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Kant's Animating Principle: On Aesthetic Vitalism and the Origin of Desire

When we encounter beauty, there is the feeling of an absolute certainty, a certainty beyond all logic. Leibniz observed that when we find a poem or an image beautiful, we know it clearly – that is, without being in the slightest doubt. And, paradoxically, we know this with such clarity because there is in the beautiful, as Leibniz puts it, “an ‘I don’t know what’ which satisfies or shocks us” (Leibniz 1953, p. XXIV). There is a constitutive excess in it that defies explanation.¹

Wolff, and then Baumgarten, would go on to link this too-muchness to the particularity of the beautiful. The beautiful is always singular. We apprehend it as such only in a particular instance: this specific thing is beautiful, not those kinds of things in general. The beautiful refuses abstraction by which it could be subjected to explanation, rules, or determinate concepts and made into what Leibniz, and those after him up to Kant, calls distinct knowledge. According to Wolff, who in addition to his

¹ Leibniz writes in his *Discourse on Metaphysics* about a clear knowledge of beauty, “that is without being in the slightest doubt, that a poem or a picture is well or badly done because there is in it an ‘I don’t know what’ which satisfies or shocks us. Such knowledge is not yet distinct... It is when I am able to explain the peculiarities that a thing has, that the knowledge is called distinct” (1953, p. XXIV). Poetic knowledge, or knowledge of the beautiful, is, by definition for Leibniz and then also for Wolff and Meier and Kant, indistinct and necessarily obscure.

influence on aesthetic thought is often regarded as the founder of psychology, knowledge of particulars can never be distinct. The particular – left to be in its particularity – remains accessible to us only as confused, obscure knowledge. Particularity is itself a resistance to the general, to abstraction. One can focus attention on a particular feature of an object and then, by abstracting it from the concrete texture of the whole, render it an object of understanding and distinct knowledge. To do this, however, is to sacrifice the confused knowledge of the thing that is necessary to apprehend a thing as beautiful and Wolff argues, to apprehend a person, from whom we might seal ourselves off through abstractions that dissolve their essential singularity.²

When Kant, near the end of his life as he seeks to bridge a gap between the sensible world of experience and the supersensible claims of reason he has elaborated in the first two critiques, turns to the power of judgment, he deepens this inherited emphasis on singularity in the aesthetic encounter. But unlike his predecessors, whether the British empiricists (Hume, Hutcheson, Burke) or the German rationalists (Leibniz, Wolff, Baumgarten, Meier), Kant *turns away from the object* as the center of the question of the aesthetic. The too-muchness of the beautiful, this excess of the aesthetic encounter, is reformulated by Kant not as an attribute of the object for which one might discover norms governing taste, as others had sought to do, but rather as a projection onto a contingent object of that which is constitutive of human being.³ The irreducible particularity

² For a brief exposition of Wolff's conceptualization of the particular and the importance of its persistence against the force of abstraction, see Karsten Harries (2016, pp. 21-23) and his references there to Alfred Bäumler's *Das Irrationalitätsproblem in der Aesthetic und Logik* and Wolff's *Psychologica Empirica* (especially paragraph 320 on the essentially singular).

³ As Kant writes, "whenever we judge any beauty at all, we seek the standard for it a priori in ourselves" (1987, p. 152). In his discussion of the sublime, Kant writes of this projection onto the object as a *subreption*: "the feeling of the sublime in nature is respect for our own vocation, which we show to an object in nature through a certain subreption (substitution of a respect for the object instead of for the idea of humanity in our subject)" (2000, p. 141). It is through this subreption – a concept from Roman law: the obtainment of a gift by concealment of the truth – that our supersensibility is made available to our intuition.

of the aesthetic encounter becomes a felt testament to the supersensible valence of each singular human being as more than their natural determinants and representations in the phenomenal world. In the beautiful and sublime, we – paradoxically – feel our supersensibility. The aesthetic is thus neither about objects in general nor about art objects in particular; instead, Kant writes, it exhibits *the subjective principle* – that is, the indeterminate idea of the supersensible in us (Kant 1987, pp. 213-214). This aesthetic is dense with an ontological pressure. While inaccessible to our direct representation or experience, we know this pressure by its effects as it conditions and puts into motion experience and subjectivity, animating desire and its drive to representation and communication with others.

One cannot make bigger claims than these that Kant attaches to beauty and the aesthetic encounter. But what is the aesthetic? What is the beautiful? Do these questions really matter in a world besieged by pressing material violence and ordinary struggles to stay alive? From my vantage as a psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, and ethnographer in urban communities living through violence and dispossession, in both everyday practices and in Kant's foundational text of modern aesthetics, the aesthetic seems to be precisely the matter of staying alive.

