On Beauty: All Roads Disgorge to Black Decay

When the topic of war and extinction come up on the news or popular media; usually it is consumed in a favorable fashion. But to call these topics and themes beautiful is something rarely done in this society and culture. Since they carry so much historical significance that even at the slightest hint of glorification one must not only defend why we think it is beautiful but also our judgment of beauty. Once these come to the forefront, we have to look back at the tools that Kant developed in the *Critique Of Judgement,* more importantly, his work in aesthetics and the judgments needed to declare something beautiful. Kant looks for the kind of grounding needed for us to make such judgments (Dolan). But such judgments for Kant affect us as much as we affect the object. Since Kant’s project are enclosed carefully explained concepts so are these objects that stir up enough pleasure to call them Beautiful. But there is something to say about the nature of tragedy and the judgment of beauty, to help us understand whether a subject such as the futility of war and the extinction of all life on earth can be judged as beautiful by anyone? I receive some help from Mary Mothersill and John Dewey as each respectively enrich the field of aesthetics by refining what it means to have art as an experience and what do we mean by “aesthetic value” (Mothersill 152). There is a sense of subjectivity that an object has on the subject, as said by Kant. But this subjectivity is a double-edged sword in which some people will simply dismiss this as relative but it is not. It stirs enough pleasure to drive us to deem it beautiful which makes it valid universally. In this essay I will pursue, what does beauty mean when it comes to depressing themes like war and extinction, more precisely I will use the astonishing poetry of Georg Trakl more specifically *Grodek* and Hideo Kojima’s tour de force *Death Stranding* to vividly build an expanse to which my arguments function within a framework that creates a possible solution; I will further write about a possible understanding of this judgment of beauty. From a glance at the *New York Times Bestsellers List*, we can see many dark and stark Young Adult novels which are a popular genre amongst a diverse group of people. By no means is this a benchmark for a "good" book in the sense that it pleases the reader but it has a hint of subjectivity when it comes to the quality of a book, and the same applies to any medium. We can also see this in popular music in which I will apply Kantian beauty judgments so we can use what works and does not as part of the framework

There have to be two cases that follow cogently from this questioning. Case one would be where we question and try to tease out some answers like why do depressing themes such as the desolation of war or the extinction of mankind attract enjoyment and pleasure which they interpret as beautiful. Why do these judgments of beauty come from such bleak and depressing subjects that would worsen the psyche and worldview of any patron and; yet they add an epistemic understanding of the world. In this essay, I will introduce some pragmatic first-hand materials so we can quickly and pragmatically apply them to Kant's aesthetic judgments. But for every case, there has been a counterexample. In case number two, depressing themes such as the desolation of war or the extinction of mankind attract attention to these mediums due to their taste and subjectivity. This limits the emergence of universal judgments of beauty since the consumers have to justify their epistemic understanding of beauty. Case number two is the negation of case number one but in a manner that would help us branch out enough to create an interesting and adequate possible solution.

So, what is the point of seeking out a solution? The point is to develop some sort of framework that uses criteria such as the judgment of beauty to be an adequate solution, for our experience with beauty Kant figured out a way to bring these epistemic questions. For our solution, we would need a robust framework that incorporates Kant but also some understanding of the experience of beauty. John Dewey (1934), Mary Mothersill (2004) and others help us figure out a path towards a solution. The focus on aesthetic experiences and the judgment of beauty.

 Kant addresses this notion, in the second moment §6-9 that beauty has to be perceived universally by everyone. Also, the object cannot be “based on concepts”. Universal validity carried by the object is not based on concepts that make it different from making distinguishing both judgments of beauty and non-judgments of beauty that use our mental capacities. This cuts away the appeal of taste from the previous moment. From this, arises the third moment §10-17, Kant says the judgment of the beautiful does not have an end purpose nor that presupposes an end purpose. For example, like a good bowl of spicy ramen passes moment one and two, but for three it does not since the purpose of eating spicy ramen is to fulfill your appetite; serving a purpose so invalidating the judgment of beauty. Kant says that the perception of the object's purposes is in imagination and free play. Ending with his fourth moment §18-22 the need for necessity, the essential sense of necessity goes like this, my judgment of taste is universally valid, but I know that some people will not perceive the object in the same manner as me, they will not share the same taste and not have the same pleasure in the object as I do.

