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Two-dimensional versus three-dimensional pictorial organization

I.

There are many ways of depicting a three dimensional scene in two dimensions. Some of these will look odd or ugly, some others may look better. The problem of arranging a three dimensional scene on a two dimensional surface is the problem of pictorial organization.¹ There are many reasons why we should pay more attention to Heinrich Wölfflin's work on the centenary of the publication of his seminal work, the *Principles of Art History* (or, in a more accurate translation, *The Fundamental Concepts of Art History*), but what I take to be the most important of these is that no-one did more than Wölfflin for allowing us to talk sensibly about pictorial organization – a topic strangely missing from contemporary analytic aesthetics.²

Wölfflin famously gave us five pairs of concepts, which he called the fundamental concepts of art history, to make it easier to talk about pictorial organization: Linear vs. Painterly, Plane vs. Recession, Closed vs. Open form, Multiplicity vs. Unity and Absolute vs. Relative clarity.³ Here is a brief characterization of these pairs of concepts:⁴

(a) Linear vs. Painterly:

Linear: “the sense and beauty of things is first sought in the outline”⁵

Painterly: “the primary element of the impression is things seen as patches”⁶

(b) Planimetric vs. Recessive:

Planimetric “reduces the parts of a total form to a sequence of planes”⁷

Recessive “emphasises depth”⁸

(c) Tectonic vs. A-tectonic (or, closed vs. open form):

Tectonic: “the picture is dominated in all its parts by the opposition of vertical and horizontal”⁹ and “pictorial elements are grouped round a central axis or, if this does not exist, so as to produce a perfect balance of the two halves of the picture”¹⁰

A-tectonic: “aversion from stabilisation about a middle axis”¹¹

¹ I leave aside the question of the pictorial organization of abstract pictures, where there is no three dimensional scene to arrange. It should become clear in Section III how the pictorial organization of abstract pictures fits into my account.

² The most important exception is Richard Wollheim, *On Pictorial Organization*. (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002).

³ All quotes are from Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, (New York: Dover, 1950). I follow the terminology of M. D. Hottinger's translation in spite of its somewhat old-fashioned phrases. I correct his translation only where necessary (ie, where his translation is misleading or just plain wrong).

⁴ Wölfflin applied these categories in the case of paintings, sculptures and architecture. Given the present paper's topic, I will only consider these categories as applied to pictures.

⁵ Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, p. 18.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 15

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

(d) Multiplicity vs. Unity:

Multiplicity: “the single parts, however firmly they may be rooted in the whole, maintain certain independence”¹²

Unity: “abolishes the uniform independence of the parts in favour of a more unified total motive”¹³

(e) Absolute vs. Relative clarity (or, clearness vs. unclearness):

Absolute clarity: “exhaustive revelation of form”¹⁴

Relative clarity: “pictorial appearance no longer coincides with the maximum of objective clearness, but evades it”¹⁵

This conceptual apparatus, and Wölfflin’s oeuvre in general, has been heavily criticized in the last hundred years.¹⁶ My aim here is not to defend Wölfflin from these critical remarks but rather to expand the conceptual apparatus he offers us for understanding pictorial organization in a way that is hopefully less problematic than his original five pairs of concepts.

II.

Probably the most widespread reason for mistrusting Wölfflin’s ‘fundamental concepts’ is the way Wölfflin applied these concepts to the differences between 16th and 17th Century style. Wölfflin’s aim was to elucidate the differences between the way pictures are composed in the 16th and 17th Century, say, Dürer’s and Rembrandt’s paintings. He does this by describing 16th Century pictures as Linear, Planimetric, Tectonic and characterized by Multiplicity and Absolute clarity. 17th Century pictures, in contrast, are Painterly, Recessive, A-tectonic and exhibit Unity and Relative clarity.

Wölfflin seems to have two goals with this conceptual apparatus: to provide an abstract characterization of pictorial organization that could, in principle, be applied to all pictures, made anywhere and in any historical period.¹⁷ But he also wanted to give an abstract account of the difference between the pictures of the 16th and 17th Century. These two goals are not always easy to reconcile as evidenced by Wölfflin’s suspiciously frequently repeated warning that what he is doing is to give abstract categories, not a description of two specific art historic eras. This ambiguity is especially salient in Wölfflin’s treatment of 15th Century art (or, the ‘primitives’, as he calls it), which he often describes as not falling under any of his ‘fundamental concepts’, which, of course, makes one wonder how ‘fundamental’ these concepts really are.

