

# Representation without background?

## A critical reading of Wollheim and Greenberg on the representational character of abstract pictures

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### 1. *The framework*

What do we mean when we say that a picture is abstract? Is there any relevant aspect that abstract and figurative pictures share? In particular, is there any similarity in the way abstract and figurative pictures represent? These are the key questions that outline the framework of this article. Focussing on some claims addressed by Richard Wollheim and Clement Greenberg I investigate how the concepts of depicted figure, background of a pictorial scene and ground of a picture are relevant for an understanding of the relation between figurative and abstract pictures, especially when it comes to consider whether abstract pictures can be said to represent pictorially.

### 2. *"Abstract" pictures and figurative pictures*

There are various uses of the adjective "abstract" in relation to pictures. (1) A picture can have an abstract *subject* if, for instance, it is said to represent an immaterial object. In the Christian tradition, the Holy Spirit is often represented by depictions of doves. It must be noted that a picture's abstract subject is not the content that is *depicted* by the picture, because it does not have visual features: when the Holy Spirit is represented by the picture of a dove it is *symbolically* represented. The object that is *pictorially* represented is the dove. (2) Figurative pictures in general can be said to have abstract *character* since, in order to depict, the painter needs to *abstract* from a variety of elements that characterize the realm of our experience, such as the third dimension, movement and the succession of events in time. (3) There is a use of the expression "abstract pic-

ture”, however, that is much more widespread than the others: “abstract picture” is intended as synonymous with “non-figurative picture” and is applied to pictures that have been produced, largely, in the realm of Western visual art since the beginning of the XX century. This is the meaning of “abstract picture” I shall concern myself with. If a non-figurative picture is an abstract picture, then one could think that figuration is what abstract pictures abstract from. Sometimes this is true: abstract pictures are abstractions from subjects that could be rendered figuratively. This, for instance, is true of many of Wassily Kandinsky’s earlier abstract landscapes, where we can observe that the painter progressively explored new ways to make his landscapes less and less evident to the viewer (to the point that no landscape could be recognized while looking at the pictures), in order to maximize the viewer’s attention to the disposition of marks and colours on the pictorial surface. The same is true of Piet Mondrian’s *Tree Series* (1908-1913), where the painter has proceeded through progressive abstractions from the figurative representation of trees. However, it is clear that there are many cases of abstract painting where it does not make sense to claim that the painter has abstracted from any visual object or scene: think of Mark Rothko’s late period abstracts, for instance. Therefore, it would not be correct to claim that all abstract paintings are abstractions from subjects that could, in principle, be figuratively represented.

What is certain is that the label “abstract picture” originated in the context of *avant-garde* visual art in the early XX century. It can be said that a strategy of displacement of the horizons of art, favoured by *avant-garde* visual art, consisted in creating objects which made it difficult, or impossible, or meaningless, to easily trace the story that went from the presence of a certain (real or fictional) visual object (or object of a certain kind) and its representation through a visual art medium. I think that the best way intuitively to express the difference between a figurative and an abstract picture is to say that while, when we look at a figurative picture, we find it natural to describe it in terms of the objects it depicts, when we look at an abstract picture we are prompted to describe what we see only in terms of the aspect of the marks and colours we see on the pictorial surface.

Is there any relevant aspect that abstract and figurative pictures share, then? In particular, is there any similarity in the way abstract and figurative pictures represent? These are the key questions that outline the framework of this article.

