Franz Boas and the primacy of form

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There is systematic epistemic asymmetry between different centers of art production: we know far more about some (e.g. fifteenth-century Italian paintings) than about others (e.g. fifteenth-century Inca textiles). As long as we are focusing on the social context of the artworks or the artist's intention, this epistemic asymmetry remains, given that we have vastly more information about the social context of the artworks or the artist's intention when it comes to 'Western' art—again, because of the historically contingent differences in record-keeping and the survival rate of such records. If we want to overcome the epistemic asymmetry between 'Western' and 'Non-Western' art, we need to look elsewhere. I will argue, using Franz Boas's work, that we should look for formal features. In order to avoid the epistemic asymmetry that follows from the historically contingent fact that we have more information about some cultures than about others, we need to start our analysis with formal categories.

1. Epistemic Asymmetry in Art History

One of the most important works of twentieth-century art history is Michael Baxandall's *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy* (Baxandall 1972). Baxandall extensively researched various texts from fifteenth-century Italy about how observers at that time looked at pictures. His conclusion is that the visual skills of fifteenth-century Italian observers were very different from ours (they included, for example, the visual skill of volume estimation as well as of recognizing various dance moves) and, as a result, their experiences were also different. He argued, extremely convincingly, that in order to appreciate a wide variety of aesthetically relevant features of fifteenth-century Italian paintings, we need to take these visual skills—as well as the ways they are different from our current visual skills—into consideration.

Now contrast fifteenth-century Italian paintings with fifteenth-century Inca textiles. We have very little information not only about the visual skills the Incas used when looking at these works, but often also about what they depict and why they do so. It is something of a historical coincidence that in some parts of Europe some people were obsessed with leaving written records about all kinds of topics, including how we look at paintings. And it is also a historical coincidence that in some parts of Europe these records have survived wars, pillaging, fire, and so on. The Incas had an extremely sophisticated writing system, but it seems that they did not use it to write treatises about textiles and about how we should look at them. Or, if they did, these records did not survive.

These two examples are intended to highlight the epistemic asymmetry between our access to information about most periods in European art and our access to information about most instances of non-European art. There could be no Baxandalls of Inca art

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because there are no written records that they could base their arguments on. But then art history, or at least some forms of practicing art history, has a significant and systematic epistemic bias.[1]

This applies especially clearly to the social history of art, which treats the arts as threads in a rich social fabric and uses information about this rich social fabric in order to understand some aspects of the artworks. This can be done fairly well when it comes to examining various aspects of, for example, Monet's Argenteuil paintings, where there are rich records about the price of hiring those boats Monet painted, the social demographics of the people who rented these boats, people who traveled to Argenteuil from Paris by train, the railway fare and frequencies of these trains as well as the factory expansions in the vicinity of Argenteuil and the tonnage of waste dumped in the river near Argenteuil (Tucker 1982; see also Dolan 2015 and Grigsby 2015 for some examples of this approach concerning Manet's *Olympia*). And so on. Needless to say, it would be much more difficult to write a social history of art about Saharan rock art.

One reason why 'Western' art still dominates the art historical discourse (and the pages of art history journals) is exactly this epistemic asymmetry. The question I want to examine in this paper is about the possibility of overcoming this epistemic asymmetry.

As long as we are focusing on the social context of the artworks or the artist's intention, this epistemic asymmetry remains, given that we have vastly more information about the social context of the artworks or the artist's intention when it comes to 'Western' art—again, because of the historically contingent differences in record-keeping and the survival rate of such records. If we want to overcome the epistemic asymmetry between 'Western' and 'Non-Western' art, we need to look elsewhere. I will argue, using Franz Boas's work, that we should look for formal features.

This movie is not exactly popular either in art history or in aesthetics. One recurring theme in the last half century of aesthetics is that we should take the social context of the artworks and the artist's intention very seriously. And we should turn away from the f-word of aesthetics: formalism. My claim is that if we do this, aesthetics will systematically favor 'Western' over 'Non-Western' art. The alternative is not to turn to radical formalism and ignore all social context or the artist's intention. Rather, the claim is that we should start with form as the first step of our exploration—thus, the title of this paper about the primacy of form.

