

COUNTERFACTUAL REASONING IN ART CRITICISM
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When we evaluate artworks, we often point to what an artist *could have done* or what a work *could have been* in order to say something about the work as it actually is. Call this *counterfactual reasoning in art criticism*. On my account, counterfactual claims about artworks involve comparative aesthetic judgments between actual artworks and hypothetical variations of those works. The practice of imagining what an artwork could have been is critically useful because it can help us understand how artworks achieve specific aesthetic effects. I conclude by responding to an objection to my account on the basis that it violates the widely accepted acquaintance principle in aesthetics, on which aesthetic judgments must be based on firsthand perceptual encounters with their objects.

1 INTRODUCTION

In one essay, Leo Steinberg considers how the effect of Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* would change if the figures depicted in the painting hadn't been prostitutes. He asks:

Those five figures in it—did they have to be [prostitutes]? Could the proto-Cubist effects in the right half of the picture—the breakdown of mass and the equalizing of solids and voids—have been accomplished as well with a cast of cardplayers (Steinberg, 1988, 11)?

Later on in the essay, Steinberg decides that Picasso could not have achieved the same effect in *Demoiselles* if he had depicted card players because the sexuality of the figures depicted in the painting serves as a *uniquely* effective complement to the painting's Cubist form:

The picture is about the image in its otherness locked in with the real world. And like those mystics of old who used sexual metaphor to express union with the divine, so Picasso will have used sexuality to make visible the immediacy of communion with art. Explosive form and erotic content become reciprocal metaphors (64).

Demoiselles, on Steinberg's view, is not merely a formally revolutionary painting. It also comments on various forms of "otherness": the otherness of Cubism and the

otherness of the depicted prostitutes. And this meaning would be lost if Picasso had depicted card players.

This paper is about the kind of reasoning Steinberg uses in his essay to establish the aesthetic significance of Picasso's depiction of prostitutes in *Demoiselles*. Steinberg does not reach his conclusion merely by considering *Demoiselles as it is*, analyzing the form and composition of the painting as it actually appears. Rather, he asks the reader to imagine what the effect of the painting *would be* if Picasso had chosen to depict card players. The fact that this imagined variation of *Demoiselles*—call it *Joueurs de Cartes d'Avignon*—is less impactful than the actual painting helps Steinberg explain the aesthetic significance of Picasso's depiction of prostitutes in *Demoiselles*.

When we evaluate works of art, we often deploy reasoning like Steinberg's; we consider hypothetical variations of artworks to make judgments of works as they actually are. For instance, we might say of Diane Arbus' photography, "Arbus could have photographed anything she wanted, but chose to photograph marginalized people. Therefore, there must be something significant about the subjects of her photographs." Or we might say of Kara Walker's enormous sugar sphinx sculpture *A Subtlety*, "The effect of the sculpture would completely change if it were made out of clay or plaster, or even some other edible substance like chocolate." When we reason in this way, we point to what an artist *could have done* or what an artwork *could have been* in order to say something about the work as it actually is. Call this *counterfactual reasoning in art criticism*.¹

Counterfactual reasoning abounds in our discussions of art. We use counterfactual reasoning not only to explain the significance of an artwork's subject matter and the materials of which it's made—as in the two examples above—but also to illustrate how a work of art could be improved (as an art teacher might say to a student, "wouldn't that patch of red in the lower right corner better fit into the composition of your painting if the patch were round rather than rectangular?") and to convey the impression that a work on art leaves on us (as someone might say of Maurizio Cattelan's *Comedian*—a work consisting in a banana duct-taped to a gallery wall that generated considerable buzz in December 2019—"I can't believe I'm seeing this in an art museum; I could have just seen it in my kitchen!"), among

¹ I use "art criticism" to refer broadly to our general practices of coming to understand and evaluating works of art, rather than in the restricted sense of the work done by professional art critics.

other things.

Although we reason counterfactually about artworks all the time, aestheticians have not theorized the mechanisms that make this kind of reasoning possible. My aim in this paper is to shed light on one way that counterfactual reasoning in art criticism works. I argue that counterfactual claims about artworks involve a special kind of comparative judgment between actual and hypothetical works of art, where the hypothetical works are just like actual ones in some but not all respects. By positing hypothetical counterparts to actual artworks and being clear about what features of the actual works we are holding fixed and which we are altering, we can explain how artworks achieve specific aesthetic effects.

