

Two senses of “work”

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March 29, 2007

1 Outline

I’m going to address the theme of this session¹—the inquiry into what kind of thing is to be denoted by the word “work”—by clarifying two different, separate senses in which the word “work” happens to be used in the broad context of cultural informatics [Slide 1]. Sometimes, in that context, the term is used to refer to one kind of thing, sometimes it’s used to refer to another, and it seems as if it would be useful to distinguish those two referents as clearly as we can. Specifically, it’s important to recognize that “work” is used in quite different ways in *Cataloging cultural objects*² (and by extension the VRA Core) on the one hand, and in IFLA’s *Functional requirements for bibliographic records*³ (and by extension *Resource description and access*) on the other.

2 Works in CCO

So let’s take a look at *Cataloging cultural objects* (CCO) first [Slide 2]. The fundamental kind of thing that CCO is concerned with is the “cultural object,” and CCO defines what that category includes by specifying various subsets of the universal set of cultural objects. At the highest level, the set of cultural objects is divided into two subsets: (i) the set of works, and (ii) the set of documentary images—the use of “documentary” here indicating that not *all* images are to be considered as cultural objects, but only those that are images *of works*. (Note also that there is no suggestion that these two subsets are mutually exclusive, since some cultural objects—some photographs of works, for instance—can be considered to be both work and image, simultaneously.) In CCO, the category of works is further subdivided into three main subcategories: (i) works of visual

¹The panel session “What is a work?,” chaired by Richard Urban and featuring speakers Sherman Clarke, Jonathan Furner, and Tammy Moore, took place on March 29, 2007, as part of the 25th Annual Conference of the Visual Resources Association, held in Kansas City, MO, March 27–31, 2007.

²Baca, Murtha, et al. 2006. *Cataloging cultural objects: A guide to describing cultural works and their images*. Chicago, IL: American Library Association.

³IFLA Study Group on the Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records. 1998. *Functional requirements for bibliographic records*. München: K. G. Saur.

art, such as paintings and sculptures; (ii) built works, such as buildings; and (iii) cultural artifacts, such as decorative and functional objects.

There are two characteristics that are obviously shared by all cultural objects (in the CCO sense of that phrase), whether they are ultimately treated as works or as images. Firstly, cultural objects are *objects*: they are physical, they are concrete; whether they exist in analog or in digital format, they exist in the external world; they are particulars that are datable and locatable in space-time. Secondly, cultural objects are *cultural*: they are made by people; their existence is the result of human activity.

So, when CCO explicitly considers the question “What is a work?” [Slide 3], the answer given is that works are “distinct intellectual or artistic creation[s] limited primarily to objects and structures made by humans.” The modifier “physical” isn’t used in this definition, but it might as well be. When CCO goes on to separately characterize works of visual art, built works, and cultural artifacts, it is made clear at that point that such objects and structures are assumed to be physical, concrete particulars. Explicitly *excluded* from this definition of “work” are literary works, musical works, works in the performing arts, and other “intangible” culture.

The answer that CCO gives to the corresponding question “What is an image [of a work]?” [Slide 4] is that an image of a work is “a visual representation [or, to use a term that is commonly used elsewhere in CCO, a depiction] of a work.” In other words, an image of a work is something that can stand as “a [visual] surrogate for a work” that “documents” it, visually—just as a textual description can be thought of as a verbal representation of (or surrogate for) a work, that documents it verbally. As CCO says, images of works typically exist in photographic, photomechanical, or digital format. Of course, images of works are precisely the things that are held in visual resource collections.

Specifically excluded from the CCO definition of “image of a work” are those things that, while they are indisputably visual representations of works, are also indisputably intellectual or artistic creations, and are therefore works themselves [Slide 5]. So, according to CCO, paintings and drawings that happen to depict other works are never to be considered as images of works, but as works. (In actuality, a painting that depicts another work is *both* an image of a work and a work-in-itself.)

Photographs of works form a category of objects that are sometimes to be treated as images of works, and sometimes as works-in-themselves. The decision about an individual photograph should be made on the basis of “the stature of the photographer and the aesthetic or historical value of the photograph”—in other words, on the basis of the significance of the photograph, as an intellectual or artistic creation that itself may require documentation of the kind that works get, and that images do not.

