

Katerina Reed-Tsocha
*Dividing Lines, Impoverished Domains:
The Aesthetic and the Artistic*

This paper is a preliminary investigation into the distinction between two concepts, the viability of the distinction, the precise way of drawing it, the motivation behind it and its general implications. The distinction I will be talking about is one drawn between the concept of the aesthetic and that of the artistic and is applicable to distinct kinds of judgement, value and appreciation. The distinction is widely acknowledged and drawn in many different ways with different purposes in mind.¹ Therefore, when I refer to the motivation behind the distinction I do not mean a welcome desire for conceptual clarity but, rather, much more specific motives: such as considerations of purity at one end (the kind of aesthetic purism found in Beardsley)² and the need to do away with the artwork in favour of the

¹ An overview of the different ways of drawing the distinction is given by Bohdan Dziemidok in his »On Aesthetic and Artistic Evaluations of the Work of Art« in Peter McCormick (ed.) *The Reasons of Art*, Ottawa: Ottawa University Press 1985 and »On the Need to Distinguish Between Aesthetic and Artistic Evaluations of Art« in R. J. Yanal (ed.) *Institutions of Art: Reconsiderations of George Dickie's Philosophy*, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press 1994. See also his »Controversy About the Aesthetic Nature of Art« *British Journal of Aesthetics* 28 (1988) 1-17 and »Aesthetic Experience and Evaluation« in J. Fisher (ed.) *Essays on Aesthetics: Perspectives on the Work of M. C. Beardsley*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1983.

With entirely different motivation, the distinction is made out by David Best who links the artistic with the »possibility of expression of a conception of life issues«. See »The Aesthetic and the Artistic, *Philosophy* 57 (1982) 351-372, reprinted as ch. 11 in his *Feeling and Reason in the Arts*, London 1985, and »The Aesthetic and the Artistic«, chapter 12 in *The Rationality of Feeling*, London 1992. The same link is drawn by Graham McFee in »Art, Beauty and the Ethical« (unpublished paper given in Antwerp 1996), whereas in »The Artistic and the Aesthetic« (unpublished paper given at the Annual Conference of the British Society of Aesthetics 1998), McFee firmly locates the aesthetic outside the domain of art arguing that »to attribute (merely) aesthetic properties to artworks is to misperceive them« [p. 2]. See also »Basic Concepts« in G. McFee *Understanding Dance*, London: Routledge 1992.

² M. C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics*, Indianapolis: Hackett 1980. Also Alfred Lessing, »What is Wrong with a Forgery?« in Dennis Dutton (ed.) *The Forger's Art*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1983 and R. Rudner »On Seeing What we Shall See« in R. Rudner and I. Scheffler (eds.) *Logic and Art: Essays in Honour of Nelson Goodman*, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill 1972.

readymade at the other extreme (that occupied by some advocates of the institutional theory)³.

My discussion is restricted in two ways: (a) by virtue of being preliminary in the sense that I focus on what I take to be the »prehistory« of the distinction, and (b) by being narrow in scope. The main part of the paper is therefore concerned with Beardsley's distinction between objective and genetic judgements and its supporting secondary distinctions. Beardsley's distinction amounts to a dichotomy between the aesthetic as perceptual and to a narrow conception of the artistic as genetic, referring to the artist in the terms of the doctrine of the Intentional Fallacy. The polarised, schematic way in which the objective and the genetic domain are separated in the context of this approach characterises also various subsequent attempts to separate the aesthetic and the artistic, in particular when the distinction is invoked in order to resolve the problem of forgeries, one of the so-called »puzzles of Aesthetics« whose formulation relies precisely on the conception of the aesthetic that is consequently invoked in order to dispel the confusion. Thus in the concluding part of my paper I will discuss briefly the problem of forgeries in relation to the distinction. In a sense, the paper remains inconclusive, so to speak, simply because the material I cover is highly selective in a biased way and thus perhaps insufficient in order to support the conclusion I would like to draw. This conclusion, which is implicitly present throughout my discussion, amounts to the expression of extreme skepticism with respect to the appropriateness of the concept of the aesthetic in defining the character of our appreciation of works of art. This line of thought supports the idea of our appreciation of works of art seen as exactly this, i.e. a holistic, well-integrated response whose character is art-historically, institutionally defined. On the other hand, a conclusion that can be supported by my material is that the sharp delineation of the aesthetic domain effected under the regime of considerations of purity leaves the aesthetic in a state of extreme impoverishment.

