

Aesthetic Investigations

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Restoring Culture to Manage the Subjective

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Abstract: When we restore some cultural object because history or the weather left its marks on it, or because it was wrecked by some vandal, the major reason for the restoration is the value we attribute to the thing. Paradoxically, restoration is an objective process, but its aim is the preservation of the thing's subjective appreciation. What does this paradox consist in?

I.

Dutch artist, Philip Akkerman, paints only self-portraits – two or three each week. He once told me how after two years he stopped painting after his reflection in the mirror, thinking that the results would still count as self-portraits.¹ I felt that his decision to circumvent the mirror was interesting, but also awkward and mistaken, even: how can you paint a self-portrait – that is: a rendering of how you see how you present yourself to a painter, which is you – if you do not look at yourself in the mirror? Surely a self-portrait must be of yourself watching yourself – and the resultant gaze in the mirror is one of realising that you cannot gaze at yourself, not even via the mirror? Akkerman argued how every single stroke of paint expressed him as a painter, and hence counted as a self-portrait: surely, he painted the pictures whilst intending to paint himself? When one appreciates the paintings that Akkerman did after his decision to forestall the mirror, one finds that most of the pictures do not resemble the way he looks.

Yet, there is something obviously right in Akkerman's claim, if only he had elaborated it in terms of Richard Wollheim's analysis of individual style.²

Yet, wanting that, the view seemed too hasty. Painters do not automatically inhabit their paintings by the sheer fact that their brushes cause daubs of paint to stick to the canvass, which causation can be matched by a forger or 3-D printer. Of course, paint must be applied to the canvas for a painting to come into being, but the application should have psychological reality for the painting to be a certain artist's work. There must be a sense to asking why the painter put the paint on the canvas where it is. It makes sense to argue that a painting should not only be connected causally to its maker. An artist makes ample choices whilst painting, and these choices spectators can later recognise in the resultant work as the painter's. Akkerman seems mistaken to say that in his work his choices turn his pictures into self-portraits. He intentionally paints in many styles – that is his point exactly. Without an individual style nothing – but the mere idea that the paintings are self-portraits – helps the spectator to recognise the maker in the work.

The causal chain from the painter's brush to the painting is a necessary condition for an individual style to surface, but to be sufficient the work, including the constellation of paint, must express the psychology of the painter – not, by the way, his neurophysiology.³ If the painting doesn't, then the marks show signature at best, rather than the painter's style. Signature may be objective and strictly causal, style involves subjective elements, both, in the painter and the spectator. If a painting is being restored, though, the causal chain is definitely broken – as it may already be due to physical deterioration.

The idea that restoration is necessary presumes a view on the nature and significance of painting, and of our interest in it. But are we merely interested in the image – we can reproduce the image – or in noticing the maker in the work, as Wollheim would have it? If the former, then why not replace all paintings with their photographic reproduction? It seems that we content ourselves with the reproduction only for lack of beholding the original, the real work. So what is it the original has in store for us, over and beyond its reproduction, when not the hand of the maker, such as is based in the causal chain of their brush strokes and the psychological reality of the choices that surface in the painting? The hard bit, it seems to me, is acknowledging that what we try to preserve or restore is not so much some objective state of the art object but its subjective appreciation; that which holds our aesthetic interest and for which that objective state is only a necessary condition.

Can paintings be restored? Maybe they cannot. Should they be restored to allow future generations an aesthetic appreciation of them? Perhaps. If only we keep asking ourselves what this future aesthetic appreciation will be the appreciation of.

But these considerations concern paintings only. With other bits of culture different issues shall surface. The restoration of allographic art forms such as poetry or classical music may seem easier. And, for instance, for the restoration of film one would more nearly consider objective qualities of the

work – though that seems a trifle too simplistic. Yet, there seems little danger there of forging the psychological reality of its makers’ intentions.

And what about public space, and buildings?

II.