The most charitable interpretation of Wölfflin’s categories from the point of view of understanding pictorial organization, which is my project here, is to interpret the ‘fundamental categories’ to be genuinely fundamental, that is, applicable to all art historical eras, including the

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid, p. 15.

¹³ Ibid, p. 159.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 196.

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ For various reasons: for his formalism, for his political outlook, for his Hegelian vision of art history, for ignoring Mannerism, for his ‘vision itself has a history’ claim, and so on. Some of these points of criticism are undoubtedly valid.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 26, where he says he seeks to identify the “most general forms of representation”.

‘primitives’.¹⁸ But this way of resolving the ambiguity of Wölfflin’s account opens it up to yet another important worry, namely that he projected late-19th and early-20th Century formal categories back to much earlier periods – concepts that 16th or 17th Century artists and observers were not aware of. In this sense, Wölfflin’s analysis is anachronistic.¹⁹

It has also been questioned how the five pairs of concepts overlap: while Wölfflin’s official account is that linear, closed form, plane, absolute clarity and multiplicity are aligned, it is possible that they come apart. For example, a painting can be both tectonic and painterly.²⁰ It is not clear to me whether this is a problematic aspect of Wölfflin’s account – definitely not if we think of these concepts as applicable to any picture of any period.²¹

Another often voiced worry is that these concepts are too abstract: they had no chance of capturing the differences between 16th and 17th Century style because they are too coarse-grained. If we want to talk about the pictorial organization of a particular style, let alone of particular artworks, we would need much more fine-grained categories.

Finally, one may wonder why there are five (and not four or six) pairs of concepts. In fact, it has been argued that the fourth and the fifth pair (Multiplicity vs. Unity and Absolute vs. Relative clarity) are redundant and the real work is done by the first three pairs of concepts.²² More generally, one may want to know more about what makes just these five pairs of concept the ‘fundamental’ concepts of art history.

These two last worries need to be addressed if we want to use Wölfflin’s account as a starting point for thinking about pictorial organization. His fundamental concepts are too coarse-grained and they are singled out in a somewhat unmotivated manner. The aim of this paper is not to defend Wölfflin but to use the original Wölfflinian insights to give an account of not just five pairs

¹⁸ This way of thinking about the fundamental categories is closer to Wölfflin’s vision of art history in his *Renaissance and Baroque*, where there is more continuity between the ‘primitives’ and the art of the 16th Century. This is also the interpretation of Wölfflin’s categories in Lambert Wiesing, *Die Sichtbarkeit des Bildes* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1997) and in Jason Gaiger, ‘The analysis of pictorial style’, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 42 (2002), pp. 20-36.

¹⁹ See, for example, Paul Taylor’s various writings, (e.g., *Composition in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art Theory*, in P. Taylor and F. Quiviger (eds.): *Pictorial Composition from Medieval to Modern Art*. London and Turin: Warburg Institute, 2000, pp. 146-171), where he argues that the concept of composition was not used before the 19th Century, at least not in the sense Wölfflin uses it, and Jeroen Stumpel, ‘On Grounds and Backgrounds: Some Remarks about Composition in Renaissance Painting’, *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, 18, no. 4 (1988), pp. 219-243, which sets out to replace Wölfflin’s ahistorical formal concepts with historically grounded ones.

²⁰ See Michael Newall, ‘Painterly and Planar: Wölfflinian analysis beyond Classical and Baroque’ (this issue)

²¹ See Whitney Davis: *A General Theory of Visual Culture*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011) and Whitney Davis: Succession and recursion in Heinrich Wölfflin’s *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (this issue)

²² See Meinold Lurz, *Heinrich Wölfflin: Biographie einer Kunsttheories* (Worms: Werner’sche Verlagsgesellschaft, 1981) and Andreas Eckl, ‘Zum Problem der kategorialen Funktion von Wölfflins “Kunstgeschichtlichen Grundbegriffen”’ *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und Allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* 38 (1993), pp. 29-52. Jason Gaiger approves of this way of thinking about Wölfflin’s categories in Gaiger, ‘The analysis of pictorial style’.

of categories but an entire hierarchy of categories for talking about pictorial organization. This may not be as radical a departure from Wölfflin's original project as it seems: Wölfflin himself emphasized repeatedly that what he calls 'painterly' or 'tectonic' are not to be considered to be monolithic categories: 'painterly' in the Low Countries is very different from 'painterly' in Italy, for example. He was also quick to acknowledge that even in different decades of the 17th Century, 'painterly' underwent very significant changes. So it could be argued that Wölfflin himself was keen to set up a hierarchy of concepts for each of his ten fundamental concepts: Early Italian painterly vs. Late Dutch painterly, for example, are very different.

