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The Ontology of Art

What Can We Learn from Borges's "Menard"?

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THE QUESTION I WANT TO ANALYZE IN THIS PAPER CAN BE SUMMARIZED AS follows: What is the nature of works of art? This question can be divided into two separate parts: (1) What differential features separate objects that are works of art from other objects that we usually do not consider as such? (2) To what ontological category do works of art belong? Recent discussions around this second topic are usually framed by the more traditional ontological discussion about universals. Thus, to answer the second question, philosophers generally use the distinction between universal and particular or between type and token.¹ But nobody would say that every universal (if she is universalist) or every particular (if particularist) is a work of art, because works of art should have "something more." But what is this "something more?" In this paper I will try to answer these questions inspired by the ideas J. L. Borges developed in the short story, "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote."

Works of art are usually considered as particulars because many of them are physical objects, entities that occupy in an exclusive and proprietary way

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a portion of space-time, and that are unrepeatable.² This is paradigmatically the case of sculptures and paintings. A universal, on the contrary, is an abstract entity that can occupy simultaneously or successively different portions of space-time, in a nonexclusive way; that is, the same universal can be completely present in more than one place at the same time or at different times. A unique portion of space-time can instantiate indefinitely many different universals (although not incompatible, impossible ones). Literary works of art are the paradigmatic case here: the same literary work can be, and usually is, instantiated in many different objects, such as the multiple copies of the same book like those of *Ficciones*, for example.

The traditional discussions relating to universals include different positions. Some people assume the distinction in the very same way in which I presented it. They are usually called realists because they assume the existence of both separate and different categories; most often they assume that universals are something beyond the mere particulars. Realists can claim that universals exist independently of particulars, in which case they are usually called Platonists. Or they can hold that universals exist only as far as they are instantiated by one or another particular; that is, they exist *in re* (and not *ante rem*). But not everybody agrees with realists. In fact there are two other main answers to the problem of universals: the nominalist and the conceptualist. According to nominalism only particulars exist, and universals are just *flatus vocis*, names, labels, used to refer to those very particulars, maybe because they resemble each other, or because they belong to the same class. According to conceptualists, universals exist only in our heads; all there is in the world are particulars that we categorize under different ideas or concepts, which do not correspond to any nonmental entity.

I do not want to defend a particular view about the nature of universals in this paper. I confess my sympathy with nominalism, and my proposal at the end of the paper—that I call “extreme particularism”—is perfectly compatible with it. However, I will assume in the first part of my paper, for the sake of the argument, that we can make a true distinction between universals (*in re* or *ante rem*) and particulars. Recent discussions about the ontology of works of art have usually been settled in the following way: either works

of art are identified with particulars or with abstract universals. It is also acknowledged that the answer could vary from one kind of work of art to another, because it might be held that the various manifestations of art cannot be included within a single ontological category (although some think they can be). The heterogeneity of the different varieties of art indicates that it is difficult to include them all in a single category: consider the obvious metaphysical differences between paintings, sculptures, dance, music, theater, cinema, literature, and so on. Those people who defend the idea that all works of art can be considered as belonging to a single ontological category are called monists; those who accept that some of them (paintings, sculptures, and architectural works) are particulars, but others (music and literature) are universals because they can be multiply instantiated, are called dualists (for example, Wollheim, according to Pouivet 1996, ch. 5, § 3).

In this paper I want to do two things. In the first place, I want to defend a negative thesis. I want to cast doubt on the idea that we should deal with the question of the ontology of works of art by endorsing the distinction between particulars and universals. The strategy I will adopt is the following: I will discuss the idea of identifying musical and literary works of art with the category of the universal, and the idea that paintings should be identified as particulars. The idea behind my strategy is that these identifications are the less controversial ones; hence if even these *prima facie* clear cases can be put into doubt, it might be evidence that the whole idea of dealing with the issue of the ontology of works of art in terms of the distinction between particulars and universals is wrong-headed. In the second place, I will explore the ideas suggested by Borges's "Pierre Menard, author of the Quixote." From this I will develop some of the constitutive elements of a work of art that could not be included within the strict ontological framework provided by the discussion presented above. These considerations will lead to an answer to the second question I posed in the beginning of the paper: What is the "something more" that we should find in a given entity for it to be considered as a work of art? These considerations will not constitute a definitive answer to my questions, but at least we will become conscious of the difficulties we have to face in solving them.