According to John Dewey, there is a disconnection of continuity with art, but if done correctly humans can be connected to art once more. Art itself offers us “insight” (Dewey 3) but is normally obstructed. He views the aesthetic value and conditions leading to its creation as something that should be experienced but once again the continuity is severed and “apart from human experience” (Dewey 3). In regards to prestige and status such as popularity and iconography, monetary value creates an even greater level of isolation to the human experience. So, Dewey’s project is to make art an experience again and reestablish the continuity by understanding the key difference between observing art—in our case poetry, films, and video games— the impact of this understanding helps in the observation and appreciation. One interesting hurdle is that art museums isolate art from objects and scenes. Meanwhile, they tell us everyday art or media like films, comics, novels, television shows, etc. are not the highbrow art that is needed when talking about aesthetic quality but they still carry the ideal. Dewey’s ideas help us along with Kant’s judgments of beauty, but they are still some more key pieces missing for our development of criteria that I will quickly go over.

In Mary Mothersill’s (2004) article “*Beauty and the critic’s of judgment*” she sets out to make philosophy relevant to peoples’ everyday lives so that concepts such as aesthetics aren’t closed off to the everyday person. Mothersill takes up issue with the term “aesthetic value” for most of the article. She argues that “aesthetic value” has been so focused as a word that it carries an aura that without it in any setting it would throw off the meaning of the art object. For my argument, I will borrow Mothersill's argument which emphasizes beauty as a better reference as she calls it a “distinctive and timeless concept” (Mothersill 157) as it finds a way into the heart of the body of art. But at the same time, Mothersill is careful with the use of "beauty" since it carries a heavy notion. There has to be “pretheoretical notions of beauty” Also, she concludes, what I find useful, that differences in the judgment of beauty can be judged and sometimes they cannot, making not one-person right in their judgment or wrong in their judgment. This also helps my argument since taste is not simply reduced to nihilism relativism.

Explaining the beautiful and somber content will be a simple task but applying Kant, Dewey and Mothersill would be not as easy but due to the essence of the argument, we have enough room for thoughts to flow out like a creek after a heavy downpour. Some possible solutions start to surface, but they might need a bit of help. First, when I bring up the words -dismal, heartbreaking, depressing, disheartening and daunting. I mean that I take their semantic meaning in the closest pragmatic sense for my use in the argument; this is also backed up by their *Merriam-Webster Dictionary[[1]](#footnote-1)* definition.

When we look into the popular forms of media that teenagers use, we are presented a wide verity to choose from film, streaming service[[2]](#footnote-2), and music streaming[[3]](#footnote-3). The music itself has been atomized due to the nature of music streaming services, The *Billboard Top 100[[4]](#footnote-4)* are the music industry standard and they have survived decades of music innovations by shifting the rules and relegations. This is important to use since music is now listed by overall popularity. I, ask myself, what is special about this? why did you tell me this? I would say to it is critical to see a contemporary example since we are going to apply some more of my argument to a possible explanation.

At the current moment in time, the top song is *Heartless* by The Weekend[[5]](#footnote-5) and noted to tell us the jump in placement. In my charitable view, the music is fine, I am unbiased meeting one of Kant’s requirement. But people will claim this is objectively good and that the chart status is proof. There is no such thing as objectively good. Some will claim that the view is subjective and involves my opinion. In such a fashion. Any time we evaluate a piece of art we carry an implicate checklist of criteria that serves as an objectively good. I can claim that the song lyrics are about drug use and the actions that come from using drugs. I could even provide direct text to back up my claim but, you may want to say that the song is about the high life of being young, rich and famous. Both our views are subjective since taste is subjective and does not have objective qualities. After listening the song, I do not feel the need to defend the song and declare an argument for its intrinsic subjective universality. When we agree on the commonality this negates that we should both have a taste for the song as Kant agrees, ”The requirements of common understanding ensure such preference without the least demand upon taste.”(Kant 145) The purpose of art is uncertain, we can ponder about the purpose of the song since the song somewhat does have a purpose if the artist is contractually obliged to make the song. Kant’s arguments help us see that the judgment of beauty is a bit more difficult to pin down so we should not throw it around. To call an object of art objectively good is to make an inadequate judgment that is faulty in the reasoning.

 The music charts themselves proved their disjointedness with the person and the only way the person experiences the art-making, it becomes something otherworldly: “So extensive and subtly pervasive are the ideas that set. Art upon a remote pedestal, that many a person would be repelled rather than pleased if told that he enjoyed his casual recreations, in part at least, because of their aesthetic quality.”(Dewey 5) With music the user can at the very least enjoy whatever they want but due to the advent of the music streaming services the user does not own the right so this might add another layer to the separation.

So far, we have worked with the framework I developed and seen it applied to an interesting example that led to an inadequate solution. Now I can build my framework and argument with the use of Trakl’s poem *Grodek* and Kojima’s *Death Stranding*. These are perfect examples of depressing materials with people who would generally agree that these mediums are gloomy in narrative and structure. Each medium we can see how beauty is found in the object without purpose and carries subjectively universality.

