(with Nelson Goodman), *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 46, 1987, 219-233; reprinted in *Analytic Aesthetics*, ed. Richard Shusterman, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989, 190-196; and in *Estetyka w swiecie*, ed. Maria Golaszewska (in Polish).

CHANGING THE SUBJECT

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Abstract: We argue that the analytic turn enabled aesthetics to shift its focus to the study of symbols. With this reconception, a variety of traditional aesthetic problems, such as the paradox of ugliness, dissolve; others, including the role of emotion and the importance of excellence, are reconceived. This enables us to see how arts function cognitively -- how they contribute, when effective, to human understanding.

1. Incarceration

'Art aspires to beauty; science, to truth. Art is creative; science, descriptive. Art appeals to emotion; science, to reason.' Convenient clichés segregate the arts from the sciences, expressing the widespread conviction that each would be contaminated through association with the other. Philosophy long sustained popular opinion, demarcating purportedly impenetrable boundaries between domains. But border crossings were common; and neither art nor science suffered for them.

Only philosophy suffered. Strangled by its own strictures, it could not explain the interanimation of aesthetic and scientific concerns. Moreover, the domestic affairs of a discipline are inextricably tied to its foreign relations. So philosophy's failure filtered inward, spreading confusion throughout aesthetics and the philosophy of science.

Traditional aesthetics conceives of works of art as artifacts, the aesthetic attitude as a form of receptivity, aesthetic experience as the satisfaction derived from the appreciation of aesthetic value. It thus frames its problems in terms of the familiar duality of subject and object.

The conception of a problem directs and circumscribes efforts to solve it. So traditional philosophy of art takes its task to be delineating the essential properties of the subjects and objects in its realm. It searches for shared features that qualify objects, attitudes, experiences, and values as aesthetic. Failing to find them, it resorts to stipulation.

Convinced, e.g., that aesthetic merit must derive from a single property common to all good art, it calls that property beauty, conveniently overlooking the implausibility of claiming that Goya's Disasters of War and Botticelli's Birth of Venus are alike in being beautiful. The paradox of ugliness springs to life, born of the conviction that beauty is essential to great art.

The pattern recurs. Under their normal interpretations, terms fail to mark the requisite distinctions. Redefinition is always an option, but stipulative definitions are uninformative. The 'pleasure' derived from both Medea and The Magic Flute, like the 'beauty' shared by The Disasters of War and The Birth of Venus, is so denatured it is unprojectible. Neither affords a basis for classifying undecided cases.

Any work has many properties. A painting is a risky investment; a sculpture, a doorstop; an opera, a welcome opportunity for a nap. But to perceive only these features is not to see the work as art. To do that allegedly requires an aesthetic experience of the work.

But what makes an experience aesthetic? Art often excites emotion. And emotion, by tradition, is antithetical to cognition. So aesthetic experience must be a feeling -- a non-cognitive reaction to works of art. Since we obviously value such experience, it must be a type of pleasure,

enjoyment or satisfaction. All this naturally follows from reasonable premises once the duality of cognition and emotion is granted. We need not investigate the apprehension of art to find these things out.

Subjectivism threatens. If feeling is decisive and knowledge irrelevant, ignorance does not discredit bliss. Moreover, if the pleasure a work produces determines its aesthetic value, popularity is the mark of great art.

Hardly a welcome conclusion. To avoid it, theorists construe aesthetic experience as a highly refined emotion -- one the Philistine is too coarse to feel. Only appropriately situated, appropriately sensitive individuals are supposed to be susceptible to such fine feeling. Unsurprisingly, controversy surrounds the identification of the favored subjects and objects. It is odd, though, to expect to escape subjectivism by taking some subjects' reactions to be determinative of merit.

Interpretation causes trouble too. Understanding is plainly cognitive. So the non-cognitivist must choose between objectionable alternatives, concluding either that interpretation yields no understanding, or that the understanding it yields contributes nothing to the aesthetic experience of the work.

We thus come to overlook the interpenetration of cognitive and aesthetic concerns, settle for the lesser among evils in choosing criteria for interpretation and evaluation, and swallow any number of additional unpalatable consequences because they seem forced upon us by a seemingly natural and inevitable conception of aesthetics -- one grounded in the dichotomies of subject and object, emotion and cognition, essence and

accident. That these dichotomies are imposed a priori rather than derived from our encounters with art makes them all the more unshakeable. To elude such unwelcome results requires a reconception of the subject, resources, and objectives of aesthetics. This is what analytic philosophy provides.

2. Liberation

With the analytic turn, philosophy abandons the attempt to police shifting and inconsequent boundaries. It reconceives philosophy's projects, recognizing that understanding neither begins nor ends with absolutes.

Instead of trying to explicate fleeting feelings and ephemeral ideas, analytic philosophy focuses on public manifestations. Thoughts are not trapped in the mind; they travel widely, borne on words and deeds. And however they may behave in private, when appearing in public, they are subject to canons of acceptable behavior.

By identifying those canons and controlling for their contributions, analytic philosophy undertakes to determine what our words and deeds commit us to. Initially the task seemed simple: Distill out convention, leaving content behind. But it soon became clear that convention and content are fused. Ideas are inseparable from their expressions; expressions, inseparable from their languages. Still, utterances can be analysed, their meanings and referents disclosed. Logic and linguistics supply the tools of the analyst's trade.

Initially, analytic philosophy focused on literal descriptive language. Its contributions to aesthetics, though salutary, were slight. By

attending to what we say about art, it revealed tensions between the theory and practice of art criticism. The principles we advocate often clash with the ones we employ; the reasons we endorse, with the ones we adduce. The avowed aspirations of critical discourse frequently diverge from its actual endeavors. In short, analytic scrutiny showed that criticism is riddled with failures to practice what it preaches.

Still, talk about talk about art is not talk about art. Nor is understanding what we say about art understanding art -- unless what we say about art is right. And metacriticism is powerless to determine that. So if analytic aesthetics is merely metacriticism, it is unable to address the main issue: It has nothing to say about art.

But analytic aesthetics need not end with metacriticism. For works of art refer, and thus are symbols. And the analytic techniques originally devised to explicate language can be extended and emended to apply to symbols of other kinds. One approach to this task is sketched below.

3. Art as Symbol

To construe a work as a symbol is to embed it in a language or symbol system. The system's syntax determines the identity of its signs; its semantics fixes their reference. One task of analytic aesthetics is to map out systems suited to art. Another is to determine how they resemble and differ from other systems.

Comparisons can be fruitful. Juxtapositions can reveal how the effects works achieve and obstacles they overcome derive from the (shared or separate) resources their symbol systems provide. Picasso's variations on

Las Meninas illuminate not just Velázquez's work, but the possibilities open to painting as an art. And Alpher's musical variations on Picasso's variations carry aesthetic understanding across media.[1]

Interdisciplinary confrontations may be equally informative. We find that science scorns vague, ambiguous, and imprecise symbols; art welcomes them.[2] In science, symbols normally refer singly and directly; in art, reference is often complex, multiple, and indirect. Scientific symbols are fairly attenuated; aesthetic ones, relatively replete.[3] Science thus seeks nearly invisible windows through which its objects can be clearly discerned. Art tends to focus on symbols themselves.[4] This is no accident. A discipline's aspirations and objectives shape and are shaped by the symbols it employs.

Nevertheless, science is not completely alien to art. For syntactic and semantic categories cross disciplinary lines. Syntactic density is common to scientific and artistic drawings; syntactic differentiation, to scientific and literary discourse. Proofs as well as poems literally exemplify their forms and may metaphorically exemplify properties like elegance, economy, and power. In science and literature, metaphor bridges gaps, forging connections between remote realms.[5]

Delineation of kinships and contrasts is far from complete. Analytic philosophy provides sophisticated techniques and a suitable framework for investigating them. Instead of segregating the arts and the sciences, it integrates them, dismantling stifling stereotypes that denigrate both.

Contemporary analytic philosophy recognizes no Archimedean point -- no position outside the fray from which to monitor or mediate the battle

between the gods and the giants. And from within, there is no sign of pitched battle, only local squabbles. These are as likely to pit science against science, art against art, as they are to set a science against an art.

This reconception of aesthetics revitalizes arts education. If artistry is the fortuitous commingling of inspiration, creativity, and genius, education has little to offer. We can hardly hope to impart receptivity to the muse! But prospects for educational effectiveness improve when works of art are conceived as symbols in syntactically and semantically structured systems. Minimally, fundamentals can be taught. A student can learn the 'grammar' of a system and develop skill in manipulating its symbols. Fluency can be inculcated, even if eloquence cannot.[6]

Learning a language does not insure that a speaker will have anything interesting, insightful, or important to say. It provides him with the ability to say what comes to mind, and with conceptual categories for framing his thoughts. Mastery of other symbol systems yields similar benefits, supplying the rudiments of an art without which creativity would be illusory; genius, idle; inspiration, mute.

Through its study of symbols, analytic philosophy maps a common ground where the interests of art and science intersect. This enables us to investigate artistry and arts education scientifically. We can explore the physiological and psychological bases of symbolizing, and inquire into the efficacy of various teaching methods. We can study the mastery of a symbol system, learn whether it is enhanced or inhibited by mastering other

systems, or by developing other skills. The value of controlled experiments here is plain. Noting, for example, that both computer languages and musical notation are digital, we might test for correlations between the ability to write programs and the ability to write music. Answers are far from obvious; research, far from complete. But preliminary studies have already yielded promising results.[7]

This reconception might seem to anesthetize art, to benumb aesthetics. But it does neither; for reason does not exclude passion. So aesthetic experiences may be at once cognitive and affective. Our revision of aesthetics displaces but does not disavow emotion. It takes the feelings works evoke, not as aesthetic ends in themselves, but as modes and means of understanding.[8] Refined emotions, like discriminating perceptions, are aesthetically valuable because they enable us to discern and distinguish subtle but significant aspects of a work.

Apprehension is not pure receptivity, but constructive engagement. Nothing is 'given' in sensation or reflection. The properties we find in a work of art and in our responses to it are products of experience, expectation, categorization, and skill. By altering the background, we modify the conditions that inform and structure a work. We discover different things in it, place different interpretations on it. Aesthetic acuity is not a natural endowment, but a synthesis of carefully honed skills. We learn to see what had been invisible; to hear what had been inaudible; to feel what had been insensible. By enriching our stock of categories, sharpening discrimination, augmenting knowledge, fine tuning

expectations, we deepen our understanding of art.

Even merit functions cognitively. Curiosity quickens when we learn that practically indistinguishable works differ in value. The news goads us to search for salient differences. Challenged to account for an unexpected evaluation, we discover what to look for, what to look at, what to overlook in works of a given kind.

So merit, like emotion, transforms from end into means.[9] We do not become connoisseurs to distinguish good art from bad; we learn to distinguish good art from bad to become connoisseurs -- people who understand art, and through art their worlds.

4. Interpretation

Construing works of art as symbols transforms the task of interpretation. No longer an exercise in speculative psychology, it need not plumb the mind of the artist or the critic or the spectator. Interpretation is closer to cryptography -- a matter of decoding signs whose makeup and meaning are not immediately evident. The signs are publicly available; and previously effective interpretive strategies may be called into play. But code breaking is not automatic. Precedents may be insufficient, and a work may belong to several systems at once. Our reconception thus yields no recipe for interpreting individual works. But it corrects common misapprehensions that often confound our endeavors.

It discredits the conviction that interpretation is inevitably subjective. Since a work is a symbol, its interpretation depends on the syntactic and semantic rules of symbol system(s) it belongs to. These

rules are intersubjective, even if discovering them is hard. We must glean them from their applications as a linguist gleans a grammar from observed language use.

Misinterpretations abound. We can no more tell what an unfamiliar work means 'just by looking' than we can tell what an alien utterance means 'just by listening'. To interpret a symbol correctly requires mastering its symbol system(s). And mastery is not given in the apprehension of the symbol. So a work does not mean whatever anyone takes it to mean.

Nor does it mean whatever an elite cadre of critics contends. Even if their readings are usually right, expertise does not make for rightness. Like skilled translators, astute critics may overlook an ambiguity, slight a subtlety, neglect a nuance, and so misinterpret a work. Even an expert can err.

Despite the manifold opportunities for error, several interpretations of a work may be equally effective, each answering to and illuminating aspects of it. None is all-encompassing. So it would be dogmatic to insist that one is right, all others wrong. The best policy is to accept any interpretation that satisfies the highest interpretive standards. A work of art then admits of multiple right interpretations. Art is inexhaustible because no interpretation or collection of interpretations can claim to deliver the last word on a work. There is no last word.

5. Analytic Aesthetics

Pluralism and open endedness may seem antithetical to the analytic enterprise. For analytic philosophy is widely believed, by supporters as

well as detractors, to promise algorithms that determine the meaning and reference of every symbol in its purview. Such a promise is not easy to keep. Still, prospects improve if we restrict our scope. So early analytic philosophy intentionally skirted aesthetics. It recognized the folly of expecting a rule to capture the meaning of a powerful aesthetic symbol. But it hoped to find rules for the simpler signs of science and everyday language.

By now we realize that not even literal, descriptive language admits of analysis by routine application of antecedent rules. No rule mandates: "'Vegetable' literally means just this and nothing more; literally refers to just that and nothing else", any more than a rule mandates: "The white whale means just this and nothing more; refers to just that and nothing else". What a symbol means depends on its use, its context, and its history, as well as on the syntax and semantics of the languages or symbol systems it belongs to. Language is too wily to be snared by an abstract, general system of rules.

Once we recognize that we neither have nor need algorithms for the interpretation of literal terms, the absence of algorithms for interpreting other symbols looks less troubling. The strategies we employ to interpret literal, descriptive language can then be profitably extended to accommodate symbols of other kinds. And our understanding of non-verbal and non-literal symbols can illuminate the workings of literal language.

Analytic philosophy no longer purports to deliver complete and final specifications of meaning. But it retains its emphasis on symbolization. To understand a discipline requires knowing how its symbols function.

Pluralism and open endedness do not exempt works of art from the analytic philosopher’s scrutiny. They challenge him to construct techniques sensitive enough to disclose the richness and complexity of aesthetic functions. If the task is endless, he’ll never be unemployed.

NOTES

[1]See Nelson Goodman and Catherine Z. Elgin, Representations (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), chapter 4.

[2]Israel Scheffler, Beyond the Letter (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), pp. 6-7.

[3]Nelson Goodman, Languages of Art (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co, 1976), pp. 252-255; and Ways of Worldmaking (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1978), pp. 67-68.

[4]Nelson Goodman, Of Mind and Other Matters (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 137.

[5]Catherine Z. Elgin, With Reference to Reference, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1983.

[6]Goodman, Of Mind and Other Matters, pp. 150-157.

[7]Cf. Howard Gardner and David Perkins (eds.), Art, Mind, and Education Urbana: University of Illinois Press, forthcoming.

[8]Goodman, Languages of Art, pp. 248-252.

[9]Nelson Goodman, Problems and Projects, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1972), pp. 120-121.