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COLLINGWOOD ON ART, CRAFT AND ALL THAT JAZZ

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R. G. Collingwood is best known within the philosophy of art for his development of the so-called expressionist theory. Briefly stated, this theory regards expression as a necessary condition for the production of any artwork, where expression is conceived as a process whereby the artist transforms inchoate thoughts and feelings into some clarified form within a given artistic medium. My intention is not to examine the conception of expression itself, but instead, turn to Collingwood's earlier distinction between art and craft. Here I am particularly interested in Aaron Ridley's analysis which maintains that, despite a strong distinction between art and craft, Collingwood's account is flexible enough to accommodate a notion of technique relevant to artistic production, where such technique is itself craft-like in character.[1] Though I agree with Ridley's conclusion, I think there is room to better spell out the role of technique on Collingwood's account. I shall do this by examining the experience of artistic practice in the cases of jazz performance and electronic music composition. The aim of this paper is to show that Collingwood's account looks eminently applicable to these instances of art within popular culture, but more importantly that these cases point us to an enrichment of Collingwood's account which better accommodates a notion of technique.

[1] It is here also helpful to note that understanding technique as 'craft-like' in character is faithful to its etymological root which is presumably from the Greek *technê*, generally translated as 'skill' or 'craft'.

I. SETTING UP THE PROBLEM

In his *Principles of Art*, Collingwood makes a distinction between art and craft in order to reject an instrumental view of artworks, one in which the artistic process is entirely conceived as a means of achieving an independently specifiable end (the artwork). On Collingwood's view a work of craft is always completely explicable in terms of some preconceived end before its execution, yet this is *not* the case with works of art: art-proper is not to be equated with craft. Instead Collingwood presents the thesis that (a) art involves expression, with the qualification that (b) expression "is an activity to which there can be no technique".[2] On the other hand, he maintains that (c) technical skill is "something used in the service of art"[3] (albeit with a stress that such skill should not be 'identified with art'). Taken together, these claims generate an apparent contradiction: technique is employed in the service of art which is essentially characterised by an activity that cannot employ technique. While some early commentators suggested that Collingwood's art-craft distinction commits us to denying (c), i.e., artworks can never involve technique (where technique is here conceived in terms of a means-end structure),[4] Aaron Ridley helpfully rebuts this charge by claiming that

> Collingwood is... committed only to a negative claim: that an artist's technique, insofar as it is understood instrumentally (in terms of means and ends etc.), is not the essence of his art. He is not committed to the silly claim that technique is irrelevant to the production of works of art.[5]

Instead, Ridley suggests that the art-craft distinction is between 'various aspects' that an object may have, hence there is no contradiction in claiming that the production of an artwork involves technique. He bolsters his case by discussing Collingwood's remarks on representational art, in which the motive to represent is regarded as instrumental in character, where "what makes [the object] a representation is one thing, what makes it a work of art is another."[6]

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2 Collingwood (1938), p.111.
3 Ibid, p.27.
4 Cf. Mounce (1991), p.11 where he claims that "having specified that the means-end relation is characteristic of a craft... [Collingwood] is forced to deny all trace of it in art."
5 Ridley (1998), p.14.
6 Collingwood (1938), p.43.

While Ridley helpfully points us towards a reading of Collingwood which accommodates technique, his distinction between the art- and craft-aspects of an object reveals a new problem. Insofar as technique is thought of as instrumental, the problem can be made clearer by asking whether we are to ignore those instrumental features pertaining to technique when considering the object *qua* artwork? Though Ridley's solution allows that technique might be a necessary condition for art-production, it seemingly fails to specify exactly what 'service' to art technique might perform; worse still, Ridley's rigid demarcation of aspects of an object might be construed as rendering technique impotent to provide any such service to art. I shall suggest that a more fruitful development of Ridley's analysis is to refine the conception of technique on offer, where we hope to elucidate the 'service' technique provides to art.

