

GOODMAN

LANGUAGES OF ART

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NELSON GOODMAN

LANGUAGES OF ART

AN APPROACH
TO A THEORY OF SYMBOLS

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PREFACE

The lines of thought that joined my interest in the arts with my inquiries into the theory of knowledge began to emerge some ten years ago. An invitation a couple of years later to give the John Locke Lectures at Oxford in 1962 led to the organization of accumulated material into six lectures. These formed the basis for the present much revised and expanded chapters.

My indebtedness to institutions and individuals is uncomfortably high in relation to the results. A year at the Center for Cognitive Studies at Harvard University and subsequent support by the National Science Foundation (under grant GS 978) and the Old Dominion Foundation made possible a wider and more detailed investigation than could otherwise have been undertaken. As a philosopher squarely in the Socratic tradition of knowing nothing, I have depended upon experts and practitioners in fields where my study has had to intrude. Among these are:—in psychology, Paul A. Kolers; in linguistics, S. Jay Keyser; in the visual arts, Meyer Schapiro and Katharine Sturgis; in music, George Rochberg, Harold Shapero, and Joyce Mekeel; in dance and dance notation, Ina Hahn, Ann Hutchinson Guest, and Lucy Venable.

I have also profited from discussions with my graduate students and with philosophers and others at the University of Pennsylvania, Oxford, Harvard, Princeton, Cornell, and other universities where versions of some of these chapters have been given as lectures. Finally, such virtues and faults

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as the book may have are in part due to the help of my research assistants, especially Robert Schwartz, Marsha Hanen, and Hoyt Hobbs. Much of the proofreading and the indexing has been done by Lynn Foster and Geoffrey Hellman.

Harvard University

Second Edition

This edition incorporates some important if not extensive changes. The definition of *density throughout* (IV, 2; IV, 5) is strengthened to preclude gaps that were inadvertently admissible under the earlier version. Suggestions by A. J. Ayer and Hilary Putnam helped here. The property of being representational (VI, 1) is now defined for symbol systems rather than symbol schemes. And incidentally, the reader may be as relieved as the author that some rewording (VI, 5), without change in theory, has banished the polysyllabic monstrosity: "exemplificationality".

1976

INTRODUCTION

Though this book deals with some problems pertaining to the arts, its scope does not coincide very closely with what is ordinarily taken to be the field of aesthetics. On the one hand, I touch only incidentally on questions of value, and offer no canons of criticism. No mandatory judgments are implied concerning any work I cite as an example, and the reader is invited to substitute his own illustrations. On the other hand, my study ranges beyond the arts into matters pertaining to the sciences, technology, perception, and practice. Problems concerning the arts are points of departure rather than of convergence. The objective is an approach to a general theory of symbols.

"Symbol" is used here as a very general and colorless term. It covers letters, words, texts, pictures, diagrams, maps, models, and more, but carries no implication of the oblique or the occult. The most literal portrait and the most prosaic passage are as much symbols, and as 'highly symbolic', as the most fanciful and figurative.

Systematic inquiry into the varieties and functions of symbols has seldom been undertaken. Expanding investigation in structural linguistics in recent years needs to be supplemented by and integrated with intensive examination of nonverbal symbol systems, from pictorial representation on the one hand to musical notation on the other, if we are to achieve any comprehensive grasp of the modes and means of reference and of their varied and pervasive use in the operations of the understanding. "Languages" in my title

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should, strictly, be replaced by "symbol systems". But the title, since always read before the book, has been kept in the vernacular. The nonreader will not mind, and the reader will understand—as the reader of my first book understands that the more accurate title would be "Structures of Appearance".

The six chapters, from their titles and their origin in lectures, might seem to be a collection of essays on loosely related topics. Actually, the structure of the book is rather intricate; two routes of investigation, one beginning in the first chapter and the other in the third, merge only in the last. No such simple warning, however, will overcome another difficulty some readers may face: while a layman should have little trouble with most of the book, he will encounter terms, paragraphs, and sections that assume some background in technical philosophy; and much of Chapter IV will be hard going for any stranger to elementary logic. Nevertheless, by reading around the technical passages, almost anyone can gather enough of what is under way to decide whether to make the effort needed to understand what he has skipped.

Layman or not, the reader must be prepared to find his convictions and his common sense—that repository of ancient error—often outraged by what he finds here. I have repeatedly had to assail authoritative current doctrine and fond prevailing faith. Yet I claim no outstanding novelty for my conclusions. I am by no means unaware of contributions to symbol theory by such philosophers as Peirce, Cassirer, Morris, and Langer; and while I reject one after another of the views common to much of the literature of

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aesthetics, most of my arguments and results may well have been anticipated by other writers. Yet since any attempt to trace the complex pattern of my agreement and disagreement with each or even any of these writers would give a purely historical matter disproportionate and distracting prominence, I can only make this blanket apology to those who may in effect already have written what they read here. However, where I have consulted specific works by psychologists and by writers on the several arts, I have tried always to give detailed references.

Frequently some result of my own earlier philosophical work has been brought to bear here, but I have tried not to regrind old axes. For instance, if some of the following pages violate the principles of nominalism, that is only because it seems unnecessary for me to show, for present purposes, how a nominalistic version may be formulated.

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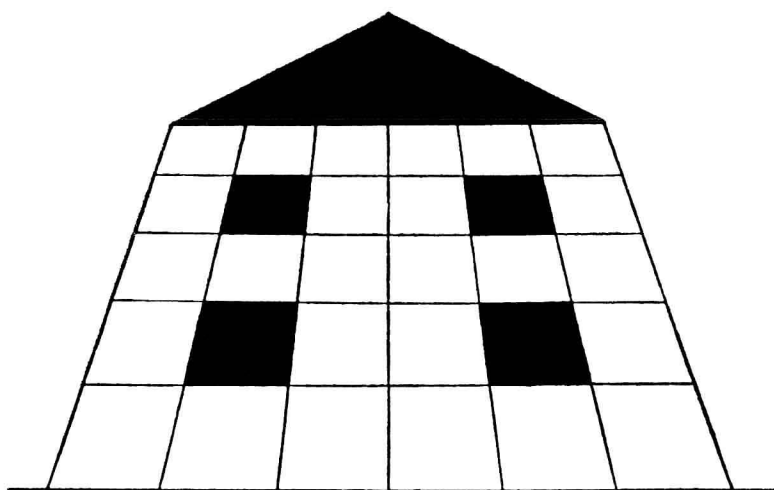
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Reverse

Drawing from Paul Klee's *Pädagogisches Skizzenbuch* (Munich, 1925; 2nd American edition, New York, Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1953), p. 41; reproduced here by permission of the publishers.

I

REALITY REMADE

*Art is not a copy of the real world. One of the damn things is enough.**

1. Denotation

Whether a picture ought to be a representation or not is a question much less crucial than might appear from current bitter battles among artists, critics, and propagandists. Nevertheless, the nature of representation wants early study in any philosophical examination of the ways symbols function in and out of the arts. That representation is frequent in some arts, such as painting, and infrequent in others, such as music, threatens trouble for a unified aesthetics; and confusion over how pictorial representation as a mode of signification is allied to and distinguished from verbal description on the one hand and, say, facial expression on the other is fatal to any general theory of symbols.

The most naive view of representation might perhaps be put somewhat like this: "*A* represents *B* if and only if *A* appreciably resembles *B*", or "*A* represents *B* to the extent that *A* resembles *B*". Vestiges of this view, with assorted refinements, persist in most writing on representation. Yet

* Reported as occurring in an essay on Virginia Woolf. I have been unable to locate the source.

more error could hardly be compressed into so short a formula.

Some of the faults are obvious enough. An object resembles itself to the maximum degree but rarely represents itself; resemblance, unlike representation, is reflexive. Again, unlike representation, resemblance is symmetric: *B* is as much like *A* as *A* is like *B*, but while a painting may represent the Duke of Wellington, the Duke doesn't represent the painting. Furthermore, in many cases neither one of a pair of very like objects represents the other: none of the automobiles off an assembly line is a picture of any of the rest; and a man is not normally a representation of another man, even his twin brother. Plainly, resemblance in any degree is no sufficient condition for representation.¹

Just what correction to make in the formula is not so obvious. We may attempt less, and prefix the condition "If *A* is a picture, . . .". Of course, if we then construe "picture" as "representation", we resign a large part of the question: namely, what constitutes a representation. But

¹ What I am considering here is pictorial representation, or depiction, and the comparable representation that may occur in other arts. Natural objects may represent in the same way: witness the man in the moon and the sheep-dog in the clouds. Some writers use "representation" as the general term for all varieties of what I call symbolization or reference, and use "symbolic" for the verbal and other nonpictorial signs I call nonrepresentational. "Represent" and its derivatives have many other uses, and while I shall mention some of these later, others do not concern us here at all. Among the latter, for example, are the uses according to which an ambassador represents a nation and makes representations to a foreign government.

DENOTATION

even if we construe "picture" broadly enough to cover all paintings, the formula is wide of the mark in other ways. A Constable painting of Marlborough Castle is more like any other picture than it is like the Castle, yet it represents the Castle and not another picture—not even the closest copy. To add the requirement that *B* must not be a picture would be desperate and futile; for a picture may represent another, and indeed each of the once popular paintings of art galleries represents many others.

The plain fact is that a picture, to represent an object,² must be a symbol for it, stand for it, refer to it; and that no degree of resemblance is sufficient to establish the requisite relationship of reference. Nor is resemblance *necessary* for reference; almost anything may stand for almost anything else. A picture that represents—like a passage that describes—an object refers to and, more particularly, *denotes*³ it. Denotation is the core of representation and is independent of resemblance.

If the relation between a picture and what it represents is thus assimilated to the relation between a predicate and what it applies to, we must examine the characteristics of representation as a special kind of denotation. What does pictorial denotation have in common with, and how does it differ from, verbal or diagrammatic denotation? One not implausible answer is that resemblance, while no suffi-

² I use "object" indifferently for anything a picture represents, whether an apple or a battle. A quirk of language makes a represented object a subject.

³ Not until the next chapter will denotation be distinguished from other varieties of reference.

cient condition for representation, is just the feature that distinguishes representation from denotation of other kinds. Is it perhaps the case that if *A* denotes *B*, then *A* represents *B* just to the extent that *A* resembles *B*? I think even this watered-down and innocuous-looking version of our initial formula betrays a grave misconception of the nature of representation.

2. Imitation

"To make a faithful picture, come as close as possible to copying the object just as it is." This simple-minded injunction baffles me; for the object before me is a man, a swarm of atoms, a complex of cells, a fiddler, a friend, a fool, and much more. If none of these constitute the object as it is, what else might? If all are ways the object is, then none is *the* way the object is.⁴ I cannot copy all these

⁴ In "The Way the World Is", *Review of Metaphysics*, vol. 14 (1960), pp. 48-56, I have argued that the world is as many ways as it can be truly described, seen, pictured, etc., and that there is no such thing as *the* way the world is. Ryle takes a somewhat similar position (*Dilemmas* [Cambridge, England, Cambridge University Press, 1954], pp. 75-77) in comparing the relation between a table as a perceived solid object and the table as a swarm of atoms with the relation between a college library according to the catalogue and according to the accountant. Some have proposed that the way the world is could be arrived at by conjoining all the several ways. This overlooks the fact that conjunction itself is peculiar to certain systems; for example, we cannot conjoin a paragraph and a picture. And any attempted combination of all the ways would be itself only one—and a peculiarly indigestible one—of the ways the world is. But what is *the world* that is in so many ways? To speak of ways the world is, or ways of describing or picturing the world, is to speak of world-descriptions or world-pictures, and does not imply there is a unique thing—or indeed