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# THE PLAGUE OF AUTHENTICITY

On the notion of authenticity  
and whether it is worth pursuing.

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Our modern understanding of the concept of authenticity emerged as a result of cultural and social changes that took place back in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The widespread popularity of portraits and biographies during that period was a consequence of the emergence of a new ideal of the individual and a different way of perceiving the individual's place in society. Society itself began to be seen merely as a result of social contract and slowly lost its organic unity, while the value of the individual was no longer determined by their social role, achievements, or knowledge, but by their individual character.

These changes led to a deepening disconnect between the public persona and the private self. The tension between these aspects of a person's identity was universally seen in a negative light, as a deceitful duplicity. *Authenticity*, which is often perceived as the opposite of this duplicity, came to be seen as not only positive but also as highly desirable – in stark contrast to hypocrisy and conventionality. In reality, however, the opposite is the case: the contemporary cult of authenticity actually promotes hypocrisy and conventionality.

## Shades of Authenticity

Starting in the seventeenth century, the concept of authenticity colonized Western culture and it has gradually acquired many closely related senses. We can talk about authentic gestures, for instance, and when we call a person authentic, we mean that their

actions and statements express their character, rather than conceal it.

Objects can also be authentic. If we say “this is an authentic Biedermeier,” we mean not only that this particular sofa resembles a dachshund, but that it was actually made between the end of the Napoleonic wars and the revolutions of 1848. Money is authentic only if it was produced in an official mint, so even a perfect counterfeit will still be false currency in light of its origins.

One significant kind of object which we expect to exhibit authenticity is an artwork – and here we often find a combination of the aforementioned meanings of the concept. We expect, for instance, works of art to actually be the creation of a specific artist (like money being produced in a mint). But of course not only that. Authenticity in this sense is naturally connected with the period of creation, as well as to the materials and techniques used. Moreover, we expect a work of art to express some inner state of the artist: to be authentic in the sense of revealing the individual character of its creator. Art, on this understanding, is a gesture that conveys or synthesizes some experience, as beheld in the “eyes of the artist's soul.” Its authenticity is thus related to the authenticity of the experiences it can give us, as the audience.

The “death of the author,” as proclaimed by the French philosopher Roland Barthes (in other words, the liberation of the reception of a work of art from the artist's intentions), does not undermine this aspect of the authenticity of art. On the contrary, it actually intensifies it, shifting the expectation of authenticity onto ourselves as recipients: in the wake of the “death of the author,” what our aesthetic experience reveals is our own individuality and sensitivity, rather than the character of the artist or the quality of his or her experience as expressed in the work. The great artist therefore is replaced by the “great interpreter,” who satisfies the need for



Henricus Antonius  
van Meegeren,  
*Supper at Emmaus*

HAN VAN MEEGEREN, PUBLIC DOMAIN, VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

their own authenticity through the conspicuous consumption of artistic objects.

The example of art shows that authenticity is closely linked with originality: authenticity is a valuable quality to the extent that it testifies to originality – ideally, uniqueness. When the artist’s originality ceases to be a point of reference, what remains is our own originality. This, in turn, requires us to find original means of expression, which, as mere passive recipients, we do not possess. The pursuit of the recipient’s own originality thus precipitates a rapid inflation of the means to express it: too many people admire Jackson Pollock, for instance, for us to be able to stand out as a result of taking an interest in his work. This forces the “great interpreter” to constantly chase new experiences that will allow them to be “true to themselves.”

## Inauthenticity

This interdependency of authenticity and originality points us towards the source of the modern-day bankruptcy of both concepts. This source becomes evident once we consider what the lack of authenticity

means in art, and how it is usually judged. Broadly, we can distinguish three types of artistic inauthenticity: copying, forgery, and plagiarism. Copies as a form of art have largely gone out of fashion and have been replaced by mechanical reproductions. A copy is inauthentic in a relatively unproblematic way as it does not deceive us – it does not pretend to be the original. We may decide to have a copy because we know the original is unattainable for us.

Forgery is different. It is inauthenticity *par excellence* – it is an attempt to deceive, presenting a copy as if it were the original. This phenomenon, once prevalent in the art world, can nowadays often be seen in caricature in the form of chintzy tote-bags bearing the logos of famous high-end brands as well as prolific knockoffs of pop mass-culture tropes.

However, forgery can also consist in imitating someone’s style, mimicking a recognized master. Posing as a well-known artist is an interesting case of inauthenticity, as it is not immediately obvious in what sense the audience is being deceived. We are, of course, deceived with regard to the authorship, but what exactly is the forger imitating? After all, he or she

is not literally pretending to be the author they imitate – they don't dress up to come off in their likeness, etc. To understand forgery it is instructive to consider the example of Han van Meegeren, a modern-day Dutch forger who gained fame by imitating Vermeer. He managed to fool the greatest authorities on Dutch Golden Age painting, and his works, especially "The Supper at Emmaus," still stir controversy.

