

Global Aesthetics

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The period in the visual arts between (roughly) 1860 and (roughly) 1960 is known as modernism. One grand question in the philosophy of art history (or philosophical art history) is what makes modernism in the visual arts different from other periods and movements. The aim of this paper is not to give necessary and sufficient conditions for modernist visual arts – I don't think this is a feasible task. Rather, I want to capture a crucial aspect of modernist visual arts – its relation to pictorial organization. I will argue that modernism in painting, photography and film has a unique attitude towards pictorial organization that is importantly different from all other periods and artistic movements: it thematizes the conflict between two-dimensional and three-dimensional pictorial organization. But I am explicitly not saying that this distinctive feature can capture everything that is interesting about modernism. I don't think we can find anything that is both non-trivial and is still in common in all human endeavors labelled as modernist. But if we narrow down the question in two ways (to two-dimensional visual art and to one aspect thereof, namely, pictorial organization), we may be able to make some progress.
