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The Challenge of Hybrid Artworks to Art Categories

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ABSTRACT Normally, it is easy to trace a work of art back to the art form within which it was created, but there are cases in which this is not so obvious. The purpose of this paper is to analyse the phenomenon happening to that kind of artworks which lies somehow in between two different forms of art. I call them cross-categorical works of art. Starting from two case studies, Jeff Wall's staged photographs and Gerhard Richter's hyperrealist paintings, I individuate two approaches to the phenomenon: (i) considering cross-categorical artworks as "monsters" or (ii) re-conceptualising them using a theory of metaphor. I suggest that this second option works better for understanding and appreciating this specific and unusual kind of works of art.

1. Introduction

This paper analyses the phenomenon of artworks which appear somehow to be in between two different forms of art. The purpose is to find a proper way of considering this phenomenon that we might call the cross-categoriality of art, without forgetting the artist's intentions and the constitutive purposes of the works. I will use as case studies the *hyperrealist* paintings by Gerhard Richter and the *staged* photographs by Jeff Wall.

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In the first section, I frame the idea that appreciating artworks has to do with tracing them back to the artistic category they belong, but in the case studies I present this as not so easy to do. That is why, in the second section, I consider cross-categorical artworks as monsters. In the third section, I point out that another important condition for appreciating artworks is being able to individuate the constitutive purposes of the work. One way to individuate cross-categorical artworks' constitutive purposes is by considering them metaphorically. I explore this approach in the last section of the paper.

Let us start by mentioning Lopes's definition of art forms: "Art forms—such as music, literature and painting—are artistic categories that explain why works of that kind are produced by working (in certain ways) with certain artistic media, and not others" (Lopes, 2007, p. 247). If we wanted to give a definition *à la* Lopes of cross-categorical works of art, we could structure it as follows: cross-categorical artworks are produced by working (in certain ways) with certain artistic media, but with the purposes and the modes of others.

2. Appreciating Art through Standards

The first question I will raise here is: how can art forms be responsible for a proper appreciation of the artworks produced within their boundaries? I adopt Walton's (1970) assumption, according to which we tend to have a proper appreciation of an artwork when we recognise the hegemonic and specific artistic category to which it belongs. For example, if I am looking at a Vermeer, I can instantly trace it back to the category of painting. By doing this, I will appreciate the characteristics generally associated with the art form of painting: the rendering of colours, the study of light and shadow, the rendering of naturalistic shapes and spaces, the richness of the technique, and so on. In general, I will appreciate the overall appearance of its subject. Analogously, if I am looking at a Letizia Battaglia photograph, I will trace it back to the art form of photography and I will appraise its veridicality, its spontaneity and its status as a documentary work which bears witness to the heinous crimes of the Mafia during the Seventies and the Eighties in southern Italy. To be more precise, what we expect from these art forms are a series of characteristics that generally lead back to two different relations of the artwork with reality: intentional for painting, causal for

photography. However, we will arrive at an *impasse* when considering our case studies. It would seem that Richter's hyperrealist paintings and Wall's staged photographs cannot be easily traced back to an individual and proper art form as instead happens with Vermeer's paintings and Letizia Battaglia's photographs. Rather, they seem to have both painterly and photographic features, which tend to be incompatible and contradictory with each other – especially those features concerning their causal or intentional aspects.

3. Genesis of the Monster

The first way of addressing the issue of cross-categorical artworks is to draw on Carroll's (1990) conception of monsters, inspired by Douglas's (1966) theory of categorical impurity. According to this theory, the monster involves a clash between two incompatible categories: the living and dead in zombies or the human and bull of which the Minotaur consists.

