

## It's Pretty, but is it Real? An Historical Examination of Authenticity

In 1994, Apple CEO Steve Jobs gave an interview about the creation of the Macintosh amid rumors that it was, at least in part, stolen from Xerox. In response to a question about inspiration, Jobs said “Good artists copy, great artists steal<sup>1</sup>.” This is, famously, a Picasso quote, something Jobs admits to immediately in the interview, but would not the more Picassoesque (and indeed Jobsian) thing have been to leave the quote unattributed? Jobs continues the interview by saying that he and Apple are “shameless about stealing great ideas,<sup>2</sup>” so why not steal the quote as well?

In order to answer that question, the very ideas of ownership, theft, forgery, and- as the title of this essay suggests- authenticity must be examined. Are these words Picasso's to own? Are they Jobs' to steal? What does it mean for anything to be truly original? And does that even matter? In this essay, I will examine Walter Benjamin's conception of authenticity (as outlined in his work “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”), and use it to analyze Orson Welles' final film *F for Fake*, as well as look at the modern era to examine the forged work of art in the age of digital reproduction.

This paper is an analysis of various parts of Benjamin's pamphlet through the lens of false reproduction. First, I will endeavor to show some of the exceptions to Benjamin's idea of authenticity, specifically forgery, and to discuss the idea of the authenticity of a forged work of art. The other aim of this paper will be to look at the further degradation of authenticity in the twenty-first century, and why in a world where art is basically free, people still find reasons to fake it.

Before I begin my analysis, however, some definitions will be necessary to follow the arguments presented in this paper. First, forgery is “the action of... producing a copy of a

document, signature, banknote, or work of art.<sup>3</sup>” (I have used Google’s definition here because it is the only one that allowed me to remove the word ‘forge’ from the definition and remain coherent.) This is often for monetary gain. Theft, by contrast, is “the act of stealing; the wrongful taking and carrying away of the personal goods or property of another.<sup>4</sup>”

## **Section I- Authenticity**

*“The unique value of the 'authentic' work of art has its basis in ritual...<sup>5</sup>”*

- Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”

Walter Benjamin outlines his idea of authenticity in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” Benjamin uses the term “aura” to describe the authentic quality of an object. According to Benjamin, the aura of artworks have been degraded in the modern era through the process of technical/mechanical reproduction. Now, I believe, is the time for further definitions. Benjamin defines aura as a specific quality of art that is lost when that work of art is mechanically reproduced<sup>6</sup>. Mechanical reproduction is the copying of a work by methods other than an individual human replicating it, usually for the purposes of mass production<sup>7</sup>. Benjamin’s aura is not easily defined, but it can be broken down into three main elements: uniqueness, context and distance. Benjamin explains that a duplicate artwork cannot be authentic. The interaction of cultures with works of art, relies, at least in part, on their having not seen it before. He gives the example of the statue of Venus, which was understood and revered by the Greeks, but was seen as heretical idolatry by later cultures<sup>8</sup>. Both, however interacted with the art as something novel rather than a ‘mere object’.

Benjamin also says that mechanical reproduction trades this authenticity for the endless copies that can be made of the artwork<sup>9</sup>. To Benjamin, an original artwork comes from a specific

place or tradition, and to remove it from that tradition would be to take something (the aura) away from the object. He uses the example of film to show that reproduction of an art form would be to liquidate them.

Finally, to understand distance, he uses the example of a mountain and the picture of a mountain. The modern era has given humanity the desire to have all experience as close to them as possible, so when trying to recapture the beauty of a mountain, we print a picture of one. This, however, is not the experience of a mountain, but merely a facsimile of it<sup>10</sup>.

Aura becomes a very interesting thing when coupled with the idea of forgery. Does a forged artwork have an aura? The best answer to that is usually not. When examining reproduction, there are three phases, manual, mechanical, and digital, and so too are there three kinds of forgery. The first is manual forgery, wherein a forger creates a duplicate artwork using the same methods that the original artist used, much like the age of manual reproduction. It is created in a particular place and time, within a particular context, but when it is merely the mimesis of the original artwork, it is nothing more than a high quality print. This means that it has no aura.

Next, there is the mechanical forgery, in which a machine is used to make copies of a work. To explain mechanical forgery, counterfeiting may provide a clearer example. Modern counterfeit money is created by manually creating a printing press capable of minting fraudulent bills. These bills are not real, even though they appear to be, because one of the requirements of legal tender (in the United States) is that they must be printed by a nation in a mint, according to the coinage act of 1792<sup>26</sup>. In the case of currency, the constitutive nature of aura has been made an explicit part of the definition of the object. Thus, mechanical forgeries too cannot be said to

have an aura, because they simply do not have the temporality that the original did. Finally, there is digital forgery, and by extension digital reproduction.

