

THE 'MOVING' LINES OF NEO-BAROQUE IN WILL SELF'S
DORIAN: AN IMITATION

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This essay aims at reading Will Self's Wildean *Dorian: An Imitation* (2002) as part of an increasingly popular neo-baroque style. Against the minimalism of past decades, there seems to be a proliferation of things baroque at the turn of the millennium. We will see how Self's novel fits the excess and movement characteristic of this aesthetics (against the harmony and stasis of classicism) and will analyse its purpose. Excess and movement should not be viewed exclusively as aesthetic concepts, since they involve the reader politically and ethically. As I will attempt to demonstrate, *Dorian: An Imitation* relies on a complex (baroque) structure and on intertextuality to meet this end. The effect of neo-baroque manifestations on the one who looks, hears or reads must be inscribed in the ethics of affects, the language of new technologies and the awe-inspiring power of the sublime. With this purpose, I will make extensive use of the concept of line as a perennial metaphor for artistic representation running from Hogarth to Newman, Derrida and Deleuze.

Keywords: Neo-baroque; lines; excess; intertextuality; sublime; AIDS

LÍNEAS QUE (CON)MUEVEN. EL NEO-BARROCO EN DORIAN: AN IMITATION
DE WILL SELF

Este ensayo propone una lectura de la novela Wildeana Dorian: An Imitation, de Will Self, como ejemplo de un estilo neo-barroco cada vez más popular. Frente al minimalismo de décadas pasadas, parece que, con el cambio de milenio, se está experimentando un triunfo de lo barroco. Veremos cómo la novela de Self refleja el gusto por el exceso y el movimiento de esta estética (en contra de la armonía y lo estático del clasicismo) y por qué lo hace. Ni el exceso ni el movimiento se plantean exclusivamente como conceptos estéticos, ya que tienen implicaciones políticas y éticas. Como intento demostrar, Dorian: An Imitation se sustenta sobre una estructura (barroca) compleja y sobre relaciones intertextuales. El efecto de las manifestaciones neo-barrocas sobre el que ve, escucha o lee se inscribe en la ética de los afectos, el lenguaje de las nuevas tecnologías, y el poder conmovedor de lo sublime. Con este propósito, haré uso del concepto de línea como metáfora perenne de la representación artística de Hogarth a Newman, de Derrida a Deleuze.

Palabras clave: Neo-barroco; líneas; exceso; intertextualidad; lo sublime; el SIDA

1. Introduction: The baroque 'Aeon'¹

Although often denigrated, the baroque has become a perennial mood, spirit or movement; hence the subtitle of this preliminary section. Strictly speaking, the term *baroque* was coined with reference to the artistic manifestations and productions of seventeenth-century European art. Against normative classicism, the traits of the baroque are regarded as “unusual, vulgar, exuberant, and beyond the norm” (Ndalianis 2004: 7). Together with these, excessiveness and ‘beyondness’ deserve special emphasis, arguably the most relevant characteristics of Self’s novel. The denigration of the baroque did not end until the twentieth century. Still in the nineteenth century, as Ndalianis recalls, “critics and historians perceived it as a degeneration or decline of the classical and harmonious ideal epitomized by the Renaissance era” (2004: 7). Just as the sublime constitutes the necessary other of beauty, the baroque may be said to work as the underside of classicism. Hence, “the baroque was [not] frozen within the temporal parameters of the seventeenth century... It continued to have a life, albeit one beyond the limits of the canon” (2004: 8). It can be argued, therefore, that the baroque constitutes a liminal and fluid phenomenon, always beyond itself and its alleged spatio-temporal parameters. In other words, the spirit of the baroque existed well before the movement itself and continues much after its conclusion.

The aeon of the baroque has been targeted by many art historians. As Angela Ndalianis recalls in *Postclassical, Modern Classicism, or Neo-Baroque? Will the Real Contemporary Cinema Please Stand Up?* (2004), art critics like Helena Sassone (1972), Christine Buci-Glucksmann (1986, 1996), Omar Calabrese (1992) and Martin Jay (1994) find traces of baroqueism in Romanticism and in twentieth-century art, particularly the early avant-gardes. The excess of signifier and the non-normative freedom associated with the baroque literally flood all artistic and cultural manifestations in the twentieth century, from literature to cinema, from music to fashion. Ndalianis provides an exhaustive list of neo-baroque manifestations in the last decades. Despite the diversity of texts in the list, which includes from Federico Fellini’s masterpieces to Sally Potter’s eponymous adaptation of Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* (1992), all of them produce a similar effect of the hyperbolic and the theatrical. Likewise, baroque traits such as multiple framing, intertextuality and parody recur in postmodernist neo-baroque texts. According to Ndalianis, the seventeenth century and the turn of the millennium mirror each other, as they constitute moments of transformation, transition and, consequently, ontological and epistemological crises (2004: 21). In other words, the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century finds its updated counterpart in the era of new technologies. Ndalianis endorses Francesco Guardini’s description of “our culture as being, like the seventeenth-century era that ushered in the scientific revolution, in the eye of an epochal storm, in the middle of a gigantic transformation of cultural and socioeconomic proportions” (Ndalianis 2004: 22). Just as the discoveries of Galileo, Kepler and Copernicus changed the perception of reality of their respective eras, ours is conditioned by cybernetics and the current proliferation of (virtual) realities. Whereas

¹ I borrow the term *aeon* from Eugenio d’Ors’ essay ‘Del Barroco’ (1934) “as a constant in the history of aesthetic forms” (in Ganteau 2005: 194).

the seventeenth-century baroque constituted the prelude to the era of reason, the turn-of-the-millennium neo-baroque may be seen as heralding the era of the *homo cyberneticus*.

