

Res Cogitans

Volume 3 | Issue 1

Article 8

6-7-2012

The Aestheticality of Allusiveness: Language, Meaning, and Indeterminacy

Joel Morrow
Pacific University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://commons.pacificu.edu/rescogitans>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Morrow, Joel (2012) "The Aestheticality of Allusiveness: Language, Meaning, and Indeterminacy," *Res Cogitans*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 8.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by CommonKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in Res Cogitans by an authorized administrator of CommonKnowledge. For more information, please contact CommonKnowledge@pacificu.edu.

The Aestheticity of Allusiveness: Language, Meaning, and Indeterminacy

Joel Morrow
Pacific University

Published online: 07 June 2012
© Joel Morrow 2012

Abstract

This paper will be investigating the largely unexamined questions that arise when the general question is asked: why do we allude instead of refer? I will be dealing with this matter as ultimately a question of aesthetics, but only insofar as common approaches to 'aesthetic questions' become inadequate. Accordingly, I will be employing my own methodology, shaped by the question of what I will call 'aestheticity.' With this special approach, I will attempt to uncover the conditions for the possibility that an allusion may *be* in such a way that it provokes aesthetic attention. Prior to this, I will carry out a short examination of the most relevant study I've found towards my topic, W.T. Irwin's "The Aesthetics of Allusion", with the intention of contextualizing my own investigation within a more common approach to aesthetic questions, and particularly the aesthetic question of allusion. However, through my own investigation, I will attempt to substantiate Irwin's descriptive claims about the 'aesthetics' of allusion, with my own theoretical claims about the conditions of its aestheticity, hoping to articulate a more philosophically significant conception of how allusiveness works within the dynamics of meaning and language.

I have found that writing a satisfactory introduction to a philosophical discussion concerning 'aesthetic issues' seems to be a near impossible task — at least within a reasonable page limit. This impasse arises out of the all-too-familiar questioning of the matter in question: what do we *mean* when we say "aesthetics?" — what do we *mean* when we say "art?"

I have no intention of trying to grapple with these notions head on, as if they are already self-subsisting concepts in themselves. Instead, I am interested in examining what *in effect* provokes us to use language such as 'aesthetic' and 'art' as descriptions of what we experience. Here, I must note that I am at a loss for conventional terms that can adequately convey this general notion, namely, of something 'being' in such a way that it can *effect* an "aesthetic" human experience, while also recognizing that this 'way of being' is not necessarily *in itself* aesthetic. I will therefore be employing my own neological term, 'aestheticity,' in order to signify the way in which something 'is' *in its capacity* to effect an aesthetic experience.¹

I find aestheticity to be a particularly interesting way to approach the general enigma of art and aesthetics because it turns our gaze to conditions of possibility. This allows us to philosophically examine those more (apparently) concrete concepts which, in themselves, have no necessary connection to 'art' or 'aestheticness,' nor even 'artwork' or 'aesthetic judgments,' but nonetheless are those concepts which *in effect* always seem to be intimately bound up with our judgments and evaluations of what we *would* consider to be instances of 'aesthetic phenomena' proper.

As the title indicates, my particular interest in this discussion is in the aestheticity of 'allusiveness.' I say 'allusiveness' instead of 'allusion,' because I am not particularly concerned with what an allusion is *per se*—not what it is as a noun, but rather what it does as a verb—i.e., what does an allusion *do*? Or more

precisely, what is an allusion *doing*? What is it about an allusion that allows it to be the way that it is and thus realize its unique aesthetic effects? I think that similar questions can be asked in regards to any form of figurative language, however, I find allusions to be particularly interesting because hardly any attention seems to be paid towards them in any thorough philosophical fashion.

Indeed, I must admit that the primary challenge I faced in writing this paper was undoubtedly the search for sources—that is, discursive bodies of writing that deal directly with questions even somewhat relevant to my own. Such questions are rarely asked at all in scholarly work and academia, let alone given much critical attention (Irwin, 521). I've found a smattering of articles and books that address the concept of allusion in the context of aesthetics, but only one which was of any help, or devoted any substantial attention to the specific questions that I want to be asking.² There are of course many scattered places where philosophers, literary theorist, and lexicologists may mention and sometimes (but rarely) cursorily discuss the notion of alluding — what alluding is, in what ways it is done, and even sometimes why alluding is preferable. My trouble has been in finding discussions that go beyond merely defining the conceptual elements of allusion or describing its role in literature.

