

Kant's Fantasy¹

FRANCEY RUSSELL

Barnard College, Columbia University, USA

frussell@barnard.edu

Throughout his lectures and published writings on anthropology, Kant describes a form of unintentional, unstructured, obscure, and pleasurable imaginative mental activity, which he calls fantasy (*Phantasie*), where we 'take pleasure in letting our mind wander about in obscurity' (LA 25:480). In the context of his pragmatic anthropology, Kant is concerned not only to describe this form of mental activity as a fact of human psychology, but more importantly, to criticize and discourage it. But must we share Kant's negative evaluation? Could fantasy play a positive role in some kinds of experience? In this paper I first reconstruct Kant's conception of fantasy, and then consider what role fantasy might play in aesthetic experience. Precisely because of his anxieties about fantasy, Kant is careful to distinguish between the lawless freedom of the imagination in fantasy and the 'free lawfulness' of the imagination in aesthetic judgment. Departing from Kant, and with help from Susan Sontag, I argue that certain aesthetic objects, especially certain works of modernist art, positively *invite* fantasy, making fantasy part of proper aesthetic appreciation. I conclude by suggesting that while fantasy can indeed play a positive role in aesthetic appreciation, there is still reason to regard fantasy as 'normatively ambiguous'.

1. Introduction

In his writings on *Anthropology*, in the notes from his decades of lectures² and in his late published text, Kant describes a form of involuntary, unruly, obscure, pleasurable, and compelling form of imaginative activity, which he calls *fantasy* (*Phantasie*), where we 'play with obscure representations' and 'take pleasure in letting our mind wander about in

¹ I have used the following abbreviations throughout the paper: A ([Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View](#)), CJ ([Critique of the Power of Judgment](#)), CPR ([Critique of Pure Reason](#)), LA ([Lectures on Anthropology](#)), MH ([Essay on the Maladies of the Head](#)), ML ([Metaphysik L](#)), RH ([Review of Herder's Ideas](#)), and UNH ([Universal natural history and theory of the heavens](#)). The references are to the Akademie edition of Kant's works, using the translations from the Cambridge Edition of Kant's Works (Cambridge University Press).

² In order to avoid unnecessary exegetical difficulties, in this paper I focus on the lectures recorded during the critical period, unless otherwise noted. See [Dyck \(2019\)](#) for a helpful discussion of how Kant's understanding of the role of the imagination in cognition changed from the pre-critical to the critical period, most obviously his introduction of a transcendental function of the imagination as a condition of possibility for its empirical use. The latter will be my exclusive focus here.

obscurity' (LA 25:480). Disregarding both the rules of the understanding and the focus of sensibly given objects, here the imagination 'enjoys walking in the dark' (A 7:136). Yet while we like to play with obscurity, Kant warns that 'more often we ourselves are a play of obscure representations' (ibid.).³ Because fantasy is passive, only dimly conscious, constrained neither by concepts nor by objects, facilitated by passion or fatigue, and productive of a sense of meaningfulness that risks approaching enthusiasm or hypochondria, fantasy is, for Kant, psychologically and morally risky.

Consider four representative passages:

Fire

- 1) Fantasy is entertained through very insignificant things if they merely provide some material for images; for example, the fire in the fireplace through its various shapes arouses a gentle motion in the mind and gives it ever new material. Likewise tobacco, with the different indefinite shapes of smoke [...] So, too, the imagination is served by broad vistas, where I cannot think anything definite about the objects and my fantasy can thus swarm as it pleases. (LA 25:1259)

The night

- 2) The inventive power of the imagination produces a kind of intercourse with ourselves, which, though it may consist merely of appearances of inner sense is nevertheless analogous to those of outer sense. The night enlivens and raises it above its real content; just as the moon in evening makes a great figure in the heavens, though on a bright day it is seen as an insignificant little cloud. The power of imagination swarms one who studies by candle-light in the still of the night [...] Therefore the taming of the power of imagination, by going to bed early so that one can get up early, is a very useful rule for a psychological diet. But women and hypochondriacs [...] enjoy the opposite behaviour more. (A 7:180-181)

³ In his day, Kant was not alone in his interest in fantasy, and his worries. See, for instance, Jonathan Mee's *Dangerous Enthusiasm* (1994). However, in this paper I do not discuss the contemporaneous debates about fantasy, nor do I discuss the subsequent developments of the concept of *phantasie*, and its re-evaluation, in German Idealism and German Romanticism. For the latter (and for a brief genealogy of fantasy, and its sometimes-uncertain distinction from imagination), see Alberto Giacomelli's 'Einbildungskraft, Phantasie and hikikomori. Reflections on the Extremes of Imagination' (2022). Thanks to Lydia Goehr for pointing me to this paper.

- 3) The imagination is stronger in the evening than in the morning, for my senses are more occupied in the morning because they have rested for so long; in the evening they are already fatigued, hence one thinks of death and eternity, etc. Some people enjoy this so much that they like to stay awake into the night. (LA 25:1258)

Sex

- 4) We often play with obscure representations and have an interest in throwing them in the shade before the power of imagination, when they are liked or disliked. However more often we are a play of obscure representations [*öfter aber noch sind wir selbst ein Spiel dunkeler Vorstellungen*] [...] Such is the case with sexual love insofar as the aim is not benevolence but *enjoyment*. How much wit has been wasted in throwing a delicate veil over that which, while indeed liked, nevertheless still shows such a close relationship with the common species of animals that it calls for modesty [...] Here the power of imagination enjoys walking in the dark. (A 7:136)

Fire, smoke, nighttime, sex. My fantasy swarms as it pleases; I cannot think anything definite; ideas and images come and go unbidden; I play with these obscure representations, and they play with me; the imagination enjoys walking in the dark.

These passages are striking and would be striking were they written by anyone, but they are especially striking coming from Kant. They have an intensely if unintentionally *confessional* quality, as though Kant were not just analysing a human tendency but confessing to a pleasure, confessing to things he's done alone in the middle of the night. The point here is not to invoke the biography of the real man Immanuel Kant, for example, by drawing connections between his anxious interest in fantasy and his own hypochondria (a 'fantastic mental condition' producing 'chimeras' and 'obscure representations' (MH 2:266)).⁴ My suggestion is rather that we can read these texts as inadvertently confessional insofar as they evidence a tension between their official normative, disciplinary position and their unofficial attractions. So even if Kant's official recommendation is to *stay away* from fantasy (go to bed early; don't smoke in

⁴ For example, Patrick Frierson writes: '[I]n "On the Power of the Human Mind", Kant ascribed his own "natural predisposition to hypochondria" to his "flat" and narrow chest' (7:104), and much of Kant's preoccupation with hypochondria throughout his life—and arguably his concern with mental disorder in general—can be traced to his efforts to combat this looming mental disorder of his own' (2009, p. 276).

the dark; or as he counselled himself in his diary after he started having nightmares: ‘no surrender now to panics of darkness’ (de Quincey 2021, p. 50⁵), the passages belie his interest and pleasure in fantasy, which can remind the reader of *her* own interest and pleasure. Confessional passages like these elicit not only philosophical interest but recognition, as though to take an interest in these passages is to make one’s own confession in turn.

