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The Work of Art and its Doubles: Restoration, Reproduction, Recording and Translation*

When we do ontology, we try to say what exists. We don't try to say what *individual* things exist – to some extent, the sciences do that – but to say what *types* of things exist, to describe the nature of real things, and even to say what it is for a thing to be what it is.

All these issues are very formal. But ontology can be less abstract if you don't ask the global question, "What things exist?", but less global ontological questions, questions about particular things or kinds of things. You can ask whether God exists. You can also ask whether Nothingness exists. You can even ask whether holes exist. So, ontology can be more existential than formal, and be about the kinds of things we encounter and about our right to say whether or not they exist as things of some real kind. This is applied ontology. Ontology of art, the question of the ontological status of works of art, belong to applied ontology.¹

But in fact, I will not only try to do applied ontology but *something even more* applied. Let us suppose that the question about the ontological status of works of art is resolved. We would still be faced with the problems presented by *restoration, reproduction, recording and translation*. The Principle of the Indiscernability of Identicals says that if two things are actually one and the same, they have all

* This paper has been read in French or English in different universities, among them the University of Iceland (Reykjavik), the University Nicholas Copernic in Toruń, the University of Rennes 1, the University of Provence (Aix-en-Provence), my own university (Nancy 2), and for a part at the École Normale Supérieure (Paris). I had the honor to read it in Bydgoszcz, the 21st April 2005. At this last occasion, it happens something like an ontological miracle. I began my lecture at the Academy of Bydgoszcz and finished it at the University Casimir the Great, without moving at all!

¹ See my book *L'ontologie de l'oeuvre d'art*, Editions J. Chambon, Nîmes 2000.

their constitutive properties in common. Now, a restored painting is supposed to be the same as the original painting, yet it seems to have properties that the original painting lacks. This is even more true of an original painting and its reproduction. And what is the status of a recording? When you listen a CD, what do you hear? The work played by the orchestra, or something else – a recording – whose author is a sound engineer? And when you read Proust in Polish, what do you read? Proust or the courageous translator?

These are not trivial questions. Today, our access to works of art is mainly access to restorations, to reproductions and to recordings. And, being serious persons, I mean good teachers and good students, we read a lot of translations because we want to know the works of all the good writers of the world. This is the reason why the ontology of art must sooner or later focus on the relation between the work of art and its doubles.

I will examine some of the problems risen by restorations, reproductions, recordings and translations. My aim is not to solve them, but simply to convince the reader that they are interesting ontological questions, and so that some ontological questions can be interesting.

Restoration

Why do we restore works of art? Very likely, we restore if we think that the properties belonging essentially to the work have disappeared. So, it would be a work that is no longer itself that we restore. The French philosopher, Étienne Gilson, said that “a restored painting has ceased to be what it was”.² He said too: “An old, tired painting is still the same work of art, older it’s true, but as it became by itself; the least change done by a foreign hand helps to make it another work”.³ Thus, restoration is a condemnable practice, because it makes us believe that we perceive a thing while we in fact perceive something else.

This thesis is based on the idea that paintings and sculptures are singular things because of the relation between them and their authors. Such a singularity would be lost through external intervention. This is exactly what Mark Sagoff says:

Works of art ... are created once and for all by a particular artist at a particular time. Michelangelo created the *Pieta* at the end of the fourteenth century [*sic!*]; can de Campos make parts for it today? No; he can only replace part of one thing, the *Pieta*, with part of another, a copy. If change continues, no matter how perfect each integral repair, the statue Michelangelo created is destroyed as fast as if there were no repair; in time, that statue may be reduced to a fragment, while a reproduction,

² E. Gilson, *Peinture et réalité*, Vrin, Paris 1972, p. 103.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

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which is slowly built around it, will take its place. Prosthetics are just that when applied to a person or to a work of art. They save the appearance of the work of art – but they change its substance. They turn it, bit by bit, into something else. In one sense, the *Pieta* cannot be repaired integrally. We cannot create a new piece, we can attach it, but we cannot make that piece a part of that work of art.⁴

But isn't possible to restore a work in preserving its identity – not its *physical* identity, but what philosophers call its *semantical* identity: what the work *means*. To preserve a work, or to restore it, would be to preserve or to restore such a semantical identity. The restorer must inquire into the author's intention and restore what the time or accident have destroyed.

