

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Architectural Symbolism: Body and Space in Heinrich Wölfflin and Wilhelm Worringer

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The paper questions Jacques Rancière's conception of the modern aesthetic regime as the correlation between visibility and language by returning to two fundamental figures of modern art history, Heinrich Wölfflin and Wilhelm Worringer. First, Wölfflin's "*Prolegomena*" (1886) is interpreted as an attempt to conceive architectural space in terms of affectivity. Second, this conception of space is related to the Th. Vischer's and J. Volkelt's theory of symbolism. Third, the paper integrates this aesthetics in a model that conceives form as force (Goethe). Fourth, this modulation of affectivity that justifies architectural space is confronted with Wilhelm Worringer's concept of abstraction. After all, this notion responds also to a conception of art in terms of space and affectivity. Finally, the paper debates the role of Wölfflin's "*Prolegomena*" from the perspective of architectural design and its relation to modernity.

## Introduction

Das Barbarische ist das Buchstäbliche.

—Theodor Adorno

To structure the history of aesthetics, Jacques Rancière (born 1940) has introduced the notion of a 'regime of arts' (2003). He defines it as a redistribution of the sensible that correlates visibility and language in various ways. The idea is that historical epochs adjust words to images differently: while in some epochs the image is a medium that denotes an idea, in others the image can be enjoyed as an independent object. The 'aesthetic regime' is a late invention that redistributes the sensible so that the visual appears as an autonomous presence and as a new type of literacy (2003: 188–189). Formalist aesthetics falls under this aesthetic regime because it approaches forms as autonomous entities that modulate without relating to anything in the world. A visual literacy emerges where forms are felt as an immediate presence that directly affects the viewer.

Rancière is not the first to conceive of aesthetic modernity in contrast to other historical ages. Hegel comes to mind as the first to have thought of art as a process, but Rancière conceives this process as a redistribution and correlation between words and the senses. Historically, the emphasis on the autonomous impact of forms on the viewer emerged in a context that reassessed the so-called artistic 'periods of decay' and explained them as corresponding to different types of aesthetic sensibility. Art historians like Heinrich Wölfflin (1864–1945), Alois Riegl (1858–1905) and Wilhelm Worringer (1881–1965)

rehabilitated art historical styles through a broader consideration of their corresponding system of visual presentation. Bracketing any normative judgement of taste, they argued that each art historical period has its own visual register through which it represents the world.

The 'aesthetic regime' of arts originated thus in art history departments rather than in architectural studios. Art historians like Wickhoff (1895) and Riegl (1901) restored the Late Roman art that was long considered a barbaric assault on ancient serene beauty. Wölfflin (1888) reinterpreted Baroque painting, sculpture and architecture as a visual regime that appealed to the mood (*Stimmung*) and that appeared in a pictorial (*malerisch*) type of visual presentation.<sup>1</sup> Rancière is right to argue that the modern aesthetic regime invents a type of visibility<sup>2</sup> that rejects the subordination of visual sensitivity to discourse. In other words, instead of conveying messages, images are experienced as independent entities that affect the viewer through their own internal structure. Rancière detects in this new regime an activity that identifies new aesthetic values in the artistic styles of the past (Rancière 2003: 95).

The question of this essay is whether the modern aesthetic regime, as Rancière often argues, can be strictly formulated in terms of a relation between these two criteria: *word* and *image*. The hypothesis I defend is that the modern aesthetic regime approached the visual in relation to an essentially *affective* experience of space. In order to test this hypothesis I return to the work of those authors who set the terms of the debate that Wölfflin and Worringer developed in architectural theory, namely Theodor Lipps (1851–1914), Friedrich Theodor Vischer (1807–1887) and Johannes Volkelt (1848–1930). The hypothesis unfolds in two steps: first, instead of bracketing the visual as an autonomous sphere that justifies the modern aesthetic regime, these thinkers relate the visual to the affective experience of the body. Second,

this justification returns to the body as the fundamental criterion of architectural design. This is a well-known position in architectural theory, yet this time the body is conceived of as the *affective experience* of the body moving in space (Rykwert 1996; Dodds and Tavernon 2002). This experience prefigures the phenomenological paradigm – matured by Husserl – based on the experience of the world by means of a living body (*Leib*) as opposed to a mere objectified body (*Körper*). The specificity of the modern aesthetic regime is its ability to mediate bodily emotions. Consequently, aesthetics justifies the architectural theory of Wölfflin and the art theory of Worringer. In this sense, an analysis of their work proposes an alternative to Rancière's understanding of the aesthetic regime as emerging at the crossroad between *image* and *word*. The alternative consists in the fact that the modern aesthetic regime correlates *space* and *affectivity*, an idea that the following essay will address.

### Symbolism and Empathy

Various overviews of modern aesthetics confirm the fact that the relation to the felt affectivity of the body is fundamental to the modern aesthetic regime. During the second part of the 19th century, Theodor Lipps developed a psychological study on subjectivity and founded a system of aesthetics on this model.<sup>3</sup> The notion of empathy (*Einfühlung*) is central in his *Ästhetischen Faktoren der Raumschauung* (1891) [Aesthetic Factors of Space-Intuition], where it designates not just the projection of one's feelings onto an object but a participative emotional immersion into an observed object. Empathy is thus a fundamental function of the self in its relation to any objects exterior to it. It designates an unhindered, felt immersion of viewers into an object that they perceive. Of course, the immersion happens on a symbolic level, meaning that the experience of the object is an unconstrained emotional flux.