The paper proceeds as follows. I begin in §2 with a discussion of comparative aesthetic judgments. In §3, I provide an account of hypothetical artworks. In §4, I bring the ideas developed in the previous two sections together to explain why counterfactual reasoning in art criticism should be understood as involving comparative aesthetic judgments between actual and hypothetical artworks. In §5, I respond to an objection to my account on the basis that it violates the widely accepted *acquaintance principle* in aesthetics, on which aesthetic judgments must be based on firsthand perceptual encounters with their objects.

My aim in this paper is not to provide a single theory that explains all instances of counterfactual reasoning in art criticism. Rather, it is to shed light on what I think is an especially important way that we reason counterfactually about artworks. Given the diversity of counterfactual claims in discussions about art, I doubt that a single theory could capture them all. But I hope that this paper generates discussion about an explanatory tool that is so commonly used, yet so poorly understood.

2 COMPARATIVE AESTHETIC JUDGMENTS

An aesthetic judgment is a judgment of an object that requires a special sensitivity or perceptiveness to make. Consider the difference between claiming that a sculpture is *elegant* and that a sculpture is *gold*. To make the latter claim, one need only have the ability to perceive color, but to make the former, one must possess a special aesthetic sensitivity. What exactly this sensitivity amounts to is admittedly vague and difficult to define non-circularly, and I won't attempt to provide an

account of it here.² But there is clearly a sense in which some ability is required to see that an object is, say, subtle, harmonious, or vivid that isn't required to see that it is red, circular, or flat.³

Most aesthetic judgments involve a single object. For instance, you might say that Mondrian's *De Stijl Composition with Red Blue and Yellow*—with its characteristic black grid and patches of primary colors—is *balanced*. In making this judgment, you attribute an aesthetic quality to a single object. To explain your judgment of Mondrian's *Composition*, you might point to some of the work's non-aesthetic qualities (for instance, the fact that the effect of a large red patch in the upper-right of the painting is counteracted by a smaller but equally vivid patch of blue in the lower-left) that make the work balanced.

Theories of aesthetic judgment tend to focus on aesthetic judgments of individual objects.⁴ But these are not the only aesthetic judgments we make. We also make aesthetic judgments of *collections* of objects, such as the works in an artist's oeuvre or a collection of works in an exhibit. For instance, you might judge that Georgia O'Keefe's landscapes are, as a whole, *dramatic*. Aesthetic judgments of oeuvres demand different justifications than aesthetic judgments of individual objects. You can't point to the non-aesthetic qualities of a single member of the oeuvre to explain your aesthetic judgment; rather, you must identify *themes* that run through the oeuvre to use as a basis for your judgment about the oeuvre as a whole. For instance, although you couldn't point to the rugged mountains in *Black Mesa Landscape* to justify the claim that O'Keefe's landscapes are dramatic, you could point out that rough, rocky terrain is *characteristic* of O'Keefe's landscapes as a basis for the judgment of her oeuvre.

In addition to judgments of individual works and oeuvres, we also make uniquely *comparative* aesthetic judgments. When we make a comparative aesthetic judgment, we judge that a work has some aesthetic quality *relative* to some other work, even though it might not have that quality *simpliciter*. Suppose you are comparing one of Rothko's giant colorblock canvases to a Pollock drip painting. You judge that the Rothko is more *serene* than the Pollock, since the Rothko appears

² It's tempting, for instance, to define aesthetic sensitivity as the ability to perceive aesthetic qualities. But this definition does nothing to help us understand what aesthetic sensitivity amounts to.

³ For discussion of the distinction between aesthetic and non-aesthetic qualities and the abilities required to perceive them, see Sibley (1965).

⁴ See, for instance, Beardsley (1973), Sibley (1959), and Sibley (1965).

static, while the Pollock, with its dynamic splashes of paint, appears to depict movement. Although you think that the Rothko is more serene than the Pollock, you might not conclude that the Rothko is serene without qualification.⁵ Indeed, you might think that the Rothko is far from serene. Considered alone, you might find the Rothko ominous or severe. But this needn't invalidate your comparative judgment of the Rothko and the Pollock.

Given that claims we make about artworks in comparison to others need not translate into claims about the artworks alone, one might wonder what the point of making comparative aesthetic judgments is. What understanding do comparative aesthetic judgments confer? Admittedly, comparisons between artworks that are vastly different may not confer much by way of understanding. That *The Silence of the Lambs* is more suspenseful than *Clueless* is so obvious that it's hardly worth stating. But comparisons between works that are alike in some interesting sense can be extremely illuminating. For instance, considering how two suspenseful films achieve suspense in different ways and to varying degrees of success is a useful critical exercise. The comparison can make it easier to identify the features of the more suspenseful film that make it more successful in that respect.