Nothing particularly radical so far – we need to contextualize the general and abstract Wölfflinian categories in order to put them to good use. The radical move comes now. I will argue that we should extend Wölfflin's conceptual apparatus not only towards the more fine-grained direction, but also towards the more coarse grained one. In other words, while we clearly need to add narrower and more contextualized categories to the original ones, we also need to add broader, even more abstract and even more general categories. Given that one main worry about Wölfflin's account is that his concepts are too abstract, adding categories that are even more abstract may seem crazy. But I will argue that this move can help us to deal with worries about the perceived randomness of Wölfflin's original categories and with the unresolved issues about the relation between them. Even this move may not be entirely against the spirit of Wölfflin's project: he talks about the five pairs of fundamental concepts as “different roots of one plant and as “one and the same thing, but seen from a different standpoint”.²³ My aim is to explicate what this 'one plant' is.

So I propose a hierarchy of concepts - Wölfflin's original concepts focussed on one level of this hierarchy only (and a fairly abstract and general level). We should extend it both downwards and, more surprisingly, upwards. I suspect that some will find this way of coming up with even more fundamental concepts of art history than Wölfflin himself too ambitious. But as long as we have such a hierarchy of concepts in place, one can, according to one's theoretical preferences, use whichever level in this hierarchy seems the most useful for particular pictorial analysis. The aim of this paper is to describe this more general pair of concepts, which I will call two-dimensional and three-dimensional pictorial organization.

III.

I want to differentiate between two very different ways of organizing pictorial elements at a very abstract level:

- (2D) two-dimensionally: pictorial elements are organized and grouped according to their outline shape on the picture surface and
- (3D) three-dimensionally: pictorial elements are organized and grouped according to their position in the depicted space.

It is important that both two-dimensional and three-dimensional pictorial organization are about arranging a three-dimensional scene on the two-dimensional surface. The difference between them concerns how the three dimensional elements are organized to give us a two-dimensional composition. So the distinction has nothing to do with the invention of linear perspective. A picture

²³ *Principles*, p. 109.

can use linear perspective and still be composed in a two-dimensional manner – in fact, this is true for most late 15th Century Italian paintings.²⁴

Suppose you need to depict seven identical spheres. On the most general level, there are two ways of doing this: you can arrange the seven spheres in space and then choose a vantage point in this space from which you want to depict them. Or you can arrange seven circles (the outline shapes of the seven spheres) on the two-dimensional surface of the picture. The former method is an instance of three-dimensional pictorial organization, whereas the latter one is an instance of two-dimensional pictorial organization.

One can completely ignore the two-dimensional pictorial organization of the picture and focus entirely on the three-dimensional one – this is the way most of us take snapshots at parties. Or one can ignore the three-dimensional pictorial organization and focus entirely on the two-dimensional one – children’s drawings often have this kind of pictorial organization.

But most often one pays attention to both – in fact, when taking a snapshot at a party, we often try to fit everyone into the frame and we also often try to not have someone’s face completely occluded by someone else’s hair. What makes the distinction between two-dimensional and three-dimensional pictorial organization especially interesting is that even in those cases where both of these ways of composing a picture are taken into consideration, as it is most often the case, one tends to dominate – in case there is a conflict between the two-dimensional and three-dimensional pictorial organization, one of them tends to win out systematically.

An oversimplified way of applying this distinction to the history of pictures in Western Europe would be to say that while (2D) was dominant until the 16th Century, from the 16th Century onward, the challenge was how to combine (2D) and (3D). Interestingly, this transition happened much later in non-Western European art – in Mughal paintings, Russian icons or Japanese prints.

It is important to emphasize that I am not endorsing the claim that the differences in the style of the 16th and the 17th Century could be described, even partially, as the difference between two-dimensional and three-dimensional pictorial organization. Rather, the 16th Century tended to resolve conflicts between (2D) and (3D) in favor of (2D), whereas the 17th Century tended to resolve conflicts between (2D) and (3D) in favor of (3D). But even this is a very vague approximation – I don’t think that the differences between the pictorial organization of the 16th and the 17th Century can be fully accounted for in these terms.

