Back to content: Nelson Goodman as philosophical basis for multiliteracy

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Abstract: Media and information literacy discussion needs a philosophical basis, which today is lacking. I propose that the thinking of Nelson Goodman be a fruitful basis. What is interesting in Goodman from the point of view of the libraries is his radical view on language. Language is for Goodman a way of making worlds. All arts: dance, music, pictures, and writing produce symbol systems and languages of their own. Understanding means taking part in the world of the artwork or text. The presentation also includes examples of everyday library work where the thought of world-creating helps understand the reading and media habits of different groups, especially those in need of special care, as people with different disabilities. When we look at the use of different media as a way of taking part in different worlds, and a making of worlds, this helps us in library work to develop a new view on customers even with disabilities as active world-makers.

Keywords: Philosophy, Nelson Goodman, Disabilities, World-making, Multiliteracy

1. Introduction

The aim of my paper is to see how Nelson Goodman's philosophy could bring some interesting new points of view in the discussion of multiliteracy. What is interesting for a librarian is his view on how he describes different symbol-systems as "ways of world-making".

I will first present some features of Nelson Goodman's philosophy that I think are relevant in the discussion of multimodal reading skills, or multiliteracy. These have to do with Goodman's very broad view on what understanding and reading is, and his thought of understanding as "worldmaking": a kind of active participating in symbol systems called "worlds". In the second part of my presentation I will give some examples of multiliteracy education in Turku City library and consider them in Goodman's context where people are seen as participators of many worlds.

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2. What do we mean by multiliteracy?
Multiliteracy is often defined by referring to advances in technology. Typical questions in research are: "How do the Internet and other information and communication technologies (ICTs) alter the nature of literacy?" (Coiro, Knobel, 2008, 1). or «New communications and information technologies pose significant challenges for their users." (Livingstone, Couvering, 2008, 103) I believe Goodman offers an alternative way of understanding that does not define multiliteracy in terms of technology.

Nelson Goodman's theories are of course not completely new. His main works in semiotics, "Languages of Art " and "Ways of Worldmaking" were written in - 76 and -78, respectively (hence LA and WW). Is multiliteracy a new concept, then? Surely music, texts and pictures have influenced each other even before the internet was invented? Didn't already Richard Wagner envision the "Gesamtkunstwerk", the work of art where myth, music, acting and text interact to form a holistic art-experience? I will not here get further into the argument, whether or not there is something qualitatively new in the new information technology, and will concede that what is new, at least, is the effectiveness and fastness at which these media are accessible to more people than ever before. Also what is new is that the tools of producing multimodal messages are easily accessible, with people publishing pictures, texts and constantly commenting on their own lives or on the opinions of others.

3. Art, science, language as symbolizing activity
Nelson Goodman's philosophical aim is to analyze many different human activities: all forms of art, science, natural languages, as different symbol systems. "A symbol system […] embraces both the symbols and their interpretation, and a language is a symbol system of a particular kind." (LA, 40) Words are symbols for things, but so are gestures, scientific formulae, musical notations… We can read the different signs used in these systems because we know the codes of that system. "Nothing is intrinsically a representation; status as representation is relative to symbol system" (LA , 226) It is easy to find examples for this in everyday life: In a ballet performance we know that the lady in white feathers is good and the one in black and red is bad. In watching a film, we know that something bad is going to happen from the change in background music. Also when we don't understand something it may be that we don't understand the system where the sign belongs. I have had difficulties in interpreting the facial expressions of Vietnamese acquaintances', and I admit having had difficulties in reading manga-comics for the first time. Also Goodman illustrates the idea of a symbol being interpreted within a system by describing how a smile or a bow can be interpreted differently in different cultures (LA, 49).

In short, in Goodman's view, all culture and mental life is a constant interpretation of symbols. Often interpretation is so automatic that we don't notice it happening. For instance in looking at realist paintings, one might think

that it is quite non-problematic to see what they represent. But Goodman shows (LA, 16) that even so-called realist paintings use different rules the use of which is tied to certain conventions, not because we would automatically see that they resemble"reality". Railroad tracks are drawn as converging in the horizon. Telephone poles, again, are drawn parallel. According to laws of geometry they should also be drawn with the tops converging, Goodman points out. But so drawn they look simply wrong.

That a sign always is interpreted within a system leads to another important statement by Goodman: that a symbol system is a version of the world. There is Van Gogh's version of the world and there is a scientific version of the world. The different versions cannot necessarily be translated to each other, since a translation would mean that there is after all one version into which all versions can be reduced. In Goodman's view there are many actual versions, or worlds, that exist side by side. One can understand Goodman's thesis on intranslatability by considering, what would for instance be a translation into a scientific language of a romantic scene in Romeo and Juliet, in terms of neurons firing or chemicals circulating in veins?

This leads to a special theory of truth by Goodman. A statement that is true in one system, version of the world, is not necessary true in others. For instance, the saying that someone is a "Don Quixote", taken literally, applies to no one, but taken figuratively, applies to many of us. (WW, 103) A sentence that in a trivial sense is not true about some person, can, in a metaphorical sense, catch something essential about that person. Goodman illustrates the same point by using phrases like "The earth always stands still" "The earth dances the role of Petrouchka" (WW, 111) that are true in within appropriate systems, like the Ptolemaic system, or a certain Stravinsky-system.

