AESTHETICS AND POPULAR ART: AN INTERVIEW WITH AARON MESKIN

I.   POPULAR ART

Postgraduate Journal of Aesthetics: As well as writing on traditional issues within the philosophy of art, you've written a number of papers on comics and videogames. Perhaps you could start off by telling us what motivated you work on these art-forms?

Aaron Meskin: As is usually the case with what I work on, I read some stuff I liked. I read an article on comics by Greg Hayman and Henry Pratt[1] and some work on videogames, Grant Tavinor's really excellent work on that topic.[2] I found the material interesting and I thought I had something to say about it. That's what usually motivates me and that's what did in these cases. With comics, my interest in the medium played a big role. I was a child collector of Marvel. I got turned on to independent and alternative comics about ten years ago by a good friend who's a successful comics artist and that played a role in my writing about comics. With videogames it's different. I have very little first-hand knowledge of videogames. I haven't really played them in twenty years. But I have a great collaborator, Jon Robson, who's a serious gamer; he probably knows a bit *too* much about them in fact! Part of the motivation to write about videogames was to learn more about them as a topic, and I like collaborating with people. I guess it's also true that I like writing about unexplored or underexplored topics. I've a long-standing interest in writing about art-forms that don't get much attention. I wrote about outsider art as a graduate student and I've been interested in popular and mass culture since I was an undergraduate. I thought that one could say interesting things about it. I was a student

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[1]   Hayman and Pratt (2005).
[2]   Tavinor (2009).

at Brown as an undergraduate and I took some semiotics classes and although I found the theory pretty incomprehensible, the idea of saying something interesting about popular art, popular culture and movies, the things that were mostly discussed in semiotics, really got me excited. That was early on in my academic career, around sophomore year of college.

PJA: Apart from widening our understanding of the arts, do you think there is anything else that we stand to gain by examining popular arts from a philosophical perspective?

AM: I'm attracted by what Peter Kivy, my former supervisor, said about aesthetics: We're likely to do better studying the philosoph*ies* of the arts, the individual arts and their individual problems, rather than the philosophy of art in general.[3] In addition to that, we will have a somewhat skewed view of art and the artworlds if we only look at the high arts. And, as I think is the case with all the arts, I believe we can learn something about ourselves and our psychology from looking at the arts. It might be that we can even learn a bit more about what attracts us, pleases us, or interests us by looking at popular art than so-called high art. After all, popular art is designed specifically to 'grab' us, and so I think it may provide us with even more insight into our psychology.

PJA: It has been claimed that popular and high arts differ in their interpretive standards. Popular arts are often thought to wear their meanings on the sleeves, so to speak, while to fully understand a work of high art it looks like one typically has to possess some knowledge of art-history or certain conventions, say, and sometimes even that may not be enough. Do you think this is right?

AM: David Carrier is one person who's argued for this in his book on comics.[4] He's an intentionalist about high art, but a kind of reader-response theorist about popular art. I don't really see it. I suppose the thought stems from the plausible idea that mass or popular art is designed for accessibility and easy access. But I don't think it follows from a work's accessibility that its meaning is worn on its sleeve. Other elements, not meaning, may underwrite a work's accessibility. And even if some meaning is worn

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[3]   Kivy (1993).
[4]   Carrier (2000).

on the sleeve it doesn't follow that all is. Surely this is the case with high art too. Think of serious representational painting or theatre, for example. In any case, knowledge of certain conventions is certainly required to have full appreciation of lots of comics, rock and roll, and television programmes. Spiegelman's *Maus* isn't understood without having at least some background knowledge of 'funny animal' comics.[5] Moore's *Watchmen* isn't understood without background knowledge of comics' history. As Ted Gracyk has pointed out, *The Simpsons* relies heavily on allusion to other works of popular art and high art too.[6] Fully appreciating Joss Whedon's works requires understanding the genre conventions he's playing around with, and so on. So I don't really see it. Finally, the proof is in the pudding; I think philosophers such as Noël Carroll and Stanley Cavell have shown that works of popular art like 1930's romantic comedies and Buster Keaton films call for rich interpretation.[7]

PJA: A similar claim has been made in regards to authorship. It's sometimes thought that the while the concept of authorship applies to high arts, it is inappropriate to talk about popular arts like film or television, say, as having authors. Do you have any thoughts on this?