What was the original question that led me here? To be concise, it was: Why do we allude instead of simply refer? However, this was quickly superseded by the more specific question: Why do we ever *prefer* allusion over reference? From here, I began to consider aesthetic questions, which eventually shifted my questioning from 'whys' to 'hows' — that is, *how is it possible* for allusions to be experienced aesthetically? What are the conditions that allow allusiveness the possibility of aestheticity? It is only through dealing with these latter questions that I believe the former can acquire any substance.

Though I commend his (seemingly) pioneering work into the subject, I have found W.T. Irwin's articles to be more helpful than insightful — more a grounding point of reference and departure than an un-grounding source of philosophical inquiry. Thus, I will be in short conversation with his "Aesthetics of Allusion" as an articulation of what I would consider to be the average common-sense interpretation of our aesthetic relationship with allusion.

How to begin? Here, I find myself in my own inquiry, directly parallel with Irwin's thoughts:

Why do we find pleasure in alluding? Why do we find pleasure in the allusions of others? These are simple and straightforward questions, and yet in answering them we have a difficult time in finding a starting point. No comprehensive study of the questions exists. Indeed, there is a dearth of literature not just on the aesthetics of allusion, but on the theory of allusion in general. (Irwin, 521)

Upon his corresponding acknowledgement of the surprisingly barren field of literature, Irwin proceeds to address the concept of allusion itself and its definition, a task that he grappled with at length in his first essay on the matter, "What Is an Allusion?"

The suffix of the word stems from the Latin *ludus*, "a game," where *ludere* means "to play;" with the added prefix we get the signification of "a playing with" (Partridge). Accordingly, the *OED* traces the genesis of this word and its concept through the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, from its synonymy with 'illusion' to a more explicit understanding of a "play upon words," to the more formal "symbolical reference or likening" (at this point being essentially synonymous with metaphor, parable, and allegory),

and up to its contemporary significance, now defined generally as “A covert, implied, or indirect reference” (“Allusion”). Most dictionaries and reference sources will offer some variation of this notion, but all seem to consistently stress the importance for a reference to be in some way or another *implicit* or *indirect* in order for it to be distinguishable *as* an allusion, and not just a mere reference.³

I find this distinction between allusion and reference to be a critical one, for it allows us to move further and ask a far more penetrating question: why is implicitness and indirectness *ever* preferable over directness and explicitness? Jean Paulhan is commonly quoted on this matter with words that articulate what I consider to be a common sentiment, “An allusion which is explained no longer has the charm of allusion ... In divulging the mystery, you withdraw its virtue.” My question is: Why?

Irwin explicitly addresses this issue towards the end of his paper.

Should an author ever explain her allusions or give overt clues as to their meaning? ... The audience should be allowed to feel the pleasure and power of discovery and creativity in order to produce an optimal feeling of intimacy and community. If an allusion needs to be explained to its intended audience, then it has not been crafted in a way that is aesthetically successful. (530)

This explanation refers back to Irwin’s earlier thoughts on why we allude and how we respond aesthetically to allusions, which need to be properly taken into account. Here Irwin identifies a rough assortment of reasons for why we may find enjoyment in allusiveness. For one, he claims that such behavior offers an invitation to ‘participate’ creatively in a text. “This is an advantage because audiences enjoy being involved in the creative process; they enjoy thinking for themselves rather than being told something; they enjoy being part of a community of understanding.” (522-23). Irwin subsequently points out that this unspoken invitation to participate in a mutual understanding also cultivates an intimacy between author and audience (523). On the more specific question regarding our aesthetic response to allusion, Irwin brings up the elements of discovery and play. He claims that “we derive pleasure from the act and feeling of discovery and recognition,” and acknowledges that, “There is something playful in making an allusion, and we are, in a sense, being invited to play in considering an allusion” (524).

