

THE NEO-BAROQUE IN VALTER HUGO MÃE'S "THE SPANISH MAKING MACHINE"

O neobarroco na obra "A máquina de fazer espanhóis" de Valter Hugo Mãe

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Abstract

In this paper we will address the question of whether in contemporary literature the baroque or the neobaroque can be found as a literary style. We will analyze the work of Valter Hugo Mãe, "A máquina de fazer espanhóis" (*The Spanish Making Machine*). We will start with a biography of the author, because we understand that there is an implication of the empirical author in the textual author, namely because the reflection about old age, illness and death is made by a healthy young man. Next, we will briefly review the state of the art. Another one about the narrative. We will look in this text for characteristics of the novel under analysis that we understand to be of baroque genesis. So that we can conclude whether or not the work "*The Spanish Making Machine*" is neo-baroque.

Resumo

Neste trabalho vamos abordar a questão de saber se na literatura contemporânea o barroco ou o neobarroco pode ser encontrado como estilo literário. Faremos análise da obra de Valter Hugo Mãe "a máquina de fazer espanhóis". Iniciamos com uma biografia do autor, por entendermos que há implicação do autor empírico no autor textual, nomeadamente por a reflexão sobre a terceira idade, doença e a morte ser feita por um jovem saudável. Faremos de seguida uma breve resenha sobre o estado da arte. Outra sobre a narrativa. Procuraremos neste texto características do romance em análise que entendemos serem de génese barroca. Para poderemos concluir se é ou não neobarroca a obra "a máquina de fazer espanhóis".

Keywords: *Neo-Baroque; Novel; Valter Hugo Mãe.*

Palavras-chave: *Neobarroco; Romance; Valter Hugo Mãe;*

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WHO IS VALTER HUGO MÃE?

Valter Hugo Lemos was born on the 25th September 1971 in Saurino, Angola. The youngest of four siblings, he came to Portugal on holiday and ended up staying because of the Carnation Revolution. He remembers walking around the square on the 25th of April playing with a child with a strange, very light colour. He lived in Paços de Ferreira and graduated in Law from the Moderna University in Porto. He gave up practising law. He said: "I was doomed to be a suffering lawyer, always being cheated by my own constituents. It was much better to start publishing poetry." He did a postgraduate course in Modern and Contemporary Literature at the University of Porto.

He uses the pseudonym *Mãe* because he believes that a mother is on the other side of the spectrum from a man; motherhood is an exclusive characteristic of women. Valter Hugo Mãe's relationship with his mother, Antónia, is very close. In 1980 he moved to Vila do Conde, where he lives simply, without the luxuries that the income from selling his books would allow him, in the town of Caxinas.

This contemporary author is a poet, painter, singer and novelist. His first work was a book of poems "*Silencioso Corpo de Fuga*", published by A Mar Arte in Coimbra. He was a member of the group *O Governo* with some members of *Mão Morta*, where he was the lead singer.

About the work being analysed, some authors stated:

A maior parte dos livros são escritos para o público; este é um livro escrito para leitores." António Lobo Antunes (Portal da Literatura).
"Impacta-me que, exatamente quando da minha entrada na velhice, chegue-me às mãos o trabalho de um jovem em que a contemplação do inexorável avanço da idade é a motivação de um exercício exuberante de escrita, onde a força da memória vocabular e emocional (força que define um verdadeiro escritor) surge luminosamente (Caetano Veloso, Prefácio, 2010).

For Valter Hugo Mãe, "*a máquina de fazer espanhóis*" is a book that begins with the desire to write about his father's death and ends with a despair that, for many, can be cutting.

Synopsis

“*A máquina de fazer espanhóis*” is a book about old age, about getting old, about loneliness, about the pains and weaknesses of body and soul, about family abandonment, but also about friendship. It's a reflection on Portuguese identity.

António Silva, a barber, has lost his wife, Laura. Laura was the pillar of his entire existence. The two children have their own lives, their own families where their father doesn't fit in. Alone and upset, he has no choice but to accept admission to the *Lar da Feliz Idade*, where he has been deposited with two bags of clothes and a photo album to wait for death. After he gets over the tantrum that has kept him quiet for several days, he manages to make friends with Américo, the Silva from Europe, Mr Pereira, Mr Esteves without *Metaphysics* (from Álvaro de Campos' poem *Tabacaria*) and many others. However, as he loses some of these friends, it's as if he's reliving Laura's farewell and the fear of death metaphorised on the left side of the *Lar da Feliz Idade*, which overlooks the cemetery (Caetano Veloso, 2010).

