

The Transparency Of Style

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My paper deals with Danto's conception of individual style as he develops it in the last two chapters of *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* – a topic that has received surprisingly little attention among his critics. Notably I shall be concerned with his claim about the “transparency” of style. My aim is to point out certain problems going along with it and offer possible solutions.

1 Danto's Conception of Individual Style

Let me recall some key elements of Danto's conception of individual style. First of all, it is not a merely “taxonomic” one but a “generative” conception, in Richard Wollheim's terminology. Style does not reduce to the manifest stylistic features of works of art. For a work to have style in Danto's more exigent sense, certain conditions of production have to be fulfilled. Notably, a work's outward stylistic features have to stand in a certain *immediate* relationship to the artist. In his style, Danto holds, the artist expresses himself or his way of seeing the world and he does so “immediately and spontaneously” (207). This condition of immediacy involves two aspects that can best be specified in terms of Danto's contrast between style and manner. First, there is the genetic aspect that style is something “given” to the artist; is not externally acquired or learned; it is employed without the mediation of a *techne*, of “knowledge or art,” in Danto's terms. Manner, by contrast, is like a technique, rule or formula that in principle everybody could teach or acquire. It “appears to be style but is in fact separated from [the artist] by a gap it is the function of knowledge or art to bridge.” (204) Thus, whereas an artist's style belongs to him “essentially,” a mere manner is “ephemeral” and “external” to the artist. (204) Second, to his style the artist stands in a non-reflexive relation. He cannot take an external third person stance towards his own style. Manner, by contrast, being like a foreign style to him that he intentionally acquires and employs, presupposes such an external perspective.

2 Unavailability of Style

Two things are important for the following. The first is that manner is not only a matter of acquiring a *foreign* style. One's own style can turn into a mere manner as well. Danto's favorite

example is Chagall, “who perhaps had a style but now has a manner, and whom we often accuse of self-plagiarization, at best of repeating himself.” (1981, 204) In that case, the artist takes an external stance towards the stylistic means he uses.

The second important thing is that the two aspects of immediacy just sketched – that style is something given and something non-reflexive – have further significance: they imply that style is *unavailable* in the sense that it is not at the artist’s arbitrary disposal or under his control. First, it is *genetically unavailable* insofar as one cannot acquire or dismiss one’s own style at will as would be the case with manner. You can choose *a* style; but you cannot choose *your* style, as Dorothea Franck has put it.¹ Unlike manner, you cannot arbitrarily adopt your style as you please. Second, Danto holds that style is *cognitively unavailable* in that it is *cognitively inaccessible* to the one whose style it is. Not only is it impossible to acquire it intentionally. His own style is not even visible or conscious to the respective artist. In Danto’s somewhat misleading terminology, it is “transparent” to him. It is not transparent in the sense that the artist has uninhibited access to his style, that it is not hidden to him. To the contrary, it is transparent in the literal sense that the artist looks *through* his style, as Danto puts it. It is *invisible* to him and not the object of his consciousness. (cf. 162 ff., 205 ff.) According to Danto, this is necessarily so: to take a reflexive, external stance toward one’s style would be “inconsistent,” he says, with its being one’s style. (Cf. 207) Manner, by contrast, since it is consciously acquired and employed by means of “knowledge or art,” presupposes that the artist is aware of it. “The [stylistic] qualities of his [the artist’s] representations are for others to see, not him, and the presence of knowledge or art exactly presupposes that externalization which is inconsistent with them being his style.” (207)

As indicated above, Danto does not exclude the *empirical* possibility that one can become conscious of one’s own style. Only then, his reasoning suggests, it is, strictly speaking, no longer one’s style. It has lost the logical or conceptual status of being the artist’s style and is, as Danto puts it, no longer “the man himself” (204). His works at best “show” his style, or are “in” his style, but do no longer “have” it, as Danto’s puts it. They are “logically styleless.” (204)

¹ Dorothea Franck, “Style and innocence: lost, regained – and lost again?”, in: C. van Eck et al. (eds.), *The Question of Style in Philosophy and the Arts*, Cambridge 1995, 230.

3 The Transparency Thesis

I shall focus on this second aspect of unavailability, the claim that his own style is invisible or not conscious to the artist. Following Danto's terminology, I shall refer to it as his "transparency thesis."