In what follows I shall assume that pictorial representation is a distinctive feature of (at least) all figurative pictures. With «pictorial representation» I intend the representation of visual objects (or aspects of them) by means of the pictorial content of two-

dimensional pictorial surfaces (the content determined by the arrangement of marks and colours on pictorial surfaces). This is a basic definition that does not require any commitment to a specific view on the understanding of pictorial representation. The hypothesis from which I shall depart here is the following: if we agree that pictorial representation is a distinctive feature of figurative pictures, then in order to understand the relation between abstract and figurative pictures it makes sense to ask whether abstracts can be pictorial representations. I shall first examine Richard Wollheim's claim that certain abstract pictures pictorially represent in the same way that figurative pictures do, focussing especially on his understanding of pictorial elements emerging from or receding out of the *background* of pictorial scenes. Then, I shall criticize Wollheim's proposal and show how alternative conceptual tools for understanding the representational character of abstract pictures may be offered by Clement Greenberg. In particular, I shall insist on the distinction between *background* (of a depicted scene) and *ground* (of a picture *qua* material object).

### 3. *Richard Wollheim and the emergence/recession criterion for pictorial representation*

In *Painting as an Art* (1987) Wollheim argues that pictorial representation is always connected to a visual phenomenon, seeing-in, that happens in presence of a variety of objects, such as clouds, paintings, walls. Seeing-in has a special phenomenology: «When seeing-in occurs, two things happen: I am visually aware of the surface I look at, and I discern something standing out in front of, or (in certain cases) receding behind something else» (Wollheim [1987]: 48). The «something», which is discerned, is the representational object of the pictorial representation: for there to be pictorial experience such an object (i) must be perceived while simultaneously paying attention to the pictorial surface and (ii) it must be collocated in a spatial dimension as a consequence of the experience of discerning «something standing out in front of, or [...] receding behind something else». This definition has interesting consequences for abstract pictures, as the following passage shows:

Abstract art, as we have it, tends to be an art that is at once representational and abstract. Most abstract paintings display images: or, to put it another way, the experience that we are required to have in front of them is certainly one that involves attention to the marked surface but it is also one that involves an awareness of depth. In imposing the second demand as well as the first, abstract paintings reveal themselves to be representational, and it is at this point irrelevant that we can seldom put into adequate words just what they represent. (Wollheim [1987]: 62)

Wollheim's argument can be summed up as follows:

(P1): for a picture to be a pictorial representation, the experience it elicits in a standard observer must include a sense of depth, which has to occur while the observer is looking at the marked surface of the picture;

(P2) when we experience depth in a picture we see something standing out in front of something else or receding behind something else;

(P3): several abstract pictures elicit such an experience of depth in the viewers who focus their attention on the pictorial surface;

(C): it follows that those abstract pictures meet the requirements for pictorial representation.

(P1) expresses Wollheim's claim that representational character is an aspect of pictures we discover by means of «thematization» of them (Wollheim [1987]: 20-25). According to Wollheim, thematizing pictures consists in attending to them while being guided by the goal of acquiring content or meaning. This way we establish a form of contact with their makers, because we, so to speak, set ourselves on the trace of their intention to communicate a given content *through* the pictures. Recognition of figures is just one of the possible outcomes of the thematization of pictures: by means of thematizing the pictorial content of an abstract picture, for example, we could grasp an artist's intention to represent some concept or emotional state. What is relevant for the present discussion, however, is that according to Wollheim, whenever we thematize a picture it is essential (i) that we have a specific experience of depth while looking at it (i.e. the experience of seeing an element of the picture emerging from something else or receding behind something else) and (ii) that this experience occurs simultaneously to our focussing our visual attention on the surface of the picture. For a better understanding of Wollheim's argument, we can split (P1) into two separate premises:

(P1a): for a picture to be a pictorial representation, the experience it elicits in a standard observer must include a sense of depth, which has to occur while the observer is looking at the marked surface of the picture;

(P1b): in order to grasp the representational character of a picture an observer must *thematize* the pictorial surface, i.e. seek to establish a contact with the picture's maker by means of grasping her intentions to communicate a given content *through* the picture.

