

Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics

Volume 17, 2025

Edited by Christopher Earley and Julia Langkau



Published by



Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics

Founded in 2009 by Fabian Dorsch

Internet: <http://proceedings.eurosa.org>

Email: proceedings@eurosa.org

ISSN: 1664–5278

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The European Society for Aesthetics



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The Goddess of Chance: Randomness from Ancient “Automaton” to AI-Art

Emanuele Arielli¹

ABSTRACT. This paper examines how randomness contributes to the perception of creativity and autonomy in both natural and artificial systems, particularly in art practices. From ancient accounts of accidental inspiration to modern aleatory practices, the use of chance has long served to unsettle habitual patterns and generate new aesthetic possibilities. Historical automata already demonstrated how mechanical structures could transform irregular events into coherent forms, producing effects that appear spontaneous despite their construction. The paper extends this genealogy to contemporary generative-AI systems. Modern machine-learning models rely on stochastic components that render their behavior partly unpredictable. Uncertainty in data and learning dynamics contributes to outputs that surprise users while maintaining coherence. This structured unpredictability is central to why such systems are often perceived as creative or quasi-autonomous. The paper then discusses the tension between automation and autonomy: both notions describe processes that "happen of themselves" (as in Aristotle's idea of automaton), yet they appear to be opposed. From this discussion, a typology of different uses of chance and random phenomena is proposed, distinguishing different levels at which stochasticity can be harnessed by (artificial and natural) systems. Ultimately, the paper argues that attributions of creativity and agency depend on a balance between indeterminacy and structure.

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1. Introduction

Throughout history, randomness and chance have played a significant role in inspiring artistic creativity.² Pliny the Elder recounted how the Greek artist Protogenes found inspiration in the accidental mark of a sponge (1991). Later, Leonardo da Vinci, in his 1651 *Treatise on Painting*, encouraged artists to draw ideas from “stained walls” (Ugander & Epstein 2024). The value of randomness lies in its ability to disrupt habitual patterns, enabling us to explore possibilities beyond our usual behavioral and cognitive frameworks. Also during the creation process, chance events could contribute in giving a strong effect of energy and authenticity, as in Jackson Pollock’s drippings. Pollock engineered what we could call a *controlled loss of control* by letting gravity, fluid viscosity, and bodily momentum shape the lines, while regulating height, movement, and timing. The paint behaved partly on its own, at the same time he continually adjusted density and direction, turning those random events into a deliberate structure.

In the twentieth century, avant-garde movements such as Dada and Neo-Dada had also embraced chance as a deliberate method of creation. Artists like Tristan Tzara created poetry by drawing words from a hat, while Marcel Duchamp incorporated chance into his works, such as in *3 Standard Stoppages* (1913-14), where he allowed threads to fall and form unpredictable patterns. Later, Neo-Dada artists such as John Cage and Robert Rauschenberg similarly relied on aleatory techniques, like Cage's use of the *I Ching* to compose music and Rauschenberg's incorporation of found objects and random processes into his artworks.

These approaches reflect an intentional rebellion against traditional notions of authorial control and intentionality in art, expanding the boundaries of artistic expression, although the works produced were still the result of choices and procedures that they themselves had decided on and directed. The use of randomness in art can be interpreted as an attempt to allow “nature” to express itself, bypassing intentionality and relinquishing control of the individual artist. Chance enables the creation of works that look less artificial (that is, less like products of *human artifice*) by mimicking the spontaneous phenomena of physical nature (Mann 1990; Jaeger 2013). As Cage said: “My *intention* is to let things be themselves” (Cage & Tudor 1959). This idea partly

² Randomness and chance are often used interchangeably in the literature, particularly in discussions of artistic practices. Randomness, however, refers to the inherent unpredictability of outcomes, whereas chance refers to the probability or likelihood that a particular outcome will occur. For reasons of concision, we cannot explore this distinction in depth in this paper.

echoes the Kantian view that the true artist should become “like nature”, and more generally the Romantic notion of creativity as spontaneous and free. It also recalls ancient conceptions of the artist as a vessel or conduit for external (divine or transcendent) inspiration: the less individual control over the process, the more inspired the resulting work appears.

Against the backdrop of these traditions, this paper concentrates on the following point: chance and randomness are also ways of triggering processes that “run on their own,” without direct human guidance, and they contribute to our impression of phenomena that we perceive as autonomous. In aesthetic production, autonomy is tied to the capacity to generate something new and to be *creative*. An autonomous entity is one whose behavior cannot be deterministically predicted; the possibility of exhibiting indeterminate behavior, at least from an observer’s perspective, is a necessary condition for that observer to regard it as somewhat autonomous. The issue, of course, is whether indeterminacy is a necessary (albeit not sufficient) condition for just the *impression* of quasi-autonomous behavior or whether it is more deeply connected to the idea of autonomy itself. In this sense, we could see a line of continuity linking avant-garde experiments, later developments in computer art, and today’s AI-generated art: the unpredictable element becomes a crucial ingredient in producing outcomes that appear creative and seem to extend beyond the explicit, hard-coded instructions provided by the programmer.

What interests me here is the phenomenology behind why one is tempted to react to these systems as if they were creative. Why do we attribute creative qualities to something we know operates through computational processes? Margaret Boden’s (2004) account of creativity offers a useful framework. She notoriously argues that we tend to call something creative when three conditions are met: something is new, surprising, and meaningful. Through this lens, it becomes clearer why generative AI systems sometimes appear creative. They produce novel outputs that often surprise us, especially given the opacity of their internal workings, and people frequently find these outputs meaningful. The use of chance and stochasticity, again, plays a substantial role, as will be argued.

2. Randomness and generative-AI

We are naturally inclined to attribute creativity (or even a degree of autonomy) to outcomes that resist strict prediction. By contrast, systems whose behavior is entirely predictable rarely appear to us as either autonomous or creative. However, unpredictability alone is not sufficient. Pure randomness or meaningless disorder does not evoke creativity or autonomy; it simply appears chaotic. What engages our imagination is unpredictability that nonetheless exhibits some level of coherence, structure, or significance. It is this combination (surprise coupled with intelligibility) that leads us to perceive an action or outcome as potentially creative or autonomous.

A simple example is the kaleidoscope: we are captivated by its shifting patterns produced by a combination of the random movement of colored fragments inside the tube. What fascinates us is not mere disorder but the way chance arrangements are transformed into symmetrical and coherent images by the mirrors inside the kaleidoscope. Although we do not ascribe creativity to it, part of the kaleidoscope's appeal lies in its ability to surprise us with unpredictable and visually meaningful outcomes. The geometric configurations it generates illustrate a blend of randomness and structure, a kind of *structured* randomness that produces unique patterns with every turn. Also, in the aforementioned works of the avant-garde artists working with aleatory processes, we can notice that they rarely relied on randomness alone. Instead, they work *with* randomness, guiding, filtering, and framing it to produce something that appears partially coherent. In their work as well, we have a dynamic relationship between indeterminacy and structure.

A more complex example of artifacts that harness randomness and give it structured meaning can be found in historical machines (*automata*) designed to produce aesthetic effects. For example, the Aeolian harp, already known in ancient Greece, was activated by the unpredictable movement of the wind, generating harmonies without human intervention, transforming a natural, chaotic force into structured sound. In antiquity, Hero of Alexandria's singing birds, powered by air pressure and water flow, also offered early examples of machines simulating organic expression through a mix of controlled mechanisms and stochastic variability. In contemporary times, Jean Tinguely's *Métamatics* (1955-1959) were kinetic

drawing sculptures that, while mechanically programmed, incorporated elements of indeterminacy in their movements, producing unpredictable scribbles.

In these examples, randomness is not opposed to structure but *embedded* within it, allowing the machine not just to repeat a programmed script, but to turn meaningless chance into structures the observers take as meaningful. Despite this capacity, they clearly remain tools, machines that harness chance and direct it along specific paths: calling them “creative” would be just a metaphorical use of the term. The creative figure, if any, is the designer or the artist who conceived them.

Debates of this kind now concern generative AI. These systems not only seem able to go beyond the intentions and skills of their users but can also produce outputs with a considerable degree of unpredictability (see Manovich, Arielli 2024). This unpredictability contributes to the impression that such systems are not simply tools but entities that, to some extent, detach themselves from the user. If AI systems were perfectly controllable and customizable, as probably professional users might prefer when using AI tools, they might lose their appeal as quasi-autonomous and creative entities. On the other hand, if they were just generating random and meaningless jumble, they would not be considered particularly interesting as well. Again, we like to call those systems “intelligent” when they behave in the middle ground of unexpected but also meaningful outputs (see Hauhio 2023, for a typology of unpredictability in Generative AI).

This leads to a conceptual tension: being *automatic*, mechanical, rule-based, programmed, and being *autonomous* appears, in principle, to be at odds. An automaton follows fixed rules; an autonomous agent can decide, adapt, or act freely. Under which circumstance *automata* could be considered (at least partially) *autonomous*? Artist Mario Klingemann’s work offers a good example of this tension. He often describes AI as nothing more than an instrument, just “like a piano” for the piano player or for the composer. From this perspective, the artist is fully in control, and the system is simply an expressive but passive tool. At the same time, Klingemann also stands behind the project BOTTO, described as a “decentralized autonomous artist”. Launched in 2021, BOTTO produced about 350 new pieces weekly, which were then voted on by a community of 5,000 people. In return, these votes determined an aesthetic ranking that influenced BOTTO’s successive creations. In this process, Klingemann sees the human’s role as just a guardian, guiding BOTTO (by giving it evaluations) but allowing it to freely (that is,

randomly) generate new images, constrained by the evaluations. According to the artist, this approach resembles the act of releasing a child into the world, much like parents do, educating them and trusting it will continue as its creator/educator intended (Nair 2022).

Now, unlike earlier automata or programs with predetermined workflows, randomness is an inherent and essential feature of machine learning and the training of neural networks. This unpredictability arises from the use of stochastic procedures in both the learning and the generative phases like, for example, sampling from probability distributions, so-called noise injection, weight initialization, data shuffling, and training strategies such as *dropout*, that is, randomly masking the output of a number of neurons to improve generalization (for an overview, see Altarabichi et al. 2024). Here, randomization allows the system to learn from data by avoiding biases, “local minima”, to tackle information from different perspectives (like a scientist using different randomized samples from a population) and preventing it from being repetitive and predictable in its outputs.

On a general level, generative systems can be described as high-dimensional probability distributions: they model patterns in their training data, and each output is a particular sample drawn from that statistical field. A language model, for example, chooses its next token by weighing several plausible text continuations and selecting one according to a sampling rule. The stochastic element is directly visible to users when they use the same prompt repeatedly and obtain different outcomes, each reflecting a distinct point within the model’s latent space.³

One relevant example in this context are systems based on diffusion models, like MidJourney. During training, the model is exposed to large sets of image-text pairs. Each image is progressively corrupted by adding Gaussian noise over many steps, until it becomes indistinguishable from pure noise. The model’s task is then to learn to *reverse* this corruption: at each step, it predicts how to remove a small portion of noise, recovering an estimate of the cleaner image. By repeating this over thousands or millions of examples, the model acquires a statistical mapping between textual descriptions and visual structures, encoded in the parameters of the neural network. Conversely, at generation time the model starts from random

³ In most machine-learning systems, the “randomness” involved is not physical randomness but a mathematically generated approximation. Computers rarely rely on genuinely unpredictable events, such as a coin toss or radioactive decay. Instead, they use pseudo-random algorithms: procedures that produce sequences which look irregular but can be reproduced exactly if one knows the initial seed.

noise and a text prompt conditions the *denoising* steps: at each iteration the network predicts which features should be kept, modified, or introduced to steer the noisy input toward an image compatible with the prompt. Through this iterative refinement (typically a few dozen to a few hundred steps) the model moves from high-entropy noise to a stable configuration that gives the visual interpretation of the text.

Many artistic practices involving machine learning actively take advantage of the fact that these systems do not behave in a fully deterministic way. There is epistemic uncertainty inherent in any probabilistic model: every prediction rests on incomplete knowledge of the underlying data-generating process (Sivertsen et al. 2024). Artists who work with AI systems treat these uncertainties not as defects to be eliminated but as material to be shaped. In line with earlier strands of digital experimentation, such as *glitch* practices, which exploited computational failures, they draw attention to the irregularities and breakdowns that occur inside the learning process. Some intentionally halt training before a model stabilizes, producing under-fitted systems whose outputs waver between recognizability and indeterminacy. What developers would normally classify as errors or artifacts becomes, in this setting, a resource. Ambiguity, drift, and malfunction are deliberately used and transformed into aesthetic procedures, allowing technical imperfections to function as generators of form.

3. External and internal randomness: “neural noise” and creativity

Now, it would be naïve to think that the use of stochastic processes is merely a technical feature of machine learning in an otherwise deterministic world. By employing such processes, AI systems operate in ways that resemble many real-world phenomena, including the brain. This also leads to a distinction between *external* sources of chance and randomness, which arise from the contingencies of an environment and the circumstances in which an organism, a person, or an artificial system may find itself, and *internal* forms of noise and indeterminacy that characterize the functioning of natural organisms at their biological and neural levels. Quantum mechanics, evolutionary biology, and neuroscience provide extensive evidence for stochastic behavior that cannot be reduced to a hidden layer of deterministic structure. Uncertainty is not a measurement defect, nor simply the outcome of insufficient modeling. It is a functional component of many physical and biological systems: quantum events exhibit

indeterminacy even under ideal measurement conditions; mutations arise with probabilistic distribution; and neural activity displays endogenous fluctuations that contribute to flexibility and adaptive behavior. Whether randomness is ultimately ontological or epistemic remains open, but treating it as mere observational error obscures its established role in shaping natural phenomena and cognitive processes.

Ilya Prigogine (Prigogine & Stengers 1984) offered one of the clearest scientific accounts of how irregularity can support organized complexity. He pointed out that some biological systems require stability, for example the heart's rhythm, while others, such as the brain, depend on intrinsic variability. Too much regularity in neural activity can even produce pathological states like epilepsy. For Prigogine, this shows that irregularity is not simply disorder but a necessary condition for the emergence of complex structures and adaptive behavior. How a system is shaped, constrained, or situated influences the kinds of instabilities that can develop, and therefore the forms of order that may emerge from them. In this sense, instability becomes a resource rather than a flaw. Based on studies of brain activity, Prigogine proposed that the nervous system itself has been evolutionarily selected for this intrinsic instability. Biological evolution, in his view, can be understood as the history of systems that remain poised away from equilibrium and capable of generating new forms of organization.

Today, internally generated neural variability, often termed "neural noise," is increasingly recognized as more than mere disturbance: it underlies intrinsic flexibility and spontaneity in neural systems. Such variability arises from stochastic processes (random synaptic input, network fluctuations), so that even with constant external inputs the brain's activity remains partly unpredictable. Noise permeates every stage of sensory processing, decision-making and motor output (Stein et al. 2005; Faisal et al. 2008). Although this imposes fundamental limits (for example on precision in sensory thresholds or movement), noise can also be functionally harnessed by neural circuits, for instance in so-called "stochastic resonance", a phenomenon where the addition of noise can enhance the response of a nonlinear system to a weak signal. McDonnell and Abbott (2009) argue that it would be more surprising if the brain did not exploit such randomness than if it did. In that sense *endogenous* noise can act as an additional signal source.

More importantly, the constructive role of noise and chaos in the brain provides a critical foundation for both creative behavior and agency, fundamentally linking unpredictability to

adaptive complexity. In perceptual and cognitive tasks, identical stimuli yield variable responses, implying a role for randomness in decision-making (Pisarkchik & Hramov 2023). This noise-related variability serves to enhance exploration: the brain deviates from fixed rules to probe new options. Youvan (2024) remarks that noise helps “cognitive processes explore multiple strategies”, which allows the system to escape solutions that are locally optimal but suboptimal in general. Computational models show that variability in neuromodulators (e.g. dopamine) causes an agent to occasionally deviate from its policy and try new actions. In behavioral experiments, on unpredictable reward schedules, rodents’ choices appear statistically random as if they were using an internal random generator to match environmental uncertainty. Gómez et al. (2024) suggest that the inevitable neural randomness in internal processing integrated into organisms, “facilitates flexibility in behaviour,” thus extending the system's exploratory repertoire. These internal fluctuations prevent stagnation of behavior, periodically pushing it into novel regions of state space. A living organism does not inspect its surroundings through exhaustive, systematic measurement. It *roams*, moves, pauses, turns, hesitates, follows stimuli, gets distracted. By contrast, a traditional machine does not roam or wander; it scans systematically and exhaustively.⁴

Of course, noise must be calibrated on a balanced level: too much randomness degrades performance, while too little limits adaptability.

When actions depend partly on brain-internal noise, the organism’s behavior cannot be fully predicted from external cues: outcomes appear initiated “from within.” Spontaneous neural variability is implicated in creative cognition: by perturbing habitual patterns, noise provides the raw randomness needed for insight and novelty. Neural noise’s unpredictability can also be factored into accounts of volition and allows avoiding a purely deterministic model of the mind (Štukelj 2020). In engineered systems, the parallel is clear, as we stated before: modern neural networks are deliberately trained with stochastic methods that are used because they improve generalization and learning. This built-in stochasticity is essential for the novelty of generated content. Across brains and machines, therefore, intrinsic randomness generates the unpredictability that is phenomenologically linked to freedom and creativity.

⁴ This line of thinking highlighting the importance of open, responsive systems that reorganize themselves through interaction, connects with enactive approaches in cognitive science, which hold that cognition arises from the ongoing exchange between organism and environment. For enactivists, perception and action depend on the ability to remain responsive to subtle variations in the organism’s surroundings.

4. Autonomous automata

The relation between “automata” and “autonomy” carries a certain tension, as said. Automata are built to follow procedures; autonomy is associated with self-direction. In contemporary generative systems these categories start to blur, the contrast between mechanical rule-following and the impression of independent agency becomes less stable.

In this regard, it is interesting to focus on the conceptual origin of these apparently opposite terms. Autonomy, derived from "autos" (self) and "nomos" (law), implies self-government and self-directed action; automaton derives from "autos" (self) and "maton" (acting), often used to describe entities that move on their own or events that seem to happen without purpose or intention. The ancient Greek noun *automatismos* is defined as “that which happens of itself, by chance”, the verb *automatizo* means to “act of oneself, act offhand or unadvisedly”, “[to] act spontaneously”, “[to] happen of themselves, casually”. Similarly, *Automatia* was an early name for Fortuna, the goddess of chance.⁵ Aristotle, in the second book of his *Physics*, introduces the term *automaton* to describe a set of phenomena that includes *tyche* (fortune). He portrays these phenomena as forces that disrupt the teleological order, essentially embodying random or chance events in nature⁶. These are not random in the modern sense of complete disorder, but events that are unusual or coincidental, that is, that present some kind of accidental order or significance. They arise spontaneously, by coincidence, without design or rational intention. This notion connotes non-intentional events that *resemble* goal-directed actions or bring about unexpected outcomes. So, chance events in Aristotle’s account amount to certain unusual *meaningful accidents*.

His notion of *automaton*, referring to events or processes that "happen of themselves" without explicit intention, offers a framework for understanding the perceived autonomy of AI agents today. Although Aristotle suggests that chance events in physics lack discernible causes, hinting at a form of autonomy, these phenomena still emerge from natural processes and fall short of

⁵ See Chiodo 2022.

⁶ “But is it not equally strange that, however freely men admit that every kind of luck [tyché] and everything that ‘happens accidentally’ [automaton] can really be assigned to some definite cause, still, while accepting this venerable argument for the elimination of chance from their thoughts, they nevertheless invariably distinguish, in fact, between things that do, and things that do not, depend upon chance [automaton] or luck [tyché]? (196a12–17)” Aristotle (2018).

genuine autonomy in the fullest sense. True autonomy goes beyond unpredictability and accidental spontaneity, it requires agency and the ability to *initiate* action. While *automaton* in Aristotle’s context primarily describes natural or mechanical occurrences devoid of purpose, it aligns with how we might describe AI systems: as entities that appear to operate independently, producing outputs that often surprise or surpass human expectations. Modern AI systems, especially those based on deep learning, exhibit behavior that can feel "self-driven," not because they possess genuine autonomy or intentionality, but because their underlying mechanisms involve stochasticity, complexity, and emergent patterns.

Aristotle stresses the role of random “meaningful accidents” also in the domain of the tragedy. In his *Poetics* (Book IX), Aristotle emphasizes how unexpected events can become especially meaningful in storytelling, but that coincidences in tragedy are most impactful when they seem to have an underlying design or purpose (an “air of design”), despite their apparent randomness, like, for instance, Oedipus meeting and killing Laius at a crossroads without knowing who he is. The encounter is accidental, but it retrospectively binds the whole plot together, giving chance the force of necessity.⁷

In essence, it’s not the inherent randomness of spontaneous phenomena that surprises us; if it were the case, we’d find every random sequence of coin tosses or dice rolls surprising and creative. Rather, what captivates us is the apparent significance of these occurrences – when chance events seem to possess an *air of design*. The way Aristotle defines the idea of the automaton closely resembles those automata that are not merely mechanically determined, but, like the examples we’ve discussed, seem to generate meaningful outcomes by chance, through a spontaneous coming together of events. In other words, they transform mere randomness into something meaningful by means of what to a user or an external observer may appear as an “happy accident” (Epstein et al. 2022).

⁷ “Such an effect is best produced when the events come on us by surprise [...]. The tragic wonder will then be greater than if they happened of themselves or by accident (“τοῦ αὐτομάτου καὶ τῆς τύχης”, “tou automatou kai tēs tuchēs”, translates also to “by chance and fortune” or “by accident and luck.”); for even coincidences are most striking when they have an air of design.” (Aristotle 2013, *Poetics*, Book IX).

5. The uses of chance: a typology

As we have seen, the way in which randomness or chance is transformed can take different forms. Randomness can serve as a source of inspiration or be incorporated into systems that channel it into coherent structures (as in the kaleidoscope or in ancient automata), or it can stem from the presence of aleatory mechanisms internal to the system itself. To sum up these different cases, we can sketch a tentative typology of how randomness comes into play in a system. By distinguishing these types, we can better grasp how certain chance-based processes, when framed or constrained in specific ways, can give rise to the impression of creativity, spontaneity, or even agency:

1. Purely random events	Completely accidental, without intention or structure.	Examples: Dice rolls, static noise.
2. Random events with projected meaning	Humans impose meaning or take inspiration from accidental patterns.	Leonardo's wall stains, pareidolia, seeing shapes in clouds.
3. Spontaneous structured events (Aristotle's <i>automaton</i>)	Spontaneous events naturally occurring without external intention but having inherent coherence or structure; they happen "by themselves" and seem internally caused.	Formation of crystals, sand dunes shaped by wind, a stone that by pure accident perfectly fits into a wall.
4. Systems intentionally converting randomness into structured outputs	Artifacts designed to channel random inputs into coherent forms.	Kaleidoscope, Aeolian harps, wind chimes, Hero's pneumatic automata.
5. Systems imposing learned patterns	Models trained on meaningful data that reorganize random inputs (e.g., noise, probabilistic sampling) into	GPT models, diffusion-based AI art generators.

onto randomness (modern AI models)	structured, meaningful outputs through learned statistical regularities.	
6. Systems governed by endogenous stochastic mechanisms	Systems whose behavior emerges from randomness generated within the system itself, independent of learned patterns; unpredictability is a consequence of internal probabilistic rules or physical noise rather than external random inputs.	Biological neural noise, stochastic cellular automata, probabilistic state-transition systems, noise-driven physical or computational models.

Type 5 refers to systems in which randomness is introduced from outside (through noise, sampling procedures, or probabilistic inputs) and is subsequently organised by patterns acquired during training. In this sense, AI systems in type 5 essentially automate the human operation described in type 2. They complete or reshape random inputs into outputs that conform to learned distributions by automatizing the process of pattern recognition and projection that, in type 2, was carried out subjectively by the human mind. By contrast, type 6 includes systems in which randomness arises from internal mechanisms: their behavior remains unpredictable because stochastic processes are part of their operation, and this would be the case even in the absence of any learned structure.

Type 6 also includes fully autonomous agents, extending to living organisms. This holds regardless of how much agency we attribute to organisms of different levels of complexity, whether a plant, an insect, or a mammal. In the context of artistic experimentation, just as some artists work with AI tools, others engage with type 6 natural systems by incorporating entities that possess their own natural agency, such as animals or plants. Examples include artworks were growth chambers encouraging specific types of vegetation to bloom, installations cultivating bacteria or fungi, or performances where artists interact with animals. These artists “use” nature, complex, spontaneous mechanisms guided by intrinsic principles rather than

artistic design. In this way, they free natural elements within their work, allowing them to unfold with minimal intervention.⁸

In this sense, AI systems remain tools whose behavior is shaped and interpreted by the people who use them. They are “serendipity machines”, their output may contain unexpected elements, but these arise within a framework set and controlled by human operators, who decide how to work with such contingencies. Treating them as agents in the same way we speak of living organisms would amount to a merely metaphorical usage.⁹ In the context of AI, we are not dealing with entities that we may “let go” into the world, giving them autonomy also in goal setting and to make the machine’s action completely unpredictable. Granting such autonomy would require building systems with objectives, motivational dynamics, impulses, and “needs” whose satisfaction could drive action. Instead, current efforts focus on keeping machine aims *aligned* with human purposes. We may already possess the technical capacity to create semi-autonomous artificial organisms, but there is little interest in pursuing that path. A crucial point here is that projects like Klingemann’s Botto might *simulate* what we might call autonomous creativity. This impression doesn’t stem from genuine autonomy but from how these systems use structured but also indeterminate processes. Botto performs something like a constrained exploration: it moves in a sort of “random walk” through a latent space defined by its training data, continuously adjusting based on human feedback. The results aren’t fully planned but they’re not purely random either, they occupy a middle ground.

In sum: when we encounter indeterminate or unpredictable behavior, we tend to see those systems as somehow creative, or even autonomous. Predictability feels mechanical; unpredictability, when it produces meaningful results, feels more like creativity. This reflection ultimately points to a larger philosophical issue: the connection between *agency* in general (or better: ascribed agency) and the role of unpredictability and randomness. Any expression of agency or creativity presupposes a background of indeterminacy, at least from the perspective of a specific observer. There must be something unpredictable, something open or contingent, for a system to show that it is not merely repeating a fixed pattern, but actively engaging with

8 Some might argue that treating living organisms as “agentic tools” already constrains their autonomy—an ethical issue that, in strong formulations, recalls practices of captivity or even slavery, since their agency is redirected toward artistic purposes rather than their own.

9 For a similar view, see Young and Terrone’s (2025) comparison between the use of generative AI systems and the practice of gardening, where images are “grown” rather than executed through strict control. Their account highlights the mix of guidance, loss of control, and indeterminacy that shapes the outcome.

circumstances, even improvising (Bertinetto&Grüneberg 2023). As an attributional quality ascribed by an observer, agency depends on indeterminacy, which in turn appears as partial openness to chance.

Not every chance event and randomness gives rise to the perception of agency. We usually don't attribute agency to mere accidents or chaotic phenomena. But we also don't see it in systems that behave in fully predictable, mechanical ways. What we do tend to perceive as creative, or even as autonomous, is something that stands in between: behavior that appears to respond flexibly to circumstances, that shapes or gives form to what is unexpected. (Perceived) agency thus resides in the ongoing negotiation between indeterminate events, contingency, and the capacity to steer or harness chance.

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Literature and Storytelling

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ABSTRACT This article argues against evolutionary accounts that reduce literature to a form of adaptive storytelling. While storytelling may serve cognitive and social functions, literature is an aesthetic experience marked by opacity, formal complexity, and non-instrumental value – where “aesthetic” denotes experiential engagement with form, ambiguity, and linguistic texture beyond communicative utility. Drawing on philosophers of literature and literary examples, the paper defends the autonomy of the literary from biological explanation.

Introduction

The enduring human propensity for storytelling has recently been reframed not just as a cultural constant, but as a biological adaptation. Scholars in evolutionary psychology and literary Darwinism, such as Brian Boyd (2009) and Joseph Carroll (2004), argue that narrative is a hardwired cognitive tool, sculpted by natural selection to enhance social cohesion, transmit crucial information, and hone our mental faculties. From this perspective, the campfire myths of our ancestors and the modern novel are points on a single continuum, both ultimately serving the adaptive purpose of survival.

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² This is the original version of the paper presented and discussed at the 2025 ESA Conference in Athens. A substantially expanded and revised version has since been accepted for publication in *Philosophy and Literature* (forthcoming). I am grateful to the audience at the Athens Conference for their insightful comments, which helped me identify issues to clarify, revise, and develop further. I would especially like to thank Marta Benenti, João Lemos, Martino Manca, Elisa Paganini, and Francesco Pierini.

This provocative thesis, however, forces a critical question: does this adaptive framework adequately account for *literature*? By literature, we mean not storytelling in its broadest sense, but the historically evolving artistic practice – rooted in language, shaped by aesthetic conventions, and prized for its formal complexity and opacity. Is there a meaningful continuity between the narrative we use to plan our day and the experience of reading Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* or savoring the phonetic precision of Nabokov’s *Lolita*? More pointedly, if we accept that storytelling is an adaptation, must we then conclude that literature is merely its elaborate byproduct? And if so, what becomes of the aesthetic dimension – the value we find in ambiguity, form, and non-instrumental beauty – that has long been central to our understanding of literary art?

This paper argues that while storytelling may be a biologically grounded capacity, literature constitutes a distinct phenomenon that cannot be reduced to an adaptive function. Proponents of literary Darwinism rightly acknowledge literature’s aesthetic power but seek to subsume it under an evolutionary *telos*, framing it as a mechanism for sharpening cognition or fostering group cohesion. This paper contends that such an approach, while valuable for explaining the ubiquity of narrative, fails to capture the essence of literary art. We will demonstrate that literature – from its oral origins (Ribeiro 2015) to its diverse modern forms (Howell 2002) – is defined by its *opacity* and its commitment to aesthetic value for its own sake, features that actively resist instrumentalization. By examining the claims of literary Darwinism, rigorously distinguishing narrative from literature, and defending the irreducible specificity of literary art, this paper aims to reassert the autonomy of the literary from biological explanation.

1. Storytelling as a Biological Function

Brian Boyd (2009), Joseph Carroll (2004, 2006), Ellen Dissanayake (1988), and Jonathan Gottschall (2012), have argued – among others – that storytelling plays an evolutionary role, having developed as an adaptive capacity in humans. For Carroll, literature is part of a human “behavioral system” that coordinates emotion, thought, and social behavior, ultimately serving an adaptive function (Carroll 2004: 116). Similarly, Boyd argues that art, including literature, originates in play – a widespread adaptive behavior in animals – and that its cognitive challenges offer survival advantages by honing our mental skills (Boyd 2009: 15-85). Take, for

instance, our ability to structure past events temporally and causally – a crucial cognitive function that helps individuals form a coherent sense of identity and orientation in the world. This narrative organization of experience, whether real or imagined, appears to align closely with what literature has done for centuries, from the Homeric epics to contemporary novels.

Indeed, stories play a fundamental role in how we understand the world and ourselves. We frame our perceptions, memories, and anticipations within narrative structures. Our explanations of the past, interpretations of the present, and projections into the future all tend to take the form of a story. Some even argue that this narrative capacity is essential to rationality and psychological development (Dennett 1991).

Yet, this optimistic view has been met with scepticism (Livingston 2009 and Strawson 2004)³ – particularly due to the ambiguity of the concept of “narrative” itself. Critics point out that storytelling is often retrospective: we frequently explain our actions only after the fact. While we live, we are immersed in experience, not always able to articulate causes or consequences. The familiar “at that point I realized...” or “I had no choice but to...” rarely coincides with the lived moment, but retroactively shapes the memory into a coherent account (Goldie 2012: 148). In this sense, reality often requires a narrative framework – one that supplies causality, goals, and coherence – to become intelligible (N. Carroll 2007). Storytelling thus serves as a powerful tool for organizing fragmented events, making them understandable and communicable (Cooper 1988). However, as compelling as this account is, it risks conflating narrative as a cognitive function with literature as an aesthetic practice. One might contend, as Ellen Dissanayake does, that art’s formal complexity itself “makes special” ordinary experience, thereby serving adaptive ends like reinforcing group identity or promoting cognitive coordination (Dissanayake 1988: 92). Yet this reasoning commits a genetic fallacy, confusing the origin of a capacity with the purpose of its products. While literature may incidentally stimulate cognition, its aesthetic value (e.g., Beckett’s untranslatable wordplay or Kafka’s unresolved paradoxes) operates independently of utility. A sonnet’s volta or *Lolita*’s phonetic precision prioritizes artistic integrity over survival logic, resisting instrumentalization.

Therefore, the fact that humans naturally construct stories to make sense of life does not mean that literary works – designed, opaque, and shaped by artistic conventions – are reducible to

³ Strawson (2004: 428) explicitly writes: “I think there are deeply non-narrative people, and that there is nothing wrong with that. I also think that the Narrative approach to self is incorrect, or at least seriously misleading”.

this same function. And it is precisely this conflation that the rest of this paper will seek to question.

Moreover, when the stories we tell concern ourselves, we tend to adopt a revisionist stance – altering, embellishing, or even distorting events not merely for coherence, but to create accounts that feel convincing and satisfying to us⁴. In shaping our narratives, we often remember things that never actually happened⁵. And this is not a flaw of memory, but part of how narrative functions: it imposes structure and meaning where chaos might otherwise prevail.

As Primo Levi insightfully observed, memory, despite its beauty and power, is far from infallible. It does not preserve events like a camera; rather, it transforms them over time – erasing, reshaping, and incorporating details from other sources. “The memories which lie within us are not carved in stone,” he writes, “but often change, or even grow, by incorporating extraneous features” (Levi 2013: 15).

Importantly, this narrative reconstruction is shaped not only by individual psychology but also by social context. We tell different versions of our story depending on whether we are speaking to a friend, a doctor, a lover, or a potential employer (Kerby 1991). These shifting perspectives are rarely deceitful in intent; rather, they reflect the human drive to render our lives intelligible to others – and to ourselves.

Stories we tell also help us envisage if not even simulate potential situations: by considering fictional scenarios and simulating possible outcomes, our brain can play out events without the risk and expense of attempting them physically. Simulation of the future allows us to test theories and assumptions, to evaluate risks, as research on counterfactual reasoning has abundantly shown (Bechara, A.R. Damasio, H. Damasio, Anderson 1994). Conditional sentences and modal constructions prove therefore to be fundamental elements for human survival by representing events that *might* happen: humans don’t want to be involved in any action/event whatever to discover its consequences, and the production and evaluation of

⁴ Strawson (2004: 443-446) shows how actually, the more one tries to remember and tell facts about her life and past, the more one runs the risk of moving away from the truth and from any form of authentic self-understanding. The more reality is told, the more it is invented (often without our being aware of it).

⁵ And it is precisely because we remember what did not happen that activities such as literary-narrative turn out to be so congenial to humans: “Writing fiction is like remembering what never happened” Hustvedt (2011: 165).

counterfactual situations (e.g. “what if I crossed the street with the red light?”, “what if I bet all on red?”, “what if I go to sleep not having closed the main door?”) is an excellent way to test and refine one’s behaviour.

All of this shows how deeply embedded storytelling is in our cognitive and social lives. But again, the question must be asked: does this explain what literature is? Or does it merely describe the mental scaffolding on which literary art occasionally builds? The danger lies in mistaking this universal narrative impulse for the specific, constructed, and aesthetic nature of literature – a confusion this paper seeks to disentangle.

2. Literature, Stories, and Human Beings

There is little doubt that storytelling has played an evolutionary role in human development. It helps us imagine other minds, build social bonds, navigate uncertainty, and simulate future scenarios. It explains why the familiar “once upon a time” formula is so effective, why dreams take narrative form, and why we never stop telling stories – even when we are alone. Stories are, as it were, the gymnasium of our social imagination.

Yet it is crucial to distinguish between storytelling as a basic cognitive capacity and literature as a historically situated artistic practice. Not all stories are literature, just as not all literature is narrative. A little story used to illustrate a philosophical concept – like the story of Jay and May used to teach Kripke’s theory of proper names – has a clear communicative and didactic function, but no literary ambition. Conversely, many literary works, from surrealist poems to linguistic experiments, do not communicate anything and nonetheless ask for aesthetic appreciation.

More importantly, the two forms serve different ends. The narratives we construct about ourselves aim at clarity, transparency, and explanatory coherence. They help us organize experience and share it with others. Literature, by contrast, is defined precisely by its *opacity*. It presents content through a particular perspective, shaped by form, rhythm, and structure. This is what readers attend to: not simply what happens, but how it is told. A literary work can surprise or disappoint expectations (Lamarque 2014: ch. 8), because its value lies not in the efficient communication of information, but in the aesthetic experience it produces.

It is therefore misleading – and potentially distorting – to emphasize the continuity between everyday stories and literary works. To conflate the two is to miss what makes literature distinct: its status as art, not as adaptation. As Peter Lamarque (2014: 1-33) argued, what fundamentally distinguishes literature from ordinary storytelling is its *opacity*⁶ – as opposed to the *transparency* typical of everyday narratives. Opacity, in this context, refers to the fact that literary works resist being paraphrased or reduced to a simple message. They are to be interpreted, not merely decoded. This opacity operates on both the level of comprehension and that of appreciation. When we read a literary work, we assume – often implicitly – that every detail is meaningful (*principle of functionality*), that characters and events must be understood in light of the work’s overall structure (*teleological principle*), and that the work invites thematic interpretation (*thematic principle*) (Lamarque 2014: 72-77). These principles guide our engagement with literature in ways that differ markedly from how we process utilitarian or communicative texts. This opacity extends beyond narrative to language itself. Keats’ “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” (*Ode on a Grecian Urn*) thins paraphrase through irreducible tension. Unlike survival narratives that seek resolution, literary language sustains ambiguity – not to clarify experience, but to deepen aesthetic provocation. Here, opacity becomes ontological: the poem exists as a linguistic artifact first, a communicative tool second.

Importantly, these features are not accidental: they are constitutive of what makes a work *literary*. The literary text is not a window we look through to see the world more clearly, but rather a surface we look at – like a stained glass window – where meaning emerges from color, pattern, and design. We are not interested in extracting content from the text, but in experiencing form and meaning as intertwined.

In this sense, literary opacity is not an obstacle to understanding but the very condition of literary experience. And it is precisely this aesthetic opacity that resists the explanatory models offered by evolutionary and cognitive theories of storytelling (Lamarque 2014: 3).

⁶ The term “opacity” was originally introduced by Todorov (1967) to emphasize that characteristic for which poetic language is self-referential, not referring to something outside itself, but only to itself, and figurative. Self-referentiality, however, is derived from another characteristic of poetic language, that for which it requires to be treated as an aesthetic object.

Furthermore, literary works do not present us with real people to whom things happen and whose stories are told retrospectively. Instead, they offer us *literary characters* – entities that may resemble real individuals in some respects, but whose ontological status is entirely different. They exist not as persons, but as structured figures within a fictional design. As Aristotle famously noted in the *Poetics* (1451b), literature is concerned not with what *has* happened (as history is), but with what *could* happen – what is *plausible*, *possible*, and *universally relevant*.

Therefore, the value of literary characters lies not in how closely they mirror real people or how easily we can identify with them, but in the way they are constructed to express general human possibilities. The temptation to read literature as a mirror of life – or to seek emotional identification with its characters – risks obscuring what makes literary experience distinctive.

Indeed, the distinction between *opacity* and *transparency* applies here as well. Life narratives aim for clarity, causality, and coherence. Literary narratives, by contrast, operate through form, ambiguity, and symbolic depth. Emphasizing the *difference* between these two domains – rather than the similarity – is crucial if we are to preserve the specificity of literature.

This is precisely what is lost in evolutionary accounts that treat literature as an extension of adaptive storytelling. In doing so, they risk reducing literature to an emotional rehearsal for social life, ignoring its aesthetic autonomy and its irreducibly formal character.

If we approach literature with the expectation that it offers a transparent view of reality, we risk losing what makes it a work of art:⁷ something crafted in a particular way, by a particular author, for a specific mode of aesthetic appreciation (Lamarque 2014: ch. 4). Literature is not meant to function as a mirror or manual for life – it is designed to meet aesthetic demands, not practical ones. Projecting our lives onto literary narratives – or interpreting them as templates for how we should live – can lead to a distorted understanding of both literature and ourselves. We may begin to impose meaning on events that have none, to structure our actions according to fictional models, to rationalize choices under narrative pressures, and to read our lives as if

⁷ Of course, there are also positions that oppose this aestheticized and aestheticizing view of literature. For instance, Hirsch (1978: 48) argues that “if literature were just a subspecies of the category of art, and if art were something that is only properly understood and appreciated under aesthetic principles [e.g., the ‘disinterested contemplation of beauty’], then our literary and cultural lives would be much impoverished”. In his view, “to regard literature as primarily and essentially aesthetic is not only a mistake – it also represents a very unfortunate narrowing of our responses to literature, and of our perception of its breadth and possibilities”.

they followed a literary plot. In doing so, we risk mistaking narrative coherence for existential truth.

Ultimately, this misreading stems from the same confusion at the heart of the evolutionary approach to literature: the idea that its value lies in its utility. But literature does not offer guidance, therapy, or adaptation. It offers *form*, *vision*, and *aesthetic experience* – and to seek something else in it is to miss what it uniquely gives.

While it is true that both literature and everyday life involve stories, it is essential to underscore the profound differences between them – differences often overlooked by literary Darwinists and similar approaches.

Concepts like evolution and adaptation may shed light on the cognitive and social function of storytelling, but they cannot account for what literature *is* – nor why human beings are so deeply drawn to it as an aesthetic experience, contrary to what adaptationist and evolutionary theorists suggest (J. Carroll 2004: viii). While storytelling may indeed be a biological trait of our species, as Brian Boyd (2009: 1) and others argue, this does not extend to literature understood as art. Literary works are not adaptive tools, nor do they serve any clear biological function. They do not aim to solve problems, ensure survival, or enhance fitness. Their value lies elsewhere: in aesthetic form, in linguistic play, and in the experience of meaning that resists utility.

In this sense, literature's primary value is not one of instrumental use but of unique and irreducible aesthetic appreciation. While literature may incidentally offer cognitive, moral, or psychological benefits – as argued by philosophers like Martha Nussbaum (1990; 1998) – these are often contingent byproducts rather than its defining purpose. To claim that literature's *essential* function is adaptive is to confuse these potential effects with its core aesthetic nature, which operates on a different register, one of disinterested contemplation and formal engagement. And that, far from being a weakness, is precisely what grants it its distinctive power. If we judged literature by the role it plays in our evolutionary development, then questions of beauty, style, innovation, and form would become irrelevant. Whether a work is aesthetically powerful or artistically mediocre would no longer matter – only its utility would count. But that is clearly not how we engage with literature.

