

## **The Aesthetics of Crossword Puzzles**

Robbie Kubala

Forthcoming in the *British Journal of Aesthetics*

Abstract: This paper develops an aesthetics of crossword puzzles. I present a taxonomy of crosswords in the Anglophone world and argue that there are three distinct sources of aesthetic value in crosswords. First, and in common with other puzzles, crosswords merit aesthetic experiences of our own agency: paradigmatically, the aesthetic experience of struggling for and hitting upon the right solution. In addition to instantiating the aesthetic value of puzzles in general, crosswords in particular can have two other sources of aesthetic value: the visual appeal of grid art and the poetic delight of idiomatic language. Crossword aesthetics takes place at the intersection of the recently popular aesthetics of puzzles and games and the more familiar aesthetics of the visual and literary arts.

Stephen Sondheim, the American musical theatre composer, used a curious example when asked to explain his craft: “the whole idea of art is bringing order out of chaos. It’s the organization of material and that really is what making a puzzle is” (Zimmer 2021). The connection between writing a musical and constructing a puzzle was not, for Sondheim, a casual one. In addition to creating some of Broadway’s most intricate musical scores and clever lyrics, Sondheim was an aficionado of crossword puzzles and is widely credited with introducing American audiences to the British-style

cryptic crossword with the puzzles he made in the late 1960s for *New York Magazine*.  
Sondheim’s favorite cryptics, however, were those that appeared in *The Listener*, a weekly magazine put out by the BBC: as he later said in an interview, “Of all the publications, *The Listener* had the most elegant, complicated, devious, interesting puzzles” (Zimmer 2021). Though some of those terms have non-aesthetic uses—a complicated knot to untie, a villain’s devious plan—their deployment here suggests an aesthetic evaluation: Sondheim judges that these puzzles are aesthetically elegant.

What does it mean to call a crossword elegant? What makes one puzzle more elegant than another? Which features of puzzles are eligible to be aesthetically evaluated at all? The aim of this paper is to answer these questions by developing an aesthetics of crossword puzzles. The aesthetics of any genre ought to begin by clarifying the nature of that genre, distinguishing the constitutive norms or standards that make an object count as an instance of that genre from the evaluative norms or standards that govern its goodness or badness as that kind of object (§1). I suggest that there are three distinct sources of aesthetic value in crosswords. First, and in common with puzzles such as jigsaws and sudoku, crosswords offer us an aesthetic experience of our own agency: paradigmatically, the aesthetic experience of struggling for and hitting upon the right solution (§2). In addition to instantiating the aesthetic value of puzzles in general, crosswords in particular can have two other sources of aesthetic value: the visual appeal of grid art and the poetic delight of idiomatic language (§3). Crosswords can also be evaluated according to non-aesthetic standards, including moral and political standards

(§4). Crossword aesthetics takes place at the intersection of the recently popular aesthetics of puzzles and games and the more familiar aesthetics of the visual and literary arts.

In the United States, an estimated 50 million people regularly attempt to solve crosswords (Levinson 2020); in the United Kingdom, it has been claimed that more than 12 million people attempt a crossword every week (Balfour 2013). Despite their massive popularity, however, crosswords receive barely a mention within philosophical aesthetics.<sup>1</sup> And in the handful of places where they have been discussed, context suggests skepticism about whether crosswords merit aesthetic evaluation at all. Alessandro Giovannelli claims that crosswords are not “better or worse *aesthetically*” when we experience them as challenging tests of our cognitive skills (2008: 493). And Aaron Smuts claims that “there is no such thing as an elegant or otherwise aesthetically qualified property of [a crossword’s] solution” (2005: 6). I will argue that crosswords can be aesthetically valuable in precisely the ways Giovannelli and Smuts deny, as well as in other ways.

## 1. Kinds of Crosswords

I begin with a brief characterization of puzzles in general, albeit without aspiring to offer a full definition or conceptual analysis. Thomas Kuhn, whose account of normal science draws centrally on the concept of a puzzle, writes that a puzzle is a problem with “the assured existence of a solution” (1996: 37). Unlike the problem of curing cancer or deciding which career to pursue, jigsaws and crosswords—Kuhn’s own examples—are

---

<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, crosswords have been more often discussed in epistemology, due to Susan Haack’s (1993) use of crossword puzzles as a metaphor for coherentism. Timothy McGrew (1999) has argued that foundationalists, too, can account for solving a crossword puzzle.

known to possess a unique complete solution.<sup>2</sup> A second necessary condition on puzzles, for Kuhn, is the presence of “rules that limit both the nature of acceptable solutions and the steps by which they are to be obtained” (1996: 38). Being asked a factual question by someone who knows the answer would satisfy the first condition, but what turns question-asking into a trivia quiz is a rule, such as a time limit or ban on looking up the answer, that satisfies the second condition. This second condition is reminiscent of Bernard Suits’ famous definition of game play: “playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles” (2014: 43). The rules of games, for Suits, always include ‘unnecessary obstacles’ that limit taking the most efficient means by which one could otherwise attain the goal of the game. The confluence of Kuhn’s and Suits’ conditions yields the result that solving a puzzle is an instance of playing a game. While these definitions are not uncontroversial, what matters for my purposes is not to insist that puzzles *are* games but to argue that, in common with games, crossword puzzles invite us to aesthetically appreciate our own agency.<sup>3</sup>

An unsolved crossword puzzle consists in a blank grid of black and white squares, with some of the white squares containing small superscripted numbers, and a list of numbered clues. Each clue typically corresponds to a single entry, which is written in the grid either vertically or horizontally starting at the location of the corresponding number.