Fluidity, transformation, movement, chaos, ontological and epistemological uncertainty, performativity, parody, intertextuality, hybridity, sublimity, excess and hyperbole are baroque features peppered throughout the writings of various critics—from classics such as Heinrich Wölfflin (1986), Walter Benjamin (1996) and Eugenio D'Ors (1993), to more recent ones such as Christine Buci-Glucksman (1986, 1996), Gilles Deleuze (1988), Benito Pelegrín (2000) and Jean-Michel Ganteau (2000, 2005)—to characterise turn-of-the-millennium neo-baroque. Thus, although these traits are recurrent in Western culture, it is the postmodernist updating of former baroque texts that brings them all together as a potent aesthetics of change. As Jean-Michel Ganteau points out:

The novels of Angela Carter or Salman Rushdie tend to be classified in a narrative category or mode that has been called new baroque. Such texts share aesthetic and ethical traits mainly based on the prevalence of hyperbole, proliferation, depravity of ornamentation, and flux that tend to challenge prior aesthetic codes ... and unremittingly focus on the darker, submerged, neglected sides of contemporary society and history, on alternative psychological and spiritual experiences, on complementary worlds and heterocosms ... on the prevalence of the other in a mass culture generally obsessed with the rhetoric of the same and its simulacra. (2005: 198-99)

With all this in mind, it is the main concern of this essay to decide whether *Dorian: An Imitation* (2002) also partakes of the poetics and politics of the neo-baroque and, if so, to what extent and with which purpose(s). On the whole, I follow the lead of Ndalians and Ganteau. However, I particularly focus on the sexual side of the neo-baroque to fully understand Self's novel.

2. Movement vs. stasis, excess vs. harmony, the sublime vs. beauty. Dorian and the realm of the liminal

At the risk of being too simplistic, there seems to be an intrinsic tendency to view art as either 'harmonious and balanced' or 'convoluted and excessive'. The former associated with Apollonian beauty, reached its apex in the Renaissance, Neoclassicism, Realism and, recently, in minimalism. Against the normative classicism of the first, there arises (in Dollimore's terms) a perverse dynamic of 'otherness', which stems from the Dionysian and the sublime and bursts out in the baroque aeon. Briefly stated, the baroque is the sign of a compound crisis, whereby the cosmic equilibrium and stasis that Andrea Cellarius represents in his painting *Harmonia Macrocosmica* (1660) gives way to a more complex concept of the world and aesthetics (Eco 2004: 225). In the seventeenth century, the crisis of knowledge led to a relentless search for new expressions of beauty. As Eco points out, new art forms were increasingly astonishing and apparently disproportionate in the attempt to 'move' the reader or spectator (2004: 228-29). Likewise, drawing on Benito Pelegrín, Ganteau argues that, out of the traditional goals of classical rhetoric (*docere, delectare, movere*), neo-baroque English

literature prefers the third. What this implies, in his view, “is that by addressing feelings, senses and emotions, one courts and instrumentalizes the sensational—even sensationalism—to win, to convince, to seduce” (2005: 210). Echoing the seventeenth-century baroque, the late-twentieth-century neo-baroque uses the irregular, the distorted and the excessive so as to involve the reader aesthetically, emotionally and even physically.²