It is true that writing can have therapeutic or communicative benefits. Goethe may have found relief in composing *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, just as Flaubert did with *Sentimental Education*. Today, billions of people share personal stories – traumas, desires, dreams – on social media, and they, too, derive psychological benefits from storytelling. But literature is not simply self-expression, nor is it a tool for cognitive health. The fact that storytelling may support the “cognitive immune system” of the species does not mean that literature partakes in this function. Literature, in most cases, is *pure luxury* – an art form pursued not for survival, but for aesthetic satisfaction. And it is precisely this non-necessity that makes literature what it is: not an instrument, but an experience.

Just remember Vladimir Nabokov’s words in his *Envoi*, while closing his *Lectures on Literature* and saying goodbye to his students:

The novels we have imbibed will not teach you anything that you can apply to any obvious problems of life. They will not help in the business office or in the army camp or in the kitchen or in the nursery. In fact, the knowledge I have been trying to share with you is pure luxury. It will not help you to understand the social economy of France or the secrets of a woman’s heart or of a young man’s heart. But it may help you, if you have followed my instructions, to feel the pure satisfaction which an inspired and precise work of art gives; and this sense of satisfaction in its turn goes to build up a sense of more genuine mental comfort, the kind of comfort one feels when one realizes that for all its blunders and boners the inner texture of life is also a matter of inspiration and precision.

In this course I have tried to reveal the mechanism of those wonderful toys—literary masterpieces. I have tried to make of you good readers who read books not for the infantile purpose of identifying oneself with the characters, and not for the adolescent purpose of learning to live, and not for the academic purpose of indulging in generalizations. I have tried to teach you to read books for the sake of their form, their visions, their art. I have tried to teach you to feel a shiver of artistic satisfaction, to share not the emotions of the people in the book but the emotions of its author—the joys and difficulties of creation. We did not talk around books, about books; we went to the center of this or that masterpiece, to the live heart of the matter. (Nabokov 1980: 381-382)

That is why literature, understood as art, cannot be accounted for in terms of Darwinian adaptation. Reading novels or poems is not as biologically ingrained as fearing snakes or caring

for offspring. While it is plausible that storytelling – in its most basic narrative form – played a significant role in our evolutionary past, this does not mean that reading *Mrs. Dalloway*, *Lolita*, or the poetry of John Keats offers any adaptive advantage. The imaginative, aesthetic, and reflective dimensions involved in literary reading are of a different order altogether. In other words, Palaeolithic people gathered around a fire to hear a tale performed were engaging in an activity that, while related to narrative, differs profoundly from the solitary, introspective, and symbolically dense experience of reading literature as we know it today.

The point here is straightforward: acquiring and sharing environmental information, imagining non-existent scenarios, experiencing emotions, and communicating with others are all essential functions for human survival – just like memory, reasoning, perception, recursive syntax, or the use of modal tense. However, these functions cannot be automatically equated with literature. Even storytelling, as a cognitive and social tool, is not the same as creating literary works. Humans may tell stories to make sense of the world, to understand themselves and others, to promote cooperation, to pass down knowledge, or to test hypothetical situations for problem-solving purposes. But none of these reasons necessarily explains why someone writes *Mrs. Dalloway* or *Ulysses*, or why Keats devoted himself to poetry. The motivations behind literature as art respond to different, non-adaptive impulses – aesthetic, expressive, even self-destructive ones – which cannot be reduced to evolutionary utility.

This distinction between storytelling as a potential adaptive function and literature as an aesthetic practice is further illuminated by considering the products themselves. The evolutionary psychologist might argue that the human impulse to create elaborate, non-utilitarian symbolic artifacts (like literature) is an adaptation, regardless of an individual author's conscious motives. However, this argument struggles to explain the specific, historically contingent forms that literature takes. The intense focus on phonetic patterning in Nabokov's *Lolita*, the relentless formal experimentation of Beckett's self-translations (for instance in his *Mercier et Camier*), or the sheer opacity of a Kafka parable (in *The Metamorphosis*) – these features are not optimizations for adaptive efficiency (e.g., clear communication, social bonding, or problem-solving). Instead, they prioritize aesthetic principles that often work against such utilitarian goals, creating experiences valued for their complexity, ambiguity, and resistance to easy interpretation. The crucial question, therefore, is not about individual motivation (why authors feel compelled to write – “Pourquoi écrivez-vous?” was the question asked by *Libération* during the Fifth Paris Book Fair in March 1985

to 400 authors), but about cultural history (how the practice of writing evolved to prioritize such non-adaptive, aesthetic complexities). The answers from writers like Beckett (“Good for anything else”) or Duras (“I don’t know anything, I’ve never known what this strange activity is”) point not to a shared evolutionary function, but to a profound engagement with the aesthetic possibilities of language itself, a pursuit that often feels more like a compulsion than a calculated strategy for survival.

The production of literature is, therefore, a far more blurred and complex phenomenon than literary Darwinists tend to assume. Even if we accept the idea of a continuity line between the storyteller and the literary human – even if literature does provide “lively and powerful images of human life suffused with the feeling and understanding of the astonishingly capable and complete human beings who wrote them” (J. Carroll 2004: 68) – literature is also much more than that. It is a superb use of language, a vivid way of conveying meaning, and sometimes of dissolving it. It is a means of creating and revealing things while narrating them.

In sum, literature cannot be reduced to storytelling. More importantly, although literary works often do tell stories – stories that might be interesting, shocking, disturbing, or enlightening – this is not what makes them masterpieces. We do not regard them as literature because of the stories they tell, but because of the way those stories are told.

For me, a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm. There are not many such books. All the rest is either topical trash or what some call the Literature of Ideas, which very often is topical trash coming in huge blocks of plaster that are carefully transmitted from age to age until somebody comes along with a hammer and takes a good crack at Balzac, at Gorki, at Mann. (Nabokov 1997: 314-315)

3. Biological and Aesthetic Value of Literature

Literary Darwinism, as the latest trend in literary criticism, seeks to explain – from neurophysiological or evolutionary perspectives – what happens when we invent, tell, or read stories and songs. Its goal is to demonstrate how these activities confer cognitive and adaptive

advantages that help human beings survive and thrive, distinguishing us from other species. This materialist approach discards the idealist or spiritualist notions traditionally attached to “literary creation” – often conceived as a quasi-divine act of genius.

However, while literary Darwinists trace a sweeping arc from the cognitive revolution of the Upper Paleolithic to contemporary literature, they tend to overlook a crucial historical discontinuity: the birth of written literature around five thousand years ago. They understate the radical transformation that occurs between a chipped stone tool and a novel like *Infinite Jest*, between natural symbolism and the self-conscious, form-bound, and medium-specific art of writing. Critically, written literature’s emergence (more or less 5000 years ago) enabled practices alien to oral storytelling: private rereading, authorial revision, and intertextual allusion (e.g., Joyce’s *Ulysses*). These demand engagement with form *as* content – a self-referential loop absent in fire-side tales. When Nabokov crafts *Lolita*’s opening for phonetic precision (“Lo-lee-ta”), he exploits writing’s capacity for aesthetic density, not adaptive efficiency.

Apparently in such an approach not *what* is literature, but *what* is literature *for*, *what is its role* in our development as human beings, is the question. Unlike Wystan Hugh Auden, who in a famous line said that “Poetry is the art of substantiating shadows, and of lending existence to nothing” (Auden 2007: 88-90), literary Darwinists believe that literature has changed the world, in particular the human species in comparison with other ones, since literature is one of the primary shaping forces of individuals and societies.

It may be true that many of our journeys end at the end of the line, but that of Anna Karenina at the Moscow station, with that red handbag that for a very long moment had tried to hold her, was a *sad, lonely and final* terminus, with the sign of the cross and that last second thought, before the candle in whose light she had read life’s deceptions and sorrows switched off forever. And then, yes, we fall in love (although we mostly believed we were falling in love, but we didn’t realize it until later) many times, but we rarely got that perfection described by Francis Scott Fitzgerald in the fifth chapter of *The Great Gatsby*, when Gatsby meets Daisy again after a long time (“Five years next November”), at Nick’s house, but then he doesn’t want him to leave letting them both alone, and not so much because he is embarrassed and terrified, but above all because he is afraid that without a witness that wonderful newfound love of his could

suddenly vanish, like a soap bubble. Things, especially unbelievable ones, exist only to the extent that we are not the only ones who see them.

And again, we experience the inebriation and purification of fasting, but what we find in Flaubert's *The Temptation of St. Anthony* opens to us the doors of perception, leading us straight to mystical delirium, while that of Franz Kafka's *A Hunger Artist* shows us with a few brushstrokes the purity of that force that knows how to replace life, that all-encompassing power of art that has no other objective than itself.

Finally, we taste Samuel Beckett's *Mercier and Camier* in French, in its essential and spiky style, but then we cannot resist and we are tempted by the English translation (a clearly suffered version, which Beckett had taken four years to complete and which compared to the original French has at least 12% *omissis*), with those words carved to perfection that remind us of which language the author is master and which instead, he is a guest. How much more lapidary is "sophistry" than "raisonnement du clerc" in "Sophistry, said Mr Conaire"? And what rhythm does the word "crusts" manage to give when replacing "pain sec" in the sentence "Yesterday cakes, today sandwiches, tomorrow crusts, and Thursday stones"? Beckett translating himself looks like one of those cats blowing at their image in the mirror: first, he plays, then he is scared, he retreats, but in the end, he seems to understand and, simply, lets it be.

In short, as Fernando Pessoa (1966: 286) says, literature, as all art, is the confession that life is not enough – not an adaptive supplement, but a confrontation with life's insufficiency through crafted form. And so, this journey was not without return. We are back to square one, yes, but to question again about literature. Being able to grasp its evolutionary scope is not enough to appreciate a literary text: it is one thing to *evaluate* the importance of telling stories *for the evolution* of our species, and another is to *evaluate* in the sense of *feeling* and *aesthetic appreciation*. We will go on, of course, asking ourselves if the fact of being storytelling animals has had a central role in making us be specifically what we are, but we will also ask ourselves, inhaling to hold that *frisson* along the spine, the secret of the enchantment of that tongue that makes three turns on the palate before knocking against the teeth – "Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta" (Nabokov 1997: 1) as the first lines of Nabokov's masterpiece read – to pronounce words as soft as velvet and rhythmic as time. And we will go on asking because,

alongside stories, there are also sculptures made with words whose musicality, ambiguity, and form, we admire when relaxing and letting our spines take over.

Although we read with our minds, the seat of artistic delight is between the shoulder blades. That little shiver behind is quite certainly the highest form of emotion that humanity has attained when evolving pure art and pure science. Let us worship the spine and its tingle. Let us be proud of our being vertebrates, for we are vertebrates tipped at the head with a divine flame. The brain only continues the spine: the wick really goes through the whole length of the candle. If we are not capable of enjoying that shiver, if we cannot enjoy literature, then let us give up the whole thing and concentrate on our comics, our videos, our books-of-the-week. (Nabokov 1980: 64)

Notably, neurocognitive studies reveal that aesthetic responses activate the brain's Default Mode Network (DMN) – a system associated with introspection, self-referential thought, and internal mentation rather than problem-solving or goal-directed behavior. This neural pattern, often described as “artistic satisfaction,” is markedly distinct from utilitarian or pragmatic processing, thereby underscoring literature's decoupling from adaptive function. Empirical evidence supports this: Vessel, Starr, and Rubin (2013) demonstrate that engaging with aesthetic stimuli – whether visual art, music, or literature – consistently activates the DMN. Similarly, Chatterjee and Vartanian (2016) argue that aesthetic processing recruits distinct neural pathways, including the DMN, and is fundamentally detached from survival-oriented cognition. According to them, such responses are characterized by disinterested contemplation rather than instrumental reasoning. This neural model provides a biological correlate for the kind of deep, non-utilitarian engagement demanded by literary opacity. The activation of the DMN during aesthetic experience aligns with the reader's focus on form, pattern, and self-referential meaning in a text – precisely the features that distinguish reading Nabokov or parsing a Keats ode from processing a utilitarian narrative (Jacobs 2015).

4. Conclusion

Anthropologists and psychologists have long recognized an innate human inclination toward storytelling. Building on their insights, some scholars in literary studies and philosophy have sought to apply evolutionary principles to the study of literature.

Whether around ancient campfires or in today's physical and virtual spaces, people share stories not merely for entertainment, but to strengthen group cohesion and contribute to cultural evolution. Myths and legends, for example, helped early human communities develop a sense of shared identity and cooperation. In more recent contexts, families continue to reinforce social ties by narrating daily experiences over dinner or watching television together.

Literary Darwinists also insist on the fact that storytelling is useful in transmitting survival-related information, crucial knowledge about navigation, resources, weather and so on. Besides this, storytelling is also considered to play a fundamental role in cognitive development and problem-solving, because while engaging with narratives people exercise imagination, empathy, and critical thinking. Entertainment as well is a significant function of storytelling from an evolutionary standpoint, since the kind of pleasure people derive from storytelling experiences causes the release of neurochemicals associated with reward, hence reinforcing engagement with narratives. In a nutshell, the approach defended by literary Darwinists offers valuable insights into the nature of storytelling and its evolutionary roots. Is this enough to understand or explain the very phenomenon of literature? It seems not. Because literature is more than just storytelling. It is an aesthetic experience, that shiver on the back, the breath caught for the tip of the tongue taking a trip, the emotion caused by nonsense, the intellectual satisfaction derived from reading something that is supposed to answer a question, even if actually, and magnificently, it does not. As in the following example, where W.H. Auden tries to tell the truth about love:

Some say love's a little boy,
And some say it's a bird,
Some say it makes the world go round,
Some say that's absurd,
And when I asked the man next door,
Who looked as if he knew,
His wife got very cross indeed,
And said it wouldn't do.

Does it look like a pair of pyjamas,
Or the ham in a temperance hotel?
Does its odour remind one of llamas,

Or has it a comforting smell?
Is it prickly to touch as a hedge is,
Or soft as eiderdown fluff?
Is it sharp or quite smooth at the edges?
O tell me the truth about love.

Our history books refer to it
In cryptic little notes,
It's quite a common topic on
The Transatlantic boats;
I've found the subject mentioned in
Accounts of suicides,
And even seen it scribbled on
The backs of railway guides.

Does it howl like a hungry Alsatian,
Or boom like a military band?
Could one give a first-rate imitation
On a saw or a Steinway Grand?
Is its singing at parties a riot?
Does it only like Classical stuff?
Will it stop when one wants to be quiet?
O tell me the truth about love.

I looked inside the summer-house;
It wasn't even there;
I tried the Thames at Maidenhead,
And Brighton's bracing air.
I don't know what the blackbird sang,
Or what the tulip said;
But it wasn't in the chicken-run,
Or underneath the bed.

Can it pull extraordinary faces?
Is it usually sick on a swing?
Does it spend all its time at the races,
or fiddling with pieces of string?
Has it views of its own about money?
Does it think Patriotism enough?
Are its stories vulgar but funny?
O tell me the truth about love.

When it comes, will it come without warning
Just as I'm picking my nose?
Will it knock on my door in the morning,
Or tread in the bus on my toes?
Will it come like a change in the weather?
Will its greeting be courteous or rough?
Will it alter my life altogether?
O tell me the truth about love. (Auden 2007: 69-71)

Auden's intention is, unmistakably, to tell the truth about love – but he does so not through straightforward definitions, but through rhythm, metaphors, music, flashes of imagery, alliteration, and assonance. We think we know what love is – but do we, really? Love might be imagined as a little boy, a bird, or the force that makes the world go round. Can it either be seen, smelled, or touched? And what are those written accounts talking about love, from mentions in appreciated and influential texts to more general publications? Love can also be and compared to sound. And what about love as a disturbing element? Maybe the confusion caused by it would prevent humans from leading a quiet and peaceful life. Is the absence of love, and of any other stimulus, the only way to achieve a perfect state of quietness? Finally, and at the end, how to tell the truth about love? Are there maybe physical places recalling this feeling? But love is not a concrete entity that can be found hidden somewhere, and it neither seems to have those qualities that can be attributed to persons.

The only plausible answer to these questions is to admit that there is no way, to tell the truth about love. “That Love is all there is, | Is all we know of Love; | It is enough, the freight should be | Proportioned to the groove” as notoriously Emily Dickinson said (1960: n. 1765). We think

we know what love is – until we are asked to define it. And then, suddenly, we don't. That is the power of literature: it reveals the limits of our understanding by tracing those very limits through language. And this is precisely what no biological or Darwinian framework can fully account for. Ultimately, reducing literature to an adaptive tool impoverishes human culture. The Darwinian framework offers a compelling explanation for the ubiquity of narrative but remains a reductive tool for understanding the essence of literature. While it may account for the *capacity* for art, it fails to explain the *content* of artistic value – why we cherish the specific, useless, and often difficult formal achievements of a Nabokov or a Beckett. To demand utility of literature is to silence its greatest power: revealing life's unanswerable questions through form, not function. As Pessoa observed, literature confesses that life is not enough. It is this confession – a confrontation with life's insufficiency through crafted form, not an adaptive tool for survival – that secures literature's autonomy and places its deepest value permanently beyond the grasp of any adaptationist framework.

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Toward a Richer Account of Illusion in the Experience of Narrative

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ABSTRACT. This study takes a closer look at the structure of the concept of illusion as it is used in Werner Wolf's theory of aesthetic illusion. This conception is widely regarded as a functional explanation of the phenomenon that more often than not accompanies our engagement with narrative – namely, the fact that we feel in a certain sense absorbed by it. The concept of aesthetic illusion is based on Marie-Laure Ryan's notion of immersion and remains closely linked to it through mutual support, shared assumptions, and a similar breadth of scope. However, the study aims to show that the concept of aesthetic illusion can, in fact, hardly live up to its ambitions. In an attempt to provide clarity and specify what aesthetic illusion actually consists in, Wolf, and by extension Ryan, adhere too firmly to a single model of illusion, namely optical or perceptual illusion. Although this model is, generally speaking, the first thing that comes to mind when illusion is discussed, once it becomes the dominant framework for an entire theory of reception, it leads to a rather distorted construal of narrative experience. In the first place, it marginalizes or even excludes other possible accounts of illusive or illusion-like effects bound to a feeling of absorption that we might, with proper tools at hand, discern within the multifarious experience of narratives. The question is whether there are other ways of approaching the phenomenon of absorption.

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1. Introduction

When reading, readers can occasionally experience the feeling that the narrative has progressively absorbed them – that they stop paying attention to place, time, and conditions of their actual location, that their thoughts, emotions, sensations, and even their very sense of what is what are in the grip of that narrative, coloured and shaped by it. This can last for the duration of the reading or (if the experience is particularly strong) even after the book has been closed. This power of narratives has been described in various ways, and it points in the same direction as Peter Brooks does when, quoting the character Tyrion from *Game of Thrones*, he remarks that “there’s nothing in the world more powerful than a good story” (Brooks 2022, p. 3).

The idea of absorption is quite eloquently brought to the fore by Victor Nell by the very title of his 1988 book. While reading, we sometimes feel *Lost in a Book*: “Among the mysteries of reading, the greatest is certainly its power to absorb the reader completely and effortlessly, and on occasion, to change his or her consciousness through entrancement.” (Nell 1988, p. 73) Such a feeling of absorption or entrancement that one can experience while reading – and arguably also while watching – a narrative has recently been conceptualized mostly through two influential and interconnected notions: *immersion*, developed by Marie-Laure Ryan, and *aesthetic illusion*, advocated by Werner Wolf. There are certainly other conceptual alternatives proliferating – for instance, *transportation*, developed by Richard Gerrig (1993) and endorsed by Emily Troscianko (2017), or *presence*, as discussed by Göran Rossholm (2017). It is, however, aesthetic illusion and immersion that have gained the most widespread recognition and acceptance, and the corresponding entries are now indispensable in any compendium or handbook devoted to the theory of reader/viewer experience, with aesthetic illusion even having its own Wikipedia entry. It seems to me that one of the main strengths of these two concepts lies precisely in the emphasis they place on the illusory aspect of absorption, the way they stress the sense of being gripped by the narrative. They thus highlight the power narrative has to manipulate its recipients – to make them interested and emotionally engaged, and to reassert or challenge recipients’ notion of how things are. I want to argue that it is precisely this feature of the concept that makes it stand out among the available alternatives. At the same time, however, it seems to me that the notion of illusion, as employed by the reception theory in question, does not fully succeed in realizing its potential.

Let me briefly outline the two concepts. The core of immersion and aesthetic illusion, as proposed by their advocates, lies in the idea that the phenomenon of absorption we experience while reading or watching allegedly consists of an imaginative relocation or entry into a distinct world as it is designed by the text. Ryan suggests that this immersive entry into the represented world should be understood as a kind of rendering of virtual reality for the recipient, providing them with virtual sensations – mainly visual ones – in a manner closely analogous to an actual VR machine, as an ultimate illusion-generating device (Ryan 2001). Wolf, in turn, builds on her concept in developing his own account of aesthetic illusion.

Aesthetic illusion consists predominantly of a feeling, of variable intensity, of being imaginatively and emotionally immersed in a represented world and of experiencing this world in a way similar (but not identical) to real life. As opposed to delusions and hallucinations, this constitutive immersion is, however, counterbalanced by a latent rational distance, which operates owing to the culturally acquired awareness of the difference between representations and reality (Wolf 2013, p. 52).

Along the lines of the psychological term pseudo-hallucination, aesthetic illusion is therefore more appropriately conceived as a pseudo-illusion. Thanks to a certain distance, an awareness of artificiality is always at least latently present. What we obtain, then, is a quasi-experience consisting of quasi-perceptions (Wolf 2013, p. 22). In this respect, both conceptions presume that we experience a represented world in a quasi- or virtually sensory manner and, from this point of view, they share the same fundamental premises.

There are also similarities between the ambition and scope of these two congruent projects. Ryan considers her notion of immersion the fundamental descriptive instrument for explaining basically every possible form of absorption mentioned above. Immersion is responsible for a feeling of forgetting one's *hic et nunc* in favor of alternative space-time coordinates, for our emotions towards characters, suspense, and, in an extreme case, for the condition she calls *Don Quixote Syndrome*, leading the one affected to confuse the world in question with his or her lived reality (Ryan 2001, p. 99).

Wolf's conviction about the scope of aesthetic illusion is very similar. He suggests that "whoever for instance, has felt fear, horror, and suspense when reading a novel or playing a computer game, whoever has been moved to tears during emotionally loaded film scenes and whoever has pitied tragic characters such as *King Lear* on stage testifies to have been in the grip of

aesthetic illusion” (Wolf 2013, p. 4). Wolf also repeatedly reflects on the significance of aesthetic illusion and its impact on readers or viewers on a broader scale. In addition to accounting for affective response, aesthetic illusion also exerts a crucial influence on the persuasive – or, to put it more starkly, manipulative – power of narrative:

A persuasive purpose may also be seen at work in the compensatory potential of aesthetic illusion to make the recipient more readily accept a general tendency of aesthetic representations towards an ‘unrealistic’ surplus of coherence and meaning, i.e. to present worlds whose closure and meaningfulness (most conspicuously in the narrative use of coincidences and the convention of ‘poetic justice’ and teleological closure) could be regarded as deviating from the openness and contingency of life (Wolf 2013, p. 53).

Aesthetic illusion is thus apparently meant to account for an emotional dimension of absorption, a tension tied to the unfolding of narrative, as well as the appeal of poetic justice. And, on top of that, it is intended to do so across all kinds of representational media. With this being said and with aesthetic illusion given such a large agenda, it is necessary to take a closer look at the inner structure of the term ‘illusion’ as employed in this fashion (section 3). Before I do so, I present one particular objection to the theory of aesthetic illusion (section 2). Although the theory has been criticized from various angles, this objection strikes me as especially interesting because at its core lies a conceptual question: by bringing to the fore illusion’s inherent proximity to delusion, might the very notion of illusion, by its nature, hinder an adequate understanding of the problem of absorption?

My own position, presented in section 4, is, in a sense, a middle one. I will argue that the real problem does not lie in the notion of illusion *per se*, but rather in a particular understanding of it. The core of Wolf’s theory, I suggest, rests on an adherence to the model of perceptual, optical illusion. Through the prism of this model, however, some cases of absorption appear less readily explicable than others. In this paper, I aim to illustrate my claim by taking a closer look at Wolf’s own paradigmatic example of aesthetic illusion in action and by comparing it with another case which, according to Ryan, represents a situation in which absorption reaches an extreme level. Her example, I argue, cannot be explained by means of immersion-based aesthetic illusion – the very mechanism that is supposedly responsible for all absorption associated with the experience of narrative.

2. Illusion and Delusion

Although the theory of aesthetic illusion (similarly to the related concept of immersion) has received considerable attention among literary and film theorists, it has also recently been subjected to criticism from various directions and on various grounds. Some critiques target the notion of immersion as entering a fictional/represented world, which, according to critics, treats such a world as a kind of space-container and thus evokes something stable and complete – thereby contradicting the processual nature of reading. Moreover, this leads to a privileging of sensuousness, particularly visual perception. Such an approach assumes that inducing aesthetic illusion through text requires more imaginative effort from the recipient than visual or spatial media do (Caracciolo and Kukkonen 2021). Other critiques question the breadth of the term, arguing that we need more fine-grained concepts for different aspects of absorption and engagement (Pettersson 2017), or that illusiveness should be discussed only in connection with certain types of narratives (Richardson 2015).

Although these and other objections certainly carry weight, I want to begin here from the criticism put forward by Emily Troscianko. She challenges the viability of the very concept of aesthetic illusion, and her critique is therefore conceptual in this regard. The main problem, she argues, lies in the fact of mutual affinity between illusion and delusion. Once we describe the recipient's experience in terms of illusion, the objection goes, the whole experience moves dangerously close to misperception, deception, or even fraud. Even everyday English, she notes, shows how close the terms illusion and delusion are. Yet, no one would seriously claim that while we are reading, we succumb to illusion in the sense that we truly believe our imaginings to be real perceptions, or that when watching an action scene, we genuinely think we have found ourselves in the middle of a car chase alongside the hero. What then is the point of calling the experience illusory?

Werner Wolf does not, of course, think that we are fully deceived. As we have seen, an essential component of aesthetic illusion, alongside the feeling of immersion, is the distance that makes aesthetic illusion a pseudo-illusion. Yet it is precisely this manoeuvre that, for Troscianko, constitutes the reason why using the notion of illusion – or pseudo-illusion for that matter – in this context does not make sense: “The term's proprietor remarks that the experience denoted by the term in fact involves non-presence of what the term normally means” (Troscianko 2017,

p. 243). It thus seems that in order to use the notion of illusion in this context at all, we must first negate it or at least substantially weaken it. I want to argue, however, that although such an objection may seem reasonable at first sight, it in fact derives its strength from a certain presumption that has been readily accepted by Troscianko and, to some extent, by Wolf as well, as is shown by his attempt to save the situation by modifying his crucial term. Namely, the objection presumes that the experience of narrative is in no sense a form of delusion and manipulation. But can we really be so sure? It seems to me that Victor Nell's *Lost in a Book* suggests we cannot: the feeling of being absorbed and a certain kind of deception may not be so far apart after all. We find ourselves under an external influence, living somebody else's life within a foreign world. Peter Brooks speaks even more directly about the manipulative – in his words, seductive – power of narratives, warning us against their capacity to absorb and manipulate us all too easily. Precisely because of the power narratives possess, we had better be careful: “We need as listeners and readers to resist a passive narcosis of response” (Brooks 2022, p. 23). I suggest that rather than banish the notion of illusion from the realm of reception, as Troscianko does, one should examine more fully what is actually meant by illusion within these debates. Understanding the concept of illusion more fully would, at least, help clarify what Wolf aims to avoid so cautiously by adding that relativizing prefix pseudo-. Let me now take a closer look at Wolf's own account of what is going on when one is allegedly in the grip of aesthetic illusion.

3. Optical Illusion Model

To describe the absorbing power of aesthetic illusion in progress, Wolf gives us a description of his own experience while watching the blockbuster movie *Day After Tomorrow* by Roland Emmerich.

[A]t first I had a curious kinetic impression of hovering over an Antarctic landscape – in spite of remaining seated in a cinema seat in Graz/Austria. And in the ensuing scene I felt interest, suspense, if not fear, and started to empathize and almost identify with the endangered scientist – and nevertheless I did not feel any urge to come to his rescue myself (Wolf 2013, p. 3).

This description quite aptly illustrates the general claims referred to above. There is the immersive aspect of the experience that leads the recipient directly through the representation

into the represented, portrayed by the feeling of ‘being there.’ There is also the element of distance, insofar as Wolf reportedly does not feel any urge to rescue the protagonist. And finally, there is clear evidence regarding the intended scope of aesthetic illusion, embodied in the enumeration of emotions and responses such as the impression of flying, interest, suspense, fear, and empathy.

In that case, however, it seems legitimate to ask how interest or tension is related to the quasi-perception that we are allegedly afforded through the operation of aesthetic illusion. Without further explanation, we are forced to assume that the relationship between quasi-perceptions and tension resembles that of cause and effect: because the recipient experiences quasi-perceptions, they can not only empathize with the characters but also feel tension about what will happen next in the story. But why should tension – clearly tied to the unfolding of the narrative – be based on the quasi-perceptions of the things represented?

Importantly, this quote illustrates the core of aesthetic illusion consisting of a state of perceiving something – that is, a flat screen inside of a cinema in the city of Graz – while getting the impression of something else – a quasi-feeling of moving through the 3D space. What is crucial here is the fact that such an account seems to have the form of a two-part schema. In short, something seems different from what it, in fact, is (with an obvious proviso that *fact* and *reality* are tricky concepts). This aligns with psychologist A. D. Smith’s definition of illusion as “any perceptual situation in which a physical object is actually perceived, but in which that object perceptually appears other than it really is” (Smith 2002, p. 23). It is, in a manner, quite similar to Akiyoshi Kitaoka’s *Rotating Snakes*. In front of us, there is simply a picture or a flat screen, yet what it yields is an impression of movement. What is at issue here is, of course, the very mechanism on which perceptual – and above all optical – illusions are based.

Now, what would happen if we removed the prefix and reconsidered this situation as a case of illusion proper (e.g. delusion)? Wolf himself offers an example of such a collapse of distance and degeneration of aesthetic illusion into illusion in the common sense of the word. In Book Two, Chapter 26 of Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*, we find an episode in which the protagonist watches a puppet-theatre performance about a damsel in distress. He becomes so absorbed, however, that he decides to intervene physically and proceeds to beat up the puppet enemies (Wolf 2013, p. 14). According to Wolf, Don Quixote is not able to keep his distance, and because of it, he loses a latent awareness of the difference between representation and reality and falls for the illusion

completely. In other words, he misperceives and mistreats the representation for the represented.

In short, such an account displays a pronounced bias toward making sense of aesthetic illusion by adhering quite rigidly to a model of optical illusion. But why should it matter whether the model in question is an optical illusion? There is an important point that needs to be made explicit. Optical illusions seem to require two clearly identified – or even explicitly defined – members of a schematic pair; that is, *what* exactly appears to be *what*. When such a schema is applied to the experience of narrative, we are compelled to construe aesthetic illusion on the basis of a stimulus–response mechanism in which the two parts of the situation are sharply delineated and one is taken for the other in an either–or fashion. In Wolf’s example, this means that the representation is taken for the thing represented. In this light, Wolf’s attempt to ground the recipient’s tension in quasi-perception appears all the more problematic. Most importantly, aesthetic illusion, which was intended to serve as an explanation of the recipient’s overall absorption in a narrative, is thus substantially diminished and fragmented. From this perspective, what we are left with is a series of rather partial, momentary, and ephemeral effects, such as a ‘feeling of hovering’ – something we might call ‘spectacles.’ Rather than accounting for the processual absorption elicited by engagement with narratives, this conception seems instead to privilege, as it were, spectacular effects best achieved by IMAX projections – to which Wolf, after all, explicitly refers (Wolf 2017, 55).

4. Dropping the model?

From this point of view, Troscianko’s concerns about using the term illusion as an explicative concept when considering the experience of narratives seem justifiable. Even with distance, we seem to get too close to misperception when experiencing Wolf’s aesthetic illusion. The point is, however, that the model of optical illusion, upon which the very notion of aesthetic illusion is based, is only a tool. And when it is not useful, there is always an option to drop it and maybe look around for a different one.² Many possibilities present themselves, for example, in the conceptual arc constructed by W. J. T. Mitchell, which connects various forms of illusion:

² Similar attempt involving a search for a different model of illusion upon which an account of illusiveness in reception could be based, is to be found in Stjernberg (2017). There the notion of cognitive illusion or bias is employed as a solution of the Paradox of Fiction.

[I]llusion is something built into the very conditions of sentience, and extends from areas of animal behavior such as camouflage and mimicry right into trompe-d'oeil, and ultimately, I want to argue, into the universal structure of ideology or false consciousness. This is illusion as *error*, delusion, or false belief (Mitchell 1990, 77).

In searching for hints of something genuinely different from optic-like illusion, we may not even need to look very far. If Wolf's anecdote about Don Quixote's predicament allegedly illustrates a lack of distance that leads the protagonist to mistake a puppet for a real villain, Marie-Laure Ryan offers a rather different interpretation of Cervantes's novel. I already noted that she invokes a certain state of mind called *Don Quixote Syndrome*, characterized by the inability to distinguish between the textual world and the actual world, and she regards this syndrome as an extreme case of absorption with a strong scent of illusiveness. However, this kind of absorption resembles neither perceptual illusion nor entry into another textual world. As the novel in question has it, Don Quixote lets the inner logic of chivalric romance break loose from the realm into which it belongs and, moreover, approaches his own lived reality through its prism. So, if we were to stick with the spatial metaphor for the moment, it is not that Don Quixote immerses himself in the textual world, but rather that something from this world steps out. True, his condition occasionally leads him to mistake innkeepers for lords and windmills for giants, and such episodes might possibly be explained by the mechanism of Wolf's aesthetic illusion (in its extreme form). In general, however, the essence of the syndrome lies in the fact that Don Quixote is not able (or willing, perhaps) to escape the power of the narratives he loves and finds absorbing. He stays in the grip of illusion all the time, sticking to the idea of knighthood even when the whole real world opposes it, worshipping the credo of poetic justice throughout all his real-life existence. The various episodes of misperceptions and mistreatments can thus be regarded as symptoms of such a general condition. A person suffering from Don Quixote syndrome might as well be described as someone extremely entranced (in Nell's words) or seduced by narrative (as Brooks would have it).

Evidently, when a person so entranced is described as someone who 'falls for an illusion,' the notion at stake is not being employed with the model of optical illusion in mind. I have identified the two-part schema as the conceptual core of optical illusions in general. At first sight, it may appear that this schema still applies here – after all, Ryan does speak of a textual world on the one hand and the actual (real) world on the other. The crucial point, however, is that the relationship between these two components exhibits a markedly different dynamic from that

found in optical illusions. Rather than one replacing the other, the textual imposes itself upon the real, blending with it – just as poetic justice contaminates the protagonist’s idea about how things work – and forming a complex illusion within which Don Quixote lives.

5. Conclusion

These remarks, however tentative and provisional, indicate at least one thing: just because the notion of aesthetic illusion turns out to be in fact limited, this does not necessarily mean that the notion needs to be abandoned *per se*.

Emily Troscianko’s criticism served as an impetus for me. And on this basis I attempted to identify the source of her concerns, which in the end turned out to lie in the fact that Wolf’s notion of (aesthetic) illusion quite strictly follows a model of optical or perceptual illusion and is therefore heavily dependent on a two-part schema in which something appears different from what it actually is. This schema foregrounds a strong imperative to identify its components concretely and thus leads the theorist toward an all-too-literal conception of illusiveness, in which the represented is effectively smuggled in as the representation. Instead of offering a comprehensive and all-encompassing account of the phenomenon of absorption and its role in the reader’s/viewer’s experience, the notion of aesthetic illusion is therefore suited primarily to explaining marginal reception effects that I have nicknamed ‘spectacles.’

By highlighting an interesting example of the Don Quixote Syndrome, I intended to highlight once more the limits of the model of optical and perceptual illusion. The only way to make it function across such a broad field – as absorption and illusiveness within experience of narrative undoubtedly is – is to marginalize or assimilate effects and modes of operation that do not fit. Yet I did not mean to suggest merely that it would be beneficial to look for additional tools and models in order to gain a better understanding of illusiveness and absorption. I also wanted to indicate that the discussion itself already contains forms of illusiveness or distinct facets of absorption that are not based solely on the optical model. And that seems to me to suggest that completely banishing the notion of illusion from the field of study focusing on reader/viewer absorption would mean giving up too much. Moreover, *pace* Troscianko, it seems to me that the very proximity of *illusion* and *delusion* that she worries about is a line of inquiry worth pursuing. And finally, one might agree that the Müller-Lyer illusion is probably not the same

as the Heider-Simmel illusion, let alone the kind of illusion Sigmund Freud refers to when famously reflecting on religion. It might be illuminating in this context, to regard the very notion of illusion rather as an assortment of various contents or sub-concepts, of which optical illusion is only one among many that may be employed when reflecting on the power of narratives to absorb their recipient.

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Anti-Entropic Fields: Art and the Inversion of Time.

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ABSTRACT. *The present paper aims to verify the relevance of the notion of anti-entropy within visual arts and aesthetics, where the term emerges—or is implied—to describe the artwork's metaphorical capacity to counteract the laws of nature, suggesting a possible transcendence of the principle of entropy. Nevertheless, anti-entropy corresponds to a precise scientific definition. This research will verify the relation between the scientific and aesthetic conceptions through a further specification of the distinction between “anti-entropy” and “negentropy”. The key to accessing the concept from a philosophical perspective is to draw on the theories by Bernard Stiegler, alongside recent philosophical inquiries into entropy and energy dissipation. The following discussion will develop this argument through the analysis of the work of three visual artists active since the 1960s: The article considers the body of work of Giovanni Anselmo and Gino De Dominicis, confronted with the already existing theory around Robert Smithson as a dialectic figure for this research. The objective of this study is to elucidate the “anti-entropic” implications of their work, with a particular focus on the paradoxical endeavor to impose a reversal or suspension of the conventional temporal progression, in order to counteract the deterioration of matter.*

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1. Introduction

The principle of entropy, stemming from the second law of thermodynamics and referring to the gradual shift towards disorder and energy loss, has gained increasing significance as an aesthetic subject since the 1960s, particularly after the publication of two pivotal texts: *Entropy and the New Monuments* (1966) by Robert Smithson, and *Entropy and the Arts: An Essay on Disorder and Order* (1971) by Rudolph Arnheim. Over the following decades, various interpretations of the concept have come to reflect an understanding of decay and disorder as essential features of contemporary society, particularly in the context of the intensifying climate crisis marked by the progressive depletion of natural resources (Mussett, 2022). As defined on the website of Tate London: “entropy is the inevitable and steady deterioration of a system or society. The concept is articulated by the Second Law of Thermodynamics (the tendency for all matter and energy in the universe to evolve towards a state of inert uniformity)”.² This conception, involving radical reflections on notions of materiality and time, has been particularly influential in the visual arts field (Lee, 2004; Bretkelly-Chalmers, 2019). Building on this evolving conception, this paper seeks to verify the significance of a secondary notion that emerges from the notion of entropy: that of anti-entropy.

A concept common to both the natural sciences and the humanities, anti-entropy coincides at the same time with an extremely precise and a purely metaphorical meaning. This paper aims to explore the extent to which these two perspectives intersect, representing a preliminary attempt to connect them conceptually and to highlight the relevance of the notion of anti-entropy in the field of aesthetics. It also aims to offer a reconstruction of the main artistic practices and theories that have so far been explicitly linked to the concept. Following an initial exploration of the existing literature, I will develop interpretative hypotheses of works of art through the lens of anti-entropy, while also expanding on the anti-entropic role of art itself.

² <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/e/entropy>

2. Origins of the Concept of Anti-Entropy between Science, Philosophy, and the Arts

The first use of the term anti-entropy appears in an unpublished text by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin in 1951, where the author uses it to describe an effect that “draws a portion of matter in the direction of continually higher forms of structurization and centration”.³ Anti-entropy, though, is now widely recognized as a mathematical principle theorized by Francis Bailly and Giuseppe Longo, which envisages a form of creation connected to the biological organization of complex organisms, which does not counterpose the action of entropy but envisions a form of order increasing in parallel with its action. It can be interpreted as the “opposition to disorganization” and is a physical-mathematical explanation of the biological phenomenon of increasing organization (the complexification of organisms) (Bailly and Longo, 2009).

The definition of anti-entropy necessitates a distinction with the concept of negentropy, which originates primarily from the research of Erwin Schrödinger, and could be summarized as “entropy with a negative sign” (Schrödinger, 1944). Negentropy implies that organisms absorb order from their environment, enabling the creation of “order from order”. An example of such a process highlighted by Schrödinger involves the metabolic processes, whereby humans do in fact “reduce entropy”, as living matter locally opposes entropic decay.⁴

From a philosophical perspective, the notion of negentropy – as well as that of anti-entropy – has been explored by philosopher Bernard Stiegler, who contextualizes such reflections by inserting them into the more complex frame of the Anthropocene (Stiegler, 2018).⁵ Stiegler’s work is of particular significance in the translation of such scientific concepts into philosophical ones. He was able to intuit the centrality of the conceptual relationship between entropic forces and the gradual destruction and abuse of natural resources on our planet, evidenced by his definition of the term “Entropocene”.⁶ In a collaborative essay with Maël Montevid, Giuseppe

³ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, “The Transformation and Continuation in Man of the Mechanism of Evolution” in *Activation of Energy: Enlightening Reflections on Spiritual Energy*, [1951] (Hancourt, 1970).

⁴ The edition that has been taken into consideration is the following: Erwin Schrödinger, *What is Life?*, 14th ed. (Cambridge University Press, 1967).

⁵ Further argumentation could be found in: Rasmus Sandnes Haukedal and Nikolaos Mylonas, *Entropy and Negativity: The Ecological Implications of Dialectics*, Technophany Vol.2 No.2, 2023.