Theoretical framework

For many years, most scholars considered the word baroque to be derived from the word baroco, which means a syllogism demonstrating scholastic logic. Renaissance humanists considered this syllogism to be absurd and ridiculous, false and tortuous, and the expression with this meaning was transferred to the arts to designate a ridiculous and false style.

Later scholars believe that baroque derives from Barokia, a town near Diu where pearls with an irregular shape, not round, imperfect, were traded.

Over time, the word came to mean irregular, out of harmony, bizarre, ridiculous...

It was in the mid-19th century that scholars began to use the word Baroque to denote a style characteristic of the arts of a certain historical period - the 17th century.

Baroque used Renaissance forms and exalted them, making it a style that developed from classicism.

Heinrich Wölfflin, a 19th century theorist, created five antithetical categories to define the passage from the Renaissance to the Baroque in the plastic arts:

Saying that in the Renaissance we find the characteristics Linear - objects are vigorously limited; a surface view - objects are arranged without overlapping; closed form - the work conveys the idea of stability; unity to multiplicity - each element has its own value and are harmoniously related; from absolute clarity to relative clarity - perfect clarity in the composition. For the Baroque, the categories are: pictorial - disregards boundaries to create confusion; vision of depth - superimposes elements disregarding the surface; open form - relaxation of rules, creates the idea of instability through asymmetries and tensions; from multiplicity to unity - total subordination of the elements of the composition to a main one; from absolute clarity to relative clarity - light and colour do not define the work. The concept of the Baroque was extended not only to the arts, but also to psychology, philosophy, maths, physics, medicine, politics, etc,

The Baroque is the expression of the contrast of antinomies between faith and reason, body and soul, heavenly pleasures and worldly pleasures, God and the Devil, life and death. It is the expression of the constant change and ephemerality of existence, and the awareness of this transience of life often leads to the idea of death, seen as the ultimate expression of the fleetingness of life and leads to pessimism.

In the Baroque, in a break with harmony, balance and classical sobriety, there is an attraction to the tragic, the cruel, the painful and the grotesque, recounting or singing about the everyday life of society, as seen:

“A uns noivos que se foram receber, levando ele os vestidos emprestados, e indo ela muito doente e chagada.
Saío a noiva muito bem trajada
Saío o noivo muito bem trajado,
O noivo em tudo muito bem conchegado,
A noiva em tudo muito bem conchagada.¹
Ela uma enágoa² muito bem bordada
Ele um capote muito bem bordado;
Do mais do noivo tudo d'emprestado,
Do mais da noiva tudo emprastada.
Folgámos todos os amigos seus
De ver o noivo assim com tanto brio,
De ver a noiva assim com tantos brios.
Disse-lhe o cura então: - Confio em Deus,
E respondeo o noivo: - E eu confio.
E respondeu a noiva: - E eu com fios.³”
(Noronha, 1655)

Legend: 1 - com chagas, com feridas; 2 - saiote; 3 - ligaduras

The language is ingenious, with many stylistic resources, hyperboles, metaphors, antitheses and paradoxes. It utilises the play of ideas and concepts. But also, baroque is the idea that natural beauty needs to be corrected, complemented and exalted by art, which adds an artificial world to the real world where everything is embellished and idealised to the limit of reality.

Dámaso Alonso defines Baroque as the art of impressive dualistic oppositions of violent and exalted antitheses.

From Portuguese Baroque literature, we can give the example of *Cartas Portuguesas*, which deals with a forbidden love, a violent and uncontrolled passion of a nun for a French military man, by Sórora Mariana Alcoforado (1640-1723), to demonstrate the duality, the contradiction, the vision of a woman of flesh and blood.

Final extract from the fourth letter:

“O oficial que há de levar esta carta preveniu-me, pela quarta vez, que quer partir. Como ele tem pressa! Abandona, com certeza, alguma desgraçada neste país. Adeus. Custa-me mais acabar esta carta de que te custou a ti deixa-me, talvez para sempre. Adeus. Não me atrevo sequer a chamar-te meu amor, nem a abandonar-me completamente a tudo o que sinto. Quero-te mil vezes mais que à minha vida e mil vezes mais do que imagino. Ah, como eu te amo, e como tu és cruel! Nunca me escreves; não consigo deixar de te dizer ainda isto. Recomeço, e o oficial partirá. Se partir, que importa? Escrevo mais para mim do que para ti; não procuro senão alívio. O tamanho desta carta vai assustar-te: não a lerás. Que fiz eu para ser tão desgraçada? Porque envenenaste a minha vida? Porque não nasci noutra país? Adeus. Perdoa-me. Já não ousa pedir-te que me queiras. Vê ao que me reduziu o meu destino. Adeus.” (Alcoforado, s.d.)