Goodman's pluralistic view with many worlds could be illustrated with the graphic below (this is my interpretation). We have many different worlds and a person who participates in these worlds (and many others, I have drawn here but a few):
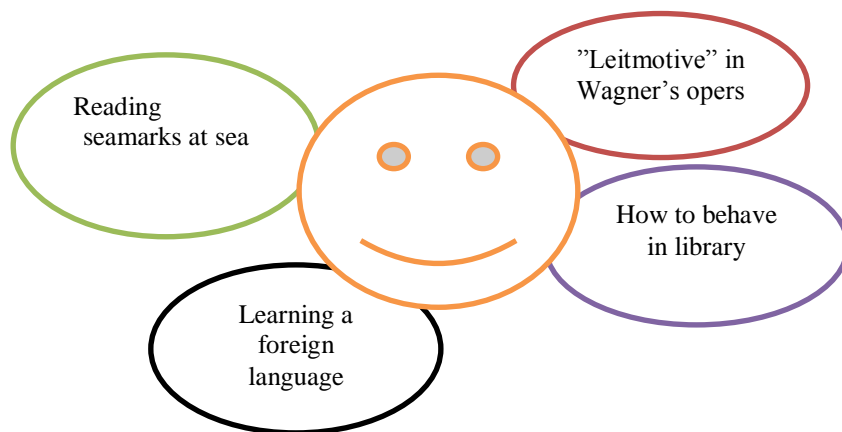
The systems also interact with each other. About the interpretation of pictures Goodman writes: "…talking and pictures participate in making each other and the world as we know them". (LA, 88-89) We would have to add some interaction into the picture. Let's look closer at understanding Richard Wagner's world of opera and how it can be connected to other worlds. One might see a connection to the use of background music in *Star Wars* films: in Wagner's music there are different themes for different characters, likewise is there in Star Wars the Emperor's theme and a theme for the Allied, for instance.

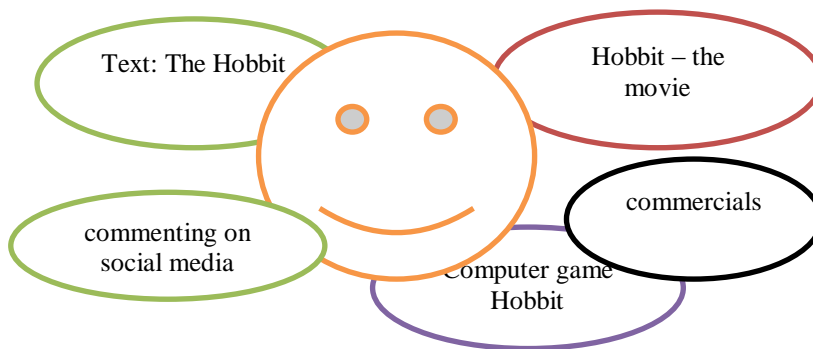We can add worlds to the Wagner-world:
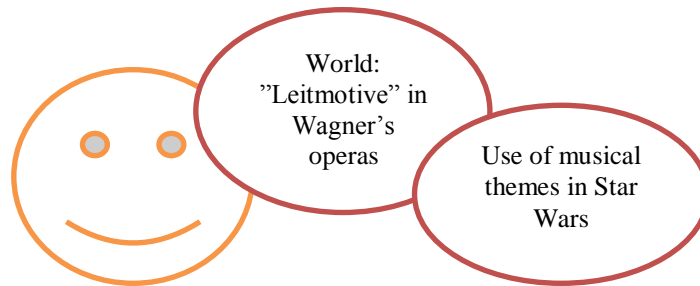
All symbolic activity is according to Goodman a way of creating worlds, and in this way all understanding is creative. Here we have to remember that Goodman is seldom interested in a subjective point of view, and these worlds are by no means meant as subjective worlds. Goodman's point is not that everybody would have his or her own reality. Goodman's "worlds" exist in some sense independent of any one person's participating in them or not.

Goodman takes his multiple-worlds model even further and states that there is no real world behind all these systems and versions of the world: all there is are the versions. There is no "real world" that is independent of our describing, perceiving, researching it. Goodman stresses that even if his pluralism can sound like the possible worlds semantics in philosophy, where there is one actual world and many non-actual possible worlds: if you choose to turn right or turn left, different possible worlds become actualized. But Goodman's idea is that our actual "real" world consists in different worlds, that even can be contradictory between themselves.

4. What is reading today?

How does it affect work at the library if I see the customers as participators of many worlds? In library education, the situation could look like this (below). I have excluded the multi-medial world as such and only concentrated on the situation where the other media and the book interact, J.R.R. Tolkien's novel as an example. This is a very familiar situation, where best-selling books soon appear as films, videogames and Lego-versions. And all these "other" versions affect the way the book is read.

