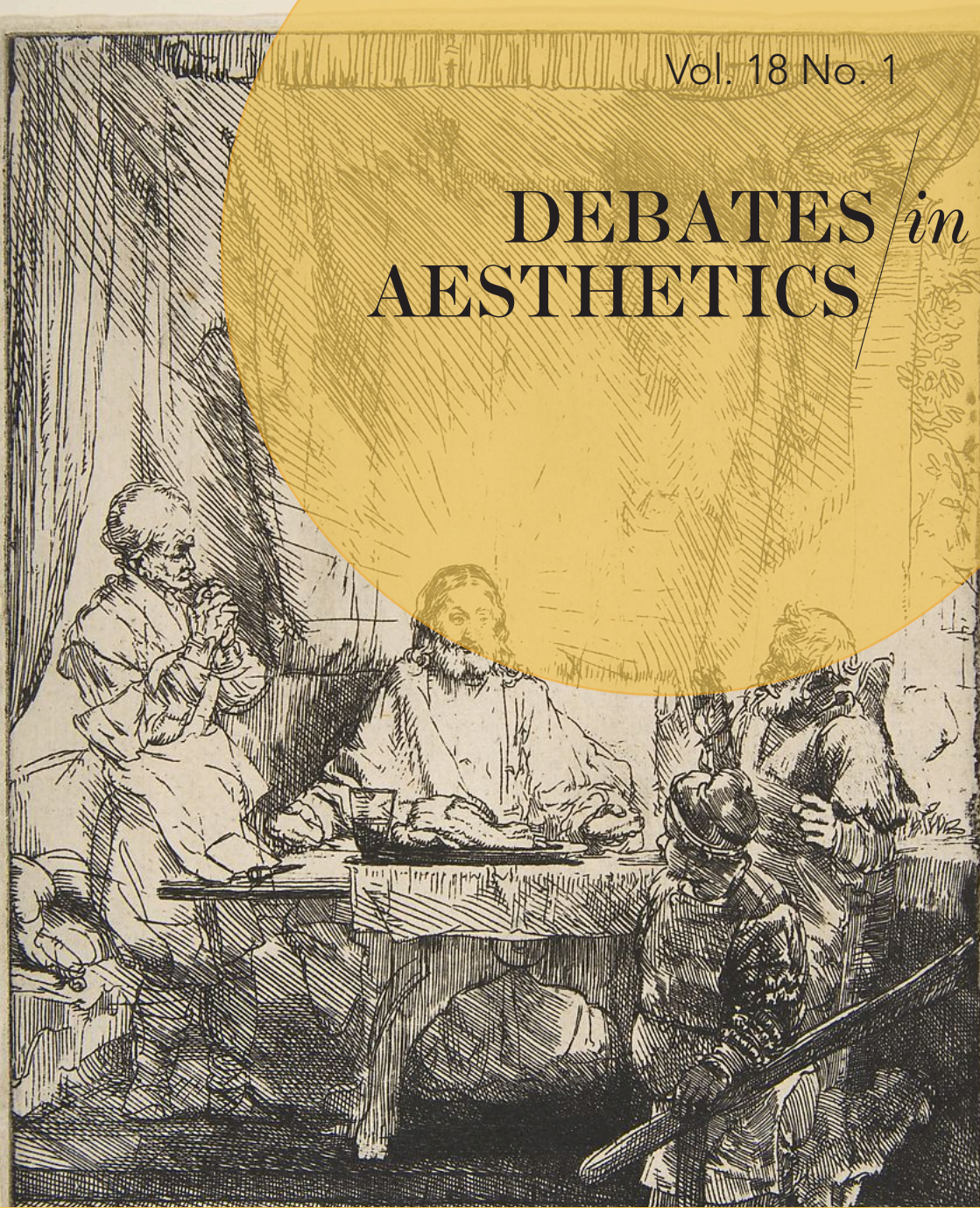


Vol. 18 No. 1

DEBATES *in* AESTHETICS



Debates in Aesthetics is a peer-reviewed, open-access journal for articles, interviews and book reviews. The journal's principal aim is to provide the philosophical community with a dedicated venue for debate in aesthetics and the philosophy of art.