⁶ Stiegler states how “The theory of entropy – deriving from thermodynamics some thirty years after the advent of industrial technology and the beginning of the organological revolution that lies at the origin of the Anthropocene, that is, after the steam engine – redefines the question of value, given that the relation

Longo, Ana Soto, and Carlos Sonnenschein, Stiegler explores the intricacies of translating such concepts, interweaving them with the disciplines of information theory, economic analysis, and philosophy.⁷ Here, anti-entropy finds its humanistic equivalent in the notion of *anti-anthropology*, defined as the extension of anti-entropy to social organizations.⁸ The employment of the term is explained by the necessity of curtailing the deleterious effects of technology towards the evolution of human subjectivities, by contrasting it with local actions of *noesis* – extensions of human “work” as the invention of a novel configuration of senses – which encompasses artistic activities.⁹

The authors of the essay *Anthropocène, Exosomatisation et Néguentropie* (2020) establish the foundational point of intersection between the scientific and humanistic conceptions of anti-entropy. However, this intersection does not enter the realm of art theory and history, opening the possibility of proposing an interpretation of their intersection within a broad philosophical framework. But what happens if we explore the literature of the visual arts in order to seek an alternative perspective, starting from works of art and their subsequent interpretations?

A point of departure for such an investigation could be found in the literature on Robert Smithson’s work, which has already been mentioned for its central role in demonstrating the influence of entropy in the arts. In his text *Entropy and the New Monuments*, Smithson reflects on how “the awareness of the ultimate collapse of both mechanical and electrical technology has motivated these artists to build their monuments to or against entropy”.¹⁰ The term “against entropy” appears to imply a conception of time and progress as something that could be potentially reversed. As highlighted by the philosopher Olivier Schefer, Robert Smithson “opposes to the entropic ravages [...] the countermodel of a time which is together timeless and eternal”.¹¹ In this context, the opposition to entropy activates and unsettles the central notion of time, revealing how a “negative” relation to entropy within the field enters, above all,

entropy/negentropy is really the question of life par excellence. It is with respect to such perspectives that we must think, organologically and pharmacologically, what we should in fact call the Entropocene and neganthropology”, Bernard Stiegler, *The Neganthropocene* (Open Humanities Press, 2018).

⁷ Maël Montévil, Bernard Stiegler, Giuseppe Longo, Ana Soto, Carlos Sonnenschein. “Anthropocène, Exosomatisation et Néguentropie”, in Bernard Stiegler, *Bifurquer Il n’y a pas d’alternative*, (Les Liens Qui Libèrent, 2020).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Robert Smithson, “Entropy and the New Monuments”, in *Artforum*, June 1966.

¹¹ Olivier Schefer, *Sur Robert Smithson. Variations dialectiques* (La Lettre volée, 2021), 192. Translated by the author, original version: “en opposant aux ravages entropiques [...] le contre-modèle d’un temps intemporel et éternel”.

a paradoxical dimension—one that departs from philosophical and scientific rigor and instead takes root in the visionary perspective enabled by its own language. In fact, as we will subsequently observe, the term rather emerges within the arts to describe the artwork's metaphorical capacity to counteract the laws of nature, suggesting its possible transcendence of the principle of entropy (Rewakowicz, 2014). It is evident that Robert Smithson has been profoundly influenced by science fiction, as this counter-entropy seems to rely on fictional and metaphysical tenets, including the inversion of the arrow of time, the cessation of energy dispersion, and the ultimate triumph over mortality. The critical reading of the selected artworks aims to enhance their potential perspectives, offering possible rereading of the intersections of art, energy, and temporality in addressing contemporary challenges.

3. Anti-Entropy at the Intersection with Visual Arts: The Case Study of Gino De Dominicis (1947-98) and a Parallel with Robert Smithson (1935-73)

Among the artists whose body of work constantly and poetically struggles with the defeat of the second law of thermodynamics, Italian artist Gino De Dominicis stands at the forefront. In his oeuvre, the artist offers unconventional perspectives permeated with a profound sense of spirituality, which develops in parallel with an obsession with immortality. These concerns are exemplified in his *Letter on Immortality* (1970), which starts as follows: “Dear...I think that things do not exist [...] to truly exist, things should be eternal, immortal. Only then would they not be mere verifications of certain possibilities, but truly things. In fact, by constantly changing, they are used by ‘nature’, which verifies all the possibilities at its disposal through their transformations”.¹² The distinction between the “thing” as existing, or as being a mere device of nature, is for the artist the condition of its immutability, the capacity of escaping its transformation and, consequently, its decay. Entropy is therefore defined as the property of non-existing things, namely, the force that corrupts them.

Among the artworks more explicitly oriented towards the perspective of the defeat of entropy, the artwork–event *Cocktail party to celebrate the overcoming of the second principle of thermodynamics* (1972) is particularly noteworthy. The event formed part of the project *Roma, Mappa 72*, a series of

¹² Gino De Dominicis, *Letter on Immortality*, 1970.

events taking place at Palazzo Taverna in Rome curated by Achille Bonito Oliva, within the Incontri Internazionali d'Arte directed by Graziella Lonardi Buontempo. Moved by an entirely paradoxical intent, the event consisted of a genuine cocktail party, marked by the cutting of a cake, which bore the date 2085.¹³

But what is particularly meaningful within the context of De Dominicis' production is a work that directly addresses anti-entropy, namely *Anti-Entropic Chandelier* (1980), which was exhibited at Galleria Pio Monti in Rome. The following excerpt, taken from the critical catalogue on the artist, describes the genesis of the piece, while providing an insight into the cultural context of Rome in the 1980s:

On May 16, 1980, the opening of Gino de Dominicis' solo exhibition was announced at the Galleria Pio Monti in Rome, on Via Principessa Clotilde. The artist asked for his canvases, brushes, and paints to be brought to the gallery, where he had chosen to remain locked away for several days. Everyone expected a painting extravaganza. He remained locked in the gallery alone until late in the evening; only around 10 p.m. did he allow the public to enter, who found themselves facing an empty space dominated by a single work consisting of all the canvases he had painted, destroyed, and assembled into a solid form hanging from the ceiling like a chandelier. He called this work *Anti-Entropic Chandelier* because it stored all the energy that the artist had poured into the painted canvases and concentrated energy, conserving it rather than dispersing it.¹⁴

It can be posited that anti-entropy is here indicative of an interruption of the energy flux and, consequently, of the dissipation of matter, through the prevention of light dispersion, which becomes the material and visual manifestation of the energy itself. From a closer examination, one could read this work by De Dominicis as a concrete counterpart to the anti-anthropic function described by Stiegler, in which the local manifestation—the artwork—appears capable of generating a new order that counters the broader tendency toward disorder, and ultimately toward entropy itself, as he noted in his *Letter on Immortality*. As Giulio di Gropello states:

According to Gino, art is one of the vehicles that can enable humans to overcome their limitations: the limitations of the laws of nature. The anti-entropic character is present

¹³ *Incontri 1972* (Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1979. Quaderno n. 3 del Centro d'Informazione Alternativa), Centro Archivi MAXXI Arte, Fondo Incontri Internazionali d'Arte, AIIA/AT/AI/008.

¹⁴ Italo Tomassoni, *Gino De Dominicis. Catalogo ragionato* (Skira, 2011), p. 307.

in all works: according to Gino, a work of art is only such when the energy used to create it is less than the energy that the work of art gives back to you. And it is obvious that the final judge of this will be time. In my opinion, almost all artists struggle on this front, even if only Gino has clearly made this his manifesto.¹⁵

This excerpt offers a precise understanding of how, even when viewed from a strictly metaphorical standpoint, the role of energy was key to Gino De Dominicis and remained anchored in something physical and measurable: the action of the artist and the actual energy expended in producing the artwork. Within this line of reasoning, matter remains essential, allowing us to ground an abstract discourse in a concrete form and enabling us to consider the issue of energy exhaustion from another angle – that of ruin. This perspective appears particularly relevant in the study of entropy, where once again a parallel with the work of Robert Smithson could provide a valuable critical point of comparison. Olivier Schefer discusses how the notion of “ruin in reverse” in Smithson “is inseparable from the concept of entropy, which refers not only to the inevitable decline of all things, as described by the second law of thermodynamics, to a zero degree of sensitivity, but also, and perhaps above all, to his conception of time as a process of reversal”.¹⁶ From this perspective, when De Dominicis’ and Smithson’s work is considered together, the role of ruins and destruction appears to be conceived in opposite senses. De Dominicis’ ruin involves the sacrifice of the work as a means to generate an energetic field that stores energy and avoids its dispersion. Smithson, on the other hand, seems to envisage the dispersion as the condition for the energy to flow, where there is no actual interruption of time; rather, the flow of time extends in two directions, either forwards or backwards. The concept of deep time, referring to a geological dimension, is central to Smithson’s work as it attempts to align human action, which is carried out arbitrarily and over a limited time, with natural forces that rely on the unpredictability of atmospheric events and the long timescales of their sedimentation.

¹⁵ Laura Cherubini and Giulio di Gropello, “He Systematically Destroyed any Proof that any Particular Work of Art Had Been Made by Him”, in *Flash Art*, May 16, 2017.

¹⁶ Olivier Schefer, “Ruines à l'envers Robert Smithson et quelques fantômes contemporains”, in Olivier Schefer, Miguel Egaña, *Esthétique des ruines: Poétique de la destruction*, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2015, p. 44. Translated by the author, original version: “L'idée de ruine à l'envers [...] s'avère donc indissociable du concept d'entropie, lequel renvoie non seulement à l'inéluctable déclin de toutes choses, propre à la seconde loi de la thermodynamique, à un degré zéro de la sensibilité, mais aussi, et peut-être avant tout, à sa conception du temps comme processus d'inversion”.

4. Inverting the Geological Time: the work of Giovanni Anselmo (1934-2023)

This vision of geological time is best realized through the use of natural elements, particularly minerals, which have accumulated through sedimentation over a long period of time and which ontologically represent the resulting outcomes of a distant past. Among these, we can find a work by Giovanni Anselmo, one of the leading Arte Povera artists: *Trecento Milioni di Anni* (1969), part of the collection of the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. The sculptural piece consists of a block of anthracite juxtaposed with a light bulb, a metal sheet, and a piece of metal wire that supports the lamp, with the metal elements fastened to the lithic block. The artwork poetically reflects on the possibility—or rather the impossibility—of inverting the process of geological sedimentation through the action of the energy produced by the light of the small lamp. According to the artist's intentions, the energy produced by the lamp reverses the sedimentation process and returns the block of anthracite to its original form. As the artist states, that the block “was once a plant or a reptile, or in any case something organic and animate, before the transformations of the Earth's crust buried many aspects of life and also removed them from the light”.¹⁷ In this way, he continues, it “cancels out the time that has passed between us and what, precisely, this material could have been then...”¹⁸. Such an intuition fits well with the “paradoxical” anti-entropic interpretation emerging within inquiry into the visual arts. Moreover, it also appears to evoke the Freudian pull from the organic to the inorganic, commonly known as the death drive. Further interpretation of the work within this framework reinforces the proposed reading, where the anti-entropic function is closely linked to the ability to interrupt, or rather restore, the flow of time. As in *Anti-Entropic Chandelier* by Gino De Dominicis, the action of light manifests the vital energy that redirects the entropic orientation of the piece. While in Anselmo, the light is a utopian force that opposes the evolution towards the inorganic, in De Dominicis it becomes the manifestation of the flow of life itself, interrupted by the resistance of the destroyed canvas, which stands as a metaphor for contemporary ruins.

¹⁷ Suzanne Pagé and Daniel Soutif, *Giovanni Anselmo*, [exposition, 27 juin-22 septembre 1985, A.R.C, Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris], (Paris: Association Paris-Musées, 1985), p. 7.

¹⁸ Ibid.

5. Conclusions

The article set out to verify possible intersections between scientific, philosophical, and artistic conceptions of anti-entropy, while also clarifying their peculiarities in order to provide a preliminary survey of the main literature on the topic. Examining these intersections seems particularly valuable as a means of reflecting on how the interdisciplinary perspective provides new tools for interpretation, allowing for a different reading of already established and widely debated authors and artists. This approach proves particularly productive when considering energetic processes and their transformations, a topic which is increasingly compelling not only for artistic research, but also for addressing to the socio-cultural challenges of our time.

Methodologically, rather than forcing unlikely associations, the article opted to propose focused studies on the different fields, highlighting pre-existing connections where they emerged (Montevil, Stiegler, Longo, Soto, Sonnenschein, 2020) and acknowledging philological grounding to articulate further hypotheses, as in the case of works by Gino De Dominicis and Giovanni Anselmo. Though the anti-entropic properties of the works by De Dominicis have been thoughtfully discussed by authors such as Achille Bonito Oliva, Laura Cherubini, and Giulio di Gropello, they haven't been contextualized in an interdisciplinary reflection. As such, the proposed interpretation of Anselmo's work presented here is a new contribution.

The article also reiterates the importance of recognizing the specificity of the artistic field: namely, the possibility of setting aside strictly philological interpretations in favor of intuition, as well as acknowledging the formal and poetic autonomy of the artwork, as the essential precondition for any rigorous interdisciplinary exploration.

In conclusion, although the proposed analysis has focused on already historicized artists, the interdisciplinary perspective outlined could be further expanded through research on living artists, given the growing entanglement of art, technology, and science today. This line of inquiry will be further developed in studies stemming from the present one, with the aim of better highlighting the social and political implications of this field, especially in light of the environmental crisis.

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Why Choose One When You Can Have Both? On the Perceptual and Rational Dimensions of Aesthetic Judgement

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ABSTRACT. Aesthetic judgements are traditionally deemed to have a perceptual nature. There is an immediate recognition of aesthetic qualities in the objects we appreciate that doesn't seem to require any conscious inference. Accordingly, a perceptual account of aesthetic judgement seems therefore to be at odds with reasoning. Such a tension between its perceptual and rational dimensions takes the form of a dilemma between non-inferentialism and inferentialism, respectively: if we form our judgements by reasoning, there is no explanation of our immediate recognition of aesthetic properties without conscious inference; and if we directly perceive aesthetic qualities, reasoning seems pointless. In this paper I defend that the dilemma isn't such, and both perceptual and rational dimensions of aesthetic judgement are compatible. The dilemma suggests that, for the non-inferentialist to preserve the perceptual, immediately motivated character of judgement, it ought to give up reasoning. In opposition, I suggest that perceptually based accounts of aesthetic judgement can account for a non-inferential structure of reasoning, neither to be dissociated from the perceptual exercise of taste, nor from evaluation itself.

1. Introduction

This paper is focused on the debate between perceptual and rational dimensions of aesthetic judgement. The use of both labels is instantiated by ordinary descriptions of our judging: on

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the one hand, it is said that we *hear* the sorrow of a song, *see* a dance movement as graceful, and *perceive* the balance of a painting; on the other, we are also said to *infer* the meaning of a symbol, *reason* our way through the interpretation of a theme, and recognise the balance of a painting *based on* the symmetry of its elements. What separates both kinds of descriptions is determined by what we take as the ground for our aesthetic judgements: the former are based on perception, while the latter are achieved by means of reasoning and inferring. The idea of perception as involved in our aesthetic judgements has a long history, but it is generally associated with Frank Sibley as its most noteworthy example². Aesthetics, according to him, ‘deals with a kind of perception’³, which seems to be the reason why our judgements cannot be ‘the outcome of considering reasons, however good’⁴. On this regard, Sibley also claims: ‘It is absurd to ask that an aesthetic judgement (involving, as it does, perception) be based upon reasons [for concluding or inferring that the work is graceful]’⁵. These well-known quotes from Sibley are often read first and foremost as (i) a defence for non-inferentialism, but also as (ii) a rejection of the role of reasoning in aesthetics and, more importantly, as (iii) the outset of an opposition between perception and rationality. In this paper I aim to follow Sibley’s non-inferentialism while rejecting (ii) and (iii).

As a response to Sibley’s view, some of the efforts⁶ at making room for rationality in aesthetics are not only committed to vindicate the part that reasoning plays in appreciation, but also to challenge the long-standing tradition of perceptually based aesthetic judgements. On this regard, the main objection non-inferentialism faces comes from inferentialism about aesthetic judgements: if our access to or ascription of aesthetic properties were grounded in perception, instead of in conscious inferences, there would be no explanation of what Fabian Dorsch called ‘the practice of backing up’⁷ our aesthetic opinions by pointing to non-aesthetic ones. According to him, ‘the availability of, and need for, additional support in the shape of the reference to relevant lower-level features becomes problematic’⁸ for Sibley-like positions. To put it briefly, it is argued that non-inferentialism cannot account for reasoning/justification in aesthetics.

2 For a reference to the central spot that Sibley has on the debate, see Dorsch (2013) and Cavedon-Taylor (2017).

3 Sibley, F. (2001), p. 34.

4 Ibid., p. 40.

5 Ibid., p. 42.

6 With some red-letter exceptions, such as the work of Keren Gorodeisky, with whom this paper aims to side. See, for instance, Gorodeisky & Marcus (2018), Gorodeisky (2018, 2022).

7 Dorsch (2013), p. 660.

8 Ibid., p. 661.

This conclusion is far from harmless to any theory of aesthetic evaluation: if not by supporting and justifying our aesthetic claims, it is hard to make sense of our critical discourse, as well as most of our conversations and arguments about art or any other aesthetic matter. The pending question is: if the sole source of aesthetic justification is first-hand perception of higher-level properties, instead of inferential reasonings from its underlying lower-level ones, can our aesthetic judgements be rationally justified?

The structure of this paper goes as follows. Section 2 analyses the debate between perception and rationality. Section 3 sheds light on two key assumptions, without which the opposition and mismatch between perception and rationality don't hold. The last part of this paper, Section 4, questions the inferentialist challenge of aesthetic justification and motivates the virtues of a non-inferentialist account of reasoning in the aesthetic domain.

2. The Debate

In his essay 'Aesthetic and Non-aesthetic', Sibley famously writes:

But an activity the successful outcome of which is seeing or hearing cannot, I think, be called *reasoning*. I may have reasons for thinking something is graceful, but not reasons for seeing it is. Yet aesthetic perception, I have said, is essential to aesthetic judgement; one could not therefore be brought to make an aesthetic judgement simply as the outcome of considering reasons, however good. It is a confusion of disparate activities to suppose that in this sense one could have a 'rational justification' for making an aesthetic judgement. Thus the aesthetic judgements I am concerned with can neither *have* nor *lack* a rational basis in this sense, namely, that they can either be or fail to be the outcome of good or bad reasoning⁹.

This passage (or at least some part of it) is often quoted as a sample of Sibley's view, as well as a piece of evidence of the opposition between perception and rationality in Aesthetics.

Contra Sibley, it is argued that 'an awareness that an object has such-and-such non-aesthetic properties suffices to demonstrate that one is justified in judging that it has such-and-such an

⁹ Sibley (2001), p. 40.

aesthetic property'¹⁰. In other words, recognising the symmetry of a painting's elements makes an ascription of balance justified and well-supported. According to this view, pointing to non-aesthetic properties wouldn't only explain the ontological presence (or absence) of aesthetic ones, but also and foremost it would ground evidentially our aesthetic judgements, as well as strengthen our epistemic trust as critics¹¹. On this basis, it is formulated what Cavedon-Taylor calls 'the challenge from critical-ostention': 'we frequently do, in the context of justifying our aesthetic judgements, [...] *ostend* the non-aesthetic properties upon which the attributed aesthetic property is believed to depend'¹². This method of supporting and justifying our aesthetic claims wouldn't be neither 'rare nor intelligible'¹³, yet the non-inferentialist is said to attribute such acts of critical-ostention any role of justification or any convincing power to demonstrate how well-founded they are or to motivate others to revise their judgements. Importantly, what we are dealing with here is an idea of justification by which the ascription of an aesthetic property rests on the recognition of the non-aesthetic ones to which the former depend.

Of course, this is partially motivated by and derived from the relationship of dependence between aesthetic and non-aesthetic properties: since the realisation of the former depends on the presence of the latter, balance in a painting may be explained by the underlying symmetry of its elements. But in contrast with Sibley, Dorsch and Cavedon-Taylor attribute a normative purport to the ontological dependence between the two kinds of properties: supporting and justifying our aesthetic judgements is thus a matter of referring to lower-level features of which aesthetic ones depend.

This line of criticism is led by Fabian Dorsch (2013, 2014) and Dan Cavedon-Taylor (2017). According to Dorsch, there's an opposition at the core of aesthetic appreciation: on the one hand, our judgements seem to be immediately motivated, 'formed in some way other than rationally responding to the consideration of reasons for or against forming them'¹⁴, that is, 'in a non-inferential way'¹⁵; on the other, their acquisition and justification often require some sort of deliberation and reasoning, from certain lower-level properties to the aesthetic, higher-level

10 Cavedon-Taylor (2017), pp. 4-5.

11 Ibid., p. 674.

12 Cavedon-Taylor (2017), p. 4.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid., p. 661-662.

ones they realise. The motivation of (some of) our aesthetic judgements, Dorsch admits, such as the recognition of the gaudiness of a painting, the unity of a set of furniture or the elegance of a poem line, is immediate. They are not thus the response to certain reasons nor the conclusion of conscious inferences. But if someone were to cast doubts on our ascription of gaudiness to a painting, ‘we would draw his attention to the colour scheme of the work; [and] if he disagrees with us about the unity of the furniture, we would point out to him his relative proportionality in similarity in design; and if he rejects our statement about the elegance of the poem, we ask him to listen (really or imaginatively) to its recital and notice its sound qualities’¹⁶. Such tension, between a non-mediated access to aesthetic properties and an inferentially mediated justification of those by reference to non-aesthetic ones, is framed as a dilemma by Dorsch:

- i. either we directly perceive aesthetic properties (without any conscious inference), and therefore reasoning and justifying are pointless,
- ii. or we reason our way through aesthetic properties and thus there is no explanation of our immediately motivated judgements (that is, of our non-mediated perception of aesthetic properties).

The dilemma, thus, acquires the form of a debate between inferentialism and non-inferentialism:

- i. either we form our aesthetic judgements non-inferentially, which rules out the possibility of reasoning and leaves unaccounted our pointing to non-aesthetic, lower-level properties as additional support for aesthetic, higher-level ones.
- ii. or our aesthetic judgements are justified inferentially, and therefore our immediately motivated recognition of aesthetic qualities requires an alternative explanation.

Hence, perceptual and rational dimensions of aesthetic judgement seem incompatible: for one, defending aesthetic judgement’s perceptual nature seems to come at the expense of giving up rationality, whereas deeming reasoning as a suitable ground for judging appears to be at odds with the kind of perception involved in appreciation. Within the framework of this dilemma, inferentialism ought to explain our immediately motivated judgements by other means than

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 661.

conscious inferences from non-aesthetic properties, whereas non-inferentialism is challenged by an agreed-upon idea of justification, which occupies Section 4. But before moving to question the challenge of aesthetic justification, Section 3 aims to examine two assumptions without which the dilemma between perception and aesthetic rationality doesn't seem to hold.

3. A Dilemma?

The dilemma between perception as the sole ground of our aesthetic judgements and our practice of 'backing up' and justifying our aesthetic claims only holds if we assume:

A1: Reasoning is always inferential

A2: Perception comes in isolation

Let's consider first A₁. As noted in Section 2, the inferentialist maintains that aesthetic judgements (e.g. 'that painting is balanced') are justified by pointing to its underlying non-aesthetic properties. Thus, reasoning our way through aesthetic judgements is often identified with the inference of aesthetic properties on the basis of non-aesthetic ones, on which the former depend, just as one infers the conclusion of an argument from a set of premises. Here the notion of reason at use means, '[...] roughly, a true statement or a fact such that, on the basis of knowing it, it would be reasonable, right, or plausible to infer, suppose, or believe that something is so'¹⁷. Since this notion of reason allows the formation of aesthetic judgements as the output of inferential reasonings, one may judge a painting to be balanced without actually perceiving it. This also presupposes a general link between reasonings and verdict, between non-aesthetic properties and aesthetic ones. But such generality is dubious: neither the presence (or absence) of certain non-aesthetic properties guarantees the presence (or absence) of aesthetic ones, nor the recognition of the former justifies the attribution of the latter. According to Sibley, 'one poem has strength and power because of the regularity of its metre and rhyme; another is monotonous and lacks drive and strength because of its regular metre and rhyme. We do not feel the need to switch from 'because of' to 'in spite of'¹⁸. Here it is important to differentiate two senses of reason: (i) reason why P has strength and power and (ii) reason for inferring its

¹⁷ See Sibley (2001), p. 42.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 7.

strength and power. Non-inferentialism doesn't thus deny the importance of referring to non-aesthetic properties to explain how an aesthetic one was realised but instead rejects the possibility to make aesthetic judgements by other means than perception. And the reason behind this isn't that one can get to the conclusion without going through the antecedent; it is the inferential structure of reasoning what the non-inferentialist gives up.

Critical activity isn't therefore concerned with giving reasons for inferring or believing, not even reasons for seeing. Instead, the kind of critical support given by the critic in order to justify their aesthetic claims has to do with giving reasons why W has such-and-such aesthetic properties, reasons for appreciation, and reasons why W is worth-appreciating. What I aim to defend here is that non-inferentialism about aesthetic judgement doesn't need to give up rationality in order to reject the inferential access of aesthetic properties from non-aesthetic ones. And, more importantly, that a non-inferential account of reasoning and justification is not only possible but preferable to grasp the mechanics of perceptual learning and aesthetic expertise.

The second assumption (A₂) is that aesthetic properties are perceived in isolation. One of the main objections non-inferentialism faces has to do with an alleged impossibility to account for the epistemic support that non-aesthetic properties bring to aesthetic ones. It is important to note, on the contrary, that directly perceiving the balance of a painting doesn't mean perceiving only that: *seeing* or *hearing* certain evaluative properties such as the balance of a painting or the gracefulness of certain dance movements doesn't mean that seeing and hearing the underlying non-evaluative ones is dispensable, neither this implies a neglect of the responsibility that the latter have on the emergence of the former. We recognize aesthetic qualities instead *as being realized by* its underlying non-aesthetic ones, on the one hand, and by many other aspects and events of the work of art and its artworld, on the other. This argument isn't exclusive of aesthetic perception; it can be easily illustrated by the following example from ordinary perception. Consider the highly expressive interpretation of Daniel's Kaluuya in the movie *Get Out*. Our direct perception of the horror and despair expressed by his character doesn't mean our unaccountability in perceiving his tears or the redness of his eyes, nor our immediate recognition of his expression of mistrust means an unaccountability in perceiving his frowning. Similarly, perceptual access to aesthetic qualities doesn't imply that other features of the artwork, either lower or higher-level ones, the context (of production and appreciation), and other aspects of the artworld that surrounds it aren't also perceived nor play a major role in our aesthetic experience. In fact, the only reason why someone is able to directly perceive certain

aesthetic properties is because she also perceived other many things, which are not to be understood as the support of higher-level qualities, but as part of the whole pack of features and events that *realize* it.

But what's the difference between "support" and "realize" here? I would like to argue that it's not a terminological issue, but a phenomenological one. We directly perceive high-level features, but not *with* the support of lower-level ones, as the inferentialist would claim, nor *without* it, as the inferentialist would object to Sibley-like positions. We recognize aesthetic qualities instead *as being realized by* the non-aesthetic ones that make them emerge, on the one hand, and by many other aspects and events of the work of art and its artworld, on the other. Directly perceiving a line as graceful is not acknowledging the quality of gracefulness in isolation but seeing its gracefulness as being realized by its shape and sinuosity. Thus, non-inferentialism does leave room for the role of pointing to non-aesthetic properties when it comes to justify our aesthetic judgements: not as 'additional support', but in a specifically non-inferential manner, as the realization of our aesthetic predicates.

If my analysis is correct and A₁ and A₂ are wrong, the dilemma between the perceptual and rational dimensions of appreciation is misguided. Consequently, non-inferentialism about aesthetic judgements may still have a chance.

4. Towards a Non-inferentialist Account of Reasoning in Aesthetics

Sibley notes in his essay 'Aesthetic Concepts' that the activity of the critic 'frequently consists in mentioning or pointing out the features, including easily discernible non-aesthetic ones, upon which the aesthetic qualities depend'¹⁹. But in 'Aesthetic and Non-aesthetic', he puts forth the following distinction:

We also saw that critics largely occupy themselves in discovering the reasons why a work is, say, graceful or unbalanced; that someone who has seen that it is graceful must in some degree have noticed these responsible features; and that a good critic should be able to point out these reasons. But these are *reasons why* the work is graceful, and to be

¹⁹ Sibley (2001), p. 15.

distinguished from *reasons*—good or bad, a critic’s or anyone else’s—*for* concluding or inferring that the work is graceful²⁰.

The point Sibley makes here is that, even though non-aesthetic properties explain why the work has a certain aesthetic quality, the mere presence of the former doesn’t justify the inference of the latter²¹. Behind this idea, there is his main thesis that aesthetic concepts aren’t governed by rules, meaning that no recognition of any set of non-aesthetic properties does guarantee the ascription of aesthetic ones:

The reason the music is sad at a certain point may truly be that just there it slows and drops into a minor key. [...] But knowledge that a piece of music slows and drops into a minor key at a certain point [...] would be very poor reasons for believing or inferring that the music must be, or even probably is, sad. [...] The music might instead be solemn or peaceful, sentimental, or even characterless²².

So, while he agrees that non-aesthetic properties, such as the slows and drops into a minor key in a piece of music, bring about a metaphysical explanation of the realisation of aesthetic ones, such as sadness and solemnity, he denies that they justify epistemically nor ‘support the judgement by permitting inference to its truth’²³. Inferences cannot therefore ground our aesthetic judgements, for even though the critic’s pointing to certain non-aesthetic properties that might have been overlooked is sometimes helpful to see an aesthetic one, it is also usual that, ‘although these *were* seen, the resultant aesthetic quality was still missed’²⁴.

Now, non-inferentialism needs to overcome a twofold challenge: on the one side, it ought to explain why pointing to non-aesthetic properties doesn’t justify our aesthetic judgements, and on the other, an alternative account of justification should be motivated in turn.

The idea of lower-level properties as the justification of our aesthetic judgements is generally assumed as the ‘common ground’ in the debate as well as in the discipline, even a neutral, ‘pre-theoretical point of view’²⁵. Just the same way a judgement that it has rained is only justified if

20 Sibley (2001), p. 42. My own emphasis.

21 Dorsch’s interpretation of Sibley accounts here for a distinction between reasons why something possesses an aesthetic quality and reasons for ascribing aesthetic qualities. For the latter, pointing to non-aesthetic features wouldn’t be a reason for ascribing an aesthetic quality, but a reason of its presence. See Dorsch (2013), p. 670.

22 Sibley (2001), p. 43.

23 Ibid., p. 44.

24 Ibid., p. 38.

25 See Dorsch (2013), p. 668.

one perceives the wetness of the street or judges that the street is wet as its evidential ground, a judgement that a painting is balanced would only be justified if one perceives its underlying symmetry or judges the organisation of the painting's elements to be symmetric. Indeed, this idea of justification is properly motivated by and derived from the relationship of dependence between aesthetic and non-aesthetic properties: since the realisation of the former depends on the presence of the latter, balance in a painting may be explained by the underlying symmetry of its elements.

As noted above, Sibley would agree on the importance of being able to recognise non-emergent, lower-level properties and the particular way in which they realise emergent, higher-level ones. Yet what would be under dispute is whether merely pointing to non-aesthetic properties really does the job in supporting and justifying our aesthetic judgements.

Given their ontological dependence, the realization of aesthetic properties is *explained* by referring to non-aesthetic ones, to which the critic frequently points. This only becomes problematic when the inferentialist, against Sibley, identifies such referring to non-aesthetic features on which aesthetic ones depend as the *justification* of our aesthetic judgements. My point is that the fact that aesthetic properties are metaphysically explained by non-aesthetic ones doesn't mean that seeing and pointing to the latter guarantees or justifies the ascription of the former. Merely referring to the realisation of higher-level properties by lower-level ones doesn't count as an aesthetic reason to recognise an aesthetic property: for such recognition to be justified, one has to say why the realisation is valuable, worth-appreciating or contributes to or detracts from its aesthetic value²⁶. Critical reasons, I claim, demand more than conscious inferences for the formation and justification of critical judgements. Here I aim to propose a non-inferentialist account of reasoning in aesthetics, the structure of which doesn't put aesthetic reasons before or beyond evaluation, but as part of it. Aesthetic reasons bring about an appreciation and a way of looking that, for someone to accept the reason given by the other, she has to perceive and appreciate it for herself.

There's a kind of critical activity that involves drawing attention to notably responsible features but goes beyond what Cavedon-Taylor calls 'acts of critical-ostention'. It entails, Sibley says,

26 On this regard, see Crawford (1970) and Gorodeisky & Marcus (2018).

‘making similes and comparisons, describing the work in appropriate metaphors, gesticulate aptly, and so on’.

Almost anything [the critic] may do, verbal or non-verbal, can on occasion prove successful. To go on to ask how these methods can possibly succeed is to begin to ask how people can ever be brought to see aesthetic (and Gestalt and other similar) properties at all. [...] Some aestheticians have held that this—showing the work, getting people to see—is the only way of supporting an aesthetic judgement, even perhaps the only point of critical activity. This is to overlook a great deal; but I see no reason why it should not be called a way of supporting or justifying, even of proving, an aesthetic judgement.²⁷

This paper aims to defend that reasoning in aesthetics cannot be dissociated from the exercise of taste nor evaluation itself. Giving reasons for appreciation involves guiding, ‘putting one’s finger on something’ in order to expand, improve or change our experience of an object, genre, style or artform. The structure of this reasoning has therefore a perceptual dimension: we give reasons to ‘get others to taste it there’²⁸, and by doing so, we offer ourselves as appreciative mirrors²⁹, as a guidance for perceptually and rationally based appreciation.

Acknowledgements

21838/FPI/22. Fundación Séneca. Región de Murcia (Spain).

The research for this project was supported by the project “The Rationality of Taste. Aesthetic Appreciation and Deliberation” (PID2023-149237NB-I00) funded by the Spanish National Investigation Agency – AEI

²⁷ Sibley (2001), p. 38-9.

²⁸ See Hansen & Adams (2024).

²⁹ See Gorodeisky (2022), p. 328.

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Perception, Context, and Categories of Art

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ABSTRACT. According to Kendall Walton, the correct perception of a work lies in perceiving it within the right “perceptually distinguishable categories” (PDCs), which are defined as categories the membership of which is determined solely by works’ perceptual properties. The correct PDC of a work, however, is determined by its historical context. Contextualists, who argue that a work’s aesthetic properties depend on its historical context, have proposed two challenges to Walton: PDCs fail to accommodate both an important feature of art—its artifactuality—and the aesthetic difference between forgeries and originals. Walton maintains that these challenges can be addressed without abandoning the concept of PDCs. My aim is to show that his replies fail, and that he need not restrict his account to PDCs. Only by accepting the contextualist view—recognizing the essential role of a work’s historical context—can we categorize and perceive a work correctly.

1. Introduction

In his 1970 paper “Categories of Art,” Kendall Walton attempts to incorporate two views that appear incompatible at first glance: *aesthetic formalism* and *ontological contextualism* (formalism and contextualism henceforth). The former, as represented by Monroe C. Beardsley (1981), holds that an artwork’s aesthetic properties depend solely on its nonaesthetic ones, and that perception is the only way to judge an artwork. The latter, by contrast, adds historical context as a co-determiner. Walton sides with the formalist in insisting that perception is the only way to judge a work. Yet he also argues that, to determine a work’s aesthetic properties, one must

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perceive it within its correct category—understood as, for example, media, genre, styles, forms, and so forth—that is perceptually distinguishable. Which category is correct, however, is determined by a work’s historical context, with authorial intention being the most important factor.

Contextualists have recently raised two objections to Walton’s thesis. First, the construal of PDCs—categories whose membership depends solely on a work’s perceptual properties—fails to accommodate the artifactuality of art: we perceive an artwork as an artifact that issues from an artist’s agency, yet PDCs cannot lead us to perceive a work as such. Second, contextualists contend that forgeries differ aesthetically from original works, even when they are perceptually indistinguishable, but Walton’s account has trouble accommodating the difference.

Walton (2020) offers three responses to these challenges. In this paper, I argue that his responses fail because of his adherence to PDCs. However, I do not entirely reject Walton’s account. I aim to show that he need not restrict himself to PDCs, since some non-PDCs are also aesthetically relevant, provided that this does not violate an assumption he accepts. This revision, I suggest, improves his account.

The next section reviews Walton’s account of the categories of art. Sections 3 and 4 examine the first and second contextualist challenges, respectively. Section 5 argues that Walton need not restrict the notion of PDCs.

2. Categories of Art

Walton’s (1970) “Categories of Art” (CA henceforth) aims to incorporate two contrasting views: formalism and contextualism.² According to formalism, represented by Beardsley, an artwork’s aesthetic properties depend solely on its nonaesthetic properties, both of which are perceptual (CA, 334, fn. 2; 335, fn. 4).³ For example, the aesthetic properties of a painting—the sense of mystery or tension—depend on its color, shape, and line (CA, 335). Since both aesthetic and

² Walton (2020) acknowledges that his later views may differ from CA. This paper treats CA as incorporating both Walton (1970) and Walton (2020) for a more charitable reading. References specify which text is cited.

³ Although formalism (and contextualism) proposes different ontological assumptions about artworks, this paper focuses on their accounts of artworks’ aesthetic properties.

nonaesthetic properties are perceptual, properties that are not perceivable—such as the historical context of a work’s creation—are not regarded as relevant in the appreciation of artworks. On this view, an artwork should be judged simply by what can be perceived in it (CA, 334). Contextualism, by contrast, holds that a work’s historical context can determine its aesthetic properties, even if it is not perceptual. For example, a composition may sound discordant initially but turn out to be satirical once we know the composer was making fun of incompetent composers in her time.

Walton agrees that aesthetic properties are perceptual, and that perception, rather than inference or cognitive penetration, is the only way to judge a work’s aesthetic properties. That is, in artwork appreciation, our perceptual processing is not shaped by cognitive states such as beliefs, which would otherwise provide direct input to perception and modulate experience (CA, 337–338, 365; see also Walton, 2020, 82).⁴ On this point, he follows both the formalist and Frank Sibley’s (1965) view. However, Walton adds what he calls the psychological thesis: what aesthetic properties a work seems to us to have depends not only on its nonaesthetic properties but also on the PDCs through which we perceive it (CA, 338).

According to Walton, a category is perceptually distinguishable if “membership is determined solely by features that can be perceived in a work when it is experienced in the normal manner” (CA, 339). More specifically, a work can be categorized into a PDC on the basis of being perceived as having certain standard, variable, and contra-standard properties, regardless of non-perceptual factors. A property of a work is standard with respect to a PDC just in case it tends to fit that work into the category in question (CA, 339, 348). A property is variable relative to a PDC just in case it is irrelevant to whether the work belongs to that category (CA, 339, 347–348). Finally, a property is contra-standard relative to a PDC just in case it tends to disqualify the work from that category (CA, 339, 352). Consider the category of painting: flatness and motionlessness are standard features; shapes, colors, and lines are variable; three-dimensionality would be contra-standard, thereby disqualifying certain artworks from being considered paintings. These three kinds of properties serve different aesthetic functions in the

⁴ The scope of aesthetic properties is controversial. Walton includes representational and resemblance properties as aesthetic (CA, 337), whereas Pettit (1983) excludes them. Walton also notes that many literary properties are not perceptual (CA, 335, fn. 5). Stacie Friend (2020) extends CA to literature. This paper, however, does not address the nature of aesthetic properties.

appreciation of a work, with variable properties being particularly aesthetically important (CA, 348).

By contrast, a category is a non-PDC if membership is determined necessarily by non-perceptual considerations of a work. For example, membership in the category of Brahms' music depends on non-perceptual factors—such as the composer of the music—and thus is not a PDC. The category of Brahmsian music, however, is a PDC, because a work can be categorized as such if it is heard as Brahms-style music solely by its sound, regardless of who composed it. In light of this, Walton restricts the relevant categories to those that are perceptually distinguishable, maintaining that only PDCs are such that works can be perceived within them (Walton, 2020, 81). Our perception of an artwork is altered by which of its nonaesthetic properties are standard, variable, or contra-standard relative to a given PDC (CA, 343).

Picasso's *Guernica*, for instance, can be viewed within both the category of painting and the imagined category of *guernicas*—whose members share the pattern of *Guernica*. It fits perfectly into both categories, yet each leads to a different perception of the work. When the piece is viewed as a painting, its flatness is taken as standard, and the pattern of *Guernica* is variable. It is then perceived as vital, dynamic, and disturbing, due to the expressiveness of its color surface. Conversely, when viewed as a *guernica*, its pattern becomes standard, while flatness is variable. It is then perceived as cold, lifeless, or perhaps boring or dull, since there may be other *guernicas* that have rolling, sharp, or jagged surfaces (CA, 347–348). This example, among others, shows that artworks should not be judged simply by what can be perceived in them, since the PDC through which we appreciate a work matters aesthetically. The next question, then, is whether *Guernica* is correctly perceived as a painting or a *guernica*. More generally, which PDC counts as correct for a given work?

Walton offers four criteria to determine whether a work is correctly perceived in a given category, based on the assumption that there is correct perception for a work (CA, 355–357). What follows are criteria for a work *W* to be correctly perceived in a category *C* (CA, 357):

- i) The presence in *W* of a relatively large number of standard features with respect to *C*.
- ii) *W* affords better aesthetic experience when perceived in *C*.

- iii) The artist of *W* intended it to be perceived in *C*.
- iv) *C* is well established in, and recognized by, the society in which *W* was produced.

Among these criteria, both (iii) and (iv) reflect the historical context of the work, while Walton considers (iii) the most important in determining a work's correct PDC, due to counterexamples to, and concerns with, the others (CA, 361). Given that a work's aesthetic properties depend on its correct PDC, and that the correct PDC is determined by historical context (especially authorial intention), it follows that a work's aesthetic properties are, in turn, determined by its historical context. The appreciation of artworks, therefore, cannot be separated from their historical contexts.⁵ In this sense, Walton incorporates both the contextualist and formalist view: a work's historical context determines its aesthetic properties, while perception remains the only way to judge them.

