

Chapter 9

Image Composition as an Aesthetic–Epistemological Problem in Wolff’s Empirical Psychology



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9.1 Introduction

Although it is not possible to say that Christian Wolff developed a proper and complete aesthetics, we can trace in his philosophy a discourse on art in a broad sense, as a “technical” activity of production. In fact, within our philosopher’s reflections on production, we find the principle of pleasure arising from knowledge about the conformity of an object with the rules of construction and from a judgement about creation (i.e. a judgement on the artist’s ability to obtain the desired effect, starting from the aims posed by him). Such a discourse, combining reflection on the emergence of pleasure, on art as technology (production) and on teleology, is made possible by considering *representation* as a productive activity and *imagining* not merely a present activity but as an anticipation of a future desired perfection.

In the present chapter first part, we take into consideration the Leibnizian presuppositions of Wolff’s psychological reflections, which are relevant to the way in which Wolff understands the active, productive and expressive nature of the soul as a representative force. In the second part, we show how our author uses reflections on artistic praxis (in particular painting and architecture) in order to think about the physiological and cognitive patterns that can explain the formation of representations. Supposing that the soul’s representative force produces *like* the artist does, Wolff characterizes the psychological *facultas fingendi* in terms of *artistic production*. Finally, in the third part, we show the psychological play between the representative and the appetitive faculties, as well as the role of the intuitive knowledge of perfection and the subjective desire for it, in aesthetic pleasure.

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9.2 Leibniz and the Theory of Expression

The increased interest in Christian Wolff's work has yielded some particularly good results in aesthetics, a field to which the German philosopher does not appear to have dedicated much attention. Whereas at the beginning of the twentieth century Alfred Baeumler (1887–1968) could write that the Silesian philosopher was the “grandfather” of German aesthetics, having made possible the famous Baumgarten's (1714–1762) work (Baeumler, 1923, p. 45), in 2009, Frederick Beiser asserted that Wolff was Baumgarten's “father”, since “Baumgarten's conception of the arts is essentially Wolffian” (Beiser, 2009, p. 48). Beiser's book is relevant for proposing that the aesthetics deriving from Leibniz (1646–1716) and Wolff provide a consistent alternative to the idea of artistic autonomy, the latter having predominated since Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. The main advantage of a rationalist aesthetics would consist in keeping a certain distance from formalism and giving value to the expressive and substantive aspects of art. In addition, Beiser touches on a capital point in Wolff's thought on the arts, that is the reformulation of the Aristotelian idea of “imitation” (Beiser, 2009, p. 50) into “representation”, as Joachim Krüger (1980, pp. 40–41) and Pietro Pimpinella (2006, p. 13) very astutely observe.

In order to understand the way in which Wolffian empirical psychology deals with notions related to the arts and aesthetics, the concept of representation is central. For sure, there is no proper autonomous aesthetics in Wolff's philosophy: in his system, aesthetic satisfaction is merely an integral component of the complex gear linking the representative force with the appetitive one. The Wolffian explanation for the connection between representation and desire has its origin in the reflections contained in Leibniz's *Principles of Nature and Grace*, when he says that monads have nothing else but *perceptions* and *appetitions*. As a “principle of change”, the latter are “tendencies to pass from one perception to another” (Leibniz, 1925, p. 407). Moreover (as explained in the *Monadology*), this “change or passage from one to another” is led by an “activity of the inner principle” called *appetition* (Leibniz, 1925, p. 226).

