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A Brief Guide to the Avoidance of Style

In 1753, Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, was elected a member of the French Academy and on the day of his official appointment he had to deliver his inaugural address. Towards the end of his speech to the noble assembly occurs the dictum that has become the most often quoted epigram on the subject of style: *Le style est l'homme même*: style is the man himself.[1]

Nowadays we are inclined to understand this little saying in the following way: Of the two terms in Buffon's equation we take "style" to be the dependent variable, because we presuppose that "man" can only be the independent one. It is man, we think, who has to play the sovereign role in the relationship of style and man. Style is, then, nothing but a form which is adopted by man in order to express himself. Style, we think, is the way in which a man speaks or paints, the way in which he moves, dresses and makes love, the way in which he treats other people and behaves in society. Style – as we understand it today – is, thus, a genuine manifestation of man.

In the 18th century, however, it was exactly the other way round. The dependent variable was not style, but man. Man did not yet manifest himself in style. Instead, man himself was nothing but a manifestation of style. Style was not created by man; man was created by

[1]Comte de Buffon: *Discours prononcé dans l'Academie française, le samedi 25 août MDCCLIII, à la reception de M. de Buffon*, Paris 1753, p.18.

style. Thus when Buffon pronounced his famous dictum, he imployed a conception of style that was very unlike the one we have.

It is, of course, impossible here to elaborate the difference between these conceptions of style with sufficient historical accuracy. But I am not so much interested in historical details anyhow. I rather want to give a rough sketch of the two notions of style, one of which is quite distinct from the one we take for granted today. In fact what I am going to present will not even be a sketch but rather a caricature, since I will deliberately exaggerate certain points in order to emphasise differences that might eventually be less spectacular in reality. This, I hope, is excusable insofar as my sole intention is to elucidate the limitations of our present, apparently self-evident conception of style.

I said "conception" here and not "concept" because the difference between Buffon's understanding and our own is not so much a difference in the meaning of the word "style". It is rather a substantial difference concerning the relationship of style and man. And linguistically, the more important difference lies in the notion of man. In Buffon's usage "man" is a much more restrictive term than it is today. In order to qualify for the application of this term it wasn't yet enough simply to be a human being. Compared with our present use, the concept was thus employed in a way that must seem normative to us. Instead of "man" pure and simple it rather meant something like "gentleman".[2]

Being acknowledged as *un homme* was an achievement, and one had to take pains to earn that title. Among other things (which are not relevant in the present context) one had to conform to a set of rules that determined the way of presenting oneself: in social life just as well as in art and literature. It is clear then that style, in this understanding, indeed does not emerge from man. It's exactly the other way round: man emerges from style. A man qualifies as such only if he is

[2]Cf. Rémy G. Saisselin: "Buffon, style, and gentlemen" in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 16/1957-58, pp. 357-361. As is already revealed in our prefigured linguistic possibilities for talking about the matter, the problem of gender is obviously pertinent to the discussion of style. See e.g. Jaques Derrida: "La question du style" in: *Nietzsche aujourd'hui? 1) Intensités*, Paris 1973, pp. 235-287, and the subsequent discussion, pp. 288-299.

obedient to the imperatives of style. In the 18th century it is a set of abstract rules that constitutes style – and, in turn, man.[3]

Antoine Watteau, *Pilgrimage to the Island of Cythera*, 1717

In order to illustrate this (pre-modern) constellation in which man has to play the role of a subordinate variable in relation to style it is advisable to take a short look at the work of Buffon's near contemporary Antoine Watteau. During his lifetime Watteau earned his repute mostly for his elaboration of a genre called the *fête galante*. With respect to his work in this genre, I want to point out two things. First, concerning the content of Watteau's pictures, I would like to emphasise that the gazes and gestures of the melancholic noblemen that he depicted al-

[3]Berel Lang has employed a distinction between style and method in his book The Anatomy of Philosophical Style, Oxford 1990, ch. 1-3, and he seems to hold the view that it would be impossible to transform Buffon's statement into "method is the man himself". But for Buffon, I would argue, style was indeed not very different from method (even in the Cartesian sense). In both cases we have a set of rules _ and although the rules of style can certainly not be formulated in the same clear and unequivocal terms as the rules of method (because of a similar "je ne sais quoi" as we can find it in matters of taste), this does obviously not prevent people from knowing exactly what they are expected to do when matters of style are at stake.

ways reflect (and reveal) the rhetorical requirements of their highly styled social interaction. Secondly, concerning the way in which Watteau painted his pictures, I want to maintain that his work also, and analogously, reflects(and reveals) the rhetorical requirements of his genre.