According to Wollheim, then, the distinction between figurative and abstract pictures does not correspond to the distinction between representational and non-representational pictures, because also what we see on the surface of certain abstract pictures can

be thematized in a specifically pictorial way, i.e. it is such that it elicits an experience of seeing-in. Let us call this *the emergence/recession criterion for pictorial representation*. Wollheim brings two examples to illustrate his point: on the one hand Hans Hoffmann's *Pompeii* (1959) on the other hand Barnett Newmann's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1948). The first painting can be seen as an agglomerate of *overlapping* rectangles and is therefore said to be an abstract picture that triggers an experience of depth. The second painting presents some thin lines sharply cutting through what would otherwise look like a single monochrome surface. This is said to be an abstract picture that does not trigger an experience of depth (Wollheim [1987]: 62). The first picture is a pictorial representation while the second one is not.

Wollheim's account presents a general problem: as Jerrold Levinson and John Hyman have pointed out, it is difficult to understand how access to the painter's intentions could provide a standard of correctness for depiction. Compare the case of pictures with the one of linguistic utterances: it is correct to say that in order to produce a meaningful utterance a speaker must intend to say something, whereas it is not correct to say that in order for an utterance to be meaningful the speaker must mean something by the words she utters. If I paint a portrait of my mother with a wall on her back, I intend to paint a portrait of my mother with a wall on her back. It may happen that, because of the way I have painted the wall, the shape of a tree can be distinguished on it, although I did not intend to depict the shape of a tree. The shape of the tree pictorially represents the tree although I did not mean anything by painting it<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, we might reject (C) claiming that (P1b) is false. I shall not pursue this strategy here and shall limit my analysis to the considerations Wollheim dedicates to abstract pictures. It might be, after all, that they illuminate a relevant aspect of those images, and that the validity of them does not entirely depend on (P1b). A different theory of pictorial experience – let us call it (P1b\*) – might be addressed, while maintaining that what is crucial for such an experience is that a sense of depth is triggered in the viewer by the picture, in the specific way described in premise (P2). This way C could be derived by (P1a), (P1b\*), (P2) and (P3).

<sup>1</sup> See Hyman (2006): 137-138. Levinson stresses that «what it is for the pictorial intentions of the artist of P to be *fulfilled* cannot be specified apart from what suitable viewers are *enabled* to see in P» therefore «the artist's intention cannot be thought as an independent condition to which viewers' responses can be held accountable» (Levinson [1998]: 231-32).

The trouble is that, as John Hyman has observed (Hyman [2006]: 134), (P2) does not describe an experience that necessarily has to take place when we are aware that a picture pictorially represents certain objects. For example, in the case of a stick-drawing of a human figure on an otherwise blank sheet of paper like the one in fig. 1, we have a figure that is not shown in depth and a ground that is not the background of the depicted scene, since it does not contribute to the content of the picture. The ground, in fact, is certainly part of the surface of the picture *qua* object, but there are no clues that prompt us to consider it as part of the depictive content of the picture<sup>2</sup>. If the stick-figure is painted on a ground, but without a background, then it is not represented as if it were occupying a three-dimensional space. Therefore we have a representational picture that does not set up an emergence/recession dynamics and, therefore, a picture that does not trigger a sense of depth in the viewer. To reformulate the point in more general terms, I argue that it is possible to represent *two-dimensional aspects of objects* pictorially (for instance, we can have a sketchy pictorial representation of the *outline* of a human being) and at the same time not to represent *objects as occupying the three-dimensional space* (for instance, we can have a pictorial representation that is *merely* the representation of an outline). It follows that at least certain PRs do not trigger an experience of depth in the viewer. Given that there are representational pictures that do not trigger an experience of depth, then, Wollheim's emergence/recession criterion is not successful in discriminating between pictures that are representational and pictures that are not. We cannot use the emergence/recession criterion to argue that those abstract pictures which do not trigger a sense of depth in the viewer are not PRs.