1. THE CASE OF PICTORIAL ART

Paintings seem to be without any doubt particular physical objects. They have a history, an artist painted them during a certain period of time, and we can trace the vicissitudes of the physical object through its history. We can consider them as three-dimensional objects that endure across the dimension of time, and that can be altered by its passing, which means that they sometimes have to be restored. Moreover, any other physical object, no matter how extraordinarily similar to it—even molecule-by-molecule identical to the painting, created, for example, by a wonderful molecule duplicating machine from the future—is not *that very work of art*, because it was not painted by that very famous artist, and it does not have the same causal history, and so on. Every copy made by a forger, no matter how perfect it is, it is not *that very work of art*, it is merely a copy, without any aesthetic value (or at least without the same aesthetic value as the original). Not even two works exactly alike from the physical point of view, painted by the same artist, one of them immediately after the other, have the same aesthetic value: the first one is a new creation but the second one is something else.

There are at least three good arguments against the idea that all the aesthetic objects³ that could be included as pictorial objects should be considered as concrete particulars. First, there are aesthetic objects that in a way have a life beyond the physical object—the painting—where they were embodied for the first time. That is the case, in my view, of the *Mona Lisa*. It is true that there is a concrete physical object, the painting painted by Leonardo Da Vinci, whose history can be traced from the sixteenth century, and is to be found in the Louvre. But it is also a fact that there are many other paintings—many of them simply copies, others that are variations of Leonardo's painting, painted at almost the same time or later—and all of them are (or constitute) an aesthetic entity that we can call the *Mona Lisa*. If there is a sense in which we can think there is an aesthetic entity called the *Mona Lisa*, which is not identical with the Leonardo's painting, then I have gone some way toward proving my point; there is at least one pictorial aesthetic entity that is not a concrete particular. In a similar vein, we can think about all the sketches made by Picasso while preparing to paint *Guernica*, to

give just one example. Even if it is true that every one of them are different works (that can be sold independently), there is a sense in which all of them constitute *Guernica*. But it is also true that *Guernica* is not only the sum of all these physical parts, which are the preliminary studies for the main painting.

Second, the idea that the *Mona Lisa* is a concrete physical object, which has a history that we know (or that we possibly could know), presupposes a certain answer to the metaphysical problem of identity through time. It presupposes that physical objects are three-dimensional entities that endure through time. If, on the contrary, this general metaphysical problem is faced in the way David Lewis faces it, holding that what we call a physical object is nothing more than a set of successive four-dimensional objects related by specific factors such as continuity, resemblance, and causality—in other words, a physical object perdures but does not endure—then there is an important metaphysical sense in which the four-dimensional object *Mona Lisa* that is today in the Louvre is not the same four-dimensional object that Leonardo painted at the beginning of the sixteenth century. And within the nominalist framework where a type is understood as a set of cases, the *Mona Lisa* painted by Leonardo turns out to be a set of four-dimensional particulars, and hence it is a type too.⁴ This shows that the identification of paintings with concrete physical objects is not as easy as it seems, since it presupposes a questionable metaphysical framework.

The next argument, the third one, claims that some works of art cannot be understood either as belonging to the category of the particular or as belonging to the category of the universal. Thus, even if the *Mona Lisa* or *Guernica* were thought of as concrete particulars, there are other kinds of pictorial works of art to which this ontological category cannot be applied. In fact, I think that in this respect we can draw a continuous line from paintings, where the identification as a particular is more obvious, to engravings, where the question of which of the copies of a given engraving is *the* work of art is more complex, to the extreme case of digital art, where the question is even more difficult if not impossible to answer. In the case of engravings, there are good reasons to hold that every copy of the engraving is a different work of art (they are sold independently, for example), but there are also good reasons to consider all the copies as cases of the very same work of art.

