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Goodman and Cavell on fakes

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Abstract

What is a fake artwork? This is seldom asked in aesthetics even though judging an artwork as excellent or original implicitly posits criteria for fraudulent or dubious artworks as well. This article presents Nelson Goodman's proposal of how we are to understand fakes. It will criticize his predominantly cognitive approach for failure of incorporating a sense of aesthetic value, thereby leaving the possibility of artworks which are fakes but nevertheless originals unexplained. Instead Stanley Cavell's writings on aesthetic judgment are explored establishing a better frame for understanding these artworks.

Keywords fake art, Goodman, Cavell, aesthetic value

Introduction

One theme not especially emphasized in contemporary aesthetics and philosophy of art, is the possible epistemological role of fakes or forgeries for understanding the aesthetic experience. Imagine a unique replica of Mona Lisa replacing the real Mona Lisa without visitors to Louvre knowing about it. Would it matter to their emo-

tional and cognitive experience? Probably not. Would it matter to a skilled connoisseur, an expert in Da Vinci's work? Probably not. What seems to matter is knowledge of whether the artwork is fake or not. Knowing the artwork is a fake somehow diminishes the experience of it. But experts can be wrong also, realizing that what they thought was a real Rembrandt, actually was a forgery. Hence, it is not enough for the artwork to be known to be real, it must somehow *be real* also. This line of thought allows, of course, for a continuous skepticism, but also the hope of what Beardsley (1958) expressed as a realism independent of the experience of it.

But what is it, then, that makes it real? Imagine we discover the Mona Lisa actually was painted by one of Da Vinci's assistants, just as skilled and visionary as the master himself. After the initial shock erupting the art world has faded, would it matter for the mysteriousness and intricacy of the smile then? Again, probably not. Even though we realize it is not a Da Vinci, there is still something real, something genuine about Mona Lisa that *matters* independently of whether Da Vinci or the assistant is the creator. One recalls Eco's subtle thinking on what 'original' can mean (Eco 1992), or Orson Welles pondering, in the movie *F for Fake*, whether a signature truly matters to an art work, as well as quoting Picasso that art is a lie making us see the truth. What a lie is, can, of course, mean any number of things independent of Picasso's original intention or Welles' restatement. In a very obvious almost simplistic sense, if we assume art as representing something, lying implies the artwork simply isn't what it tries to represent – like Magritte's famous pipe expressing a truth about artistic representations as not being copies of the "real world". In yet another sense lying could imply art as characterized by betrayal when we for example realize it is a fake, or perhaps from the artist's point of view when the intention with the artwork is misunderstood, or the artist feels estranged from the result of the creative process. Lastly, lying might point to a question of authenticity, not in the sense of real or forged painting, but as a lack of performance either on the artist's or the judgment-forming audiences' part. All art is pretending to be art, hence potentially a fake, except for art actually *being* real or judged as authentic. In this last sense, perhaps, we might judge Mona Lisa as painted by Da Vinci's assistant as also a real and genuine painting. But again,

how are we to understand this genuineness, what really *matters* in the artwork?

In the following I will address how judging, aesthetically, the difference between fake and authentic art is established using two analytical philosophers. The first, Nelson Goodman, who in his *Languages of Art* was one of the first to discuss the role of fakes in aesthetics, presents us with criteria of what *real* art is. Goodman's suggestion is, however, found wanting due to its lack of incorporating a sense of aesthetic value, and I will turn to another American philosopher, Stanley Cavell, to suggest another and better possibility. The general point of the article is the failure of judging artworks to be fakes by considering objective and factual criteria only, the aesthetic value of an artwork in itself must be considered as well. Within the limits of this article, related questions regarding artist's intention and the broad reception of artworks, will be left out.

