

Discernibility, Indiscernibility, and Re-discernibility

Joseph Margolis as a Chinese Philosopher

Feng Peng

Peking University*

ABSTRACT | In contemporary philosophy of art, Nelson Goodman is famous for emphasizing the perceptual discernibility of works of art. Arthur Danto, on the contrary, declares that what makes something to be art is the atmosphere of theory that cannot be described by the senses. Unlike the two, Joseph Margolis points out that Danto and Goodman made the same mistake of identifying the ontological status of art works in a dichotomous ontological framework. Margolis believes that we need cultural realism or cultural metaphysics that breaks through the dichotomous framework to properly deal with the ontology of artworks. A dialogue between Margolis and traditional Chinese philosophy and aesthetics seems possible, given that the ontological framework of traditional Chinese philosophy is not bifurcation but trifurcation or monism.

KEYWORDS | Joseph Margolis; Nelson Goodman; Arthur Danto; Chinese Aesthetics; Ontology of Art Works

* Correspondence: Feng Peng – School of Arts, Peking University, Beijing 100871, P. R. China. Email: pengf@pku.edu.cn



1 Introduction

In “Farewell to Danto and Goodman,” Joseph Margolis sets Arthur Danto and Nelson Goodman against each other (Margolis 1998, 353-374). Instead of taking sides between them, Margolis sets himself in stark opposition to both and declares the end of their theories.

It is well known that Danto and Goodman are two of the most influential philosophers of art in English, perhaps in all languages, since the late 20th century. In a 2016 poll of “Best Anglophone Philosophers of Art Post-1945” by a well-known philosophy blog “Leiter Reports,” Danto comes in first and Goodman second.¹ It is hard to overthrow both Danto’s and Goodman’s theories, which are widely distributed and discussed and, in some cases, diametrically opposed.

Rather than a comprehensive critique of Goodman and Danto, Margolis wittily exposes their flaws in their confrontation. Both Goodman’s and Danto’s art philosophy focus on the identity of works of art, but their views are totally different. Goodman argues that the difference between an authentic painting and a perfect forgery of it will always be confirmed by way of a perceptual difference not previously noted. This is what we call the discernibility of a work of art. In contrast to Goodman, Danto declares that to see something as art requires something the senses cannot descry. This is what we call the indiscernibility of a work of art.

According to Margolis, Goodman and Danto, though opposed to each other, make the same mistake of ignoring that arts are cultural phenomena, human beings are cultural animals, and the recognition of works of art should involve sensory perception and thinking. On the one hand, for Margolis, “Goodman’s claim is completely arbitrary” (Margolis 1998, 354). It is impossible to develop a discernibility in the Goodman’s sense to distinguish an original painting from a perfect forgery of it. Margolis, on the other hand, claims that Danto’s thesis is “incoherent or paradoxical in the extreme” (355). If a work of art cannot be distinguished from a mere real thing or another work of art, Danto himself cannot be sure that what he is discussing is that work of art. By setting Goodman and Danto against each other and himself against both, Margolis elaborates his theory of identifying works of art. According to Margolis, a work of art can be discernible, however, it is not the perceptually discernible in Goodman’s sense, but what he calls cultural discernibility.

¹ [Leiter Reports: A Philosophy Blog: Best Anglophone philosophers of art post-1945: the results \(typepad.com\)](https://leitereports.com/best-anglophone-philosophers-of-art-post-1945-the-results/)

2 Goodman and Discernibility

Forgery is usually an issue in art history and art criticism, and rarely of interest to philosophers. After becoming a philosopher, perhaps because of his previous experience as a gallery director, Goodman began to think forgery philosophically in his *Languages of Art*, first published in 1968. Although it is not a necessary part of his art theory, Goodman's discussion on forgery has attracted extensive attention and then forgery has become a hot topic in the philosophy of art. According to Wreen's observations, "Article has followed article since that time, and the debate has recently culminated in an entire anthology devoted to the topic" (Wreen 1983, 340).