II. THE PUZZLING RELATION BETWEEN TECHNIQUE AND ART

At the outset, it should be pointed out that the puzzling relation between technique and art is not new. Indeed, in *The Critique of the Power of Judgment* Kant framed this very problem in his discussion of genius, itself designed to resolve a tension generated from his positive account of fine art involving the intentional production of beautiful artefacts, and his claim that beauty is not a concept.[7] The tension arises in Kant's case because he stipulates that technique (i.e., intentional production) be employed in artistic production, yet also demands that a concept of 'what is to be produced' be provided which, given his claim about beauty, seems to debar technique from producing anything beautiful.

Though the credence of this puzzling relation between art and technique can be traced to Kant, there are recent discussions of the relation between art and technique more pertinent to our project. For example, R. Keith Sawyer discusses the artist's creative process while connecting the idea of problem-finding versus problem-solving to Collingwood's account. Here he understands "the creative process [as] a constant balance between finding a problem and solving that problem."[8] In particular, Sawyer uses the example of a five-hour improvisation by Picasso captured on film in which we see the artist work through a range of ideas, each painted over the last, only to finish by declaring he will have to discard the canvas. Sawyer remarks that "the

[7] Kant (1790).
[8] Sawyer (2000), p.159.

time was not wasted – [Picasso] has discovered some new ideas, ideas that have emerged from his interaction with the canvas, ideas that he can use in his next painting."[9] Interestingly, Sawyer's notion of 'problem-finding' seemingly captures some distinctive intermediary process between the artist's initial confrontation with the canvas and the process of arriving at some choate artistic product, i.e., expression-proper *pace* Collingwood. Though the relation to technique is not explicit, we can query this relation by asking whether such a process of 'problem-finding' is amenable to instrumental characterisation.

Paisley Livingston also points us toward the relation between art and technique in his discussion of Henri Poincaré's view of the creative process, and the relation between inspiration and constraints. Livingston attributes Poincaré the view that "creative achievements are often the product of different sorts of interacting psychological processes."[10] He makes further use of this model by identifying one of these processes as a prior commitment to a scheme of constraints which "orients the creative process by establishing formal as well as substantive, or content-related parameters, and corresponding normative expectations and conditions."[11] My understanding of the driving intuition behind such an account is that constraint functions as a *catalyst* for creative action, where, without it, our endeavours would be too 'open-ended'. The discussion is related to technique insofar as the purposeful intentions involved in laying out such constraints are often thought of as instrumental, where one might describe their end precisely in terms of the catalytic function they have upon the creative process.

Although neither Sawyer nor Livingston discuss expression, they may be understood as regarding some kind of creative process as a necessary condition to art-production. Given also that, in both cases, we have queried the role of technique with respect to such creative processes, both discussions may prove useful 'food for thought' in refining the conception of technique on the Collingwood/Ridley account. Having said this, it is not clear how we are to integrate such ideas of 'problem-finding' or 'constraint' with this account. We turn to this challenge in the next section.

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9 Ibid, p.150.
10 Livingston (2009), p.131.
11 Ibid, p.138.

III. TECHNIQUE: THE CASE OF JAZZ

In order to develop a Collingwoodian account, we must accommodate its central thesis, namely that 'art is expression'. Collingwood describes this in terms of expressing emotion, where he claims this emotion is not pre-conceived before expression, but is rather dependent upon that expression to come into existence.[12] His further claim is that expression results in 'a certain thing' as opposed to description, for instance, which results in "a thing of a certain kind."[13] Ridley describes the latter claim here as a corollary to the first, and posits these claims as explanations for two intuitions concerning expression in artworks: that the medium of expression is inseparable from what is expressed, and that expression is always unique.[14] The art-craft distinction makes sense in this light since works of craft are not unique, they are 'things of a certain kind', and thus different from artworks which are unique. Ridley helpfully relates this discussion to accounts of purposive action.[15] He identifies a standard model of purposive action as one in which the purpose it serves can be specified independently of the action itself, where we note that this model describes what Collingwood calls craft. However, the production of art, on Collingwood's account, involves *another kind* of purposive action in which the purpose cannot be independently specified. If this were not so then the clarified emotion could be specified independently of the act of expression, which contradicts the claim concerning expression's dependence upon the medium; we also note that this grounds our understanding of Collingwood's claim that expression is 'something to which there can be no technique'. This is the key idea to hold sight of when extending the Collingwood/Ridley account: art *must* involve an expressive-purposive action which can never be reduced to some instrumental-purposive action (or set of such actions). Yet if this is so, how can there be an important connection between technique, itself instrumental or craft-like in character, and art?