In a passage of a letter to Wolff, in which he explains his doctrine of pre-established harmony, Leibniz says that when one compares the parts of the body with the different faculties of the mind, one can understand that the soul has a two-fold relation with the body: it expresses either the body's present state in relation to external objects (*expressionem praesentis externorum status*)—a state in which the soul is in agreement with its body (*Animae convenientem secundum corpus suum*)—or it can be conceived as a tendency towards a new expression, “which represents a tendency of the bodies (or of the external things) to the future state” (Gerhardt, 1860, p. 56). When the pre-established harmony between soul and body occurs in the present state, the soul has a *perception* (*perceptio*); if it anticipates a future state of the body, this perceptive anticipation is called *percepturatio*. Such an explication is fundamental for the Leibnizian “aesthetics” and is centred not on the passive or imitative but on the *expressive* way in which a monad is related to the

world. In order to show how such an *expressivity* manifests itself, Leibniz appeals to the Platonic conception of the unity in multiplicity (a very important conception for much of western aesthetics, too): the way in which a soul expresses the external world is an “expression of the multiplicity in unity” (*expressio multitudinis in Unitatem*) (Gerhardt, 1860, p. 56).¹

Wolff adopted this Leibnizian distinction between a perception addressed to a present state and one addressed to a future state, as well as the relationship between perception and appetite, or—in his own words—between a representative force and an appetitive one. This distinction is quite interesting from an aesthetic point of view, since both the representation of the present state of the body and that of its future state are conceived by means of a comparison with art. Although Wolff did not adopt either pre-established harmony or monadic theory from Leibniz, his “aesthetics” nonetheless has an affinity with an aesthetics of expressivity, since it is not based on imitation.

9.3 Representation as Picture

Unlike Leibniz, Wolff accepts that external bodies cause modifications in the sensitive organs: this is, in fact, why there are representations of what happens in the outer world. In order to explicate how external objects affect sensitivity, philosophy can make use of knowledge from the sciences, such as optics, which teaches how physical objects placed on a straight line to the eye *paint* (*abmahlen*) their image on the back of its interior. Thus, the way in which we become conscious of such objects would depend on the *painting* (*Gemälde*) that they—so to speak—imprint on the fundus of the eye, and therefore, when these “painted images” are obscure or clear, confused or distinct (to employ the Leibnizian criteria used by Wolff), the corresponding ideas are likewise clear or obscure, confused or distinct (Wolff, 1720/1999, §.219). For Wolff, then, art demonstrably plays an exemplary role in explaining the birth of representation already in its physiological stage. The paintings that things produce in the fundus of the eye become exemplars for understanding what happens in the other sensitive organs (Wolff, 1720/1999, §.219).

However, the optical account is not sufficient to elucidate how a representation originates or the different ways in which we become conscious of it. In fact, the eye may receive only a vague impression of something, without necessarily seeing the parts composing the shape of this “something”. The soul has a *clear* representation of an item only when it recognizes some parts that make it possible to distinguish the item’s shape from the shape of other things, and it is only by recognizing its characteristic parts one by one that we can have a *distinct* representation of the object (Wolff, 1738/1968, §.37). The eye’s physiological structure, then, is not

¹The doctrine that a substance is an expression of the whole universe, and particularly that the soul is not affected by the body but has with it an expressive relation, is presented by Leibniz in the letters 56 and 57 to Arnauld from September and October 1687 (Leibniz, 2009, p. 238s).

enough to provide a clear or a clear and distinct idea of something. A figure's acquisition presupposes the capacity to simultaneously gather *in space* the parts comprising the figure; moreover, if such an acquisition has to be a clear and distinct one, these parts necessarily have to be captured sequentially *in time* (each one of them occupying a moment sequentially, separated from other moments). It is the *ordering* of these parts in space and time that constitutes a unified representation.

Time, space and order are therefore the three basic conditions that make possible the acquisition of any external object, this object always being something *compound*. It is for this reason that there must be a faculty in the soul in charge of the compositional figuration, which Wolffian empirical psychology calls the *facultas fingendi* or *Dichtungsvermögen*. This faculty of composition presupposes the work of the imagination in recollecting sequentially, one by one, something's marks (or parts), and of memory holding onto those characteristic marks, made available by the imagination. Finally, the soul's composing power combines all these marks in a single unified composition.

