

Ansgar Nünning, Vera Nünning and Birgit Neumann (eds.)
with Jutta Weingarten

The Aesthetics and Politics of Cultural Worldmaking

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The Aesthetics and Politics of Cultural Worldmaking

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WAYS OF WORLDMAKING IN LITERATURE AND OTHER MEDIA: THEORETICAL RECONCEPTUALIZATIONS AND CONSTRUCTIVIST CRITICISM

ANSGAR NÜNNING & VERA NÜNNING

1. Revisions: Ways of Worldmaking Revisited and Supplemented

When Nelson Goodman published his seminal book *Ways of Worldmaking* (1992 [1978]), in which he delineated his influential theory of symbolic types and symbol systems, he was mainly concerned with developing what he later called a “neutral comparative study that can reveal a good deal not only about relations among the several arts but also about the kinships and contrasts between the arts, the sciences, and other ways that symbols of various kinds participate in the advancement of understanding” (Goodman/Elgin 1988: 31-32). The emphasis is thus on comparing the commonalities of, and differences between, various artistic media and symbol systems, as well as on gauging their respective cognitive potential. Though it may be open to debate just how neutral any theory or ‘comparative study’ can ever be, his formal theory of symbol systems makes no ideological or normative stipulations, focusing instead on the ways in which the world we know is always already made from other worlds. According to Goodman, there is no such thing as a given world – the only thing we can ever have access to are culturally shaped world-models or world-versions: “Worldmaking as we know it always starts from worlds already on hand; the making is a remaking.” (Goodman 1992: 6)

Goodman’s theory of worldmaking has provided a highly flexible framework for comparative inquiry that is potentially applicable to a broad range of cultural activities and processes, including literature, film, music, computer games, and other media – a potential which it is the main aim of the essays in the present volume to demonstrate. Recent years have seen an increasing interest across a broad range of disciplines in the question of exactly how worlds are made and how the relation between worldmaking and orders of knowledge can be described. In their tellingly entitled book *Reconceptions in Philosophy and Other Arts and Sciences*, Nelson Goodman and Catherine Z. Elgin emphasize the broad range of disciplines and perspectives that their approach encompasses: “We work *from* a perspective that takes in the arts, the sciences, philosophy, perception, and our everyday worlds, and *toward* better understanding of each through significant comparison with the others.” (1988: 164) Despite their wide-ranging perspective and their proclaimed intention to further understanding not only in philosophy but also in the arts and the sciences, the reception and discussion of

Goodman's ways of worldmaking approach has mainly been confined to the domain of philosophy, though there are some laudable exceptions to the rule (cf. Herman 2009).

Despite the fact that the very terms of the titles of Goodman's two most famous books *Languages of Art* (1976) and *Ways of Worldmaking* (1978) clearly signal that "the limited attempt to produce a comparative theory of symbols has become a global project" (Mitchell 1991: 29), his "neutral comparative study" (Goodman/Elgin 1988: 31 f.) is arguably neither as neutral nor as global as its self-proclaimed intentions might suggest. W. J. T. Mitchell was the first to explicitly address the question of "exactly what Goodman is excluding under the rubric of value" (1991: 23), exploring "the scope of Goodman's project, what lies inside and outside the domain of his inquiry" (ibid.: 24). According to Mitchell, "there are three basic subject areas that Goodman routinely excludes from his system: values, knowledge, and history" (ibid.). In her essay "What Goodman Leaves Out", Catherine Z. Elgin (1991b: 89) confirms that Goodman "stands accused of multiple sins of omission", though she does a very good job of showing that he is arguably not guilty as charged, on the grounds that reference and the processes of symbolization that Goodman is interested in are, as Elgin maintains, independent of history.

The main goal of this volume will neither be to act as arbiter of hostilities between Goodman and his critics nor to provide a sustained philosophical exegesis of his works, but rather to redress the balance by focusing on exactly those areas and dimensions of worldmaking that Goodman was not particularly interested in. As the title of this volume indicates, the focus is on the aesthetic and political dimensions of cultural worldmaking, i.e. on the cultural contexts, functions, and ideological implications that processes of symbolization are always involved or implicated in. The contributors proceed from the assumption that Goodman's theory of symbol systems on the one hand, and the study of the aesthetic, historical, and political dimensions of worldmaking on the other – despite their contrary theoretical and methodological assumptions – are not as incompatible as is suggested by those of their respective practitioners who tend to ignore each other's work. Ernst Cassirer, among others, has shown that different historical contexts produce and promote different symbolic forms and that these, in turn, tend to organize the receptivity of understanding in distinct patterns (cf. Cassirer 1953-1996). It is therefore argued that an alliance between theories of symbol systems and the study of literature, culture, and media could be an important force in the current reconceptualization of cultural studies: Such an alliance can open up productive new possibilities for the analysis of both the relationship between aesthetic ways of worldmaking and their cultural contexts, and the epistemological, historical, and cultural implications of symbolic types and symbol systems. In addition, such a move promises to throw new light on both the diachronic development of cultural ways of worldmaking and their changing functions.

Another main objective of this volume is thus to explore the usefulness and range of the approach ushered in by Goodman for the study of literature, media, and culture at large. Useful concepts for exploring this question, which have come to the forefront