

Name: THIERRY SCHÜTZ

Chosen Topic: 4. 'Art is not a copy of the real world. One of the damn things is enough.' (Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 1976)

"ALL ART IS AT ONCE SURFACE AND SYMBOL"

What does art do? This question is almost as old as art itself, yet a conclusive answer has not been given. In general, we agree on one thing only: art has a certain relation to the real world; this relation is what remains to be debated. In spite of the general consent that there is such a relation, I shall briefly outline two reasons which I think oblige us to accept this relation.

Firstly, the real world precedes art. This is obviously true, as art is done by artists who live in the real world and use materials from this real world. Therefore, art could not exist without the real world, which is, for this reason, a necessary condition of art. Secondly, art never quits the boundaries of the real world. By this I mean that art never depicts something which could not be thought, in the real world, to be a possible world. If, for example, a Christian artist paints a picture of Judgement Day, he paints something which is clearly not true now and which will probably never become true; yet it can be imagined by an inhabitant of the real world, such as this Christian painter, that it might become true. It follows that there must be a relation between art and the real world; namely that art is preceded by the real world and that it is limited by it as well. (I shall, for reasons of clarity, mostly talk of painting; what I say is also applicable to every other form of art, but painting can be illustrated most straightforwardly.)

One might consider these thoughts superfluous because every rational art critic and almost everybody else accepts the fact that there is a relation between art and the real world; opinions only differ in regard to the nature of this relation. Some think that, in Nelson Goodman's words, 'art is not a copy of the real world' because 'one of the damn things is enough'. Yet most artists and art critics might disagree with Goodman's justification: they would rather support idealist ideas and argue that art can show us a more perfect, a better world and that it should not be limited to the real but imperfect world.

Others might disagree with his proposition, arguing that art does or should show the world as it is, and thus be its perfect copy. Amongst the formers may be numbered poets such as Goethe and Schiller, painters and sculptors like Rafael and composers such as Brahms. They would argue in favour of art being a means to depict a better world, or at least as a way of highlighting the deficiencies of the real world. All of them have, in their work as artists, expressed the view that art does not need to copy the real world.

On the other hand, there are poets such as Victor Hugo, painters like Albrecht Dürer and musicians like Hector Berlioz, all of whom have tried to portray the real world plainly as it is, without adding or subtracting anything at all. This, however, is just an illustration from which we can now turn: in short, there are two points of view regarding the relation of art to the real world, firstly, that it is a copy of it, and secondly, that it is not. The vast majority of standpoints can be compromised by these two fundamental attitudes.

The business now at hands is to decide between these two opinions. Essentially, I do not agree with either of them. Or, I think both of them are right to some degree. In defence of this in-between point of view, I offer the following argument.

Dürer's apples

Art is done by artists who live in the real world, which I have noted above. If such an artist tries to artistically represent the real world precisely as it is, that is to say to copy the reality in art, he cannot do anything else than depict the world as he knows it. (I understand knowledge in the Platonic sense, as justified true opinion). This is because he cannot, say, paint something he does not know, as he would not know how to correctly represent it in his painting. So an artist's possibilities of copying reality are restricted by the limits of his knowledge of the world. Albrecht Dürer, for example, could never have painted the back of a house of which he only knew the front, because he had not the slightest idea of how the back looked.

It could at this point be objected that he might have painted the back on account of somebody's recollection of it. However, the painter still needs to imagine the back of the house and as this imagination will never be perfect, due to imperfect recollections or descriptions by the other person, his picture cannot depict reality as it is. Moreover, imagination in this case is not justified true opinion; it lacks reliable rational evidence. Consequently, Dürer had to restrict himself to painting things he knew entirely, for example apples, if he wanted to portray them fully.

Yet there is no form of art which could contain the whole reality of an apple: painting apples, Dürer was able to show their shape, their colours and shades, and so on. He could not show their smell or their taste, since pictures are based on what the eye sees, not on what other organs of sense perceive. There are neither oil nor water colours which smell like apples which a painter could use to paint apples. In short, an artist can never represent the whole reality of a thing, either because he does not know it, or because the means of art itself are limited.

Recognising the apple to be an apple

So far, this argument is in favour of Goodman's opinion, at least partially. In fact I do, for the reasons outlined above, not believe that art can ever be a copy of the real world. Regarding Goodman's justification of this opinion, however, I shall leave the valuation of the real world to others; for the present argument, it is not relevant. The decisive point, which distinguishes this argument from Goodman's aphorism, is that in talking about art, one should also talk about those who look at art, not only at those who produce it. I will explain this, using again Dürer's apples as an example.

If I see a picture of an apple by Albrecht Dürer, I recognise the apple to be an apple. The reason for this is that I know apples; I have seen and eaten them before. In other words, Dürer was successful in conveying the impression of the apple he had when painting the picture, because, knowing the taste and the smell of apples, I can relate the impression the painted apple gives me to my experiences concerning the smell and taste of apples. Put differently, I can imagine what the painted apple might taste like whilst only looking at the picture.

Abstracting this example, we reach an idea of how art might work: at first, an artist has an impression of the real world, as far as he knows it. Then, he expresses a part of this impression through art; which part of the impression he can express depends on the type of art he does. The expression, that is the piece of art, again gives an impression when somebody looks at it. In the mind of the person looking at the piece of art, this impression is linked to other, previous impressions in order to evoke knowledge of the real world, as far as this person knows it.

From this—given that we understand art to work in this way—it follows that art makes us recall our knowledge of the real world. This demands that art copies the real world sufficiently well as to permit this evocation of previous knowledge, which I think it mostly does. Albrecht Dürer's paintings depict the visual aspects of the world well enough to permit links between the impressions gained from them and previous knowledge. His apples, for example, are painted well enough so I can recognise them.

This, it may be objected, contradicts what I have said above, that art can never be a copy of the real world. This objection is void: the present argument says that an artist cannot depict the world *as it is*, but *well enough* to make people who look at his art recall previous knowledge they have of the real world. Let me illustrate this again with apples by Dürer: they are not perfect imitations of real apples, as they lack smell, taste and the third spatial dimension. Thus art is not a copy of the real world. However, these apples are so well painted that, looking at the picture, I will be reminded of real apples and of what I know about them: their smell, taste and touch, that they have a third dimension, and so forth. Thus art can be strongly reminiscent of reality. I suppose many debates on this topic arise simply because this distinction between copying reality and strongly resembling it is not made.

Art's confusing ambiguity of not being a copy of reality and yet reminiscent of it is, I think, very well expressed in the *Preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde, where the author states his view that '*all art is at once surface and symbol.*' 'Surface' means that art can be very close to reality, but never become its fully perfect copy; 'symbol' means that art represents the reality not as it is, but rather as we see it—that art, in other words, needs to be interpreted by those who look at it, although it tries (at times at least) to represent reality as it is.

The 'surface'-aspect of Dürer's apples is their striking visual resemblance to real apples. At first sight, they really 'are' like real apples; it is only further consideration which shows us that they only *look* like real apples, but that they are very different from them. The 'symbol'-aspect of such a painting is that, to the person looking at it, it represents a real apple, of which this person has previous knowledge, of which the painting reminds him. If this person lacked this knowledge, the painting would remain incomprehensible to him.

What, then, does art do? The argument I have outlined shows this: art attempts to copy an aspect of the real world as it is; art makes us remember what we know about the real world. Art is not a copy of the real world—but it copies it well enough to be reminiscent of it. The above argument has probably shown that talking about art must not mean talking about the real world and the artist only. He who looks at art is just as important.