Seventeenth-century discoveries (particularly on astronomy) can explain the metaphoric lines that, for Eco, make up baroque aesthetics: “There is no line which does not lead the eye to a ‘beyond’ that must be reached, there is no line without tension: the immobile and inanimate beauty from the classic model is replaced by a dramatically tense one” (2004: 234, my translation).³ The readers and spectators of neo-baroque manifestations are propelled following a (neo)sublime force, thus defying the pleasant stasis, or nothingness, of classicism. Etymologically, baroque stems from Spanish *barrueco* and Portuguese *barroco*, “both referring to an irregular pearl deviating from the canon of the perfectly round one” (Pelegrín, in Ganteau 2005: 194). Likewise, the neo-baroque constitutes a deviation, formal and ethical, from the normative, the regular. This irregularity, which goes beyond and perverts the canon, and leads to unknown territories, is a complex phenomenon. Moreover, against the insightfulness of classicism, neo-baroque aesthetics prefers surfaces. Yet, we should be careful on interpreting the ethos of the neo-baroque, for it is intrinsically contradictory: paradoxically chaotic, albeit under control; allegedly spiritual, yet highly corporeal (see Buci-Glucksmann 1986: 96-97). Behind its irregular lines, which lead the eye to the metaphysical, and subvert classicist straightness and equilibrium, this aesthetics relies on a multiplicity of layers or frames of representation which, being arranged *en abyme*, match the postmodernist poetics of repetition and fragmentation. For example, the baroque *trompe l’oeil* recurs in neo-baroque painting and literature, putting forward the complex ontological crisis at the turn of the millennium. This logic of endless framing recalls Roland Barthes’ *sens obtus*, “a meaning that comes in excess of representation, or a signifier without a signified, a profusion without a tangible/explicit referent” (in Ganteau 2000: 38). Also following the poetics of postmodernism, the neo-baroque is essentially auto-referential. Signifiers only mean if related to other signifiers. Despite this *mimétique du rien* (see Ganteau 2000: 38), which folds the neo-baroque text within itself, its extraordinary capacity for affect does not fade away. This apparent contradiction questions Fredric Jameson’s contention that postmodernism invests in “arbitrariness, artificiality, and the waning of affect” (1991: 16). The excess of signifier and physicality of neo-baroque discourse renders it invaluable to explore the

² The boundaries between the aesthetic and the ethical/emotional are not easily defined in baroque art, whose ethics relies on the all-embracing totality of artistic creation (Eco 2004: 234). In this respect, neo-baroque art differs from its seventeenth-century predecessor. At present, when a totalising artistic creation is no longer conceivable, the relation between ethics and aesthetics has become much more complex, as the studies of many critics prove. See Eskin (2004).

³ “No hay línea que no guíe al ojo hacia un ‘más allá’ que siempre hay que alcanzar, no hay línea que no se cargue de tensión: la belleza inmóvil e inanimada del modelo clásico es sustituida por una belleza dramáticamente tensa” (Eco 2004: 234).

unfathomable or sublime. Such a poetics of the limitless, of absolute dispersal, maximum corporeality and postmodernist transcendence are the constitutive elements of *Dorian: An Imitation*.

Self's novel displays most neo-baroque traits, inhabiting a liminal space. It inscribes and shows the ontological crisis in the era of simulacra, particularly the sort associated with the proliferation of realities fostered by new technologies. It operates on the borderline between the turn of the millennium, its baroque substratum and its actual hypotexts, especially Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). It also swings between the poetics of the sublime and the beautiful, preferring the 'otherness' of the former to the normative character of the latter. Finally, as an overtly gay text revising a homosexual (albeit canonical) hypotext, the novel is simultaneously marginal and central to Western culture.

3. Recasting late-Victorian excess for (postmodernist) effect and affect

I have repeatedly made reference to excess and movement as essential features of neo-baroque aesthetics, and of *Dorian: An Imitation* in particular. My main concern henceforth will be to explore how, why and with what effect both features are accomplished in Self's novel. However, I will firstly focus on its intertextual character and its consequences.

3.1 *Imitating what?*

The novel's subtitle somehow defies the postmodernist concept of intertextuality. In fact, Self's novel has been severely criticised for virtually cloning Wilde's masterwork, normally for the worse (Harrison 2003; Leclair 2004; Anon. 2002). As a whole, the plot of the hypertext coincides almost to the letter with that of the hypotext. Only the girl Wilde's Dorian fancies for a while is replaced by a rent boy in Self's novel. However, *Dorian: An Imitation* cannot be regarded as a mere pastiche of its late-Victorian predecessor. The homosocial relations between the characters in Wilde's novel become overtly gay in the former, just as obscure perversions turn into violent episodes and strange scars into signs of AIDS. Moreover, *Dorian: An Imitation* introduces a postmodernist, neo-baroque sense of crisis, which goes beyond or, at least, problematises the art/life binomial in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Whereas Wilde's Dorian finds out his 'true' nature trapped in a self-portrait, Self's (unempathetic) Dorian does so in Baz's video installation, aptly named *Cathode Narcissus*:

The first monitor ... zigged and zagged into life. It showed the naked figure of a beautiful young man, posed like a classical Greek kouros, one hand lightly on hip, the other trailing in groin, half-smile on plump lips. A naked figure that turned to face the viewer as the camera zoomed in. The second monitor came to life and this displayed a closer view of the still turning youth. The third view was closer again. The sensation imparted as all nine monitors came to life was of the most intense, carnivorous, predatory voyeurism. The youth was like a fleshy bonbon, or titillating titbit, wholly unaware of the ravaging mouth of the camera. The ninth monitor displayed only his mobile pink mouth. (Self 2003: 12)

Both metaphors—picture and video installation—point to a common referent, namely the way in which art (re)presents ‘otherness’. The complex crisis of ontological frames that seventeenth-century art suggested, and Wilde’s tale confirmed, has become the core of Self’s novel. It constitutes a sort of hyperreal web of cross-references. Wilde’s texts and *Dorian: An Imitation*, as well as their metaphors for ‘otherness’, reflect each other, not as a mere imitation but feeding each other in what may be described as a fractalised series. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* echoes Charles Maturin’s⁴ gothic novel *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820). Like Maturin’s Melmoth, Dorian is magically released from the marks of age and sins, though he is eventually condemned. However, this is only part of the story. Behind the obvious moralistic reading, there is a more complex one. As metaphors of the abject, the picture and *Cathode Narcissus* are hidden in a dark room. These metaphoric artefacts and spaces are not simply tropes for otherness. Being arranged *en abyme*, they stand for their respective texts as a whole and are projected beyond, breaking ontological boundaries and interpellating us through the process of reading. *Dorian: An Imitation* agglutinates all the texts (baroque and late-Victorian) mentioned so far, but from a postmodernist neo-baroque stance.