In the case of digital art the question is even more difficult to answer, because the question “Where is it?” is simply impossible to answer. And, if there is no way to locate an object in the space-time, in what sense can we hold that it is a physical object, a concrete particular? Let us consider the extreme case of a work wholly made in a computer; where is the work? Which file is the work? Is it the first file located in the first computer where the artist made his work? (Assuming that the work was wholly made in a single computer, and was not transferred from a computer to another during the creative process.) Or is it the case that each copied file is a work in the very same ontological sense? Note that we speak about copies and originals, but in this case there are only “copies”! Maybe we could argue that the work of art should be printed, and only then when the work is materialized on the printed surface is there a true work of art. But there are also websites, virtual art galleries, where there might be works that have never been, and probably never will be, materialized (and if I printed them at home, I cannot claim that I am the only possessor of *the* work of art). Why shouldn’t we consider these exclusively virtual things as genuine works of art? The distinction between universal and particular seems to be inapplicable to this specific case.

2. THE CASE OF MUSIC

Music is the least controversial case in which the work of art is usually considered as an abstract universal that can be instantiated in different particulars. It seems *prima facie* plausible to hold that the different executions of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony are just that, different performances or exemplifications of *the same work of art*. The performances have space-time properties that the Fifth Symphony does not have (such as the place of the performance or different instruments used from one performance to another), but the Fifth Symphony as such has none of these properties. As such, music is seen by many as an abstract universal beyond space-time (see Pouivet 1999, ch. 2). However, I claim that this idea is open to question. The argument I propose depends upon a simple fact: each execution of a given piece of music could possess different *aesthetic* properties. Let us think about performances of the same musical piece with indigenous instruments or

with original instruments or with contemporary instruments. If we accept the thesis that different executions of a given musical piece could differ in their aesthetic properties, and if we accept Leibniz's principle of the "indiscernibility of identicals"—if two entities differ in their aesthetic properties, then they should not be considered to be the same aesthetic entity—then we are led to accept the thesis that each execution itself is a different work of art. Hence, it seems that there are particular musical aesthetic entities after all in the instance of each specific musical execution.⁵

Again, my point is modest, I do not want to hold that all the different performances of the Fifth Symphony do not have something in common (maybe only a family resemblance, but not an abstract universal), I only want to draw attention to the fact that all the particular musical performances are genuine aesthetic entities in their own right. I think that the same considerations can be made *mutatis mutandis* about dance and theatre, and this is even clearer if we think about cinema and the different "remakes" of a given story. Moreover, my point could be strengthened if we consider the case of the different versions of *Romeo and Juliet* in cinema, music, dance, theatre, and other performance media.

3. THE CASE OF LITERATURE

Literature is another paradigmatic case of works of art considered as universals. The reason is quite obvious: each particular book, each printed instance of *Ficciones*, for example, is another example identical in all the details to any other copy of the same edition of the same book (leaving aside the problem of translation, which I will come back to in the next section). In this sense, the case of literature seems an even clearer example of an abstract universal instantiated in many different instances. It seems reasonable to assume that whatever *Ficciones* is, it transcends each one of the particular books that we can hold in our hands (though maybe not all of them, if the Aristotelian realist about universals is right). The case of literature is more extreme than music, because (leaving aside the problem of translation again) the difference between copies in this case is obviously only a matter of spatio-temporal differences, and nothing else; there seem to be no relevant differences

between the different instantiations of a given book, besides those physical differences in the quality of the paper used, the typography, the colors, the included illustrations, and so on, that are clearly irrelevant for its evaluation in literary terms. (This is not quite right. In the case of poetry, the graphic disposition of the words on the page is sometimes a constitutive part of the work itself—Oliverio Girondo’s *Espantapajaros*, for example. As far as I know, nobody has claimed that the typography used or the color of the paper or the color of the ink might be relevant, but we never know.)