Let us begin the proposal with an example. From what has already been said we can see that Collingwood's account prevents a model of artistic expression in which the agent fully preconceives the result before realising it. An excellent example to support his case is that of musical improvisation which, by definition, can never be fully preconceived. We shall first focus on the example of improvisation in jazz, in

[12] Collingwood (1938), p.111.
[13] Ibid, p.114.
[14] Ridley (1998), pp.28-9.
[15] Ibid, pp.32-3.

particular based on the model of a jazz standard. These standards are often presented in sheet music form with fairly minimal content, consisting of a chord progression and a melody. Such a framework can form the basis of improvisation when the performer spontaneously plays melodies built on the chord progressions laid out in the standard. The improvisation itself is by no means pre-determined by the standard, a fact that is evident to anyone who has heard two radically different performances based on the same standard. Indeed, the jazz standard is designed to facilitate the individuality and uniqueness of such improvisational performances. The example is interesting since the jazz standard serves as a catalyst for a paradigmatic case of artistic expression, i.e., musical improvisation, yet at the same time is itself a 'thing of a certain kind' (which gives it a craft-like complexion). The question is whether the Collingwood/Ridley account can help us understand how musical expression is here linked to the function of the jazz standard.

On the Collingwood/Ridley account, technique is broadly construed as some kind of instrumental purposive action (i.e., action with a means-ends structure). We shall here propose to refine this conception by characterising technique as *a competence involving medium oriented structures*. The example of the jazz standard is supposed to exemplify the notion of a *structure* here insofar as it points to a framework in which the player can improvise, yet in no way determinately specifies the nature of the expression itself. Moreover, it is plausible that we have the accommodation of expression as an instrumental end in mind here, since the structure helpfully 'constrains' the domain in which expression is generated, rather than preconceiving it. By *medium orientation*, I mean to emphasise that the kind of structures in question are necessarily born out of a relationship with the medium of expression itself, where this relationship is logically prior to the formation of the structures themselves. By *competence*, I mean to stress a connection with the instrumental purposive actions pertaining to craft. In particular, the competence in question can be discussed in means-ends terms which are dictated to it by the pre-conceived structure to which it is coupled. Put another way, the competence seems to involve some theoretical knowledge which goes hand-in-hand with the structure. In the case of the jazz standard, for example, one may purposively select which scales to improvise upon with 'the accommodation of expression' as an end in mind, where this selection involves a judgment based on some knowledge of music theory. This notion of competence is somewhat clarified by intuitive appeal to the qualitative difference

between 'reading' a chord sequence in a jazz standard, which involves an almost mechanical improvisation that leans heavily on theoretical devices, and 'feeling' the chord sequence while improvising upon it, which involves jettisoning the theoretical scaffolding in the former case. We might be tempted to call the latter notion of feeling competence, yet this looks more like what Collingwood calls expression. In contrast, I want to emphasise the prior more technically constrained approach to the medium as that which constitutes competence. The intuition is helpful here because it indicates that reading and feeling should not be pulled apart, but merely seen as ends of a sliding scale.

The discussion above might link up with the notions of 'working out ideas' and 'constraints' presented earlier since, on this model of technique, the constraints are equated with the medium oriented structures, while the working out of ideas is based, initially at least, on what we might call competence. Moreover, the use of this model, as I understand it, is that is starts to describe the way we *begin* to go about artistic expression, and how something like technique might become the facilitator of this phenomena.