This paper has two parts. First (§§2-4), I provide a reconstruction of Kant’s account of fantasy and its product, obscure representations, which reconstruction which is so far absent in the literature.⁶ This will involve clarifying the positive role of the empirical imagination and obscure representations in ordinary experience, and contrasting it with fantasy. As noted, Kant tends to criticize fantasy, but we should ask whether we must share his negative evaluation. Thus, in this paper’s second part (§5) I propose a positive role that fantasy could play in aesthetic experience. It would seem that fantasy could have a proper role to play in our *aesthetic* lives, if anywhere.⁷ Moreover, in Kant’s philosophy, the freedom of the imagination in fantasy comes very close to the way he describes the freedom of the imagination in aesthetic judgment. But precisely because of his anxieties about fantasy, Kant is careful to distinguish between the lawless freedom of the imagination in fantasy and the ‘free lawfulness’ (CJ 5:240) of the imagination in aesthetic judgment. Departing from Kant, and with help from Susan Sontag, I argue (§6) that certain objects, especially certain works of modernist art, positively *invite* fantasy, making fantasy part of proper aesthetic appreciation. To that end, I describe two examples of such works: Michael Snow’s experimental film *Wavelength* and a scene from Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*. I conclude (§7) by suggesting that while fantasy can indeed play a positive role in aesthetic appreciation, there is still reason to regard fantasy as ‘normatively ambiguous’.

⁵ In 1827, Thomas De Quincey translated and embellished Ehregott Andreas Christoph Wasianski’s account of the last days of Kant’s life, *Immanuel Kant in seinen letzten Lebensjahren*, published in 1804. But while Wasianski’s text has been mostly forgotten and reproduced only in facsimile, De Quincey’s version has been reprinted and translated into several languages, including back into German.

⁶ Jane Kneller notes that ‘Kant scholars have tended to neglect [...] the fact that Kant was unusually struck by what he took to be the mysterious nature of the imagination and that [...] Kant did appear suspicious of the imagination’s inscrutability’ (2009, p. 97). This neglect is precisely what I want to rectify here.

⁷ The other obvious place would be our sex lives, as the fourth quote recognizes.

2. Fantasy from a pragmatic point of view

Kant's most extended discussions of fantasy are found in his lectures and published writing on anthropology. Anthropology is the study of 'the human being according to his species as an earthly being endowed with reason' (A 7:119), and can be carried out from either of two points of view, physiological or pragmatic: 'physiological knowledge of the human being concerns the investigation of what *nature* makes of the human being; pragmatic, the investigation of what *he* as a free-acting being makes of himself, or can and should make of himself' (A 7:119, emphases in original).

In physiological anthropology one studies the human being as a bit of nature, from the position of an external, expert observer. As La Mettrie describes the project in his *L'Homme-machine*, 'physician philosophers'—Kant's physiological anthropologists—'probe and illuminate the labyrinth that is man. They alone have revealed man's springs hidden under coverings that obscure so many other marvels' (1994, p. 29). If a physiological anthropologist tells me about what is happening (the 'hidden springs') in my brain when I remember something or when I fantasize, I will not understand what he's saying (until I've learned that technical language); it gives me no rules for my 'psychological diet', and there isn't much that I can *do* with this.⁸ All I learn is what nature makes of me.

But *pragmatic* anthropologists consider human beings not as external observers, but as '*participants*' in the human world (A 7:120). First, pragmatic anthropology is a kind of 'insider's' knowledge: knowledge of human beings *by* human beings, 'the oriented sort of knowledge of human nature that people gain through interacting with others rather than the theoretical knowledge of a mere observer' (Wood 2007, p. 41). Second, pragmatic anthropology is not only *about* human beings, it is produced *for* human beings: it is knowledge the human being can use in order to *make something* of herself. Pragmatic anthropology produces a normatively oriented picture of the human being, as a being engaged in active, self-conscious 'self-making' (*ibid.*).

Thus, to analyse fantasy from a pragmatic point of view is to analyse fantasy insofar as we human beings are already familiar with it from life, insofar as there is something we can *do* about fantasy, and insofar as we can raise normative questions about it (Kant claims that dreaming, which is healthy, 'lies outside the field of a pragmatic anthropology;

⁸ Kant contrasts pragmatic anthropology with physiological anthropology, physical geography, and empirical psychology, which Alix Cohen suggests should be understood as the studies, respectively, of *how man functions*, *what man is*, and *how he thinks and feels* (2008, p. 510).

for we cannot draw any rules of conduct from these phenomena' (A 7:189)). As an earthly rational being engaged in active, self-conscious self-making, what should man do with his fantasies?

3. Obscure representations and imagination in ordinary experience

We can specify eight main features of fantasy. Fantasy is the 1) *pleasurable* exercise of the 2) *productive* empirical imagination (LA 25:1262; 25:1257-1258; 25:1284; A 7:167). It is or becomes 3) *involuntary*, 4) both unreined (*zügellos*) and 'unruled' (*regellos*) (LA 25:1262; A 7:181), governed neither by 4a) the *laws of association* (CJ 5:240) nor by 4b) the *concepts of the understanding* (25:1262). Kant writes that 'with fantasy we often play our game, as we intentionally direct it, but it also plays its game with us, as it carries us away involuntarily towards ideas' (LA 25:1258) and 'images' (A 7:167), where 5) these images and ideas are to some degree *obscure* (LA 25:481; 25:1440; A 7:136). Fantasy is 6) facilitated when the *object* is in some ways obscure and when the *subject* is in some way agitated (for example, by passion or affect, by drink or food, by fatigue or excitement (LA 25:1258; 25:1260; A 7:180)). 7) Fantasy is not mindless pleasure but *feels* meaningful or significant; it seems to contain, as we shall see, 'hints pregnant with meaning'. Finally, 8) the pleasure and sense of meaningfulness characteristic of fantasy is *private*.

Before I elaborate these features of fantasy, it is important to clarify the productive, constitutive role of what I will call 'mundane' obscure representations⁹ and the empirical imagination in ordinary cognition and experience.

For Kant, any representation can be obscure and obscurity comes in degrees: it can be more or less *conscious* and it can be more or less *comprehended*. *Sensations* can vary in degrees of phenomenal consciousness: for example, I can be acutely conscious of some sound or smell, or I can register it without conscious awareness, as when my attention is focused elsewhere. *Sensible intuitions* can also range in degrees of consciousness. They are totally obscure when we are not directly conscious of them but only 'indirectly conscious' when we infer that we must 'have' them, in light of the representations of which we *are* directly conscious. For example, I see a person from a distance and conclude that because I am

⁹ In what follows I am indebted to Béatrice Longuenesse's work on this topic, especially in her 2023, but also in her 2019.

conscious of the representation 'person,' I must have obscure representations of the parts of his face (eyes, nose, mouth, and so on). But as this person gets closer, his features become less obscure (A 7:136).

