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Symbols and Symptoms: Nelson Goodman's Aesthetics

In *Ways of Worldmaking*, Nelson Goodman attempts to answer the question "How does an artwork function?" In so doing, Goodman characterizes the arts as a symbol system and distinguishes between four different forms of symbolic reference: saying, depicting, exemplifying, and expressing. These forms of reference can be seen through an analysis of "Lady Lotus" from the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts, which shows how attending to the different forms of symbolic reference allows the interpreter to see more of what is aesthetically available in the artwork.

1. The Mechanics of the Aesthetic Version and Symbolic Reference

One of Goodman's main theses in *Ways of Worldmaking* is that the world is structured by people into different versions. Consider the two statements "The sun always moves" and "The sun never moves," for example. The statements are both true and yet seem to contradict each-other (Goodman 2). We may be able to explain this difference in terms of "frames of reference," but demanding of the world that it be symbolized outside of any frame of reference is to demand something impossible. As Goodman puts it: "Our universe, so to speak, consists of these ways rather than of a world or of worlds" (3). In this way, our "world" is really a collection of *versions* which symbolize the worlds in different ways: science has one version of the world, while philosophy has another, etc. This theory of versions is where Goodman places aesthetics: aesthetics is a version which characterizes the world in a distinct way.

Aesthetics, as a version, have a symbol system: a painting or song can reference or suggest many different things, such as a person, a war, or even an emotion like sadness. How many different ways can a symbol reference or suggest something, though? To answer this question, Goodman provides four distinct modalities or forms of symbolic reference: *saying*, *depicting*, *exemplifying*, and *expressing*. Saying is the simplest of the forms of symbolic reference. The English language, for example, has 26 distinct symbols in the form of letters, which can be combined to make even more symbols in the form of words. These words often (1) reference something in the world, such as "this plant" or "Mount Kilimanjaro" which pick out particular entities in the world, or (2) they can also be used to reference abstract ideas or emotions, such as the word "goodness" or "fear." This form of symbolic reference leads to literary art, such as novels or short stories. Because of the symbol system, the art produced through "saying" is *allographic*, that is, the art has an original (such as a manuscript of a play) and different *valid* publications of that original.

Depicting is much different from saying in that it is only truly capable of referencing the world. A picture of a chair, for instance, references a chair which exists (or existed) in the world. But how could one take a picture of *goodness*? This leads to two different ways of depicting: representational and non-representational depicting. A picture which depicts something real, like a horse, represents a piece of the world; we can ask the picture "What are you a picture of?" Goodman explains that we cannot do this with other kinds of pictures: "To say that the tapestry 'represents a unicorn' amounts only to saying that it is a unicorn-picture, not that there is any animal, or anything at all that it portrays" (60-61). Such pictures depict something, but that depiction is non-representational; we cannot ask "What are you a picture of?" but must instead ask "What kind of picture are you?" Also, where saying almost exclusively results in allographic

art, depicting almost always results in autographic art: paintings and sculptures are special in their singularity, and any kind of duplication is considered an *invalid* fake or copy.

Exemplifying, in contrast to saying and depicting which focus on the *content* of the artwork, is far more about the *physical properties* of the artwork itself. In order to illustrate the nature of exemplifying, Goodman uses the idea of samples (Goodman 63). Someone who is looking to upholster furniture may begin looking at samples of cloth, which are small pieces of fabric used as symbols for larger pieces of fabric. If one were to point to a small fabric sample and say "I would like 5 square yards of this," they would be disgruntled if they got 100 pieces of the fabric, all the same size as the original sample. What this example illustrates is that samples exemplify certain properties and, in certain cases, not exemplify others. The sample of cloth in a furniture store exemplifies the texture, color, and weave of the fabric, but not the size. "The implications for our problem concerning works of art," Goodman explains, "may now be apparent. The properties that count in a purist painting are those that the picture makes manifest, selects, focuses upon, exhibits, heightens in our consciousness — those that it shows forth — in short, those properties that it does not merely possess but *exemplifies*, stands as a sample of" (65). In this self-referential way, art emphasizes certain properties of itself in order to indicate what in the artwork is important. A painting by Monet certainly does not exemplify the chemical composition of the paint it was made with; a sculpture made with biodegradable material in an exhibit on climate change, however, may exemplify its chemical composition to the highest degree. In other words, exemplification is when an artwork emphasizes its own physical properties and, in doing so, acts as a symbol.

Expression is a kind of metaphorical exemplification: it is the process of an artwork exemplifying its own metaphorical properties. So an artwork in Pablo Picasso's blue period may

exemplify its blue colors, but it also expresses the metaphorical idea of sadness: “the gloom expressed by a poem or picture is in my view possessed by it,” Goodman writes, “albeit metaphorically rather than literally; that is, the poem or picture expressing gloom is (metaphorically) gloomy” (Goodman 31). So expression, though it does not explicitly represent anything physical in the world like exemplifying does, is still a form of symbolic reference. Goodman notes: “not only representational works are symbolic. An abstract painting that represents nothing and is not representational at all may express, and so symbolize, a feeling or other quality, or an emotion or idea” (61). Thus expression is as much a form of symbolic reference as exemplification, though it operates metaphorically instead of representationally.

So we end up with the following four forms of symbolic reference: saying, depicting, exemplifying, and expressing. But Goodman notes that there are cases in which something can be completely ordinary and then, by virtue of a change in its staging, be seen as an artwork the next moment. Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes*, for example, are completely indistinguishable from ordinary brillo boxes, and if one were to see them on the street they would most likely walk by without considering them for even a moment. But somehow these ordinary objects “transform” into a work of art. Goodman explains what this means for the question “What is art?”:

> Part of the trouble lies in asking the wrong question — in failing to recognize that a thing may function as a work of art at some times and not at others. In crucial cases, the real question is not ‘What objects are (permanently) works of art?’ but ‘When is an object a work of art?’ — or more briefly, as in my title, ‘When is art?’ (66-67).

In other words, what classifies an object into an artwork is its entry into symbolic reference: “just by virtue of functioning as a symbol in a certain way does an object become, while so functioning, a work of art” (67). The brillo boxes, when laying on the street, would not be acting as a symbol to reference anything. As soon as they are put in a museum, though, they begin to act as a symbol and, by virtue of referencing, become a work of art.

2. A Goodmanian Analysis of a Picture

It may be helpful to see a specific example of Goodman's analysis of art and forms of symbolic reference. To do so, I will use Hung Liu's "Lady Lotus" from 2016 in the Kalamazoo Institute of Art's *Unveiling American Genius* exhibit. The picture as shown on the KIA website can be seen in Figure 1 in the addendum.

The picture is immediately striking as one walks through the exhibit, partially because of the vibrant colors of the foreground contrasted with the muted colors of the background. But as one approaches the painting, it becomes clear what the picture depicts: it shows an asian woman holding a flower in front of a landscape. Which of the representational symbols are important, though? The answer to this question is not immediately clear. The woman is centered in the foreground with vibrant colors, and so it is likely that she is an important symbol in the artwork, but what about the flower she holds, the decorations in her hair, or the houses and hills in the background? This is a common symptom of aesthetic experience which Goodman calls "syntactic density." Syntactic density makes it so that what the symbols are, or where the symbols begin or end, is unclear. In addition to syntactic density, the painting contains "relative repleteness." That the work is relatively replete stems from an inability to identify the important aspects of each of the symbols: is the size or color of the mountain important? What about the bright yellow color of the flower in the woman's hand, or the paleness of the woman's face? The syntactic density and relative repleteness mean a lot for identifying what the artwork exemplifies: the melting appearance of the woman's decorations and the flower are clearly exemplified by the artwork, as it is the element most in the foreground and it contrasts with the straight, precise lines which outline the plants and houses in the background.

The viewer is also confronted with the issues of what Goodman calls "semantic density" and "multiple and complex reference." Semantic density arises when the meanings of symbols are affected by very minute details, and multiple and complex reference arises when symbols mean several things or mean something by virtue of their integration with other symbols. What "Lady Lotus" expresses, for instance, is a result of interaction between the different symbols: the sadness expressed by the dark, melting decorations is affected by its interaction with what the flower expresses and the stern expression on the woman's pale, bright face.

None of these symbolic functions act in isolation. They all come together to create meaning. The artwork *depicts* an asian woman in front of a landscape with houses in the background. The artwork *exemplifies* its property of melting, its color contrast between the foreground and background, and the woman's stern facial expression. The artwork *expresses* sadness through the melting colors of the decorations and the flower alongside the strong lines and mute colors of the background. All of these aspects are even further affected and integrated by what the description of the artwork *says*:

> Hung Liu attended the Central Academy of Art in Beijing, where she was trained in the Chinese Socialist Realist style. After waiting seven years for the Chinese government to approve her passport, Liu pursued her Master's Degree in painting at U.C. San Diego. Liu is widely known in the US for her paintings of Chinese workers and women assigned to sexual servitude under the Communist regime. For Liu, photography carries an especially personal significance. During China's Cultural Revolution, when Liu's father was imprisoned by Mao Zedong's Communist forces, her mother destroyed all photographs of him to protect the family from further persecution. Lady Lotus is based on a photograph the artist found in 1990. Combining photography and painting, Liu exposes the political hypocrisy of an authoritarian regime.

Upon reading the description, many interpretations of the picture's meaning become more fully-formed: the sadness evoked by the melting decorations become an analogue for the melting of a façade, and the sadness evoked by the work becomes even stronger when contrasted with the sternness of the woman, now possibly an exemplification of forced passivity. Perhaps the

melting of the flower further expresses the loss of innocence, a theme which is also referenced by the title: “Lady Lotus.” The houses in the background plausibly become a representation of the oppressive Communist Chinese society, which the woman turns away from while she literally and metaphorically degrades. So the different forms of symbolic reference create an emergent, intense meaning and aesthetic experience.

3. Conclusion

Nelson Goodman characterizes artworks as a symbol system which includes four different forms of symbolic reference. These forms, together with different “symptoms of the aesthetic,” lead to the following view of an artwork: Begin an artwork is not a permanent quality, but rather something objects do at particular times by way of functioning as a symbol and referencing something in itself or the world.

Addendum

Figure 1: Hung Liu, Lady Lotus, 2016, mixed media on panel. Collection of the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts.

Works Cited

Goodman, Nelson. *Ways of Worldmaking*.