Goodman argues that there is an aesthetic distinction between an original painting and a perfect forgery of it, even if we cannot tell them apart by merely looking at them. Goodman presents the following supposition:

Suppose we have before us, on the left, Rembrandt's original painting *Lucretia* and, on the right, a superlative imitation of it. We know from a fully documented history that the painting on the left is the original; and we know from X-ray photographs and microscopic examination and chemical analysis that the painting on the right is a recent fake. Although there are many differences between the two--e.g., in authorship, age, physical and chemical characteristics, and market value--we cannot see any difference between them; and if they are moved while we sleep, we cannot then tell which is which by merely looking at them. Now we are pressed with the question whether there can be any aesthetic difference between the two pictures; and the questioner's tone often intimates that the answer is plainly no, that the only differences here are aesthetically irrelevant. (Goodman 1968, 99-100)

However, Goodman's answer, contrary to the questioner's, is "yes". According to Goodman, although "we cannot see any difference between them [the original and the forgery of it]," there is an aesthetic difference between them. Goodman's argument is puzzling. To the extent that aesthetic is conceived as sensitive cognition, there can be no aesthetic difference without a perceptual difference. Goodman does not deny this commonsense of aesthetic. Where do the aesthetic differences come from? According to Goodman, given the aesthetically irrelevant or imperceptible differences such as differences in "authorship, age, physical and chemical characteristics, and market value" are recognized, we can train our perceptual ability, based on these non-aesthetic or imperceptible differences, to descry the aesthetic or perceptible differences. Goodman argues:

Although I see no difference now between the two pictures in question, I may learn to see a difference between them. I cannot deter-

mine now by merely looking at them, or in any other way, that I *shall* be able to learn. But the information that they are very different, that the one is the original and the other the forgery, argues against any inference to the conclusion that I shall not be able to learn. And the fact that I may later be able to make a perceptual distinction between the pictures that I cannot make now constitutes an aesthetic difference between them that is important to me now. (Goodman 1968, 103-104)

Obviously, Goodman's argument faces some difficulties. To be sure, as Goodman points out, Americans look pretty much alike to a Chinese who has never looked at many of them. When the Chinese has seen enough Americans, she can develop a capability and see that Americans who used to be the same are in fact very different. Similarly, Van Meegeren's forgeries of Vermeer, which could not be recognized by the most skilled expert, now become easy for layman to descry. There are many such examples. After a certain amount of training, we might distinguish things that would otherwise be indistinguishable. As Goodman writes, "we must bear clearly in mind that what one can distinguish at any given moment by merely looking depends not only upon native visual acuity but upon practice and training" (Goodman 1968, 103). However, it is not always the case. For example, no matter how much we update our knowledge and our way of viewing, we may not be able to distinguish two products off the same assembly line. Furthermore, in Goodman's examples, Van Meegeren's forgeries are relatively easier to identify. We can no longer mistake Van Meegeren's forgeries for Vermeer's original paintings after updating our knowledge and viewing methods. However, it is much harder to make a distinction between Rembrandt's *Lucretia* and the perfect forgery of it, as Goodman imagined, since we cannot establish the "precedent-class" of the painter who copied Rembrandt's *Lucretia* just with this single work, and the "precedent-class" of the forger is as necessary for us to distinguish Rembrandt's *Lucretia* from the forgery of it (Goodman 1968, 111). It is difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish Rembrandt's *Lucretia* from the perfect forgery of it. It is even more difficult, if almost impossible, to distinguish two products off the same assembly line. Goodman's claim that, therefore, with the necessary training and practice, the difference between two things will always eventually be confirmed by way of a perceptual difference not previously noted is untenable.

Even if we believe that, with necessary training and practice, we will be able to confirm the difference between an original painting and a perfect forgery of it, it does not follow that this belief will enable us to make a distinction between them now. Therefore, Goodman's following argument is too strong to be true:

My knowledge of the difference between the two pictures, just because it affects the relationship of the present to future lookings, informs the very character of my present lookings. This knowledge in-

structs me to look at the two pictures differently now, even if what I see is the same. ... Thus not only later but right now, the unperceived difference between the two pictures is a consideration pertinent to my visual experience with them. (Goodman 1968, 104-105)

Historical reality is different from historian's representation of it or historical narrative. For historical narrative, what happens in the future would affect the narrative of what happened in the past. For historical reality, however, this influence is impossible. This is one of the main contributions of Danto's philosophy of history. According to Danto, history is not a simulacrum of the past itself, or, to borrow Danto's terminology, history is not the so-called "Ideal Chronicle." According to Danto's conception, an Ideal Chronicler "knows whatever happens the moment it happens, even in other minds. He is also to have the gift of instantaneous transcription: everything that happens across the whole forward rim of the Past is set down by him, as it happens, the way it happens" (Danto 1968, 149). We can properly understand the "Ideal Chronicler" as an intelligent surveillance camera that records everything happening in real time, not only the visible things happening in society, but also the invisible things happening in other's mind. In Danto's view, however, such record is not history, no matter how detailed and precise it is. History means historical narrative. Danto defines "narrative sentence" as follows:

Their most general characteristic is that they refer to at least two time separated events though they only describe (are only about) the earliest event to which they refer. ... Narrative sentences offer an occasion for discussing, in a systematic way, a great many of the philosophical problems which history raises and which it is the task of the philosophy of history to try to solve. (Danto 1968, 143)

For example, "The Thirty Years' War began in 1618" is a narrative sentence. This sentence only describes the outbreak of the war in 1618. But it also implicitly refers to an event happens 30 years later, that the war ends in 1648. Since the sentence presupposes knowledge of the fact that the war would end in 1648, it could not possibly have been uttered in 1618. The "Ideal Chronicler" could not have uttered this sentence in 1618, since he could not have known that the war would last thirty years. It is only historians who utter such sentence. In this sentence uttered by historians, as a historical narrative, what happens 30 years later affects the meaning of what happened 30 years ago. However, for historical reality, this affect would never have happened. What happens 30 years later would not have any impact on what happened 30 years ago.

When Goodman claims that the unperceived but possible perceived difference between an original painting and a perfect forgery of it constitutes an aes-

thetic difference between them for me now,² it is possible that he, unlike most people who mistake historical reality for historical narrative, mistakes historical narrative for historical reality. In this sense, we can say that Goodman's claim is arbitrary and untenable. As Margolis says:

Goodman's claim is completely arbitrary, not evidentially motivated at all, certainly not necessarily true, and very likely empirically false if we constrain sensory perception in a suitably narrow way (as Goodman intends) and if we do not allow, within the compass of the "perceptual", talk of the "perception" of intentional or (in particular) historically "discernible" features (themselves inseparable from what remains discernible in the first sense). (Margolis 1998, 354)

While criticizing Goodman's claim as completely indefensible, Margolis offers a solution to save Goodman's claim, that is to expand the range of sensory perception. We can not only perceive shape, color, rhythm, melody and other features that are discernible in the first sense or directly exhibited or manifest, but also perceive features such as intention, history, origin, use and so on that are indirectly exhibited.³ If one is willing to borrow the terminology of the 18th-century British aesthetics, the former corresponds roughly to the features discerned by the external senses and the latter, the internal sense.⁴ We will come back to Margolis's theory of perception later.

3 Danto and Indiscernibility

We mentioned Arthur Danto earlier in our discussion of Goodman's claim about the discernibility of forgery. In fact, some scholars have realized that Danto's indiscernibility can rescue Goodman's theory. For example, as Foster and Morton (1991, 156-157) have pointed out, Goodman's problem could be solved if we admit Danto's claim: "To see something as art requires something the eye cannot descry" (Danto 1964, 580). Indiscernibility is the hallmark of Danto's philosophy of art. Although Danto addressed indiscernibility before Goodman's *Languages of Art* was published,⁵ the indiscernibility as his philosophical methodology became explicit only later, which seems to be developed alone with Danto's critique of Goodman's discernibility claim.

2 Goodman writes: "In short, although I cannot tell the pictures apart merely by looking at them now, the fact that the left-hand one is the original and the right-hand one a forgery constitutes an aesthetic difference between them for me now because knowledge of this fact (1) stands as evidence that there may be a difference between them that I can learn to perceive, (2) assigns the present looking a role as training toward such a perceptual discrimination, and (3) makes consequent demands that modify and differentiate my present experience in looking at the two pictures." (Goodman 1968, 105)

3 For the directly and indirectly exhibited characteristics, see Mandelbaum (1965).

4 For internal sense and external senses, see Guyer (2014), 100-113.

5 Danto addressed the indiscernibility issue in his 1964 essay "The Artworld," four years before Goodman's *Languages of Art* was published.