---

<sup>2</sup> In an unpublished paper (“Solving Puzzles, Checking, and Backsolving”), Kenny Easwaran (n.d.) proposes that puzzles characteristically contain not only the ingredients for finding the solution, but also a means of double-checking that the solution is in fact correct.

<sup>3</sup> That said, I am skeptical about drawing a sharp distinction between games and puzzles. Grant Tavinor has argued that a distinction is “entailed by the difference between *winning* and *finding a solution*” (2009: 88), where he seems to understand winning as an outcome of competition. But there are non-competitive games, games with no win conditions, and games in which winning consists in finding a solution.

Most commonly, only one letter is entered into each square, though ‘rebus’ puzzles may contain squares with multiple letters, and very occasionally a solver may be prompted to draw an image to stand for a letter or letters (e.g., ♥ may stand for HEART). A solved puzzle consists in a correctly filled-in grid. The solution can be ‘checked’ by confirming that each letter fits both its across and down clues, for all the letters that do (so-called ‘unchecked’ letters appear in either an across or down entry but not in both). The medium of a solved crossword puzzle is therefore language: letters—typically composing meaningful words and phrases—arranged in grids.<sup>4</sup>

A crossword puzzle is a culturally specific object. Unlike the Lascaux cave depictions or ancient Egyptian jewelry, which reveal the widespread cross-cultural appeal of artistic genres of painting and bodily adornment, the crossword puzzle is a fairly recent phenomenon. Although antecedents, similar to word squares, were published in English magazines in the 19th century, the first modern crossword is widely considered to have been published in 1913 in the *New York World*, although it was called a “Word-Cross” and did not meet contemporary construction conventions.<sup>5</sup>

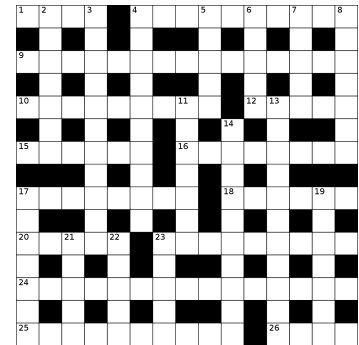
In the Anglophone world, there are two distinct genres of crossword puzzles, which are typically referred to as ‘British’ and ‘American’. British puzzles, of the kind that

---

<sup>4</sup> The medium of an *unsolved* crossword puzzle is something closer to our own agency, as discussed below.

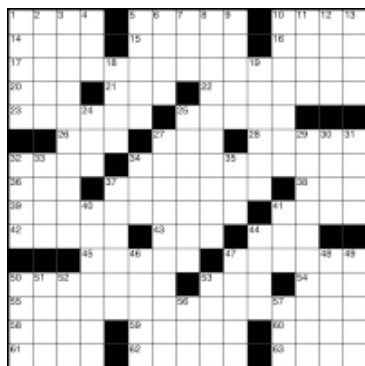
<sup>5</sup> See Tausig (2013) and Raphael (2020) for more on the cultural history of the crossword puzzle. Crosswords are written in languages other than English—the first Russian *crosswords* were published by Vladimir Nabokov in 1924 (Nabokov 2012)—but my focus is Anglophone crosswords. Martin Levinson notes that French-language crosswords are smaller and not necessarily square, Japanese crosswords contain one syllable per white square, Polish crosswords allow only nouns, and that because so many Italian words end in vowels, “Italian crossword-makers have perhaps the most difficult task” (2020: 239).

tend to appear in major newspapers in the UK, Canada, and Australia, are cryptic puzzles, while American puzzles, of the kind that tend to appear in major newspapers in the US, are non-cryptic. The two main differences concern cluing and grid shape. A cryptic clue contains four elements: a precise straight definition, a fair elliptical indication of the answer, an enumeration of the answer's length, and nothing else. “Stares at torn pages (5),” for instance, clues the answer GAPES. Although the elements can appear in any order, in this case ‘stares at’ is the straight definition, and ‘torn pages’ the elliptical clue: ‘torn’ suggests an anagram, and the only anagram of ‘pages’ that is synonymous with ‘stares at’ is ‘gapes’.<sup>6</sup> British puzzle grids



contain many unchecked letters; the ‘checking’ comes from an answer satisfying both the straight and elliptical parts of the clue.