The careful attention that Irwin pays to identifying and describing these particular elements without a doubt lays bare a more precise variety of reasons to consider when asking why allusiveness is aesthetically preferable over direct explicitness. However, he fails to provide any model for understanding the interrelatedness of his descriptions. He describes an assortment of identifiable qualities that seem to *result* from allusiveness and points out how they can be enjoyable in one way or another, but does not directly investigate the source of these qualities, namely, how they are *possible*. All of these qualitative descriptions of how we may enjoy allusiveness may very well be accurate. They may describe how, as opposed to overt reference, the allusiveness of allusion *can* invoke certain enjoyable qualities within a textual experience, but they do not help explain how this invoking is possible — that is, what allows allusion itself to *be allusive*. Here I will break from Irwin's analysis and attempt to initiate my own discussion on this matter. However, through my own interrogation of the conditions for the possibility of allusiveness, I intend to reassert Irwin's descriptive elements with a more substantial theoretical backing, affirming their common grounds in a basic hermeneutic⁴ principle.

As I would like to demonstrate, simply being implicit and indirect *in principle* does not entirely account for allusiveness, and thus the aesthetic phenomenon that is brought about by allusion remains an obscured question. I believe there are conditions that allow and disallow allusion aesthetically — i.e. disallow implicitness and indirectness their *effectuality*. These conditions can be described as hermeneutical, and, I think, can be adequately revealed upon a simple analysis of lexicological fact via etymological patterns. For our discussion, I want to specifically draw attention to the way in which allusions can, over time, become assimilated into our common idiom, and how the effects of this assimilation display these hermeneutical conditions at work. However, in order to catch a concrete glimpse of these so-called etymological patterns, we will need to begin with a concrete example of its effects. These effects are hermeneutical. Thus, to begin this circle, I want to examine the hermeneutical effect of allusions that become ‘cliché’ as an example of the way in which the effectuality of allusive principles (indirectness and implicitness) are dependent of hermeneutical conditions.

How do we commonly understand the concept of being cliché? From Merriam-Webster the definition states, “a trite phrase or expression ... a hackneyed theme, characterization, or situation; something that has become overly familiar or commonplace” (“Cliché”). Some examples of allusions that are widely considered now to be cliché are Orwell’s “Big Brother (is watching you...),” Joseph Heller’s “Catch-22,” alluding to Hercules as a figure of strength, or calling someone (in sincerity or sarcasm) an Einstein.

The term ‘cliché’ is for us, more than anything else, a prediction of a hermeneutic response; a response that in some way or another affirms the notion that a particular allusion *is* indeed “unoriginal,” — i.e., that it has been long overused. But what does it mean, hermeneutically, for us to experience a word or phrase *as if* it *is* overused? First and foremost it means that this word must be encountered as fundamentally recognizable. But, as something *overused*, there is an implied *over*-recognition—a sense that something must be *excessively* recognizable. Along with this excessive sense of recognition, there is a sense of understanding. Cliché allusions are still *in principle* indirect and implicit, however, when considering our phenomenological understanding of them, these allusive principles seem to be of little or no effect. When allusions are encountered *qua* cliché, there is a peculiar *absence* of subtlety. Instead of drawing us into the text with exegetical interest, they seem to just lay there on the page, banal and inert in a state of being *all-too-well-understood*. My all-too-common understanding of how the phrase “Big Brother” is all-too-commonly understood seems to obstruct any significant transcendence of significance beyond the text that appears present at hand. There is no evoking, searching, or uncovering involved; the significance is factual — given.

What has happened? How can a term or phrase that is *in principle* allusive, nonetheless fail to have this effect? Such a paradox affirms the notion that there are indeed hermeneutic conditions behind the possibility of allusiveness, and here we reach the crux of the matter. For this hermeneutical phenomenon of being-cliché, I think, discloses a concrete instance of a more general, etymological phenomenon, which, in turn, discloses a lexicological principle that subsequently feeds back around and indicates a hermeneutical one. It is this final hermeneutical principle that will bring us back to Irwin’s descriptions and the aestheticity of allusiveness.