BSA

BRITISH
SOCIETY OF
AESTHETICS

Vol. 18 No. 1
December 2022

Edited by
Sarah Kiernan and Claire Anscomb

Published by
The British Society of Aesthetics

Typesetting
Sarah Kiernan and Claire Anscomb

Proofreading
Laura Cadonna and Harry Drummond

Typeface
The Brill, designed by John Hudson
Avenir, designed by Adrian Frutiger

Cover
Supper at Emmaus (1654) by Rembrandt van Rijn (image courtesy of
The Met)

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ISSN 2514-6637

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AN INSTITUTIONAL THEORY OF ART CATEGORIES

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*It is widely acknowledged that categories play significant roles in the appreciation of artworks. This paper argues that the correct categories of artworks are institutionally established through social processes. Section 1 examines the candidates for determining correct categories and proposes that this question should shift the focus from category membership to appreciative behaviour associated with categories. Section 2 draws on Francesco Guala's theory of institutions to show that categories of artworks are established as **rules-in-equilibrium**. Section 3 reviews the explanatory benefits of this institutional theory of the correct category.*

Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that categories play significant roles in the appreciation of artworks. Categories affect interpretation: we can assume that the setting of a Western film is the United States during the Wild West, even if that is not stated explicitly in the story. Categories affect evaluation: if it is a musical, we cannot view it as silly when characters suddenly start singing and dancing. Not only genres but other types of categories too — form, style, movement, tradition — can have similar effects¹.

Here, I would like to take categories in a broader, more general, way, that is as points of view, ways of seeing, or frameworks for appreciating artworks. A work of art can, in principle, be perceived from several different categories. For example, we could judge Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) as a mystical and sublime masterpiece as a science fiction film, or we could judge it as a dull and uninspired waste of time as a romance film. However, the latter judgment would miss the point or be less appropriate than the former. Walton (1970) famously argued that there are correct categories for artworks, and the correct appreciation of a work is based on such categories. This raises the question, what determines the correct categories?

This paper argues that the correct categories of artworks are institutionally established through social processes. Section 1 examines the candidates for determining the correct categories and proposes that this question should shift the focus from category membership to appreciative behaviour associated with categories. Section 2 draws on Francesco Guala's (2016) theory of institutions to show that categories

1 *Inherent* categories such as the author, performer, period, region are beyond the scope of this paper. Media understood as a purely physical vehicle should also be set aside in this sense. Here I am concerned with *acquired* categories that cannot be determined by historical facts alone. A film made by Hitchcock can avoid being a *suspense film* but cannot help being a *Hitchcock film*. In this respect, whether it is a *Hitchcock-style film* is not inherently determined.

of artworks are established as rules-in-equilibrium. Section 3 reviews the explanatory benefits of this institutional theory of the correct category.

1 The correct category and membership

Walton sketches four factors that “count toward its being correct to perceive a work, *W*, in a given category, *C*.” (1970, 357):

- (i) “The presence in *W* of a relatively large number of features standard with respect to *C*. [...] it has a minimum of contra-standard features [...] .”
- (ii) “*W* is better, or more interesting or pleasing aesthetically, or more worth experiencing when perceived in *C* than it is when perceived in alternative ways.”
- (iii) “the artist who produced *W* intended or expected it to be perceived in *C*, or thought of it as a *C*.”
- (iv) “*C* is well established in and recognized by the society in which *W* was produced.” (Walton 1970, 357)

Above all, Walton emphasizes the importance of the criterion (iii), that is, the author’s intention (cf. Walton 1973). The idea that the author’s intention determines the correct categories of a work of art is deep-rooted and held even by those who otherwise prefer non-intentionalist approaches (cf. Levinson 1996, 188-189; Davies 2006, 233).

There are reasons and cases to doubt the intentionalism on categorizations. Categorical intentions are insufficient insofar as categories are frameworks for interpretation and evaluation. Allowing artists to solely determine the category of a work would grant the artist’s intention implausibly strong powers in determining the work’s meaning and value. That is, the artist could set a self-serving bar for her work. It is odd that a work that is only incoherent and sloppy should be interpreted as a symbol of something significant or evaluated positively simply because

the artist intended it to be a piece of *Absurdist fiction*. Moreover, we should consider cases where the author's intention fails. When the artist attempts to create an artwork that belongs to a given category *C*, the categorical intention alone is not sufficient for the attempt's *success* (cf. Mag Uidhir 2010).

To regard the categorical intention as a necessary condition is too restrictive in the following respects. As it is evident in practice, an artwork often belongs to a category that the author did not intend when it was created. Reading Raymond Carver's work as *minimalist literature* or listening to Portishead as *trip-hop* involves categorizations that the authors did not intend or openly rejected. Moreover, an artwork may belong to a category that the author cannot intend. Reading Kafka's or Dostoevsky's works as *existentialist literature* or watching Tarkovsky's films as *slow cinema* involves categorizations established long after the creation of these works. Since such categorizations occur in practice, theoretically dismissing these categories as incorrect would be a cost to pay. I would instead look for a theory of categories that approves various critical practices (cf. Gaut 1993, 605).