Toward Object Disorientation

To return to the aesthetic and its politics in an affirmative mode first requires clearing a space for it to be reapproached as other than that which has been bequeathed to us under the name aesthetics as the specialized study of art and artists. It requires that we displace the object as the center, push out preoccupations with culture and ideologies of taste, and recognize, with Kant, that the uses of art often produce obstacles to, rather than bring us nearer to, the power of the aesthetic.⁴ To think the aesthetic –

⁴ See Kant's comments on art as an instrument of governments, acting often through religion, to "relieve every subject of the trouble, yet also the ability, to expand his soul's forces beyond the barriers that one can choose to set for him so as to reduce him to mere passivity and so to make him more pliable" (1987, p. 135). Throughout

most paradigmatically, the encounter with the beautiful as it manifests in an encounter with an object – demands, paradoxically, that we lose sight of the object. Even more difficult, particularly from within ethnographic anthropological traditions that have relied so heavily on the notion of experience to ground and legitimate themselves, is that it challenges us to cede our insistence on experience itself.

In his first introduction to *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant separates the aesthetic from experience when he distinguishes between two fundamentally different uses of the term aesthetic. The first use pertains to the transcendental aesthetic as the forms of sensibility that we attach necessarily to objects so as to refer them to our cognitive powers. The transcendental aesthetic concerns the universal forms of space and time that Kant defines in *Critique of Pure Reason* as the conditions of all possible experience. This aesthetic is objective; it is object-oriented – that is, attached to the phenomenal appearance of objects. By contrast, the second use of

the third critique, Kant views art with suspicion and sees it as a misleading vehicle for probing the dynamics and potentiality of the aesthetic. At best, art offers a benign but interested approach to beauty, such that it is not a free beauty but instead what he calls adherent beauty. At worst, art is corrosive to the aesthetic as such and operates as a means of producing docile subjects for whom aesthetic freedom has been occluded by the ostensible provision of it in ready-made experiences of art that, contrary to true aesthetic free play, bind the subject to given structures of governance, discourse, and experience – all that the aesthetic has the potential to suspend and re-open to critique and subversion.

In dissociating the aesthetic from conventional foci on art and cultures of taste, I affirm much of the Marxian and postcolonial criticisms of these object-oriented, Eurocentric aesthetic traditions, such as criticisms articulated by Terry Eagleton (1990), Gayatri Spivak (1999), David Lloyd (2018), and Simon Gikandi (2011), for example. I understand my return to Kant's emphasis on the subjective character of the aesthetic, shaken loose from ideologies of the object and culture, to be adjunctive and supplementary to such critiques of the racial, colonial, and bourgeois underpinnings of such traditions. My ambition here, however, is less to offer yet further criticism of aesthetic ideology than it is to recuperate a line of aesthetic thought that, despite or perhaps because of its birth from within the heart of the Enlightenment, contains potentialities for subverting the enduring constraints on forms of being with others effected by dominant Enlightenment emphases on what Kant defined as reason, history, universality, autonomy, and freedom, and the associated valorization of the universal over and against the singular.

aesthetic, which is the subject of the third critique, refers to a presentation that is referred not to cognition but to the faculty of feeling, of pleasure and pain. It belongs not to objects but is instead entirely subjective; it entails a reflective movement that refers us not to experience, which is necessarily conditioned by cognition and its transcendental principles, but instead to qualities of feeling – of subjectivity and a sense of being beyond subjectivity – that are always singular, unprecedented, and particular (Kant 1987, pp. 409-410; Kant 2000, p. 25).⁵ These inner movements, and thus we as aesthetic beings, are beyond cognition and its powers of representation.

For this reason, in what is perhaps Kant's most difficult and self-contradictory text as a result, he moves away in the third critique from a reliance on experience and the conceptual abstractions through which he had built his critical project up to that point and advocated for the Enlightenment cause of a universal reason, history, science, and progress. Earlier transcendental claims find themselves shattered against the singular, subjective character of the aesthetic encounter for which the bounds of experience and its universalizing conditions no longer hold.

The aesthetic cannot be approached through generalizable rules or concepts but only through particular examples that, in each instance, refuse to yield generalities. In Kant's repeated uses of examples, because the aesthetic is inseparable from its subjective particularity, the example cannot be passively accepted to stand in for a general phenomenon. It instead demands that we actively appropriate the example to ourselves, where this appropriation entails moving with the aesthetic encounter to its incomprehensible, supersensible ground – a movement by which

⁵ My argument for an object-disoriented aesthetics is indebted to Alenka Zupančič's articulation of "object-disoriented ontology" (2017, p. 72ff), which redirects ontological inquiry away from objects as static entities and toward the structural antagonisms and contradictions that animate being itself. Zupančič's emphasis on generative negativity such that "the subject is not simply an object among many objects, it is also the form of existence of the contradiction, antagonism, at work in the very existence of objects as objects" (p. 10) resonates with my own arguments regarding the desiring-production that characterizes the aesthetic encounter through the breakdown of cognition, understanding, and representation it provokes and the associated open-ended sociality and political possibility this enables.

we ourselves, as selves tethered to the transparent European Subject asserted as a universal condition of the properly human by Enlightenment thought, are in turn appropriated and exceeded.⁶

Kant will eventually reach a point at which he acknowledges that this supersensible ground, which is felt but not cognizable, “cannot be determined any further”; we can *think*, i.e. move subjectively in our minds with, but not *cognize*, i.e. render objective and representable, the aesthetic encounter that “stymies understanding” and “strains the imagination” (1987, p. 128). There is a point beyond which we can go no further with our cognition, as our capacity for comprehension is finite, even as our capacity for apprehension and our corresponding aesthetic potential is infinite (ibid., p. 108). In the development of such claims while continuing to trace the aesthetic, Kant in the First Part of the third critique presents us with an almost-mystical iteration of himself, this otherwise famed father of Reason.