Watteau, *Pilgrimage...* – Detail

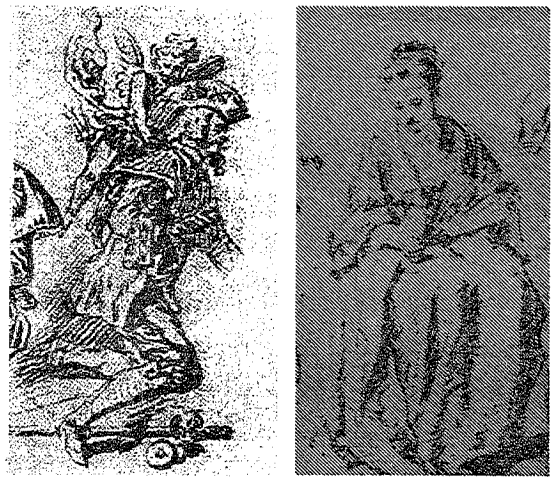
When we look at the figures in one of Watteau's typical paintings, we will feel that their gazes, their postures and their gestures, their whole repertoire of social interaction seems to be extremely ornamental and artificial. We see a number of highly stereotypical gestures of seduction and affectation as we can see them in lots of other paintings as well. But this, of course, has indeed been the grammar of behaviour in the times of Watteau. People performed an endless sequence of prefigured and repetitive ceremonious activities. Their day consisted of "periodical sighing and kneeling down".[4]

Unfortunately, a small reproduction like the one in this text cannot sufficiently display the way in which Watteau painted his figures. If one had the possibility to look at an original, however, one would immediately realize that his brushwork appears to be very sketchy. In part this is due to the fact that he was a real high speed painter who often gave away his canvases while they were still wet. But, apart from that, it seems to me that this way of painting is also significant with respect to Watteau's genre. The fancy figures that takes part in the *fêtes galantes* always appear somewhat ghostlike, as if there were no real persons be-

[4] Cf. Niklas Luhmann: *Liebe als Passion. Zur Codierung von Intimität*, Frankfurt/M. 1982, p.99.

neath the glittering robes. They seem to exist only insofar as they are seen from without, they are absorbed in their shiny appearance, they flash up like a firework display. And, just as the real figures of Watteau's times were composed of empty gestures, their representations on the canvas are composed on thin and superficial brushstrokes.[5]

Watteau's world, then, was a world which was penetrated by the imperatives of style. Man could only survive in that world as long as he remained in compliance with the discreet but forceful laws of style which governed all of his life – from the sphere of his public appearance to that of his (not yet very intimate) sexuality and to the sphere of the arts as well.[6] Style was not so much a freely chosen attire, it was more like a straitjacket – at least if we see it from without, i.e.: from our perspective.



Drawings by Watteau

Our perspective: that is basically the perspective that emerged in the 19th century. In the 19th century the relationship of man and style switches into the distributions of functions that we readily take for granted today. Now, man is no longer constituted by the forming power of style; style is rather constituted by man – or so, at least, is the newly adopted belief. *Le style est l'homme même*: now this means that a man does

[5] In his book *Word and Image*, Cambridge 1981, in which he tries to examine the painting of eighteenth- century France as "a system of signs" and not as a sequence of "successive visual styles", Norman Bryson emphasizes, quite correctly, that Watteau uses rhetorical devices all the time although he never uses them for rhetorical ends. I would add that this is also true of the figures that he depicted.