The idea of a spatial extension of the subject into depth is inherent to the aesthetic experience understood as the pleasure of a subject who 'feels his/her way into' an object: *hineinfühlen* is the term that is repeatedly used (not just by Lipps) that connotes a forward movement. With this psychological model, the aesthetic experience is conceived as a type of emotional blending with exterior objects. Essential here is the fact that aesthetic pleasure is fundamentally a *spatial* phenomenon because consciousness performs an imaginary leap forward. When I watch an acrobat, I follow his movements as if those movements were happening to me.

Johannes Volkelt, another philosopher working roughly at the same time as Lipps, criticised this model because an increased awareness of the viewer (in relation to the movements of the acrobat, for instance) can be detrimental to the aesthetic experience. Alternatively, Volkelt conceived empathy as a constitutive function of any relation to exterior objects. Where Lipps stressed the active function of empathy, for Volkelt empathy is a generic function of intentionality as such. More importantly, in *Der Symbolbegriff in der neuesten Ästhetik* (1876), [The Symbol Concept in the Newest Aesthetics] Volkelt emphasises the contiguity

between perceived visual structures and the human vital feeling (*Lebensgefühl*). Our 'bodily organisation takes part into (*mitmachen*) the experience of spatial constructions that are sensuously apprehended (*miterleben*)'.<sup>4</sup>

Volkelt and Lipps represent an important episode in architectural theory for three reasons. First, they translate in psychological terms an essential intuition of Kantian aesthetics, namely that the human body is experienced as an *affective* entity. Second, this experience is pleasurable, by which they mean that the body is maintained at a constant level of tension. Constancy generates an emotional well-being – what Kant would call *das Wohlgefallen* – and it is felt when architectural structures affirm the horizontal position of the body, its unhindered movement and regular rhythm of breathing. Third, the connotation of movement that is inherent to the notion of empathy introduces space as a fundamental dimension of the aesthetic experience. At this point, architectural theory is an aesthetic theory because *affectivity* and *subjectivity* are imagined as a forward movement that enwraps the perceived object.<sup>5</sup>

These ideas are restructured in Lipps' epic two-volume work *Ästhetik* (1903, 1906). He argues that visual presentations emulate our bodily constitution. It is strange how Rykwert, in his otherwise magnificent *The Dancing Column*, forgets to mention this fundamental intuition of modern aesthetics. Images are not beautiful because they imitate an exterior object but because they are consonant with the felt vitality of the human body. Lipps writes: 'one has to say, man is not beautiful because of his forms but rather that forms are beautiful because they are human forms and thus they are for us the bearer of human life'.<sup>6</sup> In other words, we take pleasure in visual forms not because they resemble our physical body but because their organic movement is consonant with the felt vitality of our body. The aesthetics of Lipps depends on this homologation between the perceived forms and the bodily structure. After all, he argues that aesthetic pleasure is the result of a felt consonance between them, meaning that visual forms are quantitatively measurable but also qualitatively felt entities.

Subsequently, the ugly and the sublime are aesthetic responses that disturb the felt organic structure of the human body. For Lipps, at the most fundamental level, images and architectural structures perpetuate and affirm human vitality. This means that the organic structure of our body – its proportions and symmetry – is not just an anatomical bundle but it is also experienced as general euphoria. Not unlike Kant, who identified a 'disinterested well-being' (*interesseloses Wohlgefallen*) in the purposefulness between forms and the cognitive faculties, Lipps detects a similar feeling in the vitality of the human body. That beauty is in the eye of the beholder means here that visual forms are congruous with the overall organic constitution of the human body.<sup>7</sup>

Now, the conception of subjectivity as a movement forward toward an object was also essential in the 19th-century conception of symbolism. In the semiotics of Charles S. Peirce, the symbol is a sign that signifies by means of convention (e.g., traffic lights). In the

post-Hegelian aesthetics of Friedrich Theodor Vischer, the symbol is conceived as the transference of affectivity onto an inanimate object. In *Ästhetik oder Wissenschaft des Schönen* (1846–1857), [Aesthetics or the Science of the Beautiful] Vischer describes the symbol as a premature stage of the mind that conveys a comparison to another idea for the 'confused unconscious fantasy' (Vischer 1922a: 495). In the *Ästhetik*, symbolism is conceived as an unconscious process of animating a perceived object. Animation is a way of reading intentionality in how inanimate objects or phenomena interact with the world.

In the essay *Das Symbol* (1887), Vischer distinguishes between symbolism in myth and art but he also argues that symbolism or 'the act of lending a soul remains an absolutely necessary feature of humanity, also after it has left behind the myth a long time ago'<sup>8</sup> (Vischer 1922b: 435). This 'lending of a soul' is designated – in light of Volkelt – as empathy and befalls anyone who encounters architectural works. In this case, the viewer 'immerses himself into' these spaces (*so hineinversetzt*) 'as if he were there with his entire vital force and soul, moving, raising, swinging up and down, stretching out'<sup>9</sup> (Vischer 1922b: 437).