We can apply this notion of monster to cross-categorical artworks. The clash of the 'living' and 'dead' categories embodied by zombies, for instance, is comparable to the clash between photography and painting in the case studies analysed.

a) Jeff Wall



The first artwork I will consider is Jeff Wall's photo 'Dead Troops Talk'. Wall repeatedly describes his project as "*painting* the modern life". Of course, this claim is provocative and ironic, but it could represent a good starting point for our purposes. Wall drew inspiration for the composition of his photographs from a wide range of traditional painters such as Delacroix and Géricault, to name just two of the sources. Specifically, 'Dead Troops Talk' recalls works such as 'The Raft of the Medusa' or 'Liberty Leading the People'. Wall can be considered an artist who represented contemporary life within a historical frame, by the means of photography, but with the intent and style of painting. His works were produced using a large format: the format which is traditionally identified with painting. 'Dead Troops Talk' represents one moment of the Soviet-Afghan War, which was fought between 1979 and 1989. The picture, however, is dated 1992. This is the first alarm bell calling us to the question of how we should properly consider this photograph. But let's move on by focusing on the picture's appearance. Looking at the picture, the observer might wonder whether it is a *proper photograph*: the composition looks very structured, the soldiers seem to have been positioned meticulously, there are lines conveying our attention on the execution of the soldier in the centre of the picture. At the same time, the observer cannot doubt that this *is* a photograph. This is one of the first cases of digital-imaging manipulation. Wall described his *modus operandi* as "blatant artifice": there is a meticulous study of the composition previous to the shot, a preliminary preparation, the collaboration with people who are being photographed and, as I mentioned, a digital manipulation of the image. The phenomenon of photographic manipulation is as old as photography - see, for example, the analogic photo-manipulations produced by Hannah Hoch in her photomontages from the early 1920s. But the real turning point of this phenomenon can be identified with the advent of the era of digital manipulation. The 1990s can be considered the cradle of digital photo-editing and image manipulation. Jeff Wall's 'Dead Troops Talk' dates back to these years in which photo editing started to weaken any claim images might have on reality.

All this considered, it is easy to see that 'Dead Troops Talk' cannot be considered as a photograph which possesses the canonical standards of photography. Wall's staged works can be compared to that of Pictorialist artists from the late 19th and the early 20th century. Pictorialism

was an artistic trend in photography in which the purpose of the artist was not documenting reality, but instead emphasising composition, color tonality and the subject's appearance - a mode similar to that of painting. All this considered, if we looked at Wall's photo as a documentary war picture, we would get fooled by it. Wall's staged photos seem to have something intrinsically different from photographs like Letizia Battaglia's reportages on the Mafia, which we appreciate for their truthful narration of facts. Wall's images can be placed in a blended category of painting and photography. In his works we can find some standard features both of photography and of painting.

b) Gerhard Richter



Let us see how something similar to the deception triggered by Wall's photos can happen in relation to another art form. The second case study is Gerhard Richter's painting 'Administrative Building'. Richter defines the painting technique for his hyperrealist works as "photo-painting". This

statement is not confined to considering Richter's works merely as painted reproductions of photographs or as paintings based on a photographic subject. Instead, the artist's aim is to put painting at the service of photography, to the point of *making photographs* with painting. This is intended to abandon the subjectivism typically linked to painting for an objective and automatic procedure of reproduction, leading the artist to create images as true-to-life as far as is possible. Observing this image, what immediately stands out is its *quasi-photographic* nature. The artist, using a monochromatic range of colours, creates a hyperrealistic sense of depth. The painting style aims to reproduce a blurred, black and white photograph. The depiction of the scene is so accurate that the viewer may ask herself what type of image it is, whether it is a painting or a photograph, that is, whether it is the free creation of its author or rather a trace causally dependent on some state of affairs. The work is simultaneously challenging traditional figurative art forms (and their standards), and our perception of the image, which we actually perceive as if it was a photographic image. It seems that the status of painting and that of photography improperly overlap here. In both Richter's and Wall's case, we are puzzled by the lack of a proper category to ascribe the artwork to.

If we adopt Carroll's thesis we might think of these works as belonging to a *monstrous* category: the Painting-Photography category, in which the fusion of art forms is analogous to the blend of man and bull in the Minotaur. Both Wall's and Richter's artworks might be subsumed under this category. This hypothesis, however, raises two problems (i) we are required to create a new category – and this is not parsimonious, and (ii) we cannot make a categorical distinction between two very different artworks, the one by Richter and the one by Wall, which would fall in the same puzzling category. Moreover, it also seems that, using this blended category, we miss a proper appreciation of each specific artwork, in terms of constitutive purposes (and, once again, they seem to have very different ones).