Here we find Kant in his most proximate mode of thinking, one that bears a resemblance to what we might today call the auto-ethnographic, which is grounded on reflections upon his own immersion in feeling: the limit-moments of experience. We might be tempted to say that the third critique is Kant at his most persistently experience-near, if it were not for the fact that the subjective, singular emphasis in the aesthetic so thoroughly disrupts our reliance on experience and its objective, empirical attachments. The singular example, drawn from his own encounters with a particular tulip or the tangled lines in a specific baroque wallpaper, becomes the insistent and irresolvable provocation for thinking the aesthetic, precisely because this most intimate attempt at thinking holds within its movements a necessary distance from determinate knowledge and sensible experience.

⁶ See Kant 1987, pp. 145-146, for his comments on the necessity of examples rather than rules for thinking the aesthetic. See also paragraph 33, where Kant explains that one cannot be persuaded of or shown the beauty of a poem, for example, by another, but can only ever feel it for oneself, only judge it for oneself. Also see Harries 2016, pp. 109-110, from whom I have drawn here in the use of the term appropriation, with its echoes of Heidegger's *Being and Time* and texts on language, for his reflections on how Kant requires us to engage the exemplary.

The Immediacy of Mediation

If not the object, then what is it that we encounter in the aesthetic? In the first paragraph of the third critique, Kant ties this encounter to a friction felt between the attempted generation of a particular representation upon an encounter with beauty and the feeling of the power of representation in general, which elicits in the subject a feeling of life, of vitality. Kant writes that, in the aesthetic register,

the representation is related entirely to the subject, indeed to *its feeling of life*, under the name of the feeling of pleasure or displeasure, which grounds an entirely special faculty for discriminating and judging that *contributes nothing to cognition but only holds the given representation in the subject up to the entire faculty of representation, of which the mind becomes conscious in the feeling of its state.* (2000, p. 90)

In an aesthetic encounter, the mind attempts to produce a representation that would account for its sudden enlivening, that would explain or make sense of the beautiful or sublime, for example. But, as Kant will go on to repeatedly observe, no representation is adequate to this encounter, which exceeds our cognitive faculties and their capacities for representation. It is inexhaustible, unexpoundable (Kant 1987, p. 215). The partial representation that is produced and held up to consciousness thus produces a bit of friction – a surcharging of the representational faculty as it attempts in vain to produce a representation adequate to one’s feeling. The effect is something like the blue sparks and heat of an overloaded electric circuit as the subject tries to draw more power through the mind than it can handle. The circuitry seizes as it melts into a feeling of pleasure or displeasure; representation breaks down in its hyperanimation.

This breakdown of the faculty of representation, which ordinarily operates smoothly and beneath our awareness, as it provides the material of consciousness and experience, and shocks us into a feeling of ourselves as representative beings – beings that inhere in and through the power of representation, which we can call language in its most general sense. This

is how we might take Kant's definition of the aesthetic that hinges on the subject's "feeling of life" (2000, p. 90): it is the aesthesis of our being, the sense of aliveness, in and through representation. The beautiful carries with it directly this feeling of life, the feeling of sense itself, whereas the sublime takes another route to the same end, provoking, as Kant puts it, a feeling of a momentary inhibition of the vital forces, followed immediately by an outpouring of them that is all the stronger (1987, p. 98). The aesthetic encounter in general, then, is an opening to the only possibility of immediacy available to us as beings constitutively caught in language: the immediacy of the fact of mediation, or the feeling of our being as in and through representation. With this, in the very first paragraph of the third critique, Kant lays the groundwork for how he will later in the text characterize the aesthetic as "spirit, or the animating principle in the mind" (1987, pp. 181-182).

Disinterestedness and Aesthetic Freedom

At the core of this animating principle of the aesthetic is what Kant calls *free play* between the faculties of the imagination and the understanding. The imagination is what apprehends a particular presentation. It takes up an intuition of a whole – what Kant calls a manifold: a synthesis that is more than its parts. The imagination exhibits, and its exhibitions can be of intuitions that step beyond the empirical and the bounds of its reality (i.e. spatio-temporal constraints) given by the transcendental aesthetic. Thus the imagination, like the capacity for apprehension it supports, has an infinite potential.⁷ The faculty of understanding, by contrast, transforms raw intuitions into experience, into representations; it conforms

⁷ For a brief overview of Kant's definition of the imagination, as given in *Critique of Pure Reason*, see Werner Pluhar's translator's introduction to *Critique of Judgment* (Kant, 1987, pp. XXXV-XXXVI). The imagination as laid out in the first critique must, through a complicated process, come into agreement with a concept given by the understanding, but in the aesthetic encounter of the third critique, as we will see, the imagination is unbound from its conceptual constraints as it animates but is no longer governed by the understanding.

presentations to the constraints dictated by objective reality. The understanding does this by generating and applying determinate concepts, laws, and rules. The understanding, then, is an operation of comprehension. While apprehension is infinite, comprehension is finite (Kant 2000, p. 138).