One could say that what is being imitated here is technique (mastery of the means of expression made available by a given medium) and style (the original use of these means). However, in a trivial sense, technique cannot be imitated, just as one cannot imitate riding a bike without actually doing it. In an important sense, the same is true of style. A perfect imitation of someone else's style is as paradoxical an idea as a perfect imitation of someone else's cycling style – it simply cannot be achieved without actually adopting that style, as it were, genuinely.

However, one could say that technique and style are in an important sense merely vehicles here, and that what van Meegeren had imitated was Vermeer's

enormous popularity van Meegeren gained after his trial, but also by the continued posthumous interest in exhibitions of his forged canvases.

Apart from forgery, however, there is also plagiarism, which is a form of inauthenticity most humiliating to those found guilty of it. Plagiarism is the appropriation of someone else's achievements. While an impressive forgery can even bring the forger fame, plagiarism is inevitably associated with disgrace. This is because plagiarism is evidence not only of insincerity but also – and more importantly – of a deeper dearth of creative potential.

Original gestures are unrepeatable: they become clichés with the very first repetition. The problem is that every gesture is original in the straightforward sense: it has simply never happened before and will not repeat. Very rarely, however, does a gesture reveal to us the depth of human experience and emotion as, for example, the gesture captured by Vermeer in "Woman in Blue Reading a Letter."

## Global Authenticity

It is precisely the fear of being stigmatized as lacking originality that has created most of the cultural junk heap that is called contemporary art. It is no coincidence that the Spring of Nations was also the spring of kitsch. Nothing is more derivative and doomed to commodification than the pursuit of self-expression – invariably fueled by merchandising campaigns of international corporations. Global capitalism, however, is not the root cause, but the result of individualism. In the first half of the 20th century, it became the expectation for a great artist not only to create great works but also to bring forth a new, unique style that defined a new trend in art history – and which immediately become part of history and not a live option for other artists to pursue.

These one-time trends were all still-births, because even the slightest attempt at borrowing from them or even referencing would go against the ubiquitous demand for uniqueness, and therefore authenticity. And so – in a sense paradoxically, but in another sense as an obvious consequence – in the latter half of the twentieth century it was precisely artistic "quotations" or conscious clichés that became the last resort in the pursuit of authenticity. When creating anew inevitably ceased to be anything original, only an ironic and self-conscious quotation remained as a possible expression of one's originality.

But is this not the world we live in? Have not the structures of local communities and customs, as well as the religious practices uniting them into one culture, succumbed to an irreversible erosion? Are not the conventions that ensured the very possibility of dialogue within culture, and thus its evolution, now a thing of the past? If so, then perhaps the experiences

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sensitivity – his own individual way of perceiving and representing human experience. Yet even in this case, it seems that imitation is impossible without a profound understanding of the imitated author's sensitivity, and the ability to "step into" that sensitivity to such an extent so as to be able to convincingly apply it to a subject matter never attended to by the original artist. Even after van Meegeren had confessed to his forgery, the supposed recognition of Vermeer's sensitivity made some experts defend the authenticity of his canvases in court.

Van Meegeren does not imitate either the style or sensitivity of Vermeer with the intent that they be attributed to him, on the contrary: his forgery consists in presenting Vermeer as a different artist than the one we know. The deception lies in the fact that it misrepresents what Vermeer tells us. Despite the deception, the convincing achievement of this goal remains impressive. It demonstrates an authentic mastery of the original artist's skills and authentic assimilation of his sensitivity. This is attested to not only by the



JOHANNES VERMEER, PUBLIC DOMAIN, VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Johannes Vermeer,  
*Woman in Blue Reading  
a Letter*

of individuals no longer have anything fundamentally in common, and – consequently – there can be no returning to the idea of a “style of the time” and so, perhaps, the only authentic means of expression now available to us are various forms of pastiche?

It seems to me that things are not so far gone. The ideal of authenticity is not something that has become unattainable due to our social, political, and historical circumstances. Rather, it is a contemporary fiction that has never been a within reach. A little known but vivid example of this is Johann Jakob Froberger, a fifteenth-century German composer, born two years before the outbreak of the Thirty Years’ War. His life was marked by hunger, brutality, and death, including the death of his wife and daughter, who contracted the plague. Yet despite all this, Froberger’s works do not

bear the mark of his individual suffering. Froberger had the courage not to fixate on himself, but to instead attend to what he believed to transcend individual experience and so to be of universal, not merely individual importance.

Froberger is now almost forgotten. Authenticity gives the illusion of the kind of fame that Herostratus attained. But there was only one Herostratus, and his selfish act leaves no room for epigones, let alone tradition. It is a more self-conscious and ultimately more courageous attitude to run the risk of obscurity, which is inherently bound up with belonging to a tradition and working within a convention. Few have heard of Froberger, because it is hard to call him authentic, but without him, we would not have Bach, Händel, or Pachelbel. ■

Further reading:

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