Finally, in the Logic lectures Kant observes that *concepts* can be obscure insofar as they can vary in degree of comprehension. Béatrice Longuenesse writes that a concept is clear 'if it is apt to stand in relation to other concepts in judging and reasoning. It is *distinct* if its *marks* are clear, namely, if its marks are themselves concepts that are clear and susceptible to being combined in judging and reasoning' (2023, p. 19; cf. CPR B415, emphases in original). When a concept is neither clear nor distinct, it is obscure. As an example, Kant says that 'the concept of instinct is an obscure concept. One knows, of course, that it is a drive to act, but that does not exhaust everything' (LL 840). Kant sometimes describes the task of philosophy as illuminating obscure representations: 'in analytic philosophy, I simply make obscure representations in the soul clear' (LA 25:1222).¹⁰

To summarize: representations—whether sensations, intuitions, or concepts—can be obscure to varying degrees, whether degrees of consciousness or degrees of comprehension. These 'mundane' obscure representations have received all of the recent scholarly attention, which has focused on Kant's theory of cognition.¹¹ The obscurity of these representations is *mundane* for two reasons. First, as Patricia Kitcher writes, 'Kant thought we could "undoubtedly conclude" (7:135) that we have obscure representations, because these were required to explain reportable representations and other uncontroversial cognitive achievements' (1999, p. 349); thus, to posit obscure representations is uncontroversial or mundane. Second, these obscure representations are mundane because we do not *play with* them and they do not play with us: they are either simply out of view, or indistinct, or imperfectly understood.¹²

¹⁰ This clarifies what Kant found so objectionable about certain of his contemporaries. For instance, in his review of his former student Herder's work, Kant complains that Herder purposely keeps his topics 'at an obscure distance' (RH 8:45) through an adept use of his imagination, and so 'allow[s] more to be surmised about them as the effects of a great content of thoughts, or as hints pregnant with meaning, than cold judgment would ever encounter in them outright' (ibid).

¹¹ In addition to Kitcher, see also Grüne (2009), Liang (2017), Longuenesse (2023), McClear (2011), and Merritt (2018). As far as I know Longuenesse is the only contemporary scholar who discusses Kant's connection of obscure representations with sexual love (2017, p. 194), but does not discuss our play with obscure representations in fantasy.

¹² See Kitcher (1999) for a discussion of the continuity of Kant's conception of obscure representations with both Leibniz and Condillac. Crucially, though, Kant rejects the Leibnizian-Wolffian rationalist tradition for explaining the grades between obscurity and clarity/distinction in terms of grades between sensible and intellectual cognition. For Kant the distinction between sensibility and the intellectual is not logical but transcendental (A44/B61-62), such that sensible representations can be distinct and concepts can be confused.

Famously, Kant held that ‘the field of *obscure* representations is the largest in the human being’ (A 7:136, emphasis in original). But it is not as if there are perfectly clear representations on the one hand and then a totally hidden field of completely obscure representations on the other. Rather there are infinitely many points between full clarity and total obscurity, and in this in-between range we can become aware of representations *as* obscure. For instance, I can become aware that this sensation is faint; that I do not see your face clearly; that I do not understand the concept of an instinct. Or recalling the passages from the Introduction: I am aware that the fire or the smoke or the broad vista or the object of my sexual interest is obscure. This suggests that it is precisely insofar as our representations are not wholly out of view but dimly present as unclear, indistinct, ‘as if through a fog’ (A 7:137), that we have something to play with. And it is just insofar as we do in fact play with them that obscure representations can be a proper topic of *pragmatic* anthropology. For now we can ask the pragmatic, normative question: given that we *do* play with obscure representations in fantasy, *should* we?¹³

I will now (very briefly) clarify the proper contribution that the empirical imagination makes to ordinary, objective experience of objects. The debate about the imagination’s role in Kant’s theory of cognition is substantial and highly controversial.¹⁴ What we need for our purposes is just to outline this role so that we can understand the ways in which fantasy constitutes a deviation. This will allow us, in §5, to appreciate how the freedom of the imagination in aesthetic experience marks a departure from ordinary experience, and yet still constitutes a ‘proper’ function of the imagination.

Very roughly speaking, in the case of ordinary experience and cognition of objects, the faculty of imagination [*Einbildungskraft*] functions to synthesize the sensibly given manifold into a spatially and temporally ordered intuition, or image (A120), that can be subsumed under a concept.¹⁵ Kant describes two, ‘inseparably combined’ (A102) kinds

¹³ Kant writes that ‘the field of obscure representations belongs only to physiological anthropology, not to pragmatic anthropology, and so it is properly disregarded here’ (A 7:136). And yet he continues to discuss them in connection with fantasy, sex, and the ‘studied obscurity’ of certain writers. This suggests that obscure representations do belong to pragmatic anthropology insofar as they raise pragmatic, normative questions of what man should *do* with them.

¹⁴ For monographs dedicated to the topic see: Horstmann (2018), Kneller (2009), Makkreel (1990), and Matherne (2016 and *forthcoming*).

¹⁵ Again, my exclusive focus in this paper is the *empirical* exercise of the imagination, the exercise of which presupposes and is made possible by the *transcendental* function of the productive imagination. The latter accounts for the ‘objective ground of all association of appearances’ or the ‘affinity of all appearances’ (A123).

of imaginative synthesis, apprehension and reproduction: apprehension 'runs through and takes together' the manifold (A99) and reproduction 'calls back' (A120) past representations to bear on the present. In these exercises, the imagination is subject to *two masters*: it apprehends and orders the sensibly given manifold, and it follows the rules of the understanding, which make possible full-blown experience and cognition of objects.¹⁶ Thus, the organizing activity of the imagination is, first, tethered and constrained by the sensible manifold¹⁷—'that which prevents our cognitions from being haphazard or arbitrary' (A 7:104)—and second, reined and ruled by the understanding: 'in the use of the imagination for cognition, the imagination is under the constraint of the understanding and is subject to the limitation of being adequate to its concept' (CJ 5:316). The concepts of the understanding ensure that particulars count as instances of kinds, and, as *rules*, these concepts introduce a normative dimension to cognition. Here the laws of the understanding lead the way 'as they should' (A 7:133). Finally, because nothing can be universally communicated except cognition (CJ 5:217), the understanding's rule allows one's representations to be communicable to others. The imagination is thus subject to two masters, and one 'touchstone': the judgments of others (A 7:128-131; A 7:219; CPR A820/B848).

Ordinarily, when the mind is in its business of cognizing the world, it hardly seems as though we are doing any imaginative work at all.¹⁸

¹⁶ One of the main points of debate in the literature concerns whether or not the activity of the imagination is entirely governed by concepts of the understanding, or whether its synthesizing activity is in part independent of the concepts of the understanding; put otherwise, there is a question whether all acts of synthesis are acts of the understanding, or whether the imagination performs *its own* activity of synthesis. If one opts for the latter, then Kant would be advocating what Rolf-Peter Horstmann (2018) calls a 'two-stage model of cognitive object constitution', according to which the imagination synthesizes sense impressions *into* spatio-temporally unified intuitions that are not yet conceptually determined and then, in a logically distinct second stage, these intuitions are synthesized in accordance with concepts. For our purposes, though, the main point is that in the case of ordinary cognitive experience, the imagination does, finally, operate under the guidance of the understanding, and we can leave it undecided whether its activity is independent of that guidance at a logically prior stage.

¹⁷ Though, very importantly, unlike sensibility, the imagination—specifically the empirical reproductive imagination—also operates properly, in its cognitive, experience-constituting mode, 'even without the presence of the object' (A100; see also B151; A 7:153). Imagination operating without the presence of the object is not enough to make it an exercise of fantasy. To count as the latter, the imagination also needs to be productive and 'lawless', that is, operating independently of the rules of the understanding. See Matherne (forthcoming) for a detailed analysis of the imagination's (proper, healthy, non-fantastic) operations without the presence of the object.

¹⁸ Thus, in Kant's view, all other thinkers had missed the role of imagination in the ordinary experience of objects. As he writes, '[N]o psychologist has yet thought that imagination is a necessary ingredient in perception itself' (A 7:120).