Text: The Hobbit

commenting on social media

Hobbit – the movie

commercials

Computer game Hobbit

What is reading in Goodman's view? He gives a very broad answer: understanding a symbol system is reading it. On interpreting realist paintings he writes: "Pictures in perspective, like any others, have to be read; and the ability to read has to be acquired". (LA, 24). " So in my example above reading may mean knowing the rules of a video-game; what you are supposed to do where, or it may mean seeing how a film is more action- and more violence-oriented as the original book. In Turku city library when giving booktalks we often discuss the different "worlds", that is: systems of signs, around the book in this way. A simple example is approaching the story by scrutinizing the book-covers in different translations of the book and discussing the way the covers affect our reading of the story.

More generally put, we could say that the aim of our multiliteracy education is to make it possible for children and young people to participate in different worlds. In order to participate, they have to be able to read that world, they must learn to interpret the symbols that are used in that world. This is not the same as teaching how to use some "app" or other.

4.1. Case in library education: people with special needs

How do we approach customers with disabilities if we see them as participators of many worlds? Turku City library has lately put effort into working with this kind of groups in order to lower their threshold to visit the library. In practice,

we have contacted schools and centers for young people and adults with intellectual or developmental disabilities and invited them to visit the library. A librarian then welcomes the group and shows it around the library. The group has then gathered in a meeting room and the librarian has presented books and other materials.

We have found that in library education for people with special needs, multimodality is of great help. If reading ordinary books is a problem for these customers, we can show how the story can be reached through other means: as audio book, as graphic novels, or even manga, or we may talk about the movies based on the book and their soundtracks. These materials may be more easily accessible than books.

These customers, who may have experienced the library as a place that is not for them, are surprised to learn how many other materials than books there can be found in the library. When a librarian receives happy comments like "now I want to come to the library every day!" we know that something purposeful has been achieved.

5. Evaluative criteria in multiliteracy pedagogy
When is an education session or a project successful, then? Does Goodman offer criteria for evaluating such questions? It would first seem that postulating multiple worlds leads to irresponsible relativism: That anything goes, that any liar can defend her lie by calling it "just a world-version", no worse than other people's versions. But Goodman writes: "Willingness to accept countless alternative true or right world-versions does not mean that everything goes, …. that truths are no longer distinguished from falsehoods, but only that truth must be otherwise conceived than as correspondence with a ready-made world." (WW, 94)

So Goodman does offer evaluative criteria for distinguishing lies from other claims. Firs there are many criteria of how a claim fits into a system. Goodman uses concepts like coherence and fit (LA, 262-263), and replaces the concept of "truth" with "rightness" (WW, 19). About lying or stealing one could say using Goodman's concepts that they don't fit into the system of our everyday living. Also since worlds are not private, but shared realms, pleading to some kind of distorted world-view to explain a crime won't do.

We can see many activities in library education as activities that operate within certain symbol systems. We teach the customers how books are organized in the library, we may introduce them to the world of comics in a book-talk. Maybe we produce booktrailers with a class of pupils, and have so introduced them to the world of videomaking. We don't have to say that we have taught them to use a certain application. When we introduce customers to a new world, or help them to better understanding of a world, then this can be called success in library education.

There is one more evaluative idea in Goodman that I think can be even more exciting for a librarian. Namely, Goodman writes about effective representation as re-creating the world, it presents it in such a new way that a new world-version is made. About a work of art Goodman writes in a beautiful passage: "if it calls for and yet resists assignment to a usual kind of picture, it may bring out neglected likenesses and differences, force unaccustomed associations, and in some measure remake our world… the picture – like a crucial experiment – makes a genuine contribution to knowledge." (LA, 33) Symbol-making genuinely enlarges the scope of our knowledge, and a work of art can reorganize the world (LA, 245, 258).

How could this idea of world-creating be translated to library work? Notice that not every making can be called world-making in Goodman's sense. Making a video comment about a book, you participate in the already-existing world of videos and use the already-existing ways of telling a story with visual means.
Maybe in working with the group of disabled people their world was genuinely re-created in that now they see the library as a place for them, too, instead of a nameless frightening building in town.

I am not saying that multiliteracy education could be "world-making" in Goodman's sense every time. Still, on a private level, we know that there are some books that alter the way we see the world, and we know that not every book offers this, but they more or less repeat what we already have experienced. Maybe it is this: the feeling of novelty, that we can teach young people in all library education, including multiliteracy. Together with the children or young people we can ask whether or not the chat, the video that was made, the book that was read, helped to see the world in a new and different way or did it only repeat what one already knew.

6. Conclusions
Looking at things from Goodman's point of view, reading has always been multi-modal. We don't have to refer to gadgets in order to define multiliteracy, but can concentrate on content instead, we can see past the technology that is currently "in", be it QR-codes or something else.
Did we need Goodman to see that we can talk about a film and the book at the same time? Not quite, but I think Goodman still gives us a deeper understanding of what we are doing in the multi-medial world because he gives us deeper understanding of what understanding is.
The idea of worldmaking is an exciting evaluative criteria in multiliteracy education and the consequences of it could be developed further.

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