Here, we can find a trace of the Leibnizian heritage: although, from a physiological point of view, we must say that when a sensation occurs, it is the object that "paints its image" in the eye, from a cognitive point of view there is in no way passivity in cognition, because such an image is produced by the soul's faculties. Wolff seems to believe that all previous epistemologies have erred in their excessive simplification by not having considered the entire process involved to produce an image of something. These epistemologies were conceived to acquire the external objects as if they were simple, whereas they are not at all. Only the soul is simple, and so the difficulty lies in explaining precisely how it is capable of representing bodies, which are composite entities.

In principle, an image derived from sensitivity is no different from one derived from the imagination, except for being generally stronger or more intense. With regard to what interests us here, namely, *image production*, the two are entirely the same. In order to be generated, images from sensitivity need the very same faculties as images from imagination because they are both pictures of something compound (Wolff, 1720/1999, §.750). They share this characteristic with paintings and sculptures:

But both sensations and imaginings correspond to images like paintings and sculptures in that they are representations of a compound, and for this reason, the representations of physical objects [*körperliche Dinge*] are called *images*, too. In fact, an *image* is a representation of a compound item. However, sensations and imaginings are different from paintings and sculptures because they occur as simples, whereas the latter occur as compounds. An *image* produced by art is a representation of a compound within a compound; specifically, a *picture* is a representation of the compound on a surface, while a sculpture, or a *sculpted* or *embossed image*, is a representation of the compound in a physical space [*körperliche Raume*]. (Wolff, 1720/1999, §.751, p. 598. Our translation.)

Sensitive or imaginative, any picture the soul produces is comparable to a plastic or pictorial image in the sense that it is a unity of the multiplicity within the simple, whereas the image produced by a sculptor or painter presents a unity of the multiplicity in the composite. This analogy is by no means a weak one: what is at stake

here is that the soul’s powers involved in the ideation of a sculpture or a painting are the same as the faculties needed for image production in general. The comparison is meant to show the independence of the representative forces from the matter provided by sensibility. This imaginative power is also to be found in geometry, when we design a curved line that has never been seen before (Wolff, 1720/1999, §.241).

In fact, the imaginative–compositional power frequently slips up in such cases when it combines objects in an unregulated way. This may happen because of the *associative* capacity of the imagination, which—even in its unruliness—nevertheless obeys the rules of similitude. This would explain those crazy images that painters, sculptors and other artists create when they lose full control over their pictures (Wolff, 1720/1999, §§.243–244).

When imagination obeys the principle of reason (i.e. when the selection of the composition’s parts produces “images in which there is some truth”), we follow another, completely different path of creating (Wolff, 1720/1999, §.245). Now, according to our author, there is a (transcendental) truth in something when it is produced according to the order in space and time. The creations of a sculptor “worthy of the name”, as well as those of an unregulated artist, are brought into the light by the very same faculties. Nonetheless, only the “good” sculptor has control over his own creation: you won’t see simply what has popped into his head but rather the beauty he has seen and carefully observed in other works of art. His compositional faculty uses the associative imagination to identify models of beauty that can serve the representation he wishes to realize. To achieve this, the imagination must already be well supplied with images of all kinds; that is, a good sculptor needs to have studied carefully the existing examples in order to be able to create a new ordered and beautiful composition. In the *Empirical Psychology*, the way in which the *facultas fingendi* operates is described precisely in terms of the architect’s practice:

If, from what he sees in various buildings, the architect composes the idea of a building under the principle of sufficient reason, the building is made according to the architecture’s rules. And, in general, if, from what he sees related to his art in various different artificial bodies, the artist composes the idea of some artificial body of his own art, under the principle of sufficient reason, this body [follows] the art’s rules. As a matter of fact, if, from what he sees in various different buildings, the architect composes the building’s idea under the principle of sufficient reason, he will not admit in it anything of which he cannot give a sufficient reason for which it must be more present than absent, [or] why it must be more in one way than in another (§.70 *Ontol.*). Since in civil architecture the singular parts’ reasons are chosen for their purpose (§.5 *Arch. civil.*) and ultimately all the particular reasons resolve themselves in the founder’s scope, which is the whole building’s purpose (§.2 *Archit. civil.*), he [the architect] will investigate the reasons for those things he sees having being made in other buildings, and judges [*judicat*] whether those things are in agreement with the purpose of the building whose idea he must conceive in his mind [...]. Therefore, a building follows the architectonic rules if it is built according to the idea of what the architect saw in various different buildings (and) composed it according to the principle of reason. (Wolff, 1738/1968, §.150, p. 103. Our translation.)

