Unity and inevitability: Classic/Baroque and the universal

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In the conclusion to his *Classic Art* of 1899 – a book which deals mainly with painting - Wölfflin outlines four formal characteristics of the classic:

- repose, spaciousness, mass and size
- simplification and lucidity
- complexity
- unity and inevitability

The last of these is decisive. Wölfflin had begun his book with the polemical statement that "The word 'classic' has, for us, a rather chilly sound."[1] This coldness, I would argue, derives from its respect of the notion of *unity* or identity. Wölfflin's comparison of Ghirlandaio's with Leonardo's *Last Supper* illustrates this well. Leonardo's work is presented as "the most popular picture in the whole of Italian art", having a simplicity and expressiveness that "impresses itself upon everyone".[2] Its importance for Wölfflin is indicated by its position as the first example given of the classic. He makes comparison with Ghirlandaio's fresco in the church of Ognissanti in Florence, dating from fifteen years earlier.   The similarities – the frontal view, the room shown in perspective, the table – only serve to emphasise the radical differences between the styles of the two frescos. These include the centrality of Christ, the relocation of Judas to the far side of the table, and the isolation of Christ (St John no longer sleeps on his breast). All these differences serve one aim: to unify Leonardo's composition and give it a certain inevitability.

To my eye and prejudice, it is the Ghirlandaio which is the masterpiece, and the Leonardo which is indeed exemplary of the chilly quality of the classic. It seems to have one aim, which is to gather all the components of the composition and subsume them under unity or identity: the perspective of the room, the centrality of the painted door or window, the centrality of Christ, the subsumption of the disciples to the figure of Christ. By contrast, as Wölfflin says, "Ghirlandaio's picture is a gathering without a centre"; the centre is left empty, and its very emptiness is emphasised by the console supporting the vault above.[3] Wölfflin calls the console "unfortunate", and says that Ghirlandaio in response to it and "without allowing it to embarrass him.. calmly moves his Christ to one side."[4]

This seems to me to be a very odd way of analysing what Wölfflin acknowledges is "one of the master's best works."[5] Are we really to believe that Ghirlandaio started his composition with the vault and the console and then subsequently had to compromise – shockingly without embarrassment – by shifting Christ to one side? The argument is patently unsustainable, but what is interesting here is not the attempt to prove Wölfflin wrong but rather the identification of a symptom. When a writer as rigorous as Wölfflin makes an unsustainable argument, this generally indicates something of importance.

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[1] Heinrich Wölfflin, *Classic Art*, trans. Peter and Linda Murray, London: Phaidon, 1994, xv.
[2] Op. cit., 23.
[3] Op. cit., 25.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Op. cit., 23.

On one level, this symptom is the result of contrasting the earlier work with Leonardo's unified composition and the raising of the latter and its strategies to the position of an ideal. However, this late nineteenth century symptom calls to be viewed also at a more abstract level of thought. The depreciation of Ghirlandaio's last supper seems to me to derive from a more general phenomenon - what Nietzsche at around the same time calls "nihilism", a notion which Gilles Deleuze discusses at some length in his 1962 book on the philosopher.[6] For Deleuze, the Nietzschean notion of nihilism means the depreciation of life as it is, in the name of a transcendent value or ideal.[7] It means the judging of life as being lower than that transcendent value or ideal. This is almost the opposite of how the word nihilism is usually used. My argument is that Wölfflin is engaging in such a nihilism by positing unity, inevitability and the ideal as being that from which the Ghirlandaio falls short. He carries out not merely an *empirical* comparison between the two frescos, but passes clear and more broadly-based judgement on the latter's lack of centre and coherence. From the point of view of Nietzsche and Deleuze, we could say that Ghirlandaio's work, in its very lack of centre, in its displacing of Christ by the mundanity of a console, in the sense of a multiplicity of different things occurring at the same time within the fresco, is a celebration of life which, whilst undoubtedly composed, does not subsume it under a unitary ideal. We could perhaps say that this is the Christ and events of the messy empirically of the gospels, before the advent of an idealised Pauline Christianity.