AM: Again, I don't really see it at all. The concept of authorship applies to junk or popular fiction, so it's certainly not confined to the sphere of high art. Jeffrey Archer is an author. A tendency in English is to use the term to refer primarily to producers of linguistic objects, texts or literary works. Perhaps some of the resistance to applying the term to film or television lies there. Of course, there's also auteur theory, which is not so popular now, but was once the dominant approach to understanding film. I think authorship is *different* in the case of much popular art, or it tends to be different; it's often collaborative, as in mainstream comics production, and sometimes massively collaborative, as in mainstream film-making and television production. Of course, some works of popular art are made by single individuals. For example, lots of graphic novels are made by single individuals and some works of high art are collaborative too. I guess there are interesting questions to ask about authorship and the popular arts, particularly the complex serial forms like soap-operas and comics.

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5   On funny animal comics, see: http://www.toonopedia.com/glossary.htm#funnyanimal
6   Gracyk (2007).
7   Carroll (1996), Cavell (1971).

I'd love to see work on that. But I don't see a fundamental difference between authorship in the two categories.

II. COMICS

PJA: Comics have been around for almost as long, if not longer, than film. What do you think explains why it is only very recently that philosophers have turned their attention towards comics?

AM: I think comics came before film; they're an early nineteenth-century invention. What explains the lack of philosophical attention? I suppose there are two obvious things. It's really clear what the philosophical issues about film are—most notably, the nature of cinematic representation—and it is less clear what the philosophical issues about comics are. That's one thing. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, art-forms tend to get examined philosophically when they've achieved artistic legitimacy, and film just happened to achieve artistic legitimacy earlier than comics. Although there are some great works of comics in the early twentieth-century, I think it isn't really until the later part of the twentieth-century, post *Maus*, that comics were widely recognised as able to be great works. The other thing is that people were theorising about film from its inception, not philosophers necessarily, but there were film theorists. So there's a real connection from film-theory to philosophy of film. And I just don't think that was there in the case of comics. There wasn't much comics-theory from early on in the way there was film-theory, at least not that much of theoretical significance that I know about.

PJA: What do you think explains that; why do you think people theorised film right from its inception, but not comics?

AM: There are two reasons, I think. One is that there was an early felt need to distinguish film from the theatre, to try and articulate what it was that film was and could do that the theatre couldn't do. That motivates a lot of early film theorists. Secondly, I think film wears its philosophical questions on its sleeves a bit more obviously, such as, "what are you seeing when you look at film?" Although that ends up being a philosophical question, I think it's a natural question to think about. That, and, "in virtue of what can it be an art?" That's what motivates early theorising about film.

PJA: Whereas you think those kinds of questions don't have analogies in the case of comics?

AM: Obviously one can ask in virtue of what comics can be an art, but there's drawing and illustration in comics, so the answers are more obvious to begin with. Whereas with film there's the idea that it's *recording* things. So there's the question of how, in virtue of its recording the world, film could count as an art. I think that both the questions "what is the nature of its representation?" and "how can it be an art?" just seem more obvious when it comes to film.

PJA: One might think that the project of defining comics is an obvious place for philosophers interested in comics to start their inquiry, and indeed some have done just that. What are your thoughts on the definitional project?

AM: I've argued that there's no pressing need to answer the definitional question, and that it may distract us from more interesting issues. I pretty much think it's a mug's game. We philosophers of art don't have a great record at coming up with definitions. I'm more interested in, and think we're more likely to make head-way on, more specific issues about comics and how they work.

PJA: What's the current state of play in the philosophy of comics; can you briefly talk us through the state of the art and what a few of the main issues are here?

AM: Hmm... the current state of play? I know a few people who are working in the area. Aside from the stuff I published, Henry Pratt has published a few really interesting articles on medium-specificity and narration in comics, among other things.[8] Roy Cook and I are co-editing an anthology on the aesthetics of comics for Wiley-Blackwell. Most of the articles are in, and we're excited about the book. There's a lot of interesting work in it on the relation between comics and other art-forms. We've got some cool stuff on topics such as authorship, genre, humour in comics, and the idea of a language of comics. And some articles that express healthy scepticism about the artistic potential of comics. The state of play is that there are some people working on comics, but there's not a lot out there. I think we're still

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[8] Pratt (2009a) and (2009b).

searching for the central topics that will structure the debate. Hopefully the anthology will do something towards helping us distinguish what those central topics are.

PJA: When many of us think about comics we instantly think of superhero comics and comic strips. Are these the type of works that you think philosophers could profitably study?