The aesthetic encounter is described by Kant as an interanimation, a mutual enlivening, of the imagination and understanding as they engage one another in free play. In experience, the imagination is subordinated to the understanding – to objective reality – as the understanding attaches meanings and representations to our intuitions. In the free play of the aesthetic, however, the imagination operates without being brought under the conceptuality of the understanding; no representation or determinate concept can be given to account for the beautiful or the sublime – that is, the feeling that such encounters elicit – and thus the imagination continues unrestricted its movement toward the infinite without resolution.

In a parallel process, the understanding is given an energetic surge by the aesthetic encounter that pushes it to speed up, to quicken, Kant writes, as it seeks to chase after this movement of the imagination that it cannot fully follow (1987, p. 151). Aesthetic judgment, which is precisely this free play of the imagination and understanding, refuses all constraint. It is this peculiar aesthetic freedom – free from the bounds of understanding and reason that otherwise subtend Kant's central concept of freedom as given in *Critique of Practical Reason* – that we feel in the encounter with the beautiful. This freedom, grounded not in reason but in feeling, allows us to feel our excess, to *sense* our excess without being able to *make sense* of it. It returns us to the supersensible as that which exceeds sensible reality and its laws. Rather than operating under concepts or the mandates of reason, as in the case of experience and morality, the aesthetic is its own rule unto itself. It is constitutively *disobedient* to all that would determine or constrain it: patterns, predictability, knowledge, rules. It gives itself its own singular law: that there can be no other law over it than that which arises within each singular encounter (Kant 2000, p. 168; Kant 1987, p. 224).

Kant's text turns alternately from a description of subjective states drawn from his own life – he begins from the observation that beauty happens; we are all subject to this feeling, he will testify as much as argue – to critical attempts to outline possible conditions under which these felt states, which themselves remain ineffable, could possibly be. If we agree with Kant that for each of us beauty happens upon us, that sublimity too happens, we also know that it does not happen all the time. Our cognition is not beset by constant hyperanimating breakdowns in which we drift off in infinite intuitions of felt realities beyond concepts and experience. There are particular conditions under which the aesthetic as free play between imagination and understanding becomes possible. The first of these that Kant observes is that of *disinterestedness*.

The condition of disinterest in the existence of the object – a necessary condition for free play in our apprehension of it – is not a prescription, as if it could be caused by an exercise of the will. It is not a qualification that one be free of material, bodily needs or demands in order to encounter beauty, as it has often been misunderstood. It is instead a description of what happens to us in the moment of aesthetic seizure: we have no practical or rational interest in the existence of an object that we encounter aesthetically. We do not seek to possess it or to make use of it; it is a provocation only for reflective contemplation, not acquisition.⁸ We are kept at a distance by it. We wish to let it be as just as it is. We may even feel a compulsion to protect it from proximity, both our own and others'.⁹ One who moves closer and closer to the beautiful object is typically motivated by an intention to analyze it, study it, possess it – that is, to transform the aesthetic encounter into an object of knowledge or use, to rein it into

⁸ Kant writes that aesthetic judgment “is merely *contemplative*, i.e., it is a judgment that is indifferent to the existence of the object: it [considers] the character of the object only by holding it up to our feeling of pleasure and displeasure. Nor is this contemplation, as such, directed to concepts, for a judgment of taste is not a cognitive judgment (whether theoretical or practical) and hence is neither *based* on concepts, nor directed to them as *purposes*” (1987, p. 51).

⁹ Elaine Scarry pursues this protective inclination in relation to beauty in *Beauty and Being Just* (1999), finding in it a source for an extension of care and protection laterally to others. See, for example, p. 67ff.

the realm of experience. Such a collapse of distance and an insistence on knowledge threatens to destroy aesthetic possibility as such, to render it an object-oriented experience rather than a moment of subjective seizure and excess to cognition that subverts the Subject and sends us beyond our selves.

This disinterestedness and the distance it confers from the object dictates a separation of the aesthetic from what Kant calls the agreeable and the good. The agreeable would be a merely pleasant sensation: that tastes good, it satisfies my hunger, or green is my favorite color, as it puts my mind at ease and reminds me of grassy fields. These are not aesthetic encounters, sending the imagination and understanding into free play, but are instead simply experiences that gratify the senses. They remain bound to our bodily reality, to its inclinations and needs. And unlike the aesthetic, the agreeable is a matter of preference and opinion, not a feeling of the absolute certainty of a truth, as accompanies an encounter with the beautiful. The good is also bound, not by bodily reality but by a determinate concept such that something can be a good example of a general concept. It begins with an already-known rule or ideal. The good, for Kant, is tied to the satisfaction of the demands of reason and thus also to morality. Like the agreeable, enjoyment of the good is thus not free; it is dictated by predetermined concepts that mediate our apprehension, constraining our imagination and its potential for infinite movement. Both the agreeable and the good focus on the outward existence of the object, rendering the subject subservient to the object and objective reality.