Wölfflin's earlier *Renaissance and Baroque* is concerned with architecture, and here the chilliness of the high renaissance – the early years of the 16th century – is also explicitly presented as an ideal from which architecture can and does descend.[8] There was a "golden age", and this golden age terminates (for architecture) in 1520, after which "not one really pure work was produced."[9] The baroque was something "into which the Renaissance degenerated."[10] Wölfflin acknowledges that he is repeating a nihilistic theme which had been a staple of architectural history for the preceding two hundred years, and it is clear that he does not himself depreciate the baroque in this way. But his analysis of the architecture of the 16th century is nonetheless conceptually organised around the *topos* of the ideal unified form and the subsequent deliberate removal of that unity. As Werner in his essay on Wölfflin quotes:

> Maß und Form, Einfalt und Linienadel, Stille der Seele und sanfte Empfindung, das waren die großen Orte seines Kunstevangeliums. Krystallhelles Wasser sein Lieblingssymbol. – Man setzt das Gegentheil eines jeden dieser Begriffe und man hat das Wesen der neuen Kunst bezeichnet.[11]

However, as Werner noted in his call for papers, in *Renaissance and Baroque* the disjunction between the unified ideal of the early years of the cinquecento and the "baroque" into which it descends is characteristic not of what we would now generally call baroque architecture. For early Wölfflin, baroque architecture virtually *terminates* rather than begins with Carlo Maderno at the turn of the 17th century. The contrast between unity and deliberate lack of unity in architectural composition is a contrast between high renaissance and what we now call mannerism, exemplified perhaps most clearly in the Roman works of Bramante on the one hand and that of Michelangelo on the other.

It is in 1915 with *Principles of Art History* that Wölfflin fully addresses 17th and 18th century baroque and rococo. The subtitle of the book – "The problem of the Development of Style

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[6] Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson, London: Athlone Press, 1983.

[7] Op. cit., 33, 34, 96.

[8] Heinrich Wölfflin, *Renaissance and Baroque*, trans. Kathrin Simon, London: Collins, 1964.

[9] Op. cit., 17.

[10] Op. cit., 15.

[11] Heinrich Wölfflin, *Renaissance und Barock*, München 1888: 74, quoted in Werner Oechslin, ,,,Das Wort ‚klassisch' hat für uns etwas Erkältendes." (Heinrich Wölfflin)', in *Welche Antike? Konkurrierende Rezeptionen des Altertums im Barock*, ed. Ulrich Heinen, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2011, 186. The English translation of this passage is very poor.

in Later Art" – again makes explicit that the conceptual framework of the discussion will derive from the positing of an ideal or origin from which "late" work is then derived. This time, the characteristics which are analysed are:

- linear and painterly (a neologism for *malerisch*)
- plane and recession
- closed and open form
- multiplicity and unity
- clearness and unclearness

and the position of the high renaissance prototype has apparently altered somewhat from his analysis 15 years earlier. Unity is no longer posited as characteristic of the classic; on the contrary, classic architecture has a multiplicity to it which is aligned with its *clearness* and *linear* qualities, whereas later – baroque and rococo - art and architecture combines unity with a painterly quality and a certain unclearness. Again, two or three examples will serve: on the one hand, Alberti's Palazzo Rucellai, where the architectural elements are each clearly and in linear manner distinguished from each other as a set of multiple pieces each of which have their own integrity and which, in principle, seem to be able to extend as far as necessary in any direction, the unfinished right edge of the facade only serving to emphasise this quality. Or – another example which Wölfflin himself gives – the Palazzo della Cancelleria. On the other hand, almost any canonical work of baroque or rococo architecture will serve to justify a formal characterisation of *unity* (rather than a multiplicity of individually distinct elements) and an unclearness and painterliness of overall form. (San Carlo, St Gallen).

We can construct a table of what constitutes the classic and its antithesis in each case:

	Renaissance and Baroque (1888)	*Classic Art* (1899)	*Principles of Art History* (1915)
Classic	Linear Calm Grace Static	Repose, spaciousness, mass and size; Simplification and lucidity; Complexity; Unity and inevitability	Linear Planar Closed Multiple Clear
Baroque (1888) = mannerist	Painterly (*malerisch*) Grand Massive Movement		
Baroque and rococo (1915)			Painterly (*malerisch*) Recession Open form Unity Unclearness

How to interpret the differences between these classifications, and in particular the displacement of the value of unity from classic across to the baroque? The question as to whether unity applies or does not apply to the classic might depend on what you compare it with (mannerism or the baroque); or might well depend on the specifics of the examples chosen. After all, the Rucellai façade is a multiple thing which we can imagine extended to infinity: would we say the same thing of the Rucellai tomb - which seems to me to have a distinct unifying sense to it. Alternatively, the change could be a symptom of the slipperiness of names, an inherent problem of nomination: we could say that the classic quality of *unity* which is seen in Leonardo's *Last Supper* comes to be renamed *clearness*

in the 1915 classification. Or it could be that there are numerous ways of creating a unified work of art or architecture in the sense that Alberti intended (following from Aristotle's poetics) when he required that the work should be such as to allow no additions or subtractions without spoiling its perfection – a principle that Wölfflin quotes a number of times in support of his thesis. Unity (or the lack of it) would therefore be operating on a number of levels: at the highest level of abstraction it could be said that Alberti's unity holds true of any work of art or architecture worthy of the name, whereas on a more concrete level of comparison between specific works or styles of art, unity and lack of unity would become a continuum by which to classify things.