In order to use the analysis of formal features to examine the art of communities where not a lot of records survived, we need a very general concept of formal features and one that is aesthetically relevant in all communities. And we can find help in this endeavor in the work and arguments of the anthropologist Franz Boas.

1 I should stress that this example of fifteenth-century Italian versus fifteenth-century Inca art is deliberately extreme. It needs to be acknowledged that we have a fair amount of information about some non-Western aesthetic traditions, especially the ones in Japan, China, and India.

2. Franz Boas

Franz Boas (1858–1942) was one of the founding fathers (or maybe *the* founding father) of cultural anthropology. But as he is not particularly well-known in philosophy and, in spite of his extremely detailed writings about art, in aesthetics, I will briefly introduce his ideas and contributions to the study of the arts, the mind, and anthropology.

If Boas is known in philosophy, he is known as an early critic of the concept of race and of racial differences. At the time he started his career, it had been universally accepted that there are significant racial differences, both physical and psychological. After Boas had left his native Germany and became a professor at Columbia University, he did some work for the US Government on the physical characteristics of the European immigrant populations arriving in the US at that time. This was an extremely large-scale study that he took on mainly in order to fund the anthropological fieldwork of himself and his students (see King 2019 for a detailed description of this study and its background). But to the great surprise of the US Government, what he found was that there are very little variations between these populations to begin with, and these completely disappear in no more than one generation. Today we would say that he found empirical evidence that nurture screens off nature.

But Boas's main interest was not physical characteristics, like the shape of someone's face, but cultural traits, like weaving patterns and forms of reasoning. And, on the analogy of his findings about immigrants, as well as on the basis of long years spent in remote corners of the Pacific Northwest Coast, he came to be convinced that there is no hierarchy between different civilizations. Note that this happened at a time when positing hierarchy between civilizations and arguing for the superiority of the European one was an extremely well-established and academically entrenched move.

Boas's way of arguing against the superiority of European civilisation is extremely original, and it has been vindicated by recent psychological research. Rather than arguing that non-Europeans are as rational and as good at abstract reasoning as Europeans, he questions this alleged asymmetry from the other direction and points out that Europeans are not at all rational and they only very rarely go in for abstract reasoning. So he restores the similarity between Europeans and non-Europeans not by likening non-Europeans to European norms, but by arguing that these alleged European norms are illusory. Recent psychological research on the deeply irrational nature of the human mind confirms this strategy (see Kahneman 2011 for a summary of the extremely diverse evidence for this claim).

Boas's most important work was about the art and culture of the people of the Pacific Northwest Coast (Boas 1927/1951). His method is empirical: he does not come with a priori hypotheses that he then tests; he lets the material and the long years of observation yield the hypotheses. The epistemic asymmetry I started the paper with was constantly on Boas's mind as he was trying to understand centers of art production where information about the past was not readily available, and even information about contemporary practices was sometimes contradictory. Importantly, some of Boas's ideas and arguments can be used to tackle this problem.

3. Aesthetically Relevant Features Without Epistemic Asymmetry

What we would need in order to have a solid starting point in understanding artworks where we have little or no information about the social context or the artist's intention is a set of aesthetically relevant features that we can treat as ones that were aesthetically significant in all aesthetic communities. In other words, we need features that all artworks have—regardless of where and when they were made—and that were also aesthetically significant.

For simplicity, I will focus on pictures in what follows. By pictures, I mean two-dimensional depictions of three-dimensional scenes. This is not intended to be a definition—there are surely pictures that depict two-dimensional scenes—but rather a simplified concept that we have some instances of in the vast majority of cultures. Maybe not tempera on wood or oil on canvas, but scars on one's skin or marks on a piece of stone or earthenware. Again, I am talking about pictures for the sake of simplicity, but the point can be generalized to other art forms. So, what features do all pictures have that are aesthetically significant in all cultures?

Some warm-up examples. Size is a feature that all pictures have: either this big or that big. But size is not aesthetically significant in all cultures. Similarly, material composition is a feature that all pictures have: either made of this material or made of that material. But material composition is not aesthetically significant in all cultures either. To drive home the point, here is a somewhat silly example of a feature that all pictures have: the number of apples it depicts. Most pictures depict no apples. Some depict one, some two, and so on. And, again, while this is a feature all pictures have, it is clearly not aesthetically significant in all cultures.