Beardsley's conception of the aesthetic object as it appears in his 1958 *Aesthetics* may sound dated today. However, the debate his theory of the aesthetic and the related anti-intentionalism stimulated is still very much alive. Moreover, his later, refined, theory of aesthetic experience and the aesthetic definition of art (involving the notion of an »aesthetic artwork« – a major concession to intentionalism) are still quite influential.

³ T. Binkley, »Piece: Contra Aesthetic« in J. Margolis (ed.) *Philosophy Looks at the Arts*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1977. For a discussion of the institutional theory leading to the distinction as a way of resolving what are considered to be its difficulties, see Carolyn Korsmeyer, »On Distinguishing Between Aesthetic and Artistic«, *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 11 (1977) 45-57.

Going back to Beardsley's distinction between objective and genetic reasons (judgements), i.e. those that are genuinely attributed to the work itself and those that refer to the causes and conditions of the work and include not only psychological processes but also the physical processes that brought the work into being, I am not concerned with discarding, quite redundantly, an out-of-date distinction. Rather, I am trying to highlight the surprising (to me, at least) fact that the terms in which this distinction is conceived survive to some extent in later attempts to separate the aesthetic and the artistic. That is, although nobody would think of casting the artistic in Beardsley's simplistic terms, it is still thought of as something external to the work and it is often conceived in a schematic, polarised way. Which brings me to the second reason why I find it useful to look at Beardsley again, a reason that has to do with distinction-drawing strategies in general. For the objective/genetic distinction is supported by a number of other distinctions, some of them employing spatial metaphors like the distinction between internal and external characteristics of the aesthetic object which in their turn define what lies inside and what falls outside the domain of the aesthetic. There is also the distinction between veridical and illusory characteristics of the aesthetic object, i.e. those that rely on direct sensory awareness (the aesthetic object is after all defined as »a perceptual object«) as opposed to the latter that involve the »obscurity« of inference. My claim with respect to all the above is that Beardsley is not able to maintain the distinctness of the dichotomies he proposes and that this fact renders his approach incoherent. To see why this is so requires (a) making a preliminary point about translatability and (b) going through his list of genetic and objective reasons and structuring it somewhat by organising some of them in opposing pairs.

First, translatability. Beardsley's project of objective criticism is corrective in character aiming at reforming criticism and shaking off even the last traces of the intentional fallacy. In this context, he proposes a specific way of correcting critical judgements by recasting them in objective terms. This amounts to the principle of translatability of genetic to objective judgements. But the mere possibility of translatability, involving as it would, the transference of semantic content, unchanged (i.e. without any loss of meaning), from the domain of the genetic to that of the objective shows that the conceptual dichotomy between the two domains is not as rigid as Beardsley wants us to believe. For clearly, the meaning of the genetic statement would be preserved in the objective one. So are we dealing with a continuum rather than a distinction here?

The following observations should reinforce this impression. Thus returning to the pairs of critical terms, we find that: (i) the statement »art-

work x is well-organised« is accepted as an objective judgement as opposed to »x is skilful« which is condemned as genetic, and (ii) the notion of style is accepted as objective while »technique« is rejected. The sharp opposition between the terms in each antithetical pair however can be challenged once some additional considerations are introduced. This is what I will try to do now.