I'm interested in comparative aesthetic judgments because they appear to be the judgments at play when we reason counterfactually about artworks. On my view, when we make a counterfactual aesthetic claim, we compare an actual artwork to a *hypothetical variation* of that work. Just as comparing two suspenseful films can help us figure out why one better achieves a suspenseful effect than another, comparing a work of art to a hypothetical variation of it can help us get clearer on how or whether an actual artwork achieves some aesthetic effect.

3 HYPOTHETICAL ARTWORKS

What is a hypothetical variation of an actual artwork? I opened this paper with an excerpt from Leo Steinberg's essay on Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon*. Here is my take on what he does in the essay. Steinberg posits a hypothetical variation of

⁵ Kendall Walton (1970) argues that the category that one takes an artwork to belong to determines (at least in part) the aesthetic properties that we attribute to the work. The claim I'm making here is that the category in which we consider works when we make comparative aesthetic judgments consists in just the works being compared. So we may attribute aesthetic properties to works when we are comparing them against certain other works, even if we wouldn't attribute those properties to the works considered alone.

Demoiselles—which I called *Joueurs de Cartes d'Avignon*— that is just like *Demoiselles* except in its depiction of card players instead of prostitutes. By comparing *Demoiselles* to this variation, he is able to judge that *Demoiselles'* depiction of prostitutes serves as a uniquely effective complement to the painting's Cubist form.

Steinberg's counterfactual claim about *Demoiselles* is informative. Insofar as it explains why some feature of the painting (in this case, what the painting depicts) has the aesthetic effect that it does, it helps us gain a deeper understanding of the painting. But after some thought, the informativeness of Steinberg's counterfactual claim might seem puzzling. How can some made-up work of art help us gain an understanding—let alone a *deep* understanding—of an actual artwork?

When Steinberg reasons counterfactually about *Demoiselles*, he introduces a hypothetical variation of the painting that depicts card players rather than prostitutes. This is not a "random" variation of the painting; Steinberg is clear that he has in mind a painting that is *just like Demoiselles*, except in what it depicts. This is important: when we introduce hypothetical variations of actual artworks, we must be clear about what in the actual work we're holding fixed and what we are changing. Counterfactual claims about artworks that aren't clear in this respect are not informative: they don't help us gain a deeper understanding of works of art. Although claiming simply that a work of art "could have been better" without specifying exactly what would have made the artwork better might be *suggestive*—such a claim might, for instance, prompt aesthetically insightful counterfactual inquiry into the work and how it could be improved—the claim is not informative.

Obviously, it isn't possible to change only what a work of art depicts and keep everything else about it perfectly fixed. If we change the figures depicted in *Demoiselles* to card players, we'll also need to change the painting's composition (as the figures would need to be seated around a table rather than standing with their arms crossed seductively over their heads) and the painting's colors (the figures in *Demoiselles* are nude, but the figures in *Joueurs de Cartes* would be clothed, so there would be fewer flesh tones in the hypothetical painting), among other things. Indeed, we may want to question whether *Joueurs de Cartes* is truly a hypothetical variation of *Demoiselles*, or whether it should be considered a hypothetical artwork in its own right.⁶ I argue below that there are limits to what one may alter in a hypothetical artwork to use it in one's judgment of an actual

⁶ Thanks to an anonymous referee and the editor for raising this point.

work. This suggests that *Joueurs de Cartes* is a variation of *Demoiselles*; if it were a hypothetical artwork in its own right, it would not be subject to such constraints. But what I am most interested in is the idea of forming aesthetic judgments of hypothetical artworks, whether they are variations of actual artworks or artworks in their own right. Therefore the question of a hypothetical work's identity is not crucial to my argument.

Although a painting that is "just like" *Demoiselles* except in what it depicts would not be like *Demoiselles* at all, we don't experience any imaginative resistance when asked to picture the hypothetical painting. Although we are asked to picture something quite bizarre, we don't need to exercise any particularly "violent effort" to do so; indeed, when asked to bring this hypothetical painting to mind, most of us don't bat an eye (Hume 1987, 247, quoted in Gendler 2000, 56). (One hypothesis for the lack of imaginative resistance we experience when asked to bring to mind different versions of an artwork is that, often, there is nothing of great moral significance at stake by changing certain features of an artwork. Since the puzzle of imaginative resistance is typically framed as the puzzle of explaining the difficulty of imagining fictional worlds that are morally deviant, not aesthetically deviant, it's unsurprising that we don't experience imaginative resistance when reasoning counterfactually about artworks (Gendler 2000, 56).) There is much more to be said about what picturing a hypothetical variation of painting amounts to, and I will return to this topic in §5 when I discuss the trouble that the acquaintance principle poses for my account. But for now, I will take it for granted that we're very good at imagining hypothetical variations of artworks.