This excerpt on architecture provides a general account of Wolff’s artistic vision: for him, architecture is modelling. In the architectonic art, it becomes particularly evident that a composition can assemble in one “artificial body” the construction

rules identified in many other buildings, but only if the architect has a clear understanding of how those parts apply: doors, windows, corridors, rooms, etc., observed elsewhere are like many individual rules that the faculty of composition must make compatible with a common purpose. The architect's art is paradigmatic for the procedure of composition because it is complex, implying knowledge of various crafts, such as masonry, carpentry, joinery and hydraulics (it is certainly not by chance that Kant uses the idea of an "architectonic of pure reason" to talk about the system of sciences). Much as in architecture, all other crafts are based on a process of composing aimed at covering a specific field; this is true not only of the so-called useful or servile arts but also of the "liberal arts" or fine arts (Wolff, 1738/1968, §.150, p. 103). As a matter of fact, Wolff does not distinguish between the "fine arts" and the useful arts, treating them all under the umbrella term "technology". At first sight, this seems to distance his thought from any autonomous conception of works of art, but his effort to obtain a philosophical knowledge of art by means of an explication of the rules, according to which every single craft operates, makes his "philosophy of all the arts" (*philosophia artium quarumcunque*) a forerunner of the attempt by Diderot and D'Alembert's encyclopaedic project to be—as the work's title says—a *reasoned dictionary of the sciences, arts and trades*.²

The lack of distinction between the liberal and servile arts does not make Wolff a utilitarian *avant la lettre*; rather, one can say that he is the introducer of a very particular conception of *homo technologicus*. Man improves the arts as a means for his own self-development. The perfectibilian use of techniques can be targeted, as in the invention of machines to improve our vision (glasses, telescope, microscope) or of calculation tools, to expand the capacity of our understanding. However, the most valuable service that a specific art has for our improvement can be indirect and less obvious. The architect plans a building while aiming at a particular purpose—it may be a dwelling, say—or with a more general sense of the functional role of the building. In a work planned under rules, the objective utility of the construction is accompanied by "subjective" gratification, both of the architect and of those who live in the building or who just contemplate its accomplishment. To a great extent, Wolff's thought pivots on such a tightly convergent relationship between the human artefact and its producer and/or user. All more or less well-finished creations generate satisfaction with the (manual or mental) ability to create it. For this reason, as a philosophy of art, Wolffian philosophy is a discourse on human aptitudes and abilities (see Krüger, 1980, p. 31). It is for this reason, too, that the same faculties of the soul are translated in terms of technical or artistic production, as happens when paintings and sculptures are brought to mind for the elucidation of the mental or physiological genesis of an image or a sensitive representation. Contrary to what one may think (and of what Kant himself believed, too), Wolffian dogmatic philosophy is no scholastic knowledge; instead, it is addressed to practice.

²For Wolff on technology, see his *Preliminary Discourse* (Wolff, 1740/1983a, §.71, p. 3). On philosophy of art in this broader meaning, see Krüger (1980, p. 29).

For Wolff, art is far away from all spontaneity and voluntarism. Sculptors and architects are educated through the study of the most comprehensive possible repertory of fine works, contemporary or traditional. Without making it explicit, the philosopher shares the neoclassical belief that the artist must attempt to approximate the maximum of ideal beauty, which is feasible only by means of exercise and contact with works of art. To really do so, artists need to attend art academies, which are to be promoted by the state’s authority (Wolff, 1736/1975, §§.310–311; see Pimpinella, 2006, p. 12).