Thus starting with the first opposition: Beardsley's sharp opposition between »skilful«, construed as »being skilfully made« and hence involving the end-means terminology and thus ultimately being a hidden judgement about the producer rather than about the work, and »well-organised« as an acceptable »purely descriptive« judgement referring to the unity of the work is easily challenged by pointing out that the latter has equal claims to being construed as »x was organised in a very efficient manner« and thus involving the end-means terminology as well. This comes as no surprise: artworks are created according to some principle of organisation that functions as an ideal end to which various technical rules were employed as means. Artworks should be seen as products of intelligent action and this organising intelligence should always be inferred from their formal features.

But even after we discard the claim that 'skilful' is an attribute of the artist rather than the work, we are still left with an opposition. However, we can draw an analogy between those judgements that refer to the internal organisation of the work and a class of judgements that attribute skill on the basis of the correct application of technical rules. Thus »well-organised«, a structural property, and »skilful«, a technical one, can be construed in an analogous manner by reversing an argument that Stolnitz⁴ gives in an attempt to subsume artistic judgements under the broader genus of aesthetic ones. The argument draws a link between attributions of skill and making decisions and is useful in this context because decision-making is not unrelated to applying an organisational principle.

Stolnitz's argument regards attributions of skill applied to what Stolnitz refers to as »the perceptual content of music«, taking as his example the, highly conventionalised, we should note, genre of the sonata. Focusing on the statement S : »the transition at the recapitulation from the second subject to the first subject was skilfully made«, Stolnitz unfolds what he describes as S's »perceptual meaning«. Omitting the technicalities, it is enough to say that there exist a range of conventionally established alternative ways in which the transition can be effected. These vary from scale passages, i.e. simple acoustic fillers, to rather intriguing harmonic constructions based on

⁴ J. Stolnitz, »The Artistic Values in Aesthetic Experience«, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 32 (1979) 5-15.

the interplay between the two themes. Since the transition follows at the end of the development of the second subject when the first subject returns, we are in a position, having listened so far, to anticipate the technical problem the composer is going to face. We can think of the various alternatives that are open to him. And yet, a technically perfect solution can still trigger our admiration as well as a reaction of surprise: this would qualify as a skilful solution.

In other words, the tactical move that Stolnitz resorts to here is to place the perceiver in the composer's position and enforce upon him the problem-situation that the composer is confronting. This amounts, for him, to a case of aesthetic enjoyment of the art-making activity. Thus listening to the work becomes a kind of composing it and, we may add, also the other way around, composing is a kind of listening. The distinctness of the two activities is blurred as listening emerges as a cognitive exercise we engage in by reconstructing the composer's problem.

The point that needs to be made however is that this reconstruction often has to be far more elaborate than the fill-in-the-gap situation that Stolnitz envisages. And here I can only refer you to Michael Baxandall's excellent discussion of the technical problems that Picasso and Braque encountered and the solutions they provided each other with.⁵ The implications of the possibility of such intricate reconstructions are far-reaching and my time-constraints make it impossible to unravel them here. It is however enough, for the purposes of my argument, to retain the point that by narrowing down the genetic, hence artistic, and opening up the aesthetic, all on the common basis of a construal that would employ the idea of a reconstruction of the creative process even if this is recast as merely a series of choices between a range of alternatives, we see how the aesthetic and the artistic interpermeate each other.

A different argument leading to the same conclusion can be construed with respect to the second antithetical pair that I singled out above, that is, style and technique. This would involve reforming the notion of style as employed by Beardsley by opening it up and unfolding its construal into a discussion of technique. Beardsley defines style as »the recurrent features in the texture or structure of a painting«. This amounts to a narrow formal definition which reduces style to a statistical matter of counting repetitive patterns. The theoretical debate on style,⁶ however, is organised around two major conceptions of style: (a) style as a matter of human disposition toward

⁵ *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures*, New Haven: Yale University Press 1985.

⁶ See Berel Lang (ed.), *The Concept of Style*, Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press 1987.

action⁷ and (b) style as a matter of choice among constraints set by the history of art or by artistic technique.⁸ What both approaches share in common is the idea that some reference to the artist, either direct or implicit, cannot be eliminated.