But this cannot be a good solution. The semantical identity of the work of art corresponds to an interpretation. Perhaps there are many different *correct* interpretations of the same work. How would it be possible, taking one right interpretation of the work, to infer the properties that the work would *have* to have to be the work it is? In addition, a unique semantical content can be determined by two objects that have different physical properties. These three following statements are semantically identical even if they are physically distinct:

The cat is black
Le chat est noir
Kot jest czarny

This shows that the defense of restoration in terms of the semantical identity of the original work is a dead end.

But there is perhaps another possibility. In the case of artifacts, the relational properties that connect them with human activities are essential, because artifacts are what they are because they work or function in a certain way. For example, something is a knife because it functions as a knife in certain circumstances and makes it possible to cut certain things. An artifact can lose its functional properties. We still continue to speak of it as what it was, but it is no longer the thing that it was, for it no longer *functions* as the thing it was. It suffices here to think about a knife whose blade is blunted or about a watch that cannot give the right hour. The case of a painting would be the same. It would possess particular aesthetic properties. Its specific aesthetic functioning – the class of aesthetic properties you can attribute to it – would have to be preserved and, in some cases, remade by making it function anew.

But this argument has a weak point. When I repair my bicycle, for example, I maintain its working as *this* bicycle by simply making it work as *a* bicycle. If this bicycle has a particularity, it can lose it forever, and I can be unable to restore it. When I repair my bicycle, I re-establish the functioning of *a* bicycle; but the *singularity* of my bicycle has nothing to do with what I am doing, even if it is in the end my bicycle that is working once again.

⁴ "On Restoring and Reproducing Art", *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 75, No. 9, 1978.

This criticism is correct. But it rests that it is important to make a work of art to work as the work it is. If a painting is so dirty that it is impossible to see anything, it must be cleaned. In cleaning it, we hope not to modify its working, but it would be completely useless not to clean it. Nelson Goodman, one of the best philosopher on such topics and many others, has a word for such an operation: he calls it *activation*.⁵ Cleaning and lighting are two ways to activate artworks. Of course, restoration is not always a great success. And the goal of a restoration can sometimes be to eliminate the awful work of previous restorers. But to eliminate a bad restoration is still to restore.

The restorer is not really like the bicycle repair man. He is more like a doctor or a surgeon. He must often ask himself whether an intervention is really necessary, or whether it would not be a better idea to leave well enough alone. To do nothing is sometimes the best thing we can do to preserve what can still be preserved. And even the maxim to preserve artworks in their original state, or to reestablish such a state if possible, is arguably not a categorical imperative of restorers; for sometimes the patina of the years has so many aesthetic properties that it would simply be stupidity to eliminate it. As we like our old sweaters and shoes, and we like them more than we liked the formerly new clothes and shoes, sometimes, an artwork includes what time has effected.

The problems of restoration are mainly practical, even if we must do a lot of theory to understand why they are mainly practical. What must be done in such and such a case to preserve the identity of something is not the kind of question we can answer generally. The answer is in each case historical and technical. History tells us whether we really have the necessary knowledge of the former condition of the original. But in history we have only probabilities – even shifting probabilities; and this encourages prudence and even caution. Technicians try to find new ways to modify works of art without destroying them. By contrast, philosophers are unable to say anything much about particular cases. They can only say that a functional account of artworks justifies the idea of restoration. But in a particular case, the best choice might nevertheless be not to restore.

I think that the best argument in favor of cautious restoration is the stimulus to historical research and technical progress that it provides. Even if, in a particular case, we decide not to restore, the project in prospect enlarges our knowledge and our abilities. There is a connection between our true beliefs concerning art works and their working as the works they are. The project of restoration is always a good one, even if finally nothing is done, because sometimes it can also be a good way to pay the kind of attention to artworks that they deserve.

⁵ See his paper published in French (perhaps only in French): “L’art en action”, French tr. by J.-P. Cometti, *Les Cahiers du Musée National d’Art Moderne*, n° 41, automne 1992; reprinted in J.-P. Cometti, J. Morizot, R. Pouivet (ed.), *Textes-clés d’esthétique contemporaine*, Vrin, Paris 2005.

Reproduction

Concerning the reproduction of artworks, there are two main accounts. According to the first, a reproduction is not the work. According to the second, under some conditions, a reproduction is the work. The second account is provocative. It is defended by Eddy Zemach.

Zemach says that, “If a given occurrence has enough essential features of the *Mona Lisa*, it is a (good or poor) occurrence of the *Mona Lisa*.”⁶ And he adds that “self-identity of a thing is preservation of its essence, and what is essential is a matter of evaluation.”⁷ So, “preserving the identity of an artwork is preserving the aesthetic contribution of *that* work.”⁸ The identity of an artwork is not physical or semantic, it is an evaluative identity. A reproduction can be as authentic as an original, if it possesses the aesthetic essential features of the work. To prefer the original, even when the original is of a lesser quality than the reproduction, is simply fetishism, according to Zemach.

