

# Cognitivism

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(Aesthetic Cognitivism)

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## (Aesthetic Cognitivism)

Latin *cognoscere* = to learn, to know

“cognitive” = having to do with learning, knowing, thinking

**Plato** (Greek, ~400 BC)

- Arts are not helpful in understanding the world
- Art makes “copies” of real things
- Real things are copies of “true” ideas
- Art is a copy of a copy

## **Aristotle** (Greek, ~360 BC)

- Art can help us understand the world
  - We learn by imitating
- Imitative art (mimesis) can be instructive
- “Catharsis” in theater/story =
  - by re-experiencing emotions through art
  - we are “cleansed”, “renewed”
  - 
  - Leads to deeper emotional understanding

## Martin Heidegger (German, 1889-1976)

- Art can “unconceal”...
  - that which is concealed / hidden in the world
- Art can reveal profound truths about human life
- The best art *does* reveal profound truths
- “*lichtung*” = a clearing
  - as in: a clearing in the woods

## Ernst Cassirer (German, 1874-1945)

- Humans are “symbolic animals”  
*Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1923-1929)
- All our thinking is by means of symbols
  - verbal language
  - myth/story
  - ...

## Rudolph Arnheim (German, 1904-2007)

- *Visual Thinking* - (1969)
- Visual perception is a cognitive act
- Seeing is...
  - not simple
  - not passive
  - not automatic
- Seeing requires active filtering, processing
- These are a form of “thinking”



**Suzanne Langer** (American, 1895-1995))

- Art is not about “aesthetics” (attractive visuals)
- Art is a symbolic activity
  - (cf. Cassirer)
- Art uses expressive symbols:
  - represent the “inner life” of artist
  - represent human emotional life
  - meaning of symbols changes from one artwork to another
- We come to understand human emotional life better

## Nelson Goodman (American, 1906-1998)

- Detailed study of symbol systems
  - different kinds of symbols & how they work
- Humans build / construct understandings of the world
  - ...through symbol systems
  - *Ways of Worldmaking* - (1978)
- Symbol systems include:
  - science
  - verbal language
  - visual art
  - music,....
- All are cognitive processes
  - that is, ways of thinking

## Nelson Goodman

- science and art are both trying to do the same thing
  - => understand the world
- “epistemology” = study of how we know  
Art is a branch of epistemology
- *Languages of Art* (1968)
  - Several different kinds of symbols
  - Important for art is the “exemplification” symbol
- Exemplification
  - The symbol is an *example* of the referent
    - It points to (symbolizes) something
    - But also possesses what it symbolizes

# Nelson Goodman

- A tailor's swatch exemplifies...



- It points to (symbolizes) the color and texture
- It also possesses the color and texture

## Nelson Goodman

- Music can “exemplify”....  
sadness, joy, chaos, order, etc.
- Strokes of color...
- A dance movement...
- A drawing...
  - can exemplify a concept or emotion
- They point to it because they are similar to it
- The artist uses the symbol system of art
  - to think
  - to understand
  - to convey his/her understanding

## Howard Gardner (American, 1943 ->)

- theory of multiple intelligences
- Several different kinds of intelligences:
  - verbal/linguistic
  - logico-mathematical
  - **visual/spatial**
  - **bodily/kinesthetic**
  - inter-personal
  - intra-personal
  - **musical/rhythmic**
  - naturalist
  - existential
  - moral
- Some forms of intelligence are the **artistic intelligences**

## Cognitivism in the arts

- Art is a way of thinking about our world
  - of making sense of our world, of our selves
  - of understanding our world, our selves
  - of constructing an understanding of our world

## Cognitivism – for the Artist?

- Artist figures things out through making his/her art
- In representing emotions through art,
  - we come to understand emotional issues better
- In representing ideas through art,
  - we develop, refine our ideas
- Making “good” art is very difficult
  - It involves thinking very hard about complex things
- Good art is very thoughtful



## Cognitivism – for the Viewer?

- Viewer understands things differently
  - as a result of viewing the art
- Good art can be hard to understand or accept at first
  - because the thoughts are new, different, difficult
- Good art can be profound
- When we are very moved by art,
  - it is because we understand something profound
  - which we had not understood before