

## Digital metaphors and the baroque

### Description

I've at last caught up with the philosopher-historian Giambattista Vico's (1668-1744) unusual work the *New Science*, as an e-book, purchased, downloaded and read on an iPad while travelling from Sopron in northern Hungary to the UK by train, a baroque odyssey of sorts.



obsessions about race and lineage, forced etymologies, and, in addition, three valuable insights emerge from the *New Science*.

1. Whereas Descartes required the rational thinker to strip

away all custom and tradition and return to first principles, Vico emphasized the importance of history. We are unavoidably products of our customs and histories, which determine how we think, even for supposedly objective analysts. This was a radical view in its day.

2. Societies are not to be understood as collections of *individuals*. We are each already social. Understanding and interpretation are social. Knowledge is related to the context in which understanding develops, ie our social and cultural conditions, not the supposedly independent reasoning of clear-sighted individuals.

3. In so far as there is any origin at all to language, it all started with poetry and metaphor. Colourful and imaginative language is not ornamentation applied to straight-forward, literal expression, but language begins with tropes, embellishments and figurative speech. This tendency in language towards metaphor is obvious in the impulse among children to explain the unknown in terms of the known: that the sky is no higher than a rooftop; that you can talk to inanimate objects. As for children, so for societies, that resort readily to metaphors derived from the human body and its parts. Those metaphors then become the way the universe is.

By its nature, the human mind is indeterminate; hence, when man is sunk in ignorance, he makes himself the measure of the universe.

The Baroque is not just the age when architecture and music became curvy and ornamented, but a time that countenanced myths of giants, hermetic sects, alchemy, memory theatres, and cabinets of curiosities, as well as belief in irrefutable geometrical and mathematical proof. Vico comes in the wake of Descartes (1596-1650), Leibniz (1646-1716) and Newton



Rehabilitation of the baroque is a favoured project for Gilles

Deleuze and Michel Foucault, and theorist Hayden White deploys Vico's division of history into the ages of metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony. Marshall McLuhan, media theorist and in many respects the founder of a theory of digital media, references Vico. It's easy to see Vico's influence in McLuhan's totalizing claims for the power of a metaphor, especially the metaphor of the "global village."

In the electronic age we wear all mankind as our skin. (p.47)

It seems that digital communications and electronics not only offer the potential to unite societies, but (following Vico) provide the master metaphors by which sociability is identified and defined. According to Vico

most expressions for inanimate objects employ metaphors derived from the human body and its parts, or from human senses and emotions.

For when man understands, he extends his mind to comprehend things; but when he does not understand, he makes them out of himself and, by transforming himself, becomes them.

## References

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### Category

1. Metaphor

### Tags

1. Baroque
2. language
3. metaphor
4. Vico

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