

KANT'S "AESTHETIC IDEA": TOWARDS AN AESTHETICS OF NON-ATTENTION

Frederik Tygstrup

ABSTRACT

In *Critique of Judgment*, Kant introduces a foundational theme in modern aesthetics by identifying the judgment of taste as a particular mode of attention. In distinction to the mode of attention in mundane experience that works by determining how an intuition can be subsumed under a concept, aesthetic attention celebrates the pleasure associated with the "unison in the play of the powers of the mind" confronted with "the manifold in a thing." Aesthetic attention, in other words, is an aesthetic subject's attention to itself and to the pleasures derived from flexing the power of imagination. In this respect, Kant's aesthetics reaffirms its cartesian core, the primordial positing of the thinking and reflective I as the necessary preposition for experience. This strict distribution of attention toward the secure epistemological architecture of object and subject seems to vacillate, however, in Kant's brief discussion of artworks as purveyors of "aesthetic ideas." This article discusses the de-limitation of attention instigated by the aesthetic idea. The aesthetic idea is associated with the artwork as an object, but it immediately transgresses the limits of the object through an array of analogical instantiations of "spirit." On the other hand, aesthetic ideas are subjectively appreciated, but this appreciation similarly transgresses subjective cognition in an inexhaustible ramification of associative thinking. Developing these characteristics of the "aesthetic idea," the article proposes to excavate from *Critique of Judgment* a mode of aesthetic sensibility that eventually challenges the Cartesian architecture of subject and object and thus reposit aesthetics in a field of relational interdependency.

KEYWORDS

Aesthetic Theory, Aesthetic Idea, Aesthetic Experience, Kant, Derrida

Attention is a relational notion: it names how somebody relates to something. To pay attention requires a subjective act of concentration and attentiveness, and it requires an object that promises to reveal something of interest when properly attended to. Attention, in other words, comes with an epistemic architecture that presupposes an interested subject and an interesting object in place and ready to be set up in a relation of attention. This architecture also provides a template for aesthetic experience: a beholder that pays attention to something as an aesthetic object and an object that presents itself as a site of aesthetic qualities. In the case of aesthetic theory, however, it happens that this epistemic architecture comes under pressure. In the following comment on one of the foundational texts of modern aesthetic theory, Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, I want to explore how the epistemic distribution is gradually displaced from initially positing a subject and an object in order to gauge the relation of aesthetic attention, to discover instead a mode of relation that comes *before* the possibility to delimit a subject of the act of attention and an object of that attention. What is at stake, then, is whether the aesthetic relation can provide an alternative to the epistemological habit of starting from the existence of subjects and objects and eventually become a propaedeutics of thinking in terms of relations rather than entities. In that case, we would be dealing no longer with how subjects pay attention to object but instead with how a certain non-attention can open a space for modes of existence beyond the subject-object architecture.

In *Critique of Judgment*, Kant identifies the judgment of taste as a particular mode of attention. In distinction to the mode of attention in a mundane experience that works, in Kantian parlance, by determining how an intuition derived from the perception of an object can be subsumed under a concept, aesthetic attention focuses on the pleasure associated with the “unison in the play of the powers of the mind” confronted with “the manifold in a thing.”¹ Aesthetic attention, in other words, is an aesthetic subject's attention to itself and the pleasures derived from flexing the powers of imagination. Henceforth, aesthetics is no longer concerned with the qualities that pertain to the object of aesthetic judgment but to the subjective reaction it entails—and eventually to the possibility of sharing this reaction, the possibility of a *sensus communis*. This theoretical shift coincides with what Jacques Rancière has identified as the transformation from a classical to a modern regime of art, the first being based on a “poietic” principle of the correctly

manufactured work of art and the latter on an “aesthetic” principle of sensibility and imagination. Kant’s bold gesture incidentally came to turn aesthetics upside-down by shifting the focus from that which is judged upon to judgment itself, from object to subject, and thus manifests an aesthetic Copernican turn that has eventually become thoroughly engrained in the modern mode of existence of art.

From object to subject, then. Kant insists on the epistemic import of this manoeuvre and allows no distinction when it comes to *what* arouses aesthetic pleasure, be it nature, art, or something third: it all comes back to the singular way in which a sensual impression is processed by the mind. Up to a point, anyhow. This point appears after he has developed the notion of reflective judgment and the unconditional sociality of sharing and exchanging this judgment and before he delves into the dialectics and teleological underpinning of the judgment. Or, more precisely, when he—earlier (and later) disclaimers notwithstanding—attempts to pinpoint some particularities of the judgment precisely when it pertains to works of art, an attempt he needs to make, it seems, to be able to produce the systematic overview of art forms, with which he closes the first part of the *Critique*.

