

The ontology of the digital photograph

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Digital Photography and 3 Kinds of Authenticity

- (1) Representational authenticity: “Is it a photograph of such and such?”
- (2) Medium authenticity. “Is it a photograph?”
- (3) Ontological authenticity. “Is it a print of that photo?”

Multiplicity

“Digital photographs are multiples.”

- instances or occurrences not mere copies*
- simultaneous spatially noncontiguous reception points*
- modal/dispositional*
- even if exceptions, the generic is true*

Q: When is a particular concrete image an authentic instance of a digital photograph?

www.metmuseum.org/toah/images/h2/h2_2001.415.jpg

www.medienkunstnetz.de/.../data/3464/bild.jpg



Sherrie Levine, «After Walker Evans», 1981
Untitled | © Sherrie Levine



Alabama Tenant Farmer Wife, 1936
Walker Evans (American, 1903–1975)
Gelatin silver print; 8 1/4 x 5 11/16 in. (20.9 x 14.4 cm)
Purchase, 2000 Benefit Fund, 2001 (2001.415)

Autographic/allographic

“Let us speak of a work of art as autographic if and only if the distinction between original and forgery of it is significant; or better, if and only if even the most exact duplication of it does not thereby count as genuine. If a work of art is autographic, we may also call that art autographic” (Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 113).

What kind of forgery?

Two kinds of forgery:

- (1) Referential forgery (Levinson 1980/1990): x is falsely presented as being a (or instance of a) “particular actually existing work”
- (2) Inventive forgery (ibid.): x is falsely presented as being a (or instance of a) work of art “that does not exist” (e.g., Van Meegern’s ‘Vermeers’)

Goodman is only interested in referential forgeries.

“This Is Just To Tell
You”

William Carlos Williams

I have eaten
the plums that were in
the refrigerator

and which you
were probably saving
for brunch

I’m sorry
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

Since it appears that some kind referential forgery is possible in every art form (e.g., texts that differs in a few words from *Catch-22* or “This Is Just To Say” might be falsely presented as instances of the real thing), we need to focus on *indiscernible referential forgeries*.

Autographic/Allographic

Autographic

- Painting
- Sculpture
- Printmaking
- Comics

Allographic

- Dance
- Music
- Theatre
- Literature

- *Not the singular/multiple distinction (pace Kivy)*
- *Not the creative/performance distinction*
- *Not the fine art/mass art distinction*

	Singular	Multiple
Autographic	Painting Carved sculpture Monotypes	(Most) printmaking Cast sculpture Comics
Allographic		Traditional literature* Classical music Theatre Dance <small>* w/out illustrations</small>

	Non-Performance	Performance
Autographic	Painting Carved sculpture Printmaking Comics Cast sculpture	
Allographic	Traditional literature	Classical music Theatre Dance

Notationality

'Since an art seems to be allographic just insofar as it is amenable to notation...' (Goodman *Languages of Art*, 121.)

In literature, for example, 'all that matters is what may be called sameness of spelling: exact correspondence as sequences of letters, spaces, and punctuation marks' (ibid. 115-116).

Suggestion: A work *W* is notatable iff whether or not *x* is an authentic instance of *W* can be fully determined by conformity to/compliance with a particular instance of notation (e.g., spelling and word order, score).

Why does notationality matter?

"...the fact that a literary work is in a definite notation...provides the means of distinguishing the properties constitutive of the work from all contingent properties—that is, for fixing the required features and the limits of permissible variation in each. In painting, on the contrary, with no such alphabet of characters, none of the pictorial properties...is distinguished as constitutive; no such feature can be dismissed as contingent, and no deviation as insignificant....physical identification of the product of the artist's hand, and consequently the concept of forgery of a particular work, assume a significance in painting that they do not have literature" (Goodman 116).

Ordinary photography and the autographic/allographic distinction

Ordinary photographs intuitively forgeable.

Exact duplicate of an ordinary photograph does not thereby count as genuine.

Ordinary photographs don't appear to be amenable to notation.

So ordinary photography is plausibly autographic.
(So too ordinary film and video.)

Warburton on art photography

When is a particular concrete image an authentic artistic instance of a photographic work of art?

"An authentic print is one that has been certified" (Warburton, "Authentic Photographs," 133).

"Even if two prints were virtually (or actually) indistinguishable, only the one certified by the photographer would count as genuine or authentic" (ibid., 134).

"when dealing with traditionally produced photography prints, and when considering them as works of photographic art...we need a model of photographic authenticity which allows photographers control over the second stage of a two-stage autographic process" (ibid., 136)

Warburton on Digital Photography

"as digital records of an image can be transferred and printed with no loss of quality and an absolute guarantee of sameness, the existing conventions described above will certainly need to be adapted.... Photographic art of the future could easily approach the condition of music" (ibid.)

Digital photography as allographic?

"Digitalization does not only permit perfect reproduction but also permanent rebirth. In Nelson Goodman's terminology one could say that digitalization liberates pictures from their 'autographic' mode of existence" (Karlheinz Ludeking 'Pixelpainting and Virtual Photography', 201).

"Digital images, then, are two stage, allographic, mechanically instantiated works" (William J. Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era*, xxx).