Digital reproduction, as discussed by Douglas Davis<sup>11</sup>, is characterized the lack of a clear distinction between original and copy due to the near-infinite number of copies that can be manufactured instantaneously. An example of this would be a packet of information on a peer-to-peer file-sharing service. With only a single source or ‘seeder’ a legion of potentially millions can access a perfect copy of the file. Further, each new person experiencing the packet of information is another potential seeder, making the transfer of information still faster.

This blurring of the real and the copy makes it so that a pirated copy of a film, for instance, is not a forgery, so much as it is an unauthorized copy. A true forgery would be something like a camera quality torrent (meaning someone sat in the theater with a camcorder rather than them intercepting/hacking into a computer system to retrieve a copy of the original movie file) that was reasonably indistinguishable from the original .mp4 or .mov file of the film, in the same way a forged painting would be so to its original.

Thus, nothing created digitally can have a Benjaminian aura. Digital reproduction is the most sophisticated of the three, and could be said to be the furthest from having an aura, so much so that it is impossible to know which of the myriad copies was at one point the original.

All of this is to illustrate another interpretation of forgery. Consider, for a moment, forgery as “stealing without stealing”. As it applies to art, forgery is the allowing of unauthorized experience or ownership of a work of art, thereby depriving the original owner of the art or experience the ability to charge whatever they see fit for the object.

Forgery acts as an intermediary here between art and commerce, another arm of what Benjaminian contemporary Theodor Adorno would call the Culture Industry<sup>12</sup>. Forgery is an

additional method of making art into a product. This is made all the easier if art never had any aura to begin with, thus the copy has no less value than the original. Thus the forger has become equal to the artist, at least from a commercial standpoint. Next, I will examine what happens when the forger forges not only the artwork, but the aura as well.

## **Section II- Fakery**

*“The author of the fake biography was also the author of a real biography about a faker.”<sup>13</sup>*

- Orson Welles, *F For Fake Trailer*

*F For Fake* is Orson Welles’ last major film. The project began when he was hired to edit a film about Elmyr de Hory, (referred to mononymously hereafter as Elmyr due to his litany of false surnames) one of the greatest art forgers of the twentieth century, retired to Ibiza in his twilight years. Elmyr originally turned to forgery when he was unable to make a living selling his own paintings.

The story however, massively grew in scope when the filmmakers discovered Clifford Irving, also in Ibiza, was working on a biography of Elmyr. Clifford Irving was a failed fiction writer who himself turned to forgery by writing a false authorized biography of aviator and tycoon Howard Hughes. Interspersed between these two stories are some of Orson Welles’ own tricks, such as his start as an actor in Ireland and his famous *War of the Worlds* radio hoax, and the film ends with a nearly twenty minute deception starring Orson Welles’ partner Oja Kodar and her grandfather’s supposed involvement in forging approximately two dozen Picasso paintings<sup>14</sup>.

This film raises a series of interesting questions about what aura means in the modern world, in the few places that it still exists. The first question is the one raised above, namely can a

forged work of art create its own aura? In the film, Elmyr doesn't only paint duplicates of works of art by famous painters, he creates his own.

Elmyr goes into great detail to describe the process by which he approximates the style and proclivities of certain artists in order to paint something that they might have painted during a less well-documented time in their lives.

The example he speaks on most is Modigliani. He describes changing his own style to be more hesitant to fabricate a new Modigliani painting. Do Elmyr's paintings have an aura? These paintings are surely not authentic, but they're not reproductions either. They were made in a specific context, but not the one that the painter or art dealer claims that they have. In essence, the aura is the only thing that has been stolen at all.

Elmyr and Irving both talk, or more accurately, brag, about the fact that they were never turned away by a gallery when they tried to sell one of Elmyr's fakes. Welles even comments that one unnamed European gallery in particular contains a majority of Elmyr forgeries. Things get even more complicated (and ironic) when one considers after the film, the notoriety of Elmyr made forgeries of Elmyr originals popular. To go all the way down this particular rabbit hole, in the film, Elmyr paints an original and signs it "Orson Welles". Here is where the nature of the aura gets drawn into question.

These cases are not the same as the Venus sculpture example. Rather than an ignorant version of aura, ascribed by a culture that does not understand the work, a false aura, indistinguishable from the real one, is being ascribed to it. If no one knows a painting is a fake, what difference does aura make?

Irving believes that it makes no difference at all. In the film, he says "it's not important whether [the art is] real or fake, but a good fake or a bad fake."<sup>15</sup> This brings into question the

very legitimacy of aura. Is aura intrinsic or is it conferred on an object? If the latter, then by whom? *F for Fake* attempts to answer both of those questions by coming down on the side of aura being merely something conferred by “the experts”.

