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Table of Contents

iv

v

Perceiving Authenticity:
Style Recognition in Aesthetic Appreciation

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ABSTRACT. Since the mid-Sixties, philosophers have debated over the aesthetic value of authentic art-objects and their perfect replicas. Originalists argue that authenticity, the quality of an object being of undisputed origin or authorship*,* is a *necessary* condition for aesthetic experience, since appreciating an artwork presupposes its correct identification. Anti-originalists retort that there is no aesthetic reason to favor originals over visually-indistinguishable duplicates. To this extent, they claim, the need for authenticity is a matter of case by case evaluation. Drawing from this debate, I argue that judgment of authenticity is not a primary source for aesthetic appreciation. There are instances, however, in which authenticity does intrude upon aesthetic evaluation, namely when *style recognition* is involved. In these cases, errors in attribution reduce the object's impact and jeopardize aesthetic appreciation altogether.

This paper is about the notion of style and the role style plays in the context of art appreciation, with particular regard to the notion of aesthetic authenticity. I will argue that style recognition gives us a way – although only a 'derivative' way, one requiring at least some mediation by art history – to make authenticity *perceptible* in aesthetic appreciation. As we shall see, style is taken here as a kind of symbolic system capable of exemplifying, by

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means of displaying, the various artistic, cultural, and historic meanings that lie behind any work of art. This is consistent with Alois Riegl's notion of *Kunstwollen*, artistic will, as devised in his classic essay *Stilfragen* (Problems of Style) from 1893. When a work is identified as an instance of a given artistic style, the particular artistic meanings or *Wollen* underlying the object is grasped by the viewer via its manifest stylistic properties. Were the object to be proved inauthentic, this would cause deception jeopardising the viewer's experience altogether.

1. Introduction

Let us start with a simple thought experiment. Imagine the picturesque old town of an ancient European city. This would be a piece of human artistry that has managed to survive for centuries under the tear and wear caused by time, flourishing in the constant overlapping of different tastes and styles. Pastel-coloured 16th century buildings topped with red tiled roofs surround delightful little squares filled with small shops and cafes with outdoor tables. Ahead of them, an imposing 18th century catholic church dominates the crowdy late-baroque market place, where the smell of Oriental spices blends with the scent of freshly baked bread. Imagine now that all of a sudden, a terrible war ruinously destroys the whole place. The beautiful houses, the impressive churches, the nice charming little squares: everything

is reduced to rubble in just a few days. Luckily, however, once peace is finally restored, a decision is taken to rebuild the city as exactly as it looked before the war, with all its lovely spots and corners.

The question is: is this decision problematic at all? Some people might claim that it is not: what is valuable was the *look* of the city and now it looks precisely as it looked before. Yet for many others things would be more complicated than that. What is valuable was the historical town, the authentic witness of a lost human past. What we have now is just a Disney-like replica of the original city. Something has been lost in this process. But what exactly has been lost? Notice that we are assuming that none could tell the difference between the before and the after.

If we can answer that, we are on the right track to discover what it is that we find valuable about authentic artworks. In many circumstances, originals are valued more than reproductions, even if there is no obvious difference between them and even if reproductions could offer a more rewarding experience than the originals themselves. Why is it so? Is it just snobbery? This ties into the broader question of why details of an object's history should make any difference to how the object is aesthetically appreciated – a question at the core of one of the most long-standing philosophical discussions ever, that revolving around art and authenticity.[2] The central question in the debate is simply, why should authenticity affect

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[2] See Goodman (1968), Ch. 3: 'Art and Authenticity'. For an overview of the debate see also, among the others, Goodman (1986); Dutton (1983); Wreen (2002); Kulka (2005).

our aesthetic appreciation of art? To this question, two main solutions have been offered in the literature. While some have argued that our preference for originals is justified (Sagoff 1978; Levinson 1989; Farrelly-Jackson 1997; Dutton 2003; Korsmeyer 2008), others have retorted that it is just fetishism, sentimental attachment, or, at its worst, plain snobbery (Lessing 1965; Zemach 1989; Jaworski 2013). Borrowing the terminology from Peter M. Jaworski (2013), I refer to the first position as 'Originalism', and to the second as 'Anti-originalism'.