As a classmate of Danto at Columbia University in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Margolis accurately grasp the core of Danto’s philosophy of art, i.e. the issue of indiscernibility, which means that one of a pair of indiscernible counterparts is a work of art and the other is a mere real thing or a different work of art. In Danto’s view, artists since 1960s, such as Andy Warhol, have raised the issue of indiscernibility with their works, but only he himself has devoted to answering that question. Danto writes, “... once art raised the question of why one of a pair of look-alikes was art and the other not, it lacked the power to rise to an answer. For that, I thought, philosophy was needed” (Danto 1998, 134).

The indiscernibility is not only the consistent theme of Danto’s philosophy of art, but also has been extended to be the theme of his philosophy in general, including his philosophy of history, philosophy of action, philosophy of religion, moral philosophy, epistemology and so on. Danto goes so far as to argue that indiscernibility is a subject unique to philosophy, and that all philosophy answers or should answer the question of indiscernibility. Danto writes, “The practice of using imaginary examples in which pairs of indiscernibles are juxtaposed, when these belong to distinct categories, the way truths and falsehoods do when nothing in the sentences which express them registers the difference, is endemic to philosophy” (Danto 2012, 288). The methodology of indiscernibility as the hallmark of Danto’s philosophy has been recognized in philosophy community. As Noël Carroll points out: “For Danto, this method of indiscernibles is not simply a technique of philosophical aesthetics. It is Danto’s metaphilosophical conviction that philosophy in general is generated by problems of perceptual indiscernibility. That is why, Danto maintains, philosophical problems are not tractable by empirical observation” (Carroll 2012, 120).

However, not all indiscernibles are with philosophical interests. Danto distinguishes two kinds of indiscernible pair of things, one philosophical, the other not. The philosophical one belongs to different kinds, while the non-philosophical one belongs to same kind. For example, dream and waking, moral conduct and non-moral conduct, determinism and chances, thinking beings and mere machines, works of art and mere real objects, universe with God and without God and so on are philosophical indiscernibles, while identical twins, two products off the same assembly line, two insects of the same species are indiscernibles without philosophical interests. According to Danto, “philosophical problems arise in connection with indiscriminable pairs, the difference between which is not a scientific one” (Danto 1989, 6-7).

Danto’s indiscernibility methodology, on the one hand, is inspired by contemporary art in New York City, and on the other hand, it is related with the enlightenment of Chan Buddhism.⁶ As Danto confesses:

⁶ For details, see Peng (2021).

It was Pop that engaged me as a philosopher, principally through the work of Warhol. ... The Brillo cartons of Warhol exemplified objects that were works of art which, for all practical purpose, were indiscernible from the workaday shipping cartons of common experience. Art and life looked outwardly alike, and the philosophical task was to explain why and in what way they were different. It was here that my study of Buddhism, such as it was, and of Dr. Suzuki's writing in particular, came to my aid. (Danto 2004, 57)

To illustrate the indiscernibility, Danto recounts one paragraph of Qingyuan Weixin's *yulu* (recorded conversations):

Before I had studied Zen for thirty years, I saw mountains as mountains and waters as waters. When I arrived at a more intimate knowledge, I came to the point where I saw that mountains are not mountains, and waters are not waters. But now that I have got the very substance I am at rest. For it is just that I see mountains once again as mountains, and waters once again as waters. (Danto 1964, 579)

Danto does not explain how Qingyuan's paragraph equips him to answer the indiscernibility issue. He just mentions that the indiscernibility problem can be solved "in the mode of Qingyuan" (Danto 1964, 579). In Qingyuan's paragraph, there is a pair of indiscernible counterparts that are actually completely different, namely "mountains as mountains and waters as waters" and "mountains once again as mountains, and waters once again as waters," which are similar to what Danto refers to the indiscernibles of a work of art and a mere real things, such as Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box* and the brillo box in the grocery. Danto therefore asserts that "To see something as art requires something the eye cannot descry" (Danto 1964, 580).

It is this recognition that the artistic element is indiscernible to the perception that Danto "cries out for an answer to the inverse of Goodman's question" (Danto 1981, 42). Instead of trying to prove how two perceptually indiscernible things can eventually become perceptually discernible, Danto simply admits that they are perceptually indiscernible. In Danto's view, the distinction between a work of art and a mere real thing is neither a scientific problem nor a problem of connoisseurship, but a philosophical one, especially an ontological one. For Goodman, the indiscernible counterparts, such as identical twins, belong to the same kind. For such indiscernible counterparts, we can eventually distinguish them by developing our sensibility, or with the help of more advanced equipment. While, Danto's indiscernible counterparts, such as Warhol's *Brillo Box* and the brillo box in the grocery, belong to different kinds, and to distinguish them requires not a more sensory perception or a more advanced equipment, but a kind of awareness, such as the enlightenment of Chan Buddhism.

