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Cognitive Function of Beauty and Ugliness in Light of Kant's Theory of Aesthetic Ideas

1. Introduction

One of the main debates in current aesthetics and philosophy of art concerns the question whether we can learn anything from art. On the one hand, cognitivists argue that art works are an important source of knowledge, either of propositional, conceptual, moral or experiential kinds of knowledge (i. e. knowledge of what-it-is-like).¹ On the other hand, non-cognitivists deny that art can give us any knowledge, at least knowledge that is non-trivial (not known before the work appears) and unique (that cannot be obtained by other means).² The purpose of art, anti-cognitivists argue, lies in the imaginative realization of the theme, rather than in the theme itself and what it communicates. That is, what matters in art is the organization and structure of elements and how these elements cohere into a unified pattern or an aesthetic form, thereby producing an aesthetic experience of pleasure or displeasure.

Both positions have their own merits. Cognitivists are right in claiming that there is much more to an artwork than just being aesthetically pleasing. We often admire artworks for their insightfulness, while we criticize other works for being shallow. Thus, it appears that our vocabulary of artistic appraisal is charged with cognitive value terms. On the other hand, anti-cognitivists also make a good point. The kind of knowledge that a cognitivist claims art is supposed to give is something that is either already known or can be obtained by other means. But if knowledge can be obtained by non-artistic means then what is so special about the cognitive value of art?

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- 1 The leading contemporary cognitivists are: Peter Kivy, *Philosophies of Arts: An Essay in Differences*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997; John Gibson, *Fiction and the Weave of Life*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007; Berys Gaut, "Art and Cognition", in *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art*, ed. by Matthew Kieran, pp. 115–126, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006; Noël Carroll, "The Wheel of Virtue: Art, Literature, and Moral Knowledge", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 60, no. 1 (2002), pp. 3–26.
 - 2 For the non-cognitivist position see: Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997; Jerome Stolnitz, "On the Cognitive Triviality of Art", *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 32, no. 3 (1992), pp. 191–200.

One way to defend the position that art has a unique cognitive value depends on showing that aesthetic value, essential to artworks, is cognitive. This is a difficult task to begin with, considering that aesthetic value has traditionally been distinguished from cognitive value based on the view that aesthetic experience depends on the feeling of pleasure or displeasure, and that feelings are essentially non-cognitive.³

In what follows, I aim to express a critique of this view and to show that aesthetic feelings of pleasure in the beautiful and displeasure in the ugly have inherent cognitive aspirations. I reconcile cognitive and anti-cognitive positions by claiming that aesthetic value is a species of cognitive value and thus artworks can have a distinctive cognitive value. I intent to show that apprehension of a meaning in an artwork is an aesthetic apprehension (i. e. meaning is apprehended through the feeling of pleasure or displeasure). I develop my proposal in light of Kant's theory of aesthetic ideas put forward in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.

2. Aesthetic Ideas, Beauty and Knowledge

In §49 of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* Kant puts forward a view that the free play of imagination (responsible for experience of beauty and ugliness) can be stimulated not only by perceptual properties alone, but by ideas and thoughts as well. He claims that beauty is “the *expression* of aesthetic ideas” (5:320, p. 197).⁴

Kant formulates the notion of an aesthetic idea accordingly: “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” (5:314, p. 192).

In addition, he states that an aesthetic idea is “an intuition (of the imagination) for which a concept can never be found adequate” (5:342, p. 218). These two definitions taken together suggest that aesthetic ideas are concrete sensible representations of imaginations (that is, images) and that these images are so rich and give rise to so much thinking that cannot be fully described by any determi-

3 This is nicely pointed out by Roger Pouivet, “On the Cognitive Functioning of Aesthetic Emotions”, *Leonardo*, vol. 33, no. 1 (2000), pp. 49–53.

4 References to Immanuel Kant will be given in the text to the volume and page number of the Akademie edition (*Kants gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Königliche Preußische [later Deutsche] Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin: Georg Reimer [later Walter De Gruyter], 1900). References are also given, after a comma, to the English translation of *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, transl. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

nate concepts. Aesthetic ideas are thus alike to ordinary images (say an image of a flower), but they are dissimilar to ordinary images in that no determinate concepts correspond to them (like an image of a flower corresponds to the concept of a flower). Since aesthetic ideas lack determinate concepts, they evade the possibility of cognition (i. e. they cannot be cognized in an ordinary sense by connecting empirical intuition with a determinate concept) and thus are called ideas.