To sum up, we can make the following claims: (i) the surface of a picture is its ground: it is that side of a material object which is covered in marks and colours with the intention to represent something; (ii) the ground or surface of a pictorial object can be used as the background of a depicted scene, but need not; (iii) the outline of a figure can

<sup>2</sup> The distinction between a picture's depictive content and its ground is a distinction between an aspect of the picture *qua* three-dimensional object and an aspect of the picture *qua* image. Whereas the ground belongs to the picture *qua* object (the pictorial medium), the depicted content is the content of the image.

be depicted without the figure being shown as being part of a three-dimensional pictorial scene, i.e. without there being any emergence/recession dynamics that we notice when we focus our attention on the surface of the picture. In this case the ground of the picture is not used as the background of any represented scene.

My hypothesis is that if there are figurative pictures that depict although they do not elicit an emergence/recession experience in the viewer, then, *contra* Wollheim, there might be abstract pictures that we might consider pictorial representations even if they do not trigger an emergence/recession experience in the viewer. I shall now show how certain claims by Clement Greenberg could be interpreted in order to support this hypothesis.

#### 4. *Clement Greenberg: abstract pictures and the figure/ground dynamics*

*Modernist Painters* (1960) – an essay by American art critic and theoretician Clement Greenberg – is widely considered to be one of the most accomplished examples of modernist art criticism: it identifies the defining character of modernist art and seeks to describe the logic of its development (the latter is a controversial attempt that is now widely rejected and which, at the same time, has granted to the essay much of its fame)<sup>3</sup>. With «modernist art» Greenberg refers to all those works of art which show a preoccupation with stressing what is peculiar of the art form they are exemplars of, especially as a reaction against the assimilation of art to entertainment – a conception that, according to Greenberg, became widespread with the Enlightenment (Greenberg [1960]: 774). Greenberg's definition, of course, presupposes that it is possible to identify one or more aspects that are peculiar to a certain art form only. According to Greenberg, in the case of pictorial art the defining characters are «the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of pigment» (Greenberg [1960]: 775). I shall not concern myself with the doubts that the idea of identifying once and for all the defining character of a given art form might raise. I shall assume that Greenberg has a point here, and evaluate his claims without contesting this presupposition, since an assessment of the

<sup>3</sup> For a recent and detailed analysis of Greenberg's work see Jones (2005) and for a strictly philosophical understanding of Greenberg's ideas on modernism see Danto (1997): 61-78. Here I shall not concern myself with Greenberg's understanding (or misunderstanding) of the history of modern and contemporary art. What I am interested in is the fact that Greenberg had to provide a definition of pictorial art in order to articulate his thesis on modernist art, and that this definition allowed him to trace interesting links between traditional figurative art and abstract art.

general validity of his claims (or lack thereof) is not necessary to the present analysis. What is relevant for me here is that Greenberg gives us conceptual tools to understand a prominent modernist art form: abstract painting.

According to Greenberg (1960: 774), modernist pictorial art, broadly conceived, is all that pictorial art which stresses the flatness of the surface, as opposed to the pictorial art which concentrates on sculptural and illusionistic effects (the Venetians as opposed to Michelangelo, David as opposed to Fragonard, the Impressionists as opposed to *Salon* painters and so on). There is, however, a narrower sense in which «modernism» designates that pictorial art which makes the stressing of its defining features *its main concern and very theme*<sup>4</sup>. This is a tendency that strongly emerged with *avant-garde* art and is a dominant character of much XX century art. In *Modernist Painters* Greenberg seeks to explain what it is that makes also paintings that cannot intuitively be distinguished from decorative patterns, or from meaningless flat surfaces, belong to the realm of modernist pictorial art. In trying to elucidate where the boundary between pictorial and non-pictorial art is to be traced, then, Greenberg further refines his requirements for a work to be a modernist pictorial work. Here are Greenberg's remarks on «borderline» paintings:

Modernist painting in its latest phase [...] has abandoned in principle [...] the representation of the kind of space that recognisable, three-dimensional objects can inhabit [...However], The first mark made on a surface destroys its virtual flatness and the configuration of a Mondrian still suggests a kind of illusion of a third dimension. Only now it is a strictly pictorial, strictly optical third dimension. (Greenberg [1960]: 775-777)

A few lines below Greenberg qualifies the concept of «strictly optical third dimension» in painting as the illusion (triggered by modernist paintings) of a space «into which one can only look, can travel through only with the eye» as opposed to the «illusion» triggered by traditional paintings, «an illusion of space into which one could imagine oneself walking» (Greenberg [1960]: 777). «Illusion», then, could be paraphrased as «what the painting prompts us to imagine», what constitutes the visual subject of a given painting. Greenberg distinguishes between what standard paintings prompt us to imagine (i.e. a three-dimensional space «into which one could imagine oneself walking») and what borderline paintings such as Mondrian's grids prompt us to imagine. But how should we characterize the latter? On the one hand, we could claim that Mondrian's grids require us to imagine a purely bi-dimensional space, since, according to Greenberg,

<sup>4</sup> Greenberg (1960): 775. Greenberg explores this topic also in *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* (1939) and *Towards a New Laocoon* (1940).



here we are dealing with a space that can only be looked at; however, it is not clear why we should say that this kind of representation gives us «a kind of illusion» of the third dimension. It seems more reasonable to claim that we are not asked to imagine any three-dimensional space at all in this case. On the other hand, we could claim that Mondrian's grids require us to imagine a three-dimensional space through which, for some reason, we cannot imagine walking. But this does not make sense. Here we have reached a crossroads. If we do not want to reject Greenberg's proposal because of the inconsistency I have pointed out, then we need to settle for a charitable interpretation. There are, I believe, two ways to be charitable towards Greenberg: 1) we can decide not to give relevance to Greenberg's claim that Mondrian represents a space that can only be imagined to be *looked at*, and to accept instead his claim that Mondrian gives us a different form of «illusion» of the third dimension in his paintings; or 2) we can decide not to give relevance to Greenberg's claim that Mondrian's is an «illusion» of the third dimension, and stress instead his claim that the space depicted by Mondrian is purely optical. The former reading has been suggested by Jason Gaiger (2009: chap. 6). In what follows I shall illustrate Gaiger's reading and argue that there are reasons to be sceptical towards his interpretive proposal. Then, I shall explore the latter reading, and argue that, although we might not be sure as to what exactly Greenberg had in mind, reading 2) might provide us with useful insights into the role of figure, ground and background in abstract pictures, in a direction different from that suggested by Wollheim.

Gaiger's interpretation is grounded in the analysis of another of Greenberg's essays, *The Pasted Paper Revolution* (1958). Here Greenberg concentrates on the contribution that the introduction of collage in the synthetic phase of cubism brings to the definition of modernist pictorial art. Referring to George Braque's *Fruit Dish and Glass* (1912) Greenberg argues:

The strips, the lettering, the charcoaled lines and the white paper begin to change places in depth with one another, and a process is set up in which every part of the picture takes its turn at occupying every plane, whether real or imagined, in it. The imaginary planes are all parallel to one another; their effective connection lies in their common relation to the surface; wherever a form on one plane slants or extends into another it immediately springs forward. The flatness of the surface permeates the illusion, and the illusion re-asserts itself in the flatness. The effect is to fuse the illusion with the picture plane without derogation of either – in principle. (Greenberg [1958]: 63)

Gaiger stresses how this passage allows to see that for Greenberg «the breakthrough of the collage technique lies not in the emphasis on surface pattern for its own sake – something that would be indistinguishable from a merely decorative design – but

in the dynamic tension that is set up between the picture surface and the representation of depth [...] This new and powerful “fusion” of the literal, physical surface of the picture with the depicted content simultaneously mobilizes and undermines what for Greenberg remains the one indispensable condition of pictorial representation – the establishment of a figure-ground relationship» (Gaiger [2009]: 128).