Judging from our short analysis of clichés, what seems to be conditioning the possibility of effective allusiveness? The reasoning behind my own conjecture can be implied by a basic question: To what degree can a phrase’s meaning effectively *be* implicit and indirect if those who receive its meaning understand it definitively and without reflection? For example, does the statement, “That man is

gargantuan” seem to be implicit or indirect in its meaning? What about, “It’s pandemonium out there” ...? Or, “She’s been rather jovial today” ...? In any of these statements do I at all seem to be alluding to some deeper significance beyond what is here in the text? I would assume not. Nonetheless, they are all allusions.⁵

Here we can begin to notice how there seems to be a greater etymological phenomenon at work; that of which things like clichés are merely symptomatic. Above are examples of allusions that have, in a very tangible way, become completely non-allusive. While clichés can exhibit the odd semi-allusive hermeneutical effects that occur when words are caught in an ‘etymological slippage’ from art into lexicon, the examples above reveal the effects of words that have fallen entirely into the fabric of our everyday language.⁶ Thus we meet our lexicological principle, which is, simply put, the formal recognition of the fact that our language is, to quote two lexicographers, “chock full of allusions” (Cole and Lass). Buried within our everyday idle talk, we can find a multiplicity of them, dead and inconspicuous.

So how does this bring us back to hermeneutics? Many of the words that we unthinkingly use today were once intended to *be* allusive. These forgotten allusions are still *in principle* implicit and indirect, yet of course they are not experienced as such. My original hermeneutical question was: How can something that is *in principle* implicit and indirect effectively *be* implicit and indirect if those who receive its meaning understand it definitively without reflection? We have just demonstrated the answer: it can’t. I could certainly *try* and use the word ‘gargantuan’ as an allusion to Rabelais’s satire, but I cannot realistically hope that this will ever have its proper, or full effect.

Why is this? Here we encounter our hermeneutic principle. What would most likely happen if someone were to come across my intended allusion to Rabelais? They would predictably assume I’m trying to convey a sense of enormity and move on. What is conditioning the strength of this assumption? I claim: certainty. Anyone who comes across the word will be so unconsciously and positively assured of its intended significance that the possibility of there being anything deeper implied would never even be considered. It would be passed over without a second thought. However, if this word had not become assimilated into our language as it has, and was still *first and foremost* the name of a prince in a piece of 14th century literature, the reader would not be so inattentive. The word would be encountered as *at least* unfamiliar, if not completely mysterious, and the reader would be faced with a basic hermeneutical *indeterminacy*. This dynamic between determinate meaning (certainty) and indeterminate meaning (ambiguity), I believe, is what ultimately conditions the possibility of allusiveness.

To be hermeneutically determinate is to be, so to speak, “interpretively uninteresting,” where, for example I am assured in one way or another that there is no need to question the significance of a word, sentence, etc. However, this certainty is only possible when meaning is *bounded*. Determinacy implies *definitiveness*; to define literally means, to ‘end,’ ‘terminate,’ ‘limit — to set boundaries on meaning. To have any sense of determinacy, that is, any degree of *certainty* or *definitiveness*, meaning as such, in a paradoxical way, must have prohibitions. This principle exhibits the peculiar ‘inverse relationship,’ if you will, between meaning and determinacy. The more we define words, the more we deprive them of meaning. The more absorbed we are in our language, the less we are aware of the meaning implied in each of the words we use. As soon as we become reflective about this, our ability to use language subsequently breaks down.

Meaning can thus be understood as a dynamic of ‘hermeneutic potential.’ Imagine, metaphorically, a gap — a space of hermeneutical ambiguity that can be either broadened or narrowed, where broadening increases the amount of meaning that can *potentially* come rushing in, while narrowing decreases such potential, but provides a more precise *definition* of it. If determinacy implies a formal *limitation* of such potential, then hermeneutical *indeterminacy* implies a potentiality that is ‘unbound;’ and if determinacy is experienced phenomenologically as an absorbed and unaware state of definitive understanding, then indeterminacy is experienced as state in which this understanding is thrown into question, a state characterized by attentiveness and *uncertainty*. This uncertain and attentive state of hermeneutical awareness is what I consider to be the fundamental condition for the possibility that an allusion may be encountered *as allusive* — that is, as something *effectively* implicit and indirect. There must be an initial awareness that the common order of meaning is being subverted, that somehow meaning is being *insinuated* — quietly ‘snuck in’ amongst dead words, bearing an excess of hermeneutic potential, while remaining free of the idiom and all of its rigid determinacy.

