



Aesthetics and Philosophy of the Arts

## Restoration of Art and Restoration of Nature

*Andrew Light*  
*University of Montana*  
[alight@selway.umt.edu](mailto:alight@selway.umt.edu)

**ABSTRACT:** Robert Elliot's "Faking Nature," (1) represents one of the strongest philosophical rejections of the ground of restoration ecology ever offered. Here, and in a succession of papers defending the original essay, Elliot argued that ecological restoration was akin to art forgery. Just as a copied art work could not reproduce the value of the original, restored nature could not reproduce the value of nature. I reject Elliot's art forgery analogy, and argue that his paper provides grounds for distinguishing between two forms of restoration that must be given separate normative consideration: (1) malicious restorations, those undertaken as a means of justifying harm to nature, and (2) benevolent restorations, or, those which are akin to art restorations and which cannot serve as justifications for the conditions which would warrant their engagement. This argument will require an investigation of Mark Sagoff's arguments concerning the normative status of art restorations.

"Faking Nature" begins with an identification of a particular kind of pernicious restoration—restoration that is used as a rationalization for the destruction of nature. On this claim, any harm done to nature by humans is ultimately repairable through restoration and therefore should be discounted. Elliot calls this view, the "restoration thesis." Elliot rejects the restoration thesis through an analogy between the relationship between original and replicated works of art and nature. Just as we would not value a replication of a work of art as much as we would value the original, we wouldn't value a replicated bit of nature as much as we would the original thing.

The force of the analogy is provided by an argument that with art, as with nature, we rely on an understanding of its origins in order to ascribe its value. For example, Elliot asks us to imagine a case where developers, needing to run underground pipes through our backyard, ask to remove a valuable piece of sculpture from the yard. But because the sculpture is so fragile it cannot be moved. The developer tells us not to worry, because he will replace the sculpture with an exact replica after he finishes. We will reject the fake for the original because we "value the original as an aesthetic object, as an object with a specific genesis and history." (80) In the same way, Elliot suggests we value nature as an object with a "special kind of continuity with the past." Restoration as an attempt to reproduce nature, particularly as motivated by the restoration thesis, fakes original nature as reproduction of a work of art fakes the original piece.

But after clarifying this initial claim, Elliot suggest that perhaps all restorations, not just those embodied in the restoration thesis, are problematic through a series of examples designed to push the argument that nature has a distinct, originary value. In the first two examples, a lover of wilderness named John is deliberately fooled into believing that he is experiencing wilderness. In both examples it is clear that whatever value we wish to ascribe to nature, it is not to be found in these two cases. Similar to the example of art forgery, faked nature is not the real thing. But in case three, John is taken to a place that was once a devastated strip mine. After the forest was destroyed, the earth torn up, and animals either killed or driven away, the landscape was restored. "Trees of the species which grew there once before the devastation grow there again, and the animal species have returned." (84) But as in the other two cases, Elliot maintains that "John has been short changed, presented with less than what he values most," clearly indicating Elliot's belief that there is at bottom a problem with the value of any restoration. This claim is a bit confusing since Elliot reassures us just two pages before that some kinds of restoration are beneficial, or benevolent: "Artificially transforming an utterly barren, ecologically bankrupt landscape into something richer and more subtle may be a good thing. That is a view quite compatible with the belief that replacing a rich natural environment with a rich artificial one is a bad thing." (82) With this conflicting evidence of Elliot's attitude toward restoration it seems that the only determination of the status of a restoration as either a "good thing" or a "bad thing" is the judgment of the intentions of the restorers. We can therefore derive a distinction between two different kinds of restoration: (1) malicious restorations, such as the kind described in the restoration thesis, and (2) benevolent restorations, or, those orchestrated in order to remedy a past harm done to nature though not offered as a justification for harming nature. Benevolent restorations, unlike malicious restorations, cannot serve as justifications for the conditions which would warrant their engagement. If this distinction holds, then we can claim that Elliot's original target was not all of restoration, but only a particular kind of restoration. If this claim is true, then perhaps it is the case that benevolent restorations are not diminished in value by Elliot's art analogy, and in fact, might aptly be more akin to art restoration, than art forgery, or replacement. If correct, the art forgery example has limited application. The analogy can only be applied against a kind of malicious restoration that we may easily agree ought to be rejected.

But the evidence that Elliot would accept such a distinction is mixed. As we have seen, Elliot's wilderness examples belie a skepticism about the value of any kind of restoration for not being able to produce original nature. Is there any other evidence for Elliot's commitment to the critique of all restoration? Unfortunately there is. Toward the end of "Faking Nature," Elliot's position on the value of all restoration becomes clearer. Here Elliot offers an anecdote, about a stand of mountain ash that he had once admired. Upon finding out that it had been planted to replace the original forest after it had burned he concludes, "Knowing that the forest is not a naturally evolved forest causes me to feel differently about it: it causes me to perceive the forest differently and to assign it less value than naturally evolved forests." (87-88) If the restoration of such an area is not as valuable as the original nature then certainly all restorations on Elliot's view cannot hold the same value as original nature. On Elliot's account then, the distinction I find embedded in his paper between malicious and benevolent restorations is a distinction without a difference.