We must now ask whether our refined notion of technique is compatible with the Collingwood/Ridley account. We identified the key claim of this account in terms of the irreducibility of those purposive actions distinctive of art to those constitutive of craft; part of the reasoning being that any such reduction would involve a relapse into the so-called technical theory of art. With respect to our refined notion of technique, the claim that technique has some catalytic function upon expression need not itself imply that art is reducible to technique. Indeed, the analogy to a positive catalyst in a chemical reaction is helpful since this merely facilitates the reaction in question, and remains independent of the reactants and products involved in such a reaction. In the same way, technique is never here regarded as constitutive of expression, but is nevertheless substantively connected to it. Thus the characterisation of technique given is seemingly compatible with the Collingwood/Ridley position. We must further ask whether this conception of technique elucidates the 'service' technique supposedly provides to art. In response, the proposed conception at least makes the broad strokes of this service a little clearer: technique is involved in providing some *context* conducive to expression.

However, there may be a point of objection here. We recall that the proposal was initially arrived at by critiquing Ridley's position on the grounds that Ridley failed to

do justice to a substantive connection between art and technique; a connection implied by Collingwood's own admission that technique provides some 'service' to art. What is really at stake, therefore, is understanding *how* technique has some positive function on the process of expression. However, merely claiming that technique has some catalytic function upon expression seems only to shift the burden of explanation; we must now explain how this catalytic function works. Admittedly then, in the face of the sceptic, we have merely refined the Collingwood/Ridley position to the extent that it looks 'more plausible' to posit a substantive relation between art and technique, without giving proper indication as to how art and technique are meaningfully connected. I will begin to take up this challenge in the next section.

IV. DISCOVERY: THE CASE OF ELECTRONIC MUSIC PRODUCTION

Our question is this: how can the kind of competence discussed in relation to technique turn into something like expression-proper? With respect to the intuitive difference between 'reading' and 'feeling' canvassed earlier, the question can be put by asking how such a *transition* from reading to feeling is possible. Here I suggest that an illuminating approach to understanding this issue is to focus on a more complex notion of 'working out ideas' in the medium which may exceed mere competence, and start to involve something like genuine expression. To provide a speculative sketch for such a notion I shall consider the more contemporary example of electronic music composition, in particular with a focus of the popular genre known as 'electronica'.

I should begin by explaining why I think the case of electronic music composition is particularly apt for our purposes. Firstly, such composition involves an overtly technical medium where, unlike the case of jazz, the range of possible technical interactions with the medium is greatly multiplied, giving the practitioner little hope of achieving anything without a fairly robust technical knowledge. Secondly, it is a particularly labour intensive medium to work with, where the final product is generated from a vast number of small additions, erasures and alterations. Moreover, the third key point is that such small interactions with the medium can often be described as 'pre-conceived'. For example, one such interaction might be application of a filter to cut out unwanted frequencies when adding a new audible element to the work-in-progress, where this looks like the kind of purposive action relevant to craft and not art in Collingwood's view. Indeed, engagement with the medium looks *so*

technical that one may question its viability (in Collingwoodian terms) for the expression of emotion in general. In spite of this worry, the last few decades have seen a great many innovative artists working in this medium whose artistic-products surely have expressive merit.[16] Our question then becomes: how might this be possible on the basis of what *prima facie* looks like a craft on Collingwoodian terms?

One kind of answer turns on the notion of 'discovery' within the technical space, or medium-oriented-structure as we previously labelled it, which is akin to the notion of improvisation that constituted genuine expression in the case of jazz. In particular, though the individual routine-like interactions with the work may be instrumental, there can often arise various unanticipated results, or 'discoveries', from such repeated interaction with the medium. From the point of view of the maker, these discoveries show up as kinds of micro-breakthrough in the medium, where they take on such a character precisely because they exceed the scope of what was considered possible within the technical structure. In particular, some of these micro-breakthroughs might be conceived as microcosms of expression-proper, which serve to guide our future engagement with the medium.