He starts with a simple distinction that poses no hindrance to maintain the indifference of the object of aesthetic judgment: “A beauty of nature is a *beautiful thing*; the beauty of art is a *beautiful representation (Vorstellung)* of a thing.” This representation, however, is *produced*: it is not a mere copy (*Nachmachung*), but an imitation (*Nachahmung*) a result of a creative effort. The art object comes with a producer. This does not, at this point, seem to worry Kant too much, and as if already looking ahead to the dissertation on teleology to come, he identifies the ability to make aesthetically satisfying imitations as that of the *genius*. So even though we might be dealing with two different modalities of beauty, that of nature and that of art, they remain nonetheless attached to nature as their common source. Genius is a nature-like force because it can provide rules of expression that do not stem from the realm of reason: “it cannot itself describe or indicate scientifically how it brings its product into being, but rather that it gives the rule as *nature*.”² Genius is kindred with nature but is not nature. But once this genius-maker has been introduced, Kant, of course, cannot resist delving more into the particulars of the genealogy of the work of art.

To elicit the beautiful representation, the artwork must present the beholder with a form. This form cannot be specified analytically. It remains singular and spontaneously given, like a natural form, and is given over to the spontaneity of the reflective judgment. But even though the judgment as to whether this form is beautiful or not thus still resides solely and solidly in the mental faculties of the beholder, who should not need to care about the genealogy of this form, whether it is nature or an artwork, it nonetheless needs to be acknowledged that the work is an artifact. And it cannot be disregarded that if this artifact arouses aesthetic pleasure, it is because somebody has produced it—provided it with a form—in a particular way. The object is back. There is something at work in the artwork that needs to be accounted for. To further gauge this something, Kant opens §49 with these words:

One says of certain products, of which it is expected that they ought, at least in part, to reveal themselves as beautiful art, that they are without *spirit*, even though one finds nothing in them to criticize as far as taste is concerned.³

Surprisingly, beauty now seems to come in degrees. From the outset, the *Critique of Judgment* insists that the beautiful is beautiful as per the judgment “this is beautiful,” with no further qualifications needed and no further qualifications allowed. But now, artworks can be beautiful (as we find “nothing in them to criticize as far as taste is concerned”) and nonetheless somewhat wanting. There is more to beauty than that which is bestowed on it by the apodictic judgment that, however, still defines it. Together with the genius, something called “spirit” now leaps in as a kind of supplement to the beautiful, adding something to that which was already beautiful. If Kant doesn’t seem to have too many scruples about the notion of genius because it is somehow reassuringly vouched for as per its analogy to the principle of nature, the presence of the maker nonetheless challenges the analogy because the material form of the artwork leaves behind a sensible imprint of spirit. Kant:

What is it then that is meant here by “spirit”?
Spirit, in an aesthetic significance, means the animating principle in the mind. That, however, by which this principle animates the soul, the material which it uses for this purpose, is that which purposively sets the mental powers into motion, i.e., into a play that is self-maintaining and even strengthens the powers to that end.⁴

Spirit, as an “animating principle in the mind” (*belebende Prinzip im Gemüte*), is infused into the artwork by the genius artist. The presence of spirit is, however not manifest, only derivative, oblique; it is manifested only by its traces, that is, in “the material which it uses” in order to set “the mental powers into motion.” The genius is the purveyor of spontaneous, nature-like form; moreover, this form might be not only beautiful but beautiful *cum laude* if it witnesses that spirit has been in play in the confection of form. Spirit is a vital and vitalizing principle that leaves traces, a spectral being of sorts.

The very fact that there are beautiful things, and beautiful things *with spirit*, cannot avoid casting a shadow back on the ground Kant’s aesthetics stands on, that the judgment of taste is subjective and only subjective. The potential presence of spirit, or the traces of the agency of spirit, inevitably takes us back toward the aesthetic object and directs our interest to *how* the principle of spirit has left an imprint. It might be that our first judgment is purely subjective, but if we find the work not only beautiful but beautiful in a spirited way, we are led onto a path that will eventually bring us from a constative to an interpretive mode, where we need to scrutinize formal peculiarities of the artwork that might reveal the intervention of spirit.