3.2 Trompe l’oeil and moving lines

As Angela Ndaliansis points out, against the widespread view that the baroque “implies losing control, ... [it] often reveale[s] an obsessive concern with control and rationality” (2004: 4). Likewise, neo-baroque texts generally rely on well-designed structures. Echoing this, the increasingly chaotic life stories of the different Dorians in Self’s novel are embedded within a well-tightened (albeit open) pattern. The novel is split into three parts and an epilogue, which masterfully distorts the meaning and the logic of the novel so far. Each of the three parts—aptly entitled ‘Recordings’, ‘Transmission’ and ‘Network’—ends with a death. The first part puts an end to the eighties with the death of Herman, a black male prostitute and a surrogate of the actress Wilde’s Dorian kills in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Dorian’s body is recorded as ‘points of light’ in Baz’s nineteen-eighties, when the virus of AIDS was being ‘recorded’ in gays’ bodies. The second part closes with Baz’s murder, and stands for most of the nineteen-nineties, when AIDS was transmitted through what the narrator metaphorically calls “lines of buggery” (Self 2003: 154). In the third part, transmission has evolved into a multi-referential network of death, affecting virtually everybody, even the so-far unscathed Dorian. However, the death of Dorian eventually turns out to be mere fiction, part of a *roman à clef* devised by Lord Henry while he himself is dying of AIDS. In other words, what we have been reading so far is not Dorian’s ‘real’ story, but a meta-fictionalisation made up by one of the characters. Yet, as the epilogue advances, Lord Henry’s *roman* proves to be rather more reliable than the ‘real’ Dorian acknowledges.

⁴ Charles Robert Maturin (1782-1824) was Wilde’s uncle. His famous *Melmoth the Wanderer* was deeply influenced by Milton, as well as the myths of Faust and the wandering Jew.

Dorian's replication is very complex and is inscribed in a wider context. As Ndalianis argues, thanks to a number of technical advances and an incipient consumerism, the baroque era was witness to "a nascent popular culture, one that was accompanied by a new fascination with the serial and the copy" (2004: 11). Centuries later, we are living a world of replicas and virtual realities, which propels us to confront a number of frames or (in Derrida's terms) *parerga* without content or *ergon*, when reading a text like Self's. In this context, the baroque *trompe l'oeil* has gained new significance.

The *trompe l'oeil* constitutes an artistic device which uses different proportions and perspectives so that the viewer is confused by apparently different levels of representation. Its ultimate purpose is to question taken-for-granted ontological boundaries. The eye can be tricked and so can our reason. Thus, as readers, we belong (albeit vicariously) in the artistic event. In this respect, I think that Derrida's concept of the *parergon*—borrowed from Kant—gains significance. The French philosopher defines it as a negation: the *parergon* is "neither work (*ergon*) nor outside the work [*hors d'oeuvre*], neither inside nor outside, neither above nor below, it disconcerts any opposition but does not remain indeterminate and it gives rise to the work" (Derrida 1987: 9). Although the imagery of the *parergon* is especially graphic in the *beaux arts*, literature does not escape its logic. *Dorian: An Imitation* is arranged into different *parerga* that somehow stand for and defer the *ergon* itself. Rather than actual referents, it is contours that really matter in the novel. Thus, Lord Henry Wotton's *roman à clef*⁵ or *ergon* of the novel, only means in relation to its orbiting *parerga* or frames, namely the epilogue, Lady Di's tele-visual story and Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

On analysing Derrida's *The Truth in Painting* (1987), Phillip Shaw attempts to explain the reason why art requires frames. In his view, irrespective of the form it adopts, the *parergon* is not peripheral, "rather it is directly related to the lack in the interior of the *ergon*" (2006: 117). Drawing on Cheetham, *parergon* and *ergon* are interchangeable for Shaw. Like the video installation in Lord Henry's *roman à clef*, and the high technology replicas of the 'real' Dorian and his 'other', Lady Di, the picture in Wilde's novel constitutes both the core, or *ergon*, and the *parerga* of the story. They are essential to formulate the endless otherness of the hero, yet they remain liminal to the story proper. Following the paradoxical logic of the baroque, Self's novel is overwhelmed and overwhelming owing to its redundant structure and its allegorical story.