Let us now examine the case of Borges’s “Menard.” In this text Borges imagines a character, the writer Pierre Menard, whose work divides into two parts. On the one hand, there is the “visible” work, the one that Borges enumerates in the text: sonnets, monographs, articles, translations, prefaces, verses. But on the other hand, there is a work that Borges describes as “the subterranean, the interminably heroic, the peerless . . . the unfinished. This work, perhaps the most significant of our time, consists of the ninth and thirty-eighth chapters of the first part of *Don Quixote* and a fragment of chapter twenty-two” (1974, 446).⁶ Why should we consider those fragments of a book written four hundred years ago to be the “invisible” work of Menard? Maybe because, knowing Menard’s intention while writing these pages, it is possible to consider them as a part of his work. In Borges’s words, this was Menard’s intention:

He did not want to compose another Quixote—which is easy—but *the Quixote itself*. Needless to say, he never contemplated a mechanical transcription of the original; he did not propose to copy it. His admirable intention was to produce a few pages which would coincide—word for word and line for line—with those of Miguel de Cervantes. (Borges 1974, 446)⁷

However, according to Borges, the outcome of Menard’s work was a new work of art that was created by Menard and was not identical to the work written by Cervantes. Borges holds that “Cervantes’s text and Menard’s are verbally identical, *but the second is almost infinitely richer*” (Borges 1974, 449, my italics).⁸ Let us take for granted that Menard’s purpose is possible.⁹ What this Borgean thought experiment shows us is that literary works of

art cannot be considered as a universal, or a type. There is no doubt that, according to the first quotation from Borges, the physical object made by Menard was of the same physical type as the physical object produced by Cervantes. The proof is simple: if someone gave us two different copies of the relevant chapters of *Don Quixote* without telling us if they were written by Menard or by Cervantes, we would not be able to distinguish one from the other. The reason is simple: they are both instances of the very same physical type, although not of the same aesthetic type, if Borges is right. Once again, there is something in the aesthetic type that transcends the physical type. Here is a possible conjecture: The causal chains involved in the creation of the first copy of the literary work and the following causal chains involved in the process of printing the work are relevant to determining the identity of the work of art. The concrete particular objects, Cervantes's or Menard's manuscript, and their respective physical histories are also relevant to determining the identity of a work of art. If this is so, then neither the category of the universal nor that of the particular seems to fit the case of literature, for the reasons given at the beginning of this paragraph.

With this argument I close the first part of the paper; if my examples have been convincing, the ontology of art cannot be conceptualized using the universal/particular distinction. Now, let us see what else can we learn from Borges's "Menard" for this topic.

4. WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM "MENARD"

In the case of the ontology of literary works of art, the distinction between text and work is crucial. The work is whatever all the translations of *Orlando* have in common. But the text *Orlando* written by Virginia Woolf is not the same text as the *Orlando* in the beautiful translation by Borges, because a text is a physical type, a grouping of entities constituted by some specific signs, ordered in a specific way, that were written on paper for the first time with a given hand, in a given moment, and with a specific purpose. But, certainly, they are the same literary work: the work created by Virginia Woolf. In the fourth chapter of *This Craft of Verse*, Borges makes a very interesting series of remarks about the translation of literary works of art. (He is really

talking about poetry, but it seems to me that many things he says can be extended to all literary works.) In particular I am interested in the emphasis he places on the sound quality of words and in the problem of translating words that sound very different and hence produce different effects in the reader. The idea is that the specific set of words that the author chooses to transmit a given thought is also a constitutive part of the literary work of art; hence, the original text's words with their specific sounds and their specific semantic fields can differ from the sounds and semantic fields associated with the words used in the translation.

It would seem to be possible to use this distinction between work and text to understand the case of Menard's *Quixote*. With this distinction at hand we have the possibility of separating the physical kind from the aesthetic kind: if we have many different copies of *Orlando*, some of them in English and some in Spanish, then we can say that they are all cases of the same aesthetic type but not of the same physical type, because they are all cases of the same work of art but of different texts. In this case we have two texts but only one work.