Although Margolis credits "Danto with effectively challenging Goodman's insistence on the perceptual discernibility of the difference between a forgery and a genuine artwork" (Margolis 1998, 364), he does not think that Danto is correct because he finds that Danto "voluntarily abandons the existence of artworks as such, and, with that, the literal relevance of ever speaking of the perceptual discernibility of 'their' properties" (Margolis 1998, 365).

There is a practical problem with cancelling the existence of works of art. If artworks do not exist, Margolis asks, "Why...should dealers, galleries, museums buy and sell paintings at all...?" (Margolis 1998, 368). As an art critic, Danto often talks of works of art on the one hand, and on the other hand declares that there is no perceptual difference between works of art and mere real things, and so how could he make sure that he is talking about works of art and not mere real things? In short, in Margolis's view, Danto's claim is paradoxical.

4 Margolis's Third Way

In Margolis's view, despite Danto's opposition to Goodman, "Danto makes precisely the same mistake Goodman makes" (Margolis 1998, 371). Their common mistake comes from the entrenched dualism and hence a narrow understanding of "perception." As Amie L. Thomasson points out, dualism cannot explain the ontology of works of art, since artworks, such as paintings, can be neither simply identified with mind-independent physical objects, nor treated as merely objects of the imaginative world. As an entity, a painting seems to fall between these categories. That is, while paintings are materially constituted by physical objects, they at the same time dependent on forms of human intentionality. Thomasson writes:

In short, to accommodate paintings, sculptures, and the like, we must give up the simple bifurcation between mind-independent and mind-internal entities, and acknowledge the existence of entities that depend in different ways on both the physical world and human intentionality. (Thomasson 2004, 89)

The problem of how we are to understand works of art as entities forces us to "return to fundamental metaphysics, to rethink some of the most standard bifurcations in metaphysics and develop broader and finer-grained systems of ontological categories ..." (Thomasson 2004, 88). In other words, there is a need to extend the system of ontological categories in order to accept entities that exist in between the categories of bifurcation. The study of ontology of works of art overlaps with the problem of fundamental metaphysics. Such study can there-

fore benefit not only our understanding of works of art but also other social and cultural objects. Thomasson writes:

A careful consideration of the ontology of art has impact and applications far beyond aesthetics.... Developing a more adequate ontology of works of art may also lay the groundwork for a more adequate ontological treatment of social and cultural objects generally, which are so often neglected in naturalistic metaphysics.... In short, if, rather than trying to make works of art fit into the off-the-rack categories of familiar metaphysical systems, one attempts to determine the categories that would really be suitable for works of art as we know them through our ordinary beliefs and practices, the payoff may lie not just in a better ontology of art, but in a better metaphysics. (Thomasson 2004, 90)

Margolis has been developing a “better ontology of art” and, especially, a “better metaphysics,” which he names “cultural realism” (Margolis 2001) or “metaphysics of culture” (Margolis 2016). As he sums up his career as a philosopher, Margolis says: “I’m aware that all my inquiries, no matter how scattered, have converged with increasing insistence on the definition of the self and the analysis of the unique features of the human world and our form of life” (Margolis 2016, 1). The main categories of human life are persons, actions, and practices, i.e. “the most strategic categories of the metaphysics of culture” (Margolis 2016, 48), which are between the mind-independent and mind-internal entities. The whole project of Margolis’s philosophy is a struggle against the entrenched dualism. Margolis writes:

It must be canvassed in conformity with what’s gone before, if we are ever to complete a rounded picture of the unique features of the metaphysics of culture: those, for instance, needed in launching (on some fresh occasion) an account of the complex relationship between the physical and human sciences; in opposing certain orthodoxies dominant in both scientific inquiry and moral judgment; in acknowledging the hybrid artifactuality of persons and the Intentionality of their enlanguaged “worlds” or cultures; in conceding the opposed sorts of emergence manifested in our macroscopic world, that qualify and vouchsafe the intertwined compatibility of causality and freedom; in admitting the sui generis complexity of Intentional “things”; in coming to terms with the historicity of human inquiry; and in grasping the, asymmetrical interdependence of anything said to be actual, as belonging among material and Intentional “things.” (Margolis 2016, 151)