The four factors listed by Walton would be helpful as a heuristic for identifying the correct categories. However, none of them seems to provide logically necessary or sufficient conditions for category membership. Moreover, Walton (1970) treated categories as existing options and said little about the origins of categories. For example, how a category is associated with a particular set of features and what it means for a category to become established remains open.

As Walton (1970, 362) acknowledges, tightening up the conditions that determine the correct categories would be difficult. It is also quite possible that different categories have different conditions of membership or different priorities of factors. Therefore, the theory of correct categories needs a different approach. I propose that the question of what determines the correct category of a work (the membership question) should

be replaced by how the correct appreciative behaviours related to that category are established (the behavioural question). By centering the *behaviour*, the question of category membership can be skipped.

As mentioned in the introduction, correct categories have normative roles in appreciation. The fact that a work belongs to a particular category is not just a matter of membership. It is also about undertaking certain appreciative norms. This normative aspect of categories can be described as a combination of the *Membership rule* and the *Status rule*.

(M) If X has the property F , then the correct category of X is Y .²

(S) If the correct category of X is Y , then the one who appreciates X should Z .

Z will be filled with a particular set of appreciative behaviours associated with category Y . If the work belongs to a specific category, one would be *granted* to assume that the setting is the United States or *prohibited* from evaluating it as silly just because characters start singing and dancing. This is analogous to the case of money: if X has specific historical and physical property F , X is money (Y), and if it is money, X is accompanied with rights and obligations concerning a set of economic behaviours (Z).

Here, importantly, the two rules above can be converted into a more straightforward norm of behaviour (Guala 2016, chap.5). Namely, a *Regulative rule*.

(R) If X has the property F , then the one who appreciates X should Z .

.....
 2 Here, the property F should not be understood only as perceptual properties of a work. It also includes relational properties, such as being the product of a successful intention or having a causal connection to precedents. Repeatedly, it is hard to find a condition that is determinative for category membership, but the approach of this paper has the advantage of leaving property F open. My approach is compatible with a position like Laetz's (2010), which is sceptical of equating the correct category with the category to which the work belongs.

Here, the problem of membership to the correct category is skipped, transformed into a problem about appreciative behaviours. Then the correct category as status would be an incidental outcome of the behaviours in question.

Thus, the explanatory buck is passed to how the regulative rules under each correct category arise and become established. I am going to argue that the theory of institutions explains it.

2 Categories and institutions

Francesco Guala, in *Understanding Institutions* (2016), characterizes institutions as rules-in-equilibrium. By integrating the rule theories and equilibrium theories of institutions, Guala's approach compensates for the shortcomings of each. If institutions are rules, we can explain the aspects that normatively guide behaviours. However, if they are merely rules, and not equilibria, the difference between followed institutions and those that are not is unclear. If institutions are equilibria, we can understand whether they are followed by seeing whether there are enough incentives. However, if they are merely equilibria, and not rules, we cannot explain the aspects that guide behaviours. Guala employs the concept of correlated equilibrium in coordination games to show that institutions are rules *and* equilibria.

In a practical sense, it does not matter whether a traffic law requires driving on the right or the left. What matters is to avoid the situation in which each driver chooses their lane freely and creates chaos. An agreement like driving on the right side in this country solves this *coordination game*. In this case, the strategy of following the agreement together (the "correlated" strategy) becomes the equilibrium of the situation in that no one would be better off by deviating alone. That is why people follow the agreement. A *correlated equilibrium* is an equilibrium based on external signals that are observed by each player. In this case, the signal is the public agreement. Additionally, driving

as it has been agreed becomes a normative rule for each driver, or “player”, to follow. The rule guides behaviours, and whoever violates it receives penalties imposed for interfering with the traffic flow. Penalties reduce the incentive to deviate and reinforce normativity. In this way, certain behaviours are maintained within a society. According to Guala, institutions are rules-in-equilibrium.

Correlated equilibrium can also be applied to cases with asymmetric payoffs. Suppose that when a couple decides where to go on a date. Player 1 wants to go to *A*, while Player 2 wants to go to *B*. At the same time, however, neither of them wants to choose selfishly to give up their date. Figure 1 is the payoff matrix for this case, and each cell shows Player 1’s payoff on the left and Player 2’s payoff on the right. In this situation, for example, the agreement of deciding where to go by tossing a coin can be a signal of coordination. Suppose the probability of getting heads or tails is one in two for each, and they will go to *A* for a head and *B* for a tail. Participating in the coin toss can be a correlated equilibrium because deviating and going where they want to go on their own would not bring a bigger payoff. It is also desirable in terms of equality.