Here we can turn to Boas for help. Boas argues that there are two fundamentally different ways of representing a three-dimensional scene on a two-dimensional surface (or, as we would now say, two fundamentally different forms of pictorial organization—on the concept of pictorial organization, see Taylor and Quiviger 2000, Wollheim 2002 and Nanay 2015). As Boas says, 'it may be considered as essential that all the characteristic features be shown, or the object may be drawn as it appears at any given moment' (Boas 1927/1951: 71).

In the first way of representing a three-dimensional scene on a two-dimensional surface, 'those features are represented that are considered as permanent and essential and … there is no attempt on the part of the draftsman to confine himself to a reproduction of what he actually sees at a given moment' (Boas 1927/1951: 73). In contrast, the second way represents 'the momentary visual impression regardless of the presence or absence of characteristic symbols' (Boas 1927/1951: 75).

Boas calls the first way 'symbolic' and the second 'perspectival,' which are somewhat confusing labels given the use of these terms by other twentieth-century art historians. For now, let's just call them Method A and Method B (some more meaningful labels will come in Section 4). To put it very simply, in Method A, essential features need to be represented; in Method B, they do not. It is the momentary look that needs to be represented.

Crucially, Boas argues that the choice between these two ways of representing a three-dimensional scene on a two-dimensional surface is aesthetically significant and it is also something all makers of pictures face:

> As soon as man is confronted with the problem of representing a three-dimensional object on a two-dimensional surface and showing in a single, permanent position an object that changes its visual appearance from time to time, he must make a choice between these two methods.
> (Boas 1927/1951: 72)

In other words, the way of representing a three-dimensional scene on a two-dimensional surface is both a feature all pictures have and one that is aesthetically significant in all cultures. And Boas argues convincingly that different 'Non-Western' cultures systematically go in for either Method A or Method B. Boas's main example of Method A is the art of the Pacific Northwest Coast, where there is very little resemblance between, say, an actual beaver and the canonical representation of a beaver. But he also emphasizes that Method B is not a 'Western' monopoly, and it is very much present in a variety of 'non-Western' pictures (Boas 1927/1951: 76–78).

To put it very simply, the dichotomy between Method A and Method B of representing a three-dimensional scene on a two-dimensional surface is something that does not require any kind of prior knowledge of the social context and the artist's intention. We can ask about which method a culture uses by merely examining a large number of pictures made in this culture. This way we can overcome the epistemic asymmetry I started this paper with.

Boas's distinction between Method A and Method B may remind some of Ernst Gombrich's historical narrative of the art of representing proceeding from something like Method A to something like Method B in a kind of more or less linear progression, toward what he would call a greater degree of realism (Gombrich 1959/1972). It is important that Boas explicitly warns against calling Method B more realistic than Method A (Boas 1927/1951: 72) and, even more importantly, he argues powerfully against any kind of historical progression from Method A to Method B (Boas 1927/1951: 79–80).

4. Generalizing Boas's Distinction

Boas made a distinction between the two methods of representing a three-dimensional scene on a two-dimensional surface and argued that the choice between them is an aesthetic choice all picture-makers, regardless of where and when they lived, needed to face. While this line of reasoning is extremely helpful in overcoming the epistemic asymmetry between our access to the art of different cultures, the distinction itself may not be as clear as it could be.

Boas's distinction between what I labeled as Method A and Method B is somewhat obscured by another distinction that he makes between artistic practices that disregard the details but are faithful to the whole, and artistic practices that do the opposite: disregard the whole, but are faithful to the details (Boas 1927/1951: 69–71). Examples of the former would include Filipino wood carvings, the art of the Cyclades, and African masks: the details, of, say, the eyes or the mouth are disregarded, but the whole face is a more or less faithful depiction of a human face. Boas's examples of the latter are Egyptian paintings and Haida art (and more generally, the art of the Pacific Northwest Coast). It is easy to see that

this distinction is not the same as the one between Method A and Method B (although many of Boas's examples of Method A would map onto the latter method here). Nonetheless, Boas considers this to be a more specific version of the Method A versus Method B distinction.