There is, however, an important distinction made by Walton (2020): the distinction between the category a work belongs to and the category in which a work is correctly perceived. He contends that a work may belong to a category, but that category may not be the one that reveals its aesthetic properties. For example, *Guernica* belongs to the category of guernicas, since it can be perceived as such, yet this category is not correct for determining its aesthetic properties, due to Picasso's intention. Conversely, the category in which a work is correctly perceived need not be the one it belongs to. For instance, if an artist intends to create a cubist painting, but it cannot be perceived as such—perhaps due to the artist's incompetence—it is still correctly perceived as a cubist painting, based on intention. Thus, the notion of the correct category and that of the category to which a work belongs are independent (Walton, 2020, 80). The four criteria, then, determine the correct category of a work, rather than the one it belongs to. This distinction allows Walton to avoid several potential problems.⁶

⁵ For discussions of criteria for determining a work's correct category, see Daniel Nathan (1973), Walton (1973), and Kiyohiro Sen (2022). Walton admits these criteria are inconclusive but retains historical context as essential (CA, 361–363). Whether a work has a single correct category, however, remains open (CA, 362–363; see also George Dickie & Kent Wilson (1995) for related concerns).

⁶ For example, Brian Laetz (2010) notes that Walton may conflate the correct category of a work with the category it belongs to. Madeleine Ransom (2020) addresses this via perceptual learning.

3. Challenge to CA: artifactuality

Contextualists, especially David Davies (2020), have raised serious challenges to Walton's thesis. The first concerns *artifactuality*, which Walton's notion of PDCs seems unable to accommodate. Recall that, according to Walton, a work belongs to a PDC if it can be perceived as such. However, many philosophers agree that when we engage appreciatively with, say, a visual artwork, we perceive it as issuing from an artist's agency. We apprehend a canvas as "an artistic, rather than physical, medium, that is, as composed of brushstrokes rather than mark, and design rather than pattern" (Davies, 2020, 78).

To illustrate the problem, Davies draws on Danto's example of a canvas that is perceptually indistinguishable from Rembrandt's *Polish Rider* yet was produced by an explosion in a paint factory (Davies, 2020, 78). Since the category of painting is a PDC, this canvas qualifies as a painting by Walton's definition, even though it is neither an artifact nor an artwork. In other words, members of this category are not required to be artifacts issuing from an artist's agency; some non-artifacts, or even non-artworks, can fall under it. As a result, the category itself cannot lead us to perceive a work's nonaesthetic properties as the properties of a thing made—as issuing from an artist's agency—but only as properties of a colored surface. This conflicts with the widely held view that we perceive artworks as artifacts issued from an artist's agency.

More generally, because artifactuality is a non-perceptual consideration, it cannot serve as a standard property in the categorization of any PDC. Consequently, PDCs cannot lead us to perceive an artwork as an artifact, or as something created through artistic agency, since their members are not assumed to be artifacts. Davies therefore argues that the appreciation of artworks cannot be adequately accounted for by PDCs (Davies, 2020, 78). If we are to perceive a work as an artifact within a category of art, the standard properties of that category must include artifactuality. In this sense, familiar art categories such as "painting," "film," or "music," when used to appreciate artworks, cannot count as PDCs in Walton's sense, since their standard properties must incorporate artifactuality.

In response, Walton argues that some kinds of PDCs (I call them *apparent categories*) can address the challenge (Walton, 2020, 82–83). He suggests that apparent categories such as "things apparently painted by someone" or "apparent artifacts" can satisfy the assumption, emphasized

by Davies, that we perceive artworks as artifacts. For instance, the brushstrokes in van Gogh's *The Starry Night* make it appear as though it was painted by him—or at least by someone. Because it can be perceived as something painted by someone, the work belongs to the category of things apparently painted by someone. Crucially, this categorization depends solely on the work's perceptual properties. Moreover, as Walton notes, “appreciators are often interested in the appearance itself” (Walton, 2015, 37; see also Walton, 2020, 82–83, 83, fn. 6), and we may thereby perceive objects in such apparent categories as artifacts precisely because they appear to be artifacts. Thus, while Davies's challenge is acknowledged and familiar art categories cannot be understood as PDCs, it does not follow that artwork appreciation cannot be achieved via PDCs. We need not abandon PDCs altogether, since apparent categories, Walton suggests, may help meet the challenge.

However, I argue that Walton's appeal to appearance fails in two respects: it lacks practical applicability, and it cannot fundamentally resolve Davies's challenge. As regards the first respect, since Walton holds that the artist's intention is the most important criterion for determining a work's correct category, it is doubtful that artists would intend their works to be correctly perceived in apparent categories. Schoenberg's composition illustrates this point: he intended his works to be correctly perceived as twelve-tone music, understood in Davies's terms, not as apparent twelve-tone music (CA, 360–361). Similarly, Picasso intended *Guernica* to be viewed as a cubist painting, not as an apparent cubist painting. If artists rarely intend their works to be perceived in apparent categories, then even if such categories enable us to perceive a work as an artifact, the problem of artifactuality remains unresolved. Artists generally intend their works to be correctly perceived within categories of art, as Davies construes them.

Some may argue that the other criteria—(i), (ii), and (iv)—could still establish that a work is correctly perceived within an apparent category, thereby addressing Davies's challenge. However, each of these criteria faces distinct difficulties. With respect to (i), *Guernica* could be equally well perceived as an apparent cubist painting or as an apparent guernicas, with no decisive reason for privileging one category over the other. As for (ii), one could always construct *ad hoc* categories for a work, effectively transforming a tenth-rate piece into a masterpiece (CA, 359–360). Criterion (iv) encounters the same limitation as (iii): a work's contemporaries rarely establish artworks within apparent categories. Just as *Guernica* was recognized and appreciated in its time as a cubist painting, not as an apparent cubist painting,

Monet's *Impression, Sunrise* was similarly established within the category of impressionist painting, not as an apparent impressionist painting. If criterion (iv), like (iii), has limited applicability, then, even if apparent categories allow us to perceive objects as artifacts, they are rarely the correct categories. Consequently, we generally need to rely on non-PDCs—categories of art in Davies's sense—to correctly perceive artworks. The remaining criteria, therefore, also fail to meet the challenge.⁷

As regards the second respect, even if we grant that most artists intend their works to be perceived in apparent categories, such categories cannot, strictly speaking, enable us to perceive a work as an artifact. As Walton himself notes, “appearances need not correspond to reality” (Walton, 2015, 37). Something may appear to be an artifact without actually being one, yet it can still be categorized within an apparent category and perceived accordingly. For instance, we can imagine an object that is perceptually indistinguishable from *The Starry Night* but was produced by an explosion in a paint factory—meaning that it is neither an artifact nor an artwork. Because it appears to be something painted by someone, it can be categorized within an apparent category.

If this is so, however, Davies's challenge remains unresolved. We do not perceive objects in apparent categories as artifacts, since members of such categories are not assumed to be artifacts. Some non-artifacts and non-artworks can be categorized within them, since PDCs, by definition, cannot be categorized based on artifactuality. At best, then, apparent categories allow us to perceive an artwork as *apparently* a thing made, not as *actually* an artifact. But this is unsatisfactory: we need to perceive a work as actually an artifact, rather than merely as apparently one. Thus, perceiving a work through an apparent category inevitably fails to lead us to perceive it as an artifact. More generally, since the categorization of any PDC cannot, by definition, involve artifactuality—a non-perceptual consideration—perceptual properties alone can never enable us to perceive a work as actually an artifact. The notion of PDC, as Walton construes it, should therefore be abandoned.

⁷ One might object that artworks are sometimes categorized posthumously to construct a compelling art-historical narrative, which does not fit any of these four criteria—for instance, Manet's paintings as proto-Modernist. However, such classifications still appeal to categories of art, rarely to apparent categories, and thus do not resolve the problem of practical applicability. I thank Prof. Matteo Ravasio for this point.

4. Challenge to CA: forgery

The problem of artifactuality shows that PDCs, as defined by Walton, cannot accommodate an essential feature of art. An equally serious challenge concerns forgery. Walton acknowledges that CA has difficulty accounting for the aesthetic difference between forgeries and originals (Walton, 2020, 82). According to contextualists, even when a forgery is perceptually indistinguishable from the original, the two differ aesthetically due to their distinct historical contexts of origin. This contextual difference renders them aesthetically distinct. However, because they share the same perceptual properties, they would, on Walton's account, fall under the same PDC and thus be correctly perceived as having the same aesthetic properties. Consequently, CA appears unable to explain how forgeries and originals can differ aesthetically.

Walton offers two responses to this challenge. First, he argues that we do not typically perceive or experience objects under the category of forgery or as things forged (Walton, 2020, 83). Perceiving such objects under these categories may have no effect on our perceptual experience. Indeed, he suggests, the difference between forgeries and originals may not be aesthetic at all, but rather artistic—that is, a non-perceptual one (Walton, 2020, 84, fn. 7). For example, we often value the “authenticity” of originals, but if we acknowledge a close connection between the aesthetic and the perceptual, such a value would not qualify as aesthetic. If this is right, then the difference between forgeries and originals, as asserted by contextualists, amounts merely to a value judgment. On this view, the problem of forgery falls outside the scope of CA, which is concerned with perceptual differences. The challenge, then, is sidestepped.

Walton's second response grants that even if the difference between forgeries and originals is an aesthetic one, their differing historical contexts may result in their being correctly perceived in different categories, and thus in their possessing different aesthetic properties. Importantly, the relevant categories may themselves be perceptually distinguishable in the strongest sense (Walton, 2020, 83). For instance, because originals and forgeries are produced in different manners, the original may be correctly perceived as, say, a painting or an apparent painting, whereas the forgery may not be correctly perceived in the same way. Given that their correct categories are distinct, they may indeed differ aesthetically. A similar point is already present in CA: even if two artworks are perceptually indistinguishable, they may nonetheless differ

aesthetically if they were created with different authorial intentions (CA, 364). In this way, the challenge from forgery appears to attack a straw man.

However, I argue that forgery is not entirely excluded from the discussion in CA, regardless of whether we typically perceive objects under the category of forgery. To begin with, Walton himself acknowledges that experts do sometimes perceive works as forgeries. For instance, some specialists perceive certain paintings as “van Meegeren-forgeries-of-Vermeer” (Walton, 2020, 83). In such a case—though atypical—works are indeed perceived within the category of forgery, thereby altering our perceptual experience. Consequently, at least some forgeries do differ aesthetically from their originals. The difference between forgeries and originals, in such cases, is not merely artistic but also aesthetic.

Moreover, the aesthetic difference between forgeries and originals does not rest fundamentally on perception. Even if we rarely—or never—perceive a work as a forgery or experience it differently, this does not affect the aesthetic properties it possesses. A comparable case helps illustrate this point. Suppose that *Guernica*’s correct category is the imagined category of *guernicas*; it would still possess aesthetic properties such as coldness and lifelessness, even if no one ever learned to perceive it as such. Our perceptual experience does not determine the aesthetic properties a forgery or an original possesses, because this is ultimately a metaphysical matter: whether they possess, in metaphysical terms, the same set of aesthetic properties—not a matter of how we happen to perceive or experience them. This claim rests on the view that perception plays an epistemic, rather than a metaphysical, role in artwork appreciation: it is our only means of discovering a work’s aesthetic properties. Accordingly, the historical context of a forgery determines the category in which it is metaphysically correctly perceived, and this, in turn, determines its aesthetic properties—even if we never perceive it as a forgery. The question, then, is whether Walton’s notion of PDCs can accommodate this aesthetic difference.

I agree with Walton’s claim that the historical contexts of forgeries and originals determine the correct category for perceiving them—a point already present in CA. However, the concept of PDCs cannot account for their aesthetic differences. To determine whether a forged object differs aesthetically from the original, we must correctly perceive it in the category of forgery. But this category is not a PDC: categorizing a work as a forgery depends essentially on its historical context; one cannot identify an object as a forgery solely by its perceptual properties.

Such categorization necessarily involves non-perceptual considerations, including who the artist was and which work was created first. For example, imagine two versions of *The Starry Night* that are perceptually indistinguishable, one of which is a forgery. Given their identical perceptual properties, we cannot determine which is the forgery and which is the original merely through perception. Only by appealing to their respective historical contexts—such as authorship and date of creation—can we establish which one is forged.

Some might wonder whether a forgery could nonetheless be perceptually distinguishable from the original, and thus whether the category of forgery could be a PDC. For instance, we might witness the act of forging, or the forged painting might include a caption that reads “This is a forgery.” The first case can be set aside immediately, since such a process is not among the object’s perceptual properties on which PDC categorization depends. The second case, however, would lead to a miscategorization: some members of the category of forgery would not be genuine forgeries. Imagine, for instance, an original painting on which the artist, for some reason, inscribes the caption “This is a forgery.” If the categorization of forgery depends solely on a work’s perceptual properties, an original could be categorized as a forgery, which is clearly absurd.

Thus, determining whether an object is a forgery necessarily requires appealing to its historical context—considerations such as authorship and order of creation—which are not perceptual. The category of forgery, then, is not a PDC. But if determining a forgery’s aesthetic properties depends on correctly perceiving it as a forgery, then the correct category that accounts for the aesthetic difference between forgeries and originals cannot be a PDC.

5. Abandoning the restriction to PDCs

Since PDCs cannot accommodate the contextualists’ challenges, they should be abandoned in the context of artwork appreciation. Instead, appreciation should be carried out through non-PDCs. This, however, raises an immediate worry that runs counter to a widely accepted intuition: that the aesthetic properties of artworks are to be perceived, and that perception is the only means of judging them. I argue that appreciating a work through non-PDCs does not violate this intuition. This, in turn, may point toward a revised version of CA.

Walton does not deny that some non-PDCs are aesthetically relevant (Walton, 2020, 81). In particular, he acknowledges that aesthetic property categories fall into this group, since certain (second-order) aesthetic properties of a work depend on them (Walton, 2020, 80–81; CA, 339). For example, to perceive a film as a horror movie, one must first correctly perceive it within another appropriate category—say, that of a zombie movie—in order to determine whether it possesses the aesthetic property of horridness, and thus whether it can be perceived as a horror movie. But, as previously noted, correctly perceiving a work as a zombie movie requires appealing to its historical context, particularly the artist’s intention. Therefore, aesthetic property categories are not PDCs, since categorization into them necessarily depends—albeit indirectly—on non-perceptual factors. Nonetheless, these categories are aesthetically relevant: some (second-order) aesthetic properties depend on them. In such cases, the standard properties of the category (e.g., the horridness of a film) count toward membership, while variable or contra-standard properties become salient in the perception of a work’s second-order aesthetic properties (Walton, 2020, 81).

Thus, even when we appreciate a work through an aesthetic property category, perception—not inference or cognitive penetration—remains the only means of judging a work aesthetically. The work must still be perceived within this kind of category in order to determine its aesthetic properties. Moreover, Walton’s psychological thesis is preserved: perceiving a work in different categories—including non-PDCs—leads us to perceive different aesthetic properties, depending on whether a work’s aesthetic property is standard, variable, or contra-standard relative to the category in which it is correctly perceived.

In this sense, Walton need not restrict CA to PDCs, so long as doing so does not conflict with the assumption that aesthetic properties are to be perceived. On the contrary, such a restriction renders his account vulnerable and seemingly excluding non-PDCs from aesthetic relevance. Furthermore, the problems of artifactuality and forgery can be addressed without undermining this assumption: categories of art can be constructed in Davies’s sense, and the category of forgery can be used to account for the aesthetic difference between forgeries and originals. CA thus moves closer to contextualism without entirely rejecting formalism.

6. Conclusion

I have argued that Walton fails to address the challenges posed by contextualists—namely, the problems of artifactuality and forgery. This failure stems from his continued adherence to PDCs. Moreover, his restriction to PDCs is unwarranted. I have shown that artwork appreciation need not be confined to PDCs, so long as this does not violate the assumption that aesthetic properties are to be perceived. This suggests a revised contextualist version of CA—one that retains the central role of perception, while incorporating historical context as a metaphysical determinant of aesthetic properties. Such a view brings CA into closer alignment with contextualism, without abandoning its formalist foundation. We must recognize the essential role played by a work's historical context. Only then can we perceive art correctly.⁸

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⁸ I sincerely thank Prof. Szu-Yen Lin for his valuable help.

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Tilting Images: Toward a Dialectical Theory of the Artwork. Including a Postscript on a Performance by Florentina Holzinger

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ABSTRACT. The concept of the artwork (or ‘work of art’) has been repeatedly challenged within philosophical aesthetics. Performative and post-autonomous art practices, as well as post-metaphysical philosophies, have shifted the paradigm from artefact-based to event- and experience-based models of art, and have questioned the very possibility of isolating art as a distinct ‘work’. To address these challenges, this paper proposes a dialectical reformulation of the concept of the artwork: rather than being defined by fixed properties, the artwork exists with interrelated yet opposing qualities. Namely, it is bound to a finite temporality (event-like structure), its reception (inseparability from experience), and to the art-external world (oscillation between mimesis and transcendence). Drawing on art-theoretical debates and Florentina Holzinger’s performance art as a test case, the paper illustrates how such a dialectical approach offers a more nuanced understanding of contemporary art than both traditional theories that center the concept of the artwork, and contemporary theories that dismiss it.

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1. Introduction: Florentina Holzinger Fades Away – and So Does the Artwork

In May 2022, Florentina Holzinger and her performance collective staged a one-time show in an abandoned parking lot somewhere in the middle of nowhere in West Berlin.² A few hundred spectators – including the author of this paper – gathered on a sunny early evening for the roughly one-hour-long performance with the suggestive title *Étude for Disappearing*. Standing behind makeshift barriers, they could observe Holzinger and her group performing dance, spectacular stunts, choreographed fights drenched in fake blood, and a musical performance on eight harps. After some time, Holzinger herself – naked and already covered in paint and dust – performed a strangely beautiful dance with a leopard-print car (Figure 1). While the car at first drifted around her in circles – making the audience noticeably concerned about the vulnerability of Holzinger’s body –, after a few moments, she climbed onto the roof of the car, striking various poses on the moving vehicle. During all of that, the car blew pink dust into the air, forming a surreal yet fascinating visual arrangement. The encounter between woman and car, at first seeming ominous, even dangerous, quickly tilted into a weirdly symbiotic connection between machine and human.



*Figure 1: Florentina Holzinger’s dance with a car, snippet of *Étude for Disappearing* (2022).*

Photos by Emil Egenbauer, © the artist/Schinkel Pavillon.

2 Florentina Holzinger: *Étude für Disappearing*. Komposition für acht Körper, fünf Harfen und ein Auto. 22.05.2022, Disappearing Berlin/Schinkel Pavillon Berlin.

Holzinger's dance with the leopard-print car is a paradigmatic example of the artistic style she has perfected over the last few years: she and her all-non-cis-male performers predominantly perform naked, and their style is located within a spectrum of modern dance, musical theatre, circus artistry, extreme sports, body-mutilation, and sketch comedy. Her art, however, is *not* concerned with creating enduring objects or a clear boundary between art and spheres of non-art. On the contrary, as virtually no documentation of the *Disappearing* show was produced, it vanished into nothingness as quickly as the pink dust emanating from the car, so that only the few hundred attendees of the event even remember that this 'artwork' has ever existed.

This *Étude* provides a perfect example to explain why the concept of an 'artwork' (or 'work of art') has virtually vanished from academic discourse in the last decades (cf. Adajian 2024, Rowe 2017): when art does not predominantly appear as an isolated artefact but rather as an ephemeral event, many theorists have argued that it might be better to abandon this concept altogether. In this paper – concerning questions of the *ontology of art*³ – I will argue against this strategy. My hypothesis in the following is that the challenges contemporary art poses can be a starting point for developing a more convincing concept of the artwork. Rather than conceptualizing it as a spatiotemporally extended, enduring substance, we must think of it as *dialectically* torn between extremes – between itself and its own opposites. The *artwork* is (a) an *event* we collectively experience, and (b) its ontology lies within (and only within) our *collective experience* as an event. Moreover, it can (c) be described as a *tilting image* – an appearance oscillating between *mimesis* and *transcendence*. To argue for these claims, I will reconstruct three contemporary challenges for the concept of the artwork (section 2), and, subsequently, conceptualize a dialectical notion of the artwork, learning from these challenges (sections 3–4). To illustrate the challenges and test my conceptualization, I will – occasionally during the conceptual parts of this paper and in depth within its postscript (section 5) – return to Holzinger. Readers who are uninterested in art ontology but want to know how Holzinger's shocking and fascinating aesthetics can be interpreted from a philosophical perspective may therefore wish to skip directly to the postscript.

3 I.e., the question of what art is: How does it appear? What are its qualities? What does it do?

2. Art Without Work: Contemporary Challenges to the Concept of the Artwork

The challenges the concept of the artwork faces within theory today can be roughly condensed into three groups: (1) the *performative*, (2) the *post-metaphysical*, and (3) the *post-autonomous* objection.

2.1. The Performative Turn and the Event-Structure of (Contemporary) Art

The performative turn within art since the 1960s has been broadly researched (cf. Davies 2011, von Hantelmann 2014). As performances create temporally finite, unrepeatable events rather than artefacts, many theories of performative art conclude that the concept of the artwork should be abandoned altogether. Holzinger's Disappearing-performance really was a disappearing performance: since it was not conceived for re-performances and no documentation was published, there simply was nothing that remained of the performance. This finitude is, as Erika Fischer-Lichte argues, precisely the point of performative art:

the ephemerality of the event, its uniqueness, and singularity [are] a focal point [...]. Materiality is not given as an artefact but occurs as the result of the performative generation of corporeality, spatiality, and tonality [...]. The performance's aestheticity is manifested in its nature as event [Ereignis] (Fischer-Lichte 2008, p. 162).

According to Fischer-Lichte, performative art *en bloc* eludes the category of the artwork. While this category suggests spatiotemporally extended and enduring materiality, performances rely on a fleeting 'materiality' of co-presence of bodies, sound, and space. Thus, Fischer-Lichte argues for a replacement of the category of the artwork with the category of the *event* within the field of performance art: performances are something that *happens* rather than *is*.

Fischer-Lichte's objections can be extended beyond the field of performance art, as very similar problems occur within fields like jazz (cf. Okiji 2018), installation art (cf. Rebentisch 2012); and even within more classical fields like plastic art, where reception *also* exhibits an event-like structure (cf. Davies 2004, Lyotard 1988). The more materially we think about what art *is and does*, the less convincing the artefact model seems.

2.2. Post-Metaphysical Philosophy and the Paradigm of Experiential Aesthetics

If art exists only – or at least *primarily* – as an event, then the act of reception becomes increasingly important: events exist not as artefacts but within (and *only within*) the *experiences* of those who attend them (cf. Fischer-Lichte 2008). This is the second challenge to the concept of the artwork. Contemporary pieces of art, like performances and self-destroying or decaying artworks, rely heavily on the subjects' perception of them – as they will, sooner or later, only exist within their memories.

This shift within art coincides with a shift within theory. Many contemporary philosophies of art operate within a *post-metaphysical framework* – i.e., they define aesthetic objects not via a metaphysical definition of 'the' artwork, but via the experiences we have with them (cf. von Hantelmann 2014, Seel 2004, Deleuze/Guattari 1994, Rebentisch 2012). Aesthetic theories in general shifted from object-centered to experience-centered approaches, analyzing the cognitive, affective, or even neurological effects triggered by the reception of art (cf. Truran 2022, Kappelhoff/Lehmann 2019, Kappelhoff 2018, Robson/Currie 2024).

Within German aesthetics, Rüdiger Bubner has set off this methodological shift from *art-work* to *art-reception*. Rather than “committing art to the presentation of truth” (Bubner 1989, p. 19, my translation), Bubner claims that philosophy ought to “methodically [...] depart from aesthetic experience”: “The analysis [...] strictly sticks to the impact stemming from the aesthetic phenomenon, in which ‘art’ alone comes to consciousness” (ibid., p. 34, my translation). Within the experience we have with art lies what Bubner regards as the point of art: a critical self-reflection of our judgments. Juliane Rebentisch has updated Bubner's neo-Kantian framework as follows: “All art confronts us with the historical and cultural dimensions of our judgment practices, because art is never fully absorbed in any of our definitions [Bestimmungen]” (Rebentisch 2013, p. 55, my translation). Hence, the shift toward experiential aesthetics is motivated by a deeper interest in what art actually does. Rather than looking for a metaphysical truth within 'the' artwork, so the post-metaphysical claim goes, philosophy ought to concentrate on what actually happens when human beings experience art.

2.3. Post-Autonomy and the Border-Crossings of Contemporary Art

The specter of post-autonomy may be *the* challenge not only for the concept of the artwork but for modern theories of art as such. As has often been noted, modernism constantly produced “artworks that were perceptually indiscernible from non-artworks” (Rowe 2017, p. 484).⁴ And Juliane Rebentisch has convincingly argued that the common characteristic of the so-called “contemporaries” is to “cross borders” between art and non-art (cf. Rebentisch 2013, cf. also Marchart 2019, Bishop 2004) – Holzinger’s absorption of practices other than art (such as circus, trash-movies, extreme sports, etc.) is again a good example of this. ‘Post-autonomous’ is the concept that aims to describe this wide variety of modernist and postmodernist art that deliberately blurs the lines between art and non-art – ranging from Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917) to Tiravanija’s *untitled (free)* (1992).

Post-autonomy poses the third challenge the concept of the artwork faces today. The term ‘artwork’ serves, not least, the purpose of differentiating art from non-art and containing it inside a sealed-off artefact. However, within an artistic situation where this limitation is constantly undermined by art itself, this endeavor seems at best pointless, and at worst ignorant of what art has done within the last 100 years (cf. Lopes 2014). Hence, many theorists have – instead of defining art via features of the artwork – fled to contextual definitions, such as defining art via the institutions that stage it (cf. Fischer-Lichte 2008, Dickie 1984, Danto 1981). These renunciations of defining art substantively – i.e., by stating what art *does* – show how much the concept of the artwork has lost its self-evidence.

3. In Defense of the Artwork: A Dialectical Re-Conceptualization

As announced at the beginning, I think that the concept of the artwork is capable of meeting the challenges I have identified in the previous section – the *event* challenge, the *reception* challenge, and the *post-autonomous* challenge. However, the concept of the artwork must therefore be re-conceptualized for this purpose. But before doing that, let me briefly elaborate

⁴ It is one of the central paradoxes of modernism that it at the same time brings forth and negates art's autonomy. Adorno has conceptualized this paradox as “[a]rt's double character” (1997, p. 5).

why we should do that: What is at stake? What does art theory lose when this concept is abandoned?

Frankly speaking: a lot. Not only is the concept of the artwork at the center of virtually all philosophical aesthetics from Schelling to Adorno. Even worse, a series of philosophical categories⁵ necessary for the interpretation of art seems to rely on this concept – first and foremost: the category of *form*. Without a concept of an *artwork* as a formed entity, it seems impossible to uphold the notion of form. Consequently, many theories of art that denounced the concept of the artwork (cf. Fischer-Lichte 2008, Bubner 1989, Davies 2004) also abandoned the notion of form.

However, the loss of this concept puts not only *art criticism* but also mere *art interpretation* at stake. Moreover, art *as* criticism is denounced. As a wide range of theories has (convincingly) argued, art criticizes societal practices via its formal interventions: the artwork's form questions our forms of life, our forms of thinking, our societal forms, etc. (cf. Adorno 1997, Bertram 2019, Rebentisch 2013). If art no longer appears as 'formed work', it is hard to argue that it criticizes our forms of living.

Yet another problem of letting go of the category of the artwork lies in the fact that it almost inevitably implies a certain arbitrariness with regard to aesthetic phenomena. Without this concept, many theorists concerned with the definition of art take refuge in the nominalist strategy of stating that something is art whenever it is *received*, *declared*, or *experienced* as art (or, in the institutionalized variation: declared to be art by gatekeepers like collectors, curators, etc. [cf. Dickie 1984, Danto 1981] – an even more problematic notion as it relies on the questionable authority of these gatekeepers). This strategy, however, poses its own difficulties. Let us turn back to Bubner for a moment. His intervention aimed, as shown, at doing justice to art, namely the experiences we have with it. Paradoxically, this intervention seems to have the opposite effect: when focusing primarily on the experiences that art triggers, art is reduced precisely to that – a mere trigger for a subject seeking experiences (e.g. to authentically *feel*⁶). This is especially vivid in the broad trend of philosophical aesthetics to dismiss art as a privileged mode of having aesthetic experiences – a dismissal which has led to a broad interest in, for example, aesthetics of everyday experience (cf. Saito 2007), and nature aesthetics (cf.

5 Such candidates may be: coherence; mediation (resp. unity/fragmentation); necessity; material; etc.

6 For a meta-critique of such approaches and the artworks they favor cf. Kornbluh 2024.

Carlson/Berleant 2004). These approaches are symptomatic of how the abandonment of the notion of the artwork leads to a de-valorization of art – a tragically ironic effect of the attempt of philosophers like Bubner to shift our focus to the experience of art.

To avoid these inconvenient effects of abandoning the term ‘artwork’, I will propose a dialectical re-formulation. By ‘dialectical’ I mean that the artwork is best defined as torn between extremes – between itself as a stable object and its opposites (*event*, *experience*, *non-art*). Hence, my point is *not* to refute the challenges, but, on the contrary, to learn from them.

3.1. The Artwork as a Fleeting Image

Sometimes revolutions reveal something that has always been true but could only be fully recognized through that very revolution. This is also true for the revolutions within art (cf. Adorno 2006). Something like that may have happened through the performative turn within the arts: it tore down the notion that artworks endure infinitely and revealed their event-character.

However, this revolution – and the *event-challenge* as such – is misunderstood when it is delimited to the performance arts only (cf. Fischer-Lichte 2008), and it is also misunderstood when it is read as a destruction of the notion of art as an object – or as *objective* (cf. Davies 2004). Instead, it draws our attention to *how* this object ought to be thought of. It is an *appearing* object (cf. Seel 2004). An appearance is always temporally finite, an event: something that appears vanishes sooner or later. We receive *all* artworks not as artefacts, but as appearing, fleeting phenomena; and not only are performances unrepeatable, but every act of art reception is. The act of looking at a painting and receiving its moments – letting the colors enchant us, deciphering figures, etc. – is as temporally finite and unrepeatable as the act of attending a performance. The opposition posited by performance theorists like Fischer-Lichte – object art here, event art there – is a false one.

The appearing artwork is an event – this statement, however, is not one of identity. We must understand it as a dialectical proposition, expressing an inherent contradiction. Within the artwork lies the contradiction between itself as art-*work* and itself as the (art-)event of its *appearing*. If the event-side of the artwork is the fleeting, vanishing side of it, its dialectical counterpart is

its stable, fixed, enduring one. Adorno has put this contradiction in the pair of terms “image [Bild]” and “*apparition*” (French for ‘celestial phenomenon’). He writes:

If *apparition* is that which illuminates and touches, the image is the paradoxical effort to transfix this most fleeting instant [...]. [The artwork’s] *apparition*, which makes [it] an image, always at the same time destroys [its] imagery [Bildwesen]. (Adorno 1997, pp. 83-85, transl. revised)

The tension between apparition and image is the tension of the artwork with itself, between its work-properties and its event-properties – Adorno compares the apparition of artworks with fireworks: appearing and disappearing at the same time (cf. *ibid.*, p. 81). Performances radicalize the event-properties (and thereby shed light on the event structure of all art), yet also create artworks that appear and vanish simultaneously. Not without leaving traces, though: when we attend a performance, certain images will stick in our minds – leaving lasting traces of finite events.⁷ The parts of the artwork – performative or not – temporarily assemble in a way that allows us to analyze and experience it as a ‘work’. Fleetingness (event) and imagery (work) form a paradox – artworks are fleeting images.

3.2. The Artwork as a Collective Experience

This solution of the first challenge already hints toward the one for the *post-metaphysical* challenge: the *work*-qualities of the artwork exist within – and *only* within – its reception, i.e., within the *experiences* the recipient has with it. Bubner is correct: everything important about art lies within the experiences it triggers. But again, the elimination of the term ‘artwork’ from philosophy is the wrong reaction to this insight.

Instead, we should think of artworks as *experienced entities* – i.e., the artwork is neither merely an object nor merely within the subject but *oscillating between subject and object* (cf. Rebentisch 2013). Artworks and aesthetic experiences are mutually constitutive: the artwork exists only through its reception (subject), while the recipient’s experience depends on the material work-character (object) of the received art.

⁷ Analogously, in non-visual art media like music, melodies or auditive impressions will stick in our minds.

Yet again, both sides – subject and object, experience and work – are conflicting. This becomes explicit in conflicts about interpretations (cf. Bertram 2019). The artwork exists only in and through its reception, yet the recipient is not an isolated subject but always part of a collective of recipients. Thus, the subject’s interpretation – and even their perception of what the artwork *is* – is always situated within a multiplicity of other interpretations that may differ fundamentally from their own. These divergences express the underlying tension between subject and object: between the individual act of interpretation and the objectivity that every interpretation presupposes. The ontology of the artwork is a *collective experience* – it exists within those who receive it; it is torn between collective and individual reception. Whenever one side is isolated, the conception is wrong: either an object-uninterested experiential aesthetic; or, conversely, experience-uninterested art history. This conception must be combined with the fleeting-image definition: the artwork is a *collective experience of a fleeting image*. It consists in this double contradiction – stable and fleeting, collectively and individually experienced.

3.3. The Artwork as Tilting Image

The third, *post-autonomous* challenge questions if art can be delimited from non-art, and thus if one can answer the question of what art *is* – or better: what art *does*. In the following, I sketch out a dialectical conception of art’s course of action: *Art oscillates between world-representation (mimesis) and transcendence (utopia)*.

(i) *Mimesis*: Art is not sealed off from non-art. On the contrary, it reflects the outside world and critically engages with its forms of life (cf. Bertram 2019, Jaeggi 2018). And it does so mimetically (μίμησις), i.e., art imitates non-art, transforms itself into it, “appropriates [it] in a differentiated manner” (Bertram 2019, p. 127). This mimesis has a critical aim: art represents (or *repeats*) the world as it is, in order to expose its flaws. *Within every artwork lies a – however marginal – mimetic, realist impulse.*

(ii) *Utopia*: At the same time, art transcends the existing. It creates a non-place (οὐ τόπος), a non-existent reality: its fleeting images catapult the recipient out of her mode of everyday experience (cf. Seel 2004). Art’s constructions make the familiar seem unfamiliar (cf. Cavell 1988) and let ephemeral fragments of possible – of *better* – worlds appear (cf. Adorno 1997). We can subsume all these aspects – which, of course, have very diverse forms within the concrete artworks –

under the category of *transcendence* (or *utopia*): art departs from everyday life and lets something else appear. *Within all artworks lies a – however marginal – anti-representational, utopian impulse.*

Clearly, (i) and (ii) contradict each other. However, both are dialectically intertwined, i.e., the artwork oscillates between them. Specific artworks may tend more to one of the poles (while Brecht's *Dreigroschenoper* [1928] is mainly concerned with a mimesis of capitalist demoralization, Kandinsky's *Yellow-Red-Blue* [1925] releases the spectator from her everyday experience). Still, every artwork possesses both features (Brecht's revolutionary acting techniques, after all, aimed to escape everyday ways of interacting with the world; and Kandinsky's art critically reflects the geometrical rationalization of life under Fordist capitalism).

This double-faced nature of the artwork is also observable in the way we perceive it. At the same time, artworks confront us with a representation of the world as it is, *and* a utopian defamiliarization. For this strange and estranging appearance of the artwork, I want to propose the *metaphor of the tilting image*. Tilting images, as popularized within philosophy by Wittgenstein, are pictures that capture two mutually exclusive figures within one picture – famous examples include images that show both an old and a young version of a woman's face, two faces and a vase, or a rabbit and a duck. The interesting aspect of tilting images lies in their phenomenology: when we look at a tilting image, we can only see one of the two figures, but occasionally our perception 'tilts' and we see, within a sudden shift, the other figure – Wittgenstein calls this moment the "change of aspect [Aspektwechsel]" (Wittgenstein 1972, p. 195 [II/xi]). Our experience when perceiving an artwork functions analogously: in one moment, what we experience seems like a copy of what we know all too well (the infamous 'mirror' art holds up to us); and yet in the next moment, what we experience is totally distinct from our everyday life, be it horrific or enchanting, be it abstract or estranging – everything seems unfamiliar. Just like within the observation of a tilting image, it is very hard for us to see both at the same time (after all, mimesis and transcendence are mutually exclusive). Instead, our perception tilts between the extremes: mimesis and transcendence – world-representation and utopian otherness.

This re-definition can solve the problems caused by post-autonomy: the fact that art is not clearly delimited from non-art now appears as a commonplace. Art – not exclusively, but constitutively – mimics reality, hence it is not sealed off from non-art. Again, contemporary art confronts us with something that is true for all art: the boundary between art and non-art is not

only porous (cf. Rebentisch 2013), but also functions as a semi-permeable membrane, constantly allowing exchange between these two spheres. Such exchange (*mimesis*) is as much a constitutive characteristic of the artwork as the utopian departure from non-art (*transcendence*).

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that – despite the challenges of contemporary art – it is still possible and useful to refer to pieces of art as *artworks*. My investigations have led to two theses about the artwork – one regarding its (i) *ontology*, one regarding its (ii) *appearance*:

(i) *Artworks are collectively experienced events.* The ontology of the artwork lies within the collectively experienced event of its reception. We experience works as ephemeral events, yet within our (collective) memory something remains: something we can call – and analyze as – artworks.

(ii) *Artworks appear as tilting images – oscillating between mimesis and transcendence.* Artworks copy the world and transcend it at the same time. Thus, we experience them as paradoxical appearances that tilt between extremes: representing the world as it is *and* envisioning a utopian otherness.

My definitions – as they make claims about what art *is and does* – can also substitute for tautological or institutional definitions of art (‘art is what is perceived as such [by gatekeepers]’). They contribute to specifying the conditions under which an entity can be considered an artwork.

5. Postscript: The Tilting Images of Florentina Holzinger

Let me now turn back to Florentina Holzinger’s performance described at the beginning to analyze it further and thereby test the framework of the artwork developed in this paper. To state the obvious first: Holzinger’s dance with a car within a cloud of pink dust is not an artefact but, like every artwork, a *fleeting image existing in collective experience*. Its ontology is situated within a double contradiction: appearing as a finite event *and* possessing work-like, persisting

characteristics; existing in the outside world *and* being accessible only through the experience of its recipients.

Furthermore, the artwork performed by Holzinger appears as a tilting image oscillating between (i) *mimesis* and (ii) *transcendence*:

(i) Holzinger's performances circle around the *relation between society and the (non-cis-male) body*. Her starting point is the (potential or actual) violence inflicted upon that body – it is staged as endangered and potentially destroyed. During Holzinger's dance with a car, the audience was notably worried about the safety of her body. The moving arrangement mimicked the way the female-coded body is exposed to the violence of a gaze of (predominantly male) spectators in everyday life, often together with cars (as in sexist commercials and calendars). Holzinger exposes the violence incorporated in these regimes of enacting for the gaze by making actual the latent: by bringing her body into danger. She thereby unveils what is usually hidden in art and society – its potential and actual violence – and turns it into fleeting images that mimic the dystopian status quo of societal body mutilation and patriarchal voyeurism.

(ii) This, however, is only half the story. The scene appears at the same time as the exact opposite. The way the danger and the violence are staged by Holzinger is distinct from the uninterest we usually show toward them: audience and co-performers care for the security of this body. Even more, we as spectators – exactly *because* of the violence threatening these bodies – cease to see these bodies the way we are used to seeing them: we are briefly emancipated from the societal gaze regimes in which we are inevitably engaged every day. Rather than seeing the body as a signifier for power structures (age, beauty, gender, etc.), we see it as endangered and precious flesh. And moreover, we appreciate this weirdly beautiful symbiosis of machine and human body as what it is – and not as what it could stand for. At moments, the naked bodies presented by Holzinger escape labeling, meaning, and classification: they simply *are* – and as existing, living entities, they appear valuable to us.

My short interpretation shows the following: within Florentina Holzinger's performances, the body becomes a tilting image – oscillating between social violence and freedom, mimesis and transcendence. It is crucial to note that the utopian and the mimetic aspects of the artwork are essentially *the same aspects* (just like a tilting image is one image and not two). Thus, the perception tilts between the extremes: violent conditioning of the female body under patriarchy *and* our

ability to escape the gaze structures that enable it. Holzinger's dance on the car oscillates between representing a dystopic reality and imagining a utopia. It tilts back and forth between extremes – a fleeting, tilting image.⁸

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⁸ I would like to thank Leonie von Lieben and Akwasi Osei-Dwomoh for their insightful comments on earlier versions of this paper, and the participants and organizers of the ESA Conference 2025 in Athens for their valuable input.

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Sublime Aesthetics and Politics in Kant's “General Remark”

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ABSTRACT. This paper examines the much-debated treatment of enthusiasm in Kant's “General Remark” of the Critique of the Power of Judgment. It focuses on the dual reference to the concept and seeks to trace both the continuities and discontinuities between these two treatments, as well as between them and the preceding analysis of the sublime, divided into the mathematically and dynamically sublime. Furthermore, it is argued that the concept of enthusiasm serves as a bridge between the aesthetic and the socio-political realms, revealing how aesthetics, morality, and politics converge within Kant's critical philosophy and especially within Kant's analysis of the sublime.

1. Introduction

In Kant's Critique of the Power of Judgment, at the end of Kant's “Analytic of the Sublime” and appended to the chapter on the “Modality of the Sublime” (§29), there appears a dense and somewhat puzzling section entitled “General Remark on the Exposition of the Aesthetic Reflective Judgements” (Kant 2000, 5:264–276).² In this chapter, Kant offers a recapitulation of the relationship between the beautiful and the sublime, particularly with regard to how each relates to and promotes moral principles. This discussion culminates in an aesthetic

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² Instead of citing the page numbers of the translated text, I refer to the standard volume and paragraph numbering of the German Academy Edition (*Akademie-Ausgabe*) of Kant's works, since it is retained in Guyer's English edition. Where no translation is required, references are made directly to the *Akademie-Ausgabe* (AK).

characterization of moral goodness, which Kant aligns with the sublime rather than the beautiful. This association becomes the central focus of the remainder of the chapter, where Kant seeks to reconcile the sublime with certain affects. Among these, his chief concern is enthusiasm, which he defines as “the idea of the good with affect” (Kant 2000, 5:272). This forms our main concern.

The difficulty with this relatively marginal analysis of the sublime is that it does not sit comfortably within Kant’s prior transcendental framework, nor with the established division between the mathematically and the dynamically sublime. With the introduction of affects, the focus shifts away from natural phenomena that are fit to generate ideas of infinity and power – the proper objects of the mathematically and dynamically sublime – toward certain mental states, thereby obliging us to move in our enquiry from exterior to interior nature. To account for this shift, scholars have proposed a range of interpretations. Crowther (1989) suggests that what Kant offers in this context is in fact a subdivision of the dynamically sublime; Clewis (2009) introduces a distinct category of the sublime called the “moral sublime”; and Doran (2015) argues for a hybrid form, blending moral and aesthetic judgment.