Though this sketch clearly needs to be worked out in more detail, it at least highlights how technique and expression might be meaningfully linked on an expressionist account such as Collingwood's; namely, in such a way that expression emerges against the background of instrumentally understood structures which might, in turn, be further developed on the basis of unanticipated discoveries constitutive of expression within the medium. One challenging question for this development of the proposal, however, is exactly how those expressions constituted by certain micro-breakthroughs in the medium can *guide* future engagement with that medium? Clearly such a guiding process cannot itself be instrumentally understood, else we are in danger once again of relapse into the technical theory of art. This also raises a broader question: how can expression, which is paradigmatic of purposive action *without* a means-ends structure, serve as norm to guide technique, which is paradigmatic of

[16] Though I take this 'expressive merit' as an assumption for the purposes of this paper, some pertinent examples to substantiate this claim (in the opinion of the author) might be: 'Dayvan Cowboy' by *Boards Of Canada*; 'Tea Leaf Dancers' by *Flying Lotus*; 'My Angel Rocks Back And Forth' by *Fourtet*; 'Toys' by *Amon Tobin*; 'Iambic 5 Poetry' by *Squarepusher*; 'Air Song' by *Solar Fields*; 'Kong' by *Bonobo*; and 'Childhood Montage (Title Sequence)' by *BT*. There are of course many more. (All the examples given here were available to listen to online at http://www.youtube.com at the time of writing.)

action *with* a means-ends structure? Answering this question will move us to a better understanding of how art and technique might be substantively linked.

Admittedly more needs to be done in assessing whether the notion of 'discovery' canvassed here is compatible with the notion of expression on a Collingwood/Ridley account; without such an assessment we may have reservations about positing the ideas developed in this section as a refinement of that account. On the other hand, given that the notion of discovery–which was constitutive of the beginnings of expression–necessarily *exceeds* the medium-oriented structures pertaining to technique, we may still maintain that expression is irreducible to technique, which makes the proposal *prima facie* compatible with the Collingwood/Ridley view. Supposing that such a compatibility can be justified, then the example of music production casts the nature of technique's service to art in a clearer light: technique, and the medium-oriented structures associated with technique, provide a certain field of operation in which the practitioner instrumentally acts upon the medium, out of which (and perhaps *only* out of which) genuine expression may emerge.

V. CONCLUSION

I have hoped to demonstrate that the basic conception of technique sketched above is broadly compatible with the Collingwood/Ridley account, and that it overcomes the danger of rendering technique impotent to provide any service to art on such an account. Indeed, the rumination on practice within music production seems to indicate that technique supplies a vital service in providing the *context* out of which certain 'expressive' discoveries within the medium can be made; where, more precisely, this context is equated with some technically construed field in which the artist can operate, against which the discoveries show up as unanticipated results. This view is a development of the proposal related to the jazz standard, which pointed more generally to the idea that technique involves some context which facilitates expression itself. Although our project was to connect instrumentally conceived features of artistic production–i.e., those involving technique–to artistic expression itself, it was of course crucial that we avoided the claim that technique is a sufficient condition to artistic-production (which involves genuine expression); else we relapse into the so-called technical theory of art which is incompatible with the Collingwood/Ridley position. However, as I understand it, the Collingwood/Ridley account *is* perfectly compatible with the claim that technique is a necessary condition to the artwork,

making it in principle amenable to our proposed refinement of the conception of technique. If this proposal downplayed Ridley's demarcation of technique into the so-called craft-aspect of the object, it hopefully developed his key observation that Collingwood's account is rich enough to accommodate technique. Indeed, the proposal here suggests that, far from debarring technique, Collingwood's account is fruitfully approached via the concept of technique, which may provide a route to better understanding his notion of expression itself.

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