How else then might we distinguish between different kinds of restorations? Imagine that Elliot's mountain ash restoration was an older, integrated restoration, that played a crucial role in the maintenance of the uncontroversially natural systems adjoining it—perhaps it

has become a crucial corridor for wildlife between two protected wilderness areas. Given Elliot's disvalue of all restorations, on what basis could we decide not to replace that older restoration with a newer one? Even though the role of the older restoration would be instrumental to the preservation of the value of the nature adjoining it, this would not mean that an explanation of the rationale for not altering the older area, could only be in terms of the value the older restoration served for those other areas. Beyond this ascription of value, we would say that the restored bit of nature was a restorative component of a larger ecosystem. In that sense then it would have to have some form of natural value in itself beyond its instrumental value. And I think that value—which here represents the value of the original benevolent restoration—is more like art restoration than art forgery.

Imagine by comparison that we have a great painting which consists of three separate panels. Because of the size of the work, in order to transport this painting from museum to museum we have to disconnect the panels from each other and then reassemble them later. In the last move of this painting, the middle panel was put in a separate truck for transport to the next location. On the way to the exhibit, the second truck containing the middle panel has an accident and the middle panel is damaged. Fortunately the next museum contains a skilled art restorationist who is able to carefully repair the damaged panel so that once the work is put back together the entire painting appears in tact. Certainly, the middle panel has been altered and no longer has its originary value. As Elliot would argue, it is no longer the same painting "executed by a man with certain intentions, at a certain stage of his artistic development, living in a certain artistic milieu." (83) But in a sense it is the same painting, just one that has been benevolently restored in order to preserve the cohesiveness of the entire three panel painting. What is the value of the middle panel? Its restored value is parasitic on its role in the larger painting; it provides for continuity of the work by connecting the two exterior panels. If one argues that this value must be described as an instrumental value to the intrinsic value of the original exterior panels, then surely this is an instrumental value that the middle panel had all along. The middle panel always provided this connection between the two exterior panels, and nothing about the restoration of the damage actually changes the function the middle panel served at all. But is the intrinsic value of the middle panel diminished by its restoration? No. The value of the overall work must be ascribed to the entire painting, not its individual panels. If we were to try to separate the value of one panel from the others then the question is of course begged why we do not separate out the value of individual parts of the work by some more finer grained division. Instead we take the whole work to be of value. If we must take the work as a whole, then what is the value of the three paneled work once the middle panel has been repaired? Though there may be some criteria on which we could assess its market value as being different, I do not think that its originary value, as Elliot puts it, is different at all.

Back to restoration. If we were to say that benevolent restorations are like art restorations—like the repair of the middle panel in the previous example—and malicious restorations were more akin to art forgeries, then we would have a reason for arguing that benevolent restorations do not decrease the originary value of a bit of nature, especially when viewed on a larger scale of the surrounding nature that either is or is not original. If it is the case that the restored nature helps to maintain the originary value of the larger original ecosystem then the benevolent restoration is even more valuable—which I take it is consistent with Elliot's conception of the value of nature. Our judgment that such a restoration, as a part of a larger whole, preserves something of Elliot's valid intuition that the origins of nature are important to a determination of its value. But as in the case of art restoration, benevolent restorations do not diminish the value of nature and may well add certain forms of value to certain kinds of nature.(2)

But there are problems with this equation of benevolent restoration with art restoration. Twenty years ago, Mark Sagoff published a persuasive article in *The Journal of Philosophy* on the aesthetic value of art restorations.<sup>(3)</sup> There, Sagoff argued, primarily using the example of the Vatican restoration of Michelangelo's *Pietà*, that not just any art restoration counted as a legitimate restoration of a work. Sagoff distinguished between integral restorations—a restoration that "puts new pieces in the place of original fragments which have been lost"—and purist restorations—a restoration which "limits itself to clearing works of art and to reattaching original pieces that may have fallen." (p. 457) Following the 1972 attack on the *Pietà*, the Director of the Vatican Museum, Professor Roedig de Campos, took charge of an effort to painstakingly replace as much of the statue as possible with the original broken parts and to integrally restore what remained from a plaster cast which had previously been made of the work. Though I will not reproduce the entirety of Sagoff's argument here, I am persuaded that he is correct in concluding that the originary value of the *Pietà* was lost as a work of art once the integral restoration was begun (or perhaps, once the damage occurred, Sagoff is ambivalent on this point). If the restoration which I hypothesized with my three paneled painting was a purist restoration then it could be distinguished from an integral restoration. Integral restorations on the other hand do not preserve originary value, and on Sagoff's account, can diminish, and even destroy that value.

