AESTHETIC SYMBOLS AND THE ART WORLD

Nelson Goodman's account of aesthetics is a powerful theory. It manages to be both flexible and rigorous at the same time; engendering an impressive amount of systematization in its understanding of the highly variable phenomena we call art and aesthetic experience. In this essay I aim at a better understanding of Goodman's theory of the aesthetic, which I believe is irreducibly pluralistic.

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In part I, I give an overview of Goodman's theory of aesthetic symbols, relying primarily on his *Languages of Art*, or *LA* from now on (1976), but also sections and selected papers from *Of Minds and Other Matters* (1984), *Ways of Worldmaking* (1988a), and his *Reconceptions in Philosophy* (1988b), written together with Catherine Elgin. I focus first and foremost on his so-called 'symptoms of the aesthetic' and what sense they make as characteristics of the aesthetic. I conclude by suggesting that Goodman's account is irreducibly pluralistic about what counts as an aesthetic symbol. In part II, I discuss how, and to what extent, Goodman can accommodate and explain the particular role and importance of social context or institutions in facilitating aesthetic experience. By "the social context" of the aesthetic I mean approximately what Danto (1964) meant by the "artworld", the institutions, practices, theories and other social entities involved in producing, commissioning, presenting, criticizing and selling artworks (or, in more "Goodmanian" terms, objects that tend to be interpreted as aesthetic symbols).

I. The symptoms of the aesthetic

According to Goodman (1976), artworks are symbols, belonging to certain symbol systems, just like linguistic symbols. What tends to distinguish aesthetic symbols from non-aesthetic symbols are not some intrinsic features of the entity that mark the symbol in question (for example, the physical stuff that make up some painting), or being situated in a certain context (like a gallery), or a certain kind of non-cognitive attitude the experiencer takes toward the symbol (for example, focusing on the emotional states the symbol gives rise to instead of interpreting it), rather the distinction is a matter of certain syntactic and semantic relationships between, and features of, the symbols in the symbol system of which the object is interpreted as part of.

The symbol systems themselves, though, are constructed by us, so an object is therefore not intrinsically a symbol or not. It is (at least partly) up to the perceiver to see a particular marking or entity as belonging to one symbol system rather than another. As such an object can serve as many different symbols (or none at all), depending on how it is read. Aesthetic experience tends to arise, Goodman thinks, when one interprets objects by interpreting them as symbols belonging to symbol systems which have some of the following four features:

(1) *Syntactic density*: A system of symbolization has a symbol *scheme*, which is a collection of characters and the rules for their combination; the so-called syntax. In a syntactically dense symbol scheme, for any two characters, there are characters in-between them. The consequence is that for any two distinct marks, no matter how similar, they could be tokens of different character types. This is in contrast with an articulate syntax, like the one I'm writing this essay in, where the letter-tokens 'a' and '**A**' clearly instantiate the same character, but 'b' does not.

(2) *Semantic density*: In a symbol system the scheme is related to a field of reference that imbues the characters with meaning; the semantics. In a semantically dense system, for any two referents, there are possible referents in-between. The consequence is that for any two distinct characters, no matter how similar, they could be referring to distinct referents. So English is semantically dense, as many words are ambiguous or vague in meaning, for example the words 'bank'$_1$ and 'bank'$_2$ are qualitatively alike characters but

might have distinct referents (riverbank and financial institution).

(3) *Repleteness*: Repleteness is meant to further distinguish between forms of symbolization that are dense throughout (that is, both syntactically and semantically). Two symbol systems can be dense throughout, but one of them can be much more replete than the other. When a symbol system is highly replete, any feature of a mark might count towards identifying its character (and thus its meaning also). A smudge on the corner of an electrodiagram (a relatively *attenuated* mark) will not affect the reading of the diagram, but a smudge on a qualitatively alike *sketch* might carry some meaning and be relevant to the interpretation of the sketch. So, although both electrodiagrams and sketches are dense throughout, the symbol system of sketches is much more replete.

(4) *Exemplification*: Exemplification is a kind of re ference. An item possessing some feature x and referring back to the label 'x', is exemplifying 'x'. So, for example a tailor's swatch is exemplifying certain of its features, like color and texture, but not others, like small or square (Goodman, 1988a:64). Thus, exemplification is a kind of showing forth or exhibiting, pointing to the tailor's swatch we might say 'this is "red"'. In contrast to the *denoting* statement 'this is red' that indicates that the object possesses the given feature. Exactly which of its features a given object exemplifies is dependent on context and use of the object, but it is usually only a proper subset of the set of features the object possesses. This is why we cannot say that exemplification is the converse of denotation, since although "if x exemplifies 'F', then x is denoted by 'F'" is always true, the inverse "if x is denoted by 'F', then x exemplifies 'F'" can be false (as with 'square' in the case of the tailor's swatch).