In the Taiwanese movie, *Journey to the West*, a Buddhist monk is seen walking awfully slowly through the busy streets of Marseille – almost as slow as the buildings.⁴ It takes a while to even notice his presence, let alone what he is doing. His highly concentrated slowness makes the world fly by. Even pedestrians speed by at a pace that makes one wonder whether they take in the world at all. They are merely passing by – in the streets, as in life?⁵ The monk’s presence is defined by his subtle moving, which is due to his concentrated sense of presence. It is almost as though he makes the place he crosses flow about him. But really only the humans circle around him and they all disappear within seconds. Only the streets and the buildings keep up with the monk – so to speak – who must be controlling the tiniest of his muscles to be able to walk this slow. It is almost as hard for us to stay with the monk as it appears to be for the passers-by. Some people notice him, but soon they too walk by and forget all that happened.⁶ The monk is clearly concentrated, but does not seem to pay attention to his surroundings the way we would: checking out affordances and dangers that may confront us. How to describe him? Is he present or absent? We should ask this very question of the buildings. It is the monk’s pace that makes us notice the place – authentically, one wants to say. We must realise though that we are watching a film – unlike the passers-by. We have already abandoned any interest in affordances or dangers.

All this made me think of two things. First, two conceptions of conserving ancient monumental buildings. Secondly, the notion of the historical sensation. There is a connection between the two.

In The Netherlands we often refer to the ‘authentic details’ of monumental buildings. To preserve a monumental building we concentrate on these details. The stones must be authentic, the walls, the floors, the layout, and, yes, the adornments – every detail must be authentic. When in a matter of years, too many details of a monument are lost, perhaps because its inhabitants preferred comfort over authenticity, the monument loses its monumental status. The Dutch follow the so-called Mereological Theory of Identity (MTI), the view that the identity of an object consists in the identity of its component parts.⁷ We concentrate on the ontology of the object, so to speak; ours is an objective policy – one might call it scientific. When a monument is deteriorating, we take as much old building parts as we can get – and the stones of another building from the same period may suffice – and replace bad spots with them, if possible using the same cement it was built with originally. We restore as much of the original building as possible.



Figure 1: *Journey to the West*, Tsai Ming-Liang, Taiwan, 2014

A different concept of monument preservation, I heard, is sometimes applied in Japan. When a monument deteriorates in Japan, it is sometimes torn down completely and rebuilt in the same spot: the goal is the social and cultural functioning of the building; the place is more important than the ontology.⁸ This is a subjective approach to restoration – without in any way meaning ‘subjective’ dismissively. I view the subjective, not as arbitrary or relativist, but as real and shared.

The monk in the film shares something with the buildings, something that is also shared over the ages amongst many people – perhaps at a lower level of consciousness. People pass the buildings by on a daily basis, and share the nature of their walks with each other. Walking in a narrow street is vastly different from walking on Fifth Avenue in New York – the difference is in subjective awareness, so the authenticity at stake in restoration is definitively subjective, but it is shared among all who are acquainted with it.

III.

Perhaps ‘the Japanese approach’ to monument conservation is the solution to the paradox of Theseus’s ship. Theseus sailed his ship over the seas for years, replacing every now and then rotten or broken parts of it with new ones. In the end, his ship held none of the parts of the original ship with which Theseus started his journey. (Mistakenly, the Dutch would not count the returning ship authentic). Philosophers discussing the metaphysical issue of personal identity use this counterfactual to deal with the fact that after every so many years many of the cells in a human body are replaced.⁹ My take on this: if the replacement of cells took place in one single moment, then surely the result would be someone or something other than who or what preceded the replacement. However, since the replacement of the cells, as of the planks of Theseus’s ship, takes place slowly and gradually, the situation is critically different. Each new bit takes up its place among the many more that remained, in the body or the ship – they adjust to their context, and become one of the old bunch. The context of the new elements – the human body and the ship – does not change with the relatively minor changes. The whole remains the same and incorporates the new parts.