But where does this leave us with respect to nature where most ecological restorations seem to represent integral restorations? Ironically, it clarifies a means for distinguishing different kinds of restoration while perhaps leading to the conclusion that some kinds of benevolent restoration cannot help but being of a different form of value than the original nature that preceded it. Both Sagoff and Elliot reject the once dominant stream in aesthetics that knowledge of the process of production of a work of art is unimportant in either the appreciation or value of the work. Sagoff summarizes his objection to the view in this way: "we value one object way above another because it is the product of a different process." (456) Seen through Sagoff's analysis of the value of art, it is clear that the reason why Elliot does not like ecological restoration is because the product is the result of the wrong process. It is the result of a non-natural process, specifically a human process. This same process account of the value of art informs Elliot's originary account of natural value. The thing that makes a value originary is the kind of process which produced it. In this sense process and product are distinguishable but normatively bound.

Unfortunately though, the benevolent integral restoration still does not have the value of the original work. Why? Because the new work, in the case of the *Pietà*, is now no longer a Michelangelo but some kind of combined work with the curator. Similarly, any integral restoration of nature, even if it is benevolent, cannot have the same value as original nature. But Sagoff suggests that some restorations are nonetheless still better than others. The restoration of the *Pietà* would have been of less value, according to Sagoff, if it had been done in secret with the intent of fooling visitors to the museum. Though integral restorations do not reproduce originary value, they are comparatively better if they are benevolent rather than malicious.

However, this argument does not mean that there are not restorations that could be like a purist art restoration, and therefore would supplement rather than detract from the originary value of nature. For one thing, there are acts of restoration that are very much like purist art restorations: clean-ups are the most obvious cases, but more interesting ones involve the activation of existing micro-organisms in soils to allow the land to essentially clean itself up. No new "work" is produced, but suppressed elements of nature are allowed to once

again perform their functions. Perhaps more common would be a sub-class of purist restoration which we might call "rehabilitative" restoration. When restorationists go through an area cleaning out exotic plants which were introduced at some time into a site, allowing the native plants to reestablish themselves, then they are acting as purist art restorationists would in correcting the work of an integrative restorationist who had come before them.

Of course, in practice restorations are never clearly one kind of restoration—integral, purist, rehabilitative—and any particular restoration site will contain multiple and overlapping strategies of at least these three types of activity. How then do we value restorations? At this point in my thinking on this issue I am at two conclusions. First, we have to go back to the point of the scale at which we value something. Clearly scale does matter and the object of natural value, at least from a holist perspective, must be at the level of the ecosystem. Because an ecosystem is something that is not easily demarcated then restorations are at least more likely to serve as conduits for natural value than to be discounted as fakes or forgeries. Second, to the extent that we do not need a strict nature culture distinction to criticize Elliot's restoration thesis, then the ground by which we are to determine natural value based on a restored-original distinction is very unclear. Works of art are human creations, as are ecological restorations. If what determines the value of restoration as an object is not its status as a humanly created object, but instead its role in larger natural systems, then we can easily value restorations at a much higher level than Elliot is willing to admit. But even if we import some kind of distinction between human vs. non-human value into our account of the value of restorations (because restorations are human creations), those restorations that are benevolent, and ultimately self-sustaining, at least, must have something closer to an originary value than even the purist art restoration. The reason lies again behind this idea of Sagoff's that "the product must be appreciated in relation to the process." (470) If the motivation for the process is part of the process proper, in Sagoff's sense then the human restoration of nature must be of value in some very strong sense in comparison to the value of original nature. The value of the restored parts may only be different in degree from original nature, and not in kind. As such, benevolent restorations, like purist art restorations, do not represent fakes or forgeries.

## Notes

(1) Robert Elliot, "Faking Nature," *Inquiry* 25, 1982, pp. 81-93. All citations of this paper in this essay are from the reprint of "Faking Nature," in *Environmental Ethics*, ed. Robert Elliot (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 76-88. Parenthetical page references to Elliot will be to this work. Also see Robert Elliot, "Extinction, Restoration, Naturalness," *Environmental Ethics* 26:2, Summer 1994; and "Ecology and the Ethics of Environmental Restoration," in *Philosophy and the Natural Environment* (Cambridge UP, 1996).

(2) Alastair Gunn attempts this kind of distinction between ecological restoration as analogous to art restoration, but he mistakenly thinks it is sufficient to rebut the entirety of Elliot's claims. See Gunn, "The Restoration of Species and Natural Environments," *Environmental Ethics* 13:4, Winter 1991, pp. 291-310.

(3) Mark Sagoff, "On Restoring and Reproducing Art," *The Journal of Philosophy* LXXV: 9, September 1978, pp. 453-470. Parenthetical page references to Sagoff will be to this work.