This view of things can be complicated if we introduce the notion of *metaphorical* denotation, which is the application of a label to an object not standardly in the realm of reference of the given label. This re-mapping of the label to a new realm is metaphorical when it is guided by the prior use or meaning of the label in a non-arbitrary[1] way. Thus I can call a picture or painting sad, in a metaphorical way, when, under some suitable re-mapping, emotion words, like 'sad', 'happy', 'angry', and so on, are applied to color distributions on 2-dimensional surfaces (as opposed to emotional states of human beings and other animals, the standard realm of reference). Furthermore, once metaphorical denotation is established, an object can metaphorically exemplify its metaphorically possessed feature. Goodman calls this *expression* (1984:61), so when a picture or painting expresses some feature, say sadness, this means that the picture in question possesses the feature metaphorically. Goodman thinks that this is an important kind of reference in music (and of course expressionist painting).

Goodman (1988a) adds to this list of four symptoms a fifth, which is further discussed in the paper "Routes of Reference" found in his *Of Mind and Matters* (1984):

(5) *Multiple and complex reference*: Multiple and complex reference is when a symbol integrates several referential functions and let them in teract, either in a direct manner (multiple) or through a chain of different symbols (complex). For example, we could envision a painting that both *denotes* something (say a terminally ill girl on a bed next to her caretaker seated in a chair), *exemplifies* something (certain colors or shapes), and expresses something (the caretaker's grief and maybe the strange serenity of a dying child).[2] As a symbol this painting has multiple referential functions at once. Complex or chained reference can be envisioned as a series of links between different symbols related to a specific symbol. Goodman gives the example of a picture of a bald eagle (1984:62), the bald eagle-picture denotes a bird that exemplifies the label "bold and free" which in turn *denotes* and is exemplified by a country. As such a picture of a bald eagle might not itself directly denote and/or exemplify a country, but can do so via a chain of links to other symbols.

I now turn to the task of trying to understand why these are 'symptoms' of the aesthetic and also what makes *these* the symptoms.

Why 'symptoms'?

Importantly, none of these five features are, on their own, necessary or sufficient for aesthetic experience. Goodman

suggests that they *may* be conjunctively sufficient (if you have all of them, the symbol gives rise to aesthetic experience) and disjunctively necessary (you can only have an aesthetic experience if the symbol has at least one of them) (1976:254).[3] The point is to have a flexible framework that can account for many different art forms and ways of aesthetic symbolization. So, for example literature is written in a syntactically articulate symbol scheme (thus not dense), but may yet lead to aesthetic experience since a literary work has some of the other features such as semantic denseness. Also, having more or less of these symptoms does not make a symbol more or less aesthetic. Thus, the relationship between these features and aesthetic experience behave in much the same way as the relationship between symptoms and disease: diseases are associated with a list of symptoms that tend to correlate with them, but a patient might have the symptoms without the disease or the disease without the symptoms.

Another thing to note is that these are aspects of cognitive experiences we have when interpreting certain objects as parts of different symbol systems. Thus, as was noted earlier, any given object can probably be rightly interpreted as belonging to several different symbol systems (some aesthetic, some not). Goodman encapsulates this by saying that the crucial question is not "what objects are works of art" but "when is an object a work of art?" (1988a:66–67).

The answer, presumably, is that an object is an artwork when it is functioning as an aesthetic symbol part of a symbol system with some of the requisite features. This is why something with the shape of the letter 'A' printed on a large canvas is a potential artwork. If you read this mark as part of the linguistic symbol system of a language with a Latin alphabet, then you would hardly have an aesthetic experience. Read this way the symbol is articulate, attenuated and denotational; earmarks of the non-aesthetic. But approach the canvas in a different way, let the shape in front of you be part of a symbol system whereupon no finite amount of inspection will you be able to fully determine its character or reference, let any detail at all be relevant to the meaning of the symbol, and look for what this new symbol might exemplify. Now you are reading a symbol that is dense, replete and exemplificational; chances are that you might have an aesthetic experience.