2.1. Originalism

Originalists claim that authenticity – the quality of an object of being of undisputed origin – is essential for an artwork's identity and a prerequisite for it to have aesthetic value. Accordingly, it is also necessary for an artwork's correct appreciation, for only insofar as an artwork is authenticated can it be appreciated as "the product of an artistic process" (Sagoff 1978, p. 455).

One reason for this is that we do not appreciate an object simply for the sake of its appearance or for the feelings it induces, but for what it is, and for its production history (Sagoff 1978, p. 453). Knowledge of the process by which a product was created determines the way this product is to be evaluated (Sagoff 1978, p. 456). If an original is different from a

forgery, thus, it is because it is the endpoint of a unique creative act, whereas the forgery is not (Dutton 2003, p. 258).

Indeed, if an object is identified as an artwork rather than an artefact of a different kind, is in virtue of its context of creation and its relation to a certain artist – not in virtue of an intrinsic property it displays (Levinson 1989, p. 232). Authentic artworks are special to us because they are "internally related" (Farrelly-Jackson 1997, p. 144) to the individual who produced them. For example, we value the Mona Lisa as the embodiment of Leonardo's creative act – that is to say, as the actual site of his artistic achievement[3]. This creative act is what we want to be 'in touch' with (Korsmeyer 2012, p. 371) and it is what the duplicate lacks, though a duplicate may represent or betoken it (Levinson 2004, p. 15). Of course, reproductions and replicas can "perform immense service in apprising us of the look" of many artworks and "allowing us to renew or deepen our acquaintance with them", but this is no reason to think that such replicas "could ever *displace*" (Levinson 1987, *ibid*.) the authentic objects they derived from. This is why, according to originalists, a visit to the rebuilt old town of our thought experiment could never be considered equivalent to a visit to the true, historical town *before* destruction and reconstruction.

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[3] This, however, creates further problems, for what precisely this notion of embodiment refers to is uncertain. Moreover, it seems to make appeal to kind of superstition: the creed that there is some magical energy lurking, so to speak, in authentic works of art, granting us the possibility of entering into direct relationship with their artists.

2.2 Anti-originalism

Anti-originalists, from an opposite perspective, argue that authenticity is only essential to an artwork's identity and aesthetic appreciation when it is so recognised by 'well-trained art critics' (Zemach 1986, p. 239; 1989, p. 67). Original artworks do not possess any art-relevant quality that perfect copies do not have (Jaworski 2013, p. 2), for there is no single feature that "*all* originals have in common, that make *every* original better than a duplicate, a copy" (Jaworski 2013, p. 13).[4] Therefore, when it comes to appreciating "a work of art as a work of art", an exact duplicate may be in principle "just as good as the original" (Jaworski 2013, p. 2).

Notice that, according to anti-originalists, this does not mean that an object's status as original is *always* aesthetically irrelevant. It is indeed important to distinguish anti-originalism from aesthetic empiricism. Aesthetic empiricists say: Since an original and the duplicate strike the senses in the same way, they deliver the same aesthetic experience: so why care about the difference? (see: Bell 1949; Lessing 1965; Battin 1979). The discovery that a work is forged does not alter its perceivable qualities –

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[4] Among these features, Jaworski (2013) lists: the influence that an original artwork, yet not the replica, may have had on subsequent art; the difference in meaning between the original and the duplicate; the idea that the original, but not the duplicate, is an instantiation of an original creative concept. According to him, however, none of these features gives us enough reason to justify our preference for originals.

hence it shouldn't bear any aesthetic significance. Anti-originalists, on the contrary, do not contend that an object's status as original is *always* aesthetically irrelevant, but that it takes, again, an art expert to discern in which case it is relevant and in which it isn't**.** In the case of an old city center destroyed by war, for instance, it is up to the people in charge of the reconstruction, say, the art historians and the conservators, to decide whether the shattered buildings can be replaced with replicas without detriment to the overall value of the site. The aesthetic relevance of authenticity is thus a matter of case-by-case evaluation. In this sense, attaching a special significance to originals regardless of the specific situation has nothing to do with aesthetics per se, but with something else – rarity, emotional attachment, faith. We cherish the original object because it is *that* object (Zemach 1989, p. 67), the one blessed with "the Midas Touch" of the artist (Jaworski 2013, p.14).