Gaiger stresses that for Greenberg the establishment of a figure-ground relationship is a necessary condition for a two-dimensional surface to be considered a picture. He argues that Greenberg «makes the working out of the relationship between the materiality of the picture surface and the representation of depth central to the development of modernist painting» (Gaiger [2009]: 130). That the representation of depth is central is Gaiger’s interpretation of Greenberg’s (1960) claim that «the first mark made on a surface destroys its virtual flatness and the configuration of a Mondrian still suggests a kind of illusion of a third dimension. Only now it is a strictly pictorial, strictly optical third dimension», and of Greenberg’s (1958) passage I have quoted above, where Greenberg says that a «dynamic tension [...] is set up between the picture surface and the representation of depth». According to Gaiger (2009: 131), Greenberg’s idea is very akin to Wollheim’s claim that a twofold phenomenology is the defining character of pictorial representation, because Greenberg stresses that it is crucial that the viewer be aware of a tension between the pictorial surface and the representation of depth.

I am sceptical towards this reading because, as we have seen above, I believe that while we can accept that Wollheim’s twofold phenomenology applies to the dialectic between figure and *background* of a pictorial scene, we do not have good reasons to claim that it applies to those pictures that depict figures without backgrounds, and I believe that Greenberg’s remarks are about the *figures* (or, more generally, the *pictorial content*) and the *ground* of certain paintings where we have no depicted background. (As I have explained in the previous section, whereas the ground is a property of the material support of a picture, the background is a property that the representational content of a picture might or might not have. A picture does not need to represent objects including a background). According to my reading, when Greenberg stresses that we need to distinguish between figure and ground in order for a surface to be a picture, he might be stressing that we need to regard the surface as hinting at something else by means of its visual properties in order to consider it a *pictorial* surface (as opposed to a decorative pattern or a mere two-dimensional surface), and that cubist collages (and Mondrian’s grids) point out this very fact about pictorial surfaces. This does not mean that Greenberg claims that all pictures, cubist collages and Mondrian’s grid paintings in-

cluded, need to set up a dialectic between figure and *background* in order to be considered pictures, and especially a dialectic of the kind described by Wollheim.

Let us go back to Greenberg's words and apply to them the new reading I have sketched:

The strips, the lettering, the charcoaled lines and the white paper begin to change places in depth with one another, and a process is set up in which every part of the picture takes its turn at occupying every plane, whether real or imagined, in it. [...] The flatness of the surface permeates the illusion, and the illusion re-asserts itself in the flatness. The effect is to fuse the illusion with the picture plane without derogation of either – in principle.

Greenberg says that the flatness of the surface in Braque's painting «permeates the illusion», that the two are fused together. What does this mean? «Illusion», I believe, refers to the dimension of the imagination a picture asks the viewer to enter, the pictorial world a picture asks the viewer to picture herself. According to this reading, what is peculiar about the pictorial world in Cubist collages is that it is purely two-dimensional («the imaginary planes are all parallel to one another»). How would Cubist collages achieve the effect of representing a purely two-dimensional world? Here, I believe, our understanding of Greenberg's use of the term «depth» is crucial. My suggestion is that what «changes places in depth» are the multiple layers applied on the surface of the collage, and not imagined forms in the pictorial world. Greenberg, then, might be claiming that the surface of the collage is multi-layered and therefore three-dimensional and, at the same time, he might be claiming that the surface of the collage is very democratic, in that «every part of the picture takes its turn at occupying every plane, whether real or imagined, in it». As a consequence, he might be stressing that, despite its three-dimensional character, the surface of the painting does not establish any hierarchy of planes, and that, therefore, it does not allow for ascribing depth to the pictorial world it asks us to imagine. The impossibility of establishing a hierarchy of planes on the pictorial surface would allow for the attribution of flatness, of two-dimensionality, to the imagined pictorial world<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> A reading of Mondrian's grids that firmly stresses their flat character has been suggested by John Golding: «Mondrian made full use of the grids or scaffoldings of high Analytic Cubism, but put them to new ends, right from the start. He was not concerned with opening his subjects into the space around them and then in exploring the tactility, the palpability of this space; [...] Mondrian wanted, on the contrary, to destroy the distinction between figure and ground, between matter and non-matter. The planes into which he dissolves the image and the space that surrounds it are invariably strictly frontal, and they reaffirm the flatness of the pictorial support. Although these planes hover and hang in front of and behind each other, they do not slide in and