To avoid confusion, it is worth elaborating on, or generalizing, Boas's distinction between Method A and Method B. On a very abstract level, there are two different and distinctive modes of pictorial organization, which I call 'surface-first pictorial organization' and 'scene-first pictorial organization' (Nanay 2015).[2]

> **Surface-first pictorial organization**: pictorial elements are organized and grouped according to their outline shape on the picture surface, and
> **Scene-first pictorial organization**: pictorial elements are organized and grouped according to their position in the depicted space.

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 scene-first pictorial organization, whereas the latter one is an instance of surface-first pictorial organization.

One can completely ignore the surface-first pictorial organization of the picture and focus entirely on the scene-first pictorial organization—this is the way most of us take snapshots at parties. Or one can ignore the scene-first pictorial organization and focus entirely on the surface-first pictorial organization—children's drawings often have this kind of pictorial organization.

But most often, one pays attention to both. For example, when taking a snapshot at a party, we often try to fit everyone into the frame and we also often try not to have someone's face completely occluded by someone else's hair. In short, we pay attention to the surface-first pictorial organization. But 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 surface-first and scene-first pictorial organization, one of them tends to win out systematically (a point that echoes Boas's way of drawing the distinction between Method A and Method B; see Boas 1927/1951: 78).

The distinction between scene-first pictorial organization and surface-first pictorial organization is not a distinction about how pictures are made. It is about what the spectator is supposed to attend to. Some pictures are organized in a way that they evoke attention to their surface-first pictorial organization. Some other pictures demand attention to their scene-first pictorial organization.

It is important that both surface-first pictorial organization and scene-first pictorial organization are about arranging a three-dimensional scene on a 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

2 The labels used in Nanay (2015) are two-dimensional and three-dimensional pictorial organization, respectively. These labels may have been more confusing than helpful.

perspective. A picture can use linear perspective and still have surface-first pictorial organization—in fact, this is true for most late fifteenth-century Italian paintings.

How does this distinction between surface-first and scene-first pictorial organization map onto the dichotomy between Boas's Method A (where the emphasis is on essential features) and Method B (where the emphasis is on momentary look)? While acknowledging that the two distinctions are not fully coextensive, it is easy to see that emphasis on depicting all the essential features tends to favor surface-first pictorial organization as only surface-first pictorial organization would ensure maximum visibility of these essential features, which would be required for what Boas identifies as a central aim of depicting essential features—namely, recognition (Boas 1927/1951: 72). Conversely, emphasis on depicting the momentary look tends to favor scene-first pictorial organization. Just one example: only scene-first pictorial organization puts an emphasis on perceptual constancies and, as Boas explicitly says (Boas 1927/1951: 74), it is only the primacy of momentary look where perceptual constancies show up.

In short, the distinction between surface-first and scene-first pictorial organization could be considered to be a generalized version of Boas's distinction between Method A and Method B. Note that Boas's secondary distinction between faithfulness with regards to the whole versus faithfulness with regards to the parts, mentioned earlier in this section, crosscuts the surface-first versus scene-first pictorial organization distinction (and, as we have seen, it also crosscuts Boas's own distinction between Method A and Method B).

We have seen that Boas made a case for the necessity of choosing between his two methods of depiction when he said that 'As soon as man is confronted with the problem of representing a three-dimensional object on a two-dimensional surface and showing in a single, permanent position an object that changes its visual appearance from time to time, he must make a choice between these two methods.' (Boas 1927/1951: 72). But such necessity is even more salient when it comes to surface-first versus scene-first pictorial organization. As we have seen, an easy way to tease apart surface-first and scene-first pictorial organization is to ask what the viewer's attention is primarily directed at: the surface or the scene. Given that the experience of pictures is widely acknowledged to be a twofold experience (Wollheim 1980; Lopes 1996; Nanay 2018), where we are simultaneously perceptually representing both the picture surface and the depicted scene, and where we can move our attention back and forth between the surface and the scene, it does seem that the maker of any picture, regardless of where and when they created the picture, and for what purpose, would need to make a choice about which 'fold' they want to draw the viewer's attention to: to the surface or to the scene.[3] The distinction between surface-first and scene-first pictorial organization is a distinction that applies across cultures and ages.