3. The Problem at Stake

We are confronted here with two opposing ways of interpreting the role of authenticity in aesthetic appreciation. Consider them again in the light of our initial case-study. A war occurs, reducing to rubble an old historic town: would a perfect rebuilding of the town, known to be such, be lacking something, sufficient to render it less valuable altogether? Originalists claim

that it would, since the town's authenticity – its relation to its history of production – is essential to its aesthetic appreciation. Indeed, originalists claim, we don't aesthetically appreciate the town simply for its appearance or effect, but for what it is – and how could we appraise something and not care what it is? Anti-originalists, conversely, argue that no a priori reason prevents the rebuild town from equating the original one, because, they maintain, authenticity is not (not always, at least) a condition for aesthetic appreciation. The problem, in essence, is that it is unclear whether our aesthetic appreciation of artworks or artistic sites has to do with the fact that these have been created at a certain time by a certain someone. Should history, background, origins – in a word, authenticity – count as proper sources for aesthetic appreciation?[5]

A possible strategy to tackle this otherwise treacherous question is to slightly modify its structure. To this extent, instead of asking whether or not authenticity *should* affect our appreciation of an artwork, we might try to figure out *how* it can do this, provided it actually can. The question then becomes: in what way can unperceivable factors like history, background, origins – factors that are responsible for the object's authenticity – become perceptually distinguishable in aesthetic appreciation? Of course, unlike

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[5] Notice that two different questions are implied here: 'What makes an artwork valuable per se?' and 'What makes one artwork more valuable than another (supposedly) identical one?' Though the two questions are related, we are discussing here the second (i.e., the value we attribute to original artworks as opposed to reproductions) rather than the first (i.e., the value of art in general).

standard aesthetic properties like form or color, proportion, balance, symmetry, etc., these features cannot be directly grasped from an object's surface appearance; but the issue is whether they can be appreciated *somehow*. My answer is that they *can* through identification of the object's relevant style features, where style, as I shall argue, indicates a symbolic system capable of expressing, by means of exemplification, cultural, social, historic meanings.

4. Style Recognition and Aesthetic Appreciation

Here we finally get to the notion of style. But what is style? According to Ernst Gombrich's (1968) classic formulation, style can be defined, in very broad terms, as "the distinctive visual appearance of an object, which is determined by the creative principles, inspiration and taste according to which something is designed". Richard Wollheim (1979, pp. 129-130) refines this definition by identifying two senses in which the concept occurs: we can talk of *individual style* to refer to the style of a singular artist (i.e. 'the style of Leonardo') and we can talk of *general style* to refer to the style of a period or artists' group within a period (i.e. 'Renaissance Art'). General style – which can be further divided into other sub-classes: (a) universal

style; (b) historical or period style; and (c) school style[6] – represents the 'common denominator' in the production of a time, something that is external to individuals and not a function of their own activities as artists. Interestingly, Wollheim's concept of 'general style' nicely fits what Riegl (1893/1993)[7] famously called *Kunstwollen*, 'artistic will' or 'will to art'– namely, the creative impulse to make art in a particular manner that drives the artistic production of one period, and is nourished by the historical and cultural values of the time. According to Riegl, art embodies itself in each age through aesthetic ideals that involve "a whole range of attitudes, values, ideologies" (Iversen, pp. 44-45). Different attitudes towards the world can found in this sense given realization in unique and non-repeatable stylistic types.