The Dorian whom Lord Henry devises is an *alter ego* both of the 'real', Blairite Dorian and of Wilde's hero. Like his inter- and intra-textual 'others', Wotton's Dorian lives in a world of excess that inevitably affects us as readers and witnesses. On entering the Wottons' Chelsea home, we necessarily feel confused, at a loss:

It was impossible to tell whether it was day or night-time. Not only was there this crucial ambiguity, but the seasons and even the years were indeterminate. Was it this century or that one? was she wearing this skirt or that suit? Did he take that drug or this drink? Was his preference for that cunt or this arsehole? (Self 2003: 3)

⁵ The *roman à clef* is already a liminal phenomenon, swinging between fiction and its 'real' referent.

Lord Henry is still the Pygmalion who ushers the hero into aestheticism and decadentism, though late-Victorian affectation has turned into overt gayness. From the moment Dorian poses for Baz, he undergoes a frenetic process of corruption whereby the gothic tone of Wilde's novel turns gory and overwhelmingly explicit. It is not only that most of the characters are overtly gay. The novel tries (and, in my view, manages) to dissect bodies to the scrutinising eyes of the prospective readers/viewers, following what for Buci-Glucksmann constitutes "the main axiom of baroque aesthetics: 'To be is to see'" (in Ganteau 2000: 29). *Dorian: An Imitation* is extremely visual, to the same extent as a video game. This is especially so when the narrator recounts the filthy underworld peopled by the hero and his peers. Lord Henry tells Dorian: "You are a mere corpuscle, travelling along these arteries, whereas I have a surgeon's perspective. I float above it all, and I see Hyde Park as but a green gangrenous fistula in London's grey corpse" (Self 2003: 26).⁶ Likewise, as the narrator confirms, London's brilliant surface cannot "cover up this malodorousness, the swamp that lies beneath the pleasure gardens, and the miasma percolating up through the run-down ornamental terraces" (2003: 62). Dorian's descent to Hell is so vividly described that it necessarily implicates the reader:

He reclined beside a half-open sash window on a bank of organic detritus. Filthy clothes, rotting banana skins, used syringes, stale crusts of bread. Dorian had known that there was squalor like this in London, but he never conceived of himself as part of it... This infective moraine upon which he lay was, Dorian realised, truly sordid... They all felt it—Dorian, Herman, Ginger—the giant plunger of darkness pushing down the weeping sides of the space over their heads, the pressure boiling their blood, then popping their skins, so that their puréed bodies mingled with the grime and muck and the shit to concoct an ultimate fix: the filthy past injected into the vein of the present to create a deathly future. (2003: 48-49)

The neo-baroque saturation of matter and filth appeals to our senses and, through them, to our conscience. Scenes of rapid sex and drug-taking (like the one quoted above) recur, transmitting a sense of motion and affective unsettlement to the reader. The technique and effect are analogous to those of recent neo-baroque films like Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge* (2001) and Guy Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes* (2009), to name just a couple. By adapting the baroque *chiaroscuro* to the hyper-realistic imagery of computers, these films accomplish a characteristic turn-of-the-millennium aesthetics. Despite (or precisely because of) their excessive explicitness, vividness and gory details, Luhrman's Paris and Lord Henry's and Ritchie's Londons turn out to be convincingly (un)realistic. All of them emulate the working of the *trompe l'oeil*. The optical effect of this technique, provoked by an excess of realism, has been developed to unimaginable limits by computer technology. Never before have the boundaries between ontological realms been more easily blurred. In fact, it is increasingly difficult to dissociate the virtual imagery from 'reality', as Self's novel proves. As the novel comes to an end, the 'real' Dorian seems unable to detach himself from his *alter ego* as conceived in Lord

⁶ The organic rendering of Dorian's London as a pestilent body is nothing new. Other cities, like Venice in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, are also personified as decrepit corpses able to propagate death.

Henry's fictional work. This excess of realism is paradoxically accomplished through a set of mirrors reflecting *en abyme* the experience of the different intertextual, intra- or extra-diegetic Dorians. This process of window-opening which *trompe l'oeil* painting and computers alike have exploited escapes its own dimension and grasps the viewer or reader. This constant shift of perspective, in the form of windows or pages, updates the concept of baroque movement.