One question that arises at this point is whether there are restrictions on the kinds of modifications we can make in hypothetical variations of artworks. In what follows, I consider two constraints we might want to impose on hypothetical variations of artworks. The first constraint is that the proposed changes be reasonable given contextual facts about the time and place that the work was created. The second is that the proposed changes be under the artist's control. I argue that only the first of these is a legitimate constraint on hypothetical variations of artworks.

Let's start with the first constraint—that the proposed changes in the hypothetical artwork be reasonable given contextual facts about the actual artwork. I will use a simplistic example as a starting point. Let's suppose that I say, in my evaluation of Michelangelo's *David*, that while the work is sculpted from marble,

it could have been sculpted from another material, but no other material would have so powerfully captured David's beauty.

If I wish for my counterfactual claim to constitute an aesthetic judgment of *David*, there are limits to what I may say the work could have been sculpted from. Terracotta, bronze, and wood are some examples of materials from which it's fair to say Michelangelo could have sculpted *David*, given facts about what materials were available to artists in sixteenth century Florence. On the other hand, materials such as sugar and chocolate would *not* have been available for Michelangelo to sculpt from. These materials were, however, available for Kara Walker to work with in creating *A Subtlety* in twenty-first century America. Therefore, it is reasonable to introduce a hypothetical variation of *A Subtlety* made out of chocolate rather than sugar, but unreasonable to introduce a hypothetical variation of *David* made out of chocolate rather than marble.

My point is not that it is never a useful exercise to consider what artworks could have been like in the absence of cultural, historical, and physical constraints. It might be a very useful exercise for a present-day sculptor to consider a chocolate version of *David* in the process of creating their work. My point is that it is unreasonable to use a chocolate version of *David* in one's aesthetic judgment of *David*. To illustrate this, consider how it is unreasonable to judge the original *Star Wars* films against contemporary film standards. Part of what makes *Star Wars* great is its innovation and originality; these are context-specific (rather than purely perceptual) qualities that today's audience cannot fully appreciate when watching the films. If *Star Wars* were released in its original form today, it would not have the aesthetic value that it does. But it's unreasonable to judge the film on that basis. (The same point can be made of a myriad of artworks. Contemporary audiences may understandably find *Psycho* tame and unfrightening, given how graphic and gory horror films are today. But it's unreasonable to count that as a mark against *Psycho* in one's judgment of the work's aesthetic quality.) All this is to say that when a hypothetical artwork is introduced *in order to make a judgment of an actual work*, the hypothetical work may vary from its actual counterpart only in respects that are reasonable given the context in which the actual work was made.

Another constraint that might be tempting to impose on what can be altered in hypothetical artworks is that the altered features must have been in an important sense *under the artist's control*. To say that *David* could have been sculpted from something other than marble is to say, more precisely, that *Michelangelo* could have

sculpted *David* from something other than marble, but chose not to. Whether we take a feature of an artwork to be artistically evaluable often depends on whether we believe that the artist intentionally included the feature in the work. If *A Subtlety* were vandalized and a thick stroke of red paint smeared down the middle of the sculpture, it would be unfair to evaluate the work as if the red stroke were part of the original as Walker had intended it. In doing so, we wouldn't be giving Walker her due. Because Walker did not intend for the red stroke to be part of the sculpture, the stroke is not a feature of the sculpture that one can fairly appeal to in one's aesthetic judgment of it. (One might, of course, lament the vandalism of *A Subtlety* on the basis that the sculpture, post-vandalism, is much less effective than the sculpture was before it was vandalized. But this isn't the same thing as appealing to the red stroke in one's aesthetic judgment of *A Subtlety*.)

Richard Wollheim (1987) argues that there is a basis to our intuition that a feature of an artwork is artistically evaluable only if the artist intentionally included it in the work. He argues that the difference between a painting that is artistically evaluable and mere marks on a surface is that painting involves *intentional thematization*: the artist who makes the work thematizes the features of the work for the purpose of "organiz[ing] an inherently inert material so that it will become serviceable for the carriage of meaning" (22). On the other hand, when someone merely deposits marks on a surface without the intention of thematization, the surface does not become apt for the conveyance of meaning. Intentional thematization therefore appears to be a necessary condition for a feature of a work to be aesthetically evaluable.