This thesis is clever and even fascinating, but false. When you ask why a painting or a sculpture is *that* painting or *that* sculpture, the fact that it has been painted or carved by a particular person at a particular moment is not at all secondary. It is not the kind of feature that you can exclude without modifying what you are talking about. Zemach believes that an artwork is a set of properties whose content can be determined by an interpretation. So, anything that has the same aesthetic properties would be the same artwork. But paintings and sculptures are not sets of properties, they are true things; they are substances possessing properties and not aggregates of properties.

To justify my objection against Zemach’s account, I will use an analogy between an artwork and a beloved person. I think this analogy is relevant. If you love a person who possesses a given set of qualities, you don’t therefore love everyone who possesses the same set of qualities. This would not be an argument to your beloved person to say that you been unfaithful to him or her because you met someone possessing the same set of qualities, and that finally it was making no difference. Concerning *philia*, Aristotle says that what we love is the person for him- or herself. We don’t love the person for the properties he or she possesses, for if we did the person would be replaceable.⁹ To love someone for his or her properties and not for him- or herself is not true friendship. And I think that is it even less true love. Pascal was absolutely wrong when he suggested that we never love persons, but only qualities.¹⁰ It is exactly the contrary.

⁶ E. Zemach, *Real Beauty*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park 1997, p. 145.

⁷ Ibid., p. 149.

⁸ Ibid., p. 150.

⁹ See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1156a 17-18.

¹⁰ See B. Pascal, *Pensées*, éd. Lafuma, Le Seuil, Paris 1963, 688.

Why don't we love a set of qualities, but *persons*? Because persons have their own characteristics that nobody else can have. Concerning such characteristics, Aristotle said that they are not said *of* someone but that they are *in* someone.¹¹ "Human" is said of Socrates because Socrates is a human being. But the wisdom-of-Socrates, the wisdom he incarnated, is not a quality that can be attributed to someone else – to Jacques Chirac for example. When Socrates disappeared his wisdom disappeared, even if wisdom in general did not disappear. The persons you really love are not replacable, because you love them for the characteristics they *incarnate*. You cannot have those characteristics without those very persons. These are not *free* properties but *adherent* properties. Perhaps this is also the reason why among these properties are faults and defects; and you like these defects as you love the person. Nobody is simply an aggregate of properties.

I think that artworks are like persons in this way; they are not sets of properties. And when you appreciate a reproduction, the properties you appreciate are *symbols* of the original characteristics, and not the characteristics themselves. The reproduction cannot be the same thing as the original, because some properties of the original, adherent properties, cannot be properties of the reproduction.

But as in the case of restoration, the efforts made to endow reproductions with certain cognitive functions enlarge our true beliefs concerning original works of art and enable us to apprehend more fully their aesthetic properties. In particular, the possibilities of noticing important details are improved through reproductions. We can say that a reproduction makes reference to a work by exemplifying some of its features. It sometimes makes us see better what we were unable to see before. It constitutes a sort of analysis and exegesis. It *interprets* the work, and can do this with more or less intelligence. Malraux was completely right when he said that reproductions created an Imaginary Museum far better than the one of our memory.¹² Reproduction permits us to confront works of art that we would otherwise be unable to confront – to see, for example, that some African sculptures are very great works, even when compared with the Occidental tradition of sculpture.

Reproductions are good means for entering into contact with works of art, not substitutes for those works. This is even the reason why we must sometimes restore artworks. They are fragile, they are temporal material things, without tokens, rather than eternal, ideal things that can be instantiated in many places at the same time. As you must do with your beloved, you must take care of an artwork, because you cannot have another one; and even the best reproduction will not be same.

¹¹ See Aristotle, *Categories*, chap. 2.

¹² See A. Malraux, *Le musée imaginaire*, Gallimard, Paris 1965.

Recording

When we listen a CD, do we hear the musical work? The answer is both *yes* and *no*.

The answer is *yes* because what you hear enters in the correspondance class of the work's score. It means that if what you hear respects the score – the notational identity criterion – there is no reason to insist that what you hear is not the work. For the work is what corresponds to the score. The recording makes no difference.