Digital Photography

A tension:

- (1) The distinction between original and indiscernible referential forgery appears significant. So autographic?

But...

- (2) Digital photography seems to be the paradigm of a notational art form. "It's just the bits." So allographic?

Two problems for Goodman

Contextualism: Plausible that art work identity is never fully determined by conformity to notation. Causal history matters!

If so, digital photographs (and all other works of art) are all autographic in some sense.

Fragmentation: Art forms may have autographic and allographic examples.

Contextualism

Borges: "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote"

"Cervante's text and Menard's are verbally identical, but the second is almost infinitely richer."

"The archaic style of Menard—quite foreign, after all—suffers from a certain affectation. Not so that of his forerunner..."

- Menard's *DQ* is affected and rich.
- Cervantes' *DQ* is not affected and not rich.
- So Cervantes' *DQ* is not identical to Menard's *DQ*.
- But Cervantes' *DQ* is notationally identical to Menard's *DQ*.
- If notational identity determined literary work identity, then Cervantes' *DQ* would be identical with Menard's *DQ*.
- Notational identity does not determine literary work identity.

So...

Sameness of spelling is not all that matters to literary work identity.
Sameness of notes is not all that matters to musical work identity.

If right, then all works of art are autographic in some sense. So digital photographs are autographic not allographic.

But this seems to miss out on capturing an important difference. Works of literature still seem non-forgeable (in the appropriate way). (See Janaway on texts and scores 'functioning as' instances of the works they are presented as.)

Can we reconstruct the distinction and explain this?

Levinson on the autographic/allographic (1)

“(1a) A work of art (and the art form it belongs to) is autographic(a) iff even the most exact duplication of the work or its genuine instances which does not employ the appropriate arch form does not count as genuine” (Levinson 1990, 91).

Arch form: “some unique physical object...essentially involved in the process of production of genuine instances and which imparts to those instances a common structure” (ibid.)

Digital photography and the Levinsonian distinctions

1a: Digital photographs allow for genuine instances. But no arch form is involved in their production since no unique physical object is necessarily involved. So allographic(1a).

(But Levinson’s paper pre-digital age, so how significant?)

Levinson on the autographic/allographic (3)

“(3) A work of art...is autographic(3) *iff* the identity of genuine instances of the work is *not at all determined* by the identity of character in a notation or compliance with a character in a notation” (Levinson 1990, 101).

Digital photography and the Levinsonian distinctions

3: Identity of a digital photograph is surely partially determined by notation. So allographic (3).

But (3) seems to fail to capture truth about comics and other hybrid/multi-media cases where notation is relevant (since text involved) but are intuitively autographic.

Levinson on the autographic/allographic (2)

“(1b) A work of art (and the art form it belongs to) is autographic(b) iff even the most exact duplication of the work or its genuine instances by *direct transcription* does not count as genuine” (Levinson 1990, 92).

Direct transcription: the attempt to copy a work by means of observation and the use of the standard tools and raw material of a medium (ibid.)

Digital photography and the Levinsonian distinctions

1b: Does the most exact duplication of a digital photograph by direct transcription count as genuine?

What counts as exact duplication?

What counts as direct transcription?

Digital photographs are two-faced



Exact duplication and direct transcription

Non-photographic duplication of the image (you code up something in different bits and use it to generate an indiscernible image)

- not a photo so not an instance of the photo
- but not direct transcription, so irrelevant

Non-photographic duplication of code and image (you code up identical bits and use it to generate an indiscernible image)

- not a photo so not an instance of the photo
- but still not direct transcription, so irrelevant

Exact duplication and direct transcription

Photographic duplication of image (you take a new photo and use it to generate an indiscernible image even though bits are different)

- implausible that it must be instance of the same photo (since representation may be different)
- direct transcription?
- so autographic?

Photographic duplication of code and image (you take a new photo which is stored in identical code and is used to produce indiscernible image)

- implausible that it must be instance of the same photo (since representation may be different)
- direct transcription
- so autographic

Upshot: Digital photography autographic in Levinson sense 1b.

Are the bits all that matter?

Which bits?

RAW file: proprietary file formats used to record data captured by light sensor.

JPEG: proprietary 'lossy' compressed file formats...what your ordinary photos are converted to for printing, manipulation, storage

TIFF: common format can be 'lossy' or 'lossless'

Transfer from one format to another changes bits
Compression changes bits and may change quality

Implausible—given this—that the particular bits matter that much.

Upshot

Digital photographs are:

- autographic in the strict Goodmanian sense (but so are all works of art)
- allographic in the 'arch form' sense (1a), but this sense is uninteresting (since digital arts not considered)
- allographic in the 'partially determined by notation' sense (3) but this sense too is uninteresting (since hybrid/multi-media arts not considered)
- plausibly autographic in the 'direct transcription' sense (1b)

Levinson argues that 1a and 1b are extensionally equivalent (though autographic 1b is 'intensionally somewhat broader' than autographic 1a). But they are not extensionally equivalent since dps are autographic 1b and allographic 1a.

Levinson also claims that autographic(1b) and autographic(3) are co-extensive (p. 102). But this is false since dps are autographic 1b but allographic 3.