Reforming, as I put it earlier, Beardsley's conception of style would involve asking how stylistic traits contribute to the work's unity, how they function together. In other words, it would amount to considering the stylistic traits' organic function within the aesthetic object. This would involve invoking a background of alternatives in a way similar to the analysis of skilful above. Thus the formalistic definition of style would unfold itself into a discussion of the, unacceptably genetic, according to Beardsley, notion of technique.

What is now required is an argument in the opposite direction that would recast »technique« in terms of the technical details involved in the production of the work and show how many of them directly determine our perception. This argument is twofold: it involves construing technique as (i) related to technical characteristics (the choice of materials), and (ii) as referring to technical rules that were employed in the process of making the picture.

The first part of the argument relies on the idea that certain materials are more appropriate than others in rendering a certain aesthetic effect, thus treating attributions of aesthetic effect, such as e.g. »delicate« as category-relative. Noting that such terms are objective for Beardsley, this possibility leads us to the following situation: we have an aesthetic term that refers to the form of the painting and whose paradigmatic use is to be found within a category of paintings that are classified as such by virtue of the materials employed in producing them; thus our case amounts to an objective aesthetic term whose use is partly determined by a non-objective characteristic.

Furthermore, and moving on now to the second leg of the argument, contra Beardsley, technical rules may govern our perception, esp. in cases where naturalism withdraws and the perceptual content of the work requires deciphering of an intensely cognitive character. The obvious example comes from cubism: a number of cubist devices or, otherwise, »modes of abstraction« were employed with the specific aim »to represent reality as perceived«,⁹ that is from all perspectives. They involved, for example, the frag-

⁷ Cf. Wollheim's claim that style has psychological reality, see »Pictorial Style: Two Views« in Lang (ed.)

⁸ A definition along these lines is given by Leonard Meyer in »Towards a Theory of Style« in Lang (ed.), p. 21.

⁹ For a very illuminating discussion of this point see Harold Osborne »Cubism, Cezanne and Perceptual Realism« in his *Abstraction and Artifice in Twentieth Century Art*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1979.

mentation of objects, the analysis of their volumes into various types of abstract forms suggestive of their three-dimensionality, the combination of different views of the same object (in profile, frontally, in elevation, in section) etc. These devices, which are all matters of technique, hold the key to our deciphering the representational content of cubist paintings; in fact, artistic factors though they may be, they determine our correct perceptual experience of the works. Thus now that the genetic/artistic attribution of technique has taken us back to the aesthetic/perceptual experience of the work/aesthetic object the inversion of the categories has been effected.

The key tactical moves involved in this whole transition from the aesthetic to the artistic and back consisted in (a) hypothesising about the alternative technical solutions open to the artist and (b) reconstructing the process of the work's production. These strategies lead us to posit the figure of an apparent artist, a theoretical construction having the function of a unifying principle. This conclusion would be sufficient to undermine the watertight distinction between the aesthetic and the artistic as it appears in Beardsley although the apparent artist is not a sufficient methodological tool for the purposes of a more developed philosophy of art since apparent process and actual production may diverge esp. in cases that involve elements of forging (either a forged aesthetic effect or full-scale forgeries).¹⁰

The figure of the apparent artist is invoked in order to help illustrate the idea that »we see in the work the action of producing it«. ¹¹ In both kinds of cases mentioned above, however, and perhaps more interestingly in those that I described as cases of forged aesthetic effect, such as Monet's rapid brushstrokes that turn out to be carefully and meticulously worked out through thick layers of underpainting with just about zero real spontaneity about them, the apparent artist is not a sufficient methodological tool anymore. Such cases show that we need to move on from the idea of »apparent process« to that of »reconstructed real process«. Now the claim that we see in the work the action of producing it is stretched to its limits operating as a constraint on our reconstructions. In some cases, this amounts to the claim that there is nothing in what we see that contradicts the reconstruction of the artistic process as this has been effected with the help of means that lie outside the work: art-historical evidence, for example. Elsewhere, it has the

¹⁰ My example of what I refer to as a »forged aesthetic effect« relies on Rosalind Krauss' deconstruction of Monet's brushstrokes in »The Originality of the Avant-Garde« in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge Mass. : M. I. T. Press 1994.