While in general a feature of an artwork is apt for aesthetic evaluation only if the artist intended to include it in the work, intentional thematization is not a *necessary* condition for aesthetic evaluation. Our aesthetic appreciation of age illustrates this. Consider, for instance, the dozens of castings of Rodin's *The Thinker*.⁷ Some of them are in more or less perfect condition, as Rodin saw them when they came out of their casts. Others—such as *The Thinker* displayed outside on the entrance steps of the Cleveland Museum of Art—are weathered from outdoor display or have been vandalized, and as a result have very different aesthetic effects than their pristine counterparts. Yet, the weathered looks of these sculptures are a crucial part of what we value about them. Carolyn Korsmeyer, drawing

⁷ I borrow this example from Alison Lanier, who uses it in an unpublished paper I co-authored with her and Erich Hatala Matthes.

on the work of art historian Alois Riegl, calls this the "age value" of an object, and argues that age value is relevant in our judgments of aesthetic value (Riegl 1982, cited in Korsmeyer 2008, 22). The visible accumulation of time on some castings of Rodin's *Thinker* is relevant to their artistic value even though Rodin didn't have control over the way time would change their appearance. While intentional thematization is *generally* required for a feature of an artwork to be a candidate for aesthetic evaluation, it is not a *necessary* condition for aesthetic evaluation. There are some features of artworks—such as the appearance of age—that are candidates for aesthetic evaluation even though they are not (always) intentionally thematized by the artist.

If intentional thematization is not a necessary condition for aesthetic evaluation, then it is possible to posit hypothetical variations of artworks that differ from their actual counterparts in ways that the artist could not have controlled. Suppose, for instance, that none of Rodin's castings of *The Thinker* were displayed outdoors. One might then ask: "What would *The Thinker* look like if it had been displayed in a garden all these years, rather than in a museum?" Given that it is common for bronze sculptures to be displayed outdoors, this is a reasonable question to ask. And the answer to this question might inform one's judgment about *The Thinker* as it is displayed in the gallery by making the pristine condition of the sculpture relevant to one's aesthetic judgment of it.

4 COUNTERFACTUAL REASONING IN ART CRITICISM

In §2, I introduced the idea of comparative aesthetic judgments: judgments of artworks that hold only relative to the works under consideration. In §3, I argued that hypothetical variations of artworks are imaginary works that are just like their actual counterparts in some clearly delineated respects. Now, we can tie these two strands together into a claim about what counterfactual reasoning in art criticism is. On my view, counterfactual reasoning in art criticism involves comparative aesthetic judgments between actual artworks and hypothetical variations of those works.

When I introduced comparative aesthetic judgments in §2, I used a comparison between a Rothko colorblock canvas and a Pollock drip painting as an example. I noted that one might say in this comparison that the Rothko is more serene than the Pollock, even though one might not say that the Rothko is serene

simpliciter. But a comparative judgment needn't take two actual works as its objects. It might instead involve a comparison between an actual artwork and a hypothetical variation of it. And this, I think, is the kind of aesthetic judgment we make when we reason counterfactually about artworks.

When Steinberg judges that *Demoiselles* has a more powerful aesthetic effect than *Joueurs de Cartes*, he does two things. First, he introduces a hypothetical variation of *Demoiselles*, taking care to be clear about what he wishes to change about *Demoiselles* (its depiction of prostitutes) and what he wishes to hold fixed (everything else). Next, he holds the paintings "side by side" and judges that the actual painting more successfully comments on otherness than the hypothetical one does.

My focus on this paper is in counterfactual reasoning in the criticism of visual art because it is in important ways the most difficult kind of counterfactual reasoning in art criticism to understand.⁸ Consider, by contrast, counterfactual reasoning in the criticism of poetry and of music. We can easily bring to mind or put to paper variations of poems: we need only swap out the relevant words or change the relevant rhythms. In music theory, scholars often recompose passages in order to make technical, critical, and analytical points; recomposition is an essential tool for music theorists (O'Hara 2017).⁹ In literature and in music, it is possible to *exhibit* hypothetical variations of actual artworks. Unlike works of visual art, variations of works of poetry and music can easily be made real. Therefore, unlike hypothetical variations of works of visual art, hypothetical variations of works of literature and music do not pose challenges to the acquaintance principle, challenges that I discuss in the following section.