Goodman on fakes

Goodman's discussion of fakes is framed around two problems. The first is accounting for the difference between *allographic* and *autographic* art, which, lacking relevance for the concern here, we will not address. The second problem, however, is directly related to our discussion since Goodman questions why any *aesthetic difference* between a deceptive forgery and an original work, between for example a Vermeer and a superior imitation of it would exist (Goodman 1976, 99). Part of the answer, Goodman claims, implies leaving the possibility of establishing any difference by natural scientific means – through x-rays, microscopic examination or chemical analysis – behind. These will provide a difference between the physical condition of the two paintings, but show us nothing about any aesthetic difference in the appearance of the paintings. Instead Goodman propose something like a 'common-sense' departure, that a potential aesthetic difference is established by 'merely looking', i.e. "...looking at the pictures without any use of instruments other than those customarily used in looking at things in general." (op.cit., 101) Furthermore, establishing a difference by merely looking depends not only upon natural visual acuity, but also upon practice and training of the ability to discriminate.

Given these assumptions Goodman presents the problem as follows: "...is there any aesthetic difference between the two pictures

for x at t , where t is a suitable period of time, if x cannot tell them apart by merely looking at them at t ? Or in other words, can anything that x does not discern by merely looking at the pictures at t constitute an aesthetic difference between them for x at t ?" (op.cit., 102) Yes, claims Goodman, the information that the two pictures are different at t , will make a difference for x – even if x is unable to actually *see* the difference between the pictures at t . Recall, that ‘merely looking’ also depends upon practice and training of the discriminatory capacities. Therefore, given the piece of information the relationship between x ’s present and future looking will be affected. The information will inform the character of x ’s present looking and thereby guide what is selected from past experiences of items and aspects to be used in x ’s present looking and onwards (Steele 1977, 255). Hence, from x ’s first-person perspective, even though I cannot tell them apart by looking, the fact that one picture is an original and one is a fake

“...constitutes an aesthetic difference between them for me now because knowledge of this fact (1) stands as evidence that there may be a difference between them that I can learn to perceive, (2) assigns to the present looking a role as training toward such a perceptual discrimination, and (3) makes consequent demands that modify and differentiate my present experience in looking at the two pictures.” (Goodman 1976, 105)

This *cognitive* position, i.e. taking *informative factual* knowledge about the aesthetic object to be an essential component of its identification and appreciation (Parson and Carlson 2008, 35), serves to make a general point about authenticity for Goodman (1976, 109).

How come, asks Goodman, that any knowledgeable layman today can easily tell a Van Meegeren from a Vermeer, when the most venerated experts in the 1930s could not (op.cit, 110)? The answer is, that the experts were fooled because presented with a single unfamiliar picture at the time, they had to decide the likelihood of the picture being a Vermeer. Once the wrong decision was made, it had a self-reinforcing effect. Due to each subsequent fake painting judged to be a real Vermeer, the criteria for what counted as a Vermeer changed in favor of a Van Meegeren. However, by the time

the fraud was exposed, all the Van Meegeren were "...subtracted from the precedent-class for Vermeer, but also a precedent-class for Van Meegeren has been established." (op.cit., 111). Based on this factual knowledge, classificatory criteria for the difference between the paintings were thereby established, hence perceptually telling them apart became more straightforward even for laymen. Thus, judging the authenticity of a painting depends on the sets of examples available and used in the "...exercise, training, and development of our powers of discriminating among works of art..." (op.cit., 111) Or, to put it another way, the authenticity of a picture, includes not only the aesthetic properties found and established by looking at it, but also those properties determining *how* it is to be looked at.