American puzzles, by contrast, typically contain only straight definitions, and hence tend to require more knowledge of vocabulary and cultural context than cryptics



do. To compensate, American puzzle grids standardly contain no unchecked letters. The classic American grid is 15x15 in size—although the *New York Times* Sunday puzzle is 21x21, and mini puzzles can be as small as 5x5—and has

<sup>6</sup> Still the best introduction to cryptic cluing, from which this example is taken, is Sondheim (1968), which appeared in *New York*. Besides anagrams, other types of elliptical clues Sondheim discusses include multiple meanings, reversals, charades, container and contents, hidden, and punny.

rotational symmetry.<sup>7</sup> Both American and British puzzles divide into two kinds: themeless and themed. To stick with the American case, themeless puzzles, which appear on Fridays and Saturdays in the *New York Times*, have a limit of 72 words and simply contain straight definitions. Themed puzzles, which appear on other days of the week, have a limit of 78 words and contain three or more theme answers, typically the puzzle's longest, which somehow comprise a unified set and may or may not contain a 'revealer' answer. A 2021 puzzle by Kathy Wienberg contained, as theme answers, LOG CABIN SYRUP, COTTAGE CHEESE, RANCH DRESSING, and finally HOMEMADE MEALS. The last entry is a revealer meant to signal that the first three answers are food items whose name begins with a type of home (log cabin, cottage, or ranch).

The standards described in this section are *constitutive* standards: they govern the type of thing a puzzle is. Although there are plenty of edge cases and exceptions, generally speaking a would-be constructor hasn't succeeded in even making a British cryptic, let alone a good cryptic, if they haven't arranged words and phrases in a grid such that each entry crosses at least two others and is uniquely picked out by a phrase containing a straight definition, the cryptic portion of the clue, and an enumeration. Only once we've established that something counts as a cryptic crossword can we begin to evaluate its quality. The aim of the next section is to discuss the *evaluative* standards that make something good or bad as a crossword puzzle, and to defend the view that some of those standards are aesthetic.

---

<sup>7</sup> For some exceptions from the *New York Times*, see <https://www.xwordinfo.com/Odd>. There are a variety of other mainstream and independent ('indie') crossword outlets, but the *Times* remains the most popular, reporting over 600,000 subscribers at the time of writing.

## 2. The Aesthetic Value of Crosswords: Agency

One debate we might have is whether crossword puzzles can be *art*, and there is a history of asking this question of (other) games. Some have argued that chess problems can be art (Osborne 1964, Humble 1993, Ravilious 1994), and others have argued that video games can (Smuts 2005, Tavinor 2009), though Brock Rough (2018) has recently argued that being a game is incompatible with being an artwork. Still, some evidence that crosswords can be art is provided by looking at the features crosswords share with canonical art forms. For instance, in offering his definition of art, Denis Dutton (2006) mentions crosswords as affording art's characteristic features of 'direct pleasure', because they are valued for the immediate pleasure they give, and 'intellectual challenge', because they offer challenges of exercise and mastery. Like Thi Nguyen, however, who sidesteps the debate about art-status in his recent book on games (2020: 123-4), I think the more interesting philosophical question is not whether puzzles can be art, but whether they can merit aesthetic experiences.<sup>8</sup> It is presumably uncontroversial that crosswords *afford* aesthetic experiences, at least if we think that any object we can engage with the senses or imagination can afford, in a descriptive sense, an aesthetic experience (a bubble bath, a

---

<sup>8</sup> A neglected argument from Frank Sibley (2001 [1992]) aims to establish the logical priority of the concept of the 'aesthetic' over the concept of 'art'. Such an argument, if successful, would provide a principled way of underwriting my claim about philosophical interest, though nothing hangs on this here.



plastic bag wafting through the air).<sup>9</sup> The question is whether crosswords *merit* aesthetic engagement.

As advertised above, a couple of philosophers appear to suggest a negative answer. First, in a review of a book on the aesthetic value of pictures, Alessandro Giovannelli offers crossword puzzles as a counterexample to a certain strategy for arguing that pictures have aesthetic value. The strategy is to claim that pictures that have cognitive values, such as the value of fostering fine observation, can also have aesthetic value when they are *experienced* as having the feature that is a cognitive value. Giovannelli denies this claim because he thinks it is false of crosswords: crosswords “are cognitively valuable in part because they enrich a person’s vocabulary and in part because they are experienced as doing so,” yet they are not thereby “better or worse *aesthetically*” (2008: 493). Second, in arguing that it is more appropriate to call chess an art form than crosswords, because chess puzzles admit of multiple solutions, Aaron Smuts claims that “insofar as crossword puzzles only possess one solution, there is no such thing as an elegant or otherwise aesthetically qualified property of their solution” (2005: 6). Although Giovannelli and Smuts do not strictly speaking claim that crosswords have no aesthetic value, context suggests a broader skepticism. I want to show that crosswords can be aesthetically valuable in precisely the ways they deny, as well as in other ways.