This [Slide 6] is a simplified visual representation of (i) the entity-types (or entity-classes) that are defined in the conceptual model underlying CCO, and (ii) the types of relationships existing between those entity-types. Seven entity-types are represented here. Five of them are entity-types that we’re not too concerned about today. The important thing is to note that entities of the type

“Work” may be related both to entities of the type “Image” and to other entities of the type “Work.” In other words, any individual work may be depicted both by images and by other works.

When it comes actually to creating database records that describe entities and relationships of these types, CCO recommends that the work depicted in an image should be treated as a “Related Work” of that image [Slide 7]. Similarly, any image depicting a work should be treated as a “Related Image” of that work. If the work being cataloged is a work that happens to depict another work, the depicted work should be treated as a “Subject” of the work being cataloged. But if the depicted work is itself also described in its own catalog record, then it should also be treated as a “Related Work” of the work being cataloged—just as if the object being cataloged were an image.

CCO gives some very clear examples of how certain kinds of “problem cases” should be dealt with [Slide 8]. One such example is the common case of a photograph of a work where the photograph itself has artistic significance. In this case, both the work depicted in the photograph, and the photograph itself, should be treated as works. A Work record should be created at least for the photograph, and ideally also for the work depicted (in this case, the Eiffel Tower).

Another example is the case where there are two separate images in the collection: one of a particular building, and one of an architectural plan for the same building [Slide 9]. The CCO recommendation is to create Work records for both the building and the plan, each Work record related to each other and to a corresponding Image record.

And a third example is the complex case where there exists a 35mm slide copied from a lantern slide of an artistically significant photograph of a work that itself depicts another work [Slide 10]. There are at least two different solutions here [Slide 11], the choice between them being made on the basis of whether it’s the work depicted in the photograph, or the photograph itself, that has more significance, either in the context of the collection, or to the collection’s users.

3 Works in FRBR

The foregoing is an account of the sense in which “work” is used in CCO. It’s a quite different sense from the way in which “work” is used in IFLA’s *Functional requirements for bibliographic records* (FRBR). The difference is clearly noted in CCO itself, albeit in a footnote [Slide 12]. “*Work* in CCO is more concrete than *work* as defined in FRBR . . . The work in CCO is usually a physical entity, whereas that in FRBR is an abstraction or intellectual entity, such as a literary work or a musical composition.”

Here [Slide 13] is a much simplified version of FRBR’s entity–relationship model, for direct comparison with the one underlying CCO that we looked at a minute ago. Two important things to note here are (i) the distinction made in this model that isn’t made in the CCO model, between works and the kinds of things that FRBR calls expressions, manifestations, and items, and (ii) the

distinction made in the CCO model that isn't made in this one, between works and images.

So let's take a closer look at the definitions provided in the FRBR report of its so-called Group 1 entities [Slide 14]. A *work* is "a distinct intellectual or artistic creation . . . an abstract entity." An *expression* is "the specific intellectual or artistic form that a work takes each time it is 'realized' "; "the intellectual or artistic realization of a work in the form of alpha-numeric, musical, or choreographic notation, sound, image, object, movement, etc., or any combination of such forms." A *manifestation* [Slide 15] is "the physical embodiment of an expression of a work . . . [the set of] all the physical objects that bear the same characteristics, in respect to both intellectual content and physical form." An *item* is "a single exemplar [or instance] of a manifestation . . . a concrete entity . . . in many instances a single physical object."

One note I'll make here is that this use of "physical" in the definition of "manifestation" is rather odd, since a set or class of physical items isn't physical—its members might be, but the class itself is an abstraction, just as expressions and works in FRBR are abstractions. The main point is that, in FRBR-speak, it is the FRBR entity-type called "Item" (and not the one called "Work") that most closely corresponds with the CCO entity-type "Work." In CCO, works are concrete, physical objects. In FRBR, the only things that are concrete, physical objects are items. The other Group 1 entities in FRBR are all abstractions.