Hence, both Vischer and Lipps conceive of the mind as a spontaneous expansion into the material world. Symbolisation is an activity of the mind that feels pleasure when a felicitous *agglutination* between its structure and the perceived architectural structure is facilitated. The example that Vischer uses is the experience of architecture that is no longer (quantitatively) perceived as a tectonic structure but as a (qualitative) spatial environment to which the mind is attuned and in which it circulates. Two new elements are hereby introduced into architectural theory: the affective experience of structures and the intentionality involved in the experience of architectural space. Symbolism means not just the emulation of bodily proportion in a building (as in the Vitruvius-Alberti tradition) but also a type of intentional experience, the mind imaginatively extending into space.

At this point in the history of aesthetics, the conception of symbolism as 'lending a soul' determines the conception of architecture in terms of space, the experience of space in terms of movement and according to emotional prototypes (Götz 1983: 53ff). After all, just one year after the publication of *Das Symbol*, Wölfflin interpreted the Renaissance and the Baroque as spatial structures that correspond to different types of affectivity: the tranquillity of the Renaissance is contrasted to Baroque intoxication. With the psychological aesthetics of Lipps and Vischer, space becomes a problem in both architecture and the history of art.

### **Spatial Extension and Bodily Feeling: Wölfflin's Prolegomena**

In the *Prolegomena zu einer Psychologie der Architektur* (1886), [Prolegomena to a Psychology of Architecture] Wölfflin asks an old question: how can architectural forms be an expression of a mood (*Stimmung*)? How is it possible that an inanimate object (a building) conveys an impression (*Eindruck*) that is felt as an expression (*Ausdruck*)? Wölfflin rejects Wundt's physiological explanation according to which the impression of visual forms depends on

the movement of the eye, as if a zigzag ocular movement is disturbing because it involves a strenuous muscular motion. After all, the emotional experience of music does not strictly depend on the physiological structure of the ear. On the contrary, other people can also understand the impressions expressed in music because the voice mediates the moods of the body. Wölfflin's question captures an essential problem of the humanities, namely the relationship between form and content or, as he puts it, between expression and impression.

Yet this relationship is constitutive of what 19th-century German aesthetics designated as the problem of *symbolism*. How does a symbol function? Wölfflin's question is old because it was meant to resist the reduction of aesthetics to the physiological constitution of the body. However, it is still relevant if one considers contemporary research projects of neuro-aesthetics that also tend to explain beauty in terms of the neurological structure of the brain.<sup>10</sup> In other words, the debate concerning the status of the symbolic order as the product of culture (and not just as an immanent result of material structures) remains a significant topic. Considering this debate on the essential symbolic function of the body in architecture, one wonders why the *Prolegomena* is not a key text in Rykwert's *The Dancing Column*.<sup>11</sup>

The argument of the *Prolegomena* is that all explanation of architecture presupposes the mediation between a material and a symbolic structure. First, Wölfflin refers to architectural structures in terms of their *lived experience*. The analysis of tectonic structures is subordinated to their impression on the viewer's mood. Architecture becomes a correlate for a lived experience as opposed to a set of quantifiable mathematical proportions. Second, this focus on architectural structures as an impetus of an aesthetic experience turns Wölfflin's architectural theory into a discourse on space as opposed to a discourse on tectonic structures. The reason for this transformation of architectural discourse from an inquiry into tectonic structures into an inquiry into the experience of space is inherent to the premise of the text: if architecture is the correlate of a lived experience, then this experience presupposes the movement of the body; the *kinaesthetic activity* of a body in motion justifies architecture as a practice that structures spatial relations. Space becomes the pertinent object of architectural design *because* bodily movement is placed at the core of the creative act. After all, other than the geometrical space that can be quantified, lived space can only be the outcome of body movement.

And for Wölfflin, the beauty of an architectural space is not a response to forms that are perceived on the retina but the feeling of an unconstrained relation between the perceived forms and the vital feeling of our body. Hence, Wölfflin introduces here a third term that mediates between perceived forms and the physiological structure of the body, namely the vital feeling (*Lebensgefühl*).<sup>12</sup> The notion of vital feeling refers to a constancy of energy that is felt during the unconstrained movement of the body. The experience of architectonic structures presupposes thus the symbolic mediation between perceived forms and the way in which the body affectively perceives its

own constitution. Symbolism means here that the relation between bodily proportions and architectural structures mediates a *feeling* (and not just the transfer of geometric relations from one domain to another).