9.4 Representation and Desire

The Wolffian theory of composition as an order in time and space puts the formation of representation in a relationship of similitude and difference with the formation of painting/sculpture. The “mental” image is an inner sculpture or painting, composed as a result of the major or minor ability of each individual’s inner paintbrush or chisel; still, the composition does not remain within the compound material, but rather within the soul’s unity. This productive capacity is no small thing, and yet it could be said that such explications are only given from a cognitive and theoretical point of view and do not offer any indication of the entire context in which artistic representation is involved in the Wolffian system. Returning to Leibniz’s distinction, we can say that mental images are perceptions of the present state of things, but they do not account for the perception of their future state yet. The image of a building designed by an architect gives us a better representation of a future state.

Wolff adopted the distinction between *perception* and *percepturitio* that he learned from Leibniz. Like him, Wolff thinks the soul makes an effort (*Streben*) to pass from one representation to another. This *conatus* (inclination) is defined using the same Leibnizian term: “In every present perception there is an inclination to change the perception” (Wolff, 1740/1972, §.480, p. 395. Our translation). This engagement to move on to a future perception is called *percepturitio* (Wolff, 1740/1972, §.481, p. 396). Clearly, the displacement of the focus from the present perception to the perception of a future something changes the entire game, since we leave a pretty much neutral or “theoretical” relationship with the representation’s object and start to have a relationship of desire with it; in other words, the representation now involves not only the representative faculty but also the volitional or appetitive one. The appetite does not originate from nowhere; instead, it comes from the “cognition” of something (*appetitus nascitur ex cognitione*). There is a lexical care in this expression that must be pointed out: at stake here is not the *object’s cognition* but the cognition of the fact that the object is desirable, and more precisely that changing the present perception is desirable in order to satisfy this wish (*connatus mutandi perceptionem*). To identify this kind of “consciousness of something”, as opposed to the “theoretical” consciousness of it, Wolff introduces the term *apercepturitio*, coined from the Leibnizian words

apperceptio and *percepturatio*. The *appetitus* is not a neutral representation but an *inclinatio* towards the object (Wolff, 1738/1968, §.509).

The key concept in the representation-desire device is the notion of perfection, as used by Leibniz but of Platonic descent. The inclination that constantly makes the soul depart its present state for “another” one is a constant quest for perfection. The soul seeks to achieve a state of higher perfection: when such a state is reached, the soul feels *pleasure* (the Latin term used by Wolff is *voluptas*; the corresponding German term is *Lust*). The soul is always looking for objects closer to perfection, giving greater satisfaction than those it already knows. The background of Wolff’s arguments (though he might not have been completely aware of it) is the idea of a *soul’s inquietude*, originally an Augustinian conception and strongly present in the reflections of Pascal, Locke and Malebranche, eventually filtered and mitigated by Leibniz. The soul must always be in expansion; it must avoid objects that keep it where it is or that cause repugnance and displeasure (*taedio, Unlust*) because these states of lower perfection are likely to bring it to “atrophy” and imperfection.

As Wolff himself explains, the statement that perfection is the cause of pleasure is not one of his own: Descartes had already expressed it distinctly (*distincte*) in his letter to the princess Elisabeth on 6 October 1645.³ The French philosopher’s explanation would have brought Wolff (according to what he himself said) to define pleasure as intuition of perfection—or intuitive knowledge of perfection (Wolff, 1738/1968, §.511; 1720/1999, §.404). In the Wolffian representative–appetitive–affective system, this implies that it is by means of representation that we glimpse something good we want to reach, and it is the representation of such a glimpsed perfection that gives pleasure. Pleasure is therefore prior to and independent of the realization or achievement of what is represented. With this, Wolff means that *voluptas/Lust* is *already given in the mere representation of what is perfect*. Such a conception, entirely in agreement with the central role of the *vis repraesentativa* in his system, gives autonomy to the representation, rather than conceiving of it as dependent on the desired thing. This point deserves a further discussion because it was fundamental for the development of the subsequent aesthetics.