Artworks, like persons or human selves, belong to a special kind of entity, which is between or beyond the bifurcation in metaphysics. Margolis writes:

I say you cannot disjoin the "ontologies" of selves and artworks, because, like language and action, artworks are the culturally apt utterances of culturally formed selves (ourselves). To be aware of, to perceive, the presence of a society of selves, to hear and respond to their speech, to participate in their common rituals, entails one's being able to perceive, by means of culturally informed sensory perception, the artworks they (we) produce as well. (Margolis 1998, 370)

It is because of the recognition that artworks and human selves share the same ontological status that artworks and human selves become the main topics of Margolis's cultural realism or cultural metaphysics. Margolis writes:

I have written a heterodox account of the world of human culture; chiefly about human selves and artworks, with some asides on history and language—a defense, in effect, of what I call cultural realism. The idea, of course, was to explicate the sense in which the realism of human culture is radically different from that of physical nature, without proposing any discontinuity between the two or any extravagant dualisms to account for their distinction. (Margolis 2001, xii)

Based on the cultural realism or metaphysics of culture, Margolis argues that the scope of perception cannot be limited to physical objects such as color, shape, melody, rhythm and so on, but should include cultural objects such as history, genre, style, intention and so on. Our perceiving of these two kinds of things is not separate, but continuous and mixed. Margolis argues, "Sensory perception is always and already freighted with conceptual elements of just these sorts.... There is no mere "sensory" perception that we can report, except what we agree to abstract from the culturally freighted perceptual reportings that we normally learn to make (Margolis 1998, 372). Goodman and Danto make the same mistake of limiting perception to physical objects, so neither Danto's claim that artworks are indiscernible by perception, nor Goodman's claim that artworks are ultimately discernible by perception, is consistent with our experience of art.

In view of the fact that Margolis positions the ontological status of artworks between the dichotomous ontological framework based on his cultural realism or cultural metaphysics, and in terms of the discerning artworks Margolis's view lies between Goodman's discernibility and Danto's indiscernibility, we can call Margolis's philosophy of art the "third way" as opposed to the theories that focus on either the subjective or the objective.

5 Margolis as a Chinese Philosopher

To say that Margolis is a Chinese philosopher would be an unbelievable exaggeration, since we do not find any literal connections between Margolis and Chinese philosophy, in addition to his publications in the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*. However, Margolis's cultural realism, cultural metaphysics, and pragmatism in general do share some similarities with traditional Chinese philosophy. As May Sim observes, scholars interested in comparative studies of American pragmatism and traditional Chinese philosophy, whether they agree or disagree, "they acknowledge that certain characteristics are common to both the pragmatists and early Chinese thinkers" (Sim 2009, 3). David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames also recognize that "the pragmatic concerns of most Chinese intellectuals militate against the excise of philosophical speculations that move too far afield from the concrete problems of human beings" (Hall and Ames 1998). Generally speaking, traditional Chinese philosophy, like Margolis's philosophy, is concerned with persons, actions, and practices, so it belongs to cultural realism or cultural metaphysics. Specifically, in terms of ontology of artworks, the relevant thoughts of traditional Chinese philosophy are close to the "third way" of Margolis.

It is indeed difficult to locate the ontological status of works of art within the dualism of Western metaphysics. However, the problem of the ontology of works of art is less of a dilemma in Chinese aesthetics, since the standard division in Chinese metaphysics is not a bifurcation but a trifurcation that consists of *dao* 道, *xiang* 象, and *qi* 器. According to the standard bifurcation, we can say, roughly, that *dao* is similar to the abstract or mental object, and *qi*, the concrete or physical object. This standard bifurcation leaves no room for *xiang*, which seems to be a "third entity" existing between the physical and the spiritual. *Xiang*, occupying a position between *dao* and *qi*, is capable to accommodate art within the ontological categories of Chinese metaphysics. According to Pang Pu 庞朴, *xiang* is "the soul of poetry's 'imagery thinking' (*xingxiang siwei*)" (Pang 1995, 232-235). *Xiang* and its related "imagery thinking" are the soul of not only poetry but all the arts.