In this context, my aim is twofold: first, to propose an alternative interpretation centered on the concept of enthusiasm, which appears twice in the text under examination and serves as the structural basis of my analysis; and second, to highlight the political narrative that unfolds in parallel with the aesthetic discourse in Kant’s “General Remark” – a narrative facilitated by the turn to the interior nature.

2. Aesthetic and practical Enthusiasm

As already noted, in its first occurrence, enthusiasm is described by Kant as “the idea of the good with affect” (Kant 2000, 5:272), thereby opening a broader discussion of affects and which of them – and under what conditions – may be considered sublime.

Let us here note that the concept of enthusiasm preoccupied Kant already in his pre-critical writings. Thus, when, in the passage under discussion, Kant observes that “without it nothing great can be accomplished” (Kant 2000 5:272), he is not merely registering, in a manner

reminiscent of the Aristotelian practice,³ a widely shared conviction of his time, in order then to distance himself from it; he is, in fact, returning – verbatim – to claims he had himself advanced in his early work. In the *Essay on the Maladies of the Head*, for example, Kant remarks of enthusiasm that “nothing great has ever been accomplished in the world without it” (Kant 2011, 2:267). Likewise, in the *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, Kant distinguishes enthusiasm from fanaticism (Schwärmerei) and associates it with patriotism, religion, and friendship (Kant 2011, 2:251, footnote q). Were we to attempt a kind of personification of the concept at this early stage, we could link it with the emblematic figure of Cato the Younger, who committed suicide upon hearing of the fall of the Roman Republic – a figure explicitly mentioned by Kant twice in his early works.⁴

In these pre-critical writings, a certain ambiguity regarding enthusiasm is already apparent. On the one hand, it is portrayed as the source of heroic deeds; on the other, it appears to contain an element of exaggeration: “All great undertakings are accomplished by those in a state of enthusiasm. Take Cato, for instance —in dying he may have gone too far” (AK 27:40). While rooted in noble moral principles, such as patriotism, enthusiasm reveals itself as a morally precarious disposition, prone to producing ethically dubious outcomes, as exemplified by Cato’s suicide.⁵ In the third *Critique*, Kant is more emphatic and stricter. Enthusiasm is not only an exaggeration; it is considered “blind, either in the selection of its purpose, or, if that were to have been given by reason, in [the manner of] achieving it” (Kant 2000 2: 271) and, for this reason, it can in no way receive the approval of Reason. “Nevertheless”, Kant observes, “from an aesthetic point of view, enthusiasm is sublime” and this “because it is an intensification of human powers through ideas, which imparts to the mind an elevation that acts far more powerfully and enduringly than impulses derived from sensible representations” (Kant 2000, 2: 271). This formulation, which expands the way Kant sees and thematizes the concept of enthusiasm, giving it thus a place within the mature transcendental framework of the *Critique of Judgment*, is admittedly a dense one and requires interpretation, particularly regarding the reference to an “aesthetic point of view,” which has sparked considerable discussion and the various interpretations to which we have already briefly referred.

³ See *Topics* I.1, 100b21–23 and *Nicomachean Ethics* VII.1, 1145b2–7.

⁴ See AK 20:4.

⁵ On Kant’s use of the concept of enthusiasm in the pre-critical and critical work, see Clewis 2009.

Let us start from this: enthusiasm, as treated in the third *Critique*, seems to be accessible from both a practical and an aesthetic point of view. The practical perspective, which dominates in the early work of Kant, defines enthusiasm in terms of action. It functions in this case more like a motive; a driving impulse, and indeed a quite potent one, since it allows man to surpass his usual powers. The reference to the “aesthetic point of view,” on the other hand, can be defined, antithetically to practical enthusiasm, as a certain detachment from action; an approach that does not consider enthusiasm in terms of outcomes, whether moral or practical; it involves a reflective focus on how our affectivity is structured: an intense emotion then which, however, is orientated toward a perceived good and inspires a sense of autonomy. In this context, then, the aesthetic standpoint removes us from tangible purposes, but does bring forward what, in the third *Critique*, Kant calls subjective purposiveness: that special purposiveness associated with the sublime, of course, and consisting in the awareness of a higher vocation for humanity. And it is a subjective purposiveness because we don’t recognize it intellectually but experience it as enthusiasm. From the “aesthetic point of view,” then, enthusiasm concerns the awareness of a moral capacity, whereas from the practical standpoint the question would be whether, and by what means, we actualize this capacity. In this context, Clewis is, I believe, right in considering enthusiasm as a form of the feeling of the sublime, with its object being the moral law in its different manifestations (Clewis 2009, 183-194).

Kant, however, attributes sublimity to enthusiasm, not to the moral law itself. Thus, a strict, literal reading of the text would rather suggest that it is the sight of human beings in a state of enthusiasm that is sublime; in other words, that it is “practical enthusiasm” which, from an aesthetic perspective (from the spectator’s standpoint), appears sublime. Indeed, a certain reading of the essay “An old question raised again: Is the human race constantly progressing toward the better?” could justify such an interpretation.⁶ Furthermore, in the passage under

⁶ Within the framework of such an interpretation, the notion of sympathy, as it appears in the *Essay* concerning human progress, would be crucial for understanding the function of “aesthetic enthusiasm.” Based on this, we could think of the “aesthetic enthusiasm” in the “General Remark” as operating roughly as follows: just as in the case of the “dynamically sublime,” where we imagine ourselves facing an irresistible force (under the condition of safety), so too in this case we imaginatively place ourselves in the position of the agents who are seized by enthusiasm. This imaginative transposition allows us to experience the “spiritual magnitude” they feel, yet without any inclination toward involvement. Thus, this potentiality—which does not become actualized in the case of the spectators—leads to the dynamic expansion of the imagination that characterizes the feeling of the sublime. We feel the sense of power that motivates them in view of an idea, without ourselves needing to act, and therefore without resorting to their immoral and possibly criminal means. In a way, their enthusiasm becomes our own—perhaps somewhat weakened—which might also explain Kant’s hesitation to speak of the enthusiasm of the spectators.

discussion, Kant characterizes other affects (as well as apathy) as sublime in themselves (Ak. 5:273), a reference which supports such a reading, which would subvert ours. Nevertheless, in the second reference to the concept Kant clearly conceives enthusiasm as the feeling occasioned by a sublime object —namely, God. I shall return to this at greater length in the following section; for the moment, however, I maintain that if the two references are indeed continuous with one another (as I firmly believe), then it is unlikely that Kant understood enthusiasm differently in each case.

The question that arises next is which kind of sublime we are talking about, the dynamically sublime, the mathematically sublime, or some new kind, as has often been argued? The whole context, relating to action and the division between practical and aesthetic enthusiasm and the reference to the “intensification of human powers” (Kant 2000, 2: 271) in the initial quotation – and if we wish to remain within Kant’s established categories, without needing to invent a new one – make it, I believe, more probable that we are dealing with the dynamically sublime. To this also testifies the reference found a few lines later: “Every affect of the vigorous kind (i.e., which makes us conscious that we have forces to overcome any resistance, i.e., makes us conscious of our *animus strenuus*)”, Kant writes, “is *aesthetically sublime*” (Kant 2000, 5:272). My view on this point, therefore, aligns rather with that of Crowther. We no longer have a terrifying natural phenomenon before our imagination, but an *idea*, which nonetheless generates within the soul a sense of the invincible.

At this point, I would like to introduce a brief digression, which can help to clarify both what Kant precisely means by enthusiasm and why he chooses to conclude his overall analysis of the sublime with this “ambiguous” mental state. The text I wish to turn to is the previously mentioned essay *An Old Question Raised Again: Is the Human Race Constantly Progressing Toward the Better?* In this essay, first published in 1798, Kant once again engages with the notion of enthusiasm, articulating it in a way that, in many respects, recalls the discussion presented in the “General Remark.” Overall, in the essay, Kant’s seeks the event that would attest to the moral progress of humanity and finds it in the French Revolution; not in itself, but in the universal and disinterested solidarity of the spectators with the revolutionaries.

The enthusiasm to which Kant primarily refers, in this text – and, as already mentioned, in almost identical terms to those of the *Critique of Judgment* – is the enthusiasm of the French

revolutionaries,⁷ which, in a way, replace Cato as the representative *par excellence* of the concept. He refers to their “passionate participation in the good” and “to the zeal and grandeur of soul which the pure concept of right produced in them” (Kant 1797, 155). This made them invincible compared to those in the opposing camp, who fought on the basis of self-interest or the old principle of honor; a principle that Kant regards as analogous to enthusiasm, a rather outdated and, I would say, inauthentic form of enthusiasm, since “genuine enthusiasm always moves only toward what is ideal and, indeed, to what is purely moral” (Kant 1797, 155). Still, beyond the strong and obvious analogies between the two texts, there is something, I believe, that reinforces the political reading of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, and that emerges in the context of the second reference to enthusiasm, to which I now turn.

3. Negative Representation

In moving to the second reference to the concept of enthusiasm, Kant’s point of view seems to shift considerably. From his earlier engagement with the “dynamically sublime” – those mental states involved in a kind of resistance to sensibility – Kant now turns to an argument that concerns the notion of the infinite and thus seems to return to the “mathematically sublime.” The concept that dominates here, and would go on to exert a significant influence on later thought about the sublime, is that of “negative presentation.”⁸ In any case, what holds Kant’s treatment together and connects the two references to enthusiasm is, on the one hand, the persistent concern with the aesthetic determination of the moral law, and on the other, the fact that the sublime is no longer related to nature, but is explored in its socio-political dimension, with religion occupying an even more prominent position in this section.

The guiding question at this point is the following: does the excessively abstract mode of representing moral law weaken the feeling that accompanies and characterizes the sublime? Kant’s answer is a negative one. On the contrary, abstraction expands the imagination and

⁷ The notion of enthusiasm is also attributed to the spectators of the Revolution; this however is done with great hesitation. Kant first speaks of a “disinterested sympathy for the players on one side against those on the other” (Kant 1799, 153), and a few lines later refers to “a wishful participation that borders closely on enthusiasm” (ibid). When he returns to the spectators’ attitude, he speaks of an “exaltation” with which “the uninvolved public looking on sympathized without the least in tension of assisting” (157). Thus, there is only a single reference to enthusiasm —and even that, to something merely approaching it.

⁸ See, for example, the way Lyotard reconstructs the relevant chapter in *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime* (Lyotard 1994, 147–158).

thereby intensifies the feeling of the sublime. As he notes: “It is a wholly groundless fear to suppose that if one removes from the representation everything that can commend it to the senses, nothing would remain but a cold, lifeless assent” (Kant 2000, 5:275). This statement is the key to connecting the sublime with the good from the very beginning of the chapter we are dealing with. The problem Kant addresses here would indeed arise in the case of the beautiful, which depends upon sensible presentation and is nourished by the forms of objects. The sublime, by contrast – especially the *mathematically sublime* – derives its force precisely from the formless, from that which gives the impression of infinity or is actually infinite, from what cannot be bounded by space or enclosed within any coherent representation. Hence comes Kant’s introduction of the notion of a “negative presentation” (Kant 2000, 5:275).

To grasp the peculiar pleasure we derive from the abstract, we must recall that the sublime is marked by a mixture of pain and pleasure, repulsion and attraction – what Kant calls “negative pleasure” (Kant 2000, 5:245). The intensity of the sublime arises precisely from this connection with the pain of self-frustration, brought about by the imagination’s incapacity to perform its task. For this very incapacity discloses a higher vocation that cannot be realized, but whose pursuit is experienced as expansion. “That deprivation”, Kant writes, “is therefore a presentation of the infinite, which indeed can never be more than a negative presentation, but which nonetheless expands the soul” (Kant 2000, 5:275).

In this way, Kant seems to return to his original account of the sublime —namely, the *mathematically sublime*, occasioned by absolute greatness. Yet the difference is decisive: the stimulus here is not some vast natural object but rather an Idea of reason. The similarity is that in both cases the imagination is confronted with the unrepresentable. The contrast, on the other hand, is that in the case of natural objects we face an illusion of infinity grounded in the limits of human mental capacities, whereas in the case of the moral law we encounter a genuinely abstract infinitude. In both cases, however, the sublimity concerns the subject and the higher vocation indicated for it by reason.

It is in the attempt to establish this position regarding the intense emotional response to an abstract representation that the concept of enthusiasm reappears, seemingly for the sake of clarification. It returns through a reference to the *Old Testament* and the prohibition of images found there. “There is,” Kant argues, “no more sublime passage in the legislation of the Jews than the commandment: ‘Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, nor any likeness...’

Only this commandment can explain the enthusiasm the Jewish people felt for their religion.” Unlike the first reference to the concept, enthusiasm now has an explicitly defined object. That object is religion and, more precisely, a particular kind of religion: the one that prohibits the depiction of God. This is why Kant refers not only to the Jews, but also to the Muslims. Moreover, what is also clear in this case – thus confirming the earlier interpretation – is that enthusiasm is indeed treated as the subjective feeling of the sublime.

Let us unpack Kant’s reasoning. By forbidding images, the specific commandment leaves the imagination without “nourishment.” Yet, in doing so, it brings to the fore Reason and the idea of God as an absolute being – a being beyond all spatial, temporal, or causal limitation – whom we can think as such, though not represent. Thus, the imagination is first frustrated, but at the same time pushed to transcend its limits, striving in vain to form an image of the unrepresentable idea of God. Enthusiasm, in this context, concerns the suspension of the limits of the senses and the release of the imagination, which seeks to elevate itself to the level of Reason, thereby discovering – as in the case of the mathematical and dynamical sublime – a higher vocation for man. In this way, the process of subreption⁹ is once again at work. We may call religion or God sublime, but in fact, the sublimity lies in the subjective tendency of the human being to transcend the limits of their sensible nature. Let us stress here that this paradigm is meant to cherish the sublimity of moral law, with its abstract, not representable, character, and not of any particular religion. He makes this obvious immediately after the example concerning religion, as he returns to his initial focus. He writes: “The very same thing also holds of the representation of the moral law and the predisposition to morality in us.” (Kant 2000, 5: 274).

What follows is a politically charged critique of the way institutionalized religions have been instrumentalized by governments to maintain social conformity and passive obedience. Referring to religious imagery, Kant writes “That is why even governments have gladly allowed religion to be richly equipped with such supplements and thus sought to relieve the subject of the bother but at the same time also of the capacity to extend the powers of his soul beyond the limits that are arbitrarily set for him and by means of which, as merely passive, he can more

⁹ See the way Kant introduces the term: “Thus 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), which as it were makes intuitable the superiority of the rational vocation of our cognitive faculty over the greatest faculty of sensibility” (5:257).

easily be dealt with.” (Kant 2000, 5:274-275). Although Kant does not name specific historical cases, the quoted reference most probably points to Catholicism with its reliance on visual religious representations (paintings, sculptures) and its institutionalized political power.¹⁰ From this passage, furthermore, Doran (2015, 271) infers a revolutionary spirit in Kant’s reflections, emphasizing the ideal of citizens’ autonomy. Yet, in the same text Kant also warns of the need “to moderate the momentum of an unbounded imagination” (Kant 2000, 5:274), a remark that recalls once again the ambivalence of enthusiasm and Kant’s complex attitude toward the French Revolution (admiring its ends while condemning its means) which would, of course, later (in the essay on the progress of humanity to which we referred in the first part) take an explicit form.¹¹

It is in this sociopolitical context that, I think, we must place the distinction that Kant draws next between enthusiasm and visionary rapture (*Schwärmerei*). This distinction already appears in his pre-critical writings¹² and re-emerges in the *Third Critique* through the notion of the “negative representation.” Kant observes that “This pure, elevating, merely negative presentation of morality, by contrast, carries with it no risk of visionary rapture, which is a delusion of being able to *see* something beyond all bounds of sensibility” (Kant 2000, 5:275). The concept of a “visionary rupture” refers primarily to the classical Greek use of the term “enthusiasm” (*enthousiasmos*), that is, to the idea of a divine inspiration granting ecstatic priestesses and seers the ability to foresee the future. Within the same historical framework, the notion could also, in the form of inspiration, serve as a source of artistic creativity.¹³ Indeed, Doran (2015, 273) connects Kant’s discussion to the *Sturm und Drang* movement, referring to Herder and Hamann. However, the paragraph in which Kant elaborates this distinction immediately follows the one on religion, and the sense in which he employs the term in this context points more to its religious than artistic dimension. More specifically, Kant is alluding to a phenomenon well known in his time – one that arose chiefly during the religious upheavals in Europe resulting from the conflict between Catholicism and Protestantism. The phenomenon concerned certain individuals, often members of religious sects, who claimed to experience inner visions and revelations, thereby asserting a special connection with the divine.

¹⁰ There are of course moderate forms of Protestantism, as Anglicanism, which maintained an established, state-linked, and episcopal (bishop-led) framework and even tolerated a moderate use of images.

¹¹ In *The Conflict of the Faculties*, Kant observed that the revolution «may be filled with misery and atrocities to the point that a right-thinking human being, were he boldly to hope to execute it successfully the second time, would never resolve to make the experiment at such cost” (Kant 1999, 7:85).

¹² Kant 2011, 57, footnote q.

¹³ See Plato’s *Ion*.

Writing within such a context, Kant thus refers to the opposite phenomenon from that which had previously occupied him, and I believe that what he has in mind now is a form of radical Protestantism, and again, the political implications of this kind of credo. What is at issue is no longer the passivity engendered by a particular form of religion and its political instrumentalization, but rather an arrogant exaltation of thought – that kind of “delusion of being able to *see* something beyond all bounds of sensibility” (Kant 2000, 5:275). What leads to this arrogance is a liberation from all rules and constraints, motivated by the desire to see further than one can when bound by law. In contrast to visionary rupture, which is a passion involving an imagination without rules, enthusiasm is an affect, pertaining to an imagination temporarily freed from rules. Enthusiasm is sublime, for it reveals the moral capacities of human beings; visionary rupture, by contrast, can never be sublime; it is not merely “profoundly ridiculous,” but a “disease that dismembers” (Kant 2000, 5:275).

The connection I have suggested between the French Revolution and radical Protestantism is not a direct one, yet there are significant ideological, philosophical, and social affinities between these two forms of religious and social radicalism, especially regarding their conceptions of authority, equality, and individual freedom.¹⁴ In his essay “*What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?*” Kant acknowledges the political implications of radical Protestantism —namely, that the “enlightened” rapidly attract followers, and that along with these followers come political ambitions. “First *genius* is very pleased with its bold flights, since it has cast off the thread by which reason used to steer it. Soon it enchants others with its triumphant pronouncements and great expectations and now seems to have set itself on a throne which was so badly graced by slow and ponderous reason, whose language, however, it always employs” (Kant 1999, 8:145).

Finally, let us highlight the fact that, following his brief comment on the “mathematically sublime,” Kant seems to return to the “dynamically sublime,” a move that attests to the unity of the two distinct aspects of the Kantian conception of the sublime.

¹⁴ See, in this regard Walzer 1965. Examining the religious revolutions of Calvinism, Puritanism, and other radical movements, Walzer shows how the religious reformers created the cultural and moral paradigms that were later employed in revolutions such as the French. As for Germany, more specifically, the German Peasants’ War (1524–1525) constitutes a characteristic example of the way in which theological demands were transformed into demands for social justice and economic redistribution, making use of the rhetoric of the Reformation. For a historical account of the German Peasants’ War, see Lyndal Roper, *Summer of Fire and Blood: The German Peasants’ War*, Basic Books, London 2025.

4. Conclusions

In summary, I have argued the following. First, the two references to the concept of enthusiasm, although they initially approach it from different angles and link it to different human faculties (cognitive and desiderative), nonetheless belong to the same discussion – namely, the aesthetic evaluation of the good – and should indeed be considered together. Second, we are not dealing with a special, much less inferior, category of the sublime, assumption that would fragment the coherent notion of the sublime which Kant understands as unified and as pertaining to the bridging of freedom and nature, whether external or internal; from an aesthetic point of view, moral law is situated within the transcendental distinction between the mathematical and dynamic disposition of the imagination, processing, moreover, the capacity to move on both levels – cognitive and desiderative; that is, it can be judged sublime either from a mathematical or a dynamic perspective. Third, behind Kant's concern with enthusiasm lies not merely a turn toward culture, but a specific political interest and an underlying reflection on the French Revolution and thus Kant's ambivalence toward enthusiasm appears to mirror his ambivalence toward the French Revolution: an endorsement of its ends, yet a condemnation of its means.

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The Art of Fidelity: On Films that One Can Read

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ABSTRACT. While adaptation studies have moved away from the traditional focus on fidelity as a defining criterion of adaptation, some scholars in aesthetics advocate for a re-examination of fidelity with respect to film adaptation. In my paper, I consider “experiential adaptations” – that is, those that, as films, seek to be faithful to the literary experience – and suggest that we should consider them as a bipolar art form. I begin by discussing two skeptical perspectives on film adaptation as art: Susanne K. Langer’s view against translating one art form into another and Peter Lamarque’s concept of “reading for opacity”. Langer considers hybrid art inherently less valuable, while Lamarque critiques film adaptation for promoting “transparent reading”, which he deems incompatible with art as art. Both highlight a dilemma: the very success of a work as a faithful adaptation undermines its success as a work of art. I propose avoiding this dilemma by examining appreciative practices that naturally integrate literary and cinematic perspectives, such as those discussed by Paisley Livingston and James Harold. I focus on fidelity – the concept they both employ. I contrast Livingston’s treatment of it as a norm, which may sometimes be worth breaching, with Harold’s framing of it as a merit, requiring a narrower scope. My account seeks to balance these perspectives, arguing that fidelity functions as a norm in critical practices but also as a value when understanding film adaptation as a synthesis of distinct art forms.

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² The work on this paper was supported by the grant from Czech Science Foundation [GA25.17273S].

1. Introduction

After spending some time with the “massively expanded and proliferating field” of adaptation studies (Cardwell 2018, p. 31),³ I was surprised to find that the very word it revolves around – *adaptation* – started to feel oddly empty. Its conceptual thinning, I believe, is due to harsh critiques of what has often been considered its constitutive element: the requirement of fidelity. Since the 1980s, fidelity in adaptation studies has been under attack. A sharp summary comes from Casie Hermansson, who in 2015 observed that in adaptation studies, fidelity

has been castigated over the past decades with such predictable frequency that Fredric Jameson called the practice ‘generational repudiation,’ J. D. Connor has labeled it the ‘fidelity reflex,’ and Simone Murray ‘the ritual slaying’ (Hermansson 2015, p. 147).

With this foundational act of violence, *new* adaptation studies sharply distinguished itself from older approaches to adaptation, many of which had emerged from, or remained strongly shaped by, earlier theoretical reflections on adaptation within aesthetics and art criticism.

From the perspective of adaptation studies, fidelity came to be seen as an aesthetic bias to be overcome, and its dethronement was embraced as a new beginning. As Sarah Cardwell observes:

Rejecting the prejudice and hierarchies of the pre-1980s adaptation studies, embracing and asserting pluralism, today’s scholars positively celebrate adaptation as a diverse cultural practice (Cardwell 2018, p. 31).

The critique of the central concept has thus brought a number of substitutes into focus. The proliferation of alternative terms includes intertextuality, remediation, transmediality, versioning and others. These terms, as is often pointed out, do not privilege literature over film *ante factum* – a bias for which aesthetics and pre-1980s adaptation studies have frequently been criticized. Moreover, they help articulate the vast multiplicity of relations that works of art form among themselves, and allow us to understand these relations not in evaluative terms, but for what they are: threads running through a semantically rich universe – the world of art.

³ A different assessment of the state of the arts comes from Thomas Leitch: “[A]daptation studies has made little progress in establishing itself as an academic field or discipline in its own right. ... [I]t remains a non-discipline, even an anti-discipline – a decidedly marginal field of study, if it is indeed really a field.” He connects this marginalization with “the exceptional reluctance of its leading practitioners to define its subject.” (Leitch 2025)

Still, one may want to ask: hasn't it happened that, with *adaptation*, new adaptation studies have thrown the baby out with the bathwater? I am not the first to raise this concern; in fact, there is a noticeable tendency within aesthetics and some parts of new adaptation studies to reconceive the notion of fidelity and recover it for the concept of adaptation. The just-quoted Sarah Cardwell, for example, notes that "[t]he concept of adaptation per se has necessarily been diluted as it expands to form a catch-all category for these permutations" (Cardwell 2018, p. 31). As a result, she observes, "potentially valuable distinctions between adaptation and related practices become blurred; and adaptation becomes harder and harder to pin down" (*ibid.*).

There is thus a notable suspicion that while rejecting fidelity may have been useful for embracing the diversity of remediation and transmediation practices, a narrower conception of adaptation is now needed. Against this backdrop, one may discern, from around 2010 onward, efforts within adaptation studies to reintroduce notions such as "fidelity," "authenticity," "truth," and "faithfulness" into the conceptual framework of adaptation. Parallel to this development, discussions of fidelity have also emerged within aesthetics. Paisley Livingston's 2010 paper "On the Appreciation of Cinematic Adaptations," published in *Projections*, was the first one within analytic aesthetics to suggest that faithfulness is an important evaluative feature of adaptation, and it was followed by others. This renewed interest in fidelity may signal a return to a more grounded – and perhaps narrower – understanding of what adaptation is.

The theoretical demand for a distinct conception of adaptation is matched by a practical concern. As many have noted, fidelity remains deeply embedded in the ways adaptations are understood, consumed, and evaluated. Despite its frequent condemnation in adaptation studies, critics continue to use fidelity as a criterion of successful adaptations. For example, TV miniseries *Ripley* (2024) by Steven Zaillian has been praised as truer to the original than the other adaptations of the novel (see, for example, Knight 2024 and Tallerico 2024).

Moreover, as a recent study has shown, fidelity is not only a concern in professional film criticism; it also features prominently in amateur reviews. The study conducted a computational analysis of 151,000 Goodreads adaptation reviews and found out that

fidelity criticism, an oft-dismissed critical mode, helps reviewers make comparisons between a book and film's concrete elements, like the plot structure and pacing or character personalities, to more abstract meditations about bias and affect. Fidelity criticism is an elemental tool for reviewers to ground assessment in book and film details, to justify their evaluation of a work. (Thalken, Mimno, and Wilkens 2024, p. 19).

In this paper, I take seriously the persistence of fidelity both in adaptation criticism and in audience experience, as well as recent calls for a narrower, more grounded concept of adaptation. In the account of adaptation that I wish to propose, a faithful rendering of a literary source into film is one that implicitly invites viewers to watch and read the film at once. Viewers often respond to this invitation by reading the original book (if they have not already) and by engaging in acts of comparison – or rather, by seeing one work in light of the other. I also suggest, though tentatively, that one can watch film adaptations of this kind in a different, more literary mode. To capture this intuition, the concept of fidelity is crucial.

In what follows, I first discuss the notion of fidelity and then present two examples of experiential adaptations – that is, adaptations that are faithful to the experience of reading. I then turn to two samples of aesthetic theories that adopt a skeptical stance toward adaptation. As I argue, for both Susanne K. Langer and Peter Lamarque, the more literary a film adaptation is, the less successful it is as a work of art.

2. Experiential Adaptation

The notion of fidelity I work with is etymologically close to its original meaning, dating back to the early sixteenth century and defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as: “the quality of being faithful; faithfulness, loyalty, unswerving allegiance to a person, party, bond, etc.” (OED 2025). The film adaptations that I want to focus on express loyalty to their literary sources by inviting a distinct mode of viewing. I will later refer to these as experiential adaptations.

This understanding of fidelity differs from the interpretation of the term common in art-related discourse and epitomized by terms such as “high-fi” or “high fidelity” sound system. This meaning of fidelity, dating back to the late nineteenth century, reads (again, as captured by the *Oxford English Dictionary*): “The degree to which a sound or picture reproduced or transmitted

by any device *resembles* the original”. (OED 2025) Importantly, thus, my account of fidelity is not based on resemblance.

Experiential adaptations, I suggest, are faithful to their sources not through representational resemblance – whether of plot, character, or setting – but by preserving the mode of engagement proper to the literary source. I illustrate this claim with two examples.

First, *Diamonds of the Night* (1964), a Czechoslovak New Wave film by Jan Němec. It follows two teenage boys who escape from a transport train during the final months of the Second World War and struggle to survive – physically as well as mentally – while lost in the forest. The film centers on the deepening disorientation of its protagonists, both in space and in time. Their journey is punctuated by increasingly unreliable “visions” that interrupt the main action. As spectators, we are left unsure whether we are witnessing memories, anticipations, hallucinations, or dreams. And we are also often not sure whose visions these actually are.

I believe that this radical instability of perspective and time draws us into a kind of interpretative labor that resembles literary reading. We are not simply shown a space or a timeline; we must imaginatively reconstruct it. Moreover, this labor of reconstruction is never finished – it can always be destroyed by a new scene. The film resists transparency. Its time-space is neither stable nor fully visible – it flickers, dissolves, re-emerges. It is something that must be described in order to be perceived.

This quality, I suggest, is what makes Němec’s film an experiential adaptation – faithful not to a plot or a theme, but to the literary experience itself. In both the film and the short story upon which it is based, “Darkness Has No Shadow” by Arnošt Lustig (1985), the narrative is fragmented. In the short story, the narrator is as close to the protagonists as the camera is in the film. In both, we reconstruct space and time from the protagonists’ perspective – that is, from a place of pain, hunger, and hopelessness.

Interestingly, the literary narrative is more informative – the narrator not only observes the characters from the outside but also knows their thoughts; there is also much more dialogue. Němec strips his characters of speech – the protagonists barely speak. This is a radical decision, as dialogues in the film could have at least partially compensated for the absence of the literary narrator’s voice. And yet this decision helps the adaptation preserve literary fidelity: loyalty to

the fragmentation and allusiveness that, I would argue, is the defining quality of Lustig's literary narrative.

My second example has already been mentioned: *Ripley* by Steven Zaillian. One of the main points of praise among critics was the restrained and subtle performance of Andrew Scott. He never quite allows the viewers to step fully into his character. There is always something withheld – something elusive or opaque. He is, as one critic put it, “[a]n enigma, who is both compelling and frightening [...], resistant to explanations, labels, or pigeonholes” (McEntee 2024). Again, this quality, I believe, gives the series a distinctly literary character. The psychological opacity of *Ripley* draws the viewer into a mode of attention that is closer to reading than to traditional cinematic identification. In this way, Zaillian's adaptation of *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955) preserves not just the story, but a way of relating to the story – one that resonates with the literary experience offered by Patricia Highsmith's novel.

Experiential adaptations can be understood as a distinctive kind of adaptation; my proposal, however, goes further. I suggest that they exemplify the very core of what adaptation is. As I have argued here, both *Diamonds of the Night* and *Ripley* are faithful to the literary experience offered by their respective sources and reproduce particular features of the reading experience they provide. However, I believe that the fragmentariness, gaps, the greater demands on imagination, resistance to complete identification, and a higher degree of inaccessibility are also significant features of literary experience as such. In this way, both examples are emblematic for understanding adaptation as a bi-polar art form – one that characteristically engages a mode of film perception infused, or “contaminated,” by reading.

3. Adaptation Skepticism

In the standard account developed within new adaptation studies, discussed in the first part of the paper, it is aesthetics and art criticism that are often blamed for distorting the theory of adaptation by insisting on fidelity. As critics of fidelity have pointed out, the expectation that a successful film adaptation must remain faithful to its source was often paired with the claim that it could never truly do so. As a result, film adaptation was long deemed necessarily inferior – never able to fulfill the promise it is understood to make simply by being an adaptation.

Or so the story goes, at least as told by the critics of fidelity. And like many stories, this one is not entirely true. In fact, it is surprisingly difficult to find figures in aesthetics who regard film adaptation as necessarily compromised or, more precisely, who take the requirement of fidelity to imply that film adaptations should be seen as an inferior art form, if an art form at all.

Finding skeptics of film adaptation within aesthetics is thus difficult; it is not, however, impossible. Let me now turn to two accounts that, either directly or by implication, offer a skeptical perspective on film adaptation: those of Susanne K. Langer and Peter Lamarque. After briefly outlining and comparing their positions, I will move on to consider some recent treatments of fidelity within aesthetics.

As far as I know, Langer did not write directly about film adaptations. However, I am quite sure she would regard “adaptation” with some suspicion. Adaptation, in the preliminary sense proposed above, is based on the idea that hybrid art forms – combinations “of two or more arts” – are possible. Langer, however, firmly rejects the idea that one art form can be translated into another while preserving the distinct character of both.

When words enter into music they are no longer prose or poetry, they are elements of music. Their office is to help create and develop the primary illusion of music, virtual time, and not that of literature, which is something else; so they give up their literary status and take on purely musical functions. (Langer 1953, p. 150)

The metaphors that she uses when discussing her primary example – a song – are “swallowing” (“music swallows words”, *ibid.*, p. 152) and “annihilation” (“a composer [...] annihilates the poem and makes a song”, *ibid.*, p. 153). For poetry to become part of music, it must give up its poetic nature and become fully musical. The same, however, applies to other forms of art: dance, for example, swallows music; opera annihilates drama; and drama swallows all plastic art on stage. As she brutally sums it up: “There are no happy marriages in art – only successful rape” (Langer 1957: 86).

Similarly, we may infer that for a book to become part of a film, it must relinquish its literariness and become fully cinematic. A film adaptation achieves artistic status only when it entirely ceases to be literary. Within this framework, fidelity ceases to be a virtue and becomes a flaw – a sign of incomplete transformation. From this perspective, the film’s literary origin ought to be rendered irrelevant. The film is expected to annihilate its literary source. Or, even more

strongly, adaptations, strictly speaking, do not exist; only films do, and their origins are ultimately irrelevant.

Peter Lamarque, on the other hand, explicitly (though rather marginally) discusses film adaptation, and his position may at first appear less radical than Langer's, as he acknowledges adaptations, that is, cinematic works that render literary texts, are possible. However, he argues that what such adaptations preserve – or successfully render – is fairly limited: namely, only the plot. As Lamarque put it in an interview:

A prime example of transparent reading is an adaptation of a novel in film. Most people nowadays know Jane Austen's novels through the famous film adaptations. And these adaptations are fine and they introduce you to the characters, the story, the plot, and so on, but they do so, in my terms, transparently. They are not introducing you to this through Jane Austen's text, they are not concerned with the mode in which these characters were introduced originally. If your only knowledge of a Jane Austen novel, or any other novel that has been adapted, is through a film version of it, that is fine, it introduces you transparently to the story and the characters, but it is not part of literary appreciation. It could not be, because you are not looking at it, or attending to it, opaquely (Verheyen and Cools 2019, p. 18).

Film adaptation's rendering of literature is thus not only limited but necessarily compromised. To extract the plot, Lamarque argues, filmmakers must strip the literary work of, precisely, what makes it literary; they subject it to what he calls *transparent reading*. And since transparent reading, in his view, is antithetical to literature as art, the artistic status of adaptations themselves becomes doubtful.

Both Langer and Lamarque, then, subject adaptations to a dilemma: either we have an adaptation, but one that does not qualify as art; or we have an artistic cinematic rendering of a literary work, but one that is a full-fledged film and no longer has anything to do with literature. Stated even more forcefully: to the extent that a work succeeds as an adaptation, it fails as a work of art.

4. Adaptation as an Art Form

To avoid the conclusion that film adaptations are less, or not at all, valuable as works of art – as I believe one should – let me now turn to some recent discussions of fidelity in adaptation within aesthetics. Both Paisley Livingston and James Harold have examined the appreciative practices surrounding film adaptation. While their accounts differ in important respects, they share a key commitment: the appreciation of adaptations, they argue, naturally involves both literary and cinematic perspectives.

Livingston situates his argument within a broader Waltonian framework, which holds that “categorization is a necessary condition of the appreciation of art” (Livingston 2010, p. 124). On this view, the category of adaptation imposes specific constraints on how a work should be appreciated. He treats adaptations as necessarily involving the filmmaker’s intention to adapt a literary source and maintains that, because of this, evaluation must focus on the relationship between the literary and cinematic works.

Livingston’s emphasis on intention serves to distinguish adaptations, understood as “overt imitations of [their] model”, that is, the novel (ibid., p. 2), from works that may resemble earlier literary sources, but were not intended as their adaptations. For example, *Electra* (2023) by Daria Kashcheeva would not qualify as an adaptation in these terms, since the filmmaker did not intend to adapt a specific literary work, but rather to reinterpret and actualize the mythic theme of *Electra*.

For Livingston, then, fidelity itself is not a sufficient condition for classification a work as an adaptation. However, once that categorization is established, he argues that fidelity plays an important role in the work’s evaluation. In particular, the viewer is expected to reflect on the challenges involved in translating certain literary devices, such as unreliable storytelling, into cinematic form, and to assess how the filmmaker has addressed those challenges. More strongly still, Livingston argues that viewers must do this if they wish to “appreciate the film as an artistic achievement” (ibid., p. 106).

No doubt many spectators have greatly enjoyed cinematic adaptations while remaining oblivious to the existence of the sources. For some purposes, there is nothing wrong with

this kind of enjoyment in which an adaptation is not recognized as such. Yet for other purposes – for example, if one’s concern is to appreciate the film as an artistic achievement – the rules of the game change. (Livingston 2010, p. 106)

This stands in sharp contrasts with Langer’s view according to which appreciating film as an artistic achievement requires the opposite: not that the viewer search for its literary source, but rather that they become unaware of it altogether.

Similarly, James Harold promotes fidelity as central to understanding the specific value of adaptations. In his account, he distinguishes between *story fidelity* and *thematic fidelity*: while the former, he argues, does not constitute an aesthetic merit, the latter is always praiseworthy and should be pursued by the filmmaker. Achieving thematic fidelity, for Harold, is in itself a mark of artistic merit.

Transposing a theme from one medium to another is never an obvious or straightforward matter. The transposition of a theme into a screenplay poses a very different set of challenges than transposing a story. In the latter case, the main challenge is preserving the audience’s experience of the sequence of fictional events. In the former case, the goal is to preserve the audience’s experience or the thematic ideas presented by the literary work. (Harold 2018, p. 98)

By highlighting theme as what is to be adapted and contrasting it with story, Harold offers a markedly different account of adaptation from Lamarque’s. For Lamarque, film adaptations are condemned to a transparent reading of the literary works on which they are based and therefore necessarily exclude literary values from the evaluative picture. For Harold, by contrast, cinematic adaptations of literary works seek to “preserve audience’s experience” – that is, as I understand it, the experience of opaque reading characteristic of literature as an art form. Although Harold’s account differs from mine, since I find the notion of theme too indeterminate, his emphasis on preserving the mode of experience points directly towards the concept of experiential adaptation.

It is important to note that while both Harold and Livingston discuss fidelity as a significant feature of adaptation, they frame it in different ways. For Livingston, fidelity functions as a norm – something one can reasonably expect an adaptation to fulfill. Yet violating this norm – that is, not being faithful in certain respects – does not automatically make a film worse: in fact,

departing from the literary source may at times be a more appropriate strategy than strict obedience. For Harold, by contrast, fidelity is a merit under all circumstances. Such a strong claim is made possible by significantly narrowing the scope of fidelity: it is therefore only natural that Harold concludes that thematic fidelity alone constitutes a genuine artistic value of cinematic adaptations.

5. Conclusion

I read Livingston and Harold as addressing two distinct levels of the discussion on adaptation, and I believe their accounts can be understood in complementary terms. Livingston effectively highlights specific points of rupture, moments when a call for comparison between literary source and film adaptation emerges and becomes meaningful. His is, in essence, a stance characteristic of the critical approach to adaptations and, as such, makes sense only when adaptations are already understood as a distinct art form. Harold, on the other hand, offers a more global perspective – one concerned with what a successful adaptation should ultimately aim for. By identifying thematic fidelity as the central value, he provides a framework in which departures from fidelity at lower levels can be interpreted not as failures but as artistically justified strategies. Without such a framework, a critical practice along Livingston's lines would not be possible.

In my terms, Livingston's normative understanding of fidelity corresponds to fidelity based on resemblance, while Harold's account of overarching thematic fidelity is rather akin to the term's more archaic sense – and the one that I also adopt – which associates fidelity with loyalty. Like Harold, I understand fidelity as something that adaptation should strive to achieve: it is integral to what adaptation, in my sense, is. However, I do not consider the “theme” a convincing candidate for this role. Themes transcend their individual artistic renderings, they are not bound to a particular literary text and readily invite reinterpretation. Basing an account of adaptation on thematic fidelity would, I believe, broaden the category of adaptation beyond usefulness. Thus, like Livingston, I believe that the link to a particular literary source needs to be maintained.

Rather than locating fidelity in local resemblances (as Livingston does) or in global *thematic* continuity (as Harold does), I propose that what matters is the mode of engagement an adaptation invites. In this sense, fidelity concerns less what is preserved from the source than how the adaptation calls upon viewers to relate to it. It is this invitation – to see the film both as a film and as a continuation of a literary experience – that I take to be the mark of a faithful adaptation. Such cinematic adaptations – what I have called experiential adaptations above – draw viewers into fragmentary imaginative worlds, less continuous and less complete than those of conventional cinema. In short, they invite the viewer to read.

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Singularity or Multiplicity of Aura, Atmosphere, and Environment/Place: Dialectic of Time and Space

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ABSTRACT: The paper is based on the assumption that the relationship and interconnection between aura (Benjamin 1935) and atmosphere is more intense and complex than Böhme (2017) claimed. The aim of the paper is therefore to analyse, discuss, and define the relationship and structural connection between aura and atmosphere and to argue that the aura of multiple objects, situated in one place, is necessary to the ontology of the atmosphere. At the centre of this analysis will be a case study of the concrete industrial area of ŽPA Krížik in Prešov (Slovakia), the identity of which was created by the statue of 'Working Woman' (1985). Later changes in the atmosphere of this environment were always tied to the destiny/actual situation of this statue. If we assume that this statue has an aura that was created with its origin (time and space of creation), we open the question of the relationship between the aura of this statue and the atmosphere of its environment. If there is one aura, how can there be more atmospheres of one place? Or, is there only one atmosphere, but we can interact/feel only some of its layers at a time? This question about the singularity and multiplicity of aura, atmosphere, and space, as an outcome of the dialectic of time and space, will be the main subject of the analysis. Therefore, the analysis is based on three premises: (1) aura (of an object) is a quality that we identify and feel when we interact (experience) with the object/or when we interact with a natural phenomenon; (2a) we need to be part of the atmosphere to be able to experience it; (2b) but we are not just perceiving atmosphere, we are shaping it; (3) the aesthetics of atmospheres is concerned with "spaces and spatiality" (Böhme 2017, p. 26), but the notion of aura is defined by space, but also by time (Benjamin 1935).