If architectural structures are felt as beautiful, it is because they affirm the feeling that the body has of its own 'well-being' (*Wohlbefinden*), a notion too rapidly and too often translated as 'pleasure'. In this sense, Wölfflin's theory is founded on the intuition that architectural forms mediate between our *felt* bodily structure and space. In the *Prolegomena*, Wölfflin – reader of Goethe and student of Jacob Burckhardt – is a humanist who justifies architecture as structures subordinated to the human bodily constitution. The scale of the lived environment has to comply with the human scale. The symmetry, proportion and vertical position of the body are felt as a harmonious affective disposition called 'mood' (*Stimmung*). Pleasurable responses to space are the sign of the congruence between visual forms and vital feeling. For Wölfflin, the body is experienced as mood and becomes the criterion for the experience of space. Later, in *Gedanken zur Kunstgeschichte*, [Thoughts on the History of Art] Wölfflin will argue for the evaluation of images according to their effect on the 'bodily and vital feeling' (*Körper- und Lebensgefühl*) (Wölfflin 1941: 30–31).

We will have to return to the emphasis on the human scale and on the emotional impact of architecture in the architectural theory of Sigfried Giedion, Wölfflin's student. Design does not yet follow function but the dynamic of tensions inherent to the human body dictates the morphology of the space that we inhabit. Significant here is the symbolic process involved in the relation between body and space. Humans see forms as the expression of a 'sentient soul' (*fühlende Seele*), argues Wölfflin, a process that is felt with pleasure and displeasure (*Wohl- und Wehegefühl*) while moving in space. Physical space is symbolically mediated by this original structure that we all inherently possess, i.e. 'our bodily organisation' (*unsere leibliche Organisation*) (Wölfflin 1946: 21).<sup>13</sup>

How to understand this symbolic process? This process presupposes a *qualitative* homologue between bodily and architectural structures. Regardless of their *quantitative* differences, architectural structures correspond to the bodily structure that is itself felt as a constant level of tension. Hence, Wölfflin's premise is that the original architectural prototype is our own body. Verticality and mass are quantities that are qualitatively felt as a pleasurable disposition if the external tectonic forms are congruous with them. And Wölfflin describes how

powerful columns produce in us energetic stimulations, our respiration harmonises with the expansive of narrow nature of space. In the former case we are stimulated as if we ourselves were the supporting columns; in the later case we breathe as deeply and feeling as if our chest were as wide as the hall [...] the architectural impression [...] is essentially based on a directly bodily feeling.<sup>14</sup> (Wölfflin 1994: 154–55)

There is a possible correlation between, on the one hand, the fundamental elements of architecture (matter and form, gravity and force) and, on the other hand, the feeling of our 'organic well-being' (*organisches Wohlbefinden*). A symbolic synergy between bodily tension (the feeling of organic well-being) and an architectural structure generates a euphoric feeling. The heaviness of matter interacts with the heaviness of the body maintained in the upright position by a 'force of form' (*Formkraft*). Evoking Goethe, Wölfflin conceives visual *form* as an inherent *force* that matter actualises so that there is no 'form without matter' (*stofflose Form*) (Wölfflin 1946: 23; see Ay 2010). Form is nothing but the force active in matter. Applied to the human body, this conception of form as a force is felt as an affirmation of the bodily vitality and it is opposed to gravity and formlessness. Other than a hollowing out of space, architectural design emerges here as a modulation of forces inherent in matter and adjusted to bodily movement.

### Form as Force

This aesthetic vitalism constitutes the foundation of Wölfflin's architectural theory. Visual forms are not correlated to a series of words that might capture a building's meaning or function but to the feeling one has of one's own body. In a sense, Wölfflin continues the theory of metamorphosis that Goethe and Herder had introduced in aesthetics. In *Bildungstrieb* (1810), Goethe had distinguished between force (*Kraft*) and drive (*Triebe*). Both notions account for form but from different perspectives: while force is a mechanical explanation of form, drive refers to a *process* of formation (*Bildung*). Form and matter are not opposite principles but the corresponding elements of metamorphosis understood as a dynamic process (Goethe 1975: 33). The notion of force accounts for the mechanical correlations involved in the development of forms. The notion of drive refers to a purposeful and organic principle that is active in the development of forms (Tantillo 2002: 58ff).

The distinction marks the difference between metamorphosis thought of as the *mechanical addition* of elements and metamorphosis understood as *organic growth* or the purposeful actualisation of a force. Wölfflin goes further and identifies the complexification of artistic forms with this generative process that is specific to nature. He compares the evolution of architectural forms to the growth of organisms: both represent a process that expands simple forms into complex structures (Wölfflin 1946: 24). In the language of Trachtenberg and Hyman (2003), the expansion of modern design is two-fold: it can either be *mechanomorphic* or *biomorphic*. While the former notion refers to what Goethe conceived as a mechanic addition of volumes, the second notion designates a model of design where forms organically expand as in Art Nouveau. The analogy is significant because it captures a central problem in architectural design that Wölfflin's *Prolegomena* intimated and Giedion made explicit, namely the evolution of architectural design from a hollowed-out interior space to an arrangement of volumes in space.