---

<sup>9</sup> Yuriko Saito’s everyday aesthetics is associated with the idea that everything is capable of being aesthetically appreciated. Crosswords, however, are more like traditional art objects than canonical items of everyday aesthetics in that crosswords are partially constituted by norms for experiencing them correctly; see Saito (2017: 48-51) for a discussion of framelessness.

I will argue that crosswords merit aesthetic engagement because they merit the experience of aesthetic value properties. There are two *prima facie* reasons to think of crossword solving as an aesthetic activity. The first has to do with disagreement. Aesthetic evaluations, in general, are matters of taste: we attribute evaluative properties to objects on the basis of our experience of them, and tend to expect greater disagreement about our aesthetic evaluations than about our attribution of empirical properties such as shape and color. It wouldn't be nearly as surprising if you and I disagreed about whether a puzzle was boring or engaging than if you said the puzzle was colored red when we are both plainly looking at a black-and-white grid.

The second *prima facie* reason to think of crossword solving as an aesthetic activity is that aesthetic objects tend to support robust practices of criticism. And crosswords can be, and regularly are, evaluated critically. There are at least three websites that offer daily reviews of the *New York Times* puzzle, one of which reviews puzzles from other sites as well.<sup>10</sup> These reviews presuppose that crossword puzzles are better as crosswords when, in addition to meeting the constitutive conventions of crosswords, they instantiate other values. In the remainder of this paper, I will argue that there are three broad sources of aesthetic value in crosswords, where each source can be a locus of reasonable disagreement and is apt to support criticism.

---

<sup>10</sup> For the curious: Rex Parker's blog (<https://rexwordpuzzle.blogspot.com/>), Diary of a Crossword Fiend (<https://crosswordfiend.com/>), and XWord Info (<https://www.xwordinfo.com/>). The *Times* has an in-house Wordplay blog, which includes hints and tips for the daily puzzle, but (unsurprisingly) doesn't offer full-dress criticism of its own products (<https://www.nytimes.com/column/wordplay>).

One source of aesthetic value is the aesthetic experience of one's own agency. One of the main insights of Nguyen's book is that games are especially apt to provide such experiences. Whether or not we take crosswords to be games, this aesthetic value is available to solvers of all crossword puzzles. Apart from the satisfactions of obtaining a goal, which may not be distinctively aesthetic but common to all goal-directed activity, we can aesthetically appreciate the process of striving to obtain that goal: trying to win (in the game context) or to find the solution (in the puzzle context).<sup>11</sup> In cluing a crossword puzzle, constructors prescribe certain experiences to solvers—the experience of identifying the unique answer to the set clue—and those experiences bear aesthetic value properties that solvers can appreciate. In particular, the experience of solving a puzzle can bear Nguyen's paradigmatic aesthetic property of *practical harmony* (2020: 107-12). Note that speaking of the experience as bearing aesthetic value properties is neutral between competing theories of aesthetic value, because it is the correct experience *of* the crossword that bears the relevant properties: the crossword's own properties make the experience of it the one that it is.<sup>12</sup>

Nguyen discusses several kinds of practical harmony; two will be most relevant for our purposes. First, the harmony of *solution* is the felt pleasingness of a match or fit between an obstacle and a solution. In the case of crosswords, this harmony is a matter of how a clue leads to an answer. Consider two different cryptic clues for the answer

---

<sup>11</sup> Nguyen himself implies that crossword puzzles are games (2020: 149) and is explicit that a “logic puzzle is a game, and can be played for the sake of the aesthetic experience of epiphany” (2020: 162).

<sup>12</sup> The main competitors, broadly speaking, are empiricism, which holds that aesthetic value reduces to the value of a correct experience of an object (e.g., Peacocke 2021a), and the object theory, which holds that aesthetic value is a non-reductive value that we experience objects as having (e.g., Shelley 2010).

REARM: “Stern men at first prepare for another battle” (5) and “Once again, prime minister’s back in the papers.” The first is perfectly adequate: ‘prepare for another battle’ is clearly the straight definition, while ‘stern’ quickly leads to REAR and ‘men at first’ refers to the letter M. But the second is much more clever: the comma may mislead the solver into looking for a five-letter synonym of ‘once again’, and ‘prime minister’ is a tricky distraction, because the experienced solver will think of the abbreviation PM or of names of particular prime ministers. In fact, ‘once again prime’ is the straight definition, and ‘minister’s back’—the letter R—goes ‘in’ to REAM, which is a set of ‘papers’. As this comparative judgment suggests, the aesthetic value of a clue-answer pair is a feature of our experience of a puzzle for which we can develop a taste, and about which there are intersubjective standards to which we can appeal to justify our critical judgments. It would be an interesting further task to investigate exactly which clue-answer pairs are found most aesthetically valuable and why. But when Sondheim described *The Listener*’s puzzles as ‘elegant’, it was a feature of clue-answer pairs that he had in mind.