Nevertheless, once *xiang* is identified as an entity between *dao* (mental entity) and *qi* (physical one), it may be fixed as the two main entities and lose its characteristics of betweenness and uncertainty. In view of this, Wang Shuren 王树人 especially emphasizes on the non-being, non-entity, dynamism and uncertainty. Wang writes, "Although related to image and phenomenon, in '*xiang*-thinking' as an original or presented activity '*xiang*' is not only different from the '*xiang*' in image and phenomenon, but also an '*original xiang*' which is far deeper than the '*xiang*' in the latter two.... This '*xiang*' is not the 'entity' of Western metaphysics, but non-entity, non-object and yet-to-being.... This '[original] *xiang*' is... the '*xiang*' of original creativity, the '*xiang*' of the dynamic whole which is in the 'ceaseless creativity'" (Wang 2021, 19).

François Jullien also uses betweenness, transition and uncertainty to interpret *xiang*, which, instead of beauty, is considered what Chinese painters and poets want to express or capture. Jullien writes:

Painters and poets in China do not paint things to show them better, and, by displaying them before our eyes, to bring forth their presence. Rather, they paint them between "there is" and "there is not," present-absent, half-light, half-dark, at once light-at once dark. (Jullien 2009, 4)

In order to manifest the "betweenness" or *xiang*, Chinese painters prefer to depict things in transition between presence and absence—an object displaying the character of betweenness. At the beginning of his book *The Great Image Has No Form*, Jullien quotes Qian Wenshi's remarks on landscape painting: "The mountains in rain or the mountains in fair weather are easy for the painter to figure. But should fair weather tend toward rain, or should rain tend toward the return of fair weather...; refuge taken one evening amidst the fog ... when the whole landscape vanishes in confusion—emerging-submerging, between there is and there is not—that is what is difficult to figure" (Jullien 2009, 1). Jullien gives his interpretation of Qian's remarks as follows:

Rather than figure states that are distinct—in both senses, sharp and in opposition, rain / fair weather—the Chinese painter paints modification. He grasps the world beyond its distinctive features and in its essential transition. Each aspect implies the other, even when they are mutually exclusive, and one is discreetly at work even as the other is still on display. Behind the curtain of rain sweeping the horizon, one already senses, by the breaking light, that the inclement weather is going to lift. In the same way, fair weather soon sends out a few precursory signs that it will be clouding over. (Jullien 2009, 1-2)

Chinese painters prefer to depict landscape in a transitional state, which does not only mean a transition between two things or phenomena such as the transition between fair weather and rain as Jullien conceived, but also a transition between physical world and mental state, mind and body, subject and object. In Zheng Xie's "Remarks on Painting Bamboo" we can read a multitude of transitions between physical objects, mind and body. Zheng writes:

During my stay in a riverside inn in a pleasant autumn, I got up one morning and walked out to see a bamboo grove. I found it filled with flowing mist, dew and sunlight. The whole atmosphere was floating between the branches and leaves. As I was there contemplating it, an inner drive to paint was stirred up and thus activated within my mind. As usual the bamboo inside the mind was not the same as it was inside the eye. Then I grinded the ink and prepared the paper. When the

brush touched the paper, I made changes quickly, and so the bamboo drawn out by the hand was not the same as it was conceived inside the mind. (Zheng 1986, 1173)

In Zheng's text, we read a multitude of transitions not only between mist, dew, sunlight, but also between bamboo-inside-the-eye, bamdoo-inside-the-mind, and bamboo-inside-the-hand. These multitudinous transitions can create a multitude of resemblances that are always in motion and change, with which, as Walter Benjamin conceived, the invisible ideas can be manifested in images. Benjamin writes:

Chinese calligraphy and its "ink games" thus presents itself as a highly moving thing. While the signs have a link and a form that are fixed on paper, the multitude of "resemblances" that they contain provides them with motion. These virtual resemblances, which are expressed through each paintbrush stroke, form a mirror in which thought is reflected in this atmosphere of resemblance or resonance. In fact, these resemblances are not mutually exclusive; they become entangled and constitute a whole that necessitates thought, just like the breeze necessitates a veil of gauze. (Benjamin 2018, 190)

This is Benjamin's interpretation of *xieyi*. This interpretation can help us understand *xiang's* features, especially its motion and uncertainty. *Xieyi*, *xiang*, (meaning-image), *yijing* (meaning-world) belong to the same conceptual family, which can characterize traditional Chinese art and aesthetic.

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