5 THE ACQUAINTANCE PRINCIPLE

The account of counterfactual reasoning in art criticism I have offered raises a puzzle with respect to one widely held view in aesthetics: the *acquaintance principle*. According to the acquaintance principle, aesthetic judgments must be based on perceptual encounters with their objects.¹⁰ But when we introduce hypothetical variations of artworks, the hypothetical works do not magically appear in front of

⁸ Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this point.

⁹ Thanks to Nathan Martin for bringing this literature to my attention.

¹⁰ The acquaintance principle, named by Wollheim (1980), has a long history beginning perhaps with Kant (2009, sec. 8).

us; they exist only in our minds. Because counterfactual claims about artworks are based on *imagined* artworks that one has not encountered first-hand, it appears to violate the acquaintance principle.

However, there are different ways of understanding the acquaintance principle that are sometimes confused in the literature, and not all of them conflict with my account of counterfactual reasoning in art criticism. Distinguishing three interpretations of the acquaintance principle will help us figure out where exactly its tension with counterfactual reasoning in art criticism lies:

AP-INFERENCE: one cannot form an aesthetic judgment by applying inferential rules (e.g., I cannot conclude that a painting is dreamlike on the basis that it uses muted colors and all paintings that use muted colors are dreamlike).¹¹

AP-TESTIMONY: one cannot form an aesthetic judgment on the basis of testimony (e.g., I cannot conclude that a painting is dreamlike purely on the basis of your telling me that it is dreamlike, without seeing the painting myself).

AP-REPRESENTATION: one cannot form an aesthetic judgment on the basis of a subpar representation of a work, such as a written description of a work's non-aesthetic qualities or a low-quality photograph of a work (e.g., I cannot conclude that a painting is dreamlike purely on the basis of a written description of the painting's non-aesthetic qualities, without seeing the painting myself).

My account of counterfactual reasoning in art criticism is compatible with AP-INFERENCE and AP-TESTIMONY: it does not require that one be able to form aesthetic judgments by applying inferential rules or on the basis of testimony. On my account, we judge hypothetical artworks in the same way we judge actual ones. So, if inferential rules and testimony cannot be used to form aesthetic judgments of actual artworks, they cannot be used to form aesthetic judgments of hypothetical ones. (Note that my aim here is not to give credence to AP-INFERENCE and AP-TESTIMONY, but to point out that if they conflict with the aesthetic judgment of hypothetical artworks, they also conflict with the aesthetic judgment of actual artworks.) The problem for my account is AP-REPRESENTATION. My account requires that it be possible for aesthetic judgments to be made on the basis

¹¹ AP-INFERENCE therefore rules out what Kant called "Principles of Taste": universal generalizations of the form anything F (where F is non-aesthetic) is G (an aesthetic property). See Hopkins (2006, 87). Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this interpretation of the acquaintance principle.

of (very) imperfect representations of objects: artworks that exist only in our *imagination*. Therefore, AP-REPRESENTATION poses a much more difficult problem for the aesthetic judgment of hypothetical artworks than it does of actual artworks. For readability, moving forward, I will refer to AP-REPRESENTATION simply as *the acquaintance principle*.

The acquaintance principle is not without its critics. Louise Hanson, for instance, points out that we can at least in some cases form aesthetic judgments of paintings, sculptures, and other works of visual art on the basis of photographs, and judgments about musical works on the basis of reading their scores (2018, 61).¹² But even if we can form aesthetic judgments on the basis of second-hand awareness of an object's perceptual properties gained through photographs or musical scores, rather than on the basis of firsthand encounters with the object, my account of counterfactual reasoning still appears to be in trouble. There are no photographs of hypothetical paintings or sculptures, recordings of hypothetical plays, or scores of hypothetical sonatas. Other than the images or sounds we form in our minds of hypothetical artworks, we have no way of gaining an awareness of their perceptual qualities.

One way of reconciling the tension between counterfactual reasoning in art criticism and the acquaintance principle is simply to reject the acquaintance principle.¹³ My account of counterfactual reasoning in art criticism provides evidence that we can and do form aesthetic judgments on the basis of imperfect, imagined representations of artworks; if aesthetic judgments of hypothetical artworks are accepted in our critical practices, then the acquaintance principle must be false. There is other evidence that the acquaintance principle is false: as Robert Hopkins points out, we use sensory imagination to make aesthetic judgments every time we think about how to decorate a room and pick out an outfit to wear (2006, 93-94). Many nails have been hammered into the acquaintance principle—why not add another?