Goethe refers to the conception of form as force to characterise nature's driving forces (*Triebkräfte*) as either polarity (*Polarität*) or intensification (*Steigerung*). The notion of polarity of matter, from a physical perspective, is explained as the movement of attraction (*Anziehen*) or repulsion (*Abstoßen*). Form actualises itself from a matter that oscillates between these two movements of attraction and repulsion. Polarized matter is the conjunction or disjunction of elements; layers of matter attract or reject each other. The notion of intensification explains matter from a spiritual perspective, as an 'ongoing striving augmentation' (*immerstrebendes Aufsteigen*). Through intensification matter grows infinitely, from simple to complex structures, the way light and shadow produce infinite shades (Goethe 1975: 48).

For Goethe, matter and spirit presuppose each other because, while matter extends into space, the spirit perceives this extension as attraction or repulsion.<sup>15</sup> Wölfflin follows the same intuition when he argues that architectural forms are the expression of vital feeling: the impression that tectonic forms give is nothing but their spiritual (i.e., affective) conception as a positive attraction between their structure and our bodies. In other words, what we call 'expression' is matter experienced from a spiritual perspective as the affirmation or denial of a purposeful force.<sup>16</sup>

An affect thus designates the experience of attraction or repulsion of a force active within a body. Goethe and Wölfflin conveyed the original understanding of the presupposed symbolisation process, namely the identification of purposefulness in material expansion. The body too, can be thought of as an addition of organs or as the perception of a purposeful vital feeling. Wölfflin conceives the body as an organised structure that has an affective apperception of its own unhindered movement, its vital feeling. The attraction or repulsion of architectural forms depends on whether they affirm or deny this vital feeling. On the one hand, gravity and horizontal structures decrease the vital feeling because they draw the body downward. This is experienced when the body breathes slowly and the blood circulates with difficulty. Words like 'heavy-hearted' (*Schwermut*) and 'depressed mood' (*gedrückte Stimmung*) connote the weight of gravity and formlessness. On the other hand, the vertical body is balanced and maintains the vital feeling at a regular level of tension.

The immediate question is: what does Wölfflin add to the conception of Vitruvius and Alberti? In their case, the tectonic structure was analogous to the bodily structure. Symbolism, as Rykwert has shown, is the driving mechanism of an architecture based on corresponding proportions or figurative elements. The body is the driving metaphor of Alberti's *De re aedificatoria*, where the arrangements of architectural parts are analogous to the arrangement of the body's limbs (as in Book 1) or where beauty is defined as the *concinnitas* or 'reasoned harmony' and 'consonance' of the parts into the whole (Alberti 1988: 8, 156, 303). In Vitruvius, *venustas* pointed to *eurythmia*, a proportional arrangement of human and tectonic elements. The principle of symmetry in both

bodies and buildings is the *ἀναλογία*, the 'proportion' or harmonious ratio of the members of a whole.<sup>17</sup> And indeed, the body as the criterion moves deep into modernity with Le Corbusier's *modulor*.

The difference consists in the fact that Vitruvius conceived these proportions as numerical relations. For Wölfflin, these proportions are not just *calculated* as harmonious proportions but felt as an *emotional* disposition, a well-adjusted level of tension. Architectural forms have a strong impact on the constitution and development of the affective life of the subject. Forms influence the affective subjectivity they disturb or enhance. The question is whether space is always felt as an affirmation of the vital feeling and if not, what are the consequences when this is not the case. The body as a criterion of evaluating architecture might seem a classicist preference, yet relating Wölfflin's *Prolegomena* to Worringer's work shows an oscillation in the intensity with which the body is modulated.

### Abstraction and Space

Arguably more a work of art theory than of art history, Worringer's *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* (1907) [Abstraction and Empathy] advanced a simple if not simplistic psychology of art. Abstraction and empathy designate two generic regimes of art that correspond to two psychological types.<sup>18</sup> The regime of empathy characterises a psychological type that feels at ease in the world of changing sensations, a movement and depth that are rendered in organic forms. Worringer's alternative to this original relation to the world is the art of abstraction. This art corresponds to a psychological type that experiences the changing sensations and the depth of space with anxiety. As a consequence, organic movement and density are reduced to repetitive geometric patterns on a plane.

Like Wölfflin, Worringer employs the notion of *abstraction* to place space and affectivity at the centre of all art historical analysis. While empathy presupposes a tranquil continuity between man and space, abstraction entails the disturbance of this euphoric relation. Spatial depth is felt as a threatening field where a conglomerate of changing sensations intimidates the psyche. The modulations of space occasion a psychic tension that can only be released by reducing the depth of space to rigid geometric forms. Hence, an affective disturbance of subjectivity explains the geometric lines of the primitive ornaments or the infinite multiplication of crystalline shapes in the late Gothic ribbed vaults. Like Wölfflin, Worringer explains images by relating them not to a paraphrasable iconographic content but to how they mediate the affective life. The abstract line of the Gothic art confronts the subject with a sensation that disturbs organic life.<sup>19</sup> This intensity is also identifiable in expressionism where exterior forms contradict the real forms of the object depicted. As Georg Simmel points out, the perception of a violin can cause such an intensity in the expressionist painter that the image of the violin does not conform to the perception of the same object (Simmel 1968: 15–17).