In the aesthetic encounter, however, the subject is not subservient to the object but is instead submerged in its own constitutive ground, in the subjective supersensibility to which the encounter returns us. Rather than putting us into a relation with the object wherein we seek to appropriate the object, as other, so as to derive satisfaction from it, where our existence depends upon it, the aesthetic encounter does not seek to demand the existence of a thing such that it might be appropriated but instead subjects us to our own appropriation, our own dislocation from ourselves. Rather than center the object, the aesthetic centers the subject in its own being, but only to put us outside ourselves.

As a result of this withdrawal of interestedness and a resulting distance from the object, the aesthetic does not demand that the object-other exist, does not demand that it manifest or give itself up for our practical use or satisfaction of reason. The aesthetic object, as other to knowledge and reason, is instead merely contemplated and, as an occasion only for this submersion in our own subjective state, is left to be as it is.

The aesthetic lets be. It asks nothing of the other, or rather nothing except the privilege of contemplating it aesthetically. Distance obtains and must be maintained for the aesthetic to endure. A degree of detachment, a protective distance from this object-other by which it is guarded from interest and demand, from reductive transformation into an object of legible knowledge (i.e. an object-same generalizable to a determinate concept and interchangeable with other objects within transactions of objective reality), is both a condition of possibility for the aesthetic and its effect upon us.

Kant emphasizes disinterestedness in a careful delineation of the beautiful, the agreeable, and the good to draw out the distinctive freedom of the aesthetic encounter, and it is easy to move quickly over his definitions and examples without taking in the full implications of disinterestedness. Disinterestedness is not only a condition of the aesthetic encounter but is itself bound up with it. It is one of its most profound and enabling effects. We leave behind, or cede, interest in the moment of the aesthetic encounter. We withdraw from this interest not by some act of will, asceticism, or generosity, but rather because we are uprooted from the stable position from which we might exercise interest. The interest that is suspended in the aesthetic encounter is fundamentally self-interest, and it is suspended not because interest – as an investment in existence – ceases to be, but rather because the self and its reality to which interest would be tethered fade from view. After all, we retain a kind of interest in the persistence and preservation of beauty; we want beautiful things to remain as they are, to be cared for. It pains us to see beauty destroyed, even that to which we have no direct relation or likely future contact. But this is an impersonal interest, detached from preoccupations with one's own existence and self-interest.

Aesthetic disinterestedness frees us from ourselves, from our given objective reality that closes in around us and determines us. It frees us from freedom – that is, from the insistence on being the autonomous Subject tied to Kant’s peculiarly constraining concept of freedom through a universal reason that demands we conform to its rules, that we behave and render ourselves in accordance with the moral law said to be inscribed within us. The aesthetic encounter transports us beyond any such lawfulness and challenges its processes of subjectification. As Karsten Harries puts it, we leave behind the everyday claims that objects and objective reality exert over us. We are pushed back from things and leave behind our usual engagements in the world, not to the demotion of the world, however, but towards what we could call a “transfiguration of the commonplace” (Harries 2016, p. 59; Danto 1983).

The world, or now rather plural worlds, open to us and become fuller, more inviting, and limitless. *We are thus interested in the disinterestedness of the aesthetic insofar as we wish to shake ourselves loose of the interests bearing down on the way we live, directing our attention and activity.* Each of us, in our own way and differentially so, finds ourselves burdened by interests, by the normative reality that is written within us, upon us, and around us, circumscribing subjectivity and social formations.

Aesthetic disinterestedness, then, is not the privileged domain of the bourgeois aesthete; it may instead open even more widely in proportion to the burden of material constraints, variously oppressive realities, and ongoing histories of violence by which one is motivated to seek an outside. Aesthetic investments are in this way subject to inflection – to deepening and intensification – by one’s particular historical and political conditions that bear upon psychic life and one’s sense of oneself, of one’s reality. It may be that the more constraining one’s objective reality in the world, the more receptive and desirous one becomes toward the suspension of this reality and one’s self by the aesthetic encounter that beckons us to feel more and, in turn, to be and to make more than what is and what we are said to be.

Unselfing and Paraesthesia

One can hear an echo of these latent implications of Kant's concept of disinterestedness in Elaine Scarry's emphasis on the *radical decentering* of the Subject that is effected by the aesthetic encounter (Scarry 1999, p. 109ff). The overwhelming of experience by an encounter with beauty pushes us, in the words of Simone Weil, "to give up our imaginary position at the center... A transformation then takes place at the very roots of our sensibility, in our immediate reception of sense impressions and psychological impressions" (as quoted in Scarry 1999, p. 111). Scarry draws from Weil, whose words are interspersed throughout Scarry's observation that beautiful things act like "small tears in the surface of the world that pull us through to some vaster space; the aesthetic encounter holds out ladders reaching toward the beauty of the world, openings onto it; they lift us (as though by the air currents of someone else's sweeping), letting the ground rotate beneath us several inches, so that when we land, we find we are standing in a different relation to the world than we were a moment before. It is not that we cease to stand at the center of the world, for we never stood there. It is that we cease to stand even at the center of our own world. We willingly cede our ground to the thing, to the presentation of an otherness beyond our comprehension, that stands before us" (ibid., p. 112).