Contrary to Smuts, even though a clue has only one answer, that clue-answer pair can bear the property of elegance, especially when evaluated relative to other possibilities. Even if we hold fixed the ‘solution’—the totality of correct answers in a puzzle—a constructor can elevate a puzzle’s quality with especially clever, ingenious, or elegant clues. There is an analogy here to literal musical harmonies, understood as the sound produced by multiple notes played simultaneously. Even if we hold fixed a particular musical score—its sequence of notes—a performer can play a harmony in a more or less elegant way by controlling other properties of the harmony, such as its dynamics,

articulation, or orchestration. Here the performer is analogous to the constructor, who controls other properties of the clue beyond whether it correctly leads to the answer.

Second, the harmony of *capacity* is the felt sense of one's agential capacities fitting the demands of the world. Although there are very few situations where crossword solvers have spectators—the annual American Crossword Puzzle Tournament is a notable exception—the harmony of solution is available to both solver and spectator. But the harmony of capacity is fully available only to the solver, and in fact for Nguyen is most fully experienced by the solver who is “at the outermost edge of [their] capacities” (2020: 110), struggling to meet the demands of the game or other practical task. The pursuit of this experience explains why some solvers prefer maximally challenging puzzles: we value the experience of being pushed to our limits. Rex Parker, one of the three main crossword reviewers, opens his reviews with a difficulty rating, and while I don't argue that difficulty is an aesthetic value property in its own right, it seems that difficulty is an indication of the potential to experience the harmony of capacity. There is a kind of Aristotelian relativity at play here, since each solver will have to calibrate the reviewer's rating against their own personal sense of what is difficult.

Contrary to Giovannelli, the harmony of capacity shows that being made to struggle at the limits of one's intellectual abilities can be a cognitive value that, when experienced, is an aesthetic value. That intellectual struggle doesn't have to be experienced *as* a cognitive value—under the description ‘cognitive value’, say—in order to be appreciated aesthetically. Rather, the activities that constitute the intellectual struggle just *are* experienced as the harmony of capacity, which is an aesthetic value.

Practical harmony is not the only aesthetic value property we can experience while solving. The experience of one's abilities *not* fitting the demands of the world can also potentially be aesthetically valuable, as when we fail to solve a difficult puzzle but aesthetically appreciate the failure in its own right. This kind of unresolved disharmony is a constitutive component of the experience of the sublime, in which we find our cognitive faculties inadequate to apprehend the world. Although she ultimately denies that there can be a theory of the sublime, Jane Forsey mentions "the cognitive failure I have occasionally experienced in the face of the *New York Times* crossword puzzle" as a prosaic instance of the sublime (2007: 386). Antonia Peacocke, in her elaboration of an aesthetics of agency, suggests emotions of agency, patterns of attention, and affordances as three additional constituents of phenomenal experience that can bear or reflect "real aesthetic value" (2021b: 7). Solving crosswords can, for instance, merit emotions of agency such as frustration and delight, as well as distinctive patterns of attention (scanning both across and down entries at a point of intersection, dividing attention between filling in one answer while reading the next clue), which can all be appreciated aesthetically.

In arguing that crosswords have aesthetic value properties that we can experience when we engage with them as prescribed, I have been assuming that the fact that we can correctly attribute aesthetic value properties to an object is sufficient to establish that we can have aesthetic experiences of that object. Yet some, particularly those in the Kantian tradition, will be skeptical, first, that the properties in question really are aesthetic and, second, that such property attribution is sufficient for aesthetic experience. Aesthetic value properties, on the Kantian view, are all and only those that are attributed in *aesthetic*

experience, where aesthetic experience is subject to a disinterest requirement. But, the objection goes, solving a crossword puzzle is an interested experience, one that is guided by determinate cognitive goals.

Nguyen has anticipated this objection and argues compellingly that we can have disinterested experiences of our own interested agency: “a disinterested attitude taken toward the interested states of an activity” (2020: 117). Although we care deeply about filling in the grid accurately while we are solving a puzzle, that is a disposable end that we choose not for its own sake, but for the sake of the value of the activity of solving. In other words, we can appreciate disinterestedly, in memory, our interested experience of striving to fill the grid. A full assessment of this response is outside the scope of this paper, but it should be sufficient to illustrate that there are plausible replies to make to the Kantian.

What kinds of puzzles best provide experiences of these aesthetic value properties? As with any aesthetic practice, there are no storable and exceptionless principles of taste, but we can formulate some rough heuristics. Cryptic clues, as we have seen, should be clever and economical; they are particularly elegant when they have a meaningful surface sense that has to be parsed differently in order to separate out the straight definitional component from the elliptical component. “Woman in charge of automobile club (6),” for instance, overtly suggests a single referent but is covertly a double definition: ‘woman in charge of automobile’ and ‘club’ both refer to DRIVER.<sup>13</sup> Themed puzzles should have tightly organized theme sets, such that ideally there are no, or very few, other possible

---

<sup>13</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for introducing me to the setter Sarah Hayes, known in *The Guardian* as Arachne, whose clue this is.

theme answers. American themelesses should have fresh, colorful answers, with a minimum of ‘crosswordese’ (archaic words or technical jargon). The avoidance of ‘crosswordese’ raises a question about what makes a word or phrase interesting in its own right; answering that question will be one of the tasks of the next section.