But Menard's case is the exact opposite: one text and two works. This case is similar to the thought experiment presented by Danto in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (1981, ch. 1). He proposes that we imagine an art gallery where we can find six red monochromes, painted with the very same hue of acrylic paint over the same material (wood), and exactly the same form and size (i.e., six physical objects indiscernible with respect to their intrinsic physical properties). But all of them were painted by different artists, with different purposes, and they have different titles: the first one is called "The Israelites Crossing the Red Sea," the second "Kierkegaard's Mood," the third "Red Square," the fourth "Red tablecloth," the fifth "Nirvana," and the sixth "Without Title." (The details of the names and lives of the artists as well as their intentions are irrelevant to my point here.) In fact, to be closer to the case of Menard, they should be two physically indistinguishable monochromes, painted three centuries apart, which is quite difficult given the fact that painting techniques and materials have changed between the sixteenth century and now, and that the passage of time would probably alter the old painting, so probably they will not be perceptually indiscernible. And they both should have the same title, and the second one should be painted

with the intention of recreating the original one. But beyond these “little” details, there is a family air between them: these are physically indiscernible objects that constitute different works of art.

Let us come back to the case of literature and “Menard.” Let us suppose, for the sake of the argument, that Menard’s intention is possible. Let us consider the differences between Menard’s work and Cervantes’s work, according to the suggestions made by Borges.

In the first place, both works were written by different authors, the first by Cervantes, and the second by Menard. This fact has a trivial consequence in that both physical objects have different physical histories, and there also exist multiple copies of each of them. (Or at least of one of them; Borges does not say that Menard’s *Quixote* was ever published, but it could have been.) Two different causal histories involve each work. This fact also has an additional and more interesting consequence; as Borges mentions, because they were written by different authors at different moments in history, they are therefore subject to divergent interpretations. (For example: Cervantes, unlike Menard, was not a surrealist; or Menard, unlike Cervantes, read William James, and what he says could be interpreted as an allusion to his work.) In Borges’s words, “There are differences because *the same words* said by Cervantes or by someone contemporary to W. James *mean different things*” (Borges 1974, 449, my italics).¹⁰

In the second place, given the fact that both authors lived in different eras, their works occupy different places in the history of literature. Indeed, part of Menard’s intention was to rewrite *Don Quixote*, something that Cervantes could never have attempted. Thus, in a work of art we can look for allusions to older works, but obviously not to future works. Hence the position of the work in the history of literature is part of its identity. Danto holds something similar while treating another example that also involves two physically indiscernible objects (in this case, according to Danto, one of them is a work of art, the other is not). The example is about two blue ties with no discernible differences, one of them painted by Picasso, the other one by a school child. In this case, as Danto has it, “Picasso’s smooth paint, then, may be reckoned part of the content of the work in roughly the same way in which the *absence* of Giottesque perspective must be considered a positive part of

the Strozzi altarpiece, if Millard Meiss is right about the deliberate archaism of that work” (Danto 1981, 40). The identity of the author, the moment of the creation of art, and the knowledge of art and its history that he possesses are constitutive parts of the content of a given work (literary or pictorial or, I think, any work of art at all).

On the other hand, when two works, like Cervantes’s and Menard’s, are written at different moments of history, given the constant flux and change of language, the same words produce differences in their style. Borges says, “The contrast in style is also vivid. The archaic style of Menard—quite foreign, after all—suffers from a certain affectation. Not so that of his forerunner, who handles with ease the current Spanish of his time” (Borges 1974, 449).” The differences in style can also be noted when comparing a work with the other works of the same author.

Besides the differences mentioned in style and content, both works would be read differently by both the general public and the critics. Moreover, the very fact of whether or not a given object is to be considered as a work of art is something that has changed during the history of humankind. Maybe this is why Borges said that Menard’s work is “more subtle” and “almost infinitely richer” (1974, 448, 449).

5. CONJECTURAL CONCLUSION

The most interesting conclusion we could draw from Borges’s short story is the emphasis in the extreme particularism of works of art. Knowledge, commonsensical or scientific, and philosophy are both universal and can be expressed linguistically. Art is particular and unrepeatable by nature, as is life. There is nothing universal in art. We listen to the same CD (the same physical object) at different moments of our lives, and the effects it produces in us, even the aesthetic experience or it, are very different, probably because of the different things we lived and learned between listenings. And the same happens when we read a book at two different times of our lives, or see a film or a painting or a sculpture. Literature is especially tricky because it also has a linguistic vehicle. But we must not be misled by this fact: in the case of literature, the vehicle *is* the work of art. Hence, the difficulties for

translation, and the emphasis Borges places on the specific sounds and on Menard's material process of writing.