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Atmosphere as a fundamental notion of modern aesthetics (Böhme, 2017) was of great interest through the last decades of the 20th century and the first decades of the 21st Century. It is a key concept in the aesthetics of public spaces, everyday aesthetics, urban aesthetics and more. Besides Gerold Böhme (1995, 2017), a significant contribution was made by Tonino Griffero (2014, 2017, 2019, 2020, 2023) who understands landscape as a form of atmosphere and works with the human emotions and body in environment (emotional atmosphere), by Richard Shusterman (2019) who spreads its application in the area of somaesthetic, by Daniel Pavia (2023) who speaks of atmosphere and its significance for tourism, or more recently by Nicola Di Croce (2025).

Even if the “atmospheric” discourse is quite recent, the existence of atmosphere as such, and its philosophical identification, are defined by an older concept: Walter Benjamin’s (1969) concept of aura. This origin point of the concept is important, even if Böhme (2017, p. 14) understands it (only) as a notion/theoretical concept that preceded the concept of atmosphere, because the understanding and problematic nature of aura as such explains the most distinctive aspects of atmosphere. The paper will build its argument upon this close connection of aura and atmosphere through an analysis of concrete urban space: the former ZPA Krížik factory located in Prešov (Slovakia) on Solivar Street. This environment was a subject of great change in a span of just over forty years, and therefore can fundamentally show us different aspects and temporal layers of one place/space, and it can therefore be a challenge for the concept of aura and atmosphere.

The main focus will be on time and space as crucial aspects of both notions, but their ontological significance will play a different role and be of different importance in each. Time and space play an important role in any experience of a concrete place: time and space of the experience, time of the place, space of the time, and this space-time continuum can show us different aspects of one place, or rather, different places, even if the experienced environment is the same. It is almost as if there are more places at the same time and space, or, at least, it can feel this way to us.

The aim of the paper is to identify similarities and interconnections between both notions and define the ontological relationship between aura and atmosphere, and therefore, analyze why aura and atmosphere are different, but connected, concepts. This argument will lead us to the central issue of this paper: How many atmospheres and auras of one place are there? If the

atmosphere (or aura, or both) creates an identity of the place, can we say that people, by their interaction with and entrance into the atmosphere, create different places, or layers of them? If atmosphere is defined by the place and time of the experience of this place, does it mean that the atmosphere is immune to change, and that everything is in the eye of the recipient?

1. How many identities/versions can one place have?

The factory site of ZPA Križik as an object of analysis was chosen because of its history and different traceable patterns of the past. This location, a former industrial area of Prešov, is located between a road that connects the city's biggest housing estate with the rest of the city, yet, paradoxically, is situated in "nature". This relation, an oxymoron and visible dialectic of nature and factory site, was (and still is) responsible for the first impression of this site. The identity and, therefore, the atmosphere, is not created by the objects that are situated here, but by the context and the environment as a whole.

The site is a former factory from a former regime, with a representation of an art style from a former time, situated in a former abandoned factory, and a former construction site. Like everything that creates the origin of this place, this environment, and its emotional evaluation (emotional atmosphere), is connected with that time. Almost everything except the current design/situation is a thing of the past. Everything is visually taken out of context. However, when interacting with this public space, any recipient or inhabitant of the city will clearly recognize, or even feel, its identity. They will not be able to explain it, but they might feel it, and their experience will be shaped by this undeniable and inexpressible feeling.

The place was defined for most of its existence by the sculpture of the Working Woman by Ján Hučko from 1985 (fig. no 1). This sculpture from the late socialist period came to be a kind of confirmation of the past identity of the factory and a co-creator of the atmosphere of the place. However, because of frequent changes to this area, this atmosphere already belongs to the past and nowadays looks and feels totally different. But what has not changed is the feeling of the place created by the aforementioned sculpture. Even now, the atmosphere of the place is created by its absence (not entirely consciously). This may sound paradoxical because the first big change, except for the obsolescence and ageing of the factory building, happened in 2011 when somebody (during the night) (re)painted the sculpture, and the Working Woman started

to look like the mascot of the McDonald's fast food chain (fig. no. 2), which sparked heated reactions from the town's inhabitants.

We can find a symbolic shift in this change, or interpret it as a reaction from a capitalist point of view to the socialistic past, but what is more important is that the place, its identity, and atmosphere rapidly changed. What is particularly fascinating is the fact that if you looked at the sculpture from the street, you did not see the figure/its form, but the illusion of a sculpture that was nicely painted. When you came closer, this illusion, this painting, was surpassed by the structure and shape of the sculpture, and you were looking at a painted sculpture of the Working Woman. This "duality" seemed almost comical. The sculpture camouflaged its identity. At the same time, it subverts the atmosphere of the environment, which looks like a 'cut-out' from post-communist reality, like a still-life with a crumbling, exhaust-fume-stained statue, with a deteriorating and long-defunct building in the background. The new form of the statue, or its new layers, negates its own past, destroys its own aura, and is layered with a new being. However, at the same time, in combination with or in the context of the surrounding environment, this new version (alternation) of the sculpture created a new atmosphere, and slowly started to be part of the environment again. The sculpture returned to being in the middle of it all.

This environment underwent another transformation in 2024. In the spring, the long-awaited redevelopment and transformation of the entire area into apartments and a shopping center was announced. However, before the building process began, demolition works needed to start and, again, the sculpture was in the middle of the action. A frequent question in Prešov was: What will happen to the McDonald's/Working Woman statue in front of the old factory? Interest in the sculpture that had become an important part of public space in Prešov in just thirteen years is remarkable, but it shows, at the same time, how quickly something can be incorporated into a public space and become part of its identity. During the last one and a half years, the statue was removed (not destroyed), the shopping center was built, and the rest of the site is still in the process of being rebuilt (fig. no. 3).

Why is this situation interesting? From the perspective of the constant transformation of public space, it is like a generic story of every post-socialist country. But this environment is special, because one statue constantly changed its character, its atmosphere, and our understanding of it, and therefore one object with aura (as I will argue in the paper) was responsible for the

structure of the atmosphere of the examined space. The environment under study could therefore be defined by six time periods of an atmosphere, or rather by six atmospheres:

1. the original factory, before the installation of the statue of the Working Woman;
2. the original factory site with the statue of the Working Woman in the era of socialism, i.e. in the era when the site was functional;
3. the abandoned site of the factory with the statue of the Working Woman in the post-socialist period;
4. the abandoned and crumbling factory site with the statue of a Working Woman repainted as a McDonald's fast-food mascot, from 2011;
5. the transitional phase (2024 – 2025) during which the old atmosphere slowly and gradually disappeared, but the construction site did not offer a new atmosphere (except the atmosphere of a construction site, identical to other such sites);
6. the site with its shopping center and flats, still not completed and therefore only a matter of the future.

2. Atmosphere

The notion of atmosphere “implies a certain affective quality of (lived and non-geometrical) space” (Griffero & Tedeschini 2019, p. 2), and is often understood as an “emotional space that involves one’s body” (see Shusterman 2019), that we experience and “whose atmospheric resonances can only be described from our first-person perspective” (Griffero & Tedeschini 2019, p. 2). Everything is thus, from a somaesthetic point of view, based on bodily sensations, since atmosphere is the result of individual, intuitive, and direct experience. Atmosphere is a feeling that is separate from emotion or mood; it is not a private matter but is objectively layered in the environment and functions as a “qualitative-sentimental prius of every sensible [...] encounter with the world” (Griffero 2020, p. 264).

Atmospheres are “quasi-things” (Böhme 2017) which do not exist in physical form, but, as Di Stefano (2017) noted, they are identifiable, and therefore we can recognize them through perception. But we need to focus this perception on something. According to Griffero (2020, p. 265), Böhme understood his New Aesthetic (the central notion is atmosphere) as a “general theory of perception”, but in his “quasi-things” understanding of atmosphere, he cannot

completely exclude (material) objects from his thoughts. Atmosphere is related to persons, space, and nature (Ševčík 2024): it is “something between the subject and the object” (Böhme 2017, p. 25), yet neither of them in their fullest. Therefore, Böhme (2017, p. 25) explained the aesthetics of atmosphere as something that must “mediate between the aesthetics of reception and the aesthetics of the product or of production”, which caused the indeterminacy of atmosphere. It primarily concerns their “ontological status”: we are not sure whether we should attribute them to the objects or to the environments in which these objects are embedded, or whether we should rather attribute them to the subjects by whom these atmospheres are experienced (Ševčík 2024, pp. 119).

With his exclusion of the properties of aesthetic phenomena, Shusterman (2019) thinks about the notion of atmospheres in the somatic sense a little bit differently. Atmosphere as emotional space is more about our feelings of aesthetic phenomena, even if their properties and different aspects create the conditions for atmosphere to exist and to be visible. The question is whether we are able to feel some mood, some emotion, or experience some special space and therefore to identify and experience the atmosphere of this place, if we exclude the materiality and structure of the objects, and visible impulses of the place, from our perception. This is where the question about the role of auratic objects for the existence of atmosphere arises.

3. Aura

Aura is, in discourse, usually understood as a property of a work of art, but Benjamin (1969) actually connected it to (1) artefacts that were created by human hands in a certain place (here) and time (now) and to (2) natural phenomena that are experienced in a certain place (here) and time (now). In this second, but ontologically speaking, primary, example of aura, Benjamin talks about the uniqueness of our experience, and he is paradoxically speaking about experiencing natural phenomena like hills, wind, sunlight on a face, etc. Therefore, about phenomena that weren't created by human hands or minds, but were “just” experienced by them.

According to this understanding, aura does not reflect only the temporal horizon of the object, but rather the temporal and spatial horizon of perception itself. Here and now, as a spatial and temporal element, determines the originality, uniqueness, and non-repeatability of the aesthetic experience and is a kind of ‘guarantee’ of the originality and uniqueness of the created artefact

(not necessarily artistic uniqueness), which cannot be reproduced at another time and in another space; *ergo*, by anyone else. Aura, in this context, then possesses any object, artefact, or subject that is determined and ontologically defined by the identification of the place and time of its creation, or the experience in the case of a phenomenon that cannot be created but start to exist only the initial and nonrepeatable experience of it.

This processual/perceptual aspect of aura is often forgotten, but according to Benjamin's identification of the aura of natural phenomena, *this* aura is the original one. It is like we are trying to copy or materialize this process by creating some object with a stable and unrepeatable ontology. It is a little bit confusing, because different rules apply for natural aura (time and place of experience) and for artistic/objective aura (time and place of creating). Nevertheless, in the middle of it all is the same logic: the natural phenomena start to exist for people (recipients) when he/she can experience it, and, needless to say, they cannot exist without the conscious awareness of a recipient. Therefore, for both kinds of aura, the same applies: time and space are crucial for the creation/materialization of aura, or, stated otherwise, for the aura to be brought into existence. Any object/phenomena, therefore, is ontologically defined and axiologically profiled by the place and time of its creation.

Aura is not a real value of objects (or in the case of natural phenomena, not the real value of the experience itself), but it is the guarantee of their originality, unrepeatability, uniqueness, and unfalsifiability. It is simply the result and confirmation of individual existence. Originality is understood here as authenticity, as the quality that distinguishes the original from its counterfeit (see, e.g., Goodman 1976), or reproduction, or other imitation. "The here and now of the original creates the notion of its [the artwork's] authenticity" (Benjamin 2013, p. 66) or "[T]he presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity" (Benjamin 1969, p. 3). The authenticity of a thing is the authority of a thing that cannot be repeated or copied.

Benjamin's account of aura did not define or distinguish artifacts from each other. The author never thought in this way, and therefore the aura cannot be considered as a defining criterion or a criterion for any axiological categorization. Even if aura is a guarantee of a certain value, it is not a value that can be quantified, and we certainly should not think about which aura is 'better' (Makky 2019).

4. Aura and atmosphere or the process of identifying the identity of a place

Gerold Böhme (2017) understands atmosphere as a fundamental concept of a new aesthetics that goes beyond our tendency for aesthetic judgment, beyond our tendency to evaluate any aesthetic phenomena. This lack of evaluation in a classical sense is crucial and shapes new aesthetics or aesthetic discourse itself. Böhme (2017, p. 14), in his understanding of atmosphere, refers to Benjamin's concept of "aura", which he understands as a theoretical concept that preceded the concept of atmosphere. He emphasizes the notion of natural aura (Böhme 2017; Ševčík 2024), and this broader, natural, primordial, understanding of aura (more productive for the aesthetics of everyday life) is crucial for the understanding of the relation between aura and atmosphere.

Aura is something that arises with the work and is ontologically intertwined with it. It is fixed in time but completed because of 'the distance of time and space' (Benjamin 1969), or (in the matter of natural aura) its uniqueness is created in the moment of experience. This experience will always be different, never the same, but that doesn't mean that it cannot improve, nor does it mean that different experiences in the future will be better or worse. They will be just different. In this differentiation lies the uniqueness of the aura. The awareness and setting of the recipient's mind change; their interactive skill and aesthetic grasp of the self are altered when they interact with the object that carries the aura, or when they are in the moment of the birth/awareness of the aura (but they do not create it).

Aura (of an object) is a quality that we identify and feel when we interact with the object as a recipient or (in the case of natural aura) when we experience natural phenomena in their authentic situation, but we are still recipients. In regard to atmosphere, it functions differently. One central aspect of the atmospheric approach is the nonphysical body that we feel and "whose atmospheric resonances we can describe only from our first-person perspectives" (Griffero & Tedeschini 2019, p. 2): we need to be present. We need to be part of the atmosphere (its inhabitant or dweller) to be able to experience the atmosphere. We need to enter it not just to look at it and this main difference is crucial. In comparing aura and atmosphere, from this perspective, it is a journey from recipient to (temporary) dweller of participant.

It can be assumed that the relationship between aura and atmosphere is based on this cooperative ability; however, the environment, and therefore the atmosphere, is not made up of just one object, but of a system and group of objects and connections concentrated between them in one place, including the affective circumstances of our interaction or perception of a given situation and place. Even if the aura is tied to these objects or to the experience of some special situations that carry it, the atmosphere is built up gradually and constantly based on different relationships and connections with the present, and therefore on materially existing thoughts and on felt and experienced emotions. It evolves naturally and forces the recipient to identify the nature or structure of a specific space that ‘possesses’ the atmosphere.

Aura is in existence from its inception and does not change through the transformation of external conditions; it is ontologically stabilized. This contradiction is present in Benjamin’s (1969) definition of aura itself, because it is different for objects and for natural phenomena (that also influence the atmosphere), as mentioned above. But for some reasons the aura of objects is superior to natural aura. Therefore, if we try to identify or experience the aura of human made objects, experience is not important, and cannot change anything. It can only confirm or reveal the aura (ontologically defined by the creation of artefacts). The criteria of experience as the moment when we identify aura applies only when we experience natural phenomena. Nevertheless, the combination of different objects in one place creates a frame for our participatory reception and concentration of the aura these objects create, which, in a special structural sense, is atmosphere as a potentially sensually perceivable time and space reality.

The idea of atmosphere always refers to the spatial sense of the environment. Atmosphere “fills space” and “emanates from things or constellations of things” (Böhme 2017, p. 24). It is based on the principle and system of natural aura, but consists of, and is built by, the aura of different objects. Aura, on the other hand, is defined by space but is specified by time. The specific time of a specific place creates the ontology of the object, which later co-creates the atmosphere of a specific environment. According to our analysis and chosen example, we need to find the answer to what happens to the atmosphere when a complex situation in an environment changes. Does it disappear and something completely new emerges, or is the new atmosphere just an extension or transformation of the old atmosphere?

5. Conclusion

How aura is responsible for the creation, or effect, of the atmosphere in an ontological issue. The process has already been analyzed. We can understand aura as the identity of the birth or situating of a work of art or any object made or experienced by humans, and atmosphere as the materialized mood of the environment which the recipient perceives. Aura, as an attribute of an object created by man (or as an attribute of experienced natural phenomena), creates, in the case of multiple objects, a structure of auratic resonance that we can identify as recipients. This resonance, merged together in one place, helps to create the atmosphere (atmosphere is not only the combination of different auras, or fragments of these auras) that we enter and identify: we identify it with some mood or feeling (or energy) according to our direct experience.

Therefore, what happens if there is something like a new atmosphere? Every time there is a change in the atmosphere, it means that the atmosphere works with the different layers of an existing structure, or that some new object/natural phenomena, realized in the experience environment, changed the structure, and influenced the atmosphere. New objects/natural phenomena with new auras can make this shift slightly. If there are more new situations and the old ones disappear, new layers of the atmosphere can be so visible and extreme that new atmospheres can be created. However, that does not mean that the old atmosphere will disappear. It just means that new situations and layers are more significant.

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The publication was funded as a part of the project Kega no. 009TTU-4/2025 *Eternal Returns: Exploring the Influence of Historical Epochs on Modern and Postmodern Art*



Fig. no. 1: *The statue of Working woman by Ján Hučko (ŽPA Križik, Prešov)*



Fig. no. 2: Crumbling factory site of ŽPA Križik with the statue of a Working Woman repainted as a McDonald's fast food mascot, from year 2011



Fig. no. 3: *Rebuilding of the ŽPA Křížik factory (Left October 2024, right June 2025).*

Why cannot literary interpretation do without taste?

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ABSTRACT. This paper presents a negative answer to the question of whether literary interpretation can take place without some kind of exercise of taste. By endorsing an experiential account of interpretation and identifying taste as the set of cognitive abilities that are put into play when we experience literature, I test the possibility of accounting for the different interpretive moments that take place during our literary experience by appealing to an exercise of taste. To this end, I take perception, imagination, emotion and cognitive assimilation, as the main mental processes that are involved in interpretation, and aim to illustrate how the exercise of taste permeates each of them and allows for their interaction. After considering some objections, I reassert that appealing to the exercise of taste successfully acknowledges what seems to be the ultimate purpose of interpretation as appreciation, i.e., maximizing the literary experience and stress its compatibility with the normativity of aesthetic appreciation.

1. Interpretation and taste

Interpreting literature implies more than analyzing themes and structures objectively. When readers interpret novels, they engage in appreciative experience closely linked to interpretation: appreciation both lies in and stands for the different interpretive modes characterizing the reader's experience. This opposes Noël Carroll's approach, which subsumes interpretation under critical evaluation without necessary appreciative engagement. Carroll dissociates art evaluation from aesthetic experience, arguing that aesthetic dimensions don't interfere with

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artworks' artistic value. Within this framework, engaging with literary works aims to grasp what's artistically valuable about them. This excludes aesthetic relevance, which seems to mark our appreciative experiences.

Alternatively, Jeremy Page identifies interpretation as necessarily appreciative, providing aesthetic understanding that grounds judgements about works' aesthetic character². Readers must engage in appreciative interpretation and develop a certain kind of “experiential sensitivity to the artwork's particular aesthetic character and/or value” (Page, 2022, 52). This approach makes interpretation both appreciative and experiential: discovering a novel's aesthetic character and artistic value is possible only through appreciative experience. For instance, the evaluation of *Giovanni's room* as excellent mid-20th century *queer* literature becomes possible through appreciative interpretation that develops while reading—forming ideas about theme based on events and reactions the novel provokes. Pointing to appreciative interpretation's experiential nature stresses both the agential aspect (direct, active, autonomous engagement) and the qualitative or phenomenological aspect (the experience's value). Two implications follow. First, our “initial first responses to a work (perceptual, affective and reflective)” (Page, 2022, 53) are appreciative reactions, not non-appreciative cognitive processes whose results inform appreciative interpretation. Second, if interpretation is experiential, some phenomenological attitude or ability must tie together what objects offer and what results from experience. This paper argues why and how taste's involvement accounts for both.

As for taste, in a Kantian vein, Alan Goldman outlines what this notion captures: the interaction between cognitive abilities activated when engaging with literature. For Goldman, pleasure in reading lies in “the satisfaction derived from the [...] full and interactive exercise of our mental capacities: perceptual, imaginative, emotional, and cognitive. For a work of art to so engage these capacities simultaneously and interactively is the mark of aesthetic value” (Goldman, 2013, 3). The “play” between mental abilities manifests throughout literary experience as we react to works' features, eliciting pleasure or displeasure attitudes that mark experience positively or negatively. This paper's notion of taste identifies it with the articulation of mental abilities involved in experiencing works, allowing readers to react to novels' features and develop appreciative attitudes.

² See Page (2022, 49)

1.1. An experiential approach

The importance of stressing the experiential dimension of literary interpretation stems from an observation regarding our literary engagement: whatever it is that we get to grasp about the work lies in the experience we have of it, and consequently the different activities that constitute that experience have something to do with our interpretive process. An experiential account points to this idea: we interpret during the experience, that is, as we engage with the work at hand. In this sense, our experience and interpretation of a literary work are one and the same thing. According to this approach, what a work means "rests upon the experience induced in an adequately sensitive, adequately informed, spectator" (Wollheim, 1987, 22). To apply this from paintings to novels, what a literary work means depends on what an "adequately sensitive, adequately informed" reader is capable of experience when reading.

This relates to Gregory Currie's linguistically encoded meaning (LEM) of text-based works³. LEM is "the meaning of the text itself: something that is context free and preinterpretive" (Currie, 2004, 124-125)—certain constitutive features' discernment is immediate, incorrigible, and non-reliant on interpretation, and LEM is one such feature. For example, *The Secret History*'s meaning rests on experience induced in English readers grasping LEM who are familiar with characters' way of life and sensitive to expressive offerings. If grasping LEM is preinterpretive, we needn't try to understand text to actually understand it; while reading, we simply do or don't. Additionally, we can understand text without understanding work, so any meaning beyond LEM must result from interpretation. For instance, getting *The Secret History*'s point exceeds understanding the words' literal meaning. It demands engaging in different ways, all conceivable as instances of exercising taste. Regarding the plot: hypothesizing about the theme (friendship, economic class) and identifying the overall argument (the wealthy's immoral propensity). Regarding the text: identifying structural patterns (before/after crucial events) and reacting to narration's rhythm and nuances. Regarding the story: sympathizing with characters or failing to (pitying or mocking them). Though these actions constitute getting the work, we needn't consciously "try" when reading ordinarily: it comes with reading novels. Our ultimate purpose remains constant: seeking the most valuable, richest, fullest experience possible.

³ See Currie (2004, 120)

Overall, the way "perception, cognition, emotion and imagination combine and blend in the appreciation of literary works, as they do in appreciating other forms of art" (Goldman, 2013, 6) matches the kind of phenomenon the notion of taste as presented tries to apprehend. That is, taste as the exercise and interaction of a reader's mental faculties seems to account for the way different interpretive acts interfere with each other and constitute the overall appreciative experience of the work. Accordingly, we could state the following: we interpret—that is, we grasp elements of, get the point of, appreciate—the work we engage with by exercising taste to a greater or lesser extent. In the next section, we identify four different moments within the interpretive process of literature in which an appeal to the exercise of taste can explain the kind of engagement with the work that each of them provides.

2. Reading as interpreting

Firstly, with regard to perceptual discernment, “even the direct perception of elements and their properties, if their description is a matter of dispute, counts as interpretation” (Goldman, 2013, 16). That is, the discernment of features and properties of works, while always rooted in their objective elements, can be subject to the interpretive process of the reader and therefore can be accounted for by the exercise of taste. Richard Wollheim distinguishes three perceptual qualities that point to particular ways of perceiving that diverge from uninformed, direct, aseptic perception of what is already “there” in the work: “(one) *seeing-in*: (two) *expressive perception*: and (three) the capacity to experience *visual delight*” (Wollheim, 1987, 45). He specifically refers to paintings, but his characterization is easily applicable to other works of art, including literature. Turning to Goldman again, in literature these perceptual qualities would be “quasi-perceptual” (Goldman, 2013, 5): by directly perceiving the text, we indirectly “perceive” non-sensible features of the novel that we otherwise grasp immediately.

Let’s imagine two readers of *The Secret History*, reader A and reader B. While reader A perceives Donna Tartt’s writing style as dense, reader B finds it light. This would be an example of seeing-in the novel: despite the text not being dense or light on its own, both readers perceive it that way, respectively, given that they neither reflect nor infer the density or lightness of the text from its objective properties. Furthermore, on the grounds of seeing-in the novel a dense style, reader A might have the expressive perception of it being an either skillful or pretentious

exercise of literary writing, which in turn would manifest as a form of delight –e.g. enjoyment, if perceived as skillful– or the lack thereof –annoyance, if perceived as pretentious. Similarly, on the grounds of seeing-in the novel a light style, reader B might have the expressive perception of it being an either perspicuous or basic example of literary writing, which then too would manifest as, for example, feeling admiration or boredom. This perceptual divergence between A and B’s reading experiences is easily understood when appealing to different exercises of taste as conceived in this paper: reader A’s cognitive stock, imaginary abilities, literary journey and even character traits differ from reader B’s and partake in their “quasi-perception” of the novel through the perception of the text, which is the only directly perceivable feature of literary works.

Secondly, the different associations and/or mental representations that the reader creates as they engage with the work are also explained by the exercise of taste, in this case with regard to the mental ability of imagination. There are two ways in which imaginative engagement with literature can manifest itself: the production of mental representations, usually induced by imagery; and the making of associations between information provided by the work and pieces of our cognitive stock that might become relevant while reading, such as the production of abductive judgements. Both ways of imagining while reading involve an articulation of imagination and other mental abilities like emotion and perception, and overall call for several cognitive processes that influence each other –as the notion of taste captures. Let’s look at this passage:

As I was on my way there for my first class, I saw Francis Abernathy stalking across the meadow like a blackbird, his coat flapping dark and crowlike in the wind. He was preoccupied, smoking a cigarette but the thought that he might see me filled me with an inexplicable anxiety. I ducked into a doorway and waited until he had passed.

One way in which a reader could imaginatively engage with what is narrated would be to imagine themselves as Richard, the narrator, looking at and seeing Francis, while interpreting the metaphors about him: “crowlike” as a way of pointing to the dark and mysterious vibe of Francis’ figure, or “like a blackbird” to enhance his elegance and demeanor. Another way would be for the reader to empathize with Richard by imagining the feeling of anxiety he is referring to, but also to associate that “inexplicable anxiety” with Richard’s admiration towards Francis –as previously hinted in the novel–, or to the fear of being discovered and it all seeming like Richard was spying on him the whole time. Granted that every reader of this passage would

in one way or another engage imaginatively with it, and that what we call imagination doesn't differ between cases, the resultant mental representations and associations would inevitably take different shapes depending on the subject and their particular exercise of taste.

Thirdly, the way each reader engages emotionally with a given work is also conditioned by their exercise of taste, for the emotions aroused by the novel's features may vary depending on the experience. Let's return to the passage of *The Secret History* introduced in the previous paragraph to illustrate this idea. Some expressions of Richard's monologue, like "stalking across the meadow like a blackbird, his coat flapping dark and crowlike in the wind", may induce in the reader not only the creation of certain mental images or the making of certain associations regarding Francis' character as regarded by Richard, but also a feeling of, for example, uncertainty and caution. But it could be the case that they instead feel rather curious towards, or even attracted to, Francis.

Similarly, sentences like "the thought that he might see me filled me with an inexplicable anxiety" may induce in the reader a similar sensation to the one expressed by the narrator, that is, a feeling of unease. Nonetheless, that same sentence could arouse in the reader a feeling of tenderness towards Richard's socially anxious and awkward personality. In each case, the emotional response of the reader would lie in focusing on a more or less specific element on the work, as well as in a certain moral understanding of the scene. In the former, the unsettling description of Francis prevails, in addition to a moral judgement of Richard's lurking as improper. In the latter, the naïve behavior of Richard is what marks the reader's experience, accompanied by some kind of complicity felt towards the narrator's analysis of Francis. In both scenarios, as the reading continues, those now appreciative features that become available to the reader thanks to –in this case– engaging affectively with the novel, can be compared to, associated or somehow related to new personality traits or events encountered later on in the story.

Finally, the information that a reader assimilates in the face of what the constitutive elements of the work hint at is also conditioned by an exercise of taste. In the case of literary works, particularly of narratives, what the work is about –both in a general sense and regarding concrete plot points or character traits– can be more or less transparently conveyed through its features. Consequently, the cognitive assimilation of the information that might be relevant for engaging with a novel depends on the particular way in which a reader both processes whatever

the work offers on its own and articulates the objective features or data with their personal cognitive stock. In simpler terms, for a reader to understand the different keys of significance of a given work, they don't just expose themselves to what the novel objectively offers and try to grasp as much of it as possible, but they actively engage with it, putting into play their cognitive abilities and therefore having a unique understanding of what's significant in the work. For instance, understanding the former passage of *The Secret History* implies that a reader would do more than just process the words of the text correctly: they would empathize with a feeling of anxiety that is, to Richard, "inexplicable"; and also, from the outside, they would assume that the "inexplicable anxiety" is best explained as a manifestation of the embarrassment felt by Richard before Francis' inaccessible aura. The latter assumption is possible because the reader previously learnt that Richard feels like an outsider among his colleagues, given their higher social and economic status, and so they perceive the mix of infatuation and insecurity in Richard's narrative voice every time he talks about his peers. As the reader goes on reading, they gather different pieces of information suggested by the text and, by connecting them, they start grasping an overall meaning.

In summary, everything we do to get the point of a novel is conditioned by the way our cognitive abilities are put into play in a particular manner. As such, literary interpretation is not just concerned with grasping objective features of the work with some sort of significance but is also subjectively influenced by each reader's affective and cognitive engagement. We attempted to show that the exercise of taste can account for this subjective dimension of the process of literary interpretation by illustrating its influence in different interpretive moments or acts. Nonetheless, there might still be some concerns with the necessity of drawing on the notion of taste for us to successfully characterize what it means to understand a work and how exactly we engage with it. In the next section, three possible objections to our proposal are addressed and –hopefully– answered.

3. Objections

So far, the purpose of this paper has been to argue for an experiential account of literary interpretation, as well as to showcase the different interpretive stages in which it is possible to point to an exercise of taste. By doing so, we concluded that for a reader to properly get the

point of a novel, they ought to not just read the constitutive text and grasp its literal meaning, but also to actively engage with it by exercising taste that results in a somewhat subjectively influenced interpretive process. Several concerns could be raised with regards to this; here we address three.

- A. To understand a novel is to be able to follow the story and to grasp its content, and that does not require an exercise of taste.

As Peter Kivy stresses,

The serious thoughtful reader [...] is both in it for the story *and* thinks in the gaps and in the after life about the theses that the author of the novel meant to convey by the story. *Both* make up what I would call this reader's literary experience of the novel or, in more general terms, his artistic experience of it. But, so far, the experience [...] contains no significant *aesthetic* component. Neither the experience of the story nor the contemplation of the theses that the story is meant to convey have anything to do with "aesthetic properties". (Kivy, 2011, 34)

For Kivy, aesthetic properties are perceptual or, at most, expressive. In the case of literary works, this characterization varies according to the specific kind of work. For instance, poetry has sonic –i.e. directly perceptual– properties related to its recitation that, on the contrary, narrative works don't. But overall, the aesthetic properties encountered in any literary work are limited to structural, linguistic and emotive properties. Nonetheless, the case of narratives is particularly sterile when it comes to its aesthetic significance. On the one hand, regarding structural properties, Kivy argues that these are hardly ever noticed by the reader of novels and therefore are "not a rich source of aesthetic experience" (Kivy, 2011, 73). On the other hand, given that linguistic properties of literature are directly tied to sonic purposes, prose literary language is significantly poorer regarding its aesthetic relevance than poetic language. Finally, emotive properties are artistically relevant, but according to Kivy this does not necessarily turn them into aesthetic properties –in fact, for him, they are not. In this sense, Kivy distinguishes between knowing an emotion and feeling it, and states that the former is the usual way in which we have an emotional understanding of novels –more often than not, we learn about the character's emotions rather than responding emotionally to the plot.⁴

⁴ See Kivy (2011, 139)

In summary, the formal elements of narrative works (especially of fiction) are almost irrelevant when reading them. In contrast, the significant features on which the reader focuses are content-related ones, that is, the plot and the external theses that could be intentionally transmitted through storytelling. This being so, formal properties are also the aesthetically relevant ones, while content-related properties are not. As such, the latter play “little part in the novel reader’s understanding, appreciation, and enjoyment of novels, even when the reader is a sensitive, serious one and the novel a serious or even great literary work of art” (Kivy, 2011, 94).

There are several ways of responding to Kivy’s characterization of literary understanding. Firstly, again drawing on Goldman, it is possible to argue that the “grasp of philosophical theses implicit in the novels [...] depends in part on appreciation of formal structure”, and that “access to these descriptions is greatly facilitated and reinforced by our implicit feeling for the developing structures of the narratives as we read” (Goldman, 2013, 5). Accordingly, the structural elements of literary fiction influence the interpretation of works despite the reader not perceiving, not being aware of, or not focusing on them in the first place. For example, the writing style, the opacity of the text, intensional contexts, larger structural patterns and relations between characters and/or events, and so on. In addition to this, despite the reader’s usual engagement with prose literary languages not being directly perceptual, it equally provides quasi-perceptual experiences that form part of the interpretive process and, therefore, are aesthetically relevant. For example, features such as the rhythm and texture of language, the narrative tone of the storytelling, predicates of sensible properties, or metaphors, all influence the reader’s interpretation of a novel and thus gain aesthetic relevance in their experience.

Secondly, “following” the story of a novel also requires more than just the correct processing of the succession of the various events that make up the work’s plot. To properly understand it, it is required for the reader to engage in the task of figuring out the overall meaning of the story, and to be somehow affected by it; that is, they need to have a certain “emotional engagement along with perceptual and cognitive” (Goldman, 2013, 5). As readers, we could actively engage with a story by, for instance, attuning to the plot, making up a complete picture of the represented events, grasping its unity (maybe under a theme), resonating with the overall importance of said theme, and so on. Furthermore, against Kivy, emotive properties of novels are actually less related to knowing the character’s emotions than to feeling those of our own emotions as a reaction to the story. Thirdly, it is the case that the aesthetic value of novels can

be more or less linked to the explicit content they offer, and so each work elicits a greater or lesser exercise of taste depending on its features. For instance, *Canto jo i la muntanya balla* by Irene Solà asks for a more incisive exercise of taste than *The Final Empire* by Brandon Sanderson: while the former presents the same series of events from the perspective of different –and even non-human– characters, the latter is heavily plot-focused.

- B. Emotional reactions are “prescribed” by the constitutive elements of the work, and therefore no exercise of taste is needed for a reader to have them.

This idea stems from Carroll’s cognitivist approach to emotions, according to which novels present

a criterially prefocused text –a text structured in such a way that the description or depiction of the object of our attention is such that it will activate our subsumption of the event under the categories that are criterially relevant to certain emotional states. Once we recognize the object under those categories, the relevant emotion is apt [...] to be raised in us. (Carroll, 2001, 228)

As such, emotions are rational, that is, responsive to knowledge, so the reader’s emotional reactions are tied by the constitutive elements of the narrative. For example, suspense is an apt emotional response to *The Secret History* because the events of the plot are presented in such a way that the relevant reaction to their unfolding is with suspense. Bunny’s death counts as “an event where some outcome that we regard to be morally righteous is improbable” (Carroll, 2001, 227); thus, as the reading continues and the circumstances surrounding Bunny’s death unfold, the suspense is fueled by the reader “keeping track of the shifting probabilities for the forces of good versus the forces of evil” (Carroll, 2001, 227). In turn, no exercise of taste is involved in this reader’s emotional engagement with the novel, for feeling suspense with *The Secret History* is a rational reaction to the elements of the story which the reader comes to know (or not know) via a pre-structured text.

With regards to this objection, firstly it can be argued that a “criterially prefocused” text can raise different but equally reasonable emotional responses, including those that were not intended by the author. For instance, the fact that *The Secret History* is meant to be a suspense novel does not rule out the possibility of reacting to it with amusement as the primary emotion, and it would be equally supported by features of the work: instead of focusing on the unsettling circumstances surrounding Bunny’s death, one could focus on the messiness of Richard’s inner

monologue. Secondly, the reasons for an emotion to be apt vary according to the specific reader and the experiential context of the reading. For instance, the suspense felt with *The Secret History* might make the reader focus on the circumstances of Bunny's death, or on Richard's final destiny, or on the entitlement of the characters despite their questionable actions. Overall, even though the text is fixed, the emotional response to it isn't, for it depends on what the reader does "with" the work, that is, their exercise of taste.

Thirdly, a distinction between knowledge and understanding made by Carroll is relevant to the characterization of the cognitive process involved in emotional responses to narratives. As stated in *Art, narrative and moral understanding*:

Understanding is the ability to make connections between what we already know [...] the activity of refining what we already know, of recognizing connections between parts of our knowledge stock, of bringing what we already know to clarity through a process of practice and judgement. [...] it is this kind of understanding [...] to which engaging with the narrative artworks may contribute (Carroll, 1998, 143-144)

If emotional reactions result from this kind of process, then the emotional understanding of works is dependent both on the knowledge stock and the cognitive processing of the reader. To illustrate this, let's bring back reader A and B. While reader A has certain prejudices regarding "old money" people and presents a rigid moral compass, reader B is unfamiliar with wealth-related behavioral traits and open to immoral acts in fiction. When reading *The Secret History*, it is expected that the pieces of knowledge and cognitive associations that make A feel suspense are different from B's, but just as relevant and compatible with the text. The difference here presented lies in the exercise of judgement that is involved in each case and therefore exemplifies an exercise of taste.

C. Attuning to the work is not necessary for a reader to interpret it.

The personal importance of the experience that results from the reader's interpretive process is independent of them grasping the relevant features, meaning and content of the work. In turn, if the reader resonates or not with the novel is irrelevant for them to understand it. Aesthetic understanding demands that the reader not only to properly identify the work's aesthetic character and value, but also that they be able to experience the novel as such; that is, to have an "appreciative interpretation" (Page, 2022, 58) of it. Nonetheless, this doesn't require the reader to personally resonate with the work, for "the appropriate focus of aesthetic appreciation

and judgement is [...] the pursuit of aesthetic understanding” (Page, 2022, 58), and not the other way around. The only requirement implicit in this characterization of aesthetic understanding is for it to be grounded in a “first-hand” –but not necessarily personal– appreciation. Indeed, one can interpret *The Secret History* as a thrilling commentary on the entitlement of the wealthy without relating to any of the characters or events of the story, nor to Tartt’s writing style. An exercise of taste might be needed for them to understand it, but relating personally to it isn’t necessary.

However, against Page, we could argue that the focus of aesthetic understanding is indeed the pursuit of aesthetic appreciation: when we interpret a work, we (try to) understand in order to appreciate it. The usual purpose of reading is not to, by means of appreciating the work’s aesthetic features, understand it as literature. Rather, we try to understand the novel in hopes of appreciating it. In virtue of this, the relevance of features regarding the work’s meaning and/or content is dependent on the experience and is grounded in whatever grants the most rewarding appreciation possible. For a novel to have meaning is not the same as its being meaningful; the latter is what we usually seek in reading, and it happens only when one somehow connects personally with the work. Hence

the fundamental purpose of interpretation itself: to guide perception toward maximal appreciation and therefore fair evaluation of a work. [...] The best interpretative explanations are those that guide the perceptions of an audience toward maximal appreciation of a work, those that maximize its value for the audience. (Goldman, 2013, p. 41)

In addition to this, if emotional understanding is part of the interpretive process of novels, then some kind of subjective attachment is required, for “the narrative must instill certain concerns about the fictional characters and events in the reader” (Carroll, 2001, 228-229). That is, to attempt an understanding of a work the reader must *care* about it to some extent, and this involves some kind of personal engagement compatible with the ideas of attunement and resonance.

4. Conclusion

Against Carroll, both Page and Goldman vindicate the aesthetic character of works. Nonetheless, they fall short of emphasizing the qualitative aspect of interpretation as experiential in nature. An experiential approach to ordinary literary interpretation is preferable to an inferential one, given its potential for maximizing the aesthetic experience of literature. The discernment of the work's relevant qualities to then infer how they determine the kind of work it is, or how they constitute its artistic value, can take part in the interpretative process but in no way exhausts it. The role of the exercise of taste in interpretation accounts for the aesthetic dimension of literary appreciation, which is characterized as a search for richness, completeness and value in our experiences of literature and predominantly guides way the reader's interpretive process.

To conclude, there are some ulterior thoughts that reach further than what has been argued for in this paper. Primarily, we can identify the possible reason behind the rejection of the notion of taste and its influence in interpretation whilst also aiming to preserve the normative nature of art interpretation and appreciation. Based on this reasoning, taste is understood as a set of subjective criteria and preferences—i.e. our "aesthetic personality"—whose participation rules out every possibility of distinguishing between acceptable and unacceptable interpretations. However, the normativity of art appreciation is aesthetic; that is, primitive and rule-free, and an alternative notion of taste such as the one endorsed in this paper is perfectly compatible with aesthetic normativity.

Acknowledgements

This research has been possible thanks to the support of Fundación Séneca {21837/FPI/22} and the research project 'The Rationality of Taste. Aesthetic appreciation and deliberation' (PID2023-149237NB-I00) financed by Agencia Española de Investigación -AEI.

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An ‘intrinsic’ characterisation of fiction

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ABSTRACT. D. Matravers (2014) and D. Davies (2020) have explicitly articulated a prevailing consensus within the literature on fiction, positing that fiction’s definition must be based on the kind of reactions it induces rather than its ‘intrinsic’ characteristics, i.e. the properties that fictional tools, such as words or settings, assume before being conveyed to receivers. In contrast to this prevailing consensus, this work proposes an ‘intrinsic’ characterisation of fiction. This characterisation asserts that a work is fiction if and only if there is a socially shared suspension of commitment to its representational role, and it is offered for interpretation. The aim of this study is to show that the proposed characterisation does not suffer from the limitations identified in other ‘intrinsic’ characterisations of fiction. It is further argued that this characterisation is a promising candidate for providing necessary and sufficient conditions for fiction.