The reading I have outlined supports interpretive hypothesis 2), according to which, from Greenberg's remarks on Mondrian it can be deduced that Greenberg did not believe «late modernist paintings» to trigger an experience of depth in the viewer and/or to make the viewer think about a three-dimensional scene, since Greenberg characterized them as fostering the illusion of a purely optical space. This reading is sustained by the observation that, in order to establish a figure/ground relation of the kind mentioned by Greenberg in his essay on Cubist collage, we only need to treat a suitable object as a picture, i.e. as a two-dimensional surface with marks and colours on it that we can regard as conveyors of pictorial meaning. This can be done both in the case of collage and in the case of Mondrian's grids, I believe, but it does not imply that we have a twofold experience of the kind described by Wollheim when looking at such pictures. The case of the recognition of a figure/background relation within a pictorial surface is different. If we identify a figure/background relation on a pictorial surface, this means that we have a good reason to describe the pictorial content of the picture in terms of a three-dimensional pictorial scene, to which we can attribute a background. In this case a sense of depth, or maybe an act of imagining depth, has to be taken into account.

The interpretive hypothesis I have sketched out is meant to illustrate that Greenberg's passages on Cubist collages and Mondrian's grids might be given a reading that would bring to conclusions incompatible with the ones Gaiger draws from them. I doubt that there is a way to settle the disagreement between Gaiger and me. What the introduction of an alternative explanatory hypothesis is supposed to stress is that we should be cautious in adopting a definitive reading of Greenberg on the question as of how exactly the distinction between pictorial and non-pictorial should be traced. However, the fact that Greenberg's remarks are difficult to interpret does not make them less interesting in the context of the present discussion. Greenberg, namely, gives us conceptual tools which allow us to think of abstracts in terms different from those put forward by Wollheim: he shows us where to look at, although we may need to find elsewhere the arguments to decide how to interpret what he has made us turn our gaze towards.

out of space as happens in contemporary canvases by Picasso and Braque. Similarly, lights and darks are not angled against each other to produce a sensation of volume and depth; and the blacks of Mondrian's scaffoldings already begin to read as dark elements in their own right» (Golding [2000]: 20).

## 5. Conclusions

To recapitulate, (1) I have assumed that pictorial representation is a distinctive feature of (at least) all figurative pictures; (2) I have defined «pictorial representation» as the representation of visual objects (or aspects of them) by means of the pictorial content of two-dimensional pictorial surfaces (the content determined by the arrangement of marks and colours on pictorial surfaces); (3) I have criticised Wollheim's claim that pictures pictorially represent in that they elicit a seeing-in experience in the viewer, pointing out that there are figurative pictures that do not elicit such an experience; (4) I have hypothesised, *contra* Wollheim, that of certain abstract pictures we can say that they are pictorial representation even though they do not elicit an experience of seeing-in; (5) I have identified some alternative conceptual tools for understanding the representational character of abstract pictures by means of an analysis of Greenberg's claims on the pictorial character of Cubist Collages and Mondrian's grids. In particular, I have stressed the importance of the distinction between *background* (of a depicted scene) and *ground* (of a picture *qua* material object). It remains to show if and how an account of Mondrian's grids and Cubist Collages as pictorial representations can be built up effectively with these conceptual tools, but this is a task for another paper.

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