Or are these differences symptomatic of the inherent limitations of any formal analysis in its application to empirical history? An iconographic or hermeneutic analysis would tend to disenfranchise the whole idea of defining something like the baroque or the classic in terms of form. However, that a mode of thought is inexact and open to ambiguity does not necessarily invalidate it – perhaps the contrary. Wölfflin himself is careful to state that the art work is much more than just form – a warning which is all too often ignored.[12] We should be careful to make a distinction between *analysis* and *ontology*. What is helpful in analysis, in the drawing of distinctions between phenomena (individual works of art, or styles), is not necessarily relevant or helpful in determining what the *being* of a work consists of; and conversely, the ontology of a work – a statement of what it *is* – does not of itself provide a criteria for analysis.

Nonetheless, we can summarise and say that for Wölfflin, the Classic is *unified* or *clear* phenomena – that is, a concept that is determined by a certain oneness or identity - and can be ascertained *formally* by an analysis of the form of the work.

In his various works on the 17th century thinkers Spinoza and Leibnitz, whose work he links with a specifically Baroque conception of the world, Gilles Deleuze contrasts their philosophies with "classic" philosophy, which runs as a stream from Aristotle through to Descartes (and beyond, to Kant). Classic philosophy is *essentialist[13],* whereby a thing is defined as that which fulfils its essence to a greater or lesser extent; and it is *substantialist* whereby a thing is defined as substance and therefore as *form*. As Deleuze and Guattari state:

> Classicism refers to form-matter relation, or rather a form-substance relation (substance is precisely a matter endowed with form).

As Deleuze says, substance is, at bottom, form. There is therefore a non-coincidental coherence between Wölfflin's formal method of ascertaining what classic art is, and the nature – in general – of the classic as defined philosophically. The classic is defined in classic fashion – by means of a *unified essence* and the *form* of a substance.

Deleuze is fascinated by the baroque style, as well as baroque thought, and he uses Wölfflin's formal analysis – largely from *Renaissance and Baroque* – a number of times in his book on the baroque fold, a book which calls into question this classical mode of thought. It is as if within the formal characteristics of the style, one could find a hint as to the overcoming of the classical notion of form. Baroque architecture is not only "late" or derivative in relation to a unified or clear renaissance ideal architecture: it potentially calls into question the basis on which we would define something as ideal in the first place, or rather "the ideal" as a category of thought in itself. This in turn would address the Deleuzian/Nietzschean theme mentioned above of nihilism. We could say that the setting

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[12] Heinrich Wölfflin, *Classic Art*, 288.
[13] Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold –Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley, London: Athlone Press, 1993, 56.

up of an ideal style and then the derivation of later styles from that as a process of formal degeneration or development in the manner of Wölfflin is a way of overcoming a pure empiricism of history - but a nihilistic way of doing so. Now what is interesting about Deleuze is that he often claims to be an empiricist, but a strange sort of empiricist who finally calls for a transcendental empiricism.[14] Here, *transcendental* is distinguished from *transcendent*. Rather than imposing a concept on our intramundane existence, what Deleuze is searching for are concepts which are immanent to that existence. Returning to our examples of the *Last Supper*, we could say that Leonardo's is the exposition of a transcendent concept of formal unity which tends towards a nihilism depreciating the intramundane world; whereas Ghirlandaio's concept remains immanent to that world by respecting its inherent multiplicity and lack of centre.

If there is a clear coherence between the abstract thought of classicism, the way in which classic art and architecture is defined, and the identified *formal* characteristics of classic art, then the question would be whether a similar link can be made between the anti-classic philosophers of the baroque age and baroque architecture.

For Deleuze, the definition of the baroque is inherently problematic. As he says, it is questionable whether the baroque even exists:
> It is nonetheless strange to deny the existence of the Baroque in the way we speak of unicorns or herds of pink elephants. For in this case the concept is given, while in the case of the Baroque the question entails knowing if a concept can be invented that is capable (or not) of attributing existence to it. Irregular pearls exist, but the Baroque has no reason for existing without a concept that forms this very reason. It is easy to call the Baroque inexistent; it suffices not to propose its concept.[15]