IV.

I outlined two concepts that could be considered to be the ‘even more fundamental concepts of art history’: two-dimensional and three-dimensional pictorial organization. They are supposed to

²⁴ What I call three dimensional pictorial organization should not be confused with Berenson’s concept of ‘space composition’ either. Berenson defines space composition as the “sense of space not as a void, as something merely negative, such as we customarily have, but on the contrary, as something very positive and definite able to confirm our consciousness of being, to heighten our feeling of vitality” (Bernhard Berenson, *Italian Painters of the Renaissance* (London: Phaidon, 1897/1968), p. 88) and goes on to argue that it is intimately tied to religious experience (ibid, pp. 89-90) – not exactly a very Wölfflinian angle... A closer approximation for (2D) is the way Alois Riegl described – rightly or wrongly – the pictorial organization of ancient art, see Alois Riegl, *The Late Roman Art Industry*. (Rome: Giorgio Bretschneider Editore, 1901/1985), esp. p. 24.

provide a higher level pair of concepts in the hierarchy of the Wölfflinian conceptual apparatus. But then the question arises: what is the relation between Wölfflin's actual categories and the new categories I introduced? Does the painterly or the a-tectonic logically imply or necessitate three-dimensional pictorial organization? Does three-dimensional pictorial organization imply or necessitate painterly or a-tectonic style?

I want to argue that there is no logical entailment either way. There are many ways of achieving three-dimensional pictorial organization and painterly or a-tectonic style are among these. As Wölfflin says, the five pairs of fundamental concepts are "different roots of one plant" and they are really "one and the same thing, but seen from a different standpoint" (p. 109). Linear, Tectonic and Planilinear are the roots of the plant of (2D) pictorial organization then. And, to stretch this metaphor even further, the plant can stand even if some of its roots are missing. In other words, (2D) pictorial organization does make Linear, Tectonic or Planilinear style more likely, but it doesn't necessitate any of them. Let us go through the five pairs of original Wölfflinian concepts and examine how they are related to the distinction between (2D) and (3D) pictorial organization.²⁵

One of Wölfflin's most informative characterization of the Tectonic vs. A-tectonic style already points in the direction of the (2D) vs. (3D) distinction: "In the tectonic style, the content is made to fit into the already given space, in the a-tectonic the relationship between space and filling is apparently adventitious".²⁶ While Wölfflin does not make it explicit what kind of space it is that content is made to fit into, it should be clear that it is the two dimensional space of the picture surface from the following quote: "It was natural to [the tectonic style] to take its direction, in filling its picture, from the given surface"²⁷. This sounds very much like the defining feature of (2D) pictorial organization. More generally, the verticals, horizontals and the central axis, which are the main compositional ingredients of tectonic style are features of the picture surface. To organize a picture according to its verticals and horizontals or to organize it around a (real or implied) central axis is to compose it in a (2D) manner.

In the discussion of the last pair of concepts, of Absolute and Relative clarity, Wölfflin says that "life does not arrange its scenes in such a way that we can see everything and that the content of what is happening determines the grouping".²⁸ The implication is that pictures that are composed in a way that maximize absolute clarity (that is, 16th Century pictures) do arrange their scenes in such a way that we can see everything. Wölfflin's memorable example is the depiction of hands in 16th Century and 17th Century pictures: in Leonardo's *Last Supper*, Wölfflin's main example of 16th Century pictorial organization, 26 out of the 26 hands of the 13 depicted characters are visible. In the *Staalmeesters* by Rembrandt, again, Wölfflin's main representative for 17th Century pictorial organization, only 5 out of the 12 hands of the 6 depicted characters are visible. But showing all the

²⁵ Is it possible for a picture to have (2D) pictorial organization and yet to be painterly, a-tectonic, recessive and have unity and absolute clarity? I very much doubt it. I said that (2D) pictorial organization can be achieved without one or another of the five corresponding Wölfflinian categories. But it is very unlikely to be achieved without all of them. To stretch Wölfflin's root analogy even further, the tree needs at least some roots to stand.

²⁶ *Principles*, p. 131. The first half of the sentence is my own translation, different from the published English translation. The German original is "Im tektonischen Stil nimmt die Füllung Bezug auf den gegebenen Raum".

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 125.