[6] Adopting the terminology that Richard Wollheim has developed in his article "Pictorial Style: Two Views" in: *The concept of Style*, ed. B. Lang, Philadelphia 1979, pp.129-145, I would say that I propose a "generative" – and not a "taxonomic" – conception of general style for the 18th century. Wollheim would probably object, though, that it doesn't make sense to talk about general style in this way.

the things he does in a certain way, in a certain style, which is his own personal imprint onto the world. Style is "the man himself" because it is generated by the structure of his innermost dispositions and aspirations. It is the outward appearance of his particular internal make up.[7]

It is clear, though, that not all of man's actions and utterances can now be considered as manifestations of style. Thus, the term "style", instead of the term "man", begins to take the role of a normative term. Style, in opposition, e.g., to mere "manner", is restricted to phenomena that have the quality of being (or at least being regarded as) an authentic expression of man.[8]

Authentic self-expression, however, has to face restraints from without and from within and, therefore, the abilities and possibilities to develop style are limited. In this situation the figure appears that, in a stealthy narrowing of the term, has been dubbed *l'homme* by Michel Foucault: it is the special bourgeois species of man who conceives himself as a strange "empirical-transcendental double", a being that belongs to two different spheres: the sphere of the real world with all its contingency and the sphere of the innermost self.[9] The latter imprints itself onto the former – and style is its seal.

This conception of style can perhaps most clearly be demonstrated in the case of Vincent van Gogh, who had to struggle hard against all sorts of conventions in order to achieve his highly individual style of painting which is so unmistakable that even children – I conjecture – will have little problems in recognizing it. Van Gogh's art, thus, seems to be a good confirmation of the idea that style is an expression of the inner self.

In order to illustrate this point I have chosen van Gogh's well known painting of a nocturne tavern in Arles.

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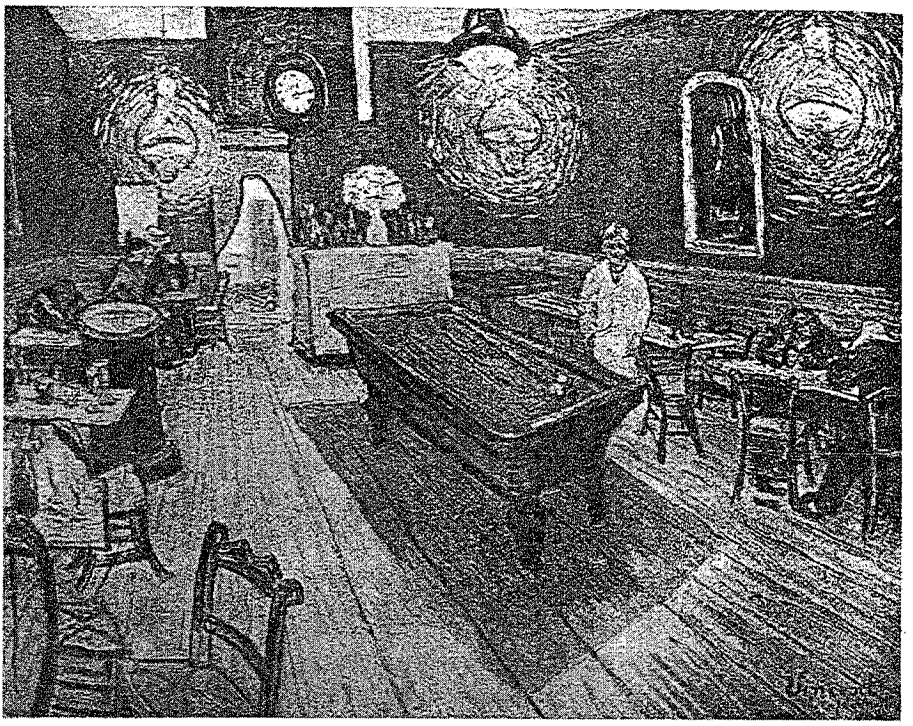
[7] From a purely historical point of view, this modern appropriation and re-interpretation of Buffon's dictum would be a clear misunderstanding. Sometimes, however, authors who intuitively tend to endorse the modern conception of style show a remarkable sensitivity to what Buffon actually meant, so, e.g., Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Vermischte Bemerkungen*, ed. G.H. von Wright, Frankfurt/M. 1977, p.148, and Arthur C. Danto: *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Cambridge/Mass. 1981, ch.7, especially pp.204-207.