D. Matravers (2014) and D. Davies (2020) have made explicit a consensus claim in the literature on fiction: that it cannot be characterised in terms of its ‘intrinsic’ properties, i.e. the properties that fictional tools, such as words or settings, acquire before being conveyed to receivers. According to this view, fiction is generally taken to be definable only in terms of its functional properties, i.e. the responses it prescribes or elicits. Contrary to this, I propose an ‘intrinsic’ characterisation of fiction: a characterisation according to which fiction is defined by the properties its tools assume before being presented to the audience. According to this characterisation, a work is fiction if and only if any commitment to its representational role is socially suspended and the work is offered for interpretation. My work aims to demonstrate

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that my characterisation does not suffer from the objections that have been raised against previous ‘intrinsic’ characterisation of fiction and that it is a promising candidate for providing the necessary and sufficient conditions for fiction.

My work is organised as follows: first, I present the consensus view, highlighting the reasons given in support of it (§1), then I articulate the problematic assumption in the previous consensus view in order to present my new characterisation (§2), and finally I consider and reject objections to the necessary and sufficient conditions offered by the new characterisation of fiction (§3).

1. The Consensus View

D. Matravers has made explicit a consensus view, widely shared among philosophers, as follows:

The debate after Walton has crystallized around two points of consensus: that what it is for a proposition to be fictional is for there to be a mandate to imagine it and that the mental state of imagining a proposition can be given a functional definition that distinguishes it from believing that proposition. (Matravers, 2014, pp. 2-3)

D. Davies further explains the consensus view as follows:

Consensus on Matravers’ first claim was motivated by the belief that the fictionality of a literary, cinematic, or more broadly visual representation must be determined by the *kind of agency* from which it results rather than by any ‘*intrinsic*’ *features* it has. (Davies, 2022, p. 241)

It is therefore important first to understand why ‘intrinsic’ features² – i.e. the properties that fictional tools, such as words or settings, acquire before being conveyed to receivers – are considered inadequate for characterising fiction. So far, proposed ‘intrinsic’ characterisations have been concerned either (i) with the structural aspects of fiction (for linguistic fictions, these are the syntactic/stylistic properties) or (ii) with the aspects that enable fiction to represent (for linguistic fictions, these are the semantic properties).

² The term “‘intrinsic’ features” is clearly taken from the above quotation. I will expand on the notion of ‘intrinsic’ at the end of §2.

It is not my concern here to defend a characterisation of fiction in terms of its structural/syntactic/stylistic properties (i.e. (i)): it is well known that even if there can be structural/syntactic/stylistic devices that are generally adopted within fiction, the same tools can be used outside fiction and, conversely, structural/syntactic/stylistic devices that are usually adopted outside fiction can be inserted into fiction without changing its fictional nature. Therefore, I will not examine these arguments in detail, because I agree with the reasons that have led to the exclusion of a structural/syntactic/stylistic characterisation of fiction.³

My aim is to challenge the way in which the above ‘intrinsic’ characterisations have been proposed in terms of representational (or semantic) properties (i.e. (ii)). More specifically, I do not challenge the rejection of previous semantic accounts themselves, but the assumptions on which those rejections rest. Before presenting my proposal, it is useful to consider why a characterisation of fiction in terms of its representational/semantic properties has been rejected.

Following D. Davies,⁴ we can say that either (ii.a) fiction was thought to represent only the world of fiction, or (ii.b) fiction was thought to represent our world and to be false. Let us consider the two options separately to evaluate each of them.

The first option (i.e., ii.a) has been made explicit as follows:

In a work of fiction, it might be claimed, expressions in the narrative refer only inwardly, as elements in a self-enclosed linguistic universe. (Davies 2007, p. 34 my emphasis)

This proposal cannot be correct because we can find references to real cities, places, people, etc., in fiction. It is therefore unreasonable to assume that fiction refers to a “self-enclosed universe.”

The second option (i.e., ii.b) is characterised as follows:

Suppose we grant that language employed in fictional narratives performs *the same referential functions as language in non-fiction*, and that, in virtue of this, sentences in fictional

³ See Currie 1990, pp. 2-4, Davies 2007, pp. 33-34.

⁴ Davies 2007 and 2022

works are, or may be, true or false of the world. It might still be suggested that the distinguishing feature of fictional works is that the sentences that make up the narrative are *false*. (Davies 2007, p. 35 my emphasis)

This proposal also fails because fiction is full of true and correct representations of reality; for example, historical fictions tend to be quite accurate in their representation of historical facts. And there is nothing wrong with assuming that fiction can be completely true; for example, an author may wish to report in fiction a complex series of events that she has witnessed.

I therefore agree that both (ii.a) and (ii.b) cannot provide an ‘intrinsic’ characterisation of fiction in terms of representational/semantic properties. My objection concerns an assumption common to both of the above representational/semantic characterisations of fiction and largely left unquestioned in subsequent discussions, namely that fictional devices maintain representational/semantic properties both outside and inside fiction. In other words, it is assumed that fiction uses tools which have representational/semantic properties outside fiction, and that they maintain representational/semantic properties inside fiction, it is just debated whether they represent a self-enclosed universe or the actual world. I will argue instead that while fiction uses tools that have representational/semantic properties outside fiction, these semantic/representational properties are suspended inside fiction, leaving room for these tools to be interpreted as either representational or non-representational by participants in the practice of fiction.

2. A new ‘intrinsic’ characterisation of fiction

The proposal I am making is that fiction is characterised by tools that have a representational/semantic role outside of fiction, but that these tools are used within fiction with the social assumption that this role is suspended, leaving it open to interpretation whether or not to consider them as representational. To summarise and clarify what I am proposing, the ‘intrinsic’ definition of fiction offered here is as follows:

(F) A work is fiction if and only if any commitment to its representational role is socially suspended and the work is offered for interpretation

By "representational role" I do not mean merely semantic content or reference. I mean the socially recognised function of a representational device as committing its producer to using that device representationally. Fiction suspends precisely this commitment while leaving the representational resources themselves available for use.

By saying that commitment is socially suspended, I do not mean that authors or audiences cease to have beliefs about what is represented, nor that representational interpretation becomes impossible. Rather, I mean that participants in the practice are not socially expected to treat the representational role of the work as binding in the way they ordinarily do outside fiction.

It is now worth considering the 'intrinsic' characterisation of fiction I propose. The idea is that the tools of fiction have semantic, or more broadly representational, properties outside of fiction, but the ordinary commitment to their representational role is suspended. In the case of written or spoken texts, commitment to the truth is expected outside of fiction. This expectation is not merely psychological but normative: ordinary communicative practices entitle speakers and audiences to hold one another responsible for the representational commitments conveyed by their utterances. What I propose is that, within fiction, this commitment should be suspended. This does not mean that the text is false or, at most, accidentally true,⁵ but rather that there is no commitment to truth or falsehood. The text takes on its own autonomy and the representational role it plays outside of fiction should not be taken for granted within it: it can be adopted, but an alternative interpretation of the means of expression used is also possible. The same applies to non-linguistic tools used in fiction, such as theatrical or film settings and actors. Here, the representational role cannot be taken for granted, and these features may be interpreted as either representational or expressive.

There are many advantages to adopting this proposal. One of the easiest aspects to observe is that when we approach fiction, we can focus our attention on the expressiveness of the means used, rather than on the object represented. The suspension of representational commitment is precisely what makes this interpretative engagement with the expressive dimensions of the work possible. For example, when we watch a classical ballet, we are interested in the expressive properties of the dance and the scenography. Some dance movements are interpreted as revealing states of mind, even if we don't think that those experiencing those states of mind

⁵ For a defence of the idea that a work of fiction is, at most, accidentally true, see Currie (1990), pp.46ff.

would behave in that way. The leaps of a dancer that we interpret as being in love do not represent real leaps of the character, but are presented to the audience to capture the lightness and candid energy that the feeling provokes; the contortions of a dancer that we interpret as being desperate do not represent real contortions of the character, but are presented to us to be interpreted as revealing the character's state of mind. Even the scenography can reveal emotions even more than the situations in which the characters find themselves.

And we shouldn't think that these are the characteristics of ballet alone, but that they are the characteristics of all the fictional tools. In theatre and cinema, for example, we can interpret blurring not as a technical error, but as a tool to capture other elements such as memories, psychological unease, confusion, etc. Literary fiction is not without these characteristics either. For example, we can consider the writer's choice of words as revealing. The repetition of words, the use of long sentences, the use of unusually complex expressions can, depending on the fictional context, reveal the state of mind of the fictional author, the attitude of the character or the situation described.

In this way, I hope to have briefly presented some intuitive advantages for accepting this definition. The purpose of this work, however, is not to go into detail about the advantages of this characterisation of fiction, but rather to defend it against the objection that it does not provide sufficient or necessary conditions for fiction itself.

Before I consider them, it may be helpful to explain why I define my characterisation of fiction as 'intrinsic'. It could be argued that semantic properties are not intrinsic to words because they depend on how language is used. Similarly, it could be argued that other representational properties are not intrinsic to the objects or settings used, but rather constructions dependent on how they are used in society. I agree that semantic and representational properties are relational in that they are based on human usage. Furthermore, when I state that the representational properties of the tools used in fiction are socially suspended, I am clearly appealing to social conventions that are relational and not intrinsic to the fictional tools themselves. These conventions concern the normative expectations governing representational practices. Within fiction, participants no longer treat representational devices as carrying the ordinary commitments that regulate their use outside fiction. To clarify my terminology, it is helpful to point out that, in the context of fiction, I distinguish between: (a) the (socially constructed) properties with which the tools are presented to the audience, which I refer to as

‘intrinsic’ properties, and (b) the audience’s permitted or required reactions, which I refer to as ‘extrinsic’ or functional properties. The terminology used here is based on David Davies’s use of the term ‘intrinsic’, as outlined in the quotation at the beginning of §1.⁶ The consensus view is that the ‘intrinsic’ properties of the tools of fiction remain constant both within and outside of fiction, whereas the distinctive characteristics of fiction only concern the ‘extrinsic’ or functional properties. Instead, I propose that the tools of fiction acquire specific ‘intrinsic’ properties that shape the ‘extrinsic’ or functional properties.

3. Objections to the Necessary and Sufficient Conditions for Fiction (with Replies)

The above characterisation of fiction (F) provides necessary and sufficient conditions for fiction. I now consider some objections that might be raised to this definition. First, I consider some objections that aim to show that the definition does not provide sufficient conditions for fiction, and second, I then consider some objections that aim to show that the conditions provided are not necessary. The aim of this section is to defend my characterisation against the objections.

3.1. Are the Conditions Provided not Sufficient for Fiction?

The conditions offered as being both necessary and sufficient for a work to be considered fiction are as follows: any commitment to the work’s representational role is socially suspended, and the work is offered up for interpretation. This section will examine whether these conditions are sufficient by looking at alleged cases in which the same conditions are met outside of fiction.

⁶ As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, David Davies uses the term “‘intrinsic’ features” (Davies, 2022, p. 241). He writes that these features are characterised as either syntactic/structural or semantic/representational. I adopt his use of ‘intrinsic’ and interpret it as I have proposed. – Some colleagues objected to the use of the term ‘intrinsic’, for which I am very grateful. In response to these objections, I have added the above paragraph and this footnote, which I hope clarify my interpretation of it.

3.1.1. Actions without Representational Role

There are cases in which our actions have no representational role. For example, when we produce sounds or words to clear our throat or to test a microphone, or when we do physical exercises. These are cases in which our actions have no representational role to begin with.

These cases are not counterexamples to my definition because they are not cases in which we offer something for interpretation, they have no communicative role. The distinguishing feature of fiction, according to this proposal, is that the work is offered for interpretation within the social convention that the representational role of its instruments is suspended.

3.1.2. Bullshit or Fake News

Whoever expresses bullshit or fake news is not committed to any representational role. The bullshitters, like the producers of fake news, are – by definition – inattentive to any commitment to truth or falsehood, and their commitment (if there is one) is usually egoistic; for example, they may be pursuing their own personal interests, the interests of the society they work for, or they may be misanthropes.⁷

In these cases, it is worth distinguishing between the commitments undertaken by individual speakers and the representational commitments governing the social practice in which they participate. Unlike fiction, bullshit does not operate within a practice where representational commitments are suspended. Rather, it exploits the very existence of those commitments, since its success depends upon audiences continuing to interpret discourse according to the ordinary norms governing representation. Bullshit and fake news are usually socially condemned precisely because they violate a social commitment to a certain way of interpreting the representational role of discourse, i.e. the commitment to truth. Therefore, the bullshitter and the producer of fake news do not operate within a social suspension of the commitment to truth.

⁷ See Frankfurt 2005 on bullshit and Grieve and Woodfield 2023 for fake news.

It might be objected that at least sometimes, for example in pubs, a small group of people might agree to talk bullshit.⁸ In that case, and this is the objection, the small group of people is socially accepting of the suspension of the commitment to truth. This is still a case that would be socially (in the sense of the larger society) condemned, but it would be condemned not only because of the lack of commitment to truth, but also because of its uselessness in communication. The people in the pub may find it funny, but their agreement does not establish the social suspension of representational commitment that characterises fiction.

3.1.3. Humour and Irony

It may be observed that people sometimes suspend their commitment to truth when they engage in humour and/or irony. It may therefore be objected that the above conditions apply to humour and irony as well, and not just to fiction.

To answer this objection, it is useful to note that humour and irony are not always uncommitted to the truth; there are cases where humourists or ironists are definitely so committed, for example when they report what a politician has said or implicated, or when they imitate his attitude, or when they make fun of people's common habits.⁹ It is clear, then, that humour and irony can be used both inside and outside fiction; when used inside fiction, they are not bound to any representational role in our society and are open to interpretation. But this is not a characteristic of humour or irony, it is a characteristic of fiction.

3.1.4. Refusal to Stick to Any Social Commitment

It may be objected that there are cases where speakers wish to avoid any obligation to take responsibility for what they say or do. For example, a speaker might say: 'P, but I do not want to be held responsible for saying P, and I will deny that I ever said P'.

While we may doubt whether such linguistic performance is sufficient to avoid responsibility, even if speakers succeed, they must perform an explicit act of denial, demonstrating their

⁸ This objection was raised with me at a conference in Paris. I would like to thank the person who raised it for drawing my attention to it.

⁹ See Carroll 2014 for humour and Sperber and Wilson 2012 for an introduction to the debate on irony.

control and intention to evade responsibility. This once again demonstrates that commitment to the representational role of language is paramount outside of fiction.

3.1.5. Reporting Dreams or Hypotheses

Sometimes, people report the content of their dreams or formulate hypotheses about events. In these cases, it can be observed that the speakers are not committed to the truth of either their dream content or their hypotheses. They usually share such information for the purpose of interpretation (e.g. the psychoanalytic interpretation of dreams) or evaluation (e.g. testing the veracity of hypotheses).

I agree that in these cases the commitment to truth is not complete, but even in these cases there is some such commitment. For example, the dream-reporter is not committed to the truth of what she dreamt, but she is at least committed to the truth that she really dreamt it; and the hypothesis-raiser is not committed to the truth of the hypothesis, but she is at least committed to the plausibility of the hypothesis, i.e. to the truth of the consequences of such a hypothesis. I conclude, therefore, that even in these cases there is a specific commitment to the truth (i.e., a specific representational role) that is suspended within fiction.

3.2. Are the Conditions Provided not Necessary for Fiction?

It may be objected that, even if the social suspension of the representational role of the fictional instruments and their being offered for interpretation are in themselves sufficient for fiction, they are not necessary. According to these objections, there may be cases of fiction in which these conditions are not met. I will consider the objections and explain why, in my view, such conditions cannot be avoided in fiction.

3.2.1. Assertions within Fictions

It may be objected that fictional authors include assertions within fictions, and that therefore fiction itself is partially committed to truth. As an example, consider the very beginning of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*:

All happy families are alike, each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. (Tolstoy (1877) [Eng. tr.: p. 3])

My answer to this objection is not simple because philosophical literature does not provide a uniform interpretation of these alleged assertions in fiction. I want my proposal to remain neutral with respect to these different interpretations. The three main interpretations of these alleged assertions are:

- (1) they are assertions, the authors express their own view of the real world with them;¹⁰
- (2) they are not assertions, the authors only provide information about the fictional world they describe;¹¹
- (3) they are hybrid, the authors provide statements that are both fictional and asserted.¹²

My claim is that whichever interpretation is given to these alleged assertions, my definition is still an adequate one. If the first interpretation is accepted (i.e. (1)), then they are real assertions and not fiction. This shows that they are not a counterexample to my proposal, since they are not fiction.

If we assume instead that they are not assertions (i.e. (2)), then my definition is not challenged, as they do not have the commitments they would have outside fiction. Under this interpretation, they are fiction, so there is no commitment to them being true.

If, however, we assume that they are hybrids or ambiguous between the fictional and the non-fictional (i.e. (3)), then my definition concerns their fictional content, not their non-fictional

10 Searle 1975, Currie 1990, Lamarque and Olsen 1996, Deutch 2000, Abell 2020

11 Beardsley 1981, van Inwagen 1977, Kripke 2011, Mahon 2019, Marsili 2023, Stokke 2023

12 Friend 2008, García-Carpintero 2013, allegedly Stock 2017, Abell 2020, Bergman and Franzén 2022

content. Once again, this interpretation, which assumes a dual content to certain fictional statements, does not challenge my proposal, which concerns only their fictional content.

3.2.2. Historical or biographical fictions

It may be objected that historical or biographical fiction is committed to truth, i.e. to the truth of historical facts or the truth of biographical facts. It might be argued, therefore, that it is socially acceptable for these commitments to be respected within fiction, thereby abandoning any suspension of the representational role of fiction.

To answer this possible counterexample, a simple thought experiment may be useful. Suppose someone accuses the author of a work of fiction of defamation of a person or of ideological interpretation of historical facts. The author can honestly defend herself by stating that the work is fiction and that she is free to take any creative licence she wishes, including offering her own interpretation or deformation of biographical or historical facts. This defence is available precisely because participation in the practice of fiction suspends the ordinary representational commitments that would otherwise govern the same representational devices. This shows that historical or biographical fiction is not committed to a specific representational role — namely, truth — and is therefore not a counterexample to my definition.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, let me summarise this work. According to the prevailing consensus view, the defining feature of fiction should not be sought in syntactic or structural properties, nor in semantic or representational properties. These are considered ‘intrinsic’ properties, acquired by fictional tools prior to presentation to the audience and pertaining to the tools independently of reception. The same consensus holds that the distinctive characteristic of fiction lies in the way it is normatively received, i.e. through imagination, pretence, or make-believe. The idea is that fiction is characterised functionally, through the attitude induced in the audience towards the content conveyed.

My proposal is that fictional tools do not have the same semantic or representational properties they have outside fiction. Within fiction, the ordinary commitment to the representational role of these tools is socially suspended. This leaves the audience free to interpret the tools either representationally or expressively. I am therefore proposing an ‘intrinsic’ characterisation of fiction, defining it in terms of properties that are socially acquired prior to presentation to the audience.

My proposal has many advantages as it can explain many interpretations of fiction that the traditional consensus view struggles to explain. However, the main objective of this brief piece is not to demonstrate the implications of the proposal; rather, it is to refute some straightforward and readily apparent objections to it. These objections are intended to demonstrate that the characterisation of fiction that I propose is neither sufficient nor necessary for fiction. My main objective has been to address these objections and defend my definition of fiction against them. If successful, the present proposal suggests that the defining feature of fiction lies not primarily in the responses it elicits from audiences, but in the distinctive social status assigned to its representational tools.¹³

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¹³ This work has been presented at various stages of development and in different forms in Turin (MUMBLE Research Seminar and SIFA Conference), Barcelona (BW12), online (II International Colloquium on the Metaphysics and Semantics of Fiction and MITE Research Seminar), Bologna (Workshop on Fiction, Reality and Communication), Paris (Workshop: The Limits of Fiction), Athens (ESA25) and Glasgow (Joint Session of the Aristotelian Society and Mind Association). I would like to thank everyone who contributed to my presentations with objections and questions. - This research was funded by the Department of Philosophy “Piero Martinetti” of the University of Milan under the Project “Departments of Excellence 2023-2027”, under the Project PRIN 2022 (Project Code 2022NTCHYF_003) and under the Project PRIN 2022 PNRR (Project Code P20225A73K_003), all awarded by the Ministry of University and Research (MUR).

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Counter-Observations: Aesthetics and Operational Images

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ABSTRACT. I develop the concept of counter-observation to analyse artistic practices that criticise urban surveillance by showing the very images through which surveillance is produced. I will consider Harun Farocki's video work Counter Music as an example of this practice. This work shows what Farocki calls operational images of the city of Lille, editing them in a style that explicitly recalls the city symphony typical of 1920s cinema. Operational images are defined by their functional role within operations such as mapping, surveying, monitoring, tracking, and guiding. This work exposes the meta-operativeness (Emilio Garroni) of these images, the fact that, in addition to being a means to an end, they can prompt awareness of the very practices of control to which they give rise. Drawing on the relations between technology and art defined by Alva Noë, I claim that operational images are ways of organizing our life, and we should therefore focus on the interactive network of humans and technology that they give shape to. Artistic experimentations such as Farocki's, by repurposing images of control, expose how they alter our environment and prompt aesthetic and social awareness.

1. Urban Surveillance and Its Enemies

Technically produced images enable, constrain, shape, and support our urban life (Amin, Thrift, 2017; McQuire, 2008; Thrift, French, 2002). Cameras, drones, satellites, and other sensor images are part of a technical network that observes, collects data, trains predictive

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models, and activates procedures that organise our behaviour in the city. It has been noted that contemporary visual culture no longer has the human eye at its centre, but the mechanical eye (Paglen, 2016). A multiplicity of images supports processes of surveillance, social control, and governmentality that increasingly escape the decisions of citizens and even their awareness. Images of this kind, images that look at us without us looking at them, have also been called *operational images* (Eder, Klonk, 2017; Farocki, 2004; Parikka 2023).

Some authors claim that if images are the devices through which procedures of social organisation are produced, we need elaborate common practices of aesthetic reflection and must develop a new ‘common sense’ (Weizman, Fuller 2021). We are witnessing various experimental attempts to develop aesthetic reappropriations of surveillance images that use images ‘against themselves’ (Elsaesser, 2004). But how can we appropriate images that were not produced for this purpose and that do not immediately show what they do? We find one solution in Harun Farocki’s video work *Counter Music* (2004).

I will develop a concept I call *counter-observation*, with the aim of analysing *a specific aesthetic strategy through which surveillance images are used to support critical reflection on the technical media that produced them*. I will distinguish it from what Weizman and Fuller call ‘counter-investigation’ (2021). Counter-observations do not contest the unfolding of an event, but how images are used as techniques that organise our forms of life without our noticing. To define it, I will initially refer to Noë’s theory of strange tools. I will then show the need to appeal to what the philosopher Emilio Garroni calls *meta-operativeness*. Meta-operativeness is the fact that human beings interact with reality not by limiting themselves to carrying out operations to achieve predefined goals, but by reflecting on possible goals that are not currently given. According to Garroni, this reflection takes place within perception, and before any explicit intellectual elaboration. I propose that we should think of meta-operativeness as a way to adapt some of the fundamental categories of modern European aesthetics to reflect on technically produced procedures of control. Through this concept, it is possible to clarify the aesthetic process that allows images commonly used as surveillance devices to be used in a work of art to criticise surveillance itself.

I will focus on how Farocki exposes operational images used for urban control. Farocki presents the city image from the point of view of the machine. It is not a coherent, human-centred image, but the outcome of a fragmentary network of observations that tracks the circulation of both human and non-human actors. Farocki’s artistic practice lies on the threshold between art

and political critique of technical apparatuses. His work not only addresses issues such as surveillance, privacy, or discrimination, but also, at a more fundamental level, analyses the ways in which operational images redistribute visibility within public spaces and embody power relations.

2. How Do We Put a City on Display?

A city can be put on display in many ways: by showing its infrastructures, its planning, its populations, the circulation of traffic. It is not at all clear what the image of a city should show to provide us with a clear view of what is happening within it. Berleant suggested that the perceptual experience of the city requires specific aesthetic treatment (2007). The same applies to the experience of the images that capture what we normally neglect as we are immersed in our urban environment. The god's eye view of the city from above is not sufficient to provide a complete view, but only one of many. Especially at the beginning of the 20th century, cinema experimented with the city image in an attempt to capture its continuous flow (Cowan, 2008; Jacobs, Kinik, Hielscher, 2019; Weihsman, 1997). The city symphony is a paradigmatic genre. Its name derives from how the editing of ordinary activities of city life produced a rhythm. From street traffic to shop windows, every element of the city acted as a component of an orchestra. The idea was that cinema could use the mechanical eye of the camera to show the chaotic movement that citizens experienced first-hand, too involved in their activities to see the urban routine from the outside.

However, today we are witnessing a new phenomenon. Sensible technologies have enabled the production of urban organisation techniques in which the city regulates itself through sensors, cameras, satellites and other image-producing devices (McQuire, 2008). The mechanical eye that used to be a means of liberation from the oppression of urban life has now become the very device of its promotion. A new technological environment made known through ubiquitous computing, the Internet of Things, network and distributed sensing, shows how image-based technologies are changing urban organisation. On the one hand, a complex technical and sensory infrastructure is set up, consisting of high-precision detection devices, like infrared sensors, multispectral optical devices, lidars, and acoustic systems operating according to automated data-acquisition protocols; on the other, operational control centres push

surveillance away from the public eye. This brings about a phenomenon of centralisation, in which a very small proportion of the population involved have decision-making power over urban surveillance, so that most people are often unaware of how it unfolds.

The city is a technology, and its infrastructure is the product of intelligent organisation of communities (Edwards, 2002; Mattern, 2015). The technologies that organise the city are not devices that perform isolated functions, but rather establish tributed ecologies that are highly integrated, coordinating storage, distribution, and transport of goods and people (Kittler, 2013; Virilio, 2002, 2006). However, it must also be argued that the city is an *aesthetic technology* that articulates the conditions of possibility for the affective and perceptual experience of citizens and determines the cases in which this experience reaches the threshold of awareness, giving rise to critical reflective experiences. Alva Noë has focused on the aesthetic experience of technology:

There is an intimate link between technology and organized activities. Roughly, a tool (such as a hammer or a computer) is the hub of an organized activity. Technology is not mere stuff. It is the equipment with which we carry on our organized activities. Technologies organize us; properly understood, they are evolving patterns of organization (Noe, 2015).

The role of art is to show us the technological organisation that goes unnoticed. By showing it to us, it provides us with a vantage point to reflect on and possibly modify it. According to Noë:

art, I am proposing, takes its impetus from the fact that we are organized but are lost in the nesting, massively complicated patterns of our organization. Art – and philosophy, too – are practices for investigating the modes of our organization, or rather, the manner of our embedding in different modes of organization. Art is not just more organization (Ibidem).

However, art is not only a rupture of the everyday, but also, a way to rethink it collectively:

art is disruptive and destabilizing, and also that it is a mode of investigation, a form of research aiming at transformation and reorganization. Art investigates or exposes by destabilizing. Art, I have urged, is a philosophical practice (ibidem)

Before a wide audience, art can expose the processes of control that escape the attention of the media. It puts in front of our eyes things we normally passively accept. However, it is not

enough to expose and rethink control procedures. It is necessary to think about the aesthetic practices through which images that conduct these procedures can become objects of political discussion.

3. Harun Farocki's City Surveillance Symphony

In 2000, Berlin-based artist and media theorist Harun Farocki introduced the term operational image. He provides this brief definition: 'They are images that do not represent an object, but rather are part of an operation' (2004). His examples include surveillance videos depicting crowded streets; videos mounted on missile warheads or recorded by drones; videos of traffic used in experiments to build autonomous vehicles; computer graphics simulations; satellite images of airports; surgical images of the inside of patients' bodies. The Images shown by Farocki are inconspicuous technologies that organise our forms of life. Farocki's approach to images as media shifts the focus from the grand narratives constructed by media such as literature, newspapers, cinema, advertisement to techniques that operate below the threshold of our attention. He focuses on images that we do not give importance to, that are not made for us to be seen, that are mostly involved in computational mechanic processes. Operational images are outside literary history, outside mass culture, outside the culture industry. They might fall under what media scholar Bernhard Siegert has called 'ontic operations' (2011), that is, material techniques that produce situations. However, the use of operational images for the control of urban life is far from neutral and entails a distribution of power relations through automatic technical devices. It is, rather, part of what Fuller and Goffey would call a *grey zone*, 'a space of activity that is ethically ambiguous' (Fuller, Goffey, 2012).

In *Counter Music* (2004), Farocki focuses on how operational images perceive urban space. *Counter Music* is a two-channel video work that pairs video footage with text. The piece analyses images embedded in computing, surveillance, and control systems that manage citizens and infrastructures, images produced by machines or used to operate machines. machines that see and act, aided by human operators, and images observed by people in control rooms. *Counter Music* is a city symphony of Lille, as seen through operational images. The city symphony is a cinematic genre that emerged in the 1920s, where urban life was filmed and edited into an orchestrated rhythm. The most well-known examples include *Manhatta* 1921; *Dynamic of the*

Metropolis (1921–1922); *Nothing but Time* (1926); *Berlin. Symphony of a Great City* (1927), along with *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) by Dziga Vertov, Farocki's main reference. These films show the frenzy of urban dwellers going about their daily tasks, chaotic streets, shops, and working people. By contrast, in Farocki's symphony, we see images of underground pipes, security cameras, and computer simulation monitors. In this work, citizens are merely one component of the traffic within a *machine landscape* (Young, 2019). *Counter Music* inherits the atmosphere of the so-called machine films, such as *La Marche des machines* (1927), *Ballet mécanique* (1924), *Mechanical Principles* (1930), *Philips Radio* (1931), replacing optimism for industrial progress and new automatic machines with scepticism and mistrust.

In *Counter Music*, we see ourselves through the eyes of machines and come to realise we are merely background figures in the flow of the city's traffic, part of a network under constant observation. Farocki compares the city to a body whose veins are the underground infrastructure, the invisible pipes that sustain life on the surface. Urban activities are monitored in hidden spaces. He contrasts the illuminated streets with the monitors in control centres, where operators supervise a technical chain of command for surveillance: 'men and women who are paid to look at images'.

Early twentieth-century theorists emphasised how the perceptual revolution of the modern metropolis was centred on the increasing exposure of citizens to sensory stimuli. This issue was addressed in the seminal works of Georg Simmel, Siegfried Kracauer, and Walter Benjamin. Today, however, the rise of *technical media* in the management of urban space has shifted the locus of perception from the citizen to images. It is machines that now collect stimuli about citizens, not the other way around. The issue of sensory overload that characterised the 1920s, while the symphony of the city was developing in parallel, returns today in reflections on the new sensing technologies used in monitoring and surveillance. From the saturation of stimuli experienced by individuals in urban spaces, we move on to the description of a technical surveillance architecture that collects enormous amounts of data and exceeds the capacity of any human being to make sense of it. Farocki inherits the tendency of the city symphony to exalt the vision of machines, showing how they allow us to access new points of view. Nonetheless, he widens the gap between human and machinic perception. In *Counter Music*, we do not feel at home in the urban context that surrounds us; we feel alienated as we see a city that is hostile to the human point of view.

The city symphony allowed the viewer to experiment with camera position, alternating between high- and low-angle shots, using unusual viewpoints to look at the city, and using moving shots by mounting the camera on vehicles. Operational images allow the projection of the gaze outside the body, realising the dream of seeing without being seen. The operator in the control room can observe, control, decide, and give orders, while being far from the actual consequences. The operator can even delegate the act of looking itself, as the image that can be directly computed by a machine. In contrast, the individual who is the subject of the image, the citizen being watched by a CCTV system, the target being tracked by a guided missile, the prisoner being surveilled by a thermal camera, does not see themselves in the image. The image sees them, but they do not see the image (Paglen, 2016). Sometimes, they do not even see the technical device that captures the image; they are not aware of it, or such awareness is below the threshold of attention.

4. Meta-operativeness

A space that Farocki focuses on at length in this and other films is the control room, which we might analyse as the opposite of the editing room from which he produces his work. A control room is an enclosed space in which one or more operators are placed in front of one or more screens. It is a room in which images are processed by experts, a decentralization of decision-making. Both the operator in the control room and the vision machine analyse images solely for the purpose of using them in their function of control.

Farocki's work does not merely bring the image of the control room into the movie theatre or the museum. It is not only about showing the machine's gaze. Instead, the goal is to allow people to creatively reappropriate it by 'unlearning to see like humans' (Paglen, 2016). He seeks to move images from the control room – that is, a space in which they are used only for a function, unreflectively, without being carefully analysed – to the editing table – that is, a space in which they become an object of critical reflection. The editor is someone who watches a video so as to decide where to make the editing cut. At the same time, they cannot be reduced to the operator merely performing a mechanical function. The decision, in the editing room, requires reflection on the work as a whole and its meaning. The editor is not a passive spectator, yet neither are they a servomechanism that can be replaced by a machine. This is why Farocki,

in other works, develops a phenomenology of the editor, a figure who interrogates images and transforms their function. Farocki wants us to see operational images as if we were editors. He prompts us to use images, to make them objects of reappropriation and, therefore, of critique, transformation, and public discussion.

Farocki's *Counter Music* does not, therefore, simply put things on display. It does not merely show us how things work. By showing us images, it makes us reflect on how to criticise the devices that produced them and their social and political implications. Therefore, the viewer of the film does not merely observe that control is exercised in a certain way, but, while watching, *reflects on how to invent other ways of operating*. I believe this is possible because, as viewers, we do not simply passively accept what we are shown but take some sort of distance from it – one that is not, however, a complete detachment. We do this based on a fundamental characteristic of our way of interacting aesthetically with reality, namely meta-operativeness.

Italian philosopher Emilio Garroni, as part of his rethinking of the fundamental categories of modern European aesthetics, particularly Immanuel Kant's thought, has developed the concept of meta-operativeness (*metaoperatività*). Meta-operativeness is, we might say, an attempt to rethink aesthetic disinterestedness as a fundamental posture through which human beings perceptually interact with the world. Meta-operativeness shows how disinterestedness is a feature of perception that occurs within practical life and not as uninvolved contemplation of an artwork.

Human perception occurs by producing what Garroni calls an 'internal image' (*immagine interna*), which is not a static image, but the dynamic scheme that allows the subject to interact with objects in multifarious ways. This image is characterised by being an indeterminate selection of relevant features that are not only those immediately perceptible. The internal image consists of the traits that enable the individual to operate in the world. Perception and operation are closely linked, although they do not coincide. When we see something, we do not have a fixed image in our minds of the operations that thing can be used for, but rather a dynamic image of an indeterminate multiplicity of possible operations.

Meta-operativeness is exemplified in our perceptual interaction with technical tools. Garroni shows that technical tools are never merely seen for the attainment of given ends, but also in view of possible ends. This means, for example, that human beings, in performing an operation

in view of some purposes, are able to distance themselves from the operation they are performing by reflecting on how that operation can also serve other purposes. This distancing occurs while the operation is being performed. We cannot distinguish it from our perceptual, volitional, emotional engagement.

Human meta-operativeness considers the tool to be produced as a tool destined for possible purposes and not only actual given objectives. [...] So in the case of man, the varying perceptual interpretability of a stone or a hammer seems to be a perceptive engagement, based on their recognition, which, although not physically transforming the object or the tool, configures them according to a specific expression in appropriate situations tacitly similar to a language that implies a metalinguistic capacity and organizes all cases, real and even merely possible (Garroni, 2025).

Garroni uses technical tools as an example to illustrate a fundamental characteristic of all our perception. The same tool, such as a hammer, can perform various functions, such as driving a nail, acting as a lever or smoothing a surface. Technical objects are not tools that perform predetermined functions. When humans interact with a tool, they do not limit themselves to perceiving it as useful for a given purpose, but also as possible purposes, not currently given, which could nevertheless arise in other circumstances. We use a tool on the condition that we always bear in mind that we could operate otherwise.

In short, we perceive these possible functions, in certain situations, without this necessarily broadening our explicit conception of the hammer. In all these cases, what occurs is the perception of the various configurations suitable for a particular use, and not necessarily the *statement of* the multiple interpretations and uses of the stone or hammer; that is to say, we do not propose different interpretations or uses, but, so to speak, we see that the stone or the hammer are suitable to them (*ibidem*).

A machine is limited to performing operations through images; it does not possess the same flexibility made possible by the meta-operativeness of human perception. On the contrary, when images are shown to a spectator, they are not simply used for specific purposes but become the subject of critical reflection.

5. Counter-Observations and Politics of Common Sense

We could consider the artistic operation conducted by Farocki in *Counter Music* as an example of how art can put on display the organisation of our forms of life, so as to allow reflection on how this organisation is put into practice and how it might be changed through social awareness. This is not a simple showing of how devices work on a technical level, but a new perspective on urban life that changes our perceptual habits. This involves a meta-operativeness that emerges in our aesthetic interaction with the city, and not only through our intellectual knowledge of its technical infrastructure.

Eyal Weizman and Matthew Fuller have thematized the difference between sensing and sense-making. While the first is produced by technical devices, the second necessitates aesthetic involvement. Their attack is not directed against the technologies that produce images, but against the separation of sensing processes and political debate. They recover a classical notion of aesthetics as the striving for a common sense so as to develop practices based on sensing technologies that criticise state violence. Therefore, they call for the construction of ‘investigative commons’ or ‘aesthetic commons’. Common sense, the notion that Immanuel Kant, at the origins of modern aesthetics, regarded as the aesthetic principle that guaranteed humanity’s universal agreement in judging, is brought back into focus today in the face of the proliferation of operative images that control our forms of life. For Kant, aesthetic judgment is not a cognitive judgment based on principles of the intellect. Aesthetic judgment, however, has the special feature that it can claim – without demonstrating it – the universal agreement of all finite rational beings, that is, all human beings. Common sense is the name he assigns to the principle of aesthetic judgment (Garroni, 1989). A principle that cannot be enunciated, but that we can presuppose everyone uses when judging aesthetically. This, however, does not imply that everyone *will* agree with the aesthetic judgement one makes, but only that when one judges, they experience the possibility of agreeing.

Aesthetic reflection makes us discover the foundation of public debate, shared reflection, and therefore grounds political life on our sensible experience. Recovering the notion of common sense, Weizman and Fuller tell us that remote sensing processes that produce operative images can reactivate an aesthetic survey of state violence deployed with the aid of surveillance technologies. While they call for investigative practices, Farocki proposes a different strategy

based on what I called counter-observation. Fuller and Weizman consider counter-investigation as the act of constructing common sense using the instruments of control through which state power perpetuates its dominance. Counter-investigation does not imitate traditional investigative procedures, but ‘seeks to exceed and to circumvent the procedural limitations and necessities entailed by the modes of power they embody’. However, they have in mind a political struggle that focuses primarily on specific crime events. Farocki’s artistic practice is best described as a counter-observation, because it develops a straightforward critique of the technical instruments through which power operates. He prompts us to counter-observe the operational images as such. For this reason, he does not limit himself to identifying the different perspectives through which an event leaves traces on technical devices, as in an investigation, but reflects on what makes the operation possible and how it might be the object of political debate. His work attempts to develop a common sense that is not limited to reconstructing events, but which aims to change the way we aesthetically inhabit urban space.

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Rethinking Nightness: Philosophical Interpretations and Artistic Depictions of Night-Time Activities and Objects

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ABSTRACT. This paper examines night-time activities, objects, and experiences—such as nocturnal urban life, landscape, and atmospheres—and explores how these have been culturally perceived, philosophically interpreted, and artistically depicted. By identifying several elements of an aesthetics of the night, the paper aims to rethink the concepts of night and nightness. Although often neglected or discredited, they constitute significant domains of sensory experience that shape aesthetic life. The paper contributes to reconceptualizing (ordinary) aesthetic life by discussing the differences between daily and nightly aesthetic experiences, challenging uncritical oppositions between them, and questioning negative ontological associations traditionally attached to night and darkness. It also specifies key elements of an aesthetic framework for understanding the night.

1. Introduction

This paper develops the research agenda outlined in an earlier study presented at the ESA Conference 2024, which proposed the possibility of a new research field called “Everynight Aesthetics”, aimed at examining different ordinary nightly aesthetic activities, experiences, and objects that—although familiar—have received limited philosophical attention (Ratiu, 2024).

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Here, I address the topic of night and nightness by focusing on night-time activities, objects, and experiences, and by examining how these have been culturally perceived, practiced, and interpreted in philosophy, as well as represented in various arts—including painting, performances and installations. My scope remains primarily within Western modern and contemporary nocturnal practices, arts, and philosophical discourses.

This exploration aims to rethink night and nightness as integral yet overlooked or undervalued dimensions of aesthetic experience that shape aesthetic life. It contributes to a reconceptualization of ordinary aesthetic life by: (1) examining differences between nocturnal and diurnal cultural practices and experiences, while challenging conventional oppositions between night and day—darkness/light, rest/activity, dream/reality, invisibility/visibility, absence/presence, unrepresentable/representable; (2) questioning the association of night and darkness with negative ontological attributes, and showing that their ambivalent meanings depend on multiple historical, social, and cultural interpretations; (3) identifying several foundational elements of an aesthetics of the night.

2. Nocturnal Cultural Practices, Perceptions and Philosophical Interpretations

I begin by examining some of the wider nocturnal cultural practices, perceptions and philosophical interpretations of the night and its aesthetics, considering sensory dimensions and affective atmospheres in relation to natural night landscape (sky, stars, moon) and urban nightlife in the broad sense of ordinary nocturnal life (night work, leisure, entertainment).

Although the night is naturally associated with darkness, its sensory experience is far from universal. As Nick Dunn and Tim Edensor show in *Rethinking Darkness. Cultures, Histories, Practices* (2021), darkness consists of diverse characteristics, forms, and temporalities, generating varied experiences, engagements, sensual and affective affordances, and atmospheres, including multisensory ones. Understanding night and darkness therefore requires recognizing their “situated and plural nature”: conceptions of, and engagements with darkness vary widely across historical periods, cultures, and social contexts, even in Western spaces.²

² See Dunn and Edensor, 2021a, ‘Venturing into the dark: gloomy multiplicities’, pp. 9–15; Dunn and Edensor, 2021b, ‘Revisiting the dark: diverse encounters and experiences’, pp. 231–233.