General style categories, like Riegl's notion of *Kunstwollen*, can be used taxonomically as a mean of organizing the variety of works and approaches that characterize the art of the past (Goodman 1975; 1978). But the interesting thing is that style is more than an instrument for the art historian – a device for sorting out what is considered distinctive in a particular moment of art history. Indeed, as Riegl explains, what is noteworthy about style is that stylistic patterns are able to transpose, as it

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[6] General style can be further divided in sub-classes (1) universal style; (2) historical or period style; and (3) school style Wollheim (1979, pp. 129-130). See also Robinson (1984) on this.

[7] Here and below, I refer to the 1993 English translation of Riegl's *Stilfragen*: *Grundlegungen zu einer Geschichte der Ornamentik*.

were, a period historical/cultural/artistic will into the artwork's perceptual characteristics: they translate this particular will into form, "shape and colour in the plane or space". To use current terminology, we could say that style 'exemplifies' this *Wollen* through aesthetically salient features–features that contribute to the object's aesthetic appreciation. For example, geometric patterns of ancient art exemplify much of the aesthetic feeling of the people who made it, and generally of how they framed their relationship to the world. This is because, according to Riegl (1993, pp. 53-83), in the earliest stages of mankind people had a defensive relationship towards the hostilities of nature, and so they framed their relation to the world in such a way as to keep the represented objects within tightly controlled boundaries. To this extent, the *Kunstwollen* determining ancient Egyptian art (and pyramids especially) is a will to create 'absolute' objects surrounded by space conceived as a void; this is achieved stylistically by sacrificing the third dimension, because depth tends to blur the boundaries between the object and the surrounding environment.

For Riegl, stylistic properties, although being contextually dependent properties, manifest themselves perceptually: they "show as well as say what they are about" (Genova 1979, p. 323). Style is thus tied to history as well as to the aesthetic impact of an object: to paraphrase Danto's famous expression, style brings artworks' history to their surfaces.

Interestingly, in more recent years a similar position towards style has

been defended by Nelson Goodman (1975, 1978). Goodman's approach emphasizes the double role that style plays in the process of both classifying and appreciating an artwork. On the one hand, Goodman argues, recognising style – a challenging endeavour requiring a 'knowing eye or ear' (Goodman 1975, p. 810) – allows us to attribute an artwork to one artist, period, region, etc. Style serves in this sense as "an individual or group signature" which helps us place the work in the appropriate context by answering questions such as: 'Who? When? Where?'. On the other hand, however, style identification is also integral to the understanding of artworks and of "the worlds they present" (Goodman 1975, p. 807) – the worldview of which such works are expressive. Style, according to Goodman, has direct aesthetic significance insofar as it tells us "the way the work is to be looked at" (Goodman 1978, p. 40) – thereby, it counts as a proper aesthetic property.

Relevantly, the idea that style attribution might have a great role to play in the context of aesthetic appreciation has recently found empirical validation. Psychological studies[8] have indeed attested that viewers with greater familiarity with recognising styles are more liable to undergo richer aesthetic experiences. This is because attribution of stylistic properties to the artwork provide them with information as to how the work is to be aesthetically evaluated. For a naïve viewer, a painting like, say, Cimabue's

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[8] See: Leder, Belke, Oeberst and Augustin (2004).

Maestà di Assisi, ca. 1285-1288, is just a depiction of a Madonna with the child Jesus. For an experienced viewer, it reveals a different meaning. She can classify the work as a Gothic masterpiece with specific iconographic properties. She might notice that the painting respects the principle of a single light source, unknown to previous painters, which makes the figures in space more realistic; she can spot the tapered hand shape of the Virgin, typical of the medieval Tuscan pictorial style; or observe that she is clothed in traditional colors – a red dress and blue mantle (now blackened) – but that she also wears an uncommon bright red cap. Finally, she can remark that the throne is depicted frontally, with both sides open like pages, as is generally the case in pre-perspective painting, but that it is unusually decorated with cosmatesque motifs. To understand and appreciate this artwork, the viewer may profit from all these stylistic features – provided, of course, that she is acquainted with that particular style and with the symbolic or iconographic code it entails. As a matter of fact, with increasing style expertise, appreciation shifts from mere description of 'what is depicted' to a classification in terms of complex art-specific properties. Information about style is thus relevant as it offers an unlimited pool of knowledge to improve the observers' perceptive discrimination skills in aesthetic experience. But style recognition also provides a further element to art appreciation: the capacity of generalisation and differentiation. Once the concept of an artistic style is learned, the viewer is able to classify new examples by