According to Kant, aesthetic ideas can sensibly represent two kinds of concepts. On one hand, "invisible beings, the kingdom of the blessed, the kingdom of hell, eternity, creation, etc." (5:314, p. 192) are *rational ideas (ideas of reason)*. They are: "concept[s] to which no intuition (representation of imagination) can be adequate" (*ibid.*). What is distinctive for them is that they can be thought, but not empirically encountered (one can think of the idea of hell, but have no sensible intuition of it). On the other hand, "death, envy, and all sorts of vices, as well as love, fame, etc." (*ibid.*) are abstract concepts, emotions and mental states which can be experienced (we can experience their concrete instances), yet they cannot be directly represented. For example, we can experience the state of loneliness, but one does not know how the idea of loneliness itself looks like, that is, one does not have an appropriate schema for such an idea (in comparison to the schema of, say, a table).⁵ Since both kinds of concepts lack a determinate schema, they can be called *indeterminate concepts*.⁶

Because aesthetic ideas are sensible representations of things that cannot be directly represented, they can be merely symbolic or metaphorical representations. Kant calls such symbolic presentations aesthetic attributes. Aesthetic attributes are "forms which do not constitute the presentation of a given concept itself, but, as supplementary representations of the imagination, express only the implications connected with it and its affinity with others" (5:315, p. 193). For example, Kant writes that Jupiter's eagle with the lightning in its claws is an aesthetic attribute of the king of heaven. Jupiter's eagle is not a logical attribute of the king of heaven, that is, it is not part of the concept of the king of heaven. When we think of the idea of king of heaven, we do not have in mind an image of an eagle. Rather, the image of a Jupiter's eagle merely expresses certain associations connected with the idea we have of the king of heaven (in terms of representing power, strength, freedom, being above the material world, etc.). It is aesthetic attributes that constitute an aesthetic idea, as I will illustrate by means of Frida Kahlo's painting *Diego on My Mind*, 1943 (Figure 1).

5 Schema is an abstract image of the essential properties and their relations that different objects belonging to the same kind share with each other.

6 Kant does not specify his notion of an "indeterminate concept". I take it to refer to a sort of a concept that evades articulation and discursive expression.

Figure 1: Frida Kahlo's painting Diego on My Mind



The painting is a portrayal of Frida in a traditional Mexican wedding dress. On her forehead there is a picture of her husband Diego, and on her head there is a crown made of flowers and leaves. One can see the veins of the leaves growing out of the crown, intertwining with Frida's hair and with the threads of her wedding dress, forming a beautiful image of a net. However, there is much more to the painting than its visual form being pleasing to the eye. Namely, these images work as aesthetic attributes, constituting the aesthetic idea. For example, the photograph of Diego on Frida's forehead may be said to be an aesthetic attribute standing for the constant preoccupation with the loved one, and the image of Frida's hair intertwined with her dress constituting an image of a net may be an aesthetic attribute of one's feeling of being trapped. The collection of these aesthetic attributes constitute the aesthetic idea of the painting, that is, a concrete sensible representation of an idea, such as the idea of captivity and the feeling of hopelessness that for example a bad marriage or an addictive relationship can induce. The combination of aesthetic attributes in this painting is internally coherent, purposive for the presentation of an idea and thus experienced with the feeling of pleasure.

As this example illustrates, an art work can be aesthetically valuable not merely due to its visual form alone, but because of the aesthetic idea it communicates to

the audience. We appreciate the communication of aesthetic ideas, because they give us an intimation of the world of ideas and state of affairs that lie beyond sensory experience. For example, while we may experience our own state of hopelessness, there are limits to the degree of understanding of the idea of hopelessness itself that is available only from our own states. Through an artistic representation, however, we can gain a different perspective on this idea, for example, what the state of hopelessness and despair itself might look like, which can consequently contribute to a richer understanding of this idea.

This idea is nicely illustrated by Michael Haneke's movie *The Seventh Continent* (1989), an agonizing story of a well-situated Austrian family and their attempt to escape the feeling of emotional and social isolation in the modern world by choosing to commit a suicide. The mental state of emptiness and depersonalization that accompanies the everyday life of this family is represented through images that are focused on objects, rather than on subjects. We do not see characters' faces, but merely fragmented and isolated shots of their hands turning off the alarm clock, opening curtains, putting toothpaste on brush, tying shoes, making coffee. Through such a cinematic technique that emphasizes the state of imprisonment by our daily routines, Haneke managed to give a perceptible form to the feeling of emptiness of one's existence, and thereby provided us with a rare opportunity of *recognizing* certain mental states, emotions and ideas that cannot be directly represented.

But to be able to recognize our subjective experiences in a perceptible form can furnish us with the opportunity for self-reflection, leading thereby to a better understanding of ourselves. Through aesthetic ideas, art opens a certain dialogue between our subjective states (say, how emptiness is felt by me) and the objective projection of our subjective states (an image of the feeling of emptiness itself). A dialogue enhances a distance between one's subjective state and the objective vision of that mental state through which one's perspective can be revealed. In other words, in art as an expression of aesthetic ideas our own subjective experiences become objects of our attention. Art thereby engages us in a cognitive process of identifying our own personal characteristics, challenging our emotional, social and intellectual patterns and recognizing inadequacies in our thoughts we attribute to our lives and experiences of ourselves and others. Accordingly, art as an expression of aesthetic ideas enhances one's self-exploration, by giving us the opportunity to reflect on the content of our own subjective experiences. It thereby fosters self-awareness and by giving us an objective vision of ourselves it facilitates self-knowledge and consequently self-change.

