

ATTENTION, AFFECT, AND AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

The article suggests a conceptualization of the interrelationship between attention, affect, and aesthetic experience. It supplements classical aesthetic theory by integrating knowledge from neurophysiology, developmental psychology, and psychoanalysis. Furthermore, the article proposes a distinction between a variety of types of affect that are discussed with a view to their potential contribution to elaborating the concept of aesthetic experience in the Kantian tradition and to reflecting different qualities of attention.

KEYWORDS

Attention, Affective Dynamic, Typology of Affects, Aesthetic Form of Perception, Aesthetic Form of Reflection, Reflective Judgement, Aesthetic Experience

1.

Attention is a necessary but not sufficient precondition for the formation of aesthetic experience. As a start, aesthetic experience can be conceptualized as a dialogical process in which the experiencing subject, by way of reflective judgement combines its sensuous, emotional, and intellectual capacities in processing experiential encounters with artefacts, aestheticized spaces, and social relations under the universalist perspective of Kantian *sensus communis*.¹ Hence, attention can be defined as an initial, perceptually shaped impetus that may (or may not) bring the reflective process into motion. The emergence of attention is in itself a complex, multilayered process, and there is no guarantee that attention actually leads to the formation of aesthetic experience. However, it remains a basic assumption that the Kantian notion of aesthetic experience, reflective agency, and the perspective of *Bildung* represent genuine developmental potentials of the human subject.

2.

The following brief theoretical outline of the structure and constituents of human experience formation supplements Kantian aesthetic theory with knowledge from neurophysiology, developmental psychology, and psychoanalysis (as elaborated by Alfred Lorenzer).² It is a basic tenet that sensory stimuli undergo a comprehensive and complex processing conducted by the nervous system and the sensory apparatus in interaction with non-conscious, somatic memory traces, before they are made accessible to conscious attention and thus put at the disposal of the reflecting subject for potential attentional agency.

According to Dieter Hoffmann-Axthelm, the non-conscious processing of sensory stimuli prior to the emergence of conscious attention is sequential: As a first step, sensory stimuli are registered in the sensory center of the brain and processed by the nervous system creating a rough representation of the sensed object in terms of shape, size, colour, movement, etc. The second step is the perceptual processing, in which the representation in question is analyzed thoroughly and precisely, thereby enabling the sensory apparatus to move on to the third step: the identification of the sensed object on the basis of comparison with the generalized object structures that are stored in the long-term memory of the brain. In the course of these sequences, a sensed object is investigated, identified, and categorized on the basis of

accumulated bodily experience, and if the result manifests itself as sufficiently relevant and important in the given context of practice, it is selected and brought to the conscious attention of the subject for reflection, decision-making, and action.³

The prerequisite for the emergence of the conscious attention of the subject is the establishment of non-conscious bodily attention that reduces the complexity of sensory stimuli and provides the subject with an ongoing, experience-based estimation of which sensory data are contextually and socio-culturally relevant for competent orientation and thus for conscious agency and meaning formation. This autonomous attentional work of the body is *affective* and performs by continually mediating and adjusting the exchange between the individual organism and its natural and socio-cultural environment. As the general energy resource for this task, *vitality dynamic* is produced by the arousal system in the brain stem as a response to any challenge that the organism meets. However, vitality dynamic does not manifest itself in a 'pure' form—in practice, the dynamic is always shaped as a specific, categorial affect by the relevant, specialized neural subsystem that the organism activates in order to meet the concrete challenge posed by a specific context or situation.⁴ Both in terms of force and categorial orientation, the production of vitality dynamic is calibrated to match the concrete challenge in question, and depending on the situation, the dynamic accordingly expresses itself as an adequate level of specific, categorial affect, e.g., aggression, pain, sexual desire, fear, hunger, need for attachment, etc. These immediate urges are processed and shaped in interaction with the multilayered somatic fund of bodily experiences originating in the given person's individual, socio-culturally embedded life history.⁵

In practice, this process of calibrating vitality dynamic may not always match the concrete challenge adequately. The sublime feeling in the Kantian sense stems from a vitality dynamic whose force exceeds the contextual processing capacity of the experiencing subject. This affective overflow creates a subjective emergency condition that may (or may not) trigger an experience formation that expands the subject's sensuous, emotional, and reflective capacity and enables it to reassess and deal competently with the challenge in question.

3.