4. Appreciating Art through Constitutive Purposes

In a more recent article, Carroll (2022) sets out an important conditions for the appreciation of an artwork. His purpose is to replace the idea that every work of art has a meaning with that of having

a *constitutive* purpose or a set of constitutive purposes. The purpose or the set of purposes of every artwork is “essential to being the particular artwork it is” (Carroll, 2022, p. 8). Identifying the constitutive purpose or purposes of an artwork, Carroll says, enables the observer to understand the artwork. We have seen how the constitutive purpose of Letizia Battaglia’s photographs is to document the Mafia crimes and murders, as well as the constitutive purpose of Vermeer’s paintings is somehow connected to painterly virtuosity and to the subject’s appearance. Following Carroll, we will appreciate Battaglia’s photos for their veridicality and truthfulness and Vermeer’s paintings for their appearance. But what about Wall’s photos and Richter’s paintings? We will see how, by adopting a metaphorical reading of their works, we would be led to the understanding of their constitutive purposes and consequently, we could have a proper appreciation of this special kind of artworks I have called crossed-categorical.

5. Applying Metaphor to Cross-Categorical Artworks

Let us move to a better way of dealing with the issue. According to Black’s metaphor theory (1979), we have the opportunity to re-conceptualise one thing (*topic*) through the properties of the other (*vehicle*): for example in the expression “John is a shark” the communicative goal is not to entirely associate the characteristics of the animal with John, but to select only those of the *vehicle* (shark) useful for a re-conceptualisation of the *topic* (John), which can explain the reason for this unusual combination. Specifically, the relevant qualities which are usually selected are linked to the animal’s ruthlessness.

In order to prevent Wall’s and Richter’s masterpieces from being *monstrous* works of art, I propose applying a metaphor-based theory to the case of cross-categorical art. First, let us consider Richter’s painting. By adopting a metaphorical reading of the image and thus by selecting a cluster of characteristics traditionally associated with the photographic process (automatic and mechanical processes of reproduction, causal and counterfactual relation with the subject, truthfulness of portrayal, objectivity, lack of free interpretation, and of invention of elements during the process of reproduction) and by applying them to the painting, it can be said that Richter *metaphorically* creates a photograph by painterly means. If we apply the metaphor’s process to painting, this allows

us to read the pictorial image through the properties of photography – and therefore to overcome the anomaly generated by the overlapping of the two art categories. In this way the observer can appreciate the image's causal and counterfactual (rather than intentional) relation with reality, as would normally happen if she observed a photograph (cf. Atencia-Linares and Artiga, 2022). This also seems to fit well with the constitutive purposes of the work, which I would metaphorically identify as photograph, appreciating it for its truthfulness.

Analogously, by reading Wall's picture in a metaphorical key, we select and transfer some of the typical properties we expect from painting (study of the composition, preliminary preparation, peculiar style of the composition, free creation of elements, strongly subjective interpretation) to an image made by photographic means. The application of the metaphor's procedure to this type of photograph lessens the observer's interest in the image's accuracy or factuality and instead leads them to appreciate the artist's creativity and interpretation, just as when we look at a painting, the fact that the subject depicted does not necessarily coincide with reality does not prevent us from appreciating it, but allows us to appreciate it as the result of the artist's creativity and interpretation. Again, applying a metaphorical reading of this kind of photograph seems to let us go in the direction of the work's constitutive purposes and so to better understand it, in the light of the artist's creativity and interpretation.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, there are two ways in which we can address the cross-categoriality of artworks: (a) by creating a new monstrous category, as, for instance, the Painting-Photography category, where we can place all that artworks that seem impure in respect of their given category; and (b) by applying a theory of metaphor. I have argued that this second option is more epistemically valuable because of its parsimony, closer to practice, useful for a proper appreciation of the artworks in terms of artist's intentions and constitutive purposes and has the advantage of not leading to the creation of new monsters which, as we know, everyone is scared of.

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