Aesthetic (and architectonic) representation works, once again, as a paradigm to explain the correlation between pleasure and perfection. “If I see a picture”, Wolff states, “that is similar to the object it represents, and I consider its similitude, I derive pleasure [from this painting]. Now, a painting’s perfection consists in similitude” (Wolff, 1720/1999, §.404, p. 344. Our translation). A painting in which we recognize its similitude with what is represented is a source of a pleasure, perceptible by the recognizance of the similitude. In his *Empirical Psychology*, Wolff mentions a similitude between the image and the prototype of perfection (*similitudine imaginis cum prototypo perfectio ejus consistit*) (Wolff, 1738/1968, §.512). This characterization is problematic, however, because it seems to consider the artistic creation again from the perspective of imitation. The more complete the mutual

³According to Pietro Pimpinella (2005, p. 253), when Wolff reconciled his own theory of the passions with that of Leibniz, he was also aware of Descartes’ efforts in the *Passions of the Soul*.

relationship between representation and that which is represented, the more perfect the imitation will be: “In fact, there is nothing in the image that does not represent something in the prototype, and there is nothing in the prototype that is not represented in the image” (Wolff, 1738/1968, §.512, p. 390. Our translation). Similar statements can also be found in the text *De voluptate ex cognitione veritatis percipienda*, one of the principal sources enabling us to trace an “aesthetic theory” in Wolff. In any case, the importance of imitation in Wolff can be evaluated once we understand with more precision what he meant by *similitudo*.

With regard to aesthetics, one of the interesting points in the Wolffian argument is the assertion that the “intuition” of perfection does not necessarily need to be true. Pleasure can arise from the vision of a false perfection, too: “[...] it is not necessary that pleasure be grounded on a true perfection; it is sufficient for it to have an appearance of perfection” (Wolff, 1720/1999, §.404, p. 344. Our translation). Being merely a first approximation (the glimmer of something of a future we do not yet know), the apprehension of something good can be founded on a mere appearance, on an illusion or mirage:

It is of the highest importance that we learn that pleasure is perceived no less by the apparent perception than by the true one [*non minus percipi ex perceptione apparente, quam ex vera*], although the seed of all moral evil resides in that fact. (Wolff, 1738/1968, §.511, p. 389. Our translation).

This sentence shows the risk that adherence to perfection, considered equivocally, as such may cause; the other side of the coin, even so, is that this adherence itself proves to be testament to the representative power and of the power of the representation itself. To a large extent, we inevitably fall victim to error at this level, because it is just the first contact with something unknown, and above all because intuitiveness is deprived of reflection (intuition in essence does not involve any judgement as to whether something corresponds to the truth). This intuition only *provides* something to be known, a gift acting like a fuse lighting up the desire for something; it is in no way the accurate knowledge of this something it suggests. Anachronistically, we can say that Wolff achieves a phenomenological description of the manifestation of a heretofore unconscious desire. The Wolffian process does indeed have something phenomenological about it, given that its purpose is to describe and distinguish, in its different nuances, *how this knowledge of something shows up*. As in the case of the Leibnizian discernment of the ideas, the intuition of perfection can be obscure, clear, confused or distinct. In the mistaken intuition of perfection, the conscious mind is not capable of seeing the characteristic marks of the represented object correctly. Another case, however, is more interesting: the distinct perception of something must be accompanied by an indistinct perception to be able to arouse pleasure.

Some examples may help us to better understand this. Comparing side by side the demonstrations of the infinitesimal calculus of Newton and Leibniz, the clearest order in which the Newtonian sequence is presented patently provides the soul with much more pleasure than does the Leibnizian sequence. This means that, regardless of its content, Newton’s exposition is more elegant. Being mathematical knowledge,

no doubt the arguments of both the English scientist and the German philosopher are irreproachable and not lacking in clarity and distinction. However, one of them has (or it has in major proportion) something the other does not: in the exposition of the Newtonian sequence, the soul feels delighted by the beautiful order (Wolff, 1729/1983b, §.5). It can be said comprehension of the infinitesimal calculus runs on two levels: the first is knowledge of the truth; the second is the cognition of intellectual perfection in the order of its presentation (far better in Newton than in Leibniz). This example makes clear that pleasure is thus somehow independent of the represented “content” (the infinitesimal calculus), being foremost a pleasure derived from representation.