The process of designing forms draws the contours of affective subjectivity. Generically, a design oscillates between the desire to emulate organic movement and the

instinctive anxiety to reduce space to crystalline shapes on the plane. Hence, images are not adequate copies of nature but rather of the vital forces inherent in nature. On the other hand, the notion of abstraction explains images as the result of a disquietude that is not exclusive to the primitive man. To the contrary, the same anxiety characterises the modern subjectivity, which is under threat in the hyper-rationalised society.<sup>20</sup> While primitive man feared the depth of space, modern man fears the mechanisation of life that threatens his individuality.

In the context of the city, modern man is under the constant pressure of interchangeable and anonymous relations. Before Simmel, Otto Wagner prescribed the design strategies for an architecture that complies with the needs of the modern man (1988: 79). This architecture displays clear planes and smooth surfaces, symmetrical arrangements that testify to a general 'self-containment' and 'self-assurance' (1988: 86). Wagner's description of modern architecture announces Worringer's analysis of Egyptian space as 'an exponent of material durability, of unlimited security of substance' (Worringer 1928: 69). The purification of the world from heterogeneous sensations and its metamorphosis into abstract forms also distinguishes the modern sense of space. Yet Wagner's description of the modern eye reflects Worringer's description of primitive perception. The modern eye is less accustomed to 'varied images, to straight lines, to more expansive surfaces, to larger masses'. Lines are straight rather than curved because they are adapted to a busy man who is annoyed by detours (Wagner 1988: 109–10). The idea that the irritated modern man subordinates space to temporal efficiency proves, once more, that the modern aesthetic regime responds to the affective life of the subject.

While the depth of space terrified the primitive man, the modern man is afraid of wasting time. As a consequence, space is redistributed and designed in modernity according to a rigid rationalisation of time. This rational approach to space can both subordinate forms to their function *and* desensitise all strong affects. The transfer of effective functionality into forms – so that time is saved – is the symptom of an architecture that becomes 'literal' (*buchstäblich*) in Adorno's sense, promising strictly to be factual and objective. However, from Vischer and Lipps to Wölfflin and Worringer, the experience of architectural space is fundamentally affective. A couple of decades later, Sigfried Giedion accounted for the rationalisation of architecture as a consequence of Descartes' separation of authentic philosophy from the speculative problems of aesthetics: while rationalism produced machines, aesthetic problems were disregarded as subjective (Giedion 1958: 73). However, he explains the expansion of modern urbanism in a sentence that could have been written by Wölfflin: 'a new plastic sensibility: a new development of spatial rhythms and a new faculty of perceiving the play of volumes in space' (Giedion 1958: 93). The emphasis is on the movement between the volumes that constitute the building and on the emotional impact of their rhythm. If we now return to Rancière's conviction that modernity debates the relation between word and image, we see how he forgets this fundamental criterion

from architectural theory: the mediation of space through affectivity.

## Conclusion

Heinrich Wölfflin's *Prolegomena* places the question of space at the core of the *experience* of architecture. In his famous *Principles of Art History* (1915), Wölfflin provides a structural explanation, not a diachronic art historical overview. His formalism emerges at a time when the weight of historicism and eclecticism is felt all over Europe. Echoing Friedrich Nietzsche, Alois Riegl writes *Over the Renaissance of Art* (1895), where he argues that the cumulative type of historical consciousness that characterizes positivism is detrimental to artistic creativity. Modern man looks at the past neither with the naiveté of the 15th-century artists who rediscovered antiquity nor with the enthusiasm of the Romantics who turn antiquity into an absolute criterion. In this context, if Wölfflin never wrote on architectural design, how can the *Prolegomena* contribute to architectural practice?

First, Wölfflin's writings emerge in an environment that, due to historical positivism and artistic eclecticism, required a new relation to architecture as a cultural phenomenon. Hence, his formalism introduces affectivity and movement as constitutive of architectural design. To play on Louis Sullivan's dictum, with Wölfflin, form follows movement. Precisely because he does not focus on concrete historical examples, his writings suggest that an aesthetic spectrum of architecture is homologous with the vitality of the body (rather than as a juxtaposition of volumes).

Second, as a consequence, space is not just geometric extension but also constant movement. Instead of thinking that architecture organises space – as if space were a given – Wölfflin conceives space as a process where the affective experience of the body dictates architectural forms. Architectural design is the spatialisation of a balanced bodily tension so that, while moving, the body maintains this equilibrium.<sup>21</sup> Third, the classicism of Wölfflin lies precisely in this idea that architecture is moulded on the human body. This centrality of the body transforms the neutrality of *space* into the specificity of a *place*. A place emerges when the space is adapted to the tension of the human body and when the function of form becomes the emulation of this motion. A place is the theatricalisation of space and the task of architectural design is to provide a proscenium for the interpretation – metaphorical, gestural and rhetorical, hence cultural – of human activities (Verschaffel 1995). Design is the means to escape the idiotic literal reading of human functions.

Hence, in modernity, the visible is not merely conceived in relation to the 'thinkable' (*le pensable*) but to affectivity (Rancière 2003: 105). In the psychological aesthetics that inspires modern formalism in architectural theory, form is the realisation of affects. If body is matter and matter is *experienced* as a force extending into space, then pleasure can only result within a space that has been adapted to the felt vitality of the body. The lived space is an extension of muscular relaxation, an unconstrained flexion, a clear vision and the constancy of sensations.