But there *is* a big difference between live performance and a recording. The recording implies a system for coding a certain sonorous sequence. In the case of a digital recording, such a system is *itself* notational, like a musical score; but of course it is not the same notational system as employed in the score. So, when you listen a CD, you hear a sonorous sequence belonging to the correspondance class of a score, but you also hear a sonorous sequence belonging to *another* correspondance class, the one belonging to the CD itself. All the diffusions of the CD belong to the correspondance class of the recording, but all the performances of the work don't belong to the correspondance class of the recording. So, the two classes are not coincident. Why?

The musical notation is a semantical medium for preserving the identity of a work through its many performances. In some cases, recording is a technical medium for preserving a unique performance. The musical notation aims at preserving the unicity of what is multiple.¹³ The recording aims at multiplying what is unique. In other and today most frequent cases, recording is a technical construction of the musical work itself, like it is in rock music, for example. Recording is not of a work, but is the work. To explain why, I must tell a sort of story: the way recordings changed their status, from reproductions to creations.

At the beginning of this story we have some recordings of classical music and of jazz music. It was nice to have recordings of the best musicians and orchestras, even if there were only ersatz of live performances. Jazz is very often improvised music. If you write down the score of an improvisation, the original improvisation does not fall within the correspondance class of that score, even if the one who writes down the score is the improviser. Just because what is at stake is an *improvisation* something which is essentially singular. This is why recording has been a great thing for jazz. We can listen to improvised sessions: to what happened with Charly Parker or Thelonious Monk at a certain moment in a particular place. A large part of the organ music of the Baroque era was also improvised. But we know nothing of the Parkers and Monks of that period; their performances are forever lost. This is why must consider ourselves very fortunate

¹³ See P. Hernadi, "Reconceiving Notation and Performance", *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol. 25, No. 1.

now to have recordings. So recordings are like reproductions. The original sequences are definitively gone, but we have recordings that make reference to them. They are audible reproductions.

However, these reproductions have their own characteristics that the original sonorous sequences did not have. One can even say that a recording has its own author: the record engineer. He or she is like the photographer, in the case of a photographic reproduction. The engineer makes his own contribution. You can sometimes even recognize, by listening, who is the author of a recording (Phil Spector, for example) or discern the characteristic style of a recording (recordings by ECM of European jazz, for example). And of course, the recording devices have their own characteristics. And, finally, when you listen to a recording, you can intervene yourself, using all the means that your stereophonic system gives to you for changing bass, treble, balance, and so on.

You know that a record can be made by musicians that have never performed. In 1996, the Beatles survivors recorded a very bad song with John Lennon, who died in 1981 (I think). All these technical possibilities give a certain artistic autonomy to the recording. And finally, recordings are now the works themselves.¹⁴ If the work is the recording itself, the works can't be played. I think about Stockhausen's *Gesang der Jünglinge* or *A Day in Life* from the Beatles' *Sergeant Pepper* album. Today, in rock music, disco, rap, hip-hop, techno, the works are created in a studio, without scores, by means of mixing instruments or synthesizers. The recording device and the musical instruments can be one and the same. In such a case, the work is nothing more or less than what you hear when you hear the CD. A rock group like Supertramp plays live exactly like on the CD, which is for me its only success. In rap music, recordings are used as materials for new recordings, just as they were in the music of Steve Reich or Philip Glass thirty five years ago. It is the method of sampling; one of the main interest of such musical works is the way they play with recording of other works.

It is obvious that recording has completely modified our relation to musical works, perhaps even more deeply than reproductions. As in the case of pictural works, we have now an incredible museum of musical works at our disposal. We listen Mozart, the Rolling Stones and Irish music in the same hour. The largest part of the music that we listen to is not played by genuine instruments but by technological devices. The ontology of musical works is presently a very difficult project! What is really the ontological status of a work produced by someone in a studio with a computer, using ready-made materials, and sent out on the web, changed somewhere else in another computer to be heard on a multimedia system, after modification by the user? I think that the old pattern of music composed by an author, and performed by musicians reading a score, is now marginal, even if it

¹⁴ See my book on "mass art": *L'oeuvre d'art à l'âge de sa mondialisation*, La lettre volée, Bruxelles 2003.

still the pattern that philosophers like best to talk about. Most contemporary composers work for radio, TV and CD audiences, not for concerts. In fact, this is very close to contemporary cinema, with script-writers, actors, technicians, directors, producers – mass art with a collective author. I think that music now is in such a situation.

Translation

Is a translated poem or novel *that* very poem or *that* novel? Once more, there are two accounts. On the first account, the identity of a literary work resides in a *semantic content*, completely independent of the language in which the work is written. On the second account, a poem or a novel cannot be translated. Once again, I think that these accounts are both true and false.