The relation between the classic concepts of stasis and movement is renegotiated in *Dorian: An Imitation*. The novel's overall effect is one of movement, though it continues to rely on still images. Warhol's Marilyn series, Madonna's computerised videos or Lady Di's tabloid shots prove the efficiency of the process: the reiteration of stasis produces a strange sense of movement. This is the way motion pictures work. Yet, against the truth-effect that most classic films allegedly targeted, neo-baroque texts, like Self's, do not aim at truth, at least not in a conventional way. It is my contention that, rather than at portraying truth *per se*, the combination of violence, sexual explicitness and a pleasurable narration of AIDS in the hectic eighties aims at moving the reader. It is in this sense that I consider *Dorian: An Imitation* a novel of affects. The leitmotif, "live fast, die young, and you will leave a good-looking corpse",⁷ fits the protagonist and his 'real' *alter ego*, namely Lady Di. If both Dorian and the Princess mirror each other and project their images outside the text or the screen, we, as readers, become deflectors of the whole process. Both figures represent "the [mutable] spirit of the age" (Self 2003: 243), fabricating themselves into visual products in order to be consumed, either in a BBC interview (2003: 239) or in the video installation of a conceptual artist. In spite of their emblematic character, their age seems to have had "too much of him [and her]" (2003: 243), and they must die: the princess "because her name was Di" (2003: 274), and Dorian because it is intertextually necessary. Symbolically, the hero witnesses her death "on the central monitor [of *Cathode Narcissus*]" (2003: 274) when he is going to die for the second time. If video killed the radio star, new technologies are killing their own products almost as quickly as they create them. The live broadcast of her death while entering "the underpass on the *périphérique* hotly pursued by paparazzi" (2003: 274) engages the reader or spectator with a postmodernist feeling of immediacy and movement. Likewise, Dorian ends his days dodging one of his victims in an agonising persecution.

In *Dorian: An Imitation*, lines are metaphoric and distorted into sinuous curves, as *Cathode Narcissus* shows. Baz's piece of conceptual art is made up of nine screens or *parerga* which frame Dorian's own contours and high-camp posing. Working like "reflective surfaces" (2003: 15), the screens constitute a symbolic line that separates the piece of art from the outside. For Derrida, framing is a fundamental aspect of re-representation whereby we can understand the interiority of the work (in Marriner 2002: 354). Without this mutual implication (of the intrinsic and the extrinsic), Derrida goes on, "the object of art/the aesthetic does not come into being" (Marriner 2002: 355). The narcissistic character of Baz's video installation and the whole novel make

⁷ This is a sentence spoken by Nick Romano, the hero in Willard Motely's *Knock on Any Door* (1947), which became a film two years later with John Derek playing Romano's part and Humphrey Bogart as Romano's lawyer, Andrew Morton.

Derrida's framing of meaning particularly complex; more so, if we take into account the implications that narcissism has (had) for gayness. Dorian's high-camp posing is unequivocally gay, theatrical and excessive according to our cultural standards. Opposed to the depth, stasis and straightness of the hetero-normative, Dorian's catholic ego and *alter egos* are superficial, mobile and curvilinear. The reflection of the hero on the screen, split into dancing Narcissi, reveals an unfeasible and fractured identity. Moreover, as happens in Wilde's novel, Dorian soon catches a glimpse of his terrible metamorphosis. The perfect lines that originally inspired and made up the symmetry of Baz's masterpiece are distorted: "Dorian saw it: the faces on the screen had all changed—and for the worse... He grimaced and drew closer... Closer and closer he drew, until all he could see were lines of dots leading into the future" (Self 2003: 70). Our eye is guided beyond by Dorian, reducing the illusion of a beautiful male body to mere lines, and its cells into dots of light.

Both Ndalianis and Ganteau make reference to Deleuze's *Pli Infini*, or Infinite Fold. Closely connected to Derrida's *parerga* and the way they are multiply folded, as happens in *trompe l'oeil* motives, "the infinite fold is designed to create the illusion that ... it can leave the surface of the painting freed from all material constraints" (Ganteau 2000: 32). Coming from Leibnitz, Deleuze's concept can be applied to literature, as Ganteau demonstrates in his analysis of Peter Ackroyd's *English Music*. It is my contention that in *Dorian: An Imitation*, the infinite fold is both metaphorical and physical, a static and mobile curve. Thus, characters are connected to each other through "congas of buggery" in a spiral of all-embracing pleasure and death (Self 2003: 95).

Drawing on Gottfried Leibnitz' and Gilles Deleuze's theories, Ndalianis renders an acute description of the production and reception of neo-baroque art:

One serial turns into another, and into yet another still: one illusion leads to an alternate path outside the "text", then finds its way back to affect interpretation; or one medium connects fully to another, relying on the complex interconnectedness of the system as a whole... The series of folds construct a convoluted labyrinth that the audience is temptingly invited to explore. Yet the baroque and neo-baroque differ in a significant way: Digital technology ... has created more literal labyrinths for players to traverse. Highlighting a crisis in traditional forms of symptomatic interpretation, the multilinear nature of game spaces suggests that our modes of interpretation need to reflect an equally neo-baroque multiplicity. (2004: 27)

Although we are not players, as readers we are invited to unfold Dorian's labyrinth, or should we say Henry Wotton's? In any case, we must confront the polyhedric nature of the text and the heroes' bodies, the way an illusion turns into another, and how this wavering effect necessarily affects ourselves as it affects our perception of the 'reality' we inhabit.

The 'lines' or fibres of Dorian's body swing between the beautiful and the sublime. His symmetry echoes that of Greek *kouroi*, though its whole effect goes beyond harmony. The curve of his back is, for Wotton, "like the spine of some antediluvian creature, browsing in the sexual swamp. His haunches quivered as he bowed down, rose, bowed down, as if abasing himself before a phallic idol, an idol which panted and groaned and eventually cried out under the pressure of such adulation" (Self 2003: 159). Dorian's body and its multiple reflections recall different linear patterns other than

baroque: namely William Hogarth's (1997) 'line of beauty', Aubrey Beardsley's curve (Denisoff 2002: 80), and the lines of the postmodernist sublime as represented, according to Shaw (2006: 120-23), in Barnett Baruch Newman's paintings.