Here is a question Goodman avoids tackling: is the relationship between the intrinsic features of the objects we find in the world and reshape for aesthetic purposes, and the symbol systems we construct to interpret them in, truly and completely arbitrary, as far as the objects and our cognitive faculties go? Or are some objects, *in themselves*, more fit for functioning as aesthetic symbols relative to our cognitive make-up? It seems Goodman would deny almost any contribution from the objects themselves in defining the aesthetic experiences we have of them (beyond minimally having some spatiotemporal properties we can grasp). Almost all work is done by the symbol systems which we construct and impose on what we observe, and we are quite free in constructing them any way we like. Thus, the idea of an un-interpreted object with qualities conducive to aesthetic experience prior to the construction of a symbol system in which it is to be interpreted, makes little sense to Goodman. One potential criticism of Goodman is to say that this radical constructivism might be a bit too radical. Potentially, the construction of symbol systems is more constrained than Goodman thinks, and one determining factor influencing our construction might be intrinsic features of the objects we interact with, together with facts about our cognitive and experiential faculties.

All the same, I think Goodman is right to talk about the symptoms and functions of aesthetic symbols as opposed to necessary and sufficient criteria for membership in a class called 'artworks'. This allows for a non-exclusive and tentative conception of what can count as artistic or aesthetic, and welcomes the denial that there is a particular aesthetic *essence* all artworks instantiate.

Why those symptoms?

Yet, we must ask ourselves: what sense does it make to enlist *these* features as symptoms of the aesthetic? Of course, the lesson from the last section is that we should not expect a highly unifying principle that binds these symptoms together in answer to our question. In a sense, to Goodman, there is no "*the* aesthetic", and consequently there might be diverse reasons for considering these symptoms (and maybe even others) as contributing towards aesthetic experiences. So, we cannot substitute the symptoms for a single underlying reason as definitive of the aesthetic, as that would give us what Goodman tries to avoid, namely the *one* essential functioning of an aesthetic symbol.

Having said that, Goodman makes some remarks on the motivation for choosing these specific symptoms in both *LA* (1976:252–253) and "On Symptoms of the Aesthetic" (1984:135–138). The main reason is that these features contribute to the *non-transparency* of the symbols in question, forcing us to remain attentive to features of the symbol itself (instead of what it is a symbol for). Non-transparency is not meant be to be a value-laden term; it is not bad *per se* for a symbol to be non-transparent. But

what is non-transparency?

Let us start with a contrast case of a relatively *transparent* (and non-aesthetic) symbol system: the set of characters are {'←', '→'}, the set of meanings {*left*, *right*}, and the relation between the characters and meaning {<'←', *left*>, <'→', *right*>}.[4] Let us assume that this system is syntactically simple (any compound of the characters are meaningless), and syntactically articulate (any marking will either pick out one and only one character or no character at all), from the field of reference we can see that it is non-ambiguous and semantically disjoint.[5] Now, in a situation where this symbol system serves as direction-showing system, these symbols are pretty transparent, that is to say, the meaning is easily accessible and one can read the direction any mark symbolizes without much thought (imagine stumbling upon one of them in a corridor with a left-right cross point, you would not be in doubt about where its pointing you). So, in seeing '←' I will almost immediately read this as pointing me *left*, I am led from symbol to the symbolized with little to no effort.

In contrast, a non-transparent symbol makes the interpretative task much more difficult (in certain symbol systems the interpretative task might be essentially open-ended); primarily by drawing attention away from what a symbol is a symbol of, towards features of itself and the task of interpretation. Non-transparency requires greater concentration on the symbol itself. This makes sense as one of the key aspects of aesthetic symbols and experiences because it helps us understand why in the case of the aesthetic (as compared to the non-aesthetic) there is a deeper and less arbitrary connection between what a symbol symbolizes and *how* and in what *form* it carries through its symbolization. Having characterized the symptoms above it is quite easy to see that they will in general add to the non-transparency of a symbol, but let us quickly describe why.

Denseness in general calls for greater care in discerning the character and reference of a given symbol; in some systems the determination of character or reference might even require an endless process. *Repleteness* calls for attention to many or all of the features of the symbol in determining its character and reference (like with the example of a *sketch* as opposed to an electrodiagram given above). *Exemplification* asks us to not go from the symbol to something denoted but from a feature of the symbol to some label; as such we must be attentive to the features possessed and exemplified by the object itself. For example, in literary texts as opposed to non-literary texts it can matter what properties the text itself has and exemplify, such as rhythm, rhyme, and even shape (as in the case of "concrete poetry" where the arrangement of the printed letters has a specific shape).[6] Lastly, *multiple* and *complex* reference requires a more careful mapping of the different referential functions and chains of association a given symbol has. Compare, as an example, the complexities involved in appreciating a picture of a bald eagle as a symbol for a country, in contrast to the recognition of actual bald eagles using a picture with a strictly denotative function from a book on ornithology.