¹¹ See Kendall Walton, »Style and the Products and Processes of Art« in Lang (ed.), p. 81.

less problematic meaning that we discern the artistic action in the work after we have reached a full account of that action because the visual evidence available was inconclusive.

These last remarks represent a major advance in our discussion so far. In other words, up to this point my main concern was to refute Beardsley's dichotomies simply by showing that the aesthetic and the genetic/artistic interpermeate each other. This was sufficient as far as Beardsley's approach goes but it may seem that in doing so, I am leaving open the possibility of construing the aesthetic and the artistic in terms of the genus-species model, subsuming the one under the other. My ultimate aim however was to show that the artistic on its own is fully adequate to cope with the requirements that the appreciation of art poses. Thus by expanding the artistic into the grey area between that and the aesthetic, I do not intend to make it an overarching concept but rather the only concept that is appropriate in order to describe our appreciation of art.

Having said this, I can now conclude with some final remarks pertaining to the problem of forgeries. The discussion of forgeries is centered around the rather artificial paradox of the original and its perceptually indistinguishable fake, a problem which is often resolved in a facile manner by resorting to the distinction between the aesthetic and the artistic. It is then argued that such identical paintings would differ in artistic value but would be equal in terms of aesthetic value.

This kind of reply has the disadvantage that it legitimizes the paradox by endorsing the possibility of perceptual indistinguishability between paintings as a genuine possibility. Still, let us resist the temptation to continue the argument along the lines of proving that the whole paradox of perceptual indistinguishability is a non-starter and let us go along with it. According to some proponents of the distinction, this paradox is dissolved by employing the terms of the distinction in the following way: the aesthetic is defined as pertaining to the visual qualities of the picture, i.e. the »actual« properties that are exemplified by the canvas itself. The artistic is seen as completely external to the work belonging to the domain of criticism or art history. This approach, defended among others by Tomas Kulka,¹² is further enriched with a quantitative, school-textbook style model of measuring the aesthetic and the artistic value in a work in a scale from 0 to 10, and with additional links of the aesthetic to the pleasing and the beautiful. And it is precisely this kind of argument that led me to claim earlier that the terms in which

¹² T. Kulka, »The Artistic and the Aesthetic Value of Art«, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 21(1981) 336-350 and »The Artistic and Aesthetic Status of Forgeries«, *Leonardo* 15 (1982) 115-117.

Beardsley casts his objective/genetic distinction survive in the aesthetic/artistic distinction as it is commonly used. For what are regarded as art-historical factors, such as originality or authenticity, are seen as so external to the work that they end up in the same league as the artist's biography. Once again we have to put up with the internal/external dichotomy.

The conclusion I draw from all the above can be summarised as follows: there is a genuine distinction between the concept of the aesthetic and that of the artistic but their respective domains of application are very different from what they are usually taken to be, that is, the distinction can be made out with precision only if the aesthetic is to be excluded from the domain of art.¹³ It is of course possible, despite this, to insist that an original artwork and an identical looking fake have equal aesthetic value but we would only be able to secure that at a very heavy price: neither of them would then be seen as a work of art. Such an implication runs contrary to the whole spirit of attributions of aesthetic value. And even if it appears as appealing to those who are inclined not to regard fakes as art, it has the disastrous consequence that the fake »takes down with it«, so to speak, the original artwork as well. This way we end up with an artwork that is regarded as non-art, i.e. as a mere perceptual surface.¹⁴

¹³ For a similar conclusion arising out of different concerns see McFee, *op. cit.* My concerns in following McFee's radical line are much narrower, i. e. seeing the artistic in terms of the technical and the institutional.

¹⁴ I would like to thank Graham McFee for useful discussions on a number of occasions as well as for allowing me to see his unpublished work on the artistic and the aesthetic.