3 Depending on one's understanding of the twofoldness of picture perception, this claim could be cashed out differently (and there are at least two different ways of understanding the twofoldness claim, both in Wollheim's oeuvre and in the literature more generally, especially if we take the non-Western concept into consideration). If twofoldness is a matter of twofold attention, then the question of surface-first and scene-first pictorial organization is that of primacy: what is it that is the *primary* target of attention? If, in contrast, twofoldness is a matter of twofold perceptual representations that are not necessarily both attended to, then the question is about which fold our attention is directed at. See Nanay (2005) on the differences between these two versions of the twofoldness claim.

5. Surface-first Versus Scene-first Pictorial Organization

In the light of the argument in the previous section, it is hardly surprising that pictorial organization in general, and something like the distinction between surface-first and scene-first pictorial organization in particular, is explicitly thought to be aesthetically significant in a wide variety of aesthetic cultures (Nanay forthcoming). One of the key concepts of Yoruba aesthetics (the aesthetic tradition of the people of Southwest Nigeria) is that of 'ifarahon,' which is often translated as 'visibility'—as the requirement that all parts of the depicted person are clearly formed and visible. While this concept initially applied to sculptures, it has also become the most important virtue photographers should aim for (where it would, for example, imply that both of the sitter's eyes should be visible; see Sprague 1978). Further, in the most detailed early work of Chinese aesthetics of painting, the sixth-century Chinese painter and critic Xie He outlined the six laws of painting. The fifth law is about placing and arranging on the surface the pictorial elements in space and depth (which became a central topic in all Chinese treatises on paintings from then on; see Saussy 1993). The third Khanda of *Vishnudharmottara Purana*, the extremely detailed encyclopedic Hindu text on painting, written about the same time, is also full of references to pictorial organization—who should be behind or next to or in front of whom (Kramrisch 1928). And pictorial organization has been a central topic of Japanese aesthetics as well.

The duality of surface-first and scene-first pictorial organization is also deeply entrenched in Western aesthetics. The first systematic discussion of pictorial organization in European art history is in Alberti's *De Pictura* (1435). This is also where the widely used term for pictorial organization—namely, the concept of composition—originates. Alberti's work contains a lengthy analysis of *compositio*: what we would now call pictorial organization (see Greenstein 1997). The compositio of pictures, according to Alberti, consists of organizing planes to members, members to bodies, bodies to pictures (or to historia). This organization of elements into higher units has its rules: for example, according to Alberti, a maximum of nine elements should be organized into the higher unit and there should be a certain degree of variety between the elements. Michael Baxandall compared Alberti's concept of pictorial compositio to the humanist concept of compositio in rhetoric (that Alberti, like any educated quattrocento Italian, would have been very much aware of): organizing words into phrases, phrases into clauses, clauses into sentences (Baxandall 1971).

What counts as compositio in Alberti's sense is a matter of the depicted scene (see below for some caveats). The basic unit of pictorial compositio is the surface of depicted objects (not the surface of the painting), not the pigment (that is, the mark on the surface), but rather something that is depicted. Thus, the equivalent of words, which serve as the basic units of rhetorical compositio is, in the case of pictorial compositio, part of the depicted scene. For Alberti, in other words, pictorial compositio is in the domain of what is depicted—the picture surface seems to play no essential role in pictorial compositio.

While Alberti's concept of compositio is clearly an example of scene-first pictorial organization, he did sometimes make some comments that could be taken to refer to surface-first pictorial organization. For example, he says that 'I blame those painters who, where they

wish to appear copious, leave nothing vacant. It is not composition but dissolute confusion which they disseminate' (Alberti 1435/1956, Book Two: 75–76). In short, already in Alberti we can find indications of the two central ways of thinking about pictorial organization: how to arrange the elements in the scene that is to be depicted and how to arrange them on the canvas. Not leaving any part of the picture vacant is a matter of the latter way of understanding pictorial organization. The humanist rhetoric-inspired organization of the depicted elements is a matter of the former way of understanding pictorial organization.