So let's try to make *this* discussion a little less abstract, and a little more concrete! According to FRBR, this [Slide 16] is how works, expressions, manifestations, and items are related to one another: works are *realized* through expressions, which are *embodied* in manifestations, which are *exemplified* by items. What does this mean in practice? Here [Slide 17] is a literary example. Imagine that I have in my hand a single copy of Ecco's 2003 edition of Edith Grossman's English translation of *Don Quixote*. That copy would exemplify or instantiate a distinct edition (or manifestation), which in turn would embody a distinct text (or translation, or version, or expression), which in turn would realize a distinct intellectual or artistic creation (or work). One way of looking at this might be to think about a hierarchy of sets and supersets and supersupersets of copies. In this view, the work that we call *Don Quixote* is ultimately the set of all the copies of all the editions of all its texts.

The point of FRBR's making these kinds of relationship explicit is to improve the design of catalogs and thus to improve catalog users' experiences. Before FRBR, most library catalog records would represent manifestations, and people searching on the titles of works would be faced with results lists that look something like this [Slide 18]—which is a display of the top eight results, sorted in no immediately discernible order, that one gets if one searches for *Don Quixote* in the title field of the CARLWeb interface to Los Angeles Public Library's current catalog.⁴ None of these eight records happens to point to an edition of the novel by Cervantes.

In contrast, this [Slide 19] is what one gets when one tries the same search on

⁴See <http://www.lapl.org/catalog/>.

OCLC Research’s FictionFinder,⁵ a “post-FRBR” catalog that neatly groups its results, initially by work, ranked in order of the number of manifestations in each work-set, and only then [Slide 20] by manifestation, this time ranked in order of the number of libraries holding physical copies.

Here [Slide 21] is a simple musical example to compare with the literary example of *Don Quixote*: my copy of the vinyl record released by Columbia Records in 1976 that encodes a 1975 recording of Abba performing a work created by Benny, Bjørn, and Stig.

But what happens if we try to think about works of visual art, rather than musical works or literary works, using this scheme of Works, Expressions, Manifestations, and Items (“WEMI”)? What happens if, for instance, we try to fit Magritte’s *La condition humaine* (1935) into this scheme [Slide 22]? Truth is, it doesn’t really work very well. We might even wish to ask ourselves, “Why bother?” The fundamental difference is that the painting, the *object*, like many other cultural objects, is unique. It’s not like a book or a vinyl record, of which multiple instances or “copies” exist. It’s not as if we really need to go to the trouble of counting the instances of manifestations of expressions of this work: there’s only one instance of this *work*, period. If we continue to think about manifestations, expressions, and works as sets, then we will presumably conclude that the work that we call Magritte’s *La condition humaine* (1935) has one member expression, which has one member manifestation, which has one member item. And it’s important to recognize that it’s not simply that this singularity is *actually* the case. It’s that, in the case of painting as an art form, it’s *necessarily* the case.

So something interesting is going on here. It seems as if FRBR’s “WEMI” scheme is applicable to *certain* kinds of cultural objects—specifically, the ones that CCO explicitly excludes from its definition of cultural objects—but not others.

4 Works in ontology of art

People working in cultural informatics aren’t the only ones thinking about these kinds of issue. In fact, philosophers have been thinking about them over a much longer period, and questions like “What is a work?” are central to the subfield of philosophy of art known as ontology of art [Slide 23].⁶ Other related questions considered in ontology of art include: What is the nature of the various sorts of relationship that exist between works of art and things of other sorts? And, in what does the identity of a work of art (of a given sort) consist? (For instance, are translations of novels, “cover” versions of songs, and “director’s cuts” of movies new works, or just different expressions of the same work?)

Why should we in cultural informatics take any interest in the results of work in the ontology of art [Slide 24]? The reason is the same as the reason for taking

⁵See <http://fictionfinder.oclc.org/>.

⁶Thomasson, Amie L. 2003. The ontology of art. In *The Blackwell guide to aesthetics*, ed. Peter Kivy, 78–92. Oxford: Blackwell.

account of the work in library science, most recently exemplified by FRBR but stretching back to Cutter, that emphasizes the importance of identifying the kinds of groups (or sets, or classes) to which objects belong, and providing catalog users with the means to browse or navigate among those classes so that they can find the objects they want.