How does this allow us to reaffirm Irwin’s descriptions? Irwin described roughly five different, vaguely interrelated reasons why allusiveness can be enjoyable in a way that overt reference cannot, and I think that these can be substantiated and brought together under what I consider to be their common hermeneutic conditions just examined. He calls attention to the way in which allusiveness presents an invitation, an invitation to become actively involved with the meaning at stake in the text. He describes this involvement as a participation in the “creative process” of a work, which we enjoy because it allows us to “think for ourselves” and ultimately feel a sense of intimacy and community (522). Allusiveness, here, seems to be characterized by a general sense of ‘openness,’ which I think translates over into Irwin’s further examination of playfulness and the pleasure of discovery. To be hermeneutically indeterminate *is* ‘to be open for meaning,’ and I think that it is only under this condition that anything like creativity, free thought, play, or discovery become possible upon engagement with a text. Irwin indirectly supports this idea when considering the conditions for an aesthetically successful allusion:

As Kellett says: “the best allusions will be those which lie beneath the surface.” This is well put, in that the author should place her allusion not at the point of surface level awareness but at a depth just far enough beneath the surface so as to cause an aesthetic experience in its discovery by the intended audience. (529)

The metaphorical language borrowed from E.E. Kellett is telling. It is only when there is a ‘play’ of covering and uncovering that an allusion can realize its aesthetic potential. This figurative placement of a signifier under conditions that remove it from the common order of understanding only so that it may in turn be *uncovered*, resonates with Heidegger’s⁷ ontological characterization of the ‘origin’ of the work of art and Hans-Georg Gadamer’s conceptualization of art as ‘play.’ Gadamer quotes:

The movement of playing has no goal that brings it to an end; rather, it renews itself in constant repetition. The movement backward and forward is obviously so central to the definition of play that it makes no difference who or what performs this movement. (Gadamer 103)

Irwin fails to describe exactly what he means by ‘play’ and ‘playfulness,’ however he cites this same chapter in *Truth and Method* that I have just made reference to. Gadamer’s notion of play is ultimately an ontological one, and he articulates it as an essentially autonomous, purposeless movement, that, like

natural phenomena, can only really be described as self-presentation. This self-presentation of ontological movement is one that can potentially be *represented* for someone, and Gadamer considers this to be “the characteristic feature of art as play” (108). This representation of play, which *is* play, (though it can now also be considered art) is for Gadamer an event that unfolds like a celebration. It is something that is *participated* in, requiring a space that is “specially marked out for the movement of the game” (107).

Gadamer’s thought is here especially pertinent, given the etymological origins of the concept we are dealing with. Recall that the Latin *alludere* means literally ‘to play,’ and that throughout its etymological history allusion’ has always retained the basic significance of a ‘play on words’ — a ‘word-play.’ As we noted before, Irwin considers the aesthetic potential of an allusion to lie in its ability to invite us to participate in a process of uncovering meaning, one that cultivates a sense of intimacy and community. If we follow Gadamer’s philosophy, this hermeneutic event can thus be re-imagined as a representation of a greater phenomenon, one characterized by play and celebration.

We can only participate in this celebratory event if something has been ‘opened up’ for it, or *it* has been opened up for us. This opening must occur hermeneutically, and the condition for this opening must be a fundamental indeterminacy of meaning. Words and phrases that have fallen into our lexicon have become hermeneutically ‘closed up’ within it, but ‘closed’ in the sense of closed *potential*. Because they are so determinate in meaning, their potential meaning has become bound to our common order of “surface level” understanding. Thus an allusion must ‘cover itself up’ in indeterminacy so that it may provide an opportunity for uncovering — *dis*-covering — which involves creative interpretation and thought that can play within meaning that is, in a sense, unbound.