Danto does not hold a singular position when he claims that style and consciousness of style do not go well together. It is a widely held and well established idea, coming in a variety of versions: e.g., that one cannot intend one's style; that consciousness of style tends to corrupt style, making it either awkward or mannered; that we have no explicit knowledge of its underlying mechanisms; that we are blind to our own style. This last version, framed in the terms of perceptual psychology, is suggested by Danto.

There is empirical support to this view. One's own style, one might argue, belongs to those kinds of phenomena that are too familiar to us to be accessible from an "external" point of view, metaphorically speaking. Individual style is thus susceptible to a significant asymmetry between first and third person view. Wittgenstein makes a similar point when he observes that it is "as impossible to view one's own character from outside as one's *handwriting*. I have a one-sided relation to my handwriting which prevents me from seeing it on the same footing as others' writing and comparing it with theirs."² One might also point to the analogous phenomenon of the so called "historicity of vision" on which Danto relies as well: in a way, we are blind to the style of our own time; it becomes visible to us only retrospectively, from a historical distance. As Danto observes, "what would have been transparent to Giotto's contemporaries [...] has become opaque to us, and we are instantly conscious of something invisible to them but precious to us – Giotto's style." (162 f.)

4 Problems with the Transparency Thesis

I shall not discuss whether Danto's transparency thesis is generally plausible as a thesis about the nature of style. Instead, I would like to point out certain internal problems that the transparency thesis generates for *Transfiguration*. Notably, it has implications that seem to be inconsistent with certain other assumptions Danto makes. I shall make three critical points.

² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. Von Wright, Oxford 1980, p. 23.

4.1 *Transparency and Mimesis*

A first problem has its roots in Danto's conception of style as *way* of representation, as distinguished from the *content* of representation (cf. 197). Together with this assumption, the transparency thesis seems to imply something that Danto elsewhere in *Transfiguration* rejects: more exactly, something that he criticizes as one of the fallacies of the mimesis or imitation theory of art (a theory that he, significantly, terms "*transparency theory*" as well). According to Danto, the mimesis theorist cannot plausibly account for those qualities of representations that are "not intended to have a representational function" (162); that is, he cannot plausibly account for the discrepancy between the appearance of an object and its representation, say in a painting: the mimesis theorist could only explain it as a shortcoming, a technical ineptitude on the part of the artist. This, however, is absurd. The divergence has to be accounted for by something else, and Danto explicitly introduces style as one candidate to fill this gap.

However, in the light of Danto's own transparency thesis, *from the point of view of the artist* there cannot be such a gap. For according to the transparency thesis, the artist "looks through his style." He sees the world through his style but does not see his style, Danto says, and hence cannot consciously intend a particular *way* of representation, i.e. his style. And this suggests the implausible conclusion that any artist who has style and wants to represent the world cannot but aim at mere mimesis: he can only be concerned with the representation of content, not with the way of its representation. Thus, construed from the first person perspective of the artist, the alleged transparency of style seems to imply the very problem that Danto set out to solve by introducing the concept of style.

4.2 *Lichtenstein's Intention*

Another problem is that the transparency thesis renders Danto's conception of style unstable in itself. For on the one hand, the transparency thesis implies that an artist cannot be conscious of his or her style. On the other hand, however, Danto introduces style as something closely related to rhetoric; it involves a rhetorical function, and rhetoric is, as Danto points out, "an intentional activity" (175). And though Danto hastens to add that "intentional" does not imply "consciously" (175), it seems fair enough to assume that at least some rhetorical intentions are sometimes or generally conscious.

This is in fact confirmed by one of Danto's own examples in this context: his discussion of Roy Lichtenstein's *Portrait of Madame Cézanne*. In this work, Danto proposes, Lichtenstein

uses a diagram, appropriated from critic Erle Loran, in a rhetorical way: as an ironical comment on the artistic vision that led Cézanne to treat in his work even the woman he passionately loved “as though she were a Euclidean problem” (1981, 143). Notably, Danto says that “[t]he Lichtenstein *self-consciously* exploits the format of the diagram to make a point, and of course it itself is not a diagram [...] its *style* consists in the fact that it uses a diagram [...] Lichtenstein uses the diagram rhetorically.” (1981, 147, emphasis added)

The problem arises generally for the works of postmodern appropriation or quotation art. Their style does not consist in the stylistic features they appropriate but, so to say, in their rhetoric of appropriation; this, however, is not something to which artists can plausibly be said to be blind to. Thus, Danto conception of style seems to be undermined precisely by those phenomena of the postmodern art world that are his primary concern and which to integrate into a general theory of art is the declared aim of *Transfiguration*.