In the first *Critique* Kant writes that we are ‘rarely even conscious’ of the work of the imagination (CPR A78/B103) and in the *Friedländer* lectures, Kant notes that ‘[i]f the object is present, then the sensible impression is present, and the imagination is obscured by the sensible impression. If however the object is absent [FR: or obscure], then the imagination is more intense’ (LA 25:514). As Longuenesse clarifies, to say that we are not conscious of the imagination means that, in ordinary cognition, there is no phenomenal consciousness of imaginative activity, ‘nothing it’s like’ for the subject to be engaged in that activity (2023, p. 22). What we are conscious of is rather the result of the imaginative work: the object.

In its proper functioning in ordinary cognition and experience, the imagination apprehends the sensibly given world in a way that is governed by concepts, such that the subject can cognize the world and share judgments with others. In ordinary cognition and experience, mundane obscure representations and the rule-governed imagination make possible the experience of an objective, public world. But this is not what happens in fantasy, to which we now turn.

4. A fantasy

Recall the scenarios described above: fire, smoke, nighttime, sex. In these scenes, the subject *could* snap to attention and cognize the object. But what we find instead is an involuntary, unruled, obscure, pleasurable, compelling, and private form of imaginative activity that does not give rise to cognition or full-blown experience of objects (and that is also distinguished from our imaginative response to beauty, as we shall see in §5). In fantasy, the imagination’s two masters (sensibly given objects and the understanding) and its touchstone (other people’s judgments) are absent or obscure, and the subject herself is unfocused.

Imagine that late at night I walk to the Hudson River and have a cigarette. I stare at the dark water and curls of smoke, the city is quiet, and I’m lulled into a drift of thought that seems to follow the movement of the waves. I find myself thinking about my day, and then the image of the leaf-covered, worn-down batting cage where I would smoke cigarettes when I was fourteen comes to mind ‘unbidden’, and then I move through more impersonal ideas like ‘death, eternity, etc.,’¹⁹ though

¹⁹ For Kant eternity is an idea of reason, a concept to which no intuition is adequate, while death is a concept that can be exhibited in experience (though of course not one’s own death) and yet can also be imaginatively presented in a way that goes ‘beyond the limits of experience’ (CJ 5:314).

I couldn't explain why just these images and ideas come to mind, nor what connects them, nor why they seem meaningful.

Here my imagination is not guided by any cognitive purpose set by the understanding (whether theoretical or practical), and what it attends to and abstracts from is constrained neither by concepts nor by empirical laws of association. For example, the concept <batting cage> doesn't dictate which images or ideas come to mind; rather, images of leaves on the ground, the baggy net, and the idea of eternity come to mind involuntarily, unbidden, and for no purpose. I am also not actively *remembering* the batting cage: memory for Kant involves choice (LA 25:521) and importantly, active recollecting involves 'no small effort to *check the flow of the imagination*' (ibid., emphasis added). It takes cognitive work to keep imagination out of memory. Rather, in fantasy the flow of the imagination runs 'unchecked', involuntary and productive, 'swarming' with ideas and images: 'I cannot think anything definite'. So it is not that *I* choose to think about whatever I wish, but that my imagination swarms: *it swarms me*. And I am not trying to *compose* or *fabricate* some artistic invention, since this, for Kant, involves choice (A 7:175; CJ 5:303), whereas fantasy is involuntary and 'does not belong to the artist' (CJ 5:303).²⁰

Whether my fantasy produces images (batting cages) or ideas ('death, eternity, etc.'), these representations are obscure though not entirely unconscious; rather they are *obscurely* conscious, as if 'at *dusk* or through a fog' (A 7:137, emphasis in original). As Kant writes, we 'play with obscure representations, and have an interest in throwing them in the shade before the power of the imagination' (A 7:136). This 'shade' or obscurity facilitates my lawless, imaginative play with these representations and their play with me: because I am not thinking anything definite, my imagination can roam from image to idea and *I* am, so to speak, taken along for the ride.

If you were to ask me what I was thinking about, I might sincerely say *I don't quite know* or *it's hard to explain*. And yet the experience of fantasy feels not just pleasurable, but significant or meaningful (even if I have enough common sense not to fully assent to these roaming thoughts). While fantasy is not conceptually ruled, it is not *mindless* pleasure; to the contrary, fantasy involves a cognitive faculty and feels

²⁰ Even in the case of genius, where the genius cannot explain how he creates what he does (CJ 5:308), the free imagination is not lawless but attuned to the lawfulness of the understanding (CJ 5:319). As Samantha [Matherne \(forthcoming\)](#) emphasizes, this marks Kant's departure from theories of genius as a form of madness or divine inspiration.

meaningful, as if on the precipice of meaning. In his discussion of play with obscure representations, Kant complains that ‘studied’ or ‘affected’ obscurity in writing functions to ‘feign profundity’ and ‘lure treasure hunters of wisdom’ (A 7:137). Precisely because such writing is obscure, it seems to contain ‘hints pregnant with meaning’ (RH 8:45). But even when one is fantasizing alone at night, fantasies are gripping because they seem to hint at meanings not fully graspable. This sense of meaningfulness also explains the link Kant draws between fantasy and madness, especially enthusiasm (*Schwärmerei*), for it is just insofar as one takes one’s fantasies to be meaningful that one risks crediting them as genuine insights.²¹

This brings us to the final point about fantasy. Because the activity of the imagination is not ruled by the understanding and because nothing can be universally communicated except cognition (CJ 5:217), both the pleasures and the sense of meaningfulness of fantasy are private. It is a kind of ‘intercourse with oneself’. It is not that I must be thinking of a private subject matter; as Kant notes, I might be thinking of ideas of reason like death and eternity, or, in another passage to which we will return, of the outer reaches of the cosmos (UNH 1:315). Rather, since my train of thought ‘swarms’, is not about anything definite, is not conceptually constrained, is not focused on an object, is animated by contingencies of my subjective state, and does not follow any coherent, ordered direction, fantasy is private. This is not to say that fantasies contain determinate yet incommunicable private meanings; it is to say that the pleasure and *sense* of meaningfulness or significance are private. Sometimes I cannot even share my fantasy with my waking, rested self in the morning, where what seemed significant last night now appears ‘an insignificant little cloud’ (A 7:181). Of course, I could try to tell someone *about* my fantasies, either my rested self or another person, just as I can try to tell someone about my dreams, but here it is more accurate to say I am reporting on an inner experience, not *communicating*, let alone sharing a judgment with others. Fantasy is private. And as Kant says of private pleasures: ‘no one cares about that’ (CJ 5:212).²²

But Kant does care about beauty, which brings us to this essay’s second aim. Because fantasy seems to come very close to the freedom of the imagination in judgments of taste, we must now consider their

²¹ Kant describes enthusiasm, a form of ‘mental illness’, as ‘the tendency to accept the play of ideas of inner sense as experiential cognition, although it is only a fiction’ and as ‘dreaming when awake’ (A 7:160).

²² Here I use the Pluhar translation for *bekümmert sich niemand*. Guyer and Matthews translate this as ‘no one will be bothered about that’.

relationship. The question orienting the next two sections is: could fantasy contribute productively to a proper aesthetic experience? Kant says no, and as we shall see, it turns out to be trickier than one might have thought to make proper space for fantasy. But departing from Kant's negative answer, I will argue, with help from Susan Sontag, that certain objects and works of art *invite fantasy*, such that fantasy constitutes part of a proper aesthetic response.