We can now see how the principle of hermeneutic indeterminacy can work as the fundamental dynamic that conditions allusiveness and its aestheticity, and thus how it also can provide a theoretical substantiation to Irwin’s aesthetic descriptions of allusion. I believe that the synthesis between Irwin’s analysis of the effects of allusiveness and my hermeneutical analysis of the conditions of allusiveness has helped uncover a deeper phenomenon at work in the allusive event. This is where I find value in the method of approaching aestheticity rather than the ‘aesthetic’ itself. In exploring the aestheticity of allusion, we have been forced to immerse ourselves in a network of philosophical questions, often overlooked in conventional aesthetic philosophy.

Our theoretical return to the Irwin’s aesthetic analysis has led us conceptualize ‘allusion’ as less a play *on* words than a play *in* words — a play that somehow occurs within the determinate structures of our language, but nonetheless remains severed from the bounds of a defined lexicon. If we are to follow Irwin’s cue to Gadamer, this play is to be understood as a celebratory event, representing an ontological occurrence that is itself autonomous, always already self-presenting where the question is only of our active *participation* in it. Thus, we can depart with a question: can this autonomous play then be considered to be already occurring within the dynamics of our language? Must our intentional participation in it be viewed as a subversion of language? — or could it in fact be seen a celebration of the way in which these dynamics are always already at work in our everyday experience of language itself?

Works Cited

- “Allusion.” Simpson, J A, and E S. C. Weiner. *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989. Print. See also: *The American Heritage College Dictionary*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002. Print.; and *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*. Springfield, Mass: Merriam-Webster, 1999. Print.
- ‘Cliché.’ *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*. Springfield, Mass: Merriam-Webster, 1999. Print.
- Cole, Sylvia, Abraham H. Lass, and Sylvia Cole. *The Facts on File Dictionary of Cultural and Historical Allusions*. New York: Facts on File, 2000. Print.
- Delahunty, Andrew, Sheila Dignen, and Penny Stock. *The Oxford Dictionary of Allusions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. Print.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*. New York: Seabury Press, 1975. Print.
- Irwin, W.T. “The Aesthetics of Allusion.” *Journal of Value Inquiry*. Dec. 2002. vol. 36 pp. 526-532. Web. 20 Jan 2012.
- Partridge, Eric. *Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English*. “Allusion” London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1966. Print.

¹ Thus, where we understand the ‘aesthetics’ of something as the various ways in which we can describe it with aesthetic language, the ‘aestheticity’ of something should be understood as the conditions that in effect provoke such language.

² Irwin, W.T. 2002. “The Aesthetics of Allusion”

³ From Merriam-Webster, “An implied or indirect reference esp. in literature.” From The American Heritage college dictionary, “The act of alluding; indirect reference ... An instance of indirect reference.”

⁴ I will be using this term as it is generally understood coming out of the phenomenological tradition, but I want to avoid any ties to a particular philosopher or theory of interpretation. When I refer to something as ‘hermeneutic’ or ‘hermeneutical’ — in this case, a principle — this should be understood as a principle of the experience of interpretation or the phenomenology of interpretation.

⁵ The term ‘gargantuan’ is derived from the name of a giant prince with an excessive appetite in Rabelais's satire *Gargantua* (1534), the name means ‘gullet.’ Pandemonium, meaning ‘all the demons,’ was the name given by John Milton to the capital of Hell in his poem “Paradise Lost” (1667). Zeus’s Roman name is Jove — ‘God of the bright sky.’ Jovial literally means “Under the influence of Jupiter,” meaning “good-humored, merry.” This derives from the astrological belief that those born under the sign of the planet Jupiter are of such dispositions. (This is also where we get the phrase “By Jove!,” as a sardonic euphemism for the more sacrilegious ‘By God!’). See Delahunty et al; also see Simpson et al.

⁶ As a case in point, ‘Gargantua’ wasn’t considered by my spell-check to be a word, while gargantuan obviously was.

⁷ See Heidegger’s “Origin of the Work of Art” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*. (pp.15-86)