Whether surface or scene-first pictorial organization was dominant clearly changed in the course of the history of painting. And one can give a (often by necessity oversimplified) narrative about how the way surface- and scene-first pictorial organization was traded off characterized various art historical periods.

Probably the most famous such narrative was given by the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century formalist tradition, especially by Alois Riegl and Heinrich Wölfflin (a tradition that was a significant influence on Boas). I will focus on Wölfflin here (but see also Riegl 1901/1985). 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.[4]

Each of these pairs of 'fundamental concepts' could be thought of as special forms or maybe case studies of the surface-first pictorial organization versus scene-first pictorial organization distinction (see Nanay 2015 for a detailed argument for this claim). Surface-first pictorial organization, for example, tends to be linear, whereas scene-first pictorial organization tends to be painterly.

Here is a quick example about the last pair of concepts, of Absolute versus Relative clarity: 'exhaustive revelation of form' versus 'pictorial appearance [that] no longer coincides with the maximum of objective clearness, but evades it' (Wölfflin 1915/1950: 196). Wölfflin's starting point is 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' (Wölfflin 1915/1950: 208). But then pictures that are composed in a way that would maximize absolute clarity do arrange their scenes in such a way that we can see everything. Wölfflin's memorable example is the depiction of hands: in Da Vinci's *Last Supper*, twenty-six out of the twenty-six hands of the thirteen depicted characters are visible. In the *Staalmeesters* by Rembrandt, in contrast, only five out of the twelve hands of the six depicted characters are visible. But showing all the hands of all the depicted characters is something that only makes sense if we follow surface-first pictorial organization: to make sure that all twenty-six hands fit into the frame and are not occluded by something else. Absolute clarity is an aspect of surface-first pictorial organization, whereas relative clarity is an aspect of scene-first pictorial organization.

Wölfflin uses these distinctions in order to characterize the difference between pictorial organization in two very specific historical periods (namely sixteenth- and

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

seventeenth-century Western art). But more generally, different painters in different times (and in different parts of the world) used different ways of composing pictures. Some paid more attention to the surface. Others paid more attention to the scene.

We can trace other historical shifts as well. In the twentieth century, for example, we find more and more discussion of surface-first pictorial organization, no doubt because of the prominence of abstract painting, where scene-first pictorial organization is not applicable.

Many artists in the first half of the twentieth century thought of the most important aspect of pictorial organization as some form of a balance between two-dimensional pictorial elements. Laszlo Moholy-Nagy talks about the 'most delicate distribution of rays to the point of a perfect balance between the values of very small and very great tensions.' (Moholy-Nagy 1928, note 2). He uses the following evocative example: 'A small quantity of white is capable of keeping in balance by its activity large areas of the deepest black.' (Moholy-Nagy 1928, appendix). Or as Robert Adams wrote, composition is 'tension so exact that it is peace' (Adams 1977/2009: 8). The origin of these approaches is likely to be Paul Klee's extremely influential *Pedagogisches Skitzenbuch* (Klee 1925), which aims to teach the basic principles of modernist composition in very simple terms (and mainly appealing to the balance between abstract shapes on the canvas).

While most of my examples of the distinction between surface-first and scene-first pictorial organization have concerned paintings, it is important to emphasize that this distinction is applicable to all pictures, regardless of how they are made, and very much including photographs and films. In fact, much of the emphasis on surface-first pictorial organization in the twentieth century comes, maybe surprisingly, from film studies—or, more broadly, from thinking about cinema. This may be surprising as, on the face of it, cinema is all about scene-first pictorial organization: you need to arrange the (three-dimensional) actors in front of the camera. Nonetheless, the history of cinema is rife with claims about the importance of surface-first pictorial organization (see Ward 2003). Boris Kaufman—Dziga Vertov's brother, who was the director of photography of many classic Hollywood movies as well as all of Jean Vigo's films—talked about 'the space within the frame' and the way that it is used in the composition (his view was that this space within the frame should be used in its entirety, see de Laurot and Mekas 1955: 5). And the most important advice the French film director Robert Bresson gave to directors and cinematographers was to 'treat your film image as a surface to cover' (Bresson 1975/1977: 13).