5. Fantasy and free play

As is well known, for Kant aesthetic judgment is not a form of knowledge but a judgment grounded in feeling; it is 'partly sensuous, partly intellectual' (A 7:239), a 'middle thing' (ML 28:248). This is not the private, sensuous feeling of the merely agreeable or disagreeable—as when I find sweets or cigarettes pleasing—but the 'reflective' pleasure of the free play of the imagination and the understanding when contemplating the form of a particular, sensibly given object: *this tulip, this tree, this painting*. The pleasure of taste is 'the effect that mere reflection has on the mind' (CJ 5:295). More precisely, this is the pleasure we take in the 'free play' of the imagination and the understanding.²³

In this pleasurable contemplation that is cognitive yet does not give rise to cognition, the imagination is free, in two senses. First, the imagination is free from the rules of the understanding; here 'the understanding is at the service of the imagination and not vice versa' (CJ 5:242). This doesn't mean that in making an aesthetic judgment, I am not, for instance, using empirical concepts like <pink> or <tulip>

²³ Let me make an important caveat about the scope and focus of the argument in this section. Another way that fantasy could play a productive role in aesthetic experience is in artistic *production*. Kant describes genius as a 'gift of nature' (CJ 5:309) for creating original and beautiful works of art, and where the genius cannot explain where his ideas came from or how he managed to execute the work (CJ 5:308). Genius is animated by 'spirit', the faculty for presenting aesthetic ideas, which are 'representation[s] of the imagination that occasio[n] 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' (CJ 5:314). It would seem then that genius is precisely where Kant does make room for fantasy. The genius is the figure who not only gives form to his fantasies, but pays them heed, gives them an authoritative voice (though even the genius's fantasy must be 'disciplined' and 'clipped,' since 'in its lawless freedom' fantasy produces 'nothing but nonsense' (CJ 5:320; 319). I think this is worth exploring, especially keeping in mind Kant's claim that fantasy 'does not belong to the artist' (A 7:175). But with respect to the present paper, Kant's genius is importantly an *incomparable* figure, a man apart, the exception that proves Kant's rule: for the rest of us, for those without the genius' special gift of nature, it seems that, for Kant, fantasy has no proper place. I want to explore whether we might carve out a place for fantasy for the rest of us. And for Kant, the capacity for aesthetic judgment is a capacity shared by all.

or the transcendental categories; it means that my imaginative activity is not ‘at the service’ of the understanding and is not geared to the task of cognition, and that the aesthetic judgment itself is not based on the application of any such concepts (as would be the case in a theoretical judgment). Second, the imagination is free in the sense that it is ‘productive and self-active’ (CJ 5:241). Rather than follow the reproductive laws of association, the imagination here (self-)actively creates new connections, links to novel ideas, and vividly apprehends the manifold of sensuous detail, where this activity is a pleasure.

Yet while the imagination does not here serve the understanding, crucially the imagination is not ‘lawless’, it is not wholly indifferent to the demands of the understanding, as is the case with fantasy; rather Kant says that in aesthetic judgment the free imagination ‘harmonizes’ with the ‘lawfulness’ of the understanding ‘in general’ (CJ 5:241). While there is much debate about what exactly this means²⁴, for our purposes we can understand the role of the lawfulness of the understanding ‘in general’—as opposed to the determinate law of a particular concept—as ensuring that the imaginative apprehension of the manifold is sufficiently *unified* (one object, one scene) that there is a dimension of normativity or appropriateness (as Hannah Ginsborg puts it, ‘there is a certain way in which the object ought to be perceived’ (2014, p. 68)), and that my aesthetic judgment is universally communicable and shareable (since, as we’ve seen, nothing can be universally communicated except cognition (CJ 5:217). As the imagination freely attends to the sensory manifold, it seeks a kind of appropriate unity, not the general unity of a concept, but the singular, non-conceptual, yet still normative aesthetic unity proper to *this* particular object.²⁵ The imagination here is not wholly unruléd [*regellos*], but is in regular [*regelmäßig*] play (CJ 5:296), exercising what Kant calls a ‘free lawfulness’ [*freie Gesetzmäßigkeit*] (CJ 5:240, emphasis in original): the imagination’s activity is free but still loosely constrained by the demands of the understanding in general for unity, normativity, and communicability.

So first, in aesthetic judgment the imagination is not lawless since it operates under the demands of the understanding in general. Second,

²⁴ See Guyer (2006) for an overview of the scholarship on Kant’s notion of free play, specifically regarding how the freedom of the imagination and the involvement (or non-involvement) of concepts have been interpreted.

²⁵ Here I follow Gorodeisky (2011) who argues for an ‘aesthetic’ approach to the free harmony of the faculties. This means that the kind of unity sought in aesthetic judgment is not the universal, conceptual, necessary unity of theoretical cognition, but is a singular, aesthetic, but still necessary and norm-governed unity.

the imagination is not free to *invent* whatever it likes, as in fabrication, invention, or composition; rather 'in the apprehension of a given object of the senses [the imagination] is of course bound to a determinate form of this object' (CJ 5:240). In judgments of taste, then, the imagination is still governed, if differently, by its two masters: the sensibly given object (specifically its form) and the understanding ('in general'). This governance ensures that judgments of taste are universally communicable and universally valid, that is, they 'lay claim' to the agreement of everyone' (CJ 5:212). Thus, we also find the imagination's 'touchstone', namely the judgments of others (even if only as possible, rather than actual).

As we have seen, these two masters and this touchstone are missing in fantasy. And yet the playful, pleasurable freedom of the imagination in fantasy brings it into close proximity to the freedom of the imagination in aesthetic judgment. Precisely because of this unsettling proximity, Kant explicitly distinguishes the two. Specifically, Kant distinguishes the free play of the faculties in response to beautiful objects from the free play of the imagination (alone) in response to what he calls 'views of objects,' which 'on account of the distance can often no longer be distinctly cognized' (CJ 5:243). He writes:

In the latter, taste seems to fasten not so much on what the imagination apprehends in this field as on what gives it occasion to invent, i.e., on what are strictly speaking the *fantasies* with which the mind entertains itself while it is being continuously aroused by the manifold which strikes the eye, as for instance in looking at the changing shapes of a fire in a hearth or of a rippling brook, neither of which are beauties, but both of which carry with them a charm for the imagination, because they sustain its free play. (CJ 5:243, emphasis in original)

In the case of a *view* of an object, the imagination is not sufficiently tethered to the determinate form of the object since the object is indistinct. Whether due to distance (a broad vista) or darkness (the night) or the object's own dynamism (fire; smoke; a rippling brook), in these cases the object is indistinct, obscure, as if through a fog.²⁶ Gazing at a fire or into the brook, I am not arranging the parts of the object or scene into a conceptually indeterminate but aesthetically unified whole; rather my imagination 'entertains itself,' 'intercourses with itself,' roams as it

²⁶ These objects are also not purposively organized, whereas the proper objects of aesthetic judgment are either living, purposive organisms or works of art, though the question of the role of purposive form lies beyond the purview of the present paper.

pleases amongst ideas and images that have no necessary relationship to the thing in front of me. Hence, fantasy would seem to be a way of *disengaging* with the world and having intercourse with myself, losing all normative orientation and any prospect of universal communicability.²⁷

The same could be said of fantasy in response to a work of art. If, while looking at a painting by Francisco Goya (to take an artist from Kant's time) or Mark Rothko (to take an artist from ours), my fantasy produces an involuntary, unruly, pleasurable stretch of obscure images and ideas, this, for Kant, can play no legitimate role in aesthetic judgment. As Paul Guyer puts this point, the free play of the faculties must 'somehow be relevantly related to the work of the artist, and not just day-dreaming while in its presence' (2021, p. 624). In this case, the work deploys aesthetic ideas which allow the lawfully free imagination to 'spread itself over a multitude of related representations' that cannot be comprehended 'in a determinate linguistic expression' (CJ 5:315). And yet for all this imaginative freedom, the artwork still constrains the imagination's activity. To 'just day-dream in its presence' would seem to be a way of *disengaging* from the work, to be indifferent to how it ought to be seen, and to be indifferent to communicating with others.