²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 208 – I changed the translation, which got the second half of the sentence wrong.

hands of all the depicted characters is something that only makes sense if we follow (2D) pictorial organization: to make sure that all 26 hands fit into the frame and are not occluded by something else (see the next section for more on occlusion). Absolute clarity makes much more sense in a (2D) than in a (3D) framework.

The same goes for the other three pairs of categories: lines are primarily elements that belong to the two dimensional surface, whereas patches and areas of light and darkness are primarily elements of the three dimensional depicted space.²⁹ Planimetric compositions are defined by a sequence of planes that are parallel to the picture surface – again, a stereotypically (2D) way of organizing the picture’s content (but, again, the organized content is very much three-dimensional). And, finally, holistic Unity, which is contrasted with Multiplicity, is very difficult to achieve if one sticks to (2D) pictorial organization. And Multiplicity is probably even more difficult to maintain if one follows a (3D) pictorial organization.

I can’t give full justice to the interesting conceptual connections between Wölfflin’s categories and the (2D) vs. (3D) pictorial organization distinction. And this connection is further complicated by the fact that, as we have seen above, it is not clear whether Wölfflin’s categories are supposed to capture the 16th and 17th Century pictorial style or something more general. In my framework, both (2D) and (3D) pictorial organization are present in both the 16th and the 17th Century and the challenge is to reconcile these two very different ways of composing pictures. And the difference between the 16th and the 17th Century is the way these two different methods of pictorial organization are reconciled or combined: the 16th Century subjugates (3D) to (2D), whereas the 17th Century reverses this order. But it is important to emphasize that (2D) pictorial organization is not to be equated with the 16th Century and (3D) pictorial organization is not to be equated with the 17th Century. Given that Wölfflin oscillates between thinking of concepts like Linear, Tectonic or Planimetric as typical of 16th Century and as thinking of them as fully general, a similar reinterpretation of the original Wölfflinian categories may be needed in order to fully align the (2D) vs. (3D) distinction with the Wölfflinian categories.

To sum up the argument in this section, the Wölfflinian categories are various different ways of achieving (2D) and (3D) pictorial organization, which could be labeled as the ‘even more fundamental concepts of art history’. And the five Wölfflinian categories achieve (2D) and (3D) pictorial organization in very different ways. But this leaves open the question about whether there are others ways of achieving (2D) and (3D) pictorial organization. And I don’t see why there couldn’t be. I will devote the next section to another way of doing so, which would give rise to another pair of concepts that could be added to the Wölfflinian toolkit.

V.

I argued for a hierarchy of concepts to supplement Wölfflin’s five pairs of ‘fundamental categories’: we should extend these categories downwards, towards the more fine-grained direction. And we should also extend them upwards, towards the more abstract direction. But if we accept that there is an even higher level of describing the five pairs of Wölfflinian categories in terms of (2D) and (3D) pictorial organization, then nothing should stop us from adding different ways in which the (2D) and (3D) pictorial organization could be achieved.

²⁹ See Paul Klee, *Pedagogisches Skizzenbuch* (Munich: Langen, 1925) for an interesting take on this relationship.

This should not strike anyone as a sacrilege: In *Renaissance and Baroque*, published in 1888, 27 years before the *Principles of Art History*, Wölfflin gave only three characteristic features of the Baroque era: ‘areas of light and shade’, ‘the dissolution of the regular’ and ‘elusiveness’³⁰. These three features are the predecessors of the five pairs of fundamental categories in the later work. A very general gloss about the relation between the three aspects in 1888 and the five categories in 1915 is that ‘areas of light and shade’ became ‘Painterly’, ‘elusiveness’ became ‘Relative clarity’ and ‘the dissolution of the regular’ was split in the other three concepts: Recession, Open form and Unity (as Wölfflin talks about all these three in *Renaissance and Baroque* under the heading of ‘the dissolution of the regular’).³¹ If we can add even more categories, this would give us an even richer hierarchy of the fundamental concepts of art history.

My aim in this section is to add a sixth pair of ‘fundamental categories’ to the existing five (a pair that has its roots in Wölfflin’s earlier writings). It is occlusion versus no occlusion.