### 3. The Aesthetic Value of Crosswords: Grid Art and Idiomatic Language

Besides the aesthetic experience of one’s own agency, there are two other sources of aesthetic value that are distinctive to crossword puzzles, particularly in the American style: the visual appeal of grid art and the poetic delight of idiomatic language. These are, in the first instance, features of puzzles themselves—they could be appreciated by looking at a solved grid without considering the clues—whereas practical harmony is in the first instance a feature of our experience while solving.

Grid art is a conventional practice in which the grid itself is meant to be appreciated aesthetically. Some examples from the *New York Times* include grids that depict a panda, a piñata, a tennis racket, a lightbulb, a musical note, a kite, a heart, and a dog.<sup>14</sup> The poet and cultural critic Adrienne Raphel describes this feature as “a cross between a Mondrian and latte art” (2020: 45), and her reference to Mondrian is no coincidence. Raphel situates crosswords in a wider art-historical context: “The beginning of the twentieth century was the renaissance of the grid. ... The grid had been a background figure for centuries, a tool used to create perspective and to provide structure

---

<sup>14</sup> These examples, and more, can be found at <https://www.xwordinfo.com/GridArt>.



within a painting. Now, the grid was not the ground, but the figure itself. Think Piet Mondrian's 1943 *Broadway Boogie-Woogie*, for example, which pixelates Manhattan into essentially a primary-color crossword grid" (2020: 171). Crosswords' association with major urban newspapers, and the stereotype of the commuter solving them on the train on the way to another day of productive labor, is another aspect of the link between crosswords and modernism, explored by Raphael and others.

Perhaps because it does not require that the solver complete the puzzle, however, this kind of grid art is a somewhat marginal practice, not universally agreed to make a crossword better *qua* puzzle. A second class of grid art, though, contains information that is at least potentially relevant to solving the puzzle. For instance, some puzzles use patterns of black squares to depict letters: one puzzle's black squares form a large SOS, which is a clue that each of the theme answers will comprise three words beginning with an S, an O, and an S, respectively. A grid containing a spiral of black squares is suggestive of the central staircase of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, which turns out to be its theme.

A third class of grid art invites the solver to trace a shape only *after* the puzzle is completed. Examples include a butterfly, a treble clef, an angel, a horse, a bat, and a martini glass.<sup>15</sup> A notable *New York Times* puzzle from 2018 contained circled letters which, when traced in the appropriate order, formed a pipe; the central theme answer was TREACHERY OF IMAGES, and other answers referenced surrealism and René

---

<sup>15</sup> For these examples and others, see <https://www.xwordinfo.com/Visual>.

Magritte. For all three classes, some solvers may find that grid art, whether related to the answers or not, is simply irrelevant to their experience of the puzzle. In particular, regular cryptic solvers, who are accustomed to admiring the concision of a clue, may find the extraneous visual information to detract from the puzzle’s aesthetic quality, a distraction or gimmick rather than an additional source of delight. Nonetheless, grid art remains a potential source of aesthetic value, though perhaps its potential has not yet been fully realized.

The third and final source of aesthetic value in crosswords, while in principle detachable from the overall experience of solving, is in practice more closely tied to it than grid art is: idiomatic language. A good themeless puzzle frames and displays interesting words and phrases, which stand out as humorous, slangy, chatty, or otherwise memorable. A 2022 *New Yorker* puzzle from Erik Agard includes the entry I MEAN COME ON (clued, “Like . . . is that not infuriating?!”). A 2017 *New York Times* puzzle by Kyle Mahowald includes lively entries such as PITY PARTY (“Bout of feeling sorry for oneself”), SMALL WORLD (“You know so-and-so, too? How about that!”), and I’LL DRINK TO THAT (“You said it!”). These phrases are evocative and entertaining; as the constructor Anna Schectman writes, “The potential for words to mean so much with so little context is the puzzler’s great pleasure” (2021: 22). As these examples illustrate, good crosswords call attention to novel bits of slang or usage, thereby recording, in their way, the evolution of language. Sometimes this is recorded in a clue rather than the answer: Natan Last, in *The New Yorker*, clued YOU TOO as “Awkward knee-jerk response to a waiter saying ‘Enjoy your meal!’” Even to see a middle-of-the-road phrase like BUCKET

LIST in the puzzle can make one reflect on how figurative ordinary language is: ‘things I want to do before I die’ is not an especially interesting phrase, but ‘kick the bucket’ is. Idiomatic language makes crosswords a kind of poetry.