The freedom of the imagination in aesthetic judgment thus comes importantly close to fantasy, and indeed, Kant's analysis of the former may be his way of making legitimate room for the kind of mental activity that finds expression in fantasy. But crucially, whenever Kant allows for the free activity of the imagination in aesthetic experience, it must *always*, eventually, be constrained, disciplined, or 'clipped' by the understanding (CJ 5:320), for this ensures the necessary unity, normativity, and universality to secure it the status of a judgment that can be communicated to others. This subtle distinction is what allows Kant to draw a line between the two kinds of imaginative activity— the free lawfulness

²⁷ Might we conceive of the pleasure of fantasy, in this scenario, as a kind of agreeable pleasure, akin to my liking for sweets or cigarettes? I think there are two main reasons why not. First, the agreeable pleases *the senses in sensation* (CJ 5:205): the sensation 'is immediately produced by the empirical intuition of the object' and is 'not related to the faculty of cognition at all' (CJ 20:224) and this sensation excites a desire for that object (CJ 5:207). The pleasure of fantasy, though, is pleasure in the unruly play of the imagination and thus broadly *cognitive*, and it does not necessarily excite any desire for the fantasized 'object' (idea or image). Second, relatedly, we couldn't make sense of Kant's specific worries about fantasy if it were just a form of agreeable pleasure. Not all fantasy is enthusiasm or fanaticism, but we can only make sense of Kant's worries about their proximity if we see fantasy not as something that pleases the senses but as a pleasure taken in imaginative, which is to say cognitive activity, which involves a sense of significance, or of 'hints pregnant with meaning'. Thanks to both Lucy Allais and an anonymous reviewer for raising this question.

of the imagination and lawless fantasy—where, again, the latter has no legitimate role to play in aesthetic experience.

But must this be so? Can fantasy play no productive role in aesthetic experience? Might there not be objects and scenes that *invite* fantasy, where fantasy is part of a proper aesthetic response to the object and constitutive of a distinctive kind of aesthetic encounter? If this were possible, our imaginative play would be different—stranger—than in the case of Kantian free play, and yet, since the object positively *invites* fantasy, it would also be different from ‘just day-dreaming in its presence’. In the next and final section, I begin to develop such a revaluation of fantasy.

6. Invitations to fantasy

Consider, first, what Kant calls ‘views of objects’, for example, fire. To revalue fantasy would allow us to regard sitting fireside not as a mere trigger for trivial mental wanderings, but as a special occasion for a more expansive, ranging form of unfettered imaginative mental activity, which, precisely given the daily incessant demands of cognition and action, it is not always possible to engage in. In this case, while fantasy does not contribute to an aesthetic judgment of the object, it need not be regarded as total disengagement or indifference or sheer idleness. Rather fantasy could constitute a distinctive form of imaginative responsiveness that is facilitated by obscure objects like fire, a rippling brook, a broad vista, or the dark of night, for even though the mind is not focused on the object or scene, let alone geared towards arriving at a universally communicable aesthetic judgment, still ‘the fire in the fireplace through its various shapes arouses a gentle motion in the mind and *gives it ever new material*’ (LA 25:1259, emphasis added). Fantasy is one way of taking up this ever new material.

While more needs to be said about fantasy and natural objects, I want to focus on the idea that some works or styles of art positively invite fantasy. In fact, [Susan Sontag \(1969a\)](#) argues that much modern art should be understood in this way.²⁸ Writing on a range of artists and cultural producers including film director Ingmar Bergman, playwright

²⁸ ‘The Aesthetics of Silence’ was originally published in the short-lived arts magazine *Aspen*, Issue 5 & 6, ‘The Minimalist Issue’, alongside the first publication of Roland Barthes’ ‘The Death of the Author’. And in fact, in this essay Barthes explores ideas and territory in the history of art that link it quite closely to Sontag’s objects and aims. The ‘silence’ of the work and the rejection of the authority and voice of ‘authorship’ are kindred ideas.

Samuel Beckett, and composer John Cage, Sontag describes what she calls an ‘aesthetic of silence.’ Unlike traditional art, which often seeks to narrate history, morally edify, and valorize power,²⁹ these modern works withdraw from their audience—they are ‘silent’ or ‘obscure’—and thereby make space for a different form of imaginative activity and aesthetic experience.

On the side of the object, works that exemplify the aesthetics of silence, Sontag argues, undermine and problematize not only traditional standards of representation and aesthetic form, but also the classical artistic aspirations of expressing and communicating the exalted, unutterable ideas of the author (genius), and of holding and directing the audience’s aesthetic attention.³⁰ ‘Silent’ works are characterized by their opacity, incomprehensibility, and non-representational and non-narrative form; they rebuff the efforts of the audience to plumb their depths for hidden meanings (a rebuffing that Roland Barthes describes as ‘anti-theological’ (1977, p. 147)). With such works, the object is ‘obscure’ or ‘silent’, and this obscurity and silence keep space open for more unruly, untethered imaginative involvement.

On the side of the subject, traditional art demands attentive imaginative contemplation of its form and meaning that is ‘voluntary’ and ‘mobile’ (Sontag 1969a, p. 15) (Kant characterizes the activity of attention as voluntary and guided by the understanding (A 7:131)). Think, for instance, of the use of perspective in painting, which not only depicts the phenomenology of human perception but directs the viewer’s gaze and thereby the images and ideas that she associates and generates. By contrast, art that is silent ‘invites a stare’ (Sontag 1969a, p. 15) and ‘provid[es] time for the continuing or exploring of thought’ (ibid., p. 19), a description which recalls Kant’s description of staring into the fire or the brook. Sontag notes that such unregulated forms of thought appear ‘from the perspective of traditional thinking and the familiar uses of the mind as no thought at all’ (ibid. p. 17), and this seems to be Kant’s position; as he writes, the imagination’s lawless play in fantasy constitutes a ‘*reversal of the natural order* in the faculty of knowledge, because then

²⁹ Consider that Kant’s examples of aesthetic ideas include moral and religious ideas, kings and queens of heaven, a cosmopolitan disposition, the tranquillity of virtue, and that ‘beauty is a symbol of morality’ (CJ §59). But while these are a source of focus for Kant, I agree with Matherne (2013) who argues for an ‘inclusive’ interpretation of aesthetic ideas, according to which aesthetic ideas can present moral and purely rational ideas *and* concepts and emotions related to ordinary experience.

³⁰ See also Bersani’s and Dutoit’s *The Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnais* (1993), which pursues a similar thesis and takes its title from a line from Sontag (2002, p. 13), but does not cite her.

the principles of thought do not lead the way (*as they should*) but rather follow behind' (A 7:134, emphases added). In a moment, we will look in some detail at a work that invites such a stare and the unruly exploration of thought.