acknowledging similarities and differences with known artworks. Aesthetic perception can be strengthened or refined by testing against further cases: interesting qualities are revealed through the juxtaposition of works in a comparison. This, of course, require some explicit training, for although stylistic knowledge can also be acquired somehow implicitly – e.g., via repeated exposure to works that have a certain style[9] – the process of style-identification requires its outcome to be explained, and this involves mastering categories that can only be acquired via a formal education in art history.

5. Style, False-friends and Authenticity

So far, we have seen that attributing an artwork to the right stylistic period is crucial for aesthetic appreciation and impacts on the overall quality of the experience. But how does this relate to authenticity? The idea is that to be effective, identification in terms of style *requires* the object to be authentic – situated at the right place in the right event sequence. This, however, needs further explanation. We all know that stylistic features can be imitated. A

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[9] Implicit style learning requires also familiarity with a plurality of different styles. For example, while it is impossible to identify Mozart's style *without* having listened to at least a few of his works, it is also impossible to identify it having listened *only* to his works – in this sense, comparison appears to be one crucial mean for style learning. Interestingly, studies have also shown that implicitly acquired style increases simple preferences among viewers (Gordon and Holyoak 1983).

painter can paint a subject *à la manière de* Velázquez, a composer can write pieces that sound like Mozart or Vivaldi, and a sculptor can carve statues that resemble Canova's in every respect. Imitation 'in the style of', also known as *pastiche*, has been common artistic practice for centuries.[10] So in what sense is style tied to authenticity?

To understand this, we have to go back to Riegl's conception of style and how style works. As noticed before, the most important thing about style is, for Riegl, that stylistic properties are able to exemplify content through form. To use an effective expression by Judith Genova, we can say that style "weds form to content" (Genova 1979, p. 322), by transposing the imperceptible properties of a work – its artistic meaning or *Wollen* – into perceptible aesthetic patterns. In this sense, style can be conceived of as a kind of symbol system of some sort. Like stylistic features, symbols *show* as well as *say* what they are about. To the same extent, the properties or predicates that style expresses find visual manifestation in the work. So, for example, Italian medieval artists like Cimabue or Giotto used stylistic devices to display their religious intents in their works: the style of the Virgin's hands, long and tapered, served them as a 'vehicle' to express her

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[10] Although it is questionable whether an artist can actually dive himself into the stylistic conventions of a period to the point of completely disguising his belonging to a certain age, taste, or style. Even the famous forgeries by van Meegeren display elements of the style of his own time: as Dutton (1993) notes, for example, in his *Christ and the Disciples at Emmaeus* (1936) the characters' faces show features that today, in retrospect, appear very modern. These stylistic aspects were much less obvious to the viewer of the 1930s, probably because they seemed just 'normal' at the time.

merciful royalty; it was meant to 'instance' this meaning. We could quote thousands of similar examples taken from art history, but this should suffice to demonstrate the central point that in style, *what* is being said cannot be divorced from *how* it is being said. Meanings describing what the work is about are metaphorically exemplified in the work by its style features. Style features and meaning are in this sense inextricably interwoven, they express and constitute each other.