Baroque literature often uses the theme of ugliness, the grotesque and the macabre through a humorous or sarcastic perspective of reality, exalting emotions with descriptions of imperfection and deformities, especially in human nature. They no longer sing of the *donna angelicata*, but of the beautiful gypsy, the lame, the beggar and the dwarf. The tactile sensations are a source of delight, the eroticism described transports the figure of the woman to a being of flesh and blood, the colours, perfumes and sounds are a source of inspiration for Baroque art.

The artifice we've been talking about regarding the visual arts in literature leads to the construction of complex formal structures and the use of expressions with significant multivalence that translates into contrasting values.

The contrasts in the visual arts can be seen in literature with the suggestion of the inner conflict of man's soul happening simultaneously and not in a continuum. In Baroque literature, descriptions are mere suggestions with blurred and confused outlines. Human figures and actions are reflected through the vision of characters. The use of figures such as paradox to characterise divided characters and contradictory feelings, metaphor to find similarities in dissimilarities, or to give metaphors a density of fantastic meaning, with the hyperbolic and the obscure, with repetition, hyperbole, anaphora and violent antithesis.

It is debated whether the Baroque should be considered an artistic style and therefore a metahistorical phenomenon, or whether it should be considered a historical phenomenon, that is, conditioned by time.

Aguiar da Silva says that theorists unanimously accept “the fundamental principle that the Baroque should be conceptualised and studied as a historical phenomenon, situated in a certain time, and not just any time, which is connected to multiple problems - aesthetic, spiritual, religious, sociological, etc - of a specifically historical nature” (Silva, 2021, p. 454).

This author believes that the fact that we find isolated and punctual characteristics of the Baroque throughout time does not mean that we are returning to a style or a literary period.

An example of Baroque literature is the Portuguese letters of the 17th century. These letters were revisited by three authors known as the three Marias (Maria Isabel Barreno, Maria Teresa Horta and Maria Velho da Costa) in contemporary times with the work *New Portuguese Letters*, all of which is neo-Baroque, see here this extract from the first letter V:

Quero vos falar daquele homem que me disse durante uma longa tarde: «possuir-te só posso se vestida; de freira tu, se possível - acrescentou baixo desviando os olhos -, o hábito levantaria a enrolar-to nas pernas que me apareciam virgem (...) (Barreno et al., 1972, p. 77).

Nowadays, and therefore in contemporary times, literature is characterised by the absence of a dominant current, authors are individual, have their own style and adopt characteristics of different styles from the past or create their own style.

The neo-Baroque in Valter Hugo Mãe's *The Spanish Making Machine*

And it is with this formal and thematic freedom that authors like Valter Hugo Mãe rescue features of the Baroque to express the complexity and ambiguity of the post-modern world, using raw, harsh language with images of the protagonist's pain and suffering, questioning established structures, and subverting traditional literary conventions.

In *a máquina de fazer espanhóis* the narrator is the protagonist António Silva, the elderly man who was deposited with two bags of clothes and a photo album at the Feliz Idade home and, contrary to the rule that the narrator is the same from beginning to end of the novel, in chapters five and seventeen the narrator is omniscient and starts speaking about the protagonist in the third person. Throughout the novel, the line between the narrator and the characters isn't always clear, plus the fact that there are several Silvas makes it less clear who is speaking to us, bringing the pictorial effect of the visual arts to literature.

The whole book is written without a single capital letter, apart from chapters five and seventeen, where the use of capital letters respects the rules.

What is special about these chapters that justifies the change of form? The theme. The whole book centres around the idea that the home is a place where the elderly wait to die, when arriving they occupy a room closer to the garden and start moving on to the wing closer to the cemetery towards the end of their lives. There was a fire in the cemetery wing, a recurring fire that was used to kill people and open up vacancies in the home. Three people died. The police were investigating. Chapter five begins with Teófilo Cubillas, a smiling Peruvian. He was on a poster hanging on the wall in the bedroom of Mrs Leopoldina, a fanatical “portista” who didn't like football, but who lost her virginity to the Peruvian. And that single night became the only relevant event in her life. This is a lighter chapter, with fewer accounts of suffering, pain and death.

Chapter seventeen is entitled *The Spanish Making Machine* and continues the theme of chapter five.

António Silva's time is constantly in flux, and the analepsis and prolepsis create the idea of instability and confusion.