3. Aesthetic Ideas and Reflective Power of Judgment

I argued so far that art works can be cognitively valuable due to the aesthetic ideas they express. In what follows I want to briefly point out the connection between aesthetic ideas and beauty by referring to Kant's notion of the reflective power of judgment and the *a priori* principle of purposiveness. Kant discusses this principle mainly in relation to its use in cognitive judgments (empirical concept acquisition), but in addition, he suggests that there is a connection between this principle and aesthetic judgments.⁷

In short, Kant claims that the principle of purposiveness amounts to a certain way of seeing the world, that is, for preferring one way of organizing sensible manifold to another. This preference for organizing sensible manifold in a certain way is reflected in our cognition, but also occasionally in the feeling of pleasure in finding an object beautiful. For example, in preferring certain combinations (such as the spiral structure of petals in a rose) and disliking others (such as the disorganized aftermath of a storm or tornado). The principle is an idea about how the world is supposed to be, how we expect it to be, so that it allows our understanding to cognize it, and it is an idea that holds only for us, as cognitive beings (5:184, p. 71).

According to this explanation, the feeling of pleasure in finding an object beautiful is a result of the confirmation or satisfaction of the principle of purposiveness. We appreciate forms that are in accordance with this principle and that reassure us that the world is indeed such as we expect it to be, namely, amenable to our cognitive abilities. The experience of pleasure is a sign of the familiarity with the world, of feeling at home in the world. For this reason beauty is associated with positive feeling value ideas such as innocence, joyfulness, virtue, vitality, optimism, etc.

But it is not merely beauty that expresses aesthetic ideas. Also ugliness can bring forth aesthetic ideas, the difference being that such ideas are negative and uncomfortable, yet are part of our experience of the world and ourselves and therefore worthwhile attending to. My reasoning for this view is the following. If the feeling of pleasure is the result of the confirmation of the principle of purposiveness, then the feeling of displeasure in finding an object ugly must be a result of the dissatisfaction

7 For the legitimization of this connection see: Hannah Ginsborg, "Reflective Judgment and Taste", *Nous*, vol. 24, no. 1 (1990), pp. 66–68; Avner Baz, "Kant's Principle of Purposiveness and the Missing Point of (Aesthetic) Judgments", *Kantian Review*, vol. 10, no. 1 (2005), pp. 1–32; Patricia Matthews, *The Significance of Beauty: Kant on Feeling and the System of the Mind*, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2010, pp. 63–79; Mojca Küplen, "Kant and the Problem of Pure Judgments of Ugliness", *Kant Studies Online* (2013), pp. 124–134.

of our expectation that the world is amenable to our cognitive abilities. James Philips nicely puts this idea by saying: "The displeasure of ugliness is the displeasure of the thought that the world might not want us to know it."⁸ But the inability to know the world occasions the state of estrangement between us, our mental structure, and the world. When our expectations of order and our need of organizing the world in a specific way are violated, we do not merely experience displeasure, but also a sense of loss of control over the organization of experience, and this can occasion feelings of fear, anxiety, horror and a sense of estrangement, powerlessness, absurdity, mortality, disorientation, destruction, dehumanization, etc. Ugliness can be a valuable experience, because it is the unique way through which these ideas and emotions themselves, for which there is no adequate sense intuition, can be sensibly represented.⁹

Figure 2: Willem De Kooning's painting Woman I



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- 8 James Philips, "Placing Ugliness in Kant's Third *Critique*: A Reply to Paul Guyer", *Kant-Studien*, vol. 102, no. 3 (2011), p. 395.
- 9 For the opposite view see: Jeremy Proulx, "Nature, Judgment and Art: Kant and the Problem of Genius", *Kant Studies Online* (2011), pp. 27–53. See also: Charles Debord, "Geist and Communication in Kant's Theory of Aesthetic Ideas", *Kantian Review*, vol. 17, no. 2 (2012), pp. 177–190.

This is nicely illustrated by the Willem De Kooning's painting *Woman I* (1950–1952). The painting (Figure 2) is a representation of a woman's body. We can distinguish certain features of a female's body, such as her invasive breasts, bulging eyes, teeth spreading into a grinning smile, while the rest of the body is disintegrated and dissolved into the spontaneous and dynamic brush strokes, with frantic lines and garish colours. The combination of colours and shapes seem incoherent and chaotic, arousing the feeling of discomfort, frustration and displeasure. Nonetheless, even though the artistic representation is itself chaotic and displeasing, it can still be expressive and thoughtful, but this differs from beautiful works in that such conflict produces instability in the expression of ideas, contrary to a unified expression of the beautiful. For example, one can notice that De Kooning's *Woman I* has no straightforward interpretation, but it motivates an interpretative exploration of its meaning. The physical destruction of a female body might symbolically represent the destruction of the classical notion of a woman as a beautiful, virtuous and sensitive human being. This idea is suggested by the violence of the brushstrokes, the chaotic and aggressive combination of colours, the idea of sexual dominance expressed through the accentuation of the women's breasts, and the maliciousness, hostility and pretense conveyed by her grinning smile. The expression of this idea is stimulating, thought-provoking and for this reason aesthetically significant, even though it is perceived with displeasure.