The explanation of the human experience as art directly connects us towards the function of building a tower in which the bottom foundation in nature and the top of the tower is beautiful. You do not need to have to know the same level of sadness but the work of art still holds itself to the experiences of the person:” “Flowers can be enjoyed without knowing about the interactions of soil, air, moisture, and seeds of which they are the result.” (12 Dewey) There is an inquiry to the origin of these narratives that lead the poet or the video game producer to bring together art objects without talking about full production such as the pen, paper, producer, publisher and so on. As Dewey explains,” The comparison of the emergence of works of art out of ordinary experiences to the refining of raw materials into valuable products may seem to some unworthy, if not an actual attempt to reduce works of art to the status of articles manufactured for commercial purposes.” (Dewey 12) Even from the most disheartening moments, the emergence from a phenomenal account gives us the same pleasure as a happy account. But lived experience trumps whatever told emotion that is told to us,” The point, however, is that no amount of ecstatic eulogy of finished works can of itself assist the understanding of the generation of such works” (Dewey 12). Only If we come to understand the process in which the growth directs us by lived experience, rending us at the heart of the art object: “The answers cannot be found unless we are willing to find the germs and roots in matters of experience that we do not currently regard as aesthetic.”(Dewey 12).

We can now shift directions to Georg Trakl’s poem *Grodek* as we need to build the foundation of our tower with the understanding we gain from my argument and polemic of the poem. This idea helps establish that spoken word engages with the experience of a person as Kant believes, "Poetry is the art that comes closest to the work of discursive reason, being made of the same mental stuff, language, and ideas." (Penny 374) The background for *Grodek* is self-contained in a frame of history that is captured in the poem. The brutality of war, the ending of potentiality in one swoop. The mood of the poem begins this way, “At evening the woods of autumn are full of the sound / Of the weapons of death, golden fields /And blue lakes, over which the darkening sun.” (Trakl 123) Right away the poem beings with the imagery of an autumn day and the undisturbed nature in juxtaposition with the brutality of war that happened some moment within the day. As somber as this is, Dewey believes that this experiences is needed for growth and reaffirming our choices up until this point, as Dewey says ” Life grows when a temporary falling out is a transition to a more extensive balance of the energies of the organism with those of the conditions under which it lives.” (Dewey 14) This experience adds to the already “beautiful” opening lines of the poem. We can agree that this has subjective universality, the poem has no purpose and according to Kant the poem does an important function of using our imagination and free play faculties, as Kant says “[..] that everything runs up into the concept of taste as a critical faculty by which an object is estimated about the free conformity to law of the imagination. If, now, imagination must in the judgment of taste be regarded in its freedom […]” (Kant 144 §22) Kant goes on to say that it has to be necessary beautiful and I argue that this poem is necessary for warning us about the futility of war. The end of the poem not only signals this but also builds us an image of a beautiful autumn day in the Kingdom of Galicia and Lodomeria but in one instant blood has been spilled. This poem does not glorify the death of the men that died nor fetishes such a sacrifice for nationalistic gain. Trakl is quick to point the relationship between the underlying beauty of the poem and the necessity for it to live on. Even though it is clear that his time and the time of many young men are up. As Trakl poem ends:

To greet the ghosts of the heroes, bleeding heads;

And from the reeds the sound of the dark flutes of autumn rises.

O prouder grief! you bronze altars,

The hot flame of the spirit is fed today by a more monstrous pain,

The unborn grandchildren. (Trakl 123)

This poem passes all of Kant’s judgments and what makes it beautiful is that it allows for our imagination to create a scenario where we are the ones witnessing the carnage and that we are the ones that are lying dead in the field on that autumn day. Laura Penny wrote on Kant’s use of poetry as means of bettering one's common sense but also the refinement of the imagination as she noted, “Rather, the challenge of poetry is to avoid nonsense, and make new sense. The poet must speak to—and through—the sensus communis.” (Penny 374) As the imagination is being used to interpret Trakl’s poem one heads to the conclusion of the beautiful since it is a rational exercise.

Someone could object to my argument and say that this could be seen as misanthropic or even bad poetry. Rather than resorting to simply dismissing them on the grounds of differing taste or even bad taste, I would say that Kant keeps our imagination and free play from going to irrational places like linking this poem to SpongeBob SquarePants. To which Penny’s quest also helps me establish my point by saying, “Kant makes it very clear that the free exercise of the imagination, either in the creative act of art-making or the reflective act of aesthetic judgment, is no license to wax mystical or irrational.” (Penny 374) Also, when the aesthetic judgments are made based on showing human experiences, we get more commonality and clear all the judgments of beauty since free play and imagination, make the human experience feel like it *ought* to do something. Human fulfillment and self-actualization are at the highest order of needs for humans but even in imaging the soiled beauty of a world war one battlefield we feel the continuity, Dewey agrees “ Since the artist cares peculiarly for the phase of experience in which union is achieved, he does not shun moments of resistance and tension.” (Dewey 15) Trakl knew that this was important in his poetry and that is how he made such depressing themes beautiful.