Here is where Arthur Danto and Martin Heidegger enter the picture. In Danto’s view of art, in the 1960’s, Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Box* was the end of Western Art as we know it. From that point forward, according to Danto, all art became self-reflective, at least so some degree<sup>16</sup>. Forgery, on the other hand, has always been incredibly self-reflective, almost singularly so.

Forgery has been ahead of art, if one adopts a Dantoesque view, from the start. One of the other changes to art, as described by Danto is the change from *the* style to *a* style. Prior to the end of art, there was a predominant style of art that the masters of the day worked in, and art worked along a historical progression, but post-Warhol, each of these types of art had become merely one way to interpret the medium<sup>17</sup>. This is much like Elmyr’s forgery. One day, he would do a Picasso, the next a Modigliani, or a Matisse, etc. None of these styles were singularly art to Elmyr, they were not even singularly his art. They were merely what the art world wanted to buy from him.

The inclusion of the critic is also the inclusion of Heidegger. Heidegger’s conception of aesthetics is one that breaks down the subject-object dichotomy. Prior to Heidegger, in art, there was the observer, the human looking at the art, and the observed, the art that was being observed by the human. The affective relationship was unidirectional, as we humans were separated from the art. Heidegger proposes an ontology where humans and artwork are objects of the same kind and that each affects the other, the artwork affecting humans by enlightening them with a “lived experience” as he puts it<sup>18</sup>.

What this means for forgeries like Elmyr's is that their aura is not what makes them authentic works of art, it is the evocation of a lived experience in them that makes them real works of art or not. All of this is to say that aura simply cannot be the only criteria on which one judges the "realness of a work of art". Picasso himself once claimed that he "can paint a fake Picasso as well as anybody."<sup>19</sup> But if aura cannot determine the authenticity of art, what- if anything- can?

### **Section III- Modernity**

*"For the first time ever, images of art have become ephemeral, ubiquitous, insubstantial, available, valueless, free."<sup>19</sup>*  
- John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*

In a world where the authenticity of art seems nearly impossible to grasp, no artist exemplifies this confusion more than Drake. Born Audrey Graham, Drake rose to prominence after transitioning from the television series *Degrassi: The Next Generation* to rap music with the 2009 EP, *So Far Gone*. In the intervening years, Drake has become one of the most famous and profitable popstars in America.

In the middle of the year 2015, Drake and fellow rapper Meek Mill were involved in a 'rap feud' over Meek Mill's assertion that Drake used ghostwriters to help him write his songs. While Drake won the feud, these allegations were proven to be true, and remain a part of Drake's (and many other pop star's) album recording process<sup>20</sup>.

These questions of authenticity continued to follow Drake, when his 2015 single, "Hotline Bling" was shown to be "essentially a reworking of D.R.A.M.'s 'Cha Cha', which is in turn a reworking of Timmy Thomas' '70s hit 'Why Can't We Live Together'<sup>21</sup>". To complicate authorship even further, later that year, Dallas artist Erykah Badu released "Cell U Lar Device,"

yet another reworking of this material featuring rapper ItsRoutine doing an impression of Drake so convincing that many thought that it was Graham himself.

Other examples include the line between media hoaxes and performance art. Welles' *War of the Worlds* broadcast was an adaptation of an H.G. Wells novel, that when read over the radio, caused some degree of panic, but in the aftermath was considered one of the most significant radio broadcasts of all time, and in 2002 was inducted into the National Recording Registry in the Library of Congress<sup>22</sup>. Or more recently, indie band YACHT faked not only a sex tape, but the release of said sex tape, for sale, online. They, by contrast, have been publically condemned and forced to issue not one, but two apologies<sup>23</sup>. What makes one performance art and the other a cheap ploy to boost album sales? The only difference is public response, and conference of authenticity by experts.

We have long since passed the Benjaminian standard for authentic art, but in its place, we have installed a trust in experts, who as Irving, Elmyr, and YACHT have all proven are not particularly difficult to fool.

I titled this paper with a paraphrase of a Rudyard Kipling quote from *The Barrack-Room Ballads and Other Verses*, "And the first rude sketch that the world has seen was joy to his mighty heart/ Till the Devil whispered behind the leaves, 'It's pretty, but is it art?'"<sup>24</sup> Many of the questions of aesthetics ponder what exactly qualifies as art, but questions of authenticity are equally important and equally elusive.

It appears as if authenticity is something that changes historically. Aura seemed to be a fine standard when artwork was something that was made one at a time, but judging authenticity on aura would be like saying that books contained less knowledge because they were manufactured on a printing press rather than written by hand.