4.3 Normativity

A third problem concerns the normativity of the style manner distinction. We praise artists for having their own style and blame them for cultivating a mere manner, applying ever the same mannerisms over and over again. Danto adopts this pejorative use of the term “manner,” pointing out e.g. that we “*accuse*” Chagall for his mannerisms (204). However, the transparency thesis seems to prevent one from doing justice to this normative dimension.

Though an artist’s individual style is *qua* style not visible to the artist, according to Danto, it can become visible to him or become an object of his consciousness – only then it is, for logical or conceptual reasons, no longer the artist’s style, strictly speaking. For one condition for the concept of style to apply – the transparency condition – is no longer fulfilled. The problematic point is that according to Danto’s reasoning this “externalization” seems to suffice to turn style into a manner, given that the style manner distinction is an exhaustive one. While having style is incompatible with this kind of external, reflexive stance it is the mark of mere manner. Since Danto offers no further criteria for the deterioration of one’s own style into a mere manner, this change in the artist’s cognitive relation to his own style seems to bear the main argumentative weight in that regard. Note that what turns style into manner is not that the artist’s works take on a “mannered” appearance, that its stylistic features become manifestly stale, repetitious, artificial etc. For style to become a mere manner it seems to suffice that the artist becomes conscious of his style, whether or not this affects the outer appearance of the work. Of course, there are good

reasons for Danto not to rely upon manifest, perceptual deteriorations. After all, *Transfiguration's* "method of indiscernibles" can also be applied to style and manner. Rather, what distinguishes style and manner is their different "logical status." Works can be "logically styleless," as Danto puts it, if they do not stand in the appropriate relation to the artist. But if this is so, then it is also solely this difference in the relation between artist and work that has to account for the *normative* implications of the style manner contrast. And the question is how we can account for the normativity of the style manner distinction on that basis. There are two problems:

First, one wonders why there should be something wrong simply with becoming conscious of one's style. Why should it be regarded a *failure*? Or, to put the other way round: if there *is* something blameworthy with "mere manner," why should this have anything to do with the question whether or not one is conscious of one's style?

The second problem concerns the conditions of blame and responsibility. After all, to become conscious of one's style seems to be something that just happens. It is not up to the artist whether or not his style remains transparent to him or not, and hence, whether it loses its status as style. Hence, arguably, he cannot be held *responsible* for it. But if we cannot hold him responsible for it, how can we justifiably blame him for it? Thus, on the one hand, Danto suggests that manner is blameworthy; but on the other hand, his relational account of the style manner distinction seems to thwart this normative dimension.

An analogous question may be raised for style: how can we praise an artist for having style if style is simply something given of which the artist may not even be conscious such that he cannot help but paint in the way he does? In short, how can style and manner be susceptible to praise and blame if ultimately they are a matter of happy (or unhappy) chance?

5 Possible Solutions

How shall we deal with the sketched impasses of the transparency thesis? Let me first outline some ways how the problems can be avoided by reinterpreting and modifying the transparency thesis in certain ways.

5.1 Weaker Version

First, the transparency thesis could be reformulated in a weaker sense. For the most part, Danto suggests a strong version of the thesis, namely, that the artist has no cognitive access

whatsoever to his own style, that it is “invisible” to him (cf. 162 f., 206) and that being aware of stylistic features is “inconsistent” with these features being his style (cf. 207).

Weaker versions would be that one sees one’s own style only in a *different way* from the way others see it, or that it may take some *effort* to become aware of one’s style and to take an external stance towards it and to see it from “outside” (cf. 206 f.), or that one’s style *can*, but need not be, invisible to oneself. In fact, beside his strong formulations, there are also some passages in Danto that suggest such a weaker reading of the transparency thesis: he proposes that one is aware of one’s style and of foreign styles “in a different sense of ‘of’” (206), or that our own style is “not *commonly*” visible us (207, emphasis added).

5.2 *Explanation*

Furthermore, one might suspect that the problems arise due to an all too literal reading of Danto’s vocabulary of perception and visibility. For a more plausible version, we may displace the perceptual vocabulary and reformulate the transparency thesis in the following way: that artists have no *explicit knowledge* of the *rules, mechanisms, or processes* that generate the stylistic features of their work and that they cannot *explain why* they paint the way they do – whether or not their style is *perceptually* accessible to them.