Extending this transportive, self-dislocating effect of aesthetic acts of apprehending and creating that push us beyond ourselves and bring us to a feeling of life, of aliveness, Scarry points to Irish Murdoch's notion of *unselfing* in the face of the beautiful. This unselfing is not a solipsistic aestheticism but instead implicates and opens us as aesthetic beings to another form of being with others. Beauty is the most powerful provocation for unselfing in our surroundings. In this encounter, one does not forget oneself but, instead, "some more capacious mental act is possible: all the space formerly in the service of protecting, guarding, advancing the self (or its prestige) is now free to be in the service of something else" (ibid., p. 113). This process of dislocating the self from the center puts us outside ourselves and into an indeterminate relation to the object – one that dis-

turbs any simple binaristic subject-object relation. Relations between subject and object, self and other, are reconfigured in the aesthetic encounter such that one becomes a *lateral figure* who assumes a position of adjacency in relation to both one's self and the other, rather than one of center-periphery or hero of one's own story (ibid., pp. 112-113).¹⁰ For Scarry, this repositioning of the aesthetic subject beyond or beside the self opens a tie between beauty and justice.

It is through this unselfing and resulting adjacency that what I would like to think as *paraesthesia* – a mode of feeling alongside, around, and with an other – becomes integral to the aesthetic encounter and imbues it with an ethical significance and political potentiality. This peculiar sociality, one that is grounded not in positive content but in a resonance at the level of an incomprehensible and unrepresentable state of feeling, is at the core of the aesthetic as such. Kant makes this social dimension a necessary element of the aesthetic and places it at the core of the third critique, with his emphasis on the universal communicability of one's singular aesthetic judgment and the notion of the *sensus communis* that this communicability subtends.

As Kant explains, although we cannot explain the basis for a particular aesthetic judgment, we nonetheless feel absolutely certain of its universal validity. When we ask, "Isn't this beautiful?", we fully expect and even demand agreement from whomever we address with this declaration that only pretends to be a question. To feel beauty in relation to an object is not simply a matter of opinion but is an absolute conviction – one not only

¹⁰ Scarry proposes a third term, *opiated adjacency*, to describe this aesthetic repositioning of the subject. Opiated adjacency is meant to sit between Weil's radical decentering and Murdoch's unselfing, and to invoke the peculiar operation of the aesthetic that at once both sidelines us and makes us feel acute pleasure. Although many things may make us feel pleasure and many others make us marginal or adjacent to our own experience, Scarry suggests that the encounter with beauty is perhaps the only the only event in our lives that makes us feel pleasure and marginality simultaneously and synergistically. For Scarry, this delight in our lateralness lends itself to an ethical symmetry of everyone's relation to one another – a definition of justice she draws from John Rawls (p. 93). See p. 114ff and Scarry's essay "Poetry Changed the World: Injury and the Ethics of Reading" (2012) for an elaboration of her notion of opiated adjacency.

of the truth of our judgment for ourselves but also of universal truth: you also find this beautiful. This sense of universal validity is essential to aesthetic judgment, which requires an other, even if only imagined, who is addressed and with whom one shares the aesthetic encounter.

Of course, experience informs us that this is not in fact the case; our aesthetic judgments in relation to particular objects are not actually universally shared. Each judges for themselves – as aesthetic judgement is necessarily a wholly subjective judgment – and we constantly find that judgments of beauty, for example, are widely variable. Despite this apparent discord between experience and our feeling, however, we do not cede on our felt insistence, repeated upon each aesthetic encounter, that our aesthetic judgment must be shared by others. This tension finds resolution when we recognize that the agreement that we expect and insist upon from others is not an objective agreement with a particular judgment – that this thing is beautiful – but rather a subjective agreement with the state of mind that the aesthetic encounter provokes.

Recall that the aesthetic judgment is not that a thing is beautiful – a floating signifier without determinate content – but rather inheres in the free play of the imagination and understanding to which a particular contingent encounter sends us. It is a state of mind: the feeling of life, of one's animation, and of one's excess to objective reality and one's self. It is this capacity for a capacious feeling beyond representation and communicative rationality that one feels must be universally valid and with which one expects the other to agree. The demand for universal agreement in the judgment of beauty is a kind of aesthetic interpellation – a peculiar call to the other to meet one not at the level of a known subject position or determinate relation but rather in a shared feeling of excess to any fixed position in the world. In this agreement that is, as Lyotard puts it, a kind of “communication without communication,” what each affirms is the aliveness of the other (Lyotard 1991).

This aesthetic communicability – a sense of being able to share that which one cannot express; a communicability of the incommunicable – is the basis for what Kant calls the *sensus communis*. This a community of shared feeling that is both necessary for the aesthetic encounter to occur

and also predicated upon it. The pleasure we feel in the moment of aesthetic seizure is in part the feeling of falling into a supersensible connection with innumerable yet singular others that allows us to feel and share that which is most intimate to our own being.