The present conceptualization of affects distances itself critically from the predominant, vitalistic affect theory by e.g., Brian Massumi and Nigel Thrift.⁶ Inspired by, first of all, Gilles Deleuze, vitalistic affect theory escapes poststructuralism's self-limitation to linguistic discourse by substituting it with the notion of the pre-discursive body and its supposedly pre-social vital forces as privileged, autonomous generators of meaning and agency beyond the consciousness of the subject.⁷ Instead of conceptualizing affects as an ontological level that is entirely separate from the level of subjective consciousness, the present analysis regards affects and subjective experience as positions in a dynamic continuum in which interaction between bodily and conscious attention takes place, experience is potentially formed, and qualitative transformation (e.g., from unconscious to conscious affective forms) is possible.⁸

Furthermore, it is a basic assumption that vitality dynamic constitutes the general driving force behind a variety of concrete affective forms: more or less intensive *bodily reactions* to physical stimuli; *emotions* (i.e. an unconscious, somatic reservoir of potential subjective states); *feelings* (conscious, reflective subjective states related to specific objects or specific imaginations); *moods* (consciously experienced, pre-reflective subjective states; a mood is without distinct object, yet integrates all sensed phenomena in a subjective experience of totality).⁹ As a collective phenomenon, moods constitute *atmospheres* (i.e., common, pre-reflective experiences of totality that represent both subjective states of mind and objective conditions of practice).¹⁰

In other words, vitality dynamic as a general energy resource can be organized and channeled in the shape of distinct affective forms ranging from non-conscious bodily experience, over conscious, non-reflective experience, to conscious, reflective experience. It is hardly a controversial assessment that these distinctions also indicate different qualities of attention and different potentials in terms of facilitating aesthetic experience formation. To be sure, these shapes of affective organization should be regarded as potentially changeable positions in a continuum. But affects that *remain* confined to bodily reactions and non-conscious emotions are able to play only a role as a somatic framing condition for the dialogical process of aesthetic experience. Likewise, conscious yet non-reflective affects create only a diffuse, unfocused level of

attention that can serve as a valuable material for manipulative interventions of any kind but is insufficient for developing competent attentional agency on the subject's own terms. The productive perspectives for attentional agency and potential aesthetic experience formation are in this conceptualization to be found in the affective shape of conscious, reflective subjective states, i.e., feelings. This quality of attention enables the subject to process sensory stimuli in interaction with the collective categorizations of language and thereby establish a reflective distance to immediate affective impulses and gain the option of conscious choice.¹¹

4.

What constitutes *aesthetic attention*—as opposed to other types of attention—is either a specific form of perception or a specific form of reflection—or a combination of both.¹² An aesthetic form of perception is characterized by being affectively potentiated. Due to the encounter with e.g., challenging or otherwise significant movements or shapes, the process of perception is charged with a corresponding level of vitality dynamic that interacts with affective qualities of related somatic memory traces and unconscious, repressed forms of experience.¹³ As a central feature of many artistic practices, a variety of aesthetic techniques are utilized in order to establish and maintain a potentiated form of perception—or the aesthetic production works with an interplay between establishing, breaking down, and rebuilding affect in the appeal to the audience.

An aesthetic form of reflection, conversely, represents a distinct intellectual sensibility to form, composition, structure, etc. (that has emerged as an integral part of the differentiating process of modernization) and that is, in principle, applicable to any object, practice, relation, and imagination. Aesthetic reflection bears its purpose in itself and operates as a specific, non-directed type of intellectual appropriation of—and meaning ascription to—the object of conscious attention. An aesthetic form of perception may trigger—and may itself be triggered by—aesthetic reflection, but both may also occur independently.

5.

Aesthetic experience in the Kantian sense emerges when aesthetic attention is processed in the mode of reflective judgement. In contrast to the determinative mode of judgement that mediates between sensory object and theoretical understanding by

subsuming the specific object under an existing universal concept, reflective judgement takes its point of departure in the specific object of attention and grants its unique qualities precedence over existing universal concepts.¹⁴ On the basis of intuition, imagination, and feelings, reflective judgement unfolds as an unceasing movement of investigation between an object of attention that cannot be fully determined and a universal concept that cannot be found.¹⁵ Put differently: in the mode of determinative judgement we merely affirm what we believe to know already, whereas in the mode of reflective judgement we potentially gain new insight into both our outer and inner world of experience.