Neither this version nor the weaker version sketched before implies that we have no cognitive access whatsoever to our own style. And as soon as we admit that an artist can be aware of his own style, the possibility is no longer foreclosed that he has influence on his style and thus can be susceptible to praise and blame with regard to it. Furthermore, the weaker version does no longer conflict with the rhetorical, intentional aspects that Danto claims for style. And, finally, one is no longer committed to ascribe to artists merely mimetic intentions as long as they have style.

5.3 *De Re / De Dicto*

Another solution to the problems of the transparency thesis would be to draw a kind of *de re / de dicto* distinction with regard to consciousness of style. An artist might be aware of, see, reflect about, or intend the stylistic qualities of his work without seeing them or intending them *as* his style. That is, he might be conscious of or intend his style *de re*, but not *de dicto*, so to say. In Danto’s example, Lichtenstein might have consciously intended to use the diagram rhetorically

without having intended this *as his style*, even if we, from the outside, count his rhetorical strategies as his style.

Unfortunately, this maneuver is not particularly satisfying. For what is at stake is precisely why one should not also have access to one's style *de dicto*. That is, why should it be inconsistent with having style that the artist is conscious of his *style as his style*?

6 An Alternative Proposal: Commitment vs. Arbitrariness

Finally, why not dismiss the transparency thesis altogether? After all, we are not bound to it even if we accept the genetic claim that style is something given. For though the alleged transparency of style excludes that one can consciously *acquire* one's style, the inverse does not hold: from the assumption that style is something given it does not follow that one cannot be conscious of one's own style. Apart from that, if we dismiss the transparency thesis the concept of style is no longer inconsistent with a range of common assumptions about style: that artists reflect about problems of style, that they search for and develop their style, that they are spectators of their own works while producing them, etc. Moreover, it seems to me that what *matters* in the distinction between style and manner is not transparency, whether in a strong or weak sense; the important criterion of distinction is not whether we take an internal, non-reflexive stance or an external, reflexive stance towards style. Generally speaking, it seems to me that what matters is no *cognitive* difference at all.

Let me conclude with sketching a proposal for an alternative criterion. What matters in the distinction between style and manner (as far as their relation to the artist is concerned) is, I would like to propose, not a *cognitive* but an *attitudinal* aspect: what makes manner suspicious or precarious is its air of arbitrariness as opposed to commitment (commitment understood in the attitudinal or affective sense of being dedicated to something or taking something seriously). Manner is commonly associated with, and blamed for, the arbitrary application of stylistic formulas, employed with the sole aim to yield certain anticipated, marketable, effects. It is arbitrary insofar as these formulas are applied without regard to the peculiarities of the particular work within which they are used. They are not subjected to the demands of the work, as it were. Style, by contrast, would involve an element of commitment. This may either be construed as a matter of being committed to the *work* and its alleged demands; in that case the work's stylistic qualities would be the outcome of an artistic process that takes the work seriously, so to say; they would be a byproduct rather than the aim. Or, it may be construed as a matter of being true to or

being committed to *one's own style*. This attitude of commitment would then also distinguish having one's own style from merely repeating or plagiarizing oneself.

Danto does not explicitly address this aspect of commitment as a distinctive feature of style. But it seems to fit well with the general, somewhat romantic, spirit of his account. By this romantic spirit I mean e.g. his view of "style as the man" or that in his style the artist expresses himself; or when he says of Ad Reinhardt's *Black Canvases* or Morandi's still lives that they come "from the same impulse" or "out of the same artistic source" such that, in spite of their interresemblances, they cannot be charged for self-plagiarization. (204)

Most importantly, the appeal to an attitude of commitment preserves what I take to be one of the most valuable insights of Danto's style manner distinction: the idea that style, in contrast to mere manner, involves an element of unavailability or non-arbitrariness, of not having at one's arbitrary disposal. Unlike Danto's transparency condition, however, the notion of commitment allows to spell out this element of non-arbitrariness or unavailability without implying the cognitive inaccessibility of style.

The question is of course why the criterion of commitment, referring to an attitude of the artist, should in itself be relevant for the art critical evaluation of the *work*. It may be a normative issue but maybe not of the relevant kind. Who cares about the artist's attitudes towards style, one may wonder, as long as he makes (stylistically) good art? But this question I leave for another paper.