Turning our attention to our other example Hideo Kojima’s *Death Stranding,* a sci-fi genre video game based on the premise that humanity is headed towards extinction due to a supernatural event called the Death Stranding. Many video game critics were perplexed at the subject matter of the video game, but they were amazed at how the video game transcended its meaning in the “aesthetic value”. Even small-town reviewers David Wilcox of the Missoulian who reviewed the game found commonality in the video game as Wilcox describes: “Kojima's strange new America is full of wonder and resonance from sea to tar-black sea. The stakes, emotional and otherwise, are always clear. As is the unwavering conviction of the game's creator.” (Wilcox, Missoulian) The game itself has been labeled a “UPS simulator” since your goal is to deliver item X from area A to area B sometimes with time and item condition constraint. But the terrain is what makes the video game stand out even more since flat rocky land ruined by timefall\*, gives way to rocky jagged cliff faces with the best waterfalls seen in video games. This landscape does not play the backdrop while the events unfold instead the landscape is the event. The protagonist, Sam Porter Bridges is the courier contracted to deliver item X to area B, this makes the virtual avatar not only relatable but an average man living through the slow painful extinction of all life on earth. From what judgments we can make in a dystopian setting is the emergence of beauty not from the end of the day but the end of life.

Dewey speaks of bringing continuity back to humans and art, and I think that *Death Stranding* is one such way to the connection to art but also beauty and nature. *Death Stranding* is not hitting us over the head with the implicit existential problems we face now. But *Death Stranding* shows and makes questions of the underlying issue of our relation to the world and one another. The non-playable characters—we will call them NPC— are depressed about the outlook of the future since society is functionally dying. But Sam changes that by connecting them to the network and brings some sense of order and normality as Dewey uses a great metaphor that would serve my argument, ”For only when an organism shares in the ordered relations of its environment does it secure the stability essential to living.”(Dewey 14) But that does not bring them growth it might stunt them. Dewey also agrees with this “Life grows when a temporary falling out is a transition to a more extensive balance of the energies of the organism with those of the conditions under which it lives” (Dewey 14). Only when life is out of synch do epistemically grow and know about our environment. Kantian judgments are great ways to see how beauty does exist at the end of the world.

The beauty that is found in the video game serves no purpose, but our preconceived notions on what “aesthetic value” could a video game have been tripped like a well-placed landmine. Mothersill says the use of the term distorts the real interest of aesthetics. She also thinks that beauty itself has been rendered feeble “The beautiful is what is perceived as pleasing in a non-strenuous way, relatively small, dainty, graceful, and feminine.” (Mothersill 155) But this does not describe *Grodek* nor *Death Stranding* nor the stark depressing subjects. The battle of Grodek was the first bloody battle in the east from between the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Russian Empire. It must have been dispiriting to Trakl, enough so he committed suicide shortly after the battle. The historical background provides us with the artist insight and with heaviness and yet when describing *Grodek* as beautiful, do we imagine soft qualities? No, I do not think so. So, the sexist descriptions that Kant distinctions to the beautiful and sublime are faulty at best. The suffering and violence both real and virtual are terrible and in no way does beauty wash over the pain they cause. But knowing that someone else is experiencing the same events be it in a poem or in a video game, those events are appreciated.

Finally, we have built out a tower and we can see that it was not easy to tease out answers from such an opaque subject. Most troubles were trying to find and explain adequate solutions with the framework I built. The most pragmatic reading of my argument would say that I went too technical with the framework and with a close reading it could be undone. My response is that since we know that Kant himself leaves beauty in a solid position in both the object and subject. In whatever reading we could agree that the establishment of universal subjectivity along with the taste is the baseline for arguments if not we have no grounding. As for Dewey, we need to make art accessible for everyone and stop the hoarding of art by museums or people. Looking at the beauty from a depression subject can always be found if we used the correct reasoning.

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1. I used “Dictionary by Merriam-Webster: America's Most-Trusted Online Dictionary.” *Merriam-Webster*, Merriam-Webster, https://www.merriam-webster.com/.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. By this I mean Netflix, Hulu and Disney+ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Spotify and Itunes [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The use of a method of radio plays and sales. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I have not heard this artist but after this essay, many people do like his music. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)