Here, then, we have some considerations motivating the choice of symptoms above. Specifically, we are asked to reflect on the fact that the process of interpreting aesthetic symbols is usually somewhat open-ended and non-transparent, and these are here seen as key characteristics of such interpretation. Furthermore, it helps us understand why the aesthetic more often than not requires of us to be attentive (both in the creative and interpretive process) to what *form* the symbol takes. But, as warned against earlier, this would not exhaust the aesthetic according to Goodman; it is just more typical of aesthetic symbols for them to be non-transparent. As he writes at one point "I am not denying that expert revelatory description or depiction or exposition can constitute art" (Goodman 1984:136). Furthermore, this non-transparency is not necessarily meant to hinder us from achieving the goal of the interpretative process, namely understanding. But it might facilitate new and interesting, maybe even to some extent more rewarding, ways of understanding.

How satisfying is this account of the symptoms? One could imagine a kind of disappointment with the way I've told the story. We asked why *those* symptoms, and in answer we got some considerations that partly answers the question but essentially remains only a part. We saw that non-transparency is still not the one unique distinguishing feature from which aesthetic experiences arise, although it is very important to many of them. We have yet to hit upon the bedrock of the aesthetic. But should we think that there is such bedrock of the aesthetic to be found? If the answer is "no", I think we should be satisfied with an account that is *irreducibly pluralistic* about the nature of aesthetic experience. That is, there is no single feature common to every aesthetic symbol. I find motivation for such a view in Goodman and Elgin's (1988b) radical pluralism about the world itself. They claim that reality can be conceptualized in many ways, and though some conceptualizations are more legitimate than others (there are, so to speak, some standards in play); within the range of 'legitimate conception of reality' there will always be

found a plurality. In trying to account for aesthetics, then, it should not surprise us that there is no single principle or notion from which our aesthetic experiences flow.

II. The Art World

Let us change gears. So far we have tried to understand Goodman's theory; we now turn towards an attempt at assessing its strength. It is a theoretical virtue of an account that it is able to explain and unify several of the aspects of the phenomena for which it is an account. To test the merits of Goodman's theory in competition with other theories of art, we can investigate whether or not it can explain the same phenomena in an equally good or maybe even better way.

In *LA* (245–252) Goodman tries to do this for the role of emotion in aesthetic experience. Many theories of art take as their starting point the notion that aesthetic judgement is grounded in the sentiments, arising from some emotional or non-cognitive state in the experiencing subject. Goodman denies this, and thinks that aesthetic symbols, being *symbols*, are first and foremost meant to be interpreted and understood, an essentially cognitive task. That does not mean that Goodman's account banishes from view the role emotion *can* play in aesthetic experience. In fact, I think we learn something deeper about the role of emotion in aesthetic experience; they acts as *means* in the cognitive task of interpreting the aesthetic symbols, not the end. That is, the understanding is "endowed" with emotions in its attempt to grasp meaning (*LA* 1976:248).

The point here is to illustrate what I take to be part of the power of Goodman's account: it is able unify and tie together in explanatory satisfying ways many of the considerations that fuel other theories or accounts of art. What some theorists thought was *definitive* of aesthetic experience as such (emotions) is shown to be only one of many tools we have in connection with aesthetic symbolization and the cognitive task of interpreting them. Furthermore, we get an explanation for why that aspect of the aesthetic experience *can* play a role in Goodman's account. Thus the role of emotions have been subsumed and explained within the framework of the symbol theory of art.

I think we can add similar considerations for the notion of the "artworld"[7] and its role in connection with aesthetic symbols. As a social phenomenon the art world is an indubitable entity: what we call artworks are surrounded by people who produce, commission, preserve, promote, chronicle, criticize, sell and even theorize about them – this is the art world. But some philosophers have gone further than just characterizing these social phenomena. Frustrated by the difficulty of looking for the essence of art or the aesthetic, especially in the light of the proliferation of more modern art forms, like Duchamp's readymade art and Warhol's replicate art, some philosophers have suggested that it is necessary and, more importantly, sufficient for something to count as art as long as it is accepted as such by the social institutions we here call the art world. So, on some versions of so-called *institutional* theories of art it is definitive of something being an artwork, an object for aesthetic experience, that it has this status conferred upon it by the art world.