The author brings in the theme of religion with the image of Our Lady of Fatima given to a non-believer - António Silva, with the message that in time he would gain a religious creed, calls her *Mariazinha*, hurting the feelings of believers by mutilating the image by cutting off its doves, in an act of revolt and anger at being left at home and losing Laura. These doves are used to play with the other elderly people and even to give them a sexual character when he draws a parallel between the clay dove, part of the image of Our Lady, and the sex of the women he plays with, one character says: "I'm going to eat your dove." The author wants to shock the reader and reflects on the dichotomy between faith and reason, saying that Esteves without metaphysics is the best Lady of Fatima in the house.

The author uses descriptions that make us feel horrified and disgusted through metaphors with grotesque images, for example: *the carers' hands were like the toothy beaks of bugs* (p. 33), *the earth opening its jaws to swallow him* (p. 41), *the stomachs of vultures tearing the flesh of his body apart with their sours* (p. 61), *the metaphor of birds vomiting on clouds* (p. 63), *romanticism made of shit and coming out of an animal's arse* (p. 68), *he refers to his son as a pig and says he wants to beat him to pieces, rip his head off, rip his lips off* (p. 71); *the dumb bad old woman sending the judiciary to hell* (p.158), *she's always scratching her arse (...) what a piece of crap, you're a bit of a slob* (p.159); *I'd slice myself up in the rubbish bin* (p.192); *I'd wait until they left me alone to run to the cemetery to trample the flowers* (p.247); *let them take me to the bottom of the earth where the bugs will eat me* (p.258); *imagine the area around my anus, like a swollen crown of filth. Imagine little worms piercing that ring and wriggling around like they're walking through damp earth* (p. 259); *imagine those knives going up your arse, you see, madam, up your arse. You sit there and you get the feeling that your arsehole is alive, you start fidgeting and mulling over ideas* (p. 284); *and what are you going to do to it, you can't stick anything in it, only lick it, but it's not old enough to lick anything, or the denture falls off* (p. 287).

He also uses slang and rude, common language: "the fucking flowers (p. 39) "the fucking romanticism; could I be beyond the fucking amorphous man I had been; he shouted at her, whore, get out of the way whore" (p. 198); "fuck you, Mr Cristiano, you're a piece of shit". (p. 202); "Look, shitting is for everyone and, if someone pisses us off, we'll shit together, we'll shit on them" (p. 233); Die, you son of a bitch, die, your big son of a bitch (p. 294)

Also characteristic of the Baroque is the use of contradictions and paradoxes, in particular the fact that the home next to a cemetery where people are taken to suffer loneliness and die is called the Home of the Happy Age; sentences such as "I looked at the figure of Our Lady and spoke mutely" (p. 43) appear unpredictably. 43), the protagonist's family dressed up in Sunday clothes to visit him, but when he wasn't in the Home and was visited every day, they didn't get dressed up; he tells them, "everything is fine and we're dying slowly; the cemetery is the place of an uncomfortable life" (p. 133); or, "I wasn't going to be an adult, I was coming as an adult" (p. 149); "a sympathy of deep frustration" (p. 149); "you're a good man, you're a good man" (p. 133); "you're a good man" (p. 133); "You're a good man. It felt like a huge failure to hear that" (p. 230).

CONCLUSION

The empirical author, a young man, wrote a book about old age and dedicated it to his father, who didn't live to old age and died of cancer. *A máquina de fazer espanhóis* is a work that deals with themes such as death: its non-acceptance and the anxious desire for its arrival, along with the fear of it, the suffering of people at the end of their lives with illness, loneliness, and abandonment. The author uses everyday language with slang to transport us to the characters' angry and suffering experience. The grotesque and the paradoxical are a constant presence in the text. The author uses figures of speech such as anaphora throughout the text, maintaining some coherence and taking us back to contexts he has already mentioned, because the discourse is non-linear, with constant analepsis and prolepsis.

The narrator is autodiegetic throughout most of the book, apart from two chapters which he treats differently, using capital letters and where the narrator is omniscient. Another technique to create confusion, which we consider baroque.

Despite being a story about old age, death, and suffering, it is, in the background, a treatise on Portuguese identity, or rather on the death of Portuguese identity along the lines of Miguel Real's thoughts on the growing blurring of European identities, which is why the *Spanish making machine* is Portugal.

We have no doubt that, given the characteristic described, this work is neo-baroque.

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Appendice

Covers of the work "a máquina de fazer espanhóis" (The Spanish Making Machine).