It is not just the filmmakers who emphasize the importance of surface-first pictorial organization. Film theorists are equally vocal about this. The key concept of Noel Burch's analysis of composition is the frame and the way pictorial elements are organized inside, outside, or around the frame (Burch 1973). Andras Balint Kovacs, in his study of cinematic modernism, appeals to the distinction between continuous and discontinuous visual texture (where continuous texture means large homogeneous expanses and discontinuous texture means the lack thereof), which is entirely a feature of the way two-dimensional elements are organized on the surface (Kovacs 2007: 125; see also David Bordwell's analysis of the pictorial organization of the film image in Bordwell 2015.).

Finally, Sergei Eisenstein makes a similar distinction when he appropriates the theatrical term 'mise-en-scène' to describe something very much like scene-first pictorial organization in the case of film images and contrasts it with 'mise-en-cadre,' which would be the equivalent of surface-first pictorial organization. As he says, 'The "Mise-en-scene" is an interrelation of people in action, "mise-en-cadre" is the pictorial composition of shots' (Eisenstein 1934/1957: 15–16). By a 'shot' Eisenstein means 'a single piece of celluloid. A tiny rectangular frame in which there is, organized in some way, a piece of event' (Eisenstein 1934/1957: 36).

In short, we have found a pair of categories that are applicable to all pictures, regardless of where and when they were made and that do not presuppose any knowledge of the social context or the artist's intention, which would tilt the art historical narrative in the direction of 'Western' picture-making traditions.

6. Conclusion: The F-word of Aesthetics

I argued that in order to avoid the epistemic asymmetry that follows from the historically contingent fact that we have more information about some cultures than about others, we need to start our analysis with formal categories, like surface-first pictorial organization and scene-first pictorial organization.

The rhetoric I have been using throughout the paper is that we should start with formal categories—surface-first pictorial organization and scene-first pictorial organization are formal categories. This insistence on form is bound to sit uneasily in the aesthetic mainstream, which is strongly and explicitly anti-formalist. Hence, I want to close with a brief discussion about what version of formalism (if any) my insistence on the primacy of form amounts to.

The first thing to note is that while Boas himself insists that his modes of representing are about formal organization, they are not formal categories in the strong sense that classic formalists such as Clive Bell use the term (Bell 1928).[5] Pictorial organization is by definition about the relation between form and content, so it is not about pure form. But as it is about the relation between form and content, it is a semiformal category. In 2016, I introduced the sense of my concept of semiformalism, according to which a semiformal feature is one that depends constitutively on a formal property (Nanay 2016: 99). The relation between form and content depends constitutively on form. So it is a semiformal property. Pictorial organization is a semiformal property par excellence. In short, appeal to categories like surface-first pictorial organization and scene-first pictorial organization presupposes an extremely weak version of formalism: semiformalism.

Second, my claim is not that understanding the pictorial organization of an artwork exhausts our aesthetic understanding. I argued that starting with social context and the artist's intention distorts the geography of art, as it systematically over-represents cultures we know more about. Instead, we should start with a method that does not have epistemic asymmetry built into it. The emphasis on pictorial organization is one such method.

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5 It is important to note that Boas also devotes a lot of space to the analysis of fully formal features, such as symmetry, repetition, parallel lines, or empty surfaces; see Chapter 1 of Boas (1927/1951).

However, it is important to highlight that the emphasis on pictorial organization is only the first step in our analysis and understanding of artworks. On the basis of the examination of pictorial organization, we can be in a position to identify some pictorial elements that are bound to have some cultural significance. If we have additional information (about the social context or the artist's intention), we can plug those in at this point. My claim was merely that we should start with form, and then we add on the content.