		Player 2		
		<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>	head⇒ <i>A</i> tail⇒ <i>B</i>
Player 1	<i>A</i>	6, 2	1, 1	3.5, 1.5
	<i>B</i>	0, 0	2, 6	1, 3
	head⇒ <i>A</i> tail⇒ <i>B</i>	3, 1	1.5, 3.5	4, 4

Figure 1. Correlated equilibrium for games with asymmetric payoffs

How is the artwork categorization game played? Let us assume two

things. Firstly, each critic has an incentive to categorize an artwork in a way that deepens one's understanding of the work, that is, in a way one prefers. This is not an assumption that all critics seek to maximize the value of a work. The category that helps me notice a work's severe flaws and points out how it fails to achieve its goals is my preferred one because it deepens my understanding of that artwork. Secondly, each critic has an incentive to choose the same categorization as other critics because working together to criticize a work based on a particular category helps discover meanings and values that one would not notice on their own.³ These assumptions lead to a situation that is analogous to the couple deciding where to go on a date, i.e. an asymmetric coordination problem.⁴

If the work to be appreciated is a typical one, coordination will be easy to achieve thanks to precedent works (Xhignesse 2020, 479).⁵ It is not difficult to assign a new work to *salient*, socially well-established categories, in which the connection between standard/variable/contra-standard features and the categories is solid. There is no difficulty in categorizing Christopher Nolan's *Tenet* (2020) as a science fiction and action film. The real problem occurs when pioneering works require pioneering ways of appreciation. According to Xhignesse, "their existence calls for a theory of the art-kind which they pioneer, [...] they call for the development of conventions" (2020, 474). Works such as Marcel

3 Abell (2020) identifies 'the communication of imaginings' (32) as a coordination game to be solved and argues that the contents of fictional utterances are institutionally determined. Although her interests and assumptions differ from mine, some of my arguments overlap with Abell's insofar as categories have interpretive roles.

4 Xhignesse (2020, 477-8) is hesitant about my assumption here, and argues that many artistic practices are not like solving a coordination problem. Such remarks do not threaten the argument of this paper because my argument is more limited than his, and I only argue that one of these practices, the critical categorization of works, is a coordination problem.

5 To the question of what makes a given kind an art-kind, Xhignesse (2020) takes an approach like mine, appealing to the existence of social practices. However, while I rely on Guala's institution, Xhignesse prefers Millikan's convention as the explanans.

Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917), Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of This World* (1949), Herschell Gordon Lewis's *Blood Feast* (1963), and The Sugarhill Gang's *Rapper's Delight* (1979) require more than just putting them into existing categories at the time of their creation. It is not difficult to imagine that categories that are well established today also had pioneering works that called for the new categories at the beginning of their history.

As we saw in the previous Section, the choice of categories can be converted into the choice of appreciative behaviours. With this in mind, the origin of a category can be described in two phases. In the *institutionalizing phase*, critics attempt various appreciative behaviours. As mentioned above, critics, who confront each other, have incentives for both their preferences and agreements. Over a pioneering work, some prefer to Z_1 ; while others prefer to Z_2 . Here, the *critics* should be taken in a broad sense. The theoretician-inclined artists would often be the first critics of their works, promoting specific behaviours. Categories like *Nouvelle Vague* and the *Readymade* were thus theoretically driven by the artists. In the *institutionalized phase*, a particular strategy is established as the correct appreciative behaviour for the artwork: collectively choosing that behaviour becomes a rule-in-equilibrium.

Meanwhile, the categories behind these appreciative norms were named *conceptual art*, *magic realism*, *splatter film*, or *rap music*. It helps us solve coordination problems smoothly based on precedents when we encounter new works with similar properties. This background is also consistent with what Walton points out as the causes of perceiving works in specific categories (1970, 341-342): (a) our familiarity with other works, (b) categorization by critics and others, and (c) the context in which we encounter the work.

However, suppose the incentive to choose the individually preferred category is much greater than the incentive to choose the same category as other critics. In that case, the correct category might not take hold.

If both players prioritize their preferences over an agreement when deciding where to go, the only equilibrium is to give up on their date. The uniqueness of equilibrium remains unchanged even when the game is extended by adding the strategy of participating in a coin toss. Here, the couple is in a so-called prisoner's dilemma:⁶ even though the strategy of participating in the coin toss is superior in terms of payoff, players cannot but act selfishly (Figure 2). If the artwork categorization game has such a payoff setting, then no one needs correct categories.