This community of feeling is distinctive in its constitutive resistance to definition and content. It is made possible by a disinterestedness that enables the self to recede, to be decentered such that one is repositioned as adjacent both to oneself and the other. This is not, however, a renunciation of the self that compels a sacrifice of self-interest and subsumption of one's particularity in submission to a general interest, as in classical liberal concepts of community and nation. Instead, the self recedes in the aesthetic encounter and one falls into a concomitant submersion in the *sensus communis* in such a way that unencumbers and expands the feeling of each one's irreducible particularity – what Kant calls the expansion of one's soul – as it is untethered from the strictures of subjectivity and experience.¹¹ The singularity that one brings to the *sensus communis* is thus universal but not general; it remains particular to each one, incommensurable with all others, infinite, and unprecedented. Its only precedent is the unprecedentedness of the singularity of the other, which upholds and reinforces the unprecedentedness of each one.

Each feels their singularity as an excess to the specific representations and corresponding realities by which they are rendered as determinate in the world. We are all tied to particular enunciative positions that overdetermine the representations we may give of ourselves. The suspension of these determining forces in the felt inadequacy of our representational faculty in general that arises out of the aesthetic encounter thus takes on

¹¹ What I am calling the sense of one's singularity or particularity that is unbound and expanded in the aesthetic encounter echoes what Kant refers to as "the soul." For example, when describing the free play of the imagination as it roams without conceptual constraint, Kant writes, "For though the imagination finds nothing beyond the sensible that could support it, this very removal of its barriers also makes it feel unbounded, so that its separation [from the sensible] is an exhibition of the infinite; and though an exhibition of the infinite can as such never be more than merely negative, it still *expands the soul*" (Kant 1987, p. 135). See also pp. 181-182 for Kant's parallel claim that aesthetic sense animates the soul.

historically contingent, particular characteristics for each one. Differentially bound in the world, we can each only be untied in our own singular way and only in relation with an other with whom we can share the beyond of our symbolic determination.

Distributional Pressure and the Incitement toward the Other

Contrary to critiques of aestheticism in which it is imagined that the perceiving subject withdraws into solitude and turns away from engagement with the world, the aesthetic encounter requires community and incites our desire for it. In Kant's view, the beautiful only happens upon us when we are in society. If isolated on a desert island, he writes, we cede all interest in the beautiful; we do not think to adorn ourselves, plant flowers, or appreciate a beautiful form. Cut off from others, we are confined to the practical; an otherwise beautiful palace, Kant suggests, brings us no more satisfaction than a simple hut that shields us from the elements. Pleasure in a beautiful object is unavailable to us if we cannot feel it in community with others (Kant 2000, pp. 176-177). The aesthetic requires others.

With respect to our feeling in the aesthetic, "each expects and requires of everyone else a regard to universal communication, as if from an original contract dictated by humanity itself" (Kant 2000, p. 177). Only through relations with others can the world around us take on aesthetic character and an inner sense arise within us that acquires *almost infinite value* through its universal communicability. Kant argues that this universal communicability is at the core of aesthetic judgment:

One could even define taste as the faculty for judging that which makes our feeling in a given representation universally communicable without the mediation of a concept... Only where the imagination in its freedom arouses the understanding, and the latter, without concepts, sets the imagination into a regular play is the representation communicated, not as a thought, but as the inner feeling of a purposive state of mind.

Taste is thus the faculty for judging *a priori* the communicability of the feelings that are combined with a given representation (without the mediation of a concept). (ibid., pp. 175-176)

Kant goes on to link this universal communicability of aesthetic being to human sociability – an intrinsic need to be in relation with others. The aesthetic both makes us feel this need and enables its satisfaction; it supports our capacity to make connections with others, not at the level of determinate content but rather in the open-ended register of feeling. The aesthetic thus compels us towards others and also requires others as *other* – as beings beyond determination, open to resonance in their difference to comprehensibility. It is in this way that Kant defines aesthetic judgment as a faculty of judging by means of which one can communicate their feeling to everyone else; it is a register of being that promotes, even gives rise to, the intrinsic sociability of human being as activity. The aesthetic does not just require society in order to happen; it operates as an inaugurating force behind the constitution of social relations themselves.

It is from this vantage that Hannah Arendt sees in Kant's notion of communicability and the *sensus communis* an elementary, if latent, ground for a political philosophy, investing aesthetic community with a fundamental significance for thinking the political (Arendt 1982). Arendt observes that the relation into which the aesthetic puts us with others is not that which political philosophers have stressed as a necessary human interdependence for the fulfillment of our material needs, wants, and security; it is instead much more basic to our being. The sociability made possible by the *sensus communis* is necessary for the very possibility of our mental faculty of judgment, which is bound up with our capacity for feelings and emotions – that is, Arendt writes, “our whole soul apparatus” (ibid., p. 74).

Furthermore, this sense of universal communicability in our aesthetic impressions, as if inaugurated by a founding contract of intersubjectivity itself, does not regulate only our reflections but also inflects and drives action. It inspires us to act in the world as if a communion of feeling, a kind of subjective agreement or resonance, with all others is not only possible

but is *in a sense* already extant and simply awaiting activation. The aesthetic encounter thus inclines the subject towards the other – both toward the inner otherness or unrepresentability of oneself and simultaneously toward the other to whom one appeals for an affirmation and redoubling of this deterritorializing feeling of oneself whereby inner-outer and subject-object distinctions lose stability. Furthermore, it inclines us toward the other in a generative, reproductive activity that seeks to prolong and extend the aesthetic supersession of object-oriented circumscriptions of reality.