So let's take a quick look at some of the findings, firstly of ontology of literature, and then of ontology of art in general [Slide 25]. Most contemporary philosophers treat literary works, such as *Don Quixote*, as types, where the word "type" is used in a special sense derived from Peirce, in which any given type is instantiated (or, more strictly speaking, instantiatable) by multiple tokens. The idea is that, just as there exist multiple separate occurrences of the same word, and multiple separate utterances of the same sentence, there can exist multiple separate instances of the same text.

But what criteria do philosophers use to decide whether two tokens are tokens of the same type [Slide 26]? Different people have come up with different ideas to take care of various problem cases in different ways,⁷ and I'm not going to go further into these today, except to specifically note one idea dating back to Charles Stevenson⁸ in the 1950s [Slide 27], which is relevant because his conception of what he called the "megatype" is similar to FRBR's conception of "work," and in fact serves as a bridge connecting (i) the ideas underlying FRBR's WEMI hierarchy, and (ii) the ideas underlying vocabulary control as it is applied in library science. Just as a concept can be viewed as a set of words that share the same meaning, and a proposition can be viewed as a set of sentences that share the same meaning, so a work can be viewed as a set of texts or translations that share the same meaning.

In ontology of art in general, there is continuous debate between proponents of what are called uniform theories and proponents of non-uniform theories [Slide 28].⁹ Uniform theories are those that explain the nature of all artworks, in whatever art form, in the same way. Among the proponents of uniform theories, there are unitarians and dualists. Unitarians argue that the Peircean distinction between types and tokens is not actually characteristic of any of the arts, not even the literary arts. I've provisionally characterized CCO as an application of a unitarian theory, since CCO similarly does not allow for the representation of type/token relationships (at least, not at the entity-type level). Dualists argue that the Peircean type/token distinction is in fact characteristic of all the arts, even the visual arts, in which at first glance it might not appear particularly useful to distinguish between the work we call *La condition humaine* and the particular object hanging on the wall that instantiates that work. I've provisionally placed FRBR in the dualist category, since FRBR similarly does not allow for simpler treatment of works of visual art.

Proponents of non-uniform theories, including Stephen Davies—arguably

⁷Howell, Robert. 2002. Ontology and the nature of the literary work. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60: 67–79.

⁸Stevenson, Charles L. 1957. On "What is a poem?" *Philosophical Review* 66: 329–362.

⁹Wolterstorff, Nicholas. 1992. Ontology of artworks. In *A companion to aesthetics*, ed. David Cooper, 310–314. Oxford: Blackwell.

the leading figure in contemporary ontology of art—argue that the type/token distinction is characteristic of some arts, but not others [Slide 29].¹⁰ According to this view, some art forms are characterized by the creation of what might be called singular works—paintings, hewn sculptures, Polaroids, many buildings—that do not have multiple instances. Other art forms are characterized by the creation of what might be called “type-works,” that can have multiple instances. The thing to note is that here we’re not just talking about literary works and musical works, but also several common kinds of works of visual art—cast sculptures, prints, and photographs from negatives, for instance.

5 Conclusion

What this all leads us to, in conclusion, is some questions for discussion: two and a half questions, to be exact [Slide 30]. The two main questions are: 1. Should CCO be modified in the light of FRBR?, and 2. Should FRBR be modified in the light of CCO? In FRBR, we have the explicit facility to represent the relationships between type-works and their instances. In CCO, this facility is buried below the level of the underlying conceptual model. Does that matter? Then, in CCO, we have the explicit facility to represent the relationships between objects and their images. In FRBR, this facility is buried below the level of the underlying conceptual model. Does that matter?

Then, finally, if images—that is, photographs from negatives, slides, and digital images—are themselves type-works in the sense that they can be instantiated by multiple copies, is it possible that the distinction in CCO between works and images at the entity-type level is less useful than a simple distinction between different sub-types of “Work”? In fact, isn’t it precisely their “type-workness”—their instantiability—that makes images distinctive? Could this recognition form the basis of a FRBRized CCO?

¹⁰Davies, Stephen. 2006. Varieties of art. In *The philosophy of art*, 81–108. Oxford: Blackwell.