Thus, I return to my definition of forgery as “stealing without stealing,” a pirated film, an unchecked sample, neither of these are taken from the artist, as they still literally have them, but what is being taken is a commercial right to exclusive ownership. Authenticity has always been tied up in ownership. In the era of manual reproduction, and even mechanical reproduction, this was physical ownership, but in the era of digital reproduction, no one owns anything. Instead, rights of ownership are conferred to individuals and corporations by governments, and this paradigm informs the way that authenticity is determined.

The final thing I will discuss in this paper is the futility of determining authenticity. It may become helpful to conceptualize authenticity on two axes: those of intention and those of perception. I have created these axes in order to imitate the relationship of the work of art to the humans that it has a relationship with. It's only relationships to humans (not as a mere thing) are those that worked on it and those that experience it, so these are the only two criteria on which authenticity can be judged, since there is no objective quality of the object that can do that determination.

The intentionality axis refers to if the artist knowingly intended to copy some part or whole of another artist in their work or to deceive the audience into believing some false portion of the piece is true. The perception axis will (have to) be some kind of expert consensus on whether the work of art is both original if not attempting to depict true events and real if it is.

One can already see the problems that arise in this conception. Picasso intended to steal from other artists, but he is considered one of the most original artists of all time. Elmyr intended to steal from artists as well (including Picasso) but he is one of the most infamous forgers of all time, but because no one knows which of his paintings are where (besides maybe Elmyr

himself), he and Picasso would be in the same category. *F for Fake* and *War of the Worlds* too would suffer similarly confusing fates.

What I am left with at the end of this puzzling search is that authenticity must be regarded in the same manner that Danto regards artwork as a whole. One can only comment on the affinities of one artwork to another<sup>25</sup>. Trying to claim that one artwork is authentic while another isn't seems to be a futile exercise, as in many cases, it is impossible to tell if your artwork is real such as a real Picasso, fake imitating the real thing such as an Elmyr, or a real thing imitating a fake thing, like one of Picassos' fake Picassos. All of that is to say nothing of the very blurry line between influence and forgery. So when considering Jobs, as I did at the beginning of this essay, I believe it best to leave authenticity as a construction, manifested in our evolving rights of ownership, and interpreted seemingly arbitrarily through various courts of both law and opinion.

Bibliography

1. CDernbach. "Steve Jobs: Good Artists Copy Great Artists Steal." YouTube. YouTube, 2008. Web. 13 May 2016.
2. *Ibid.*
3. "Forgery." Google. N.p., n.d. Web. 13 May 2016.
4. "The Definition of Theft." Dictionary.com. N.p., n.d. Web. 13 May 2016.
5. Benjamin, Walter, and J. A. Underwood. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. London: Penguin, 2008. Print.
6. *Ibid*, p. 4.
7. *Ibid*, p. 1.
8. *Ibid*, p. 5.
9. *Ibid*, p. 4.
10. *Ibid*, p. 5.
11. Davis, Douglas. "The Work of Art in the Age of Digital Reproduction." *Leonardo* 8.5 (1995): 381-86. JSTOR. Web. 13 May 2016.
12. Adorno, Theodor W., and J. M. Bernstein. *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*. London: Routledge, 2001. Print.
13. Orson Welles' F for Fake Trailer. Saci, 1975. DVD.
14. Orson Welles' F for Fake. Saci, 1975. DVD.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Danto, Arthur C. *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-historical Perspective*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1992. Print.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Thomson, Iain. "Heidegger's Aesthetics." Stanford University. Stanford University, 2010. Web. 13 May 2016
19. *Ways of Seeing*. British Broadcasting Corp., 1972. DVD.
20. "Meek Mill vs. Drake: A Full Timeline of the Rap Beef & Who Weighed In." *Billboard*. N.p., n.d. Web. 13 May 2016.
21. Staff, Pitchfork. "The 100 Best Tracks of 2015." - Page 10. N.p., n.d. Web. 13 May 2016.
22. "Complete National Recording Registry Listing - National Recording Preservation Board." *The Library of Congress*. N.p., n.d. Web. 13 May 2016.
23. Phillips, Amy. "YACHT Apologize for Sex Tape Hoax." *Pitchfork*. N.p., n.d. Web. 13 May 2016.
24. Kipling, Rudyard. *Barrack Room Ballads*. London: n.p., 1894. Print.
25. Danto, Arthur C. *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-historical Perspective*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1992. Print.
26. Roffer, Michael H. *The Law Book: From Hammurabi to the International Criminal Court, 250 Milestones in the History of Law*. N.p.: n.p., n.d. Print.