[8] A typical document from the time when this conception was first developed is Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: "Einfache Nachahmung der Natur, Manier, Styl" in: *Der Teutsche Merkur vom Jahre* 1789, No.1 (First Quarter), pp.113-120.

[9] Michel Foucault: *Lets mots et les choses*, Paris 1966, ch.9, sec. ii-viii.



Vincent van Gogh, *Le café de nuit*, 1888

Whereas in the painting by Watteau we saw courtly gentlemen and their mistresses who were engaged in all sorts of highly styled interaction, we are here confronted with a solitary person surrounded by a dense physical atmosphere of high pressure which nearly seems to suffocate him and the other figures in the room. This obviously is a metaphorical expression of the attitude of the painter who felt that he had to strain himself to the limits of his power in order to survive in a hostile world where nobody understood him and his strange artistic achievements.

At the time when van Gogh did this painting he had, however, already developed his own, deeply personal style. Therefore, I guess, everyone would immediately have recognized the painting as a painting by van Gogh (even in its obviously inadequate reproduction above) – and even if it would turn out to be a forgery, it would at least be clear that it is a forgery of a van Gogh painting. The bright colours, applied to the canvas in thick pigment, the short parallel strokes of the brush, the circular movement of coloured lines as we can see them around the

illuminated lamps – all of this is highly characteristic for van Gogh's style of painting. And all of these features can be observed in his landscapes and self-portraits as well.

The effect of this way of painting is that in most of van Gogh's mature pictures it seems as if the whole scene was penetrated by a vigorous inherent vibration. It seems as if a strong invisible force would electrify the world, as if it would take hold of every little particle – in the things depicted as well as in the painting itself. An irresistible and overwhelming power seems to have invaded the scene – and also the body of the artist where it has commanded the nervous brushstrokes with which he executed his work.

Now, this style of painting – which is so typical for van Gogh – is certainly a precise expression of his peculiar personality. Thus his work actually does illustrate the conviction that style is an authentic manifestation of man himself. On the other hand, however, this example also casts doubts on the optimistic presupposition that this so-called "man himself" really is that autonomous authority as which it is frequently seen by those who advocate the idea that style is a matter of intentional choice – or at least of deliberate striving.

As becomes evident in the case of van Gogh, the autonomous self might turn out to be nothing but a consoling fiction. From such a point of view, which is more pessimistic, but perhaps also more realistic, it is attractive to consider style as a result of unintentional processes, as it was already done by Giovanni Morelli, who, at the lifetime of van Gogh, published a number of essays in which he identified a number of wrongly ascribed pictures in famous European galleries by means of certain details which were characteristic of the respective painters exactly because they were executed with little or no attentiveness at all: for example ears, toes and fingernails.[10]

Morelli's method, as Sigmund Freud confessed, was an important impulse for the birth of psychoanalysis. And if the "I", the ego, as psychoanalysis teaches, is no longer master in his own house, it can also

[10] Ch. Richard Wollheim: "Giovanni Morelli and the Origins of Scientific Connoisseurship" in *On Art and the Mind*, Cambridge/Mass. 1974, pp.177-202, and Carlo Ginzburg: "Spie. Radici di un paradigma scientifico" in: *Rivista di storia contemporenea*, 7/1978, pp.1-14.

no longer be the procreator of style. Style, instead, becomes the index of the unconscious.

The unconscious, however, as the well-known Lacanian slogan goes, is structured like a language.[11] So, to be sure, is the conscious. Therefore, no matter if style is an expression of the conscious or of the unconscious, it is in any case an inscription regulated by a system of possible oppositions, combinations and replacements.[12]

It is under this premise that I would like to ask what an option to go *beyond style* would consist in.