I think that the possibility of forming judgments of imagined artworks seriously weakens the acquaintance principle. But, for the sake of thoroughness, I also wish to explore one way of reconciling counterfactual reasoning in art criticism with the acquaintance principle that involves showing that visualizations of

¹² For further discussion on the appreciation of visual art on the basis of photographs, see Hopkins (2006, 90-92).

¹³ Thanks to an anonymous referee for pushing me to elaborate on this.

artworks, though imperfect, are good enough representations of artworks to serve as bases for aesthetic judgment.

Let's assume that it is sometimes possible to form an aesthetic judgment on the basis of imperfect representations of artworks, such as photographs of paintings and a recordings of musical compositions. This is a plausible assumption. We do, as a matter of fact, judge artworks on the basis of photographs and recordings all the time; the disciplines of art history and art criticism as we know them would be impossible without representational substitutes like photographs and recordings. Given this assumption, the question becomes *how* imperfect a representation can be for it nevertheless to serve as an apt substitute for an artwork. The high-resolution photographs of paintings and sculptures in online museum catalogs are generally good enough substitutes to use as a basis for aesthetic judgments of the real things. (Sadly, I am in no place to afford a painting by my favorite artist, Mondrian. But that doesn't stop me from buying prints of his work. Although the prints are imperfect representations of his paintings, they "do the job"; they are good enough substitutes for the real thing most of the time.) Of course, not all high-resolution photographs are good enough substitutes for the real thing. It's hard to grasp the grandeur and imposingness of *A Subtlety* without seeing the sculpture oneself. But it's plausible enough that in general we can form preliminary and imperfect yet *legitimate* aesthetic judgments of artworks on the basis of high-resolution photographs in a way that we can't on the basis written descriptions of artworks.

Are blurry photographs apt substitutes for visual artworks? If high-resolution photographs are, *some* blurry photographs probably are, too. The difference between a crystal clear photograph and a slightly blurry photograph usually won't be significant enough to make a difference in aptness as a substitute for an artwork. But just how blurry can a photograph of an artwork be before it becomes inapt as a substitute for an artwork? Could a mental image of an artwork be thought of as a kind of "blurry photograph" that is good enough to serve as an object of aesthetic judgment?

On one view known as *perceptualism*, mental imagery is a perceptual state of the same fundamental psychological kind as veridical perception, hallucination, and other kinds of visual experience. On this view, to picture something in one's mind *is to perceive it*; as Hume writes, "That idea of red, which we form in the dark, and that impression which strikes our eyes in sun-shine, differ only in degree, not

in nature" (1739, 1.1.1.5). Because on this view mental imagery and visual perception are of the same kind, the mental image we form of a hypothetical artwork is akin to a blurry photograph of that work. So, if some blurry photographs are apt substitutes for artworks, it might be the case that some mental images are, too.

There is a lot to say in favor of perceptualism. There are important resemblances between visual perception and mental imagery: they share an "iconic" or "analog" rather than propositional format and a phenomenology, among other things (Cavedon-Taylor 2021, 3848).¹⁴ But perceptualism is controversial.¹⁵ Robert Hopkins, for instance, argues that perception and visualization elicit affect in different ways: in the case of perception, affect is a response to what we perceive, whereas in the case of imagination, affect is part of what we imagine, rather than a response to what is imagined (2006, 93). But this difference between perception and visualization itself need not undermine the possibility of forming aesthetic judgments of imagined artworks. Hopkins himself argues that we can still form legitimate aesthetic judgments on the basis of visualization, but we form them on a different basis than we do judgments of artworks we visually perceive (93-94).

I have shown that one way counterfactual reasoning in art criticism and the acquaintance principle can be made compatible is by appealing to perceptualism. I won't pursue this argument further; my aim has simply been to show that this is a possible (and promising) argument. I do wish to make one more argument in favor of counterfactual reasoning in art criticism despite its tension with the acquaintance principle. I think that even if counterfactual reasoning in art criticism violates the acquaintance principle and therefore does not yield "legitimate" aesthetic judgments, we shouldn't care, because this kind of reasoning promotes something more important than acquaintance: *aesthetic autonomy*.

C. Thi Nguyen (2019) has observed that the demand for acquaintance when forming aesthetic judgments is often confused with the demand for aesthetic autonomy. This confusion has led theorists to over-emphasize the importance of acquaintance and under-emphasize the importance of autonomy. But there is an important distinction to be made between the two concepts. The acquaintance principle says that aesthetic judgments ought to be based on perceptual encounters with their objects. The autonomy principle, on the other hand, says that

¹⁴ For further discussion of the similarities between mental imagery and other forms of visual experience, see Nanay (2015).