Whether we restore a building, say, in the Dutch or the Japanese manner, the whole, the place and the use of the building will define the authenticity of the result. This fits with Heraclitus, who, in his famous fragment, ‘On those who enter the same rivers, ever different waters flow.’ (fr. 12), says that we stand in the selfsame river, but are nevertheless surrounded by different water all the time. The river forms the context of its ever changing waters.

Applied to works of art this identity problem could make the problem of decay and restoration seem a gradual issue: how much parts of a work can be replaced before the work no longer is what it was? As long as you do

it bit by bit and allow the work to regain its composure (in the eye of its spectators) the work arguably retains its authenticity – think of the slowly darkening ceilings of the Sistine chapel. But the problem is that part of the context of a painting is the fact of the psychological reality of its making. The accessibility of a painter’s individual style can be disturbed if others replace paint on the canvas and the paint no longer is causally connected to the painter’s movements.

Authenticity then comes in two kinds, at least: the kind that regards the ontological identity of a work – something we may, perhaps, identify negatively using scientific methods – and the aesthetic authenticity which has to do with the relation of the work to its maker. Again, the causal chain is necessary, but insufficient for this latter type of authenticity. The former kind seems to be confronted with the mereological problem, the latter confronts all sorts of problems that are all based in the aesthetic value of the work and its accessibility for an audience. Decisive, here, are the subjective aspects of a work – what the audience sees in it, and what the painter realised in it, and why. Another factor hindering a work’s authenticity is the massive audiences standing before you, making pictures of the work that you are trying to take in calmly.

IV.

The place, also, forms the core of what Huizinga called the historical sensation.¹⁰ Take, for instance, the barracks in Auschwitz. Apparently, they have been extensively restored. Though some people complain that this was done purely for commercial reasons, one may wonder what exactly is wrong with it. The possibility to recognise the ones who build the barracks will be all but gone, but would they have ever been visible? We realise how the people who were captured, tortured and killed in the camps by the nazis built it with their bare hands in inhumane conditions. What is important about the current remnants is that people can still visit these sites and imagine just how the victims’ predicament has been. They have an authentic perception of that predicament – even when, in an objective sense, not all the details in the barracks are still original. Auschwitz is subjectively authentic, one could say, and this authenticity can be shared.

If only the camp sites were not flocked with tourists. And why does that hinder the authentic experience?

But does all this hold for works of art in the same manner? Sticking with painting for now, we must be capable of recognising the work done by the artist as a factor in the authenticity of their work: the psychological reality of the individual style the painting is in. If we restore a painting we run the risk of making the movements of the hand of the painter inaccessible, and hence the psychological reality of the making – the way they applied the paint to

the canvas. What is the gain of retaining the image but not the work that was done to make it? Surely, we can reproduce all paintings merely to retain the images, as we do on the internet. I think that would do for tourists only.¹¹

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NOTES

1. This conversation took place after he had published a big catalogue containing all of his 2314 self-portraits he had painted over the years, from 1981 to 2005.
2. See Wollheim 1993.
3. Wollheim 1993, 181-82.
4. *Xi You*, directed by Tsai Ming-Liang, 2014.
5. Perhaps, the homeless are present in the streets like the monk – possibly, for other reasons, they are not.
6. You can watch a ten minute take from the film on youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6z0YqK1ptyo>
7. S. Marc Cohen, 2004, Identity, Persistence, and the Ship of Theseus, <https://faculty.washington.edu/smcohen/320/theseus.html>
8. This may have induced Dutch architect, Rem Koolhaas, to argue that whole blocks can be demolished to make way for something new. See Koolhaas and Mau 1998.
9. Not that I am sure that this metaphysics is the real problem here. I side with Wollheim 1984 on this issue.
10. Frank Ankersmit 1993 wrote about it in his book on the historical experience; Jo Tollebeek and T. Verschaffel in *The Joys of Houssaye. Apology of historical interest* (in dutch).
11. That is the second time I refer to tourists. I guess I define tourists as people collecting experiences, for the mere sake of their quantity. They are not out to share these experiences with the ones around them, which is why they disturb people who do want to share their experiences of the world.

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