This double way of considering the same facts remained unperceived by Descartes and Locke. It was spotted but not exactly explained by Leibniz: when the mind knows, it also has—so to say—a gaze fixed on itself; it observes what happens in itself, although usually without noticing it (Wolff, 1720/1999, §§.727–730). Without doubt, one of Wolffian psychology’s greatest discoveries is the elucidation of this dual, objective–subjective addressing of consciousness. Wolff was led to this result by, *inter alia*, this conclusion: clear and distinct knowledge has, by definition, to be conscious knowledge, and moreover, by being conscious (i.e. “knowing that it knows”), consciousness must be at once knowledge of the difference between itself and what it is conscious of. Now, it happens that consciousness cannot be simultaneously a clear and distinct consciousness of the object and of itself, and for this reason, when it has knowledge (of something) with clarity and distinction, it can only have a confused knowledge of itself. Wolff knows that the possibility of concomitance between these two views implied the contrast in clarity between them. A converse example may help us to understand the point: the soul can have clarity and distinction about the fact it has obscure knowledge of something. Such technicalities should not allow us to lose sight of the fundamentals, however; that is, that even the perfection we know with the highest possible clarity and distinction cannot provoke an equally clear and distinct representation in cases where it might generate pleasure. An explication in the *German Metaphysics* on why science and discovery provide pleasure elucidates this point. A deep (*gründlich*) knowledge and new discoveries give a greater and more sensible (*so viel empfindlicher*) pleasure:

[...] the greater the effort we made before to understand it or to find them out. In fact, we have then an intuitive knowledge of our understanding’s perfection and at the same time [*zugleich*] of the object we know distinctly [*deutlich*], as well as of the discoverer’s perfection, if we learn to comprehend what someone else has found out. Now, the more demanding it is to comprehend or to find something out, the greater is the knowledge we get of our perfection, particularly if we call to mind all the other things that we have already come to know with less of a struggle; in that case, the pleasure is undoubtedly greater. (Wolff, 1720/1999, §.412, p. 350. Our translation.)

It becomes clear that the focus of the Wolffian reflection here is not the knowledge gained or the new discoveries but the difficulty and the struggle to obtain them, the pleasure felt being proportional to the effort. This point is fundamental: it is as though the reflection puts into parentheses the objective side of the cognition,

concentrating only on its subjective activity. This is essential to understanding the problem of artistic production and representation in Wolff.

As we have seen, the pleasure we derive from a well-executed painting originates from the existing similitude between the image and its prototype. When a painter sketches an image (e.g. when he paints a grape), he does not pretend to be doing anything other than representing on the canvas the prototype of which he has made an image. That is, it is necessary to distinguish in the image what we distinguish in the prototype (Wolff, 1738/1968, §.512). All this seems to reinforce the impression that imitation is essential to appreciating a picture. Indeed, this does matter but—much as we saw in the case of knowledge and discoveries—the role of imitation has to be put into parentheses in order to be able to identify the source of the true pleasure. It cannot be said that pleasure comes from the represented object: the poor grape is nothing in comparison to the artist’s power to imitate it. The admiration a picture generates does not come from the comparison between the real object and the represented object but from the capacity of the artist to achieve the effect of representing something. The same grape projected into a mirror, with the same play of shadows, would be a mere product of chance, and he who observed it could, at most, admire the casual artistic potential of such a sight, but no intentional proposal behind the representation.