In light of Goodman's theory, I think this train of thought signifies confusion. It gets the explanatory agenda all wrong. On the picture in the above paragraph we are wondering why some objects are called 'art' and some are not, the institutional theory then wheels in social institutions to *explain* how certain objects become artworks (maybe by some act of *transubstantiation*, a mysterious process where the artists and high priests of the notorious artworld somehow confer the property of art onto certain non-art objects, turning wine into blood and bread into flesh). With Goodman's theory we get the chance to invert the explanatory relationship, it is not the social institutions that explain the existence of aesthetic symbols, it is the aesthetic symbols that explain the existence and use of the social institutions.

How so? The basic answer is similar as in the case with emotions. The social institutions surrounding aesthetic symbols act as *means*, facilitating the creation, interpretation and further development of aesthetic symbols, towards aesthetic experience. If artworks are symbols with a tendency towards non-transparency, it is not so strange that something like galleries, theaters, opera houses, the art market, art journals, and so on, arise: they help facilitate, by creating a more conducive environment, the interpretation and appreciation of aesthetic symbols.

Here it might be helpful with an analogy to science. Plausibly, the point of scientific activity is to achieve some degree of knowledge and understanding of reality. At the same time, to achieve these goals, we have created social institutions, like universities, research facilities, scientific journals, and so on. And although it might be interesting to study the social aspects of scientific activity, it would be, to most, confused to take science to be *nothing more* than those social aspects, to think that science is *defined* solely by its institutions. The same goes, I think for the artworld. Yes, aesthetic symbolization and interpretation tend to happen in certain restricted social contexts. But art (or aesthetics in general) does not reduce to these institutions.

The existence of such institutions are instead explained and motivated by the underlying account of artworks as aesthetic symbols. Thus, similar to the case of emotions, embedding objects that tend to play the role of aesthetic symbols in highly specific social contexts is not *definitive* of the status of the object as an artwork but simply a means to the cognitive end of interpreting and contemplating the aesthetic symbol.

Again, we find that Goodman's theory has a capacity to unify and explain. This time it is the role of the artworld that has been subsumed and explained within the framework of the symbol theory of art. To me, this is a more fulfilling account of the social dimension of aesthetic experience, explaining its function in facilitating the interpretation of aesthetic symbols. Also, this view might make available some further insights about how to evaluate and maybe normatively criticize our social institutions. Since they are only *means* towards other independent goals, we can ask to what extent they are functioning in accord with our goals, much in the same way the independent goals of science can inspire us to criticize and reform the social practices trying to achieve those goals.

Conclusion

In this essay we have looked at Goodman's theory of aesthetic symbols. First, we tried to understand the theory. We saw that the symptoms of the aesthetic allow for an interesting and flexible account of aesthetic experiences. We focused on the underlying notion of non-transparency, but also how the theory might suggest an irreducible pluralism about the nature of aesthetic experience, in the sense that there is no single feature common to every aesthetic symbol. Second, we tried to assess the theory's strength. I argued that the importance of the social institutions of the artworld, so central to institutional theories of art, can be subsumed and explained in a satisfying way by Goodman's theory of artworks as aesthetic symbols, adding to the strength of the theory.

Admittedly, the essay has been a philosophical love letter to Goodman's theory of art. The remark acts as a warning: infatuation brings with it rose-tinted glasses. But even through such a skewed perspective one can still hopefully observe some insights and beauties that will remain when the rose-tint gives way to clear daylight in which cracks and shortcomings might also come into view.

LITERATURE

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NOTES

[1]This is in contrast to an arbitrary re-mapping of a label, potentially making the label polysemous.

[2]The scene is taken from Edvard Munch's *Det syke barn* (*The Sick Child*), which is not, in fact, the name of a single painting but rather six slightly different paintings and a number of lithographs, drypoints and etchings.

[3]Confusingly enough, he retracts this suggestion in his *Of Mind and Other Matters* (1984:135). A charitable interpretation of this is that Goodman never claimed that the symptoms are conjunctively sufficient and disjunctively necessary under the everyday concept of the aesthetic, but instead he claimed that maybe they ought to be so under a philosophically stringent concept of the aesthetic. This gains support in light of (Goodman 1988:68–69).

[4]This set is the semantic relationship that maps each symbol in the character-set to a meaning, hence the ordered pairs.

[5]The system will also, in a direction-showing context, be relatively attenuated (the only feature that matters is the position of the head of the arrow relative to its body). Interestingly though, the system is arguably exemplificational as the symbols have as features being oriented (relative to any facing observer) in the direction the symbol denotes, thus showing the direction by referring to its own possession of the given directionality.

[6]A nice example of this is George Herbert's poem "Easter Wings" from 1633, printed sideways in the shape of a pair of wings.

[7]The term is taken from Danto (1964) but I do not attempt here to give a precise account of Danto's views.