		Player 2		
		A	B	head⇒A tail⇒B
Player 1	A	6, 2	3, 3	4.5, 2.5
	B	0, 0	2, 6	1, 3
	head⇒A tail⇒B	3, 1	2.5, 4.5	4, 4

Figure 2. Prisoner's dilemma in a selfish couple

There are three possible responses to this supposed objection. Firstly, such a payoff setting is questionable in that it is at odds with the existing practice of critical consensus on the interpretations and evaluations (cf. Walton 1970, footnote 21). It precisely shows the situation where there is no disputing about taste, and it is difficult to recognize the significance of critical debate. Secondly, even if the incentive to choose the individually desirable categorization is great, it is not an immediate threat to establishing correct categories. The correct appreciative behaviour is established in a reflective equilibrium through more detailed

⁶ There is a dominant but inefficient equilibrium in the prisoner's dilemma, so it is not a coordination game because the problem of choosing among multiple equilibria does not arise. In the classic example, the choice to remain silent together is efficient but not an equilibrium.

negotiation instead of a random coin toss. Even if an inappropriate interpretation or evaluation is made, the features and facts that do not fit it do not disappear. This prompts re-categorization, which eventually leads to a better category by equilibrium. The reached consensus will be superior at least to the expected value of the coin toss as far as the payoff is concerned. Thirdly, Guala (2016, chap.6) shows a path to convert the prisoner's dilemma into a coordination problem by considering the costs (penalties) associated with breaking the rule. In this regard, there could be institutions that would be useful for prisoner's dilemma situations too.

3 Explanatory benefits and consequences

One of the advantages of identifying the correct categories as institutional outputs is that we can observe the categories' stability as well as the critical innovation's possibilities and difficulties. When a specific categorization of a work is firmly established as a rule-in-equilibrium, the attempts at unusual appreciative behaviours are often weeded out without having much impact. However, in rare cases, they may prompt a revision of the institution. Evolutionary games may explain this. When an *evolutionarily stable strategy* is given, even if a few new players choose a strange strategy, the stable state is maintained without a proliferation of players choosing such mutable strategies.⁷ However, a highly applicable strategy (in our case, a highly attractive categorization) may arise as a small number of mutations and eventually lead to another equilibrium that is superior to the current rule-in-equilibrium.

The advantage of adopting Guala's account of the institution over other accounts is that it does not require the player to display a high degree of linguistic ability. There is no need to collectively recognize that the

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 7 *Evolutionarily stable strategy* (ESS) was introduced by John Maynard Smith and George R. Price to explain natural selection. A strategy *S* is evolutionarily stable in a particular group if and only if every player selects *S*; selecting alternative strategies would not improve one's reproductive fitness; that prevents mutant strategies from invading.

category to which a work belongs is called '*horror*' if one can recognize what to do. We recognize that the purpose of the work is to frighten the viewer, so it should be evaluated according to the effectiveness of the means. We recognize the precedents and conventions, which shape how we interpret that artwork. Like the etiquette of standing on one side when using an escalator, the rule-in-equilibrium does not always have a name. Jan Švankmajer's works are authentic when seen as a category that evokes disgust through vulgar eating scenes. We do not need the category's proper name to make such an evaluation. Of course, since having a name is advantageous to the operation and modification of the institution, naming and describing informally accepted categories will be one of the critics' essential tasks.

If the correct categories are institutional outputs, then the correct meaning and value of a work of art are relative to its history and the community of reception. In this regard, the stable state of a game often has *path dependence* on its initial conditions. Suppose a situation where a coordination game is being played repeatedly in a group. The strategy chosen by a randomly selected player is influenced by the ratio of strategies in the group: if many people use Windows, I choose Windows; if many people use Macintosh, I choose Macintosh. If the percentage of Windows users is above a certain level, the randomly selected player has more incentive to choose Windows. Eventually, an equilibrium will be achieved where most people choose Windows. The same thing can happen with Macintosh since the achieved equilibrium depends on the initial state at a given point in time. Although there are many other factors to consider in the real world, this is partly how VHS defeated Betamax and Blu-ray defeated HD DVD. Likewise, the categorization of an artwork that was salient in the early days of its publication may affect the correct categories, later established. In this respect, the current correct categories are contingent and, like social institutions, not always the best. Tracing these origins and transitions, and then documenting

the facts, will be one of the essential tasks for art history.⁸

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⁸ I would like to thank John O'Dea for helpful discussions. Thanks also to anonymous referees for insightful comments.

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