Now, it would be easy to conclude that Goodman is intending to argue that these properties determining how to look at pictures, hence criteria for authenticity, somehow consist of lists of assessments. But he is keen on ensuring that subjective evaluations are not what he is after, "We are not called upon here to make such particular comparative judgments or to formulate canons of aesthetic evaluation" (op.cit., 109) But if that is the matter, then, as Steele puts it "...Why should the difference be called aesthetic?" (1977, 257). As such the criteria established are more related to judgments made by an art historian or archivist, i.e. aiming at establishing objective criteria – the right representation of classification by authorship - for the difference, and relating this to our perceptual discriminating powers and exercises. Goodman fails to provide us with a reasonable account of *why or how* the information or knowledge making a difference is credible and justified in an *aesthetic* sense. Furthermore, as stated in the introduction, experts including art-historians can be wrong and withdraw seemingly objective criteria for discriminating the real from the fake (Duton 1983). This, however, implies considering aesthetic values, *not* as the canons of aesthetic evaluation Goodman denounces in the quote above, but taking seriously how aesthetic judgments since Kant (1790/2000), i.e. judging some piece of artwork as genuine or beautiful, imply a universality which cannot be impersonal. Aesthetic judgment combines some sort of subjective response with an aspiration to universality. In lieu of the lack of absolute certainty for discriminating the real from the fake, of making an objective classification, or es-

establishing canons for how artworks are to be evaluated, the possibility of this other point of departure for establishing aesthetic differences will be our next concern. We will therefore turn to Stanley Cavell whose writings address the possibility of aesthetic judgments in light of an overall skepticism, that the lack of objectivity (as a classificatory rationale), "...of conclusiveness in aesthetic argument, rather than showing up an irrationality, shows the kind of rationality it has, and needs." (Cavell 2002, 86)

Stanley Cavell on aesthetic judgments

It is common to divide Cavell's writings on aesthetics and art into several themes: the first, which will concern us here, focus on aesthetic judgment and modernism; the second addresses the ontology of specific artistic media, and the third contains concrete analyses of literature, opera, film, etc. (Hammer 2002; Mulhall 1994) As our question above revolves around aesthetic judgments, we will focus on some of the early papers in Cavell (2002).

Approaching Cavell's thinking let us start by noting that he conceives answering the question "What is art?" as depending on answering "...why it is we treat certain objects, or how we *can* treat certain objects, in ways normally reserved for treating persons." (Cavell 2002, 189, original italics) Implied here is *not* treating artworks as objects to be classified as done by Goodman, but rather as expressing the kind of genuineness and individuality we normally reserve for people with whom we engage. Our concerns, when engaging these people, are of course subjective. But it is still a responsible subjectivity defending both the correctness of the concern, as well as replacing the concern with disappointment or even sorrow in the face of insincerity or lack of genuineness on the part of these people. Artworks and people, Cavell seems to claim, are to be considered like ends in themselves. Recognizing falseness, insincerity, fraud, etc., depends therefore on the same capacity as recognizing genuineness and sincerity (op.cit., 190). I understand Cavell as claiming that connecting this complex relationship between a responsible subjectivity and the normative universal import of (in) correctness is what aesthetic judgments are about.

Understood this way the aesthetic value lies less in the supposed originality by authorship of the artwork, its classification, than in recognizing its aesthetic value. Thus, it will be possible to recognize

as aesthetically meaningful the examples Grasset (1998, 266) states, namely that Rembrandt signed works done by his pupils, or Poussin painted figures for Gaspard Dughet who then painted the background of some of Poussin's paintings, or painters' inability, eg. Van Dyck, Rodin as well as Bourdelle, to recognize the authenticity of their own work. Hence, the value is expressed through the work as an end in itself, as an autonomous work, recognizable through aesthetic experience. But what does this mean, that a work is autonomous, and how does this relate to the idea of fakes?