This peril to the univocal authority of subjective judgment does not prevent Kant from delving further into the question of this animating principle. The citation above goes on like this:

Now I maintain that this principle is nothing other than the faculty for the presentation of *aesthetic ideas*; by an aesthetic idea, however, I mean that representation of the imagination that occasions much thinking though without it being possible for any determinate thought, i.e., *concept*, to be adequate to it, which, consequently, no language fully attains or can make intelligible.—One readily sees that it is the counterpart (pendant) of an *idea of reason*, which is, conversely, a concept to which no *intuition* (representation of the imagination) can be adequate.⁵

Here the spectral agency of spirit gets a name: it is the presentation, or production—*Darstellung*—of aesthetic ideas. What we admire in the formal confection of the spirited work of art is the way in which form puts a particular kind of idea in front of us. This

idea is itself, as Michel Chaouli has argued, an “oxymoronic monster” in Kant’s conceptual landscape;⁶ it might be that a representation (*Vorstellung*) without concept is somehow a counterpart (*Gegenstück*) to a concept with no intuition (*Anschauung*), but that would expectedly make it into the opposite of an idea rather than into another kind of idea. But then again, Kant was never afraid of inventing new concepts when in need; as Theodor Adorno remarks in his lectures on *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant had a propensity for “aporetic concepts, (...) that from the outset reflect an embarrassment, a difficulty.”⁷ And even if the notion of the aesthetic idea does indeed seem aporetic, it also solves a problem and actually proves to be quite fertile for theorizing the artwork.

With the notion of the aesthetic idea, the derivative presence of spirit—or the trace of an “animating principle”—is positively designated as a *Vorstellung* that emerges from the formal arrangement of the work. And this aesthetic idea can be recognized by the fact that it “occasions much thinking without it being possible for any determinate thought (...) to be adequate to it”. Michel Chaouli has pointed to a subtle distinction at work in this passage, namely the (also somewhat aporetic) difference between thinking and thought: thinking is a process that cannot come to a halt, that perpetually reiterates and transcends itself by bifurcating and reassessing, in contrast to the already thought, which can be repeated and confirmed. A thought can be attributed to someone who has thought it, whereas thinking is a process through which the one who is thinking is constantly going beyond herself as the instrument of thought in motion.

The aesthetic idea takes us back to the artwork and the formal particularities that reveal the machinations of spirit. But it does so in a way that makes sure not to break off too conspicuously from the aesthetic Copernican turn, as the reception of the aesthetic idea is still an appreciation that hinges on the celebration of the capacities of the mind it sets in motion. If the attention of aesthetic theory here momentarily slips back to the object, it can still claim the methodological credo of having moved the focus of aesthetics from the object to the subject.

This is a delicate balance, and the “aporetic concept” of aesthetic ideas actually does the job of binding together the focus on the aesthetic judgment on the one hand and the temptation to take the particular form of the artwork into consideration on the other.

The aesthetic idea, in other words, functions as a point of transition between an aesthetic of production and an aesthetic of reception. At the same time, however, it also discreetly subverts the premise of Kant's Copernican turn, the turn from object to subject. When installing the aesthetic idea as a transmission point between objective work and subjective judgment, Kant also enters a territory where the neat distinction between the two comes to vacillate.

On the object side, the aesthetic idea is indeed to be identified in the formal articulation of the artwork. But this articulation is somehow negative and it is a trace of something, namely the arcane agency of spirit. And spirit, again, as a kind of spectral élan, is incarnated in the somewhat vague character of the genius and his (her?) complicity with nature. There is, in other words, a problem of location when it comes to the aesthetic object, as pointed out by Jacques Derrida in his reading of these same passages from *Critique of Judgment*:

The beautiful would always be the work (as much the act as the object), the art whose signature remains marked at the limit of the work, neither in nor out, out and in, in the parergonal thickness of the frame. If the beautiful is never ascribed simply to the product or to the producing act, but to a certain passage to the limit between them, then it depends, provided with another elaboration, on some parergonal effect: the Fine-Arts are always of the frame and the signature.⁸

The object does not hold: each attempt to pinpoint what the essential feature of the work of art might be—form, representation, idea, spirit, genius—eventually comes to locate it somewhere else. Or, as Derrida has it, it is not possible to determine where the signature is to be found, the signature that we expect, on the one hand, to authenticate the work and differentiate it from other possible versions or instantiations and, on the other hand, to identify who did the work that has the artwork as its result. The determination slips upstream, from the material object to the maker (in so many different guises), and back again from maker to matter, which leaves us with a work somehow out of focus, less a determinable object than an effect of “framing” of different creative instances. If we consider the aesthetic idea as a point of transition, we find, on the object side, a form that refers to an act and an act that has no other manifest existence than that of the form. Or, to stick with Derrida's metaphor of framing, of the *parergon* that comes to

define the work, the *ergon*, of which it does not itself take part. When we encounter an aesthetic idea, what we see is an instance of creative practice that has the “thickness of the frame” as its element.

