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Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment (review)

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Angela Ndaljian explores the interrelated spectacle of today's films, theme parks, computer games, and other amusements in terms of an overarching "neo-baroque" aesthetic. She draws elaborate comparisons between the seventeenth-century baroque and the current age. In particular, she emphasizes similarities in the ways in which new technologies and new sciences drive the spectacle. Wonder is excited by means of technical effects made possible through developing, intertwining media. In both the baroque and neo-baroque aesthetic, the spectator is called to participate in a labyrinthine world whose possibilities are only half-charted, and where the technical and the "spiritual" assume a similar aspect.

Neo-Baroque Aesthetics is one of a series of MIT media studies published under the title *Media in Transition*. As such, it is intended for an audience comfortable with the idiom of literary criticism and aesthetics theory. It is very thin on both its analysis of technology and its historical depth. As bothersome as this is, however, the factual shortfall is not crucial to the message here. For example, Ndaljian's discussion of the development of animation techniques is less informative than the DVD short *The Making of Jurassic Park*, but her interest is in how this short made the technology behind the spectacle visible, a spectacle of virtuosity in and of itself. Although there are glaring misstatements of fact with regard to Galileo's condemnation, it is more important for Ndaljian that the many works of wonder and speculation that followed Galileo's original telescopic discoveries can be understood as popular and scholarly expressions of the "aesthetics of rare experiences." This is an ambitious work, and it can be quite thought-provoking when taken on its own terms.

In a book that leads its readers through polyvalent meanings, multicursal models, polycentric narratives, multidirectional mappings, and multiple genres, *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics* can only be described as "polychronic." Ndaljian applies history as a kind of parallel universe

through which she intends to provide a "clearer understanding of the significance of cultural objects and their function during our own times." An already-developed analysis of baroque aesthetics provides a perspective for understanding the current "neo-baroque" age. For example, Cervantes's *Don Quixote* "is the fragmented, schizophrenic, postmodern subject," an old reader in times of new printed media, new technologies, and the new commerce associated with both of these. The intertextual references of the picaresque tale told by Cervantes can be compared to the intertexts of modern Western entertainment as characters travel through adventures from **[End Page 657]** comic books to computer games and movies, often encountering variations of stock characters.

The optical tricks of the baroque *trompe l'oeil* employed scientific technique to engage the viewer in the "labyrinthicity" of the composition's multidirectional movement, just as the technical virtuosity behind a computer game like *The Evil Dead* gives players personalized access to potent cultural figures in a labyrinth of possible virtual episodes. For both the baroque sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini and the film mogul Steven Spielberg, special effects created through technical virtuosity with mixed media are meant to stimulate the senses and evoke a magical, even spiritual presence. In both ages, the development and coordination of technical effects enable artists to produce a broader range of emotional affect in viewers. Ndalianis offers thick description and loving analysis of current entertainments that exemplify baroque characteristics, and points readers toward the differences between contemporary and seventeenth-century cultural expectations.

Historians of science long ago discarded Thomas Kuhn's notion of a cultural "aesthetic" that might embrace and actually redirect scientific endeavor. *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics* reopens this issue, even if it does not entirely answer the historian's concerns. Ndalianis outlines a "logic of the neo-baroque aesthetic" and locates the connections that hold together this aesthetic. Without ever distinguishing between "high tech," "official science," and the manifestations of these as popular amusements, she

gives serious attention to the notion that this aesthetic logic creeps into all forms of representation—both for knowledge and amusement. The work begs the question of...

Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment.

By Angela Ndalianis. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2004.

Pp. xiv+323. \$34.95.

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