¹⁵ For another argument against perceptualism, see Cavedon-Taylor (2021).

aesthetic judgments ought to be made through the application of one's own faculties and abilities. Acquaintance and autonomy often go together. Generally, judging an artwork oneself involves seeing the artwork firsthand. But in some cases, acquaintance and autonomy come apart. Nguyen uses a pair of cases to illustrate the difference between acquaintance and autonomy:

AUDIO TOUR BRANDON: Brandon considers himself to be an art-lover. Whenever he visits the museum, he rents the audio guide and follows its directions. He engages only the works the audio guide calls his attention to and always assents to the guide's aesthetic judgments of the works. He never attempts to establish his own aesthetic views (Nguyen 2019, 1132).

INDUCTIVE KATE: Kate considers herself to be a movie-lover. She forms strong and careful judgments of all the movies she watches. After she has seen enough movies from a director or production group, she will sometime form aesthetic judgments inductively. For instance, she will say that Quentin Tarantino's *Hateful Eight* is clever, perverse, and postmodern without having seen it, basing her judgment on induction from previous experiences of Tarantino movies (1133).

Audio Tour Brandon is acquainted but unautonomous; Inductive Kate is autonomous but unacquainted. But, as Nguyen points out, although we might refrain from accepting Inductive Kate's particular judgment of *Hateful Eight* on the basis that she lacks firsthand acquaintance with the film, there is an important sense in which her aesthetic life is preferable—more fulfilling, rich, and meaningful—than Audio Tour Brandon's.¹⁶ Audio Tour Brandon may be acquainted with all the works he judges, and his aesthetic judgments—which are based entirely on his deference to aesthetic experts—may be more reliable than Kate's. Nevertheless, his aesthetic life is clearly more impoverished than Kate's.

Counterfactual reasoning in art criticism bears similarities to inductive aesthetic reasoning. In both cases, we form aesthetic judgments on the basis of imperfect ideas of what artworks are like. But even if there's something imperfect about the aesthetic judgments that counterfactual and inductive reasoning produce, they promote aesthetic autonomy, a characteristic that we value highly in art appreciators (perhaps even more than we value acquaintance).

One fascinating feature of counterfactual reasoning in art criticism that illustrates its promotion of aesthetic autonomy is the way it mirrors the kind of

¹⁶ This isn't to say that Kate's judgment of *Hateful Eight* is *totally* unreliable. She is in a far better place to reliably judge the film than, say, someone who has never seen a Tarantino film.

reasoning that artists often employ in their creative processes. An artist considers the possible ways their work could be—where the next stroke of paint could be placed, whether to add a crescendo or a decrescendo to a score—and chooses to bring into existence the version of the work that will best achieve the aesthetic effects they envision. When we reason counterfactually about artworks, we place ourselves in the position of the artist. We consider what was possible for an artist to have created and we use these considerations to evaluate the artistic decisions they made. It is often thought that being an artist and being an aesthete require different inclinations, abilities and attitudes; the artist, after all, assumes a *creative* role, while the aesthete assumes an *appreciative* one (Levinson 2017). But counterfactual reasoning in art criticism is one instance where the roles of artist and appreciator converge. When an artist stops to consider different ways their work could be, they become appreciators of hypothetical artworks; they bring to mind and evaluate these hypothetical works as their audience might, and only then choose to bring into existence the version of the work that best realizes their vision. When an appreciator stops to consider different ways a work could be, they become artists of hypothetical works: they paint, sculpt, and compose works entirely in their minds. Counterfactual reasoning in art criticism gives those of us who typically or exclusively assume the role of the appreciator an opportunity to adopt, however temporarily, an artist’s psychology and all the freedom, play, and autonomy that comes with it.

That counterfactual reasoning in art criticism promotes aesthetic autonomy doesn’t do anything to resolve the tension with the acquaintance principle. It doesn’t prove that aesthetic judgments formed on the basis of subpar representations of artworks can be legitimate. But thinking about aesthetic autonomy does, I think, demonstrate that we might not want to *care* about whether we can form fully legitimate aesthetic judgments of hypothetical artworks. Counterfactual reasoning in art criticism undoubtedly helps us hone our aesthetic judgments of *actual* works, and it promotes something that we value just as much if not more than aesthetic acquaintance: aesthetic autonomy.¹⁷

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