For Cavell asking these questions indicates a modern aesthetic attitude: "...the experience of the modern is one which itself raises the question of fraudulence and genuineness..." (2002, 214). Now his point is *not* that questions like these are not addressed in pre-modernity, only they were not *forced* upon people through earlier art because the "...conventions were deep enough to achieve conviction without private backing" (op.cit., 226). In a sense, then, modernity presents a condition in which we are, when it comes to aesthetic judgment, strangers to ourselves and each other. What was fixed previously through tradition and conventions of taste, are in modernity not evident sources of authority. So, what is up for grabs in modernity is the question of why we accept something as a genuine painting, as a piece of art, or not. However, this is not a question of conforming to the conventions (as if they were canonized), but, as the quote alludes to, involves some sense of personal backing, what Cavell in other places terms *voice* (Cavell 1979). It relates to the Kantian idea above, i.e. connecting subjective claims with some sort of universality. But where the universality for Kant seems to amount to no more than a projection of the subjective claim to an intersubjective whole, for Cavell it denotes the possibility of the individual voice to become actually shared, i.e. recognized as achieving a common validity (Laugier 2015, 64). In other words, how the subjective voice involves a claim to community, or in our case, how an artwork can serve as an experiential basis for a new conversation of what art is and can be.

Thus, the condition of modernity implies lacking any "...a priori criteria for defining a painting, what matters is that we realize that the criteria are something we must discover, discover in the continuity of painting itself." (op.cit., 219). Where in ordinary cases we acknowledge something as being correct just *for* me or us, what we

discover through the continuity of painting, is how (if it does) a specific painting speaks for painting as such. Cavell uses painting as an example here, but other artforms are implied here as well. Furthermore, I assume here that aesthetics/the art process for Cavell spans the relation between the artist, the work and an audience, with the possible acknowledgment of a given work as art obtaining within this relation. Hence, it is through painting and looking at a painting, reading and writing a novel, *as such*, that any criteria for something being a work of art is to be discovered. Being art *generally* is not made up of a priori criteria abstracted from or applied to the aesthetic process but is acknowledged as being part of and expressed through the process itself. Furthermore, there is a subtlety in Cavell's use of words in the quote, namely the relation between discovery and continuity. When we speak of discovery emphasis is usually on something new, whereas continuity indicates a continuation of something. This difference noted, how are both, then, related to the discovery, to the aesthetic process?

First of all, Cavell and Goodman both seem to agree on the problematic in a priori presenting a *canon*, a list of criteria for what is an artwork. At least Goodman claims so. For as claimed above, he ends up trading a *canon* in for another kind of abstraction, namely one based on the formal relation between the artist and his work. The real artwork has less to do with the aesthetic value of the work itself, than with establishing the right formal relation between artist and artwork. A relation detected from a place *external* to the artistic process itself. For Cavell, however, the aesthetic value of an artwork involves, as said above, a complex relationship of continuity and discontinuity towards the tradition "...of which it is an inheritor and voice." (op.cit). The non-genuineness and fraudulence quoted above being part of the modern aesthetic attitude, is characterized by the failure of realizing this. This attitude, Cavell claims, is characterized by eluding and failing to assemble any critical powers (op. cit 208), i.e. it fails at being a voice as expressing an individual critical understanding of art aiming at a new shared validity. Both could be exemplified by either an amateur landscape painting, not being a fraud but still not being genuinely a piece of art, i.e. it is a personal expression but without providing a claim to, or being recognized as speaking on behalf of landscape painting as such. Or the van Meegeren discussed above just reproducing the

tradition, pretending to be the work of an original artist, failing to become a voice.

Second, the lack of a priori criteria is not tantamount to no involvement of criteria at all – this is where the relation between discovery and continuity returns. Cavell's understanding of criteria is heavily influenced by his reading of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (see Mulhall (2014) and Affeldt (2014) for an extended discussion of Cavell's reading). By criteria is often meant something like rules for applying a concept (or a rule for applying rules), or for evaluating whether something is more or less correct, beautiful, heavier, tastier etc. than something else (Cavell 1979, 6ff). In this sense criteria function like a measuring rod we can appeal to, when aiming for agreement in judging some piece of work to be genuinely art. Cavell disagrees with this description.