But this concept of the baroque does not need to refer to an essence. For instance, Spinoza's question is not about essence, but about power: he famously asks in the *Ethics*: what can a body *do*? The thing (architecture and art included) is, and is regarded as, no longer a substance with a form, but a collection of relations, a series of nested individualities to infinity, or, in the case of Leibniz, a series of folds to infinity. The relational character of reality extends, for the baroque, to the mathematics of integration and differentiation – dx/dy as the subsistence of the relation in the absence of its terms. This, for Deleuze, is what characterises baroque thought: the introduction of a notion of the "fold to infinity" which is taken directly from certain formal characteristics of baroque art (especially Bernini's sculpture). But what is demanded here is that the formalism of the fold be taken to the limit, *beyond* the classical question of form and substance. The folds of St Teresa's clothing are taken as indicative of folds within folds within folds, to infinity. In other words, the fold becomes *primary* relative to substance. It is not that there exists a substance which comes to be folded, but rather that the fold is made up only of smaller folds, just as Leibniz says that "the machines of nature, namely living organisms, are still machines even in their smallest parts, *ad infinitum.*"[16] The little machine is a little fold, and what is disavowed is any substantial final atom from which those machines or folds would be made. Substance, rather, is merely an after-effect of those folds or relations to infinity.

We can see this fold within fold, or machine within machine, echoed within the formal structure of baroque architecture, even at the outset. Carlo Maderno's work, as I have argued elsewhere,[17] exhibits this formal structure of inclusion, evident for instance in his very distinctive use of double pediments both at Santa Susanna and on the rear façade of the Villa Aldobrandini (note this is a speculative reconstruction of the pediment – the

[14] Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence – Essays on a life*, trans. Anne Boyman, New York: Zone Books, 2005, 25.

[15] Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold –Leibniz and the Baroque*, 33,

[16] Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz, *Monadology*, trans. Nicholas Rescher, London: Routledge, 1991, section 64, 25.

[17] Tim Gough, *A structure of Carlo Maderno's work*, paper at Carlo Maderno Architetto e ingegnere nella Roma barocca, Convegno internazionale a cura di Axel Christoph Gampp, November 2006.

original outer one having been removed). Further examples of this formal structure of inclusion can be seen in the windows of the Palazzo Barbarini and the entrance to the staircase of Palazzo Mattei; these can be interpreted as perspectival in nature, but what we are seeing here too is the inclusion of elements or frames within frames. Perhaps we could argue that it is this nesting or folding to infinity which finally distinguishes, at the beginning of the 17th century, the onset of baroque architecture, and in this regard see a formal consonance between architecture and the possibilities for a non-classical philosophy (which is also a non-Cartesian philosophy).

Similar structures are to be found in key examples of baroque architecture, in the work of Borromini, Pietro da Cortona (at Santi Luca e Martina and Santa Maria della Pace) and very distinctively in the work of Guarini. At the other end of what we might broadly term the baroque, we can see these folds within folds, machines within machines in the work of the brothers Asam at Weltenburg.

Conversely, there is a classicism of the baroque period and of the 17th century more generally that seems to me to be defined by its lack of interest in such structures. It has been said of Bernini that he was baroque in plan but not in elevation[18]; however, I see little evidence of the baroque in either plan or elevation of much of his architectural work, unless we define the baroque plan merely in terms of a penchant for the ellipse; here at Castel Gandolfo, or even at San Andrea on the Quirinale, or indeed in the colonnade at St Peters, which is surely neo-classical in spirit. Moving beyond Italy, the French were singularly uninterested in the baroque: we can see in Perrault, Francois Blondel and others an avoidance of anything resembling the complex structures of the Roman baroque or the anti-Cartesianism of Spinoza or Leibniz. Both of these sets of examples reflect the nature of the classical in another sense; Bernini, in his architecture, tends towards the position of the academy, of the professional once removed from the day-to-day work and understanding of the guildsman. He tends towards Alberti's suggestion that the architect should present a set of drawings to site and not actually get involved in the implementation of the *idea*. Perrault and Blondel of course exemplify the professionalism of the French academy, ie the disjunction of the design from the implementation. Here we see a "return" to the ideal, to the nihilistic tendency to depreciate the intramundane in the name of the classical ideal: in essence, the academy posits a chilly realm of thought and activity on the part of the architect, a realm of the idea transcendent to the world in which it comes to exist. This is famously in contrast to Borromini, whose architecture is predicated on his activities as a craftsman; likewise the Asam brothers and really the whole of the rococo, which relies on an intimate relation and interplay between craft and idea; and of course in contrast to Bernini himself when he forgoes architecture and engages directly with material in his sublime sculpture.

What is at stake here is the manner in which we escape from a pure empiricism or nominalism. How do we posit or work with the universal, with that which allows us to throw the concept or the idea across time, to draw connections between disparate phenomena? Deleuze's fascination with Wölfflin's formalism and his conception of the baroque allows us to see hinted in baroque architecture an alternative to the unity and seeming inevitability of the classic philosophical notion of form and substance. Paradoxically, it is by pushing form to the limit – something we see in the extremity of the best of baroque and rococo architecture – that formalism, and with it nihilism, can be overcome and a non-classical ontology discovered.

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[18] By Peter Carl