Finally, architectural forms are not structures simply placed on top of each other and the dwelling human being is not in opposition to a space that extends outside of him or her. On the contrary, architectural space is the outcome of this *prototypical image* that is the human body. The implication is not just that aesthetics determines good architectural design but that the aesthetic body can resist the shapes that restrain its movement. Placing the unhindered movement of the body at the core of architecture is not just an aesthetic judgment; it is also an ethical imperative that determines the place of man in the design of space. Architecture in modernity oscillates between an inherent dignity of the body that has to feel at home in the world and its submission to calculable standards of efficiency. The apparently innocent formalism of Heinrich Wölfflin reveals that the world we build is a symptom of how we allow our bodies to move and their ability to resist the directions imposed on them.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> After all, Wilhelm Worringer's revaluation of the Gothic was not restricted to primitive Gothic art but also included the *expressionist* cultivation of intensive affective states. In *Vienna Genesis* (1895), Franz Wickhoff approached Late Roman reliefs by comparing them to *impressionist* optic values, like the play of light and shadows. These rehabilitations of art historical styles thus presupposed a new sensibility towards the visual as an aesthetic regime with its own internal logic. Towards the fin-de-siècle, historians of art and architecture looked at the past with a fascinatingly anachronistic gaze, associating newly emerging artistic forms with past artistic styles. This autonomous status of the visual allowed modern historians of the time to interpret present artistic productions (impressionism and expressionism) retrospectively, somehow referring them to the foregone and forgotten styles, like the Late Roman and Gothic art.
- <sup>2</sup> The autonomy of visuality receives an early formulation in the work of Konrad Fiedler, who called it 'pure visibility' (*reine Sichtbarkeit*). We speak of 'visuality' precisely in order to distinguish the mere ability to see (visibility) from the purely visual dimension of the image (which Fiedler's notion designated).
- <sup>3</sup> Lipps' doctoral thesis, defended in 1874, concerns the ontology of J.F. Herbart, and his following publications emphasise the structure of subjectivity. His immense oeuvre includes treatises like *Grundtatsachen des Seelenlebens* (1886) [*Fundamental issues of the Life of the Soul*] but also *Raumästhetik und geometrische-optische Täuschungen* (1897) [*On the Aesthetics of Space and the Geometric-Optical Illusions*], *Komik und Humor* (1898) [*Comedy and Humour*], *Von Fühlen, Wollen und Denken* (1902) [*About Feeling, Willing and Thinking*], an introduction to logic, psychology, a translation of David Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739) and the two volumes entitled *Aesthetics* (1903, 1906).
- <sup>4</sup> The original reads, 'mit unserer körperlichen Organisation mitmachen, sinnlich miterleben' (Volkelt 1876: 57). The preposition 'mit' [with] in the words used clearly designates the intentional and conjunctive experience.
- <sup>5</sup> This intuition returns in the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl (via Franz Brentano) as the intentionality that characterises consciousness. A pertinent criticism comes from Edith Stein (1917), who argues that Lipps forgets the analogical act involved in the notion of empathy. He confuses the 'self-forgetfulness through which I can surrender myself to an object with the dissolution of the I into the object' ('die Verwechslung der Selbstvergessenheit, mit der ich mich jedem Objekt hingeben kann, mit einem Aufgehen des Ich im Objekt') (Stein 1917: 17). Subsequently, Stein argues that one is never *with* the acrobat but *at* him.
- <sup>6</sup> The original reads, 'Der Mensch, so müssen wir sagen, ist nicht schön wegen seiner Form, sondern die Formen sind schön, weil sie Formen des Menschen und dennoch für uns Träger menschlichen Lebens sind' (Lipps 1903: 105).
- <sup>7</sup> The Kantian premise of Lipps' aesthetics is significant because with Kant the aesthetic experience of beauty is defined as essentially affective (as opposed to cognitive) and as the result of a correlate that generates a harmonious attunement of the intellectual faculties. See also Allesch (1987: 330ff).
- <sup>8</sup> The original reads, 'Der Akt der Seelenleihe bleibt als naturnotwendiger Zug der Menschheit eigen, auch wenn sie längst dem Mythos entwachsen ist'.
- <sup>9</sup> The original reads, 'als ob er mit seiner Lebenskraft und Seele selbst darin sei, sich bewege, hebe, auf und nieder schwinde, ins Weite dehne'.
- <sup>10</sup> While Wundt referred beauty to physiological conditions, recent neuro-scientific research correlates beauty to stimulations in the medial orbito-frontal cortex. The area of study changes but the fundamental structure of argument is the similar: beauty requires no analogical mediation to an affect but is the measurable result of stimulations. See Ishizu and Zeki (2011) and Kawabata and Zeki (2004). For a reaction on these attempts, see Hyman (2010).
- <sup>11</sup> Rykwert does refer to Wölfflin's famous *Principles of Art History* (1915), especially to his association of the linear with a 'new objectivity' (*neue Sachlichkeit*) and his distinction between the Baroque sensation (*Reiz*) and the re-emerging outline of the 'singular form' (Rykwert 1996: 252). The *Prolegomena* is also mentioned *en passant* in Dodds and Tavernon's *Body and Building*, but they do not thoroughly address it.
- <sup>12</sup> The notion of 'vital feeling' was central to Kant's aesthetics. It appears regularly in the *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790), as when Kant argues that while grasping a regular and purposeful building from an aesthetic perspective, the subject perceives the representation solely from the perspective of how it affect its 'vital feeling' (*Lebensgefühl*), thus bringing about a feeling of pleasure or displeasure (Kant 1976: 115). While the beautiful 'brings with it a feeling of the promotion of life' (*ein Gefühl der Beförderung des Lebens bei sich führt*), sublime pleasure is indirect: it begins with 'the feeling of a momentary inhibition of the vital powers'