Here is an example, deliberately from 'Western' art, as it helps us to appreciate how far formal analysis can get us even in the absence of a wealth of culture-specific information about the social context or the artist's intention. Annunciations depict Mary and the Archangel. Often the two characters are depicted on separate panels, but even when they are depicted in the same picture, they are invariably depicted at some distance from one another. Mary inside, the Archangel outside, for example. Or with some significant obstacle (or visual distraction, like an open window) in between. Now suppose that you have no idea about who these two figures are. You will nonetheless note this invariant formal feature of the many thousands of Annunciation paintings and can form hypotheses about why there is such distance. And, on the basis of this merely formal (or, to be more precise, semiformal) feature, we can come to the conclusion that these two figures must be inhabitants of very different spiritual domains, which is in fact the case: Mary is a human and the Archangel is an angel. Of course, if we have access to various treatises about the different variants of Annunciation depictions, such as Baxandall in the opening example of this paper, these hypotheses will be much richer.[6]

One might wonder how we can generalize this line of argument. First of all, I have been focusing on pictorial organization, which, on the face of it, misses a number of potentially aesthetically relevant properties. Color would be a prime candidate. Boas himself says relatively little about color in understanding the overall methods of picture-making. But the emphasis of this paper on scene-first and surface-first pictorial organization could go a little further.

Consider color constancy—one form of perceptual constancies. In everyday perception, two objects of the same size have retinal projections of very different sizes: the object that is further away takes up a smaller part of the retina. This is called size constancy. Further, the same shape, when viewed from a different angle, projects differently onto the retina (as a circle or an ellipse, for example). This is shape constancy. Finally, the same color, if illuminated differently, registers as different colors in the visual system. This is color constancy. Some picture-makers respect size/color/shape constancies. Some others do not. Paying attention to these perceptual constancies (either by deliberately respecting or deliberately disrespecting them) is, again, an indicator of surface-first pictorial organization.

Using the same general strategy in the non-visual arts is trickier, however, for example, in the cross-cultural experimental study of music, there are ongoing research programs that use a combination of formal properties in order to draw conclusions about aspects of

6 Another possible example of using formal properties to understand a complex feature of pictures that very much depends on the social context is their expressive character (see Rose 2019 for a thorough discussion of this line of reasoning).

the work that very much depend on social context. For example, in all cultures, healing songs have slower tempos and comparatively flat melodies, with pitches closer together, whereas love songs are faster in tempo and have comparatively less flat melodies (Mehr et al., 2019). This does not mean that all cultures are the same or even remotely similar in terms of their uses of formal properties. For example, it has been argued that tonality, which was historically the most promising candidate to be a cultural universal in music, is not, in fact, universal. Tsimanéé people, who live in the Amazonian rainforests, do not have a preference for tonal music (McDermott et al., 2016). Clearly a lot more research is needed here, but these results show that it is not too much of a stretch to extend the kind of formal analysis that this paper is about beyond the visual arts.

Finally, the general strategy of examining form first and only afterward turning to content (something Boas is quite explicit about in the way he structures his opus magnum; Boas 1927/1951) may raise some eyebrows as one of the most influential arguments against any variety of formalism is that it is impossible to specify form without reference to content (Wollheim 2001, see also Lopes 2005). Two remarks about this potential worry: first, if we are focusing on categories like surface-first and scene-first pictorial organization, these are in fact semiformal categories in the sense that they depend constitutively on formal categories. So they are formal categories that are already specified with reference to content. Second, and at this point we can turn to Boas again, sometimes form does precede content. Boas gives a series of examples where some formal features are learned and meaning is 'read in' (or, rather, read into) them only at a later point (Boas 1927/1951: 119–27). So a formal pattern has spread in a sparsely populated area with little communication between the local communities. And the different communities 'read' very different content into this formal pattern. As Boas says, 'the same form may be given different meanings' (Boas 1927/1951: 128). One evocative example Boas gives is about a needle case from Alaska (Boas 1927/1951: 124–26—other examples include reels, arrow shaft straighteners, and snow knives, also from Alaska). Needle cases are small tube-shaped objects, with a slight bulge in the middle. There are very little variations in geometric form in a fairly large geographical area. But this form is elaborated in terms of representative content very differently: in some communities as seal heads, in others as walrus heads. And sometimes as completely different animals.

In short, formal analysis is not the last word. Nor is it the entire story. I argued, following Boas, that it should be the first step if we want to avoid tilting the art historical narrative in the direction of 'Western' aesthetic traditions.[7]

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