In a rather trivial sense, one could say that it requires the decision to break with any given convention. This is what Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno demands, who, at least on short notice, must appear to be one of the most resolute critics of style. According to his posthumous *Aesthetic Theory* it is a "criterion of radical modernism" – which means that it is a criterion of anything respectable in modern art – that it cancels all obligations of style.[13]

But, as Adorno himself points out, even those artists who renounce any intention to work in a certain style will, under the urge to shape their peculiar material, inevitably create something like a new style again. Although they might struggle severely against a given style they will in the end not escape from the realm of style altogether. They merely repudiate the liabilities of a general style in favour of a personal style – pretty much in the way it was done by van Gogh. Therefore, what Adorno has to say about style does not amount to much more than a mere paraphrase of the historical transformation of style that took place in the 18th and 19th century.

The reason why Adorno cannot show a way beyond style is that he believes that art has to say something – something earnest and au-

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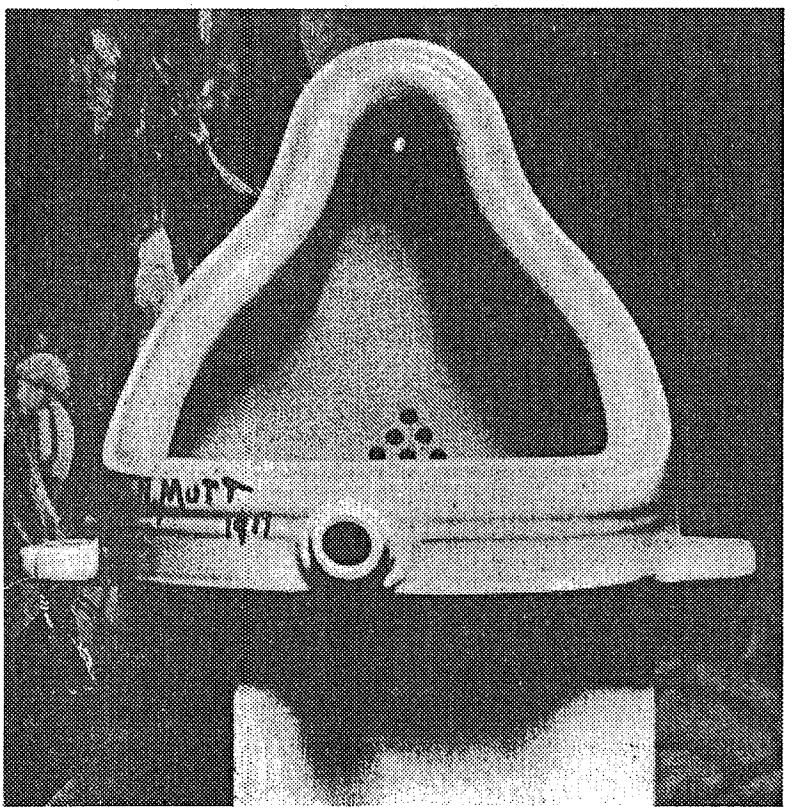
[11] Cf. Jacques Lacan: "L'instance de la lettre dans l'inconscient ou la raison depuis Freud" in: *Écrits*, Paris 1966. Lacan, by the way, opens the preface of his *Écrits* with a reference to Buffon, and he aptly raises the question: "Le style c'est l'homme, en rallierons-nous la formule, à seulement la rallonger: l'homme à qui l'on s'adresse?"

[12] Here I have to disagree with Richard Wollheim who, in his book *Painting as an Art*, London 1987, p.27, explicitly declares that "style, pictorial style, is not at all like a language".

[13] Theodor W. Adorno: *Ästheische Theorie* (= Gesammelte Schriften, Vol.7), Frankfurt/M. 1970, p.307; cf. also pp.257-258 and 435-436.

thentic. He could not see that art might also be an exploration of the conditions of the possibility to say something. But, as long as one tries to say something one will, of course, always have to say it in a certain way, i.e.: in a certain style. The only possibility, therefore, to escape from the indispensable necessity to say what one says in a certain way – in a certain style – requires moving to a meta-level of discourse.

In my opinion, this move was enacted by Marcel Duchamp whose work was, unfortunately, entirely neglected by Adorno. I hope that my readers will not be too resentful if I once again refer to his notorious urinal in this context.



Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917

Duchamp, as it is well-known, bought a urinal in a plumber's shop, put a mock signature on it, gave it the title "Fountain" and send it in for an art-exhibition where the hanging-committee tacitly decided not to show it. The photograph which is reproduced here was taken by

Alfred Stieglitz, and it is obvious how Stieglitz has taken pains to draw the strange object back into a familiar arthistorical (and even stylistic) context. He has put it in front of a comparatively traditional painting of Marsden Hartley, he has chosen a perspective that reveals the most agreeable aspects, and he has brought out all the romantic hues of colour that were characteristic of his own photographic style at that time.[14]

Duchamp, of course, had completely different things in mind when he submitted his urinal. He neither wanted to draw attention to the neglected beauty of his object, nor did he merely want to produce an item of anti-art. In my opinion, he basically wanted to initiate an experiment in semantics. He took an arbitrarily selected object in order to see what happens when it becomes part of the art world. And in doing this he knew beforehand that the fate of that simple object could no longer depend on him, the artist, or his idle intentions. The fate of the object would rather be a result of altogether unforeseeable processes.

The artist, therefore, loses his customary function. He is no longer the sovereign creator of his work. Instead he becomes more like a fictitious character of an arbitrarily invented tale that is optionally added to a work which has its own independent life. It is thus also completely consistent with Duchamp's tendency to erase himself as the author of his art that he adopted a second identity under the name Rrose Selavy.

Although, for obvious reasons, I cannot prove it here, I would finally like to point out that the work of Duchamp differs from the work of the aforementioned artists with respect to the possibility of recognizing new items of their work. Having seen a sufficient number of typical paintings by Watteau and van Gogh one can easily anticipate what other examples of their works display evident stylistic coherences. That, however, is not the case with Duchamp. Even someone who knows a large number of his paradigmatic works would be utterly at a loss if he were

[14] William A. Camfield: *Marcel Duchamp/Fountain*, Houston 1989, relates all the details and offers an interpretation which is completely in accord with the conservative efforts of Duchamp's contemporaries to cope with this disturbing piece.

to predict what the rest of his oeuvre would be like.[15] If he has, e.g., seen all of the ready-mades he will nevertheless have no criteria to infer that the last reproduction in this text also shows a work of Duchamp.

This is a certificate which was issued by Duchamp in order to collect money for playing roulette at the casino of Monte-Carlo. It is decorated with a photograph of Duchamp, whose face is covered with shaving foam to make him look like some kind of winged messenger of the gods. The picture has been put exactly upon the wheel of the roulette, and this I take to be a clear statement of Duchamp's sarcastic opinion about the role of the artist in our modern (western) society. The mask of the divine messenger or the inspired godlike artist is only a fiction that conceals what is behind, namely a mechanism of pure chance. From Duchamp's point of view, art is basically a social game. Hence the rules of the game cannot

Marcel Duchamp, *Monte Carlo Bond*, 1924

[15] It is not possible to identify a work of Duchamp by means of purely stylistic criteria. This implies that it is an illegitimate generalization when Nelson Goodman claims that stylistic analysis always contributes to the discovery of the origin of a given work, that it helps to "answer the questions: who? when? where?". Cf. "The Status of Style" in: *Critical Inquiry*, 1/1974-75, pp.799-811, especially p.807.

be determined by the artist alone. He can not even get control of them. He can only participate in the game as a gambler.

The art of Duchamp, thus, differs very much from what art was before. Art ceases to be the expression of a self-possessed person or (as it has increasingly been the case in modern times) the expression of a possessed person. Art is no longer an attempt to speak up in one's own or some alien language. It rather becomes a subversive act of commentary on *ready-made* systems of language. Art, as it is conceived by Duchamp, is no longer understandable as a specific use of language; it is at best *about* language. This implies that there is no longer a need for someone who presents or expresses himself in some language or other.

In Duchamp's work we can, therefore, find a testimony of Foucault's thesis that "man is dead". And then – no matter how we read the phrase *le style est l'homme même* – we can conclude that style is dead, too.