The poetry comparison has not always been favorable to crosswords or to poets; a reviewer in the 1930s wrote, of T. S. Eliot, “‘The Wasteland’ *may* be a great poem; on the other hand it may be just a rather pompous cross-word puzzle” (Jackson 2022). The eminent literary critic William Empson drew a comparison between “obscure puzzles” and “obscure poetry” (Jackson 2022). This connection has been, at times, a self-conscious one: the legendary cryptic constructor Torquemada published a book of ‘verse puzzles’, called *Cross-Words in Rhyme for Those of Riper Years* (1925), in which each clue takes the form of a metrical rhyming couplet. In a recent piece on the link between modernist poetry and crosswords, Roddy Howland Jackson (2022) observes, “The solver poses as a literary critic, performing a caricature of close reading to unlock a secret.” This connection is probably more illuminating of literary interpretation than it is of crosswords, however, since it analyzes the hermeneutical task in terms of puzzle-solving, and not the other way around.

Still, the connection to poetry can be an apt one for understanding the aesthetic value of crosswords.<sup>16</sup> Reviewers often speak of a constructor’s ‘voice’ or ‘style’, and while sometimes this is a matter of subject-matter (one constructor favors references to film, another references to technology), it can also refer to the kinds of phrases the puzzle

---

<sup>16</sup> Oswald Hanfling makes this comparison explicitly in discussing “the satisfaction of working things out” (2003: 180), where he notes that in reading difficult poetry and in solving difficult puzzles, we *enjoy* the struggle. Nguyen’s harmony of capacity has many affinities with Hanfling’s discussion.

contains. Just as in literature, this authorial voice should not be identified with the creator's own: a constructor can include phrases they would never themselves use in conversation.

Interestingly, not everyone agrees that a good themeless requires flashy marquee answers. As Raphel puts it, “A great themeless doesn't necessarily rely on weird central words. Lack of ostentation can be equally impressive. In *On Crosswords*, T. Campbell classified smooth themelesses as ‘puddings’: perfectly crafted fill with no awkward crosswordy quirks, the Japanese Zen gardens of the crossword biodome” (2020: 41). These divergent styles are exactly what we should expect when it comes to matters of taste.<sup>17</sup> Still, almost everyone agrees that standards for smoothness in puzzles have recently been elevated, improving the quality of crossword fill (Raphel 2020); indeed, to call a *puzzle* elegant, as opposed to calling a clue elegant, is often to praise the puzzle's smooth fill and lack of ‘junk’ entries. Words like ESNE (an Anglo-Saxon feudal laborer), TSETSE (a tropical African fly), or NENE (a Hawaiian goose) have common letters and tended to be overused in American crosswords relative to their frequency in the language; today, they are frowned upon. These more demanding fill standards make the constructor's task more difficult but the solver's experience more enjoyable.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> A passage from Aristotle's *Poetics* nicely foreshadows disagreement about ordinary language in crosswords: “Ariphades ridiculed the tragedians for introducing expressions that no one would ever use in conversation ... Ariphades failed to realize that it is precisely by being out of the ordinary that such expressions elevate the style” (2013: 46).

<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, there is by now a large literature within computer science about programming crossword construction software; one early contribution that explicitly discusses crossword aesthetics is Smith (1983).

#### 4. Conclusion

In arguing that crosswords have (at least) these three sources of aesthetic value—the experience of one’s own agency, the visual appeal of grid art, and the literary pleasures of idiomatic language—I have not denied that there are other evaluative standards in play. The *New York Times* puzzle notoriously requires that each answer pass a ‘breakfast test’, avoiding not just slurs and curse words but even potentially off-putting references to bodily functions.<sup>19</sup> This rules out answers like ENEMA and URINE, to the chagrin of constructors who would otherwise be happy to use such friendly letters (all those vowels and common consonants). Other indie crossword venues (like the *American Values Club Crossword*) are not subject to such constraints, however, and are open to a range of potentially edgier solving experiences.

Recent years have also seen important debates about representation among constructors and crosswords alike. There are efforts both to diversify the pool of known constructors—including *The Inkubator* (a subscription service for puzzles by women) and *Queer Crosswords* (for LGBTQ+ constructors)—and to expand the range of cultural references that are deemed ‘cross-worthy’, especially in mainstream outlets. Cringeworthy and offensive clue-answer pairs, such as cluing MEN as “Exasperated comment from a feminist” (in 2015 in the *New York Times*), have inspired calls to improve the cultural sensitivity of cluing practices. The reasons to do better in this regard are moral or political, but may also be aesthetic, at least if a moral defect in a work can thereby be an

---

<sup>19</sup> In the documentary *Wordplay* (2006), the constructor Merl Reagle memorably described this test: “I mean, there are people solving the big Sunday puzzle. They’ve waited all week for this. They’re sitting there relaxing, and here comes, you know, ‘RECTAL’? I don’t think so.”

aesthetic defect: if a crossword prescribes experiences of content that morally offends a solver, then that is arguably an aesthetic reason to do better, too. There is much more to say in this connection. But this ongoing contestation over evaluative standards is part of what makes crossword puzzles such a dynamic aesthetic practice.<sup>20</sup>

### Bibliography

Aristotle. 2013. *Poetics*, trans. Anthony Kenny. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Balfour, Sandy. 2013. Why do the British love cryptic crosswords? *The Spectator*, November 16, 2013. <[https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/why-do-the-british-love-cryptic-crosswords->](https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/why-do-the-british-love-cryptic-crosswords-)

Dutton, Denis. 2006. A naturalist definition of art. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64: 367–77.