AM: I definitely think those forms can be profitably studied. There are interesting examples of comics in each category. In the superhero genre you've got work by Alan Moore and Grant Morrison. In the comic strip category you've got Charles Schulz and George Herriman. Many of us working on comics think that a lot can be learned by thinking seriously about graphic novels and alternative or experimental comics—works by Art Spiegelman, Robert Crumb, Chris Ware, Alison Bechdel and Daniel Clowes. I also think it would be useful for those interested in comics to look at comics from other cultures, like manga, French and Belgium bande dessinée and Italian photo comics.

III. VIDEOGAMES

PJA: You've argued that videogames are fictions in the Waltonian sense that they are props that function to prescribe imaginings,[9] in particular that the player is performing an action within the game-world (e.g., that one is driving a Ferrari round a race-track, battling the Horde, being barraged by barrels thrown by a monkey, say). Does this claim extend to videogame versions of traditional games like chess, noughts-and-crosses (i.e. tic-tac-toe) and poker, say?

AM: Jon Robson and I argue this in a paper that's currently under submission for an anthology on computer games. The paper's largely a response to some work by Grant Tavinor, who argues that there are some issues with understanding videogames as full-fledged Waltonian fictions.[10] To be clear, we're not committed to all actual and possible videogames counting as Waltonian fictions. We think most, maybe the vast majority, are, including chess and poker. Our reading of these games is that they do function to prescribe imaginings, such as that you're moving real pieces and holding real cards. But I can imagine different views.

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9   See Walton (1990).
10 Tavinor (2009).

PJA: On the face of it, videogames seem to fall naturally within the category of cinema or what Carroll coins 'the moving image.'[11] For instance, videogames are sometimes positively evaluated for being cinematic. You've argued that while videogames are instances of the moving image, they do not belong to the art-form of the moving image. Could you talk us through this claim?

AM: The idea that Jon and I had is that the term 'the moving image' is ambiguous, like 'film' and 'painting' are, between picking out a medium and picking out an art-form. We think it's pretty clear that videogames meet conditions for belonging to the medium of the moving image, but that they aren't, at least not yet, part of the art-form of the moving image. We thought that because we were influenced by Dom Lopes' recent work on art-forms.[12] Roughly, the idea is that art-forms are contrast classes, categories of things that are evaluated against one another. We don't think its standard, at least not yet, to compare videogames with film and television shows for critical purposes. Even if you call a videogame cinematic, it doesn't follow that you're really evaluating it in comparison to films.

PJA: So denying that videogames belong to the art-form of the moving image is not to express scepticism about whether they are art?

AM: No. For one thing I don't believe that all art-works belong to art-forms, though I'm not sure what Jon thinks about that. I think there are art-works outside of the art-forms. And for another, it's perfectly consistent with denying that videogames belong to the art-form of the moving image that they, or at least some sub-genre, belong to a distinct art-form. For example, videogames might belong to the art-form of computer art.

PJA: Are there are any other art categories that videogames might be usefully compared with?

AM: Dom Lopes has talked about videogames as a sub-category of computer art, and interactive art more broadly.[13] I think that is one useful way of thinking about

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[11] Carroll (1996).
[12] Lopes (2010).
[13] Lopes (2010).

videogames. Jon and I were interested in exploring some of the ways that videogame playing is like performing, although we don't argue that gaming *is* a matter of performing. We think this helps shed light on the way in which tokens of videogames, that is individual playings, may be aesthetically appreciated and perhaps even count as art in their own right, though I think Jon is more attracted to that last claim than I am. We also thought it was useful to make the connection between videogame playing and performance to understand the way that videogames function as distinct Waltonian fictions.[14] That is to say, both videogames and their playings pick out distinct work-worlds, just like theatrical works and their performances do. We think there are some important analogies between videogame playings and performance, but we certainly don't think that videogame playing really is a matter of performance, at least not standardly.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEE

Aaron Meskin is Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Leeds. Before coming to Leeds he taught at Texas Tech University in Lubbock Texas for six years. His current research focuses on the aesthetics of comics, the semantics of aesthetic terms, the imagination, empirical aesthetics, the aesthetics of the short story, and the ontology of the multiple arts. He is Treasurer of the British Society of Aesthetics and a Trustee of the American Society for Aesthetics. He is also Director of the Centre for Aesthetics at Leeds. He co-edited *Aesthetics: A Comprehensive Anthology* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2007) and is co-editing an anthology of new essays on the aesthetics of comics with Roy Cook (also to be published by Wiley-Blackwell).

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(forthcoming). "Videogames and the Moving Image", (with Jon Robson), *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*. Available online at:
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[14] Walton (1990).

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