The investigative movement of reflective judgement is propelled by affect in the shape of feelings, but its unfolding involves sensuous and intellectual capacities of the individual as well, and it potentially interacts with the person's full spectrum of both conscious and non-conscious life historical experiences. In this sense, reflective judgement operates in the border region between conscious and non-conscious attention, potentially expanding the scope for conscious attention and agency. Herein lies the specific emancipatory perspective of aesthetic experience: it sets us free without determining what for.¹⁶

It is a central characteristic of aesthetic experience in the Kantian sense of the term that the investigative movement continually strives to mediate between the perspectives of the specific and the universal. In the case of the aesthetic judgement of taste, this mediation is organized as a combination of 'disinterested pleasure' as the experiential quality of feeling in relation to the beauty of the sensory object and the overall reference to the notion of *sensus communis*. The judgement of taste, in other words, transgresses the level of immediate affective responses to sensory stimuli by submitting them to a reflective distance and the universalizing perspective of reason. In the case of the sublime feeling, any experience of normality, control, and common sense is initially disrupted by an overwhelming encounter with the superior forces of nature, a social event, or an artwork. But the subject's subsequent process of dealing with a chaotic multiplicity of triggered affects, of reestablishing general orientation, and of developing a renewed, reflective sense of self on changed terms relies extensively on the universal perspective of reason.¹⁷

6.

This mediation between the specific and the universal that characterizes aesthetic experience formation is a precondition for establishing competent agency on contemporary socio-cultural premises, but it is not automatically associated with the emergence of aesthetic attention. This requires a dialogical exchange between the sensuous and intellectual capacities and feelings of the experiencing subject and the specific invitation to aesthetic attention issued by the object. The aesthetic features of the object do not, in a strict sense, determine the exchange, but they represent a dynamic framing condition for the subject's process of experience formation and for developing reflectively qualified agency.

In contemporary society's public space, including the highly affect-charged social media, a multiplicity of commercial, political, institutional, and civil agents struggle to obtain attention in its capacity as both a scarce resource and gateway to wealth and power. Aesthetic appeals are, to a vast degree, designed in order to be competitive on the premises of this power struggle, and instead of inviting a dialogue in the mode of reflective judgement, they address the public as a bearer of non-reflective affects: impressionable moods and immediate urges to consume. The type of attention created by such appeals remains foreign to aesthetic experience.

- 1 Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1963 (1790)).
- 2 Alfred Lorenzer, *Die Sprache, der Sinn, das Unbewußte* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2002).
- 3 Cf. Dieter Hoffmann-Axthelm, *Sinnesarbeit. Nachdenken über Wahrnehmung* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 1984).
- 4 Cf. Daniel N. Stern, *Forms of Vitality: Exploring Experiences in Psychology and the Arts* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).
- 5 Ibid.; Alfred Lorenzer, *Die Sprache, der Sinn, das Unbewußte*.
- 6 Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); Nigel Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory. Space, Politics, Affect* (London: Routledge, 2008), <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822383574>.
- 7 Cf. Melissa Gregg & Gregory J. Seigworth, eds., *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); Britta Timm Knudsen & Carsten Stage, "Affektteori," in *Kulturteori og kultursociologi*, edited by Bjørn Schiermer (København: Hans Reitzels Forlag, 2016).
- 8 A parallel argument is delivered by Margaret Wetherell, *Affect and Emotion* (London: Sage, 2012).
- 9 Distinctions inspired by among others Simo Køppe et al., "Vitality Affects", *International Forum for Psychoanalysis*, nr. 17 (2008); Tone Roald, *Cognition in Emotion: An Investigation through Experiences with Art* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007); David E. Wellbery, "Stimmung", in *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe*, edited by Karlheinz Barck et al. (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2010). See also Henrik Kaare Nielsen, *I affekt. Studier i senmoderne politik og kultur* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2021).
- 10 Cf. Gernot Böhme, *Atmosphäre. Essays zur neuen Ästhetik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995); Reinhard Knodt, *Ästhetische Korrespondenzen* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1994).
- 11 Cf. Alfred Lorenzer, *Die Sprache, der Sinn, das Unbewußte*.
- 12 Cf. Henrik Kaare Nielsen, *Æstetik, kultur og politik* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1996).
- 13 Cf. Alfred Lorenzer, "Tiefenhermeneutische Kulturanalyse," in *Kultur-Analysen*, edited by Alfred Lorenzer (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Wissenschaft, 1986).
- 14 Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*.
- 15 Cf. Rüdiger Bubner, *Ästhetische Erfahrung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989).
- 16 Ibid., 92.
- 17 Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*.