These considerations allow us to compare style to a linguistic system. Just as one linguistic expression is linked to a certain meaning in the context of a certain natural language, so one stylistic pattern is linked to a certain meaning in the context of one particular *Kunstwollen*. When we transfer a linguistic expression from one context to another, we run the risk of misunderstandings and communicative failures. This happens for instance in the case of so-called 'false-friends', that is, pairs of words in two languages that look similar or identical but have in fact different meanings. If I say the Italian word *burro* to get some *butter* but I am in a restaurant in Spain, I will be very disappointed to discover that the word actually means 'donkey'. To the same extent, if I express my *delusione*, Italian for 'disappointment', for what just happened to my English companion, he will arguably get me wrong, for 'delusion' means to him *deception*. At the art level, pastiche copies use the same signifier – a given stylistic pattern – to refer to a different signification. Like linguistic false-friends, they mimic a style's

surface features but end up conveying a whole other message; therefore, they may be a prompter of misunderstandings and failures in aesthetic appreciation. Of course, as long as the deception remains hidden there is no problem, but as soon as truth is revealed, this can challenge the experience altogether. Indeed, when an object is identified as an instance of a given artistic style, its being proved inauthentic reduces the aesthetic impact or even jeopardises the experience altogether.

This brings us back to the central claim about style and authenticity, for while the formal patterns determining one style, meant as a codified set of signs, can be more or less successfully imitated for a variety of reasons – as homage, parody, technical training and so on – none of these reasons, however, can match the *authentic* artistic will – what Riegl calls the *Kunstwollen* – those patterns were meant to exemplify. When Giotto used the chiaroscuro effect to depict the face of the Madonna, he was experimenting and innovating pictorial style, surpassing tradition with his own revolutionary ideas about new naturalistic depiction. If an art student were told to copy this effect, his intent wouldn't be to give a naturalistic depiction of light but rather to furnish a convincing imitation of Giotto. To explain what Giotto was doing we must invoke his aesthetic intentions with respect to the depiction of light. To explain what the student would be doing, and how well he succeeds, we must consider his desire to produce an effective imitation. The two actions fall under different descriptions even

though the outcome is similar in both cases. Again, imitations, no matter how accurate they might be, can never keep the initial meaning associated with certain stylistic properties. Out of the original artistic will of one period, style's authenticity is impossible.

Whenever we recognise art objects as 'gothic', 'baroque', 'neo-classic', we are appreciating their authenticity, that is, their connection with a given historical moment and its specific *Kunstwollen*. We do not just presume that we are experiencing something authentic, i.e., coming to us from past centuries, but we *perceive* authenticity through the object's manifest stylistic features. Were unaware visitors of our imaginary town to discover that the object of their aesthetic interest is in fact a modern reconstruction, they would feel deceived for, as Carolyn Korsmeyer (2008, p. 121) puts it, they would perceive the right stylistic property "in the wrong frame". If so, then stylistic features can *differentiate* the original from the replica, though always in a 'derivative' way – a way, that is, which requires a reasonable knowledge of art history, since styles are difficult to identify without explicit learning.[11] When we detect, recognise, and attribute style, the origins of the object – whether or not it is authentic – make a crucial

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[11] Although stylistic knowledge may also be acquired implicitly, e.g., via repeated exposure to works that have a certain style. Interestingly, empirical studies have shown that implicitly acquired style increases simple preferences among viewers (Gordon and Holyoak, 1983). However, the process of style-identification requires its outcome to be explained, and this involves the mastery of categories that can only be acquired via an explicit training in art history.

difference to our perception and counts as a genuine factor of aesthetic evaluation.

By exemplifying via form and design the peculiar *Kunstwollen* of an epoch – its relevant historical/cultural/artistic features – style makes authenticity aesthetically appreciable.

6. Conclusion

What lesson shall we draw from all this? First of all, something important has been said about the nature of styles. Sameness (or near sameness) of formal features is not sufficient for sameness of styles, just as sameness of spelling between two words is not enough for sameness of meaning, as we learn from the false-friends case. Further questions about what lies behind these formal features – what creative intentions they serve, what expressive will they translate, what *Kunstwollen* they exemplify – need to be raised. But if that is true, then authenticity may well not be a primary condition for aesthetic appreciation – unlike what originalists believe – but it is surely a 'derivative' one, one that is mediated by style identification. When we detect, recognize, and attribute style – *pace* anti-originalists – the origins of the object, i.e., whether or not it is authentic, make a crucial difference to our perception and counts as a genuine factor of aesthetic evaluation.

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