I will finally focus on Newman's painting and his use of lines,⁸ as approached by Philip Shaw. This will necessarily lead us to Jean-François Lyotard's notion of the *postmodern sublime* and, indirectly, to AIDS. As Shaw points out, though apparently simple, the impact of Newman's "large, asymmetrical blocks of colour divided by rectilinear lines, or zips, ... on the viewer is mesmerising" (2006: 121). The brushstrokes "draw the eye into the canvas, to the point where it is impossible to distinguish between object and subject: the inside of the painting, the *ergon*, and the outside, or *parergon*, in which it occurs". For Newman, the effect of this warping of time and space is profoundly spiritual. As he writes in his influential essay 'The Sublime Now' (1948), the intention is to "reassert ... man's natural desire for the exalted, for a concern with our relationship to the absolute emotions" (Shaw 2006: 121).

What is here at stake is how contemporary literature in general, and Self's novel in particular, uses different devices and tropes, like lines or intertextual references, to render the sublime and thus interpellate our emotions. Against (or rather supplementing) Kantian aesthetic theories, critics like Derrida and Lyotard and artists like Newman (and other abstract expressionists) still consider the sublime as a notion worth discussing. Although lacking its former transcendentalism, the sublime forces disruption, leading "critical thought to a crisis [through] its resistance to rationalist appropriation" (Shaw 2006: 129-30). In Shaw's view (2006: 122), the blocks of colour split by zips in Newman's paintings produce a bizarre feeling of extinction and nothingness. In contrast to the beautiful, which, for Lyotard, relies on "the unity of experience" (1984: 72), on producing "data that can be grasped by sensibility and that are intelligible to understanding" (1984: 124), the postmodern sublime resists a closed conceptualization, as far as it "can only take place ... at the price of suspending the active powers of the mind" (1984: 124). Therefore, the question is whether *Dorian: An Imitation* makes us feel something akin to what, in Shaw's view, Newman's paintings do. In other words, do the novel's overflowed frames of meaning and their metaphoric lines place us on the edge of otherness, making us revise the astonishment fostered by the sublime? Are we compelled by its moving lines as we are reading the text?

3.3 *The excess of AIDS*

The sublime allegedly transports our bodies and moves our minds and conscience to the limit, i.e. to a disturbing astonishment that cancels reason. However, opposed to the classic concept of transcendence, the postmodern sublime is rather demythologising. The feeling of astonishment enmeshed in the face of AIDS and of its victims points to a sense of undecidability which, paradoxically, demands articulation. This takes us to

⁸ It may seem contradictory to use Newman—one of the forerunners of minimalism—in an article on the neo-baroque. Yet, his artistic production proves to be particularly useful to describe the postmodern sublime.

Lyotard's masterpiece, where he points out: "In the differend, something asks to be put into phrases and suffers from the wrong of not being able to be put into phrases right away" (1988: 13). For Lyotard, this state of undecidability, whereby we are surpassed by our inability to supply a concept for an unspeakable event is 'ideally' represented by the Holocaust (1988: 88). In *Dorian: An Imitation*, the Holocaust is replaced by AIDS. Although literature can still astonish, it can no longer aim at transcending its textuality. That is, despite the many frames *Dorian: An Imitation* may overflow, it cannot escape its textuality, and thus any reference to the transcendental constitutes an ephemeral delusion. Its characters will always escape our reach, for they multiply *ad infinitum*, like Lyotard's *analoga*. Who is the 'real' Dorian? The one Wotton devises? Or the one living the Blairite dream? Who is the 'real' Lady Di? And, to what extent does she or her imagery interact with the hero(es)? What do artefacts such as the picture, the video installation or Wotton's *roman à clef* make reference to? Are they metaphors? Of what? Of beauty, death, the sublime, the crisis of representation, or of our interaction with the other? All these open questions only corroborate the complex and ironic character of contemporary transcendence.

The intangible texts and images evoked in the novel refer paradoxically to an excess of corporeality. Dorian himself is a metamorphic beast whom, owing to his excessive physicality, Wotton regards as "the true retrovirus" (Self 2003: 108). The swing between sexual omnivorousness (2003: 98) and insubstantiality (2003: 112) works like Marilyn Monroe's imagery in Warhol's series, simultaneously disembodied and sexually reified. When we find out that the Dorian we have been reading about is part of another character's imagination, we confront anew the logic of the sublime. The hero's capacity to multiply fold ontological layers turns into a fake transcendentalism, a mere textual game. Only as far as we believe Wotton's metafiction can we grasp a glimpse of the sublime. It is only through the process of reading that we have access to the different Dorians' fragmentation and replication.