I would venture that the diversity of appreciations of the same physical object, because of the presence of different people or the same person in different moments of her life, occurs because aesthetic appreciation is essentially a matter of interpretation, and the interpretations we make about events or objects in our surroundings are dependent upon our previous experiences and our knowledge. We do not value in the same way a poem whose author is unknown to us, as the very same poem after we learn the details of the author's life that led him to embody his own life experience in the way he did in the poem being read. In the same way, if we know the manuscript in front of us was written by Menard instead of Cervantes, different interpretations occur to us. And the same phenomenon occurs with a blue tie painted by a child or Picasso. We do not have to look for the features that led us to value them as an aesthetic object in the objects or events themselves, nor in their intrinsic properties. The aesthetic evaluation is in the eye of the interpreter. And the eye of the interpreter is not limited to taking into account only the intrinsic features of the object, and usually does not do that; knowing the author of the piece and his life, its title, and other relational properties of the object are essential for its aesthetic appreciation.



NOTES

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1. We can distinguish these two pairs of concepts—most notably, the first one is absolute, the second one relative—but I will use them indistinctly.
2. Some people, for example Davidson (1980a; 1980b), consider events as another basic kind of concrete particular. I will not consider events in this paper, because nobody, as far as I know, proposed this special ontological category to deal with the problem of the ontology of art. But maybe it is not a bad idea to include this category: in fact music and

dance should be considered as particular events, and not particular objects, to include the temporal dimension that is central to them.

3. An “aesthetic object” is not identical to a “work of art.” An aesthetic object is everything that can be aesthetically valuable. Works of art are aesthetic objects, but for example, some natural landscapes are too, and in my opinion they should not be considered works of art.
4. Here I follow Zemach, as discussed by Puvovet (1996, ch. 5, § 4).
5. Note the fundamental differences between this case and the paradigmatic case for the universal/particular relation, in which we can distinguish between an abstract number and the different instantiations of that number. These physical instantiations of number can differ dramatically with quite different physical properties: numerals are the physical instantiations of numbers that we, limited and material humans, use to make calculations and to store arithmetical information. These numerals are different in the arabic and roman notation; they can be written on paper, wood, stone, with ink or blood, or even stored as bits of information in a calculator. However they cannot differ in their arithmetical properties; if they did, they would no longer be instantiations of the same number. In the case of musical executions, I claim that they differ in their aesthetic properties, and because of that they should be considered as different aesthetic objects/events, and not simply different instantiations of a single aesthetic entity. (I am grateful to Marcelo Sabatés for making me think more about this point.)
6. “[S]ubterránea, la interminablemente heroica, la impar . . . la inconclusa. Esta obra, tal vez la más significativa de nuestro tiempo, consta de los capítulos noveno y trigésimo octavo de la primer parte del Don Quijote y de un fragmento del capítulo veintidos” (Borges 1974, 446).
7. “No quería componer otro Quijote—lo cual es fácil—sino *el Quijote*. Inútil agregar que no encaró nunca una transcripción mecánica del original; no se proponía copiarlo. Su admirable ambición era producir unas páginas que coincidieran—palabra por palabra y línea por línea—con las de Miguel de Cervantes” (Borges 1974, 446).
8. “El texto de Cervantes y el de Menard son verbalmente idénticos, *pero el segundo es casi infinitamente más rico*” (Borges 1974, 449, my italics).
9. Although Borges himself holds that it is an impossible enterprise (Borges 1974, 447). In my opinion, however, there is no *logical* impossibility in this case.
10. “Hay diferencias porque *lo mismo*, dicho por Cervantes que por un contemporáneo de W. James *quiere decir cosas diferentes*” (Borges 1974, 449, my italics).
11. “El estilo arcaizante de Menard—extranjero al fin—adolece de alguna afectación. No así el del precursor, que maneja con desenfado el español corriente de su época” (Borges 1974, 449).

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