The first account implies that it is possible to isolate semantic content from its linguistic form. I think that such a thing is perhaps possible in the case of formalized languages. Surely it is true that “If p, then q” is equivalent to “not-p or q”. Their semantical content is exactly the same. But even in formalized languages, there are differences. The Principle of Identity was formulated by the Stoics in this way: “If p, then p”. Aristotelians formulated it quite differently: “A is said of all the A’s”. Jan Łukasiewicz explained that this is no small difference; it is a very deep contrast between two ways of understanding logic.¹⁵ The Aristotelians had a different ontological apprehension of logic, using a subject-predicate form that the Stoics rejected. So perhaps even in formal languages, the isolation of semantic content from linguistic content breaks down. In natural languages, the idea that semantic content can be isolated is obviously even less credible. Philosophers have shown that even if you preserve semantic content when translating, you don’t preserve what Paul Grice called *conversational implicature*: what a statement implies, or presupposes, in context. And this is the reason why some things can be said only in one language.

Should we then adopt the second account? On that account, a poem or a novel is a text. If you don’t know the language in which the text is written, you have no access to it. A translation is another text, because it is a text in another language. Translations are works in themselves. So they are not identical to the original texts. But even if this is correct, it would be silly to say that it is impossible to translate. In fact, the problem of the translation is not that translation is impossible, but that there are too many possibilities. There are, to be sure, bad translations, and if they are bad enough, they are simply not translations. But for one and the

¹⁵ At the beginning of his paper “Zur Geschichte des Aussagenlogik”, published in German in *Erkenntnis*, 5, 1935.

same text, there are many right and good (and equally good!) translations. The reason is that translations refer to the original text. You cannot have a French text of *Pan Tadeusz*, because Mickiewicz wrote this text in Polish. But you can have many French versions of *Pan Tadeusz*, each referring to Mickiewicz's Polish text. The authors of these versions are the translators, but their goal is to write a text that can give access to another text by a different means than simply reading the text written by Mickiewicz. As Goodman and Elgin say, "the translator of a poem typically has to decide the relative importance of preserving denotation (what the poem says), exemplification (what rhythmic, melodic, and other formal properties it shows forth), and expression (what feelings and other metaphorical properties it conveys)".¹⁶ In a sense, a translation is like an interpretation; the difference is in the way in which they refer to a text. You can refer to Aristotle in saying: "The dissident disciple of Plato", or "The preceptor of Alexander", or "Nicomachos' father", "Thomas Aquinas' favorite philosopher". The four formulas are all correct concerning Aristotle; they refer to him. If we wish to choose between them in a given instance, the question would be which of them is most informative, or most interesting, in that context. Translations, like interpretations, must be right; but they are also context-dependent.

A translation is not the work because it is itself a work. It can have its own merits. As with restoration and reproduction, it is better to be able to know a work through its translation than to ignore it completely. But it must also be noted that the translator makes the works work. One way to apprehend a work is to translate it. To do it, you must pay a lot of attention to it and to another language. Milan Kundera considers that the French translation of his works written in Czech has the same authenticity as the works he wrote initially. I am not sure that this makes complete sense; for even if he examined the translations, and even if he had been himself the translator (which is not the actual case), the translations are different works referring to his works. But there is sense to saying, with Mishima, that he prefers reading himself in English to reading himself in Japanese. Strangely, the English translator of Mishima was able to make Mishima's works function better than Mishima himself was able to do.

Conclusion

Works of art have doubles. The best they can do is to give an access to the works, and often they do this. But doubles are also things in their own right. In the ontology of art, there is definitely a place for restored paintings, reproductions, recordings and translations, not only for originals.

¹⁶ N. Goodman and C.Z. Elgin, *Reconceptions in Philosophy*, Routledge, London 1988, p. 57.

In a well known text, “The Origin of the Work of Art”, Heidegger criticized the business that has been built up around artworks, all such activity being seen by him as a kind of assault against true art. I think exactly the contrary. One of the best way we have of doing justice to works of art is often to create doubles, and to make all the effort that it takes to make fine doubles. This is a good way of apprehending, and coming close to, works of art. It is of course a way connected intimately with the technical world, which Heidegger thought of as the main obstacle to what he called Being. But I think that aesthetic experience is a cognitive and active one.¹⁷ To restore, to reproduce, to record and to translate are important modes of *paying attention* to works of art. No ontology of art can ignore such doubles, without also ignoring what art is now for us, and even what is art.

¹⁷ See my book *Esthétique et logique*, Mardaga, Liege 1996.