Easwaran, Kenny. n.d. Solving puzzles, checking, and back-solving.

Forsey, Jane. 2007. Is a theory of the sublime possible? *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65: 381–9.

---

<sup>20</sup> Thanks to Kenny Easwaran, Kathleen Higgins, Josh Landy, Natan Last, and especially Kyle Mahowald for discussion and comments, to the audience at the 2022 ASA Rocky Mountain Division Meeting for helpful questions, and to three anonymous referees at this journal for their supportive and thoughtful feedback. Special thanks to Kevan Choset, Natan Last, Kyle Mahowald, and Finn Vigeland for all the hours of aesthetically rewarding puzzle-solving.

Giovannelli, Alessandro. 2008. Review of *Sight and Sensibility: Evaluating Pictures* by Dominic McIver Lopes. *Mind* 117: 490–4.

Haack, Susan. 1993. *Evidence and Inquiry*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Hanfling, Oswald. 2003. Paradoxes of aesthetic distance. *British Journal of Aesthetics* 43: 175–86.

Humble, P. N. 1993. Chess as an art form. *British Journal of Aesthetics* 33: 59–66.

Jackson, Roddy Howland. 2022. Beastly clues: T. S. Eliot, Torquemada, and the modernist crossword. *The Public Domain Review*, January 12, 2022.

<<https://publicdomainreview.org/essay/beastly-clues>>

Kuhn, Thomas S. 1996. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Third Edition. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Levinson, Martin H. 2020. Crossword puzzles: Mapping the territory. *ETC.: A Review of General Semantics* 77: 232–9.

McGrew, Timothy. 1999. How foundationalists do crossword puzzles. *Philosophical Studies* 96: 333–50.

Nabokov, Vladimir. 2012. *Nabokcrosswords*, ed. and trans. Joseph Clayton Mills with Kate Kozhukohva. Chicago: Sibilance Press.

Nguyen, C. Thi. 2020. *Games: Agency as Art*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Osborne, Harold. 1964. Notes on the aesthetics of chess and the concept of intellectual beauty. *British Journal of Aesthetics* 4: 160–3.

Peacocke, Antonia. 2021a. Let's be liberal: An alternative to aesthetic hedonism. *British Journal of Aesthetics* 61: 163–83.

— 2021b. Phenomenal experience and the aesthetics of agency. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 48: 380–91.

Raphel, Adrienne. 2020. *Thinking Inside the Box*. New York: Penguin Books.

Ravilious, C. P. 1994. The aesthetics of chess and the chess problem. *British Journal of Aesthetics* 34: 285–90.



Rough, Brock. 2018. The incompatibility of games and artworks. *Journal of the Philosophy of Games* 1: 1–21.

Saito, Yuriko. 2017. *Aesthetics of the Familiar: Everyday Life and World-Making*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Schectman, Anna. 2021. Escaping into the crossword puzzle. *The New Yorker*, December 27, 2021. <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/12/27/escaping-into-the-crossword-puzzle>>

Shelley, James. 2010. Against value empiricism in aesthetics. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 88: 707–20.

Sibley, Frank. 2001 [1992]. Arts or the aesthetic—which comes first? In *Approach to Aesthetics*, eds. John Benson, Betty Redfern, and Jeremy Roxbee Cox (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 135–41.

Smith, P. D. 1983. XENO: Computer-assisted compilation of crossword puzzles. *The Computer Journal* 26: 296–302.

Smuts, Aaron. 2005. Are video games art? *Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive)* 3.

<[https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts\\_contempaesthetics/vol3/is](https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts_contempaesthetics/vol3/is)

**s1/6>**

Sondheim, Stephen. 1968. How to do a *real* crossword puzzle. *New York Magazine*, April 8, 1968. <**<https://nymag.com/article/2019/03/stephen-sondheim-on-how-to-do-a-crossword-puzzle.html>**>

Suits, Bernard. 2014. *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia*. Third Edition. Peterborough, CAN: Broadview Press.

Tavinor, Grant. 2009. *The Art of Videogames*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Tausig, Ben. 2013. *The Curious History of the Crossword*. Race Point Publishing.

Zimmer, Ben. 2021. Stephen Sondheim didn't just change musicals. He changed crosswords. *Slate*, December 4, 2021.

<**<https://slate.com/culture/2021/12/stephen-sondheim-crossword-puzzles-cryptic-west-side-story.html>**>