When inversely we gauge the subject side, the aesthetic idea indeed mobilizes the individual mental capacities and the pleasures their agitation entails. But then again, we might have trouble recognizing subjectivity in the hypertrophied thinking that never relays through a finished thought. Within the subject, subjectivity itself is deterritorialized in processes of ramified thinking. Confronted with aesthetic ideas, the subject as well ceases to hold:

When my actions are driven by what “seems to have no intention,” when I can no longer explain to myself my own outbursts or the monstrous growth within me, then I have become a stranger to myself and thus also an observer of myself. At the same time, the observer, even if this is a philosopher or scientist, has no greater explanatory purchase on this alien presence than does the one inhabited by the monster.⁹

The aesthetic idea crops up quite late in *Critique of Judgment* when Kant moves from the general theory of the aesthetic judgment to considering artworks. It is a notion designated to bridge the theoretical grounding of aesthetics in the subjective judgment with the forms encountered in art (and their differing from natural forms). The fecundity of the notion should not, however, be judged only in terms of how Kant succeeds in making this bridge—and the philosophical chores it entails.¹⁰ The relevance of aesthetic ideas, not least in a contemporary context, I would argue, also stems from the way in which this bridge might be reassessed, no longer as a conceptual reconciliation between the objective and the subjective aspects of the aesthetic encounter, but rather as a platform for rethinking aesthetic experience beyond the confinement to the notions of the objective and the subjective. This raises a question about the *theoretical attention* of aesthetics: Kant navigates a—historically paradigmatic—conversion from paying attention to the object to conferring it on the subject of aesthetic experience. The aesthetic idea appears as an intermediary and transitional compromise. However, it also foreshadows a legacy of theoretical *non-attention*: not paying attention to the traditional epistemological nuclei of aesthetics, the work, and the beholder, but considering art as a particular institution or parergonal devise that

facilitates an encounter between uncertain practices of expression on the one hand and transformational individual sensibilities on the other. According to Adorno, it is a particular merit of Kant's aporetic concepts that they offer the reader to follow "the consequential movement of thought" to eventually reach "a place that does not exist." (329) One such place is the aesthetic idea as a modality of aesthetic experience that transgresses the epistemic architecture of subjects and objects. In his Copernican effort, Kant attempted to take us from the object to the subject, but in belaboring this conversion, he happened to open a passageway between them and eventually beyond them, with which we can think about art as a framework where creativity and sensibility meet in nascent and volatile exchanges that defy our propensity to ascribe them to something either objective or subjective. Conceptually, this modality "does not exist," at least not in Kant's own philosophical universe. But he nonetheless paves the way for thinking aesthetic experience in a new key as an event where subjective and objective impulses blend and where an unfamiliar measure of non-attention to what is subjective and what is objective becomes mandatory if one wants to gauge the import of aesthetic experience.

- 1 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, translated by Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 189, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511804656>.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 187.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 191.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 192.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 Michel Chaouli, "A Surfeit in Thinking: Kant's Aesthetic Ideas," *The Yearbook of Comparative Literature* 57 (2011), 56.
- 7 Theodor W Adorno, *Kants "Kritik der reinen Vernunft"*, Hg. Rolf Tidemann (Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 1995), 199.
- 8 Jacques Derrida, "Economimesis," *Diacritics* 11, vol. 2 (1981): 7, <https://doi.org/10.2307/464726>.
- 9 Chaouli, "A Surfeit in Thinking: Kant's Aesthetic Ideas," 61.
- 10 In addition to the architectonic task of reconciling aesthetic judgment and artistic form, as discussed here, the aesthetic idea also invites a series of important and more general observations on the role and function of form in aesthetic expressions. See for instance Henry Allison, *Kant's Theory of Taste* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 283, and Günter Figal, *Aesthetics as Phenomenology: The Appearance of Things*, translated by Jerome Veith (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 56, 74, and 101.