Arendt's unfinished reflections, cut off by her death, on the political implications of Kant's critique of aesthetic judgment gesture toward the confluence of what Elaine Scarry regards as two distinct constitutive dimensions of aesthetic being: a *generative drive* toward reproduction and a *distributional pressure* intrinsic to the aesthetic movement of one beyond oneself.¹² As in Kant's elaboration of how the beautiful sends the imagination and understanding into free play, whereby the drive to representation is imbued with an excessive energetic charge, Scarry reflects upon how the encounter with beauty activates a drive to make more and more – a compulsive pursuit of an immediate, terrestrial (rather than a deferred, heavenly idea of) plenitude (Scarry 1999, pp. 5, 33, 47). The aesthetic incites, even requires, the act of reproduction or replication of the feeling it imparts. We wish to hold the beautiful in view and in mind for as long as possible, to promote its endurance as we follow its movement along the horizon with our eyes. We are moved to draw it, write it, speak it, share it – anything to remain before it and the sense of aliveness we find in it. In this way, the aesthetic brings us face to face with our own powers to create (ibid., p. 115). Pleasure in the aesthetic encounter compels acts of reproduction; it provokes a basic desire to feel and to make more and more

¹² The final section of Arendt's *Life of the Mind* was to have been on "Judgment," of which only the first page, consisting of two epigraphs, was left in her typewriter at the time of her death in 1975. We must therefore make do with her lectures on Kant's political philosophy (1982), last delivered at the New School in 1970, to speculate on how she may have further extended Kant's third critique to think the stakes of judgment and the *sensus communis* for political form and action.

that would sustain our feeling of limitlessness. It pushes one toward an *unceasing begetting* of yet further occasions of aesthetic suspension of understanding and expansion of one's *soul* – that name by which both Kant and Arendt invoke the animating force of being – in the world around us (*ibid.*, pp. 4-5).

This provocation toward aesthetic plenitude has a “forward momentum,” mobilizing a “desire to bring new things into the world,” perhaps most of all in the form of new human connections (*ibid.*, p. 46). When the mind is overcome by an aesthetic event, it incites deliberation – a search for an adequate representation that becomes, in its impossibility, “a search for something beyond itself, something else with which it needs to be brought into relation” (*ibid.*, pp. 28-29). As no operation of the understanding can yield a determinate thought adequate to the limitlessness of one's feeling, the only possible site of a resonance of our feeling available to us is the complementary limitlessness that we sense in another speaking being's capacity for feeling.

For Kant, the certainty with which we sense and expect this aesthetic capacity from all other human beings – a capacity with which he defines the human as such – is constitutive of and necessary for our own apprehension of the beautiful. We feel certain, without rational mediation of this conviction, of our capacity to share with the other that which is innermost to ourselves. This immediate certainty of aesthetic communicability enables us to seek to sustain and extend the aesthetic intensification of life by turning to another for an agreement: an agreement of feeling or an attunement at the level of mood or spirit. In this way, the aesthetic encounter, in its excitation of a drive to make more and more, pushes for its own distribution; it reproduces and regenerates itself by mobilizing a distributive and interpellative movement through others. It stirs a pressure within us to exceed ourselves as isolated experiencing subjects and to extend ourselves into resonant connections with others that supersede subject positions, bodily-material interests, and the constraints of communicative rationality.

There is here in aesthetic communicability and its open-ended sociality a conjunction with Lacan's reformulation of the Hegelian dialectic of

recognition in which the subject's desire is for the desire of the Other – *le desire c'est pour le desire de l'Autre* (Lacan 2007). There is a double meaning in this articulation, which expresses both a desire to be desired by the other and also a desire whose object is the very desire that one senses in the other. Desire, if we think it in its psychoanalytic valence with Lacan, who in turn draws on Kojève and Heidegger, is inaugurated by our being in language and the impossibility of ever saying that which we mean to say. There is an unbridgeable chasm between the signifier and the signified; it is in this gap of inexpressibility – what Heidegger calls the rift-structure of language (Heidegger 2002; 2008) – that each one's desire is inaugurated and propelled. In the infinite, indeterminate movement of desire constitutive of the speaking being who resists any closure or final determination, the only possibility for its recognition is in the limitless indeterminacy of the desire of the other.

It is this communicability of the incommunicable – the felt mutual recognition of unbound imagination, caught within the rift in language, and the feeling of being beyond any possible representation – that subtends the *sensus communis* and imbues us as aesthetic beings with the desire and need to make ties with others. The aesthetic encounter, as that which puts in motion the ceaseless search for representation adequate to our overwhelming feeling, thus incites a desire for life: for thinking, making, and being with others by which the aliveness of our being might be felt and sustained.

If Kant's first critique is, crudely put, about how and what we can think, and the second critique about how we should live and what we should do, then the third critique might be said to concern the question of why: Why do we think and why do we act? What propels us to do either? In this way, the aesthetic subtends both pure and practical reason, and it is the well-spring of both ethics and politics.

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