In the case of three-dimensional pictorial organization, we should expect lots of occlusion: if pictorial elements are organized and grouped according to their position in the depicted space, nothing should prevent some of these pictorial elements occluding one another. In the case of two-dimensional pictorial organization, in contrast, we should expect the relative lack of occlusion: if pictorial elements are organized and grouped according to their outline shape on the picture surface, the possibility of occlusion is something that artist needs to explicitly consider – and this, at least in the history of Western painting (especially up until the 16th Century), mostly meant something the artist explicitly wanted to avoid.³²

Wölfflin himself took occlusion to mark a very important distinction between the art of the 16th and the 17th Century in his first book the 1888 *Renaissance and Baroque*, where he writes:

It is characteristic of ‘painterly disorder’ that individual objects should be not fully and clearly represented, but partially hidden. The overlapping of one object by another is one of the most important devices for the achievement of painterliness, for it is recognized that the eye quickly tires of anything in a painting that can be fully grasped at first glance. But if some parts of the composition remain hidden and one object overlaps another, the beholder is stimulated to imagine what he cannot see. The objects that are partly hidden seem as if they might at any moment emerge; the picture becomes alive.³³

³⁰ Heinrich Wölfflin, *Renaissance and Baroque* (London: Collins, 1888/1964), p. 32.

³¹ *Ibid*, pp. 32-33. Not that this makes any attempt to reduce the 4th and 5th Wölfflinian pairs of categories to the first three (see footnote 17) extremely suspicious.

³² One may wonder whether applying this pair of concept would be anachronistic (in the same way as Wölfflin’s categories are often accused of being anachronistic. The short answer is that I don’t think so. Take one of the most crucial concepts in 17th Century Dutch art writing, that of ‘houding’. Willem Goeree writes in 1668 that ‘houding’ means “placing each thing, without confusion, separate and well apart from the objects which are next to and around it” (*Inleyding tot d’Algemeene Teykenkonst*, p. 129) – this sounds very much like the avoidance of occlusion. See also Paul Taylor, The concept of houding in Dutch art theory, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 55 (1992): 210-232.

³³ *Ibid*, p. 33

He contrasts this use of occlusion with the earlier style, where, while occlusion couldn't always be avoided, special effort was made to make sure that "all the essential features stood out clearly".³⁴ And even in *Classic Art*, published in 1899, Wölfflin took occlusion to be something the 16th Century was trying to minimize. When analyzing Raphael's *Sistine Madonna*, he writes:

At the bottom of the picture, two child angels represent ordinary nature, as a foil to the superhuman. Has it been observed that the larger of them has but one wing? Raphael avoided the overlapping of a second wing for he did not want too massive an effect at the base, a license which is all of a piece with others of the classic style.³⁵

In *Renaissance and Baroque*, Wölfflin considered occlusion to be so important that he took it to be the mark of one of three key features of painterly style, namely, 'elusiveness'. So we would need to find more on occlusion in the discussion of Absolute vs. Relative clarity in the *Principles*, but there is hardly more than a sentence in passing.³⁶

An interesting question is why Wölfflin abandoned the lack of occlusion as an important feature of the 17th Century and a defining feature of Relative clarity, especially as the relation to how occlusion is treated clearly changed around the end of the 16th Century – exactly when Absolute clarity was supposed to give way to Relative clarity in Wölfflin's system. One nice illustration of this is the comparison between different versions of the same composition of Brueghel's *The Census at Bethlehem*, one painted in 1566 by Pieter the Elder and the other painted in 1610 by Pieter the Younger. There are very few differences between the two paintings (which hang side by side in the museum in Brussels), but all of them seem to be dictated by a move towards more occlusion.

My explanation for why Wölfflin abandoned the occlusion/lack of occlusion distinction in the *Principles* is that this pair of concepts makes the ambiguity in Wölfflin's general project, noted at the very beginning of this article, more salient than the other categories. Remember, Wölfflin pursues a double goal: to describe the fundamental categories of pictorial organization without specific reference to historical eras and to provide a close characterization of the differences between 16th and 17th Century style. While, as we have seen with the Brueghel example, the emphasis on occlusion and the lack thereof could help us to keep apart the 16th and the 17th Century, it behaves very differently when applied outside this range. Importantly, the lack of occlusion is especially prevalent in the 15th Century. So the emphasis on occlusion and the lack thereof fits much better with the big picture view of art history Wölfflin offers in *Renaissance and Baroque*, where there is a continuity between the 15th and the 16th Century, whereas in the *Principles*, the 15th Century style is considered to be very different from, and at places even inferior to, 16th Century style. If the lack of occlusion is the most typical of the 15th Century, then it couldn't be considered to be the defining feature of one of the major concepts that characterizes the 16th Century.