To sum up: on the side of the object, 'silent' work does not communicate ineffable meanings or direct attention, and on the side of the subject, the mind wanders freely. Sontag proposes that this 'silent' art meets what she calls '*the mind's need or capacity for self-estrangement*' (ibid., p. 4, emphasis added). We can understand this 'need for self-estrangement' as the mind's need for freedom from ordinary world-directed, action-oriented, fully conscious functioning. This again suggests that the proper rather than misguided or distracted response to this kind of art will involve precisely the kind of unstructured, obscure, and passive mental wanderings characteristic of fantasy, the kind of 'staring'—into the painting, into fire, into the night—and lawless thinking that Kant could only regard as improper. Of course, Sontag's focus on modern art also indicates the need for a historical lens in our analysis of Kant and in our understanding and evaluation of fantasy, suggesting that the kind of art and the unusual kind of responsiveness that interest Sontag may not have been available in Kant's time.³¹

Let us now look at two examples. Beginning with a very contemporary work, consider the Canadian artist Michael Snow's best-known experimental film *Wavelength* (1967). *Wavelength* is a forty-five-minute zoom that traverses the length of a New York loft space towards the windows on the far end, terminating in a still photograph, taped to the wall, of dark rolling waves. This (seemingly) single zoom is dynamized by subtly discontinuous edits, slow yet not seamless progressions, alternating colour filters, reversals of the photographic image from positive to negative, and has a soundtrack that combines noises from the street outside with an increasingly screeching sine wave. *Wavelength* has been called one of the most important experimental, structural, or minimalist films of all time, 'without precedent' and 'a triumph of contemplative cinema' (Youngblood 1968).

Now on the one hand *Wavelength* is surprisingly riveting, generating the tension of a bizarre kind of thriller. On the other hand, it is boring, monotonous, occasionally intolerable (too loud, too strobic), and refuses narrative or formal coordination. As I watched (stared), my

³¹ A historical reconstruction would involve considering the progression from post-Kantian Romantic aesthetics, with its emphasis on opacity and the ineffable, to Sontag's modern aesthetics of silence.

mind would wander—almost without my noticing it and certainly without my directing it—away from the film to other ideas and images, and then would snap back to attention, and I would realize, for instance, that the camera had moved forward an inch or that there was now a red filter. My mind would ebb and flow, now attending to the film, now wandering in the dark. But crucially, this obscure, estranged imaginative wandering to and from the work seems proper, indeed essential to the full experience of this work, rather than a failure of attentiveness or ‘just’ day-dreaming.³² Notice that if I had simply become bored and started planning a grocery list, this *would* have been a way of simply disengaging, but this would not have been *fantasy*, since making a list is voluntary, conscious, governed by concepts, and end-directed. By contrast, fantasy, as invited by this work, involves an imaginative drift away from the film and back again, where the images and ideas may be inspired by the film (the mind is ‘continuously aroused by the manifold which strikes the eye’; the film gives us ‘ever new material’), but my fantasy also moves in individual and idiosyncratic directions, and thus in directions that I would not expect others to share.

Wavelength does not tell its viewer how to take it in. In an interview, art critic Amy Taubin—who also makes a brief, enigmatic appearance in the film—says that *Wavelength* ‘made space for anyone who was watching to fill in their own narrative’ (2023). I don’t think Taubin means that anyone can fill in the film with a determinate *plot*; I think she means that this film makes space for the idiosyncrasies of the viewer’s free imaginative activity. This is a film that, in its sparseness, formal unpredictability, and non-narrativity, refuses to grab its audiences’ attention, and instead makes space for other forms of thinking.³³ As Sontag puts it, ‘silence keeps things “open”’ (1969a, p. 20).

This is one way that a work of art can positively invite fantasy as part of a proper aesthetic response. This is not to say that more standard forms of Kantian free play would be totally inappropriate. For example, one might pleurably contemplate how Snow’s rigorous employment of the cinematic apparatus deploys and generates various aesthetic ideas

³² Iranian film director Abbas Kiarostami (1997) describes this kind of experience when he says: ‘I prefer the films that put their audience to sleep in the theatre. Some films have made me doze off in the theatre, but the same films have made me stay up at night, wake up thinking about them in the morning, and keep on thinking about them for weeks.’

³³ In his short piece on *Wavelength* on the occasion of Snow’s death, artist Arthur Jafa writes: ‘Snow was surfing the event horizon [...] and] having traversed the distance between here and there, arrives at a full stop beyond which progress, rational (Western) comprehension, fails’ (2023). Given Kant’s racialized conception of fantasy (to be discussed in §7), Jafa’s observation about the failures of ‘progress’ and ‘rational (Western) comprehension’ is apt.

about, say, artistic media, time, mind, urbanity, and so forth. It would thus be more accurate to say that such 'silent' works invite the mind to toggle between the two, engaging in attentive free play and then letting the imagination swarm as it pleases. To appreciate or love *Wavelength* is not just to find it formally impressive, even beautiful, which it is; it is to appreciate and love it for the strange, estranged, imaginative movement of mind that it invites, and dignifies.

Let us now consider a second way that a work may positively invite fantasy. For Kant, without the touchstone of others to confirm or share one's experience, fantasy risks being nothing more than an 'insignificant little cloud'. But some works of modernist literature function as a kind of touchstone, not for any particular fantasy, but for fantasy as a valued, private form of mindedness. Writers like Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, and Robert Musil, for example, often describe characters drifting into fantasy, where this is represented not as an insignificant distraction, but as a significant exercise and experience of one's mind. Consider, for example, Mrs. Ramsey's imaginative train of thought as she sits alone after putting the children to bed in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*:

For now she need not think about anybody. She could be herself, by herself. And that was what now she often felt the need of—to think; well, not even to think. To be silent; to be alone. All the being and the doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated; and one shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others. Although she continued to knit, and sat upright, *it was thus that she felt herself*; and this self having shed its attachments was *free for the strangest adventures* [...] It was odd, she thought, how if one was alone, one leant to inanimate things; trees, streams, flowers; felt they expressed one; felt they became one; felt they knew one, in a sense were one; felt an irrational tenderness thus (she looked at that long steady light) as for oneself. There rose, and she looked and looked with her needles suspended, there curled up off the floor of the mind, rose from the lake of one's being, a mist, a bride to meet her lover. (1989, p. 63, emphases added)

While I don't share Mrs. Ramsey's particular fantasies inspired by the trees and streams, I do recognize this experience. The work stages a character in fantasy and thereby speaks intimately to its readers insofar as we recognize not only that we have such experiences, but that we care about them and experience them not simply as pleasurable but as obscurely meaningful. By staging Mrs. Ramsey in fantasy and suggesting that it

was thus, in fantasy, ‘that she felt herself’ and was ‘free for the strangest adventures,’ Woolf shows fantasy to be valued and important in the life of an ordinary person (not a genius). I would further propose that works that stage characters’ fantasy in this way also make space for the reader’s own fantasies, as when I set the book down (as Mrs. Ramsey suspends her needles) and allow what is curled on the floor of my mind to rise and swarm.³⁴ As with *Wavelength*, such works confirm fantasy as a vital part of the life of the mind, and thereby provide a kind of touchstone.