To philosophically frame this diversity, I draw on several concepts from Jacques Rancière—particularly his analyses of the relationships between the aesthetic, art, the sensible and communal life in *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible* (2000/2013a), *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* (2004/2009), and *Aisthesis. Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art* (2011/2013b). In his view, the term “aesthetics” refers not only to “a specific regime for identifying and reflecting on the arts”, the modern “aesthetic regime”, as opposed to the “ethical” and “representative” regimes.³ It also refers, in a broader sense, to a form of the “distribution of the sensible” (*partage du sensible*) that “determines a mode of articulation between forms of action, production, perception, and thought.” (Rancière, 2013a, p. 86) This includes a “redistribution of the relations between the forms of sensory experience”, such as the visible and the invisible, the perceptible and the imperceptible, the audible and the inaudible, the speech and the silence or the noise. This second meaning shows the (paradoxical) links between the aesthetic paradigm and political community, referring both to forms of inclusion and of exclusion.⁴ Therefore, the term “sensible” itself “does not refer to what shows good sense or judgement but to what is *aisthēton* or capable of being apprehended by the senses”, that is, the “modes of visibility operative in the political domain” as well. (Rancière, 2009, pp. 7-8, 11, 14; Rancière, 2013a, pp. 4, 7–9, 39–42, 89; Rancière, 2013b, pp. ix, xii–xiv)

The insights on what might be called the production of the nocturnal “sensible” and the unequal distribution of light (“the visible”) and dark (“the invisible”), offered here and there by Rancière (2009, pp. 24–31; 2013a, p. 42), allow a new perspective on the nocturnal objects and activities. In *The Politics of Aesthetics*, chapter 6 ‘On Art and Work’, when he discusses “the way in which artists’ art found itself defined on the basis of a twofold promotion of work”, he identifies one type of promotion with “the struggles of the proletariat to bring labour out of the

3 See Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible*, ‘Appendix I. Glossary of technical terms’: “The aesthetic regime abolishes the hierarchical distribution of the sensible characteristic of the representative regime of art, including the privilege of speech over visibility as well as the hierarchy of the arts, their subject matter, and their genres [...] The aesthetic regime also calls into question the very distinction between art and other activities.” (Rancière, 2013a, pp. 84–85)

4 See Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*: “I call the distribution of the sensible the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it. A distribution of the sensible therefore establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts. This apportionment of parts and positions is based on a distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution.” (Rancière, 2013a, p. 7)

night surrounding it, out of its exclusion from shared visibility and speech.”⁵ Although Rancière often associates “night” metaphorically with “exclusion” and opposes it to “visibility” and “speech”, his conceptual framework helps illuminate the experiencing of night and darkness and the production of their multiple meanings.

Through these lenses, night and darkness can be examined through a threefold perspective: 1. regimes of perception / invisibility; 2. regimes of experience and practice; 3. regimes of interpretation, since previous regimes are themselves produced and distributed according to particular values and emerge as “reconfigurations of experience”. These regimes interact to form the nocturnal sensible—what can be sensed, experienced, understood, or excluded in relation to the night. To paraphrase one of Rancière’s statements about art in *Aisthesis*, the night or darkness “is given to us through these transformations of the sensible fabric.”⁶

2.1. Night/Darkness as a Regime of Perception

Approaching *night* as a “regime of perception” (or “invisibility”) is a first possible angle of analysis. Night has long been associated with *dark/darkness* that challenges the visual capacity, and understood as “absence of light”. Historically, the endless successive rhythms of light and dark(ness) and the human inability to see clearly in darkness have structured the temporality of quotidian activities and created oppositions: night versus day, rest versus activity, dark(ness) versus light, dream versus reality, invisible versus visible, and so on.

These sensory and symbolic oppositions were often moralized in Western thought, reinforced by Judeo-Christian traditions, and associated with other positive and negative attributes. While day/light was related to truth, knowledge and good, night/darkness became linked with ignorance, danger, and evil—the Devil, sin, death, or heresy. (Dunn and Edensor 2021a, pp. 1–2)

⁵ Rancière, 2013a, p. 42, my emphasis; see also his book *La nuit des prolétaires: Archives du rêve ouvrier*, 1981, first translated in English as *The Nights of Labour: The Workers’ Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, 1989.

⁶ Rancière, 2013b, ‘Prelude’, p. xi. See also: “The conditions of this emergence [of art] cannot be deduced from a general concept of art or beauty founded on a global theory of man or the world, of the subject or being. Such concepts themselves depend upon a transformation of the forms of sensible experience, of ways of perceiving and being affected. They formulate a mode of intelligibility out of these reconfigurations of experience” (p. ix). This is why what he proposes to call the “aesthetic regime of art” is a “regime of perception, affection and thought” with its own logic. (Rancière, 2013b, pp. ix, xii)

Yet perceptions of darkness have been far from homogeneous. The *nocturnal* perception is not limited to visual perception. Darkness is not merely visual deprivation; it can enhance non-visual senses, producing multisensory or synesthetic experiences. As Michel Serres notes in *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*, “the world is perceived differently after nightfall”, since immersion in darkness mobilizes sensory capacities neglected during daylight: sounds intensify, smells sharpen, touch becomes more exploratory, taste is enhanced, and even vision recalibrates.⁷

Moreover, the attributes of night, dark and darkness have shifted according to changing contexts across time and space, since their perception is mediated by cultural practices and values. (Dunn and Edensor, 2021a, p. 6) Although the dualistic opposition between day/light and night/darkness is common in Western cultures, there are also examples of positive spiritual meanings of night/darkness—depth, mystery, and adventure. For instance, Craig Koslofsky in *Evening’s Empire: A History of the Night in Early Modern Europe* (2011) draws attention to a different 16th and 17th century European mystical theology where darkness was valued instead as “conducive to mystery, profundity and beauty, signifying the ineffability and inexpressibility of God.”⁸ Likewise, other cultures—including Inuit, Indian, Polynesian, Native American, and African traditions—have attributed positive qualities to darkness, seeing it as conducive to sociability, ritual, creativity, or spiritual depth. As Guy Bordin shows in ‘Inuit’s perception of darkness. A singular feature’ (2021), in Inuit culture “darkness, despite the strong physical limits that it could impose on daily life (...), was a condition conducive to sociability, storytelling, play, rituals and festivity, qualities and understandings undermined by the advent of Christianity.”⁹

Thus, the perceptual regime of night is diverse and ambivalent, shaped by more than natural conditions. To understand the complexities of the aesthetics of night, a complementary perspective is needed.

2.2. Night/Darkness as a Regime of Experiences and Practices

7 Serres, *The Five Senses*, 2008, pp. 68–69; see also Dunn and Edensor, 2021a, p. 9–10.

8 Koslofsky, *Evening’s Empire: A History of the Night in Early Modern Europe*, 2011, quoted by Dunn and Edensor, 2021a, pp. 3–4, 6.

9 Bordin, ‘Inuit’s perception of darkness. A singular feature’, 2021, pp. 91–103; see also Dunn and Edensor, 2021a, pp. 3–4; Dunn and Edensor, 2021b, pp. 232–233.

Perceptual regimes of night and darkness must be considered alongside the material conditions and “the sensible fabric of experience” (in terms of Rancière, 2013b, p. x), including emotional and affective dimensions. This perspective is central for understanding modern night-time experience.

A first example is the nocturnal experience of *the natural landscape* or *the night sky* (*stars, moon*). Romantic portrayals of night emphasize emotional depth, sublimity, and mystery, against the negative representations of darkness prevalent before, when darkness has been associated with night-time real-life dangers in forests, mountains or other areas of wild nature. However, it is critical to recognize the highly ambivalent, contradictory sentiments that night and darkness still can provoke. (Dunn and Edensor, 2021a, p. 6) This ambivalence is related to dramatic changes in the “material conditions” of experiencing darkness: the ongoing expansion of illumination—initially by gas and later electric lighting—not only into cities, but also into hitherto unlit realms, such as rural areas or large areas of wild, uninhabited nature, radically reshaped human behavior after dark.

One significant contemporary reversal is the defense of darkness, especially the dark night sky with visible stars, as a valuable natural and cultural resource. Nocturnal tourism—such as stargazing by “celestial tourists”—re-conceptualizes darkness as aesthetically, scientifically, and spiritually meaningful. Two studies in *Urban Lighting, Light Pollution, and Society* (2015) summarize the diverse values of the dark night sky, conceived of not only as a natural resource, but also as “a scenic asset and part of humanity’s cultural heritage, signifying more ecologically sustainable environments”¹⁰, as well as “a source of aesthetic, scientific and spiritual inspiration.”¹¹

Another relevant example is that of *urban nightlife*, in the broad sense of ordinary nocturnal life (night work, leisure, entertainment). Artificial illumination transformed modern cities, opening up divergent experiences and alternative valuations of night and darkness. Most of them are positive, since artificial illumination enabled vibrant night-time economies and leisure. Yet it

10 Sutton and Elvidge, ‘Night lights: An indicator of the good life?’, 2015.

11 Gallaway, ‘The value of the night sky’, 2015, p. 280; see also Dunn and Edensor, 2021a, p. 7. Within the urban areas, “the nocturnalization of tourism is also seen in growing popularity of visits to museums in the dark, graveyard tours, ghost walks and bat walks.” (Eldridge and Smith, ‘Tourism and the night: Towards a broader understanding of nocturnal city destinations’, 2019; Dunn and Edensor, 2021a, p. 7)

also produced over-lit “nocturnal landscapes” that consign darkness to marginal spaces, prompting calls to rethink urban lighting design. (Dunn and Edensor, 2021a, p. 22)

The sensory and affective ambivalence of nocturnal city life, and the multiple meanings of darkness not only reflect the new material conditions of illumination, but are also related to “the sensible fabric of experience”, since “the distribution of darkness and light” often remains geographically, socially and culturally specific. As many accounts of night/darkness have shown, for many people domestic spaces that embrace low light levels and darkness are experienced and valued as sites of “intimacy”; likewise, other urban public spaces with similar night atmosphere are imbued with qualities of “depth, mystery, introspection, imagination, variation, and theatricality”. For others—depending on gender, age, or ethnicity—darkness is still associated with fear, danger or vulnerability, while light, by contrast, evokes visibility, safety and orientation. (Dunn and Edensor, 2021a, pp. 23-24)

To understand this multiplicity, a third perspective is essential.

2.3. Night/Darkness as Regimes of Interpretation

Considering the perceptual and experiential regimes of night/darkness as regimes of interpretation is essential, since they are produced and distributed according to particular values – “categories that identify them, thought patterns that categorize and interpret them” (Rancière, 2013b, p. x). These interpretative frameworks have shaped, in turn, the perceptions of the night and nightly ordinary activities and objects, as distinct from the daily ones, as well as their experiencing and ambivalent affective overtones.

This threefold perspective is useful for approaching contemporary nocturnal cityscapes and life, and understanding both their production and experiencing and the correlated “affective atmospheres”.

In particular, I invoke here Rancière’s contention that the “regimes of the sensible” are shaped by particular values espoused by the powerful—“the elite”, “the power of educated senses”—as opposed to the “demos”, those who have no share in the communal distribution of the sensible (Rancière, 2009, pp. 24–26; 30–32, Rancière, 2013a, pp. 7–8, 42, 87–88). As Dunn

and Edensor note (2021a, p. 9), these values influence the production of nocturnal space and lighting regimes, shaping how darkness is experienced and interpreted. Matthew Gandy argues in ‘Urban atmospheres’ (2017) that this uneven distribution of the light—and, respectively, of the nocturnal sensible—is “integral to the changing sensory characteristics of late modernity [and] the contemporary city.” By these characteristics—including the sensory ones and the correlated “affective atmospheres”—he refers to the city’s quotidian “affective dynamics of everyday life” (that encompass the built environment), its “circadian rhythms” and “pervasive landscape or atmospheres of consumption and distraction”, but also to the “increased levels of technological control over society” (Gandy, 2017, p. 354). “Affective atmospheres” (shaped by sociocultural structures) is thus a key concept for accounting for the urban nocturnal sensible and its ambivalences:

Changing patterns of artificial illumination interface with multiple forms of subjectivities, both single and multiple, and extend to the more-than-human realm. In this sense, an *atmosphere* can be invoked as a kind of complex yet everchanging totality that is rooted in material forces yet connected with different forms of consciousness and experience. (Gandy, 2017, p. 368)¹²

Darkness is therefore not only sensory but political. This perspective helps us understand why *dark night* or *darkness* was and still is experienced, valued and interpreted not only as a realm of *danger* and *fear*, but also of *affordances* and *fascination*. Night turns up as a potential site for protest, subaltern resistance, subversion, and alternative identities. Historically, lower classes, marginal groups or persecuted minorities have used the night to create alternative social spaces outside daytime norms. For instance, it provided “an opportunity to escape day-time surveillance” or for “political debate, discourse and protest”. Therefore, darkness was imbued with positive qualities for these subaltern and oppositional groups. In the dark, they may “carve out time and space outside working time and achieve freedom from both labour and social scrutiny.” (Dunn and Edensor, 2021a, p. 5) In *A History of the Night in Early Modern Europe* Koslofsky describes and emphasizes a similar dialectic of the uneven production and distribution of light and nocturnal sensible: „As illumination has expanded, it has been resisted by ‘the traditional inhabitants of the night: servants, apprentices and students... tavern visitors, prostitutes’ and other workers and pleasure-seekers, because of the dark night’s affordances, such as the “possibilities for

¹² For this topic, see also Dunn and Edensor, 2021a, p. 9; Dunn and Edensor, 2021b, p. 232; Sumartojo et al., ‘Atmospheres in Urban Light’, 2019.

transgression, adventure, subversion and libidinal encounter.” (Koslofsky, 2011, p. 27; see also Dunn and Edensor, 2021a, pp. 5–6, 8)

In summary, I would say that the aesthetic production and distribution of the sensible (in a sense inspired by Rancière) have shaped both shared and divergent perceptions and experiences of the night and nightly ordinary activities and objects, as distinct from the daily ones. Likewise, all these have configured the complex and ambivalent ways people interpret and endorse different experiences and values attached to *night/nightness* and *dark/darkness*, compared to the *diurnal* “regime of visibility”, the day/dailyness and light/lightness.

My second claim is that artistic practices often intervene in these regimes. Certain pieces or instances of modern and contemporary arts and literature have further reframed or challenged the common perceptions and experiences of night or darkness, to incorporate different values. This claim will be substantiated here by some cases of artistic reappraisals of the night, darkness, and nocturnal practices and experiences of quotidian life.

3. Artistic Depictions of Night and Darkness

Art and literature have long explored the night and darkness as a domain of altered perception, emotion, and meaning (Bronfen 2013; Dewdney, 2010; Dunn and Edensor, 2021; Gosetti-Ferencei 2007). The study of how we experience quotidian life is enabled by visual arts and literature, if we consider these artistic media also as “forms of reflection on the very structure of the everyday world” (Gosetti-Ferencei, *The Ecstatic Quotidian*, 2007), and of the nocturnal life-world as well. Several exhibition catalogues and analyses of particular art works, events, performances and installations related to night and darkness have also contributed to this study (Fondation Cartier, 1996; Kerr 2008; Moore, 2016; Morris, 2011).

Even in the Renaissance, painting was not considered a medium unsuitable to depict *night* or *darkness*, which would otherwise be invisible and unrepresentable. Leonardo Da Vinci included in his *Treatise on Painting* a note on ‘How to represent Night’, offering technical advice on how

to overcome the absence of light in nocturnal actions or objects by using artificial firelight.¹³ Modern and contemporary art, however, goes beyond these techniques for representing nocturnal scenes to reshape and transform the common understanding of night and darkness, by envisioning different ways of perception, mediating multisensory experiences and challenging socio-cultural norms.

I briefly present here such transformations through a number of examples of artistic reappraisals of the night and darkness that may capture certain displacements in their perception, experiencing and interpretation.

3.1. Exhibitions and Night Imagery

The exhibition *By night* at the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain in Paris (1996) presented nocturnal themes across literary and visual media, displaying writers, painters, photographers and video artists, from Victor Hugo to Nan Goldin, from Lewis Carroll to Bill Viola. The exhibition was structured around three main themes: the urban night and adventure, the night sky, and the night of sleep and dreams. This reconstituted history of night phenomena, objects and activities witnesses for the “fascination and emotion exerted by night-time”, and emphasized night as a pivotal site of aesthetic investigation and identity formation. (Fondation Cartier, 1996)

Likewise, Janette Kerr's exhibition catalogue *Night: A Time Between* (2008) highlights night as a space of unexpected possibilities—for expression, intimacy, and creativity. The various depictions of nocturnal natural landscapes and cityscapes in this exhibition evoke atmospheres that convey qualities not only of depth, mystery, and adventure, but also of introspection, imagination, variation, theatricality, and intimacy. All of this stimulate creativity and imaginative approaches to space, producing “new immersive and participatory aesthetics”.¹⁴

¹³ “THOSE objects which are entirely deprived of light, are lost to the sight, as in the night; therefore, if you mean to paint a history under those circumstances, you must suppose a large fire, and those objects that are near it to be tinged with its colour, and the nearer they are the more they will partake of it.” (Leonardo Da Vinci, *A Treatise on Painting*, 2014, chapter CLXII. – How to represent Night.)

¹⁴ Kerr (ed.), *Night: A Time Between*, 2008, p. 6; see also Dunn and Edensor, 2021a, pp. 11–18, 23–24; Dunn and Edensor, 2021b, p. 237.

Some of the key themes in these painterly representations drawn out by Janette Kerr in this exhibition catalogue are:

‘Exoticism and frailty of existence, human paranoia and psychological uncertainty, temporal shifts, voyeurism and concealment, references to the metaphysical and vanitas, and to night’s physical state, where objects dissolve and merge, and distance distorts’. The catalogue reveals that painters conjure many *nocturnal qualities*: forms of light that seem unearthly, the silvery reflection of moon on water or bursting through clouds and vague glimmers and barely visible shadowy entities and dark silhouettes. *The urban night* has proved a fertile landscape for different representations of darkness that increasingly became sharper and scarcer as artificial illumination becomes more prominent. (Dunn and Edensor, 2021a, pp. 17–18; my emphasis)

3.2.Night-time Installation Art

Darkness has also been inventively exploited in art events, installations and performances not only to challenge its common appraisal as “frightening void” or “mere absence of light”, but also to reconfigure our relationships to natural landscape. A case in point is the night event-installation, *The Storr: Unfolding Landscape* (2005), created by the Scottish arts group NVA (Nacionale Vite Activa) on the Isle of Skye. This is how Nina Morris described it in ‘Night walking: darkness and sensory perception in a night-time landscape installation’ (2011):

The work involved the audience moving up and across the hillside after dark with minimal illumination, confronting a series of enactions and installations that aimed to deepen their apprehension and understanding of the landscape. Participants walked through woods and rugged slopes in varying weather conditions; witnessed pale projections of moving figures; listened to peculiar recorded sounds, poetry and music; and at the climax of the uphill section, confronted an array of illuminated rocky ridges. (Morris, 2011, p. 335; Dunn and Edensor, 2021a, p. 20)

As Morris (2011) argues, this temporary night-time event-installation revealed the nocturnal landscape as dynamic and sensorially rich, fostering a heightened sense of self and environment. Her post-phenomenological account shows how individuals experienced the nocturnal landscape “as a dynamic, animated entity, an active agent which is always ‘in process’ (as

opposed to one which is static, fixed and easily definable)”. The analysis of this event-installation also reveals the *night/dark* as a richly “textured realm of sensory perception”, and as “presence” rather than “absence”, which “engenders a different sense of self within the landscape to that which might be experienced during daylight hours.”¹⁵

3.3. Bill Viola’s Night Imagery

Another example that illustrates the artistic engagement with the *nocturnal sensible* is Bill Viola’s night imagery and his use of darkness and dark room in video art to create immersive perceptual environments exploring transformation, mortality, and spiritual insight. It is relevant in this context not only because Viola is one of the world’s leading video artists, but also because Rancière refers to him in *The Future of the Image* (2007, chapter ‘Sentence, Image, History’, pp. 63–67) and *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* (2009, chapter ‘Problems and Transformations of Critical Art’, pp. 58–59). As Rancière notes, with some dissatisfaction, referring to some art installations and video pieces, including the most ambitious project by Bill Viola, *Going Forth by Day* (2002), through them “mystery”, which was the central concept of Symbolism, is back on the agenda of contemporary art yet without sufficient critical engagement. (Rancière, 2009, p. 58)

More specifically, Rancière’s critique targeted certain types of contemporary installations and exhibitions, such as the exhibition *Moving Pictures* staged at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 2002, criticized by him because they “play on the fluctuating boundary between critical provocation and the undecidability of its meaning.” (Rancière, 2009, p. 59) Yet Rancière identifies beyond this ambiguity a latent and apparently disturbing tendency, that is, the shift from “the interrogation of perceptual stereotypes towards a quite different interest in the uncertain boundaries between the familiar and the strange, the real and the symbolic that had fascinated painters at the time of Symbolism, metaphysical painting and magical realism.” (Rancière, 2007, p. 64; Rancière, 2009, p. 59)

According to Rancière, this shift was spectacularly underscored by Bill Viola’s installation called *Going Forth by Day* (2002). This consists of “five simultaneous video projections covering the walls of a dark rectangular room, where visitors stand on a central carpet”, and does not

¹⁵ Morris, ‘Night walking: darkness and sensory perception in a night-time landscape installation’, 2011, pp. 315, 334–335; see also Dunn and Edensor, 2021a, p. 20.

hide “a certain nostalgia for the great painting and fresco series” (Rancière, 2007, p. 64–65). Rancière briefly describes and interprets this video installation as follows:

[It] beamed onto the four walls of a dark room flames and floods, slow processions, urban wandering, wakes and ship embarkation, to symbolize, in addition to the four elements, the great cycles of birth, life, death and rebirth. Experimental video art thus manifests in plain language the latent tendency of many of today’s *dispositifs* by miming, in its own way, the great frescos of human destiny so admired by the Symbolist and Expressionist age. (Rancière, 2009, p. 59)¹⁶

Therefore, what Rancière detects and criticizes is specifically this shift, part of the larger “shift from dialectical conflict to symbolist community characteristic of works and installations that employ traditional materials and means of expression” (2007, p. 66), which conveys in its turn a “more fundamental undecidability in the politics of the art” (2009, p. 60). In other words, Rancière draws attention to the contrast between “two poetics of the image”—the revival and prevalence of “a melancholy relating to the world in common that art once carried in it”, over “the interrogation of perceptual stereotypes” able to “reshape political spaces” (Rancière, 2009, p. 59–60):

Today, the photographic sequences, the video monitors or projections, the installation of familiar or strange objects that fill the spaces of museums and galleries seek less to create the sense of a *gap* between two orders—between *everyday appearances* and the *laws of domination*—than to increase a *new sensitivity* to the signs and traces that testify to a *common history* and a *common world*. (Rancière, 2007, pp. 66–67; my emphasis)

It is true that Viola’s cutting-edge video installations engage with the history of art and are thematically rooted in the European art-historical tradition (both modern and old masters), and leave room for *mystery*. (Guggenheim Museum, 2005; Oleynick, 2019) Yet I would argue that the spiritual and theological “mysteries” evoked by Viola’s video art symbolize deeper realities

¹⁶ In contrast, this is how Viola’s video installation is described on the webpage of Guggenheim Museum: “Going Forth By Day is an epic, five-part projection-based installation that addresses the complexity of human existence and explores cycles of birth, death, and rebirth. A different phase is embodied in each of the five looped projections with audio accompaniment. In one sequence, a community is shown anticipating and then fleeing from a deluge while another panel predicts a hopeful future as dawn illuminates a ravaged landscape. Each video is projected directly onto the wall of the exhibition space, just as the paint of a fresco adheres to the surface of a plaster wall. Viola acknowledges the influence of Giotto’s fresco cycle in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, a Renaissance work that, like Viola’s installation, occupies an architectural space through which the viewer may physically pass.” (Guggenheim Museum, 2005). The title of the work comes from the literal translation of the title of The Egyptian Book of the Dead, where the soul is freed from the darkness of the body to finally “go forth by the light of day”. (James Cohan, 2002)

than the “everyday appearances” criticized by Rancière; rather, they “help us to see what we ordinarily can’t”, as Bill Viola himself emphasized (quoted in Oleynick, 2019).

On the one hand, Viola engages with night/darkness through complex perceptual experiences, visual and acoustic. There is first the literal or material darkness shared by the videos and the dark room, which makes Viola’s video installations “total environments that envelop the spectators in image and sound”, thus allowing them “a total aesthetic, sensory, and philosophical experience”. On the other hand, this exploration of the phenomena of sense perception is used by Viola as “an avenue to self-knowledge”, to deal with major themes of human existence—individuality, society, life, death and rebirth. (Perov, *Bill Viola. Biography*, 2024)

For instance, Viola often uses darkness or twilight as metaphors for “transformation” and “self-understanding”. In his video installations, like the seven displayed in the 2019 retrospective *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like: The Art of Bill Viola* at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia, characters emerge frequently from darkness and undergo mystical changes. The film *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like* (1986), which lend the title of the exhibition, is structured in five parts, “The Dark Body”, “The Language of the Birds”, “The Night of Sense”, “Stunned by the Drum”, and “The Living Flame”. It “unfolds as a wordless odyssey, an epic quest for self-understanding and transcendence, through an awareness of the Other (embodied here by a shamanistic vision of animal consciousness)”. Likewise, other Viola videos seek to dramatize how apparent voids contain potent insight and to show that “darkness and defeat aren’t necessarily negative”, but they are crucial stages in the soul’s journey to God, as in the 16th-century mystical poem *Dark Night of the Soul* of St. John of the Cross that fascinated him in college. Viola has later turned the paradoxical imagery of this poem—the night shining like sunrise, the oblivion yielding knowledge—into a video installation in 1983, entitled *Room for St. John of the Cross*. (Oleynick, 2019)

Therefore, Viola’s night imagery—waterfalls at midnight, figures traversing dark chambers or emerging from, and returning to, darkness—symbolizes more than the mystery of the Symbolist age: it expresses profound existential and spiritual themes, showing darkness as a generative rather than purely negative state, that is, as a passage toward self-knowledge, that touches on the universal and, possibly, shared transcendence.

4. Conclusion: Elements of an Aesthetics of the Night

This discussion has shown how night and darkness have been perceived, experienced, interpreted, and artistically reimagined across historical, social, and cultural contexts, thus framing their diversity, plurality, and rich aesthetic meanings and effects. Several key elements of an *aesthetics of the night* have emerged, showing how the dialectical interplay of light and darkness and the *night-time*, as a distinct temporal structure of the quotidian life-world, also structure our aesthetic experience by reshaping space and temporality and thus affording new ways of understanding ourselves and our life-world. These elements can be summarized as follows:

Multisensory engagement beyond visual norms: darkness enhances non-visual senses and recalibrates perception.

Transformation of spatial and temporal experience: the light/dark dialectic reshapes how space and time are apprehended.

Ambivalent atmospheres: night evokes depth, mystery and adventure, but also intimacy and introspection; danger, fear and vulnerability, but also sociability and affordances.

Alternative aesthetic potentials: night offers opportunities for creative, affective, and transgressive practices.

Self-reflection and identity formation: night-time provides conditions for introspection, existential exploration, and self-discovery or self-fashioning.

Exploring night and darkness thus enriches our understanding of ordinary aesthetic experience and demonstrates the potential of Everynight Aesthetics as a field of inquiry. Further research may examine how nocturnality continues to transform contemporary life-worlds.

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A Spinozist Alternative to Baumgarten's Introduction of Aesthetics

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ABSTRACT. In his Aesthetica (1750), Alexander Baumgarten introduced the term “aesthetics” as the philosophical discipline concerned with the “science of sense cognition.” Yet rather than treating sensibility itself as the primary object of inquiry, Baumgarten’s project quickly centered on the “perfection” of sensibility—that is, beauty—and on its artistic realization, particularly in poetry. I describe this shift as a hijacking of aisthesis, wherein the tradition inaugurated by Baumgarten’s foundational gesture proved unable to engage corporeality, sensibility, imagination, and affectivity as such, and instead restricted aesthetics to judgments of taste and the philosophy of art. This paper argues that Spinoza offers a viable alternative understanding of these concepts, providing a framework for a redefinition of aesthetics. His account of body, imagination, and affect enables a deflationary and adjectival redefinition of the term, understood not as an evaluative domain but as a methodological orientation toward thinking through and about corporeality. I will outline Baumgarten’s formulation, present a Spinozist critique of his conception of aesthetics, and highlight key aspects of Spinoza’s metaphysics that ground the proposed redefinition of the term.

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1. Introduction

The term “aesthetics” is commonly understood to refer to the philosophical engagement with judgments of taste, especially those concerned with beauty and related evaluative categories. Such inquiry is directed toward both natural (i.e. not man-made) phenomena and, more centrally, the arts: painting, literature, music, and other artistic practices.¹ This paper proposes to interrogate the historical emergence of the term “aesthetics” as a designation for this domain, approaching the issue through the lens of Spinoza’s philosophy. My guiding hypothesis is that, just as Spinoza radically reconceives ethics, his account of the conceptual constellation of corporeality, imagination, and affectivity may allow us to redefine aesthetics. Rather than grounding it in value judgments about the artwork as the privileged object of aesthetic attention (e.g. regarding beauty, see Youpa 2010), I suggest a deflationary and adjectival understanding of “aesthetics” as a methodological orientation: a tendency of thinking through and about corporeality.

To pursue this redefinition, the broader project sketched here undertakes a quasi-genealogical examination of the dominant conception of aesthetics, beginning with Alexander Baumgarten’s introduction of the term in his *Aesthetica* (1750). This genealogy aims to reveal the metaphysical presuppositions that underwrite the modern alignment of sensibility with both taste and the philosophy of art. Within this frame, the *signifier* “aesthetics” is construed as a historical symptom of the early modern (and continuing) philosophical bewilderment towards corporeality as such, the body indeed functioning as the unthinkable otherness of thought (Nannini 2022, 104).

My problematic is therefore partially aligned with contributions such as everyday aesthetics (Saito 2008) and somaesthetics (Shusterman 1999), which seek to broaden the scope of aesthetics by respectively rectifying the exclusion of non-art, “everyday” objects, and of the “cultivation of the body” (Shusterman 1999, 301) from its remit. However, while these directions of research broaden the field of aesthetic inquiry, they also tend to preserve aesthetics

¹ Some examples: “Aesthetics may be defined narrowly as the theory of beauty, or more broadly as that together with the philosophy of art” (Slater n.d.); “[a]s the subject [of aesthetics] is now understood, it consists of two parts: the philosophy of art, and the philosophy of aesthetic experience and character of objects or phenomena that are not art” (Budd 1998, p. 59). But a glance at any aesthetics conference program or journal issue contents is, I think, convincing enough.

as a fundamentally normative and teleologically oriented discipline. By contrast, I argue that the initial conflation of sensibility with judgments of taste and with the philosophy of art is itself problematic, insofar as it marginalizes corporeality as such within aesthetic discourse. In this sense, the modern concept of aesthetics can be understood as a hijacking of sensation (*αἴσθησις*)² through its subordination to normativity and artistic discourse, beginning with Baumgarten. Spinoza, by contrast, offers a robust and systematic account of affectivity, corporeality, imagination, and sensibility that provides ample conceptual resources for a deflationary redefinition of aesthetics. Rather than merely expanding the range of aesthetic objects while remaining rooted in the problematics of traditional aesthetic theory, the aim here is a more radical rethinking of the term itself. Given the constraints of the present format, this paper will offer only a preliminary sketch: first, of Baumgarten's formulation; second, of a Spinozist critique of Baumgarten's conception of aesthetics; and finally, of key concepts essential to the construction of a Spinozist aesthetics.

2. Baumgarten's Introduction of Aesthetics

The initial naming of a discipline is as critical as any of its later theoretical developments.³ The modern concept of aesthetics is typically traced to Alexander Baumgarten's treatise that bore the same name, the *Aesthetica* of 1750.⁴ Aesthetics was conceived by Baumgarten as a theory of "sensible cognition" (i.e. of perceptions stemming from the external sense, c.f. Baumgarten's *Metaphysica* §534-556; Nuzzo 2006, p. 579-80), which was parallel and complementary to logic. A follower of Wolff, and thereby of Leibniz, Baumgarten sought to address what he regarded as a lacuna in Wolff's system: the absence of a systematic account of sense cognition. Accordingly, he attempts to construct a rationalist theory of sense cognition through the deductive method inherited by his predecessors—definitions followed by demonstrations and

² The term going back at least to Aristotle, cf. e.g. *On the soul*; or *Parva Naturalia* 436a f.

³ The emergence of aesthetics as a discrete philosophical discipline is closely linked to the sociopolitical developments of its era: urbanization, rise of the bourgeoisie, the development of the art market and the commodification of artworks, secularization, and related phenomena. While a full discussion of these factors is beyond the scope of this paper, they are essential to any thorough account of the birth and consolidation of aesthetics. Rancière offers an insightful observation regarding the emergence of the modern regime of the arts as a largely distinct field of philosophical analysis, and the concomitant modern conception of aesthetic: "The conditions of this emergence of art cannot be deduced from a general concept of art or beauty founded on a global theory of man or the world, of the subject or being. Such concepts themselves depend upon a transformation of the forms of sensible experience, of ways of perceiving and being affected" (Rancière 2013, ix).

⁴ Having first used it in his 1735 dissertation *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus* (*Philosophical considerations of some matters pertaining to the poem*). For an excellent summary exposition of Baumgarten's aesthetics, cf. Gregor 1983.

explications—even though the style of his work remains deeply marked by the Scholastic style of exposition. In elevating sensory cognition to a legitimate domain of epistemological inquiry, Baumgarten can be seen as critiquing the rationalist tradition’s prior neglect of sensible perception (Nuzzo 2006, p. 579). Yet in the *Aesthetica*, the investigation of sensibility as such is almost immediately redirected toward its “perfection,” namely beauty, and toward its artistic realization, especially in poetry, the preeminent art form in eighteenth-century philosophy.⁵

The *Aesthetica* is divided in short paragraphs, and in the first one Baumgarten provides his well-known succinct definition of aesthetics: “Aesthetics is the science of sense cognition” (§1).⁶ This form of cognition—like Spinoza’s imagination—⁷constitutes the lowest degree of knowledge; Baumgarten therefore describes aesthetics, in a parenthetical clarification, as lower epistemology (*gnoseologia inferior*). Although it concerns sensible cognition, aesthetics is nonetheless a *scientia*, that is, an undertaking aimed at certain knowledge. This science appears paradoxical within a rationalist context, since the senses are precisely what resists distinct cognition. How, then, can they become the object of a science? This aspiration to scientific treatment is a defining feature of Baumgarten’s new discipline. A full account would require situating his project in relation to both the rationalist tradition and competing eighteenth-century theories of taste and the arts, which cannot be undertaken here.⁸ It should be noted, however, that Baumgarten introduces an important and novel distinction between the clear and distinct discourse of logic, on the one hand, and aesthetic discourse, on the other. The latter, he argues, is characterized by ideas that are confused (i.e. not distinct) but nevertheless clear to varying degrees. Baumgarten terms this *extensive clarity*, in contrast to the intensive clarity characteristic of intellectual ideas (cf. *Metaphysica* §531). He treats this notion of extensive clarity as a criterion for artistic evaluation: ideas presented in, for example, a poem should be as clear

⁵ As already mentioned, his 1735 dissertation was devoted to the subject. Therein, Baumgarten defines the poem as a “perfect sensate discourse”, i.e. a perfect discourse involving sensate representations, that is representations received through the lower part of the cognitive faculty (*Meditationes philosophicae*, §3, 9; cf. Baumgarten’s claim about the preeminent place of poetry vis-à-vis painting, §40).

⁶ The full definition reads “Aesthetica (theoria liberalium artium, gnoseologia inferior, ars pulchre cogitandi, ars analogi rationis) est scientia cognitionis sensitivae.”

⁷ According to Spinoza, imagination is the first kind of knowledge (E2p40s2) and the only source of error (E2p41). The other two kinds of knowledge are reason and intuition. Of course, this typology resonates with the rationalist tradition to which both authors belong. For Baumgarten’s own theory of the imagination, cf. *Metaphysica* §557-571. I’m referring to the *Ethics* by “E,” utilizing the following system: the first number denotes the part of the work, the second number (p^x) denotes the proposition; furthermore, d=demonstration, s=scholium, cor=corollary, etc.).

Thus, E2p40s2 = the second scholium to the 40th proposition of the second part of the *Ethics*. When necessary, I also refer to the Gebhardt edition by G, followed by Latin numeral for the volume and Arabic for the page.

⁸ For a standard account, cf. Cassirer 2009, p. 275-360.

and as rich as possible. Aesthetic truth, ideas, and discourse are therefore clear but confused; they cannot be distinct (Åhlberg 2003, p. 146). Thus, for Baumgarten, extensive clarity is proportional to poeticality: poetic clarity is the ability to fuse—indeed to *confuse*—elements into a coherent and satisfying whole (Åhlberg 2003, p. 147; cf. also Gregor 1983, p. 364). So, even though he inherits Leibniz’s typology of ideas,⁹ Baumgarten appears critical of his intellectualism, both in general and in its implications for art.¹⁰

After defining aesthetics, Baumgarten proceeds to specify its “special uses,” i.e. philology, hermeneutics, rhetoric, poetry, music, etc. (§4). These aims fall under his broader project of developing a method for producing what he calls “aestheticians”: individuals who “think beautifully.” Crucially, Baumgarten also seeks to provide practical exercises for cultivating such beautiful thinking. At the same time, as he emphasizes in the opening paragraphs, the philosopher needs to keep in mind that he is “a man among men” (§6) and that rational and sensible cognition are complementary (§7-8). Soon thereafter, however, in the first proposition of the main body of the work (following the introductory thirteen paragraphs), Baumgarten proceeds to specify the end of aesthetics: “the end of aesthetics is the perfection of sense cognition as such. This, however, is beauty” (§14). Thus, at the very dawn of aesthetics as a discipline, sense cognition is inextricably linked to its end in beauty—here defined as its perfection. In this way, Baumgarten’s conception already frames aesthetics as a teleological and value-based theory of beauty understood as perfected sensible cognition. It therefore seems reasonable to ask where this perfection is most fully realized; for Baumgarten, the paradigmatic object is the work of art. His innovation thus lies in articulating a systematic relation between three domains that were previously treated as largely autonomous: sensibility, art, and beauty (Pranchère 1988, p. 8). Yet this same gesture indeed narrowed the scope of subsequent aesthetic theory, reducing it “from the vast field of sensory cognition to the narrow compass of beauty and fine art” (Shusterman 1999, 301).

⁹ Cf. the “Meditations on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas” (1684), in Leibniz 1989, p. 23-27.

¹⁰ “And further, even the pleasures of the senses reduce to intellectual pleasures known confusedly.

Music charms us, even though its beauty consists only in the harmonies of numbers and in a calculation that we are not aware of, but which the soul nevertheless carries out, a calculation concerning the beats or vibrations of sounding bodies, which are encountered at certain intervals. The pleasures that sight finds in proportions are of the same nature, and those caused by the other senses amount to something similar, even though we might not be able to explain it so distinctly” (“Principles of Nature and Grace,” in Leibniz 1989, p. 212).

Baumgarten's aesthetics can then be summarized as the inquiry into sense perception, aimed at perfecting perceptual, sensory cognition as such—a goal he considers worth developing for its own sake. Although he acknowledges the superiority of the intellect by designating aesthetics as “inferior gnoseology,” he nevertheless stresses that it is complementary to rational (or intellectual) and sensory knowledge. This complementary relationship rests on the richness of sensible cognition: given the finitude of human cognitive existence, confusion is not merely the privation of distinctness but also a form of fusion, the inseparability of the marks and notes delivered by the senses. “Reason,” Baumgarten proclaims, “is more exact than the senses, but it is also poorer” (*Aesthetica*, §560). Yet his attempt to rehabilitate sensibility is constrained by his decision to bind aesthetics, beauty, and art together. What is important for the present inquiry is that a reevaluation of the sensible—of corporeality and affectivity—had already been performed by Spinoza, and was coupled with a relative *devaluation* of ideality, insofar as both fall under the order of necessity; hence the famous Spinozist challenge: *who knows what the Body can do* (E3p2s)?

It is, of course, impossible to do justice to Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* in the present context. His systematic treatment does indeed mark the transition from traditional poetics to the broader enterprise of modern aesthetics (Pranchère 1988, p. 9). Several of his contributions have proved indispensable: a) the systematic character of his aesthetic project, later methodologically appropriated by Kant, Hegel, and others; b) his insistence on the richness of the senses as compared to reason; c) the conceptualization of intensive and extensive clarity—extending Leibniz's typology of clear, distinct and adequate ideas—which underwrites this claim of sensory richness; d) his break with the mainstream rationalist tradition in affirming the perfection of sensory knowledge as a philosophically legitimate goal; and e) his doctrine of the complementary nature of modes of cognition, even while aesthetics remains the lower sphere of epistemology. His project is also wider in scope than many contemporary understandings of aesthetics, encompassing a practical preoccupation with philosophy as a way of life (Shusterman 1999, 299). And, in contrast to the subsequent focus on the aesthetic object that followed his introduction of the term, his relative attention to perception, sensation, and sensory cognition (Kaiser 2013, p. 10) is crucial for understanding how *aisthesis* and *aesthetics* eventually diverged. Nonetheless, the initial puzzle remains: why must a “science of sense cognition” revolve around judgments on beauty; why should the arts serve as the paradigmatic realizations of beauty understood as the perfection of sensible knowledge; and why, within the arts, is poetry accorded pride of place?

3. Towards a Spinozist Aesthetics

In the wake of Baumgarten's introduction of the term aesthetics to designate the science of sense perception as a "general theory of the beauty of thoughts" (*Aesthetica* §6), both Kant and Hegel voiced reservations. In a footnote in the "Transcendental aesthetic," Kant observes:

The Germans are the only ones who now employ the word "aesthetics" to designate that which others call the critique of taste. [...] For the putative rules or criteria are merely empirical as far as their sources are concerned, and can therefore never serve as *a priori* rules according to which our judgment of taste must be directed (Kant CPR A21).

Similarly, Hegel finds the term unsuitable for the role accorded it by Baumgarten:

These lectures are devoted to Aesthetics. Their topic is the spacious realm of the beautiful; more precisely, their province is art, or, rather, fine art.

For this topic, it is true, the word *Aesthetics*, taken literally, is not wholly satisfactory, since "Aesthetics" means, more precisely, the science of sensation, of feeling (Hegel 1988, p. 1).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine fully the reasoning behind either Kant's rejection of the possibility of a science of judgments of taste, or the tension between Hegel's understanding of the "literal meaning of aesthetics" and Baumgarten's appropriation of the term for the goals outlined above. My aim, rather, is to outline how Spinoza's thought can illuminate this apparent discrepancy.

How, then, might Spinoza prove to be useful in this context? I must stress that my goal is not to develop a philosophy of art from Spinoