

Modal Aesthetics

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There is an old controversy about the cognitive value of art. Do works of art teach us something or not? Aesthetic cognitivism answers this question affirmatively. Berys Gaut says that aesthetic cognitivism conjoins two claims:

The first, an epistemic claim, holds that art can nontrivially teach us; the second, an aesthetic claim, holds that this capacity to teach partly determines art's aesthetic value. (2006, p. 115)

Here, I will say nothing about the second of these claims and will confine myself to what may be called the “epistemology of art”, focusing on the relation between knowledge and art. I want to make some remarks about how and what art can teach us.

I.

The claim that art can teach us something has been challenged. One can, for example, easily note that purely instrumental music or non-figurative arts cannot teach us in the sense that a novel or a play might arguably be able to do. However, there may be a cognitive account of art that permits us to say that even purely instrumental music and non-figurative arts can teach us something. Such an account supposes that we do not identify *learning something* with *acquiring propositional truths*. In this vein, Nelson Goodman says:

Much of knowing aims at something other than true, or any, belief. An increase in acuity of insight or in range of comprehension, rather than a change in belief, occurs when we find in a picturesque forest a face we already knew was there, or learn to distinguish stylistic differences among works already classified by artist or composer or

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writer, or study a picture or a concerto or a treatise until we see or hear or grasp features and structures we could not discern before. (1978, p. 21-22)

Progress in understanding may mean a new way of seeing things, rather than the discovery of truths. It perhaps permits us to discover properties of things we were formerly unable to perceive prior to developing what might be called “aesthetic understanding”. This kind of understanding cannot be limited to narratives and representational arts (mainly literary arts) or to movies. It is also pertinent to painting, sculpture, music, architecture, and dance. Goodman’s generous conception of aesthetic cognitivism moves him to a form of ontological pluralism. He says, for instance:

When we leave an exhibit of the works of an important painter, the world we step into is not the one we left when we went in; we see everything in terms of those works. (1984, p. 192)

Such a view can be extended to dance, for example. When you have seen Preljocaj’s duo, *Annonciation*, it changes your apprehension of various things in the world, including surely the Christian notion of annunciation, even if it is not easy to say how, or even what, has been modified.

However, even though I have a certain sympathy with Goodman’s view, I think that it is a bit exaggerated. The world I step into when I leave the Centre Georges Pompidou is the same vale of tears I quitted before entering the building to see an exhibition. To say that the world has changed is just a way of saying that I have been impressed; it is not a genuinely ontological remark. I agree with Goodman that works of art as symbols suppose our mastering of logical operations, among them exemplification, literal and metaphoric, and many others. So aesthetic appreciation is not only closely related to cognitive activities, but is actually one of them. And, to be sure, it cannot be described as a purely contemplative or purely sensible, non-rational, non-cognitive experience. But this does not mean that an exhibition of paintings affords us access to another world made by an artist, nor is this the sort of cognitive achievement we must attain through art. If aesthetic cognitivism requires ontological relativism, as Goodman evidently thinks, then it seems to me to carry a metaphysical and epistemological price tag that is much too high. I will not develop this line

of argument any further here, because I want to focus mainly upon narratives, including fictions, which do not necessarily suppose such an account. Rather, they suggest something like propositional claims that could teach us something, without necessarily giving us new perspectives on the world, or even, as Goodman suggests, new worlds to explore.

Against aesthetic cognitivism, one can also note that what strikes us about fictions is that a great many of them, mainly novels and movies, are illusory, vulgar, immoral, and, finally, boring. They could hardly teach us anything. One way to answer to this objection would be to insist that we focus upon the greater works. We should focus on what are considered to be the best fictional works in the history of literature — those that are supposed to provide lessons for humanity, such as Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. But by reading even this novel, what is it that one learns? And even if it were possible to determine the thesis defended by Dostoevsky — or implicit in the novel, independently of what Dostoevsky may have wanted to transmit — what are the arguments that permit one to take the thesis seriously and thus be genuinely taught? A literary critic would not concern himself with this question. He wants only to discern the *global significance* of the novel and not to indicate through an argument of three or four sentences what Dostoevsky's novel shows us. Such an approach might be appropriate in trying to show what Newton's *Principia* has brought humanity to understand, but it has little or no application to a novel, even a novel that teaches us something important. And even if there is something right in claiming cognitive value for a novel like *Crime and Punishment*, is it clear that attention to the “global significance” of such a novel really teaches us something? If we are unable to indicate what we have learned, in the way that we could do for Newton's *Principia*, can we plausibly claim to have learned something or, indeed, anything?

Jerome Stolnitz (1992) speaks about the “cognitive triviality of art”. His example is *Oedipus Tyrannus*, one of the great Greek tragedies, a work of the same educational dimension as *Crime and Punishment*, and one of those that we would introduce in a course where literature is supposed to play an educating role. What is this global significance of the *Oedipus* tragedy? It can teach us that unexpected things happen in life, and that one never knows what will happen. But do we even have to be educated about such things? Don't we know them without having talked

about them? The “lesson” of *Oedipus Tyrannus* amounts to little more than what I and my charming baker woman might say to one another when I buy a *baguette* from her. Looking at the first page of *L’Est Républicain*, the local newspaper, I could offer the deep philosophical remark: “There are a lot of misfortunes in the world.” And she could answer: “Oh, Mr. Pouivet, you are so right, and I will not call someone happy until all the hours of his life have passed.” She and I are speaking like the chorus in the *Oedipus* tragedy. In fact, you may have noticed that I have just put into our mouths exactly what that chorus says. This indicates to us that fictions, even the greatest ones, are typically full of banalities, such as those that might be exchanged in the course of a daily conversation at the bakery. This is true also for Conrad’s *Lord Jim* or Bergman’s *Cries and Whispers*. How could they possibly have anything to teach us? We learn “deep truths” of this kind through garden variety experience, and we have no need of works of art to acquire such “wisdom”.

Critiques of aesthetic cognitivism, in its various guises, are thus not without foundation. The Goodmanian notion of rightness as opposed to truth, and the notion of *world-versions* as opposed to *correspondence* to a supposedly unique world, both flirt with relativistic and post-modern ideas of a kind that many of us have little sympathy with. And I agree with Jerome Stolnitz that “compared to science, above all, but also history, religion, and garden variety knowing, artistic truth is a sport, stunted, hardly to be compared.” (1992, p. 342)

However, I still consider myself to be an aesthetic cognitivist. First, I accept the two defining claims of Berys Gaut: (1) that art can nontrivially teach us, and (2) that this capacity to teach partly determines art’s aesthetic value. Second, I also accept that there is a sense in which aesthetic cognitivism does not amount only to Gaut’s two claims, but includes the idea that our apprehension of works of art is a form of cognitive experience that requires cognitive operations of the mind. This is the sort of Goodmanian cognitivism — not directly related to the unrealistic account I disapproved of just now — that I espoused in my book *Esthétique et Logique*. I also defended the related idea that understanding and correct appreciation of works of art supposes the ability to grasp their aesthetic properties, and that this is in the main a cognitive process. This is the reason why I insisted, in my book *Le réalisme esthétique*, upon the im-

portance of what I called “aesthetic virtues”, which are akin to epistemic virtues. Like the latter, aesthetic virtues are acquired dispositions that we need in order to apprehend real features of the world around us, including works of art.

I see many good reasons to be circumspect about aesthetic cognitivism, in its several forms. But I also think that our intuitions to the effect that art can teach us, and that aesthetic experience is cognitive, are correct in important ways. One of the reasons for defending aesthetic cognitivism has been its focus on the role of imagination. I want now to consider this aspect.

2.

Berys Gaut defends the cognitivist claim by focusing on the role played by imagination. He says that “one can ... learn from imagination, and this has particular importance in the way that art can teach us, in guiding our imaginings” (2006, p. 116). Gregory Currie has also defended something close to this (1997, 1998): Literature, for example, is supposed to aid us in our native pursuit of knowledge and to do this by exploring different kinds of possibilities. This means that fictions allow us to discover logical and conceptual possibilities through imagination, and these are basic human possibilities.

There is, however, an objection brought by Berys Gaut himself:

[T]here is a confirmation problem here, for one could imagine that something would occur, or be permissible, yet one’s imaginings could be mistaken; and if one can be mistaken, one needs confirmation that one has imagined correctly. (2006, p. 117)

If a fiction can teach us something, we must be able to check that it does not mislead us. To eliminate this objection, Gaut suggests that:

There is way in which imagination can provide a degree of confirmation in such cases ... Part of the explanation of how we can learn from imagination is that we can affectively respond to imagined states of affairs ... What we imagine is itself revealing of who we are ... (2006, p. 118)

But is this sufficient to answer the objection? I am not sure. And this is exactly why the aesthetic cognitivist needs, I think, what could be called “modal aesthetics”, that is, an account of the kind of modal knowledge that is made possible through fictions. Modal aesthetics would be a special branch of what Peter Van Inwagen calls “modal epistemology”.

One often says that we can engage in the sort of make-believe that the contemplation of fictional scenarios evokes without being constrained by what we take to be factual. We have no trouble imagining that Sherlock Holmes solves mysteries, that an archaeologist named Indiana Jones, whose female students are all in love with him, has extraordinary adventures, and that a hobbit named Frodo Baggins carried a magic ring with him. And when we imagine fictions, we are supposed to be unconstrained even by what we take to be possible. For example, we accede to the pretense that a character can travel back in time. It seems to be not too difficult for novelists and films-makers to get people to believe in imaginary scenarios that oppose what they really believe. “Otherwise, fantasy and science fiction would not be popular genres”, as Gregory Currie says (2002, p. 214).

Some philosophers, following Hume, affirm that there is a phenomenon called “moral imaginative resistance”: Even if we are unconstrained by facts when we imagine far-fetched and implausible scenarios, we have, by contrast, a strong difficulty in imagining fictional worlds that we take to be morally deviant. For example, we would have a lot of difficulty imagining that murder or rape could be good things. If a character in a novel is a murderer and a rapist, how could it be possible for us to form a picture of him that fails to take this into account? We would resist accepting a scenario that presented him as acting admirably. Even if I can make believe that the earth is flat, I am nevertheless unable to make believe that murder and rape are good things.

I will not discuss here this very interesting phenomenon of moral imaginative resistance. What interests me for the moment is only the idea that making believe is generally unconstrained, even by possibility. This point seems to be obvious to those philosophers who accept the notion of “moral imaginative resistance”. Even if these philosophers think that we cannot believe at will, they accept the idea that we can, at will, simulate believing in make-believe: we can, so to say, decide to imagine that something is

possible. But I am not at all sure that this is really so.

Reading a novel or watching a movie, we can be struck by the patent impossibility of the story. This does not mean that we are unable to accept the elementary principle of fiction: it can make sense even without resemblance to real persons and facts, and even if it is not true to the world. When looking at a movie like *Blade Runner*, we do not say it is impossible because robots could never be so similar to human beings that Rachel — a supposedly last-generation, perfect machine — could be as charming and attractive as the movie depicts. The opening chapter of this movie invites us to make believe that such-and-such a thing happens at a certain date in Los Angeles, as is usual at the beginning of fictions. What I want to focus on is that we sometimes cannot imagine that things could turn out in the way proposed in fictions — of whatever kind they might be, science-fiction or not. There is not only moral imaginative resistance but also *non-moral* imaginative resistance. It is not directed to things like time travel, the existence of hobbits, or sexy academics who undergo extraordinary adventures. We do not believe such things, but we easily “make-believe” them. What I will call *modal imaginative resistance* is directed primarily at the way fictional characters act. Sometimes, when reading a novel or watching a movie, *we simply cannot imagine* that somebody acts in the way that a certain character does. As Berys Gaut remarks (2006, p. 119), we can imagine a scene, entertaining the propositions which describe it. But at the same time, *we can't imagine it*, in the sense of complex imaginative projection involving human action.

There is a kind of imagination by which we can consider ourselves as being relevantly different than we actually are. And this is of course what novels and movies often invite us to experiment with — to discover, through fictions, human possibilities: what we could be. But this does not always work. And it seems that fictions are also interesting when we *resist* the possibilities that they offer. Fictions are, in short, sometimes non-starters where certain possibilities are concerned. Some philosophers — those who consider that we *decide* to make believe — exaggerate our ability to do this. Sometimes we simply cannot make believe, being unable to imagine that things could proceed as presented in a novel or a film.

The way fiction teaches us is by improving our disposition to determine what is possible or not, what might be taken as a serious alternative or not;

so the failure to be able to imagine something is at least equally important to our success in making believe. To develop the virtue of discriminating between serious alternatives and epistemologically stupid or morally disgusting ones is one of the main abilities we can acquire. Modal imaginative resistance has both epistemological and moral significance. Sometimes we think that things could not possibly turn out in a certain way — and this is epistemological; while sometimes we think that things must not turn like that — and this is moral. In the latter case, we can be struck by the fact that an author's suggestion that things could happen in a particular way means that he wants us to consider seriously a possibility that is not morally acceptable.

3.

I now want to explain why fictions play a crucial role in the acquisition and development of the kind of modal imaginative disposition by which we both imagine, and also resist, what is offered to us as a possibility.

In our actual lives, we acquire a sense of certain possibilities by putting ourselves in danger. We hesitate between two careers, two loves, two lives. We imagine that something other than what we choose is possible; sometimes discovering that it was, after all, an illusion. Sometimes, on the contrary, we discover too late that we had a possibility that we failed to exploit. And we may come to regret our actual choices. Regrets are closely related to our modal dispositions. Fictions can help us to imagine possibilities without the affective difficulties, moral pains, and existential dangers we confront in true life. This is especially the case when we see incompatible possibilities between which we must choose, but without knowing what would be best and, worse, without even knowing whether there is a best choice to be had. In such a case, fictions are like test tubes that help to develop our *modal disposition*. But, in turn, the modal contents of fictions are controlled by this same disposition. This is why we can often resist what are offered as possibilities. There is a kind of reflective equilibrium between the two: We modify our sense of possibilities when a fiction convinces us that something we had not thought of or had considered as crazy or disgusting seems, finally, not only possible but even an important possibility that we cannot afford to neglect; and we imaginatively resist fictions

when we think them to be incompatible with our best modal intuitions. I belonged to the generation of boys who still discovered passionate love by studying Corneille and Racine at the age of fifteen and understood that love was an open possibility — a terrible one, but not to be neglected. And I must say that I also always resisted the possibilities proposed in Sade's novels, even to the extent of thinking that these were not even real possibilities but only fake possibilities: a sort of modal treachery, not to be taken seriously.

This implies that fictions do not teach us about actual situations in possible worlds, as David Lewis might have said. They do not even teach us something about possibilities, in the sense of determining which things are possible or not. But they improve our modal intuitions and make us able to be confident in these intuitions. Fictions help us to acquire and train modal dispositions. And, I insist, they do this not only by developing our ability to enter into fictional situations and making us believe in such situations, but also via the important phenomenon of modal imaginative resistance, whereby we *cannot* imagine some of the things that are proposed to us. Fictions can play a vital role in our apprehension of possibilities, which are modal properties of the world.

I would like to see this kind of idea developed much further. This would, as I said, constitute *modal aesthetics*. In a sense, many papers by Gregory Currie could be seen as belonging to modal aesthetics, leaving aside the question of the extent to which I agree or disagree with his particular views. I will now give an example of my own. It is rather crude, but it will perhaps help to explain further what I mean in speaking of modal aesthetics.

Peter van Inwagen says that “many of our modal judgments are analogous to judgements of distance made by eye” (2001, p. 246). These judgements are evidently not infallible. They can be pretty accurate in circumstances not remote from the practical business of life, but quite inaccurate and misleading in other circumstances. “We are able to discern the modal status of some propositions in a way that, like our intuitive judgment of distance, is ‘non inferential’” (p. 246), van Inwagen says. For example, we understand what it means to say that the table might have been two feet to the left of where in fact it is, or that John Kennedy could have died of natural diseases. So, we have non inferential, modal knowledge of the

world around us: of what is possible, impossible, or even necessary. And in the practical business of life, such knowledge is indispensable. When I park my car, I judge the distance by eye, and I know whether it is possible or impossible to enter a parking space without touching the cars parked at either end.

Clearly, we are effective in using our disposition to detect possible, impossible, and necessary things in the practical business of life. We are, of course, not infallible. The table could have been two feet to the left of where it is. No problem, we are good at seeing this kind of possibility. Our world is not simply the one in which the table is where it is, but *also* the one in which it might have been two feet to the left. One could say to me: “Roger, I think that the table would be in a better place if we pushed it two feet to the left”. I would answer: “This is a possibility, but two feet to the right would be far better, don’t you think?” “No. *Impossible!*” Well, this shows that even if I share many views with this person, we have different modal intuitions. This is quite different than if a philosopher says: “It is possible that I exist and nothing material exists”. In this case, I must confess that I am not sure that I have any modal intuition which corresponds to this formula. Frankly, I do not see what it means. Philosophers say things like that, and I am even able to repeat them in philosophical discussions. I might say that what is described is a *logical* possibility, and students might perhaps take this possibility seriously, perhaps, because the context is that of a course in philosophy. And we might eventually use such a formula in an argument like this: (1) It is possible that I exist and nothing material exists, (2) Whatever is material is essentially material, (3) I am not a material thing. So far so good, the argument seems convincing. But I agree with Peter van Inwagen when he asks:

What kinds of justifications can be given for the assertions of the form “Such-and-such is a possible [impossible, contingent, necessary] state of affairs [proposition, property]”? If we ever do know theses of this form to be true (or to be false), what is the source — or what are the sources — of this knowledge? (2001, p. 245)

We certainly know some modal propositions, those which are of use in everyday life. To park our car, we must ask ourselves, for example, if it is possible for the car to enter the space between the wall and another car. It

is also clear that hypothetical reasoning plays a crucial role in the sciences. In philosophy it can also play an important role. Think about the Evil Genius, the State of Nature, the Veil of Ignorance, brains in a vat, teletransportation, and other fictions that philosophers use and abuse. We often exaggerate our modal knowledge, especially when we transcend the trivia of everyday life — things like parking a car, or changing the place of a table. The fallibility of our modal intuitions is already evident when we move to more existential considerations (especially concerning affective life). In these matters, we must be somewhat sceptical about our ability to imagine what will happen. I suppose that, like myself, you sometimes imagine that you are living out another life-possibility. For example, I imagine that I am not a married man with children but a monk in a monastery. Or I am not a philosophy professor at the University of Nancy 2, but a gangster in Chicago during the Prohibition (called “Al Pouivet”). Sometimes, one considers some possibility and decides to realize it by moving, quitting his or her job, divorcing, becoming a priest, and so on. But we cannot easily test these possibilities, or even determine whether or not they really make sense. The situation is different in the empirical sciences where we can introduce experimental procedures that permit us to test our hypotheses. In philosophy, modal intuitions seem to me to be far less easy to test or control. And we even tend, I think, to be much too confident of our ability to distinguish between serious and crazy possibilities. Entire philosophical accounts can rest on the sands of dubious possibilities. To mask this fact, philosophers sometimes say that if something is not a logical impossibility, it is logically possible. But, as Peter van Inwagen says, “It hardly follows that because a certain thing cannot be proved to be impossible by a certain method, it is therefore possible in any sense of ‘possible’ whatever” (p. 248). So, when we move far from the familiar world of everyday life, and cannot rely upon the techniques of scientific tests, our modal intuitions become more and more fallible.

As I say, we generally tend to exaggerate our modal knowledge. We reason in terms of counterfactuals and find ourselves very happy to think things such as: if I were a monk in a monastery, I would have time to work and write extraordinary books, living a life of prayer and meditation; if I were a gangster, I would have a lot of money, and all the women would love me. But one can wonder if this kind of daydream is not strongly illusory.

To be a logical — existential, physical, biological, and so on — possibility, something must first and simply *be* a possibility. And we are not modally infallible; far from it. This is the reason why it seems reasonable in philosophy to be, for the most part, a *modal sceptic*. If Descartes had been a serious sceptic, he would have not doubted his existence as a body, but he would have been far less confident than he was of his capacity to understand a proposition like “It is possible that I exist and nothing material exists.”

We have more or less modest modal intuitions in everyday life; more or less testable modal intuitions in the empirical sciences; more or less pretentious and dangerous modal intuitions in philosophy. But, thank God, we also have a natural place within which to acquire, train, and enjoy our modal intuitions. This natural place is the world of fictions, especially those presented in novels and movies. By reading novels and watching movies, we acquire and train our modal disposition. We even can become what I would like to call “modally virtuous”, by acquiring the best sense of possibilities that a human being can have. This does not mean, of course, that we can ever become infallible in our modal intuitions. But we can become competent at judging whether certain things are possible, even if we might not have thought them to be so before reading a certain novel or a play. We also gain competence when we resist taking certain possibilities seriously on the grounds that it seems to us that things simply could not be like that, when we think that certain novels or films present us with fake possibilities. And this has nothing to do with what is often called “realism” in fiction. Even completely unrealistic stories can reveal to us true possibilities, and realistic stories empty ones.

Modal aesthetics would be the study of the ways in which fictions can not only teach us some possibilities, but also train our modal disposition and make us less easy to deceive by what is presented as putatively possible. You remember when the devil tempted Jesus Christ:

The devil took him to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Then Jesus said to him, "Begone, Satan! for it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.'" (Matthew, 4, 8-10)

In a sense, Jesus resisted certain possibilities by not taking them seriously. “Begone Satan” might be read (less elegantly) as: “I modally imaginatively resist.” Well, perhaps novelists and film makers are sometimes like the devil, and the right way to use their works of art is to modally imaginatively resist what they propose. But even then, their works may still be useful in training our disposition both to accept and to resist.

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