Wolffian reasoning has its fulcrum, in fact, in the creator’s intention, and judgement of his creation must be addressed to his ability to achieve the desired effect, starting from the aim he established beforehand. The principle of reason commanding the execution of any work of art is final, although the execution itself is the result of mechanical actions; that is, it is subject to rules of efficient causality. We admire a clock insofar as it is efficient at correctly showing the hours: “pleasure consists here, too, in an intuitive knowledge of perfection”, and likewise if a connoisseur of architecture (*Bau-Kunst Verständiger*) contemplates a building made according to architecture’s rules, he knows its perfection (on the basis of such rules) (Wolff, 1720/1999, §.404, p. 344. Our translation). Pleasure originates, then, from such knowledge of the conformity of something with its principles of construction: put another way, with its *rules*. This “finalism” might be expanded to a global perspective, in which the universe is conceived according to the rules of a great artificer—a great architect—which is God. However, the ingeniousness of Wolffian thought is surely not addressing theological proof, since its concern, as we have said, is the human capacity for knowledge and refinement. Every well-executed work generates pleasing approval because the observer recognizes its manufacture according to the standards required by the relevant art.

We can now better understand the status of painting and imitation in Wolff. The *purpose* of a pictorial work is to imitate, just as any other type of art (liberal or utilitarian) must produce an effect starting from its own specific finality. What matters, however, is not the imitated content, but whether the imitation is well done. The relevance of Wolffian “aesthetics” consists in the fact that intuitivism is the paradigm of the relationship between representation and perfection—an “image” anticipates something that we do not yet know but that we desire in our quest for perfection. In this sense, it is necessary to understand that *intuitivism is not a*

synonym for visibility but for something broader, called *representativeness*. The obvious fact that it is somehow much easier to talk in terms of images and similarity cannot prevent us from recognizing the broader significance of the representative faculty; it embraces, besides painting, complex objects like Newton's mathematic calculation, architecture and clockwork mechanisms. As an anticipation of perfection, painting comprises only one of the classes of the wider genre named *technique*, involving representation. The same thing must be said, retrospectively, of pictorial and plastic imagery as a paradigm of present representation. These kinds of art are not the present perception's only means of representation (if this were the case, it would imply as a consequence the exclusion of the non-visual senses), but they are probably the best means of explication of what a present perception is (the unity of the composite in the simple) because of their capacity to demonstrate *that the mental representative force produces its images like an artist*.

It is the representative capacity, in fact, that is at stake. Someone who follows a demonstration can admire any order contained in it and thus distinguish it from a disordered demonstration (order is the expression of the principle of reason). In the case of a very long demonstration, it is always useful to divide it and place it within a framework that can be intuitively understood at a single glance (*uno obtutu*) (Wolff, 1729/1983b, p. 382). In the same way, architects (or connoisseurs) who contemplate a building made under the best rules of their particular architectonic craft are not able to hold in their mind individually (i.e. distinctly) all the rules used to make the building; rather, they perceive the good order implicit in its construction, consisting, for instance, in the good rhythm (*eurhythmia*) of its parts, that is in the similarities between them and in relation to the building as a whole (Wolff, 1729/1983b, p. 381). What is important, once again, is that although the architect may be aware of all the rules separately, in the moment in which he contemplates the work of art he is not able to keep them all in his mind with clarity and distinction.

9.5 Conclusion

Wolff brings all the arts together under a singular principle of finalistic explication (in which what is at stake is observing whether the realization of the purpose is well executed), and nothing would seem to be farther from the idea of the autonomy of the aesthetic object than such an explanation. However, this finalistic vision is constructed in parallel with a highly innovative conception of *representativity*. It was along this path that his followers—A. G. Baumgarten (1714–1762), G. F. Meier (1718–1777), M. Mendelssohn (1729–1786)—proceeded. Kant knew, directly or indirectly, such Wolffian ideas. It was without doubt the autonomy of representation that linked Wolff to aesthetic thought; it was for this reason that Joachim Krüger very appropriately affirmed that the dogmatic philosopher got very near to the modern idea of exposition (*Darstellung*), a topic dear to Kant and to German idealism (Krüger, 1980, p. 41).

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