and dependency on the other's gaze. I introduce Ndalianis' rather naïve formulations to argue, by way of comparison, that Burningham's approach is both more prudent and more sophisticated. Prudent insofar as he refrains from attempting any definitive theoretical model; sophisticated in that he recognizes the 'darker side' of the baroque element of contemporary culture, as figured by the dystopian atmosphere predominating in *Fight Club*, *Brazil*, and *The Matrix*, and also in Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*. If we are living in a neo-baroque world, this is not of itself necessarily a cause for celebration.

Finally, I would like to briefly address the question of the audience(s) for this book. Burningham states early on that he has two audiences in mind, "readers interested in contemporary popular culture" and Golden Age scholars (4). We may well hope that some of the chapters will find readers among those working on the specific topics involved, but I anticipate the primary audience will be Cervantists. *Tilting* will be invaluable in the classroom, where it will inspire us to find new ways to stimulate our students' interest in *Don Quixote* and other early modern works. One potential audience not mentioned in the introduction are Latin Americanists who live and work in the U.S. Burningham refers to a number of Latin American authors, mainly novelists of the Boom and, above all, Borges. Moreover, they serve him as intermediaries in the creation of the baroque *Quixote* whose affinities with postmodern culture he has so convincingly demonstrated.

*Tilting Cervantes* is a gutsy book. Burningham maintains a perfect deadpan when discussing popular culture, including children's movies and television programs, in same the breath with what we are used to thinking of as 'high' culture. There is something quite exhilarating and very liberating in that. And indeed, one can read this as basically a 'fun' book by a scholar of early modern Spanish literature who happens to be an avid viewer of contemporary film and reader of current fiction. But it also has a significant contribution to make to the invention of a new way of doing literary history, now that the traditional approach of national literatures divided into neatly defined periods, is both discredited and irrelevant. The literature of the past means insofar as it continues to have meaning for people, people of flesh and blood who are alive now. *Tilting Cervantes* is as vivid a demonstration as we have yet seen that *Don Quixote* and other works of its day can have meaning for people who are otherwise engaged in reading Rushdie, listening to punk rock, or watching *Fight Club* or *The Matrix*. This is material we will come back to again and again in the coming years, as we engage in a debate

that must take place concerning the position of our field in relation to larger cultural, historical, and, yes, political trends in the emerging global literary field.

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