(*augenblicklichen Hemmung der Lebenskräfte*) and continues with their intense 'outpouring' (*Ergießung*); see Kant (1976: 165).

- <sup>13</sup> Wölfflin writes, 'Aesthetic perception even transposes that most intimate experience of our own body onto inanimate matter' (Wölfflin 1994: 159) ['Die ästhetische Anschauung überträgt diese intimste Erfahrung unseres Körpers auch auf die leblose Natur'] (Wölfflin 1946: 22)
- <sup>14</sup> The original reads, 'Kräftige Säulen bewirken in uns energische Innervationen, nach der Weite oder Enge der räumlichen Verhältnisse richtet sich die Respiration, wir innervieren, als ob wir diese tragende Säulen wären und atmen so tief und voll, als wäre unsre Brust so weit wie diese Hallen [...] der architektonische Eindruck [...] wesentlich in einem unmittelbaren körperlichen Gefühl beruhe' (Wölfflin 1946: 18).
- <sup>15</sup> Goethe writes, 'Yet, because matter can never exist and act without spirit and spirit without matter, matter too can increase, just as spirit cannot be denied attraction and repulsion' ['Weil aber die Materie nie ohne Geist, der Geist nie ohne Materie existiert und wirksam sein kann, so vermag auch die Materie sich zu steigern, so wie sich der Geist nicht nehmen läßt, anzuziehen und abzustoßen'] (Goethe 1975: 48). See also the original essay, *Die Natur* (1789), which is continued in the fragment entitled *Erläuterung zu dem aphoristischen Aufsatz 'Die Natur'* (Goethe an Kanzler v. Müller, 1828).
- <sup>16</sup> In *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (1784–1791), Herder argues that creation (*Bildung, Genesis*) is the activity of 'organic forces' (*organische Kräfte*), 'the impact of internal forces, arranged by nature in a mass, that develop themselves, in which they will make themselves visible' ['eine Wirkung innerer Kräfte, denen die Natur eine Masse vorbereitet hatte, die sie sich zubilden, in der sie sich sichtbar machen sollten'] (Herder 1971: 134). On Herder's *Ideen*, see especially book 5, chapter 2, 'No force of nature is without organ; but the organ is not the force that works through it' ['Keine Kraft der Natur ist ohne Organ; das Organ ist aber nie die Kraft selbst, die mittelst jenem wirkt'].
- <sup>17</sup> See Vitruvius (1914), especially book 3, *On Symmetry: In Temples and In the Human Body* where the structure of the temple is presented as reflecting the 'harmony in the symmetrical relations of the different parts to the general magnitude of the whole' (Vitruvius 1914: 72–73).
- <sup>18</sup> Carl Jung's dichotomy of introversion vs. extroversion echoes Worringer's of abstraction vs. empathy. Empathy matches extroversion because an extroverted libido is directed towards an object that it wants to assimilate. Abstraction corresponds to introversion as the movement away from the object that is perceived 'by purely intellectual thought, crystallized and fixated into the rigid forms of law, the universal, the typical' (Jung 1916: 293). Abstraction is the consequence of an introversion that subordinates reality to abstract thought. The geometric structures of the primitive man are strategies of defending oneself from a world that is perceived as deeply disquieting.

<sup>19</sup> Worringer argues that the abstract line is purely psychic, 'transcending all senses, non-sensitive or supersensible movement' ['über alle Sinne erhabenen, unsinnlichen oder [...] übersinnlichen Bewegtheit'] (Worringer 1920: 35). He adds, 'the northern line does not live from any impression that we bestow on it, but seems to have its own expression which is stronger than our life' ['die nordische Linie lebt nicht von einem Eindruck, den wir ihr willig geben, sondern sie scheint einen eigenen Ausdruck zu haben, der stärker ist als unser Leben'] (Worringer 1920: 32).

<sup>20</sup> See Clara Öhlschläger's introduction to Worringer (2007).

<sup>21</sup> This would be the topic of a different paper, yet the same premise justifies the utopian and fascinating projects of Shusaku Arakawa and Madeline Gins. Their houses that promise to make death redundant combine design with thought experiments. They are all based on a profound understanding of the human body with all its conscious and unconscious patterns) (see Arakawa and Gins (2002)).

### Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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