In fact, Kant’s own writings about fantasy—themselves unusual, confessional, and beautiful—provide such touchstones of recognition, even if he himself did not intend them to do so:

It is a not inconsiderable pleasure to allow one’s imagination to roam freely beyond the limits of perfected creation into the realm of chaos and to see half raw nature in the proximity of the sphere of the formed world lose itself bit by bit through all stages and shadings of incompleteness in the whole of unformed space. (UNH 1:315)

In this passage, the reader recognizes the author’s pleasure and the nature of his unusual imaginative adventure. I might not have roamed imaginatively beyond the limits of perfected creation, but I recognize this kind of roaming imagination, not just as considerably pleasurable but as seemingly meaningful.

In this section, I have argued that certain works of art, especially modern works and styles, can be understood to invite not, or not only, Kantian free play, but Kantian fantasy. In these cases, fantasy is not just something that randomly happens and it is not a way of simply disengaging from the work; rather, the work positively invites fantasy, making fantasy part of a proper aesthetic response. Such works do not insist on any particular content to the fantasy, but make space for ideas and images to come and go unbidden. It might be too strong to say that someone who does not allow for fantasy thereby fails to appreciate the work. But one might still think they had missed the opportunity that the work had made space for, and thereby missed part of the work’s value and power.

One important question this all raises is what role *invited fantasy* could play in aesthetic conversation and criticism. If fantasy is private

³⁴ As Roland Barthes observes, the best experiences of reading ‘produces, in me, the best pleasure [...] if, reading it, I am led to look up often, to listen to something else’ (1975, p. 24). Here Barthes does not mean that the pleasure of reading involves listening attentively and intentionally to some other sound; I think he means, using the terms I’ve developed from Kant, that the pleasure of reading involves the pleasure of fantasy.

and idiosyncratic, how does fantasy intersect with universal communicability as a Kantian criterion of aesthetic judgment?

Without being able to fully answer this question here, I suggest that fantasy could be conceived as an important, even essential component of certain aesthetic experiences, while allowing that each individual's particular stretch of fantasy and her sense of its significance will remain private and potentially incommunicable. Whereas Kantian free play ensures the communicability of aesthetic judgment, fantasy activates what in a person is *not* in community with everyone else.³⁵ Fantasy could then be part of what 'individualizes' one's appreciation of a work and cements a sense of personal, private connection with it.³⁶ The particular way my mind is moved by Mrs. Ramsey will be different from the way yours is moved, but it seems true of *To the Lighthouse* that it invites our minds to move in such unusual ways and that this is integral to its aesthetic success.

Crucially, to argue that fantasy constitutes part of a proper aesthetic response to certain works requires making an aesthetic argument, as I tried to do above, for why this particular work positively invites fantasy, and so why fantasy, in this case (as opposed to others), is not just day-dreaming in its presence. Not all works positively invite fantasy and so the burden is on the viewer, or the critic, to explain, through careful analysis, in what ways *this* work positively invites *this* form of thought. What, precisely, makes this art 'silent' and how, precisely, does its silence invite our fantasy? That such an argument is possible again indicates that fantasy is not simply a form of disengagement but can rather be a proper mode of aesthetic responsiveness.

7. Conclusion

In this paper I have provided a reconstruction of Kant's account of fantasy, and of his argument for how lawless fantasy should be distinguished from the free lawfulness of the imagination in aesthetic judgment. While

³⁵ I take this phrasing from Gregg Horowitz's essay, 'The Homeopathic Image, or, Trauma, Intimacy and Poetry' (2010, p. 479). I am conceiving of Kantian fantasy as part of what Horowitz calls 'intimate life'.

³⁶ On the idea of 'individualizing beauty', that is, experiences of beauty that do not involve a claim to universality, see Moran (2012). For other contemporary arguments against the Kantian position that aesthetic judgments necessarily aspire to universality, see for instance Nehamas (2010) and Riggle (2015; 2022). I am not siding with this anti-universalist position about aesthetic judgment *tout court*, but suggesting that works that invite fantasy involve an importantly individualizing or private dimension.

Kant maintained that fantasy could not contribute to proper aesthetic appreciation, I argued that we can use Kant's analysis to show how certain works or styles of art positively invite fantasy, in which case, fantasy is not a failure but part of a proper aesthetic response. Moreover, by positively inviting fantasy, these works lend fantasy a kind of legitimation and dignity. This invites a further question for another time: where else in our lives does fantasy have a proper role to play?

Kant was too nervous and too negative in his assessment of fantasy, as he tended to conflate fantasy as such with its malign or proto-pathological forms.³⁷ In addition to linking it with forms of madness, Kant also characterizes fantasy in explicitly gendered and racialized terms: throughout his lectures on anthropology, he suggests that an unruly imagination is found among all 'oriental peoples' (LA 25:1261; cf. LA 25:536; 552; 655). For example, he maintains that 'the power of imagination's being unruly [...] is found among all oriental peoples, as with them everything is based on a play of images' (LA 25:1261). And he characterizes fantasy as a 'feminine' way of thinking: 'I know of a fear which is not exactly *unmanly*, namely to recoil from everything which unhitches reason from its first principles and permits it to wander about in unbounded imaginings' (UTP 180; cf. LA 25:1258, emphasis in original).³⁸ In another essay, Sontag notes of the mind's need for self-estrangement that 'this society serves that need poorly. It provides mainly demonic vocabularies in which to situate that need' (1969b). Kant's evaluations indeed tend in this demonizing direction.

Yet Kant's analysis of fantasy is still instructive and dimensions of it remain attractive. The interest and attraction of Kant's writings on fantasy derive from his artful communication of what fantasy is and what it is like for us, but also from his palpable anxiety. For fantasy is an unusual and sometimes disturbing form of thought. It can be distressing to find your mind getting away from you. Fantasy constitutes a departure from

³⁷ Here, Stuart Hampshire's characterization of the personality of certain philosophers is apt. He writes that some philosophers 'are always aware of the precariousness of sanity, and of the danger of uncontrolled speculation as a disease of the mind, often leading to monstrous growths of illusion. Perhaps they remember [...] abysses of doubt, morbid moments in their own thinking, against which a therapy is needed' (1968).

³⁸ See David L. Clark's 'Kant's Alien's: The Anthropology and its "Others"': '[T]he violently "pragmatic" intersection of knowledge and power at which the *Anthropology* is situated and by which it is animated: for Kant, determining "what man makes of himself" [...] is indistinguishable from what the anthropologist reiteratively—and, sometimes, with palpable anxiety—makes of others' (2001, p. 202), whom Clark describes as 'the Jews, the primitive cultures, women, the aristocracy, all of the questionably rational and questionably human beings that [...] haunt the margins of the *Anthropology* as so many phantom menaces' (ibid., p. 213).

orderly, focused 'day-time' thinking, it can feel overwhelming and confusing, it can lead our thoughts down nerve-wracking paths, it can feel weird or risky or out of control, and such experiences can be 'potentially isolating' (Moran 2012, p. 306; p. 318). Kant gets something right about fantasy, and so even if we wish to resist his almost entirely negative evaluation of it, we should not try to completely defang it.

My closing suggestion is that we cannot and should not try to simply reverse Kant's normative assessment and unambivalently endorse fantasy, because the interest and attraction of fantasy derive from the very qualities that made Kant nervous. The qualities that support Kant's negative evaluation of fantasy are not optional but integral to fantasy, and so our honestly valuing fantasy must acknowledge that negativity. Fantasy is thus normatively ambiguous. Allowing for ambivalence about fantasy is thus appropriate to its distinctive phenomenology and pleasure, its mysterious significance, its risk and adventure, and the unusual way that we value it, to the extent that we do.³⁹

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