The outburst of AIDS revived the poetics of the sublime, as Self's novel proves. Although published when gays—like the 'real' Dorian—had gained some rights during Blair's first term and the disease was becoming for many a matter of the past, Wotton's *roman à clef* returns to the nineteen-eighties. The character's intradiegetic narration is particularly eager to describe the terrifying effect of the disease on youths, whose "radiator-grille ribcages and concentration-camp eyes telegraphed ... the front line with Death" (Self 2003: 78), and whose "faces were studded with Kaposi's sarcoma" (2003: 78). Wotton's apocalyptic discourse defies the blockage of representation that this type of traumatic episode usually brings about, more insofar as he is also infected by the virus, both as a diegetic character and narrator and also as an intradiegetic character. The narrator's visual rendering of the physical impact of the disease stands out against his failing sight, as he suffers from "severe viral conjunctivitis ... [and] post-operative cararacts" (2003: 183). It is, he argues, "as if a veil of beauty has been thrown over the world—because, let's face it, the closer you get to someone the uglier they become"

(2003: 183). Wotton's discourse recalls Derek Jarman's latest films which, in turn, evoke Newman's (and Yves Klein's) sublime paintings.⁹

Like Newman's paintings, Jarman's last film *Blue* (1993) shows no recognizable images. It consists "of an uninterrupted aquamarine screen ... revolving around Jarman's experience of AIDS, ... an ascetic denial of visual pleasure" (Moor 2000: 49). The monochromatic screen of *Blue* "comments primarily upon the loss of sight which he suffered as a result of his own illness" (2000: 50). Despite the "free-floating immateriality" of the film, for Moor, "the melding of matter and spirit forms the basis of Jarman's romantic quest" (2000: 52), as it does in *Dorian: An Imitation*. *Blue*'s monochrome both renders and rejects the materiality of AIDS. Instead of rotten bodies, Jarman resorts to a semiotic void that "is still a signifier, and its cultural connotations of spirituality or infinity propel the film towards the sublime" (Moor 2000: 63). However, like Self's novel, other works by Jarman surpass this spiritual sublime to render the bodily effects of the disease on its (gay) victims. There may be a void of monochromatic nothingness in what the characters and readers or spectators see, or how they see themselves reflected; even that nothingness may be particularly effective to represent "the cellular Auschwitz of AIDS" (Self 2003: 252). Yet, there must be a more corporeal response to AIDS. *Dorian* is insubstantial, but excessively physical. Likewise, Jarman's *Queer* exhibition of paintings in 1992 is predominantly red, aggressive and explicit, "connoting carnality and rage, and provocatively suggesting the body's fluids and the disease of the flesh, ... a stark antithesis to the cool of Blue" (Moor 2000: 64). Both Self and Jarman conflate spirit and matter, the sublime and the corporeal, so as to render testimony of the otherwise unspeakable, and thus astonish the spectator.

4. Conclusion

Dorian: An Imitation constitutes a masterful example of the aeon of the baroque in late-postmodernism. Instead of the safety, stasis and depth of classicism, the novel definitely prefers the distorted discourse and imagery of neo-baroque. It scrutinizes contemporary society, particularly its most neglected and dark corners, in search of new ways of rendering 'reality'. Like the seventeenth century, the turn of the millennium is a moment of transition which, therefore, needs new formulas to represent a new *status quo*. However, this process is especially problematic in our time, when an overall ontological crisis makes it difficult, or virtually impossible, to represent what lies outside the text. As the novel focuses on the gay underworld of the nineteen-eighties, the crisis of representation derived from the outburst of AIDS constitutes a fundamental issue.

Dorian: An Imitation updates baroque devices and tropes, particularly excess and movement, in order to affect the reader. Through intertextual references, visual narratives, frames and metaphoric lines, we are propelled to the realm of the sublime.

⁹ Moor points to Yves Klein (1928-1962) as a referent for Jarman's monochromatic last films (2000: 63). In spite of the religiosity implicit in his paintings, Klein's monochromes are comparable to those by Newman.

However, this push to the unbounded is not akin to the sublime in Burke's Empiricism or classic German Idealism, but is controlled by and de-secularised out of the logic of late postmodernism. Although readers are purportedly affected by the sense of movement and excess of the frantic narration of Wotton and the extradiegetic voice of the epilogue, we are never led to transcendence. The novel is blocked within the limits of the *ergon* and its surrounding *parerga*. The ultimate *aporia* of *Dorian: An Imitation* is however that its *ergon* is a void, which only has meaning through multiple references and within the artistic paraphernalia of *parerga*. The story of Wotton's Dorian is deferred to that of Wilde's Dorian and that of Blair's Dorian. Likewise, these characters are reduced to the lines of their delusive beauty, as represented in interconnected artefacts and metaphors, namely *Cathode Narcissus*, a decadent portrait, and Lady Di's avalanche of shots. This web of never-ending references produces a sense of frenzy akin to that produced by action films and video games. This neo-baroque vertigo necessarily moves readers, confronting them with their own role, as well as with "the neglected and other", particularly that implicit in the act of reading itself.

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