First of all, it makes criteria appear like the *canon* he argued against as shown above. Second, according to Cavell (1979, 13) criteria do not serve as a separate basis or foundation for how we agree in judgment. Rather criteria are already interwoven with cases where we claim to know something is the case. In this sense, criteria express both our agreement, a continuity in the sense of our attunement in describing something, but also the possibility of discovery of a new and different way of understanding and speaking about things. In case of dissonance no independent source of authority, like a canon, exists for us to appeal to in responding to the dissonance. At best criteria can here serve as an impetus for understanding what the dissonance consists in, and how, if possible, one should and could move on from here. Third, criteria therefore point toward the indeterminacy of our aesthetic judgments, they express a possible renewal and advance of understanding (McMahon 2014, 52) but also the possibility of failure. Fourth, as expressions of understanding criteria are claims to community, i.e. "...reminders and vehicles of reorientation – to and on behalf of both others and oneself..." (Eldridge 2003, 6), as well as claims to reason. As Cavell (1979, 20) expresses it, "The wish and search for community are the wish and search for reason". So, the genuineness of an artwork lies both in its reminding us of central traits of the aesthetic practices and thoughts from which it historically sprung (again both from the creation and reception side), and its claim (its voicing) of reorienting these aesthetic practices and thoughts by being the focus of a

new conversation of what art generally is. It is a *reasonable* process, carried out between *you and me* but on *behalf of us*, and without recourse to some external place for acknowledging art.

Take for example, the introduction of the cut-up technique connected both with Dada and Burroughs (Skerl 1986). By now it is a familiar technique, but initially it critically pushed the self-definition of literature asking in what sense it can be, perhaps already is, composed of already made elements. It thereby reminded us, from a particular point of view, of the agreed definitions or criteria for what a text is and how it is handled, and in the process reorients our agreement of these criteria, but again by using the already given medium of a text. Furthermore, its genuineness was expressed through the sincerity of arguing and presenting the conditions of its own making and claiming responsibility for the general idea, making a claim to community, of what is brought forth. For Cavell this would therefore indicate an originality of an artwork and how it is to be judged compared to Goodman's more archival judgmental criteria. Goodman's formal criteria are, in the end, supposed to reach an objective agreement, a conclusion about the proposed fakeness or originality of an artwork established outside the artistic process or tradition itself. For Cavell, the matter is more about expressing one's voice from inside an inherited tradition, than achieving agreement as to the correct formal representation of an artwork. Thus, the artist "...is not to discount his subjectivity, but to include it; not to overcome it in agreement, but to master it in exemplary ways. Then his work outlasts the fashions and arguments of a particular age. That is the beauty of it." (Cavell 2002, 94) But also the potential tragic side of it, for outlasting the fashions of the age is dependent upon the claim to community being addressed, recognized and continued in the ongoing conversation of what art is and can be.

So, for Cavell the dissolution of fakeness is not a question of establishing true authorship or evidential knowledge about the artwork in question. It is a matter of understanding and judging in what sense an artwork questions its own inherited conditions establishing a new genuine exemplar for art.

Conclusion

I have argued here, that criteria for establishing the originality or the fakeness of artworks will need to consider the notion of an aes-

thetic value related to the aesthetic experience besides establishing any genuineness through historical or curatorial evidence. The latter was exemplified by Nelson Goodman who sought criteria for the difference between fakes and non-fakes in objective criteria establishing the authorship of artworks. It was questioned whether these criteria actually establish any *aesthetical* difference. Instead appeal to aesthetic value was made referring to Stanley Cavell's views on aesthetics and modernity. For Cavell a genuine artwork has less to do with authorship, than with questioning and responding to art. This process, then, presents new arguable ways of understanding art, i.e. establishes new criteria by and through which art can become a potential meaningful part of our lives. Unlike a fake, a genuine piece of art presents a claim to community, an exemplary way in which we can learn something new about ourselves and each other, becoming more attuned without being aligned or harmonious in the process.

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