It is important to emphasize that, like the five original Wölfflinian categories, occlusion and the lack thereof are not necessitated by (2D) and (3D) pictorial organization either. Some 15th Century Flemish painters started playing with occlusion long before we can talk about the primacy of three-dimensional pictorial organization. Nothing about two-dimensional pictorial organization

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Heinrich Wölfflin, *Classic Art*. (London: Phaidon Press, 1899/1952), p. 135

³⁶ On p. 206. There is also some (brief) discussion of occlusion in the plane versus recession chapter (understandably as recession is sometimes difficult to achieve without occlusion).

necessitates the lack of occlusion – after all, one can make a point of arranging outline shapes on a surface in a way that they occlude one another. But (2D) pictorial organization implies only that occlusion is something that artist needs to explicitly consider, which doesn't necessarily mean avoiding it. When Van der Weyden in his *The Seven Sacraments* (Leuven) depicts only the nose and chin of a face, with the rest of the face occluded behind a wall, he very much composes in two dimensions, but he does so not by explicitly avoiding occlusion, but by explicitly using it. The same goes for the depiction of crowd scenes where pre-16th Century painters routinely used occlusion to indicate a crowd of nondescript people.

But if we use the general way of applying the distinction between (2D) and (3D) pictorial organization in the context of 16th and 17th century pictures, we can make sense of the role of occlusion in the 16th Century in a more interesting and informative manner. As we have seen, the 16th Century did not use exclusively (2D) pictorial organization: it combined (2D) and (3D) methods in a way that gave priority to (2D) pictorial organization. And a similar big picture art historical narrative could be given about occlusion and the lack thereof. In the 15th Century (especially in the first half), occlusion was avoided at (almost) all costs. But as the 16th Century was trying to combine (2D) pictorial organization (characterized by the lack of occlusion) and (3D) pictorial organization (characterized by occlusion), the lack of occlusion is much less salient here. But it is still much more salient than in the 17th Century.

And the usefulness of this new, sixth distinction can also be seen when applied outside the scope of the 16th/17th Century. Corot avoids occlusion. So does Canaletto, but not Guardi. The use of occlusion also very much depends on genre and even on context – Bosch's hells have significantly more occlusion than his heavens, for example. This distinction, like Wölfflin's five original ones, is also applicable to photography and film – some contemporary film directors, for example, go out of their way to avoid occlusion.³⁷

VI.

I argued that as long as we make a distinction between (2D) and (3D) pictorial organization, we can add further pairs of categories to Wölfflin's five. I illustrated this with the occlusion/lack of occlusion category, but I do not mean to suggest that this is the only one.

Here is another possible candidate, which also has its roots in Wölfflin's own writings: avoiding or seeking out empty regions on the canvas. One important aspect of (2D) pictorial organization is that one needs to pay attention to whether there are empty regions on the canvas. This, at least in the 14th and 15th Century typically meant seeing to it that no largish regions of the canvas is left empty – painters went out of their way to fill empty spaces with various decorative items. Wölfflin himself observes this very briefly (and, somewhat surprisingly, in the discussion of the Planilinear category, which, strictly speaking, it is independent of).³⁸

Is it a good idea to multiply the 'fundamental concepts' of art history? I think it is. One could think of the five original Wölfflinian pairs of fundamental concepts as mapping out a five dimensional space, where the dimensions would correspond to the five pairs of 'fundamental

³⁷ See David Bordwell, *Wölfflin and Film Style: Some Thoughts on a Poetics of Pictures* (this issue) on how the same directors (e.g., Wes Anderson) also tend to use planimetric style, which is another mark of (2D) pictorial organization.

³⁸ Wölfflin: *Principles*, p. 90.

concepts' and where we can understand something important about each picture in the light of where it is placed in this five dimensional space. If we add further 'fundamental concepts', we get a six- or seven-dimensional space and thus we can learn even more about these pictures. And, again, not just pictures made in Wölfflin's preferred period of the 16th and 17th Century, but any pictures made anywhere, any time.³⁹

³⁹ I am grateful for comments by Dan Cavedon-Taylor, Hans-Christian Hönes, Jeremy Melius, Sam Rose, Maarten Steenhagen and Paul Taylor. I gave talks based on this material at the University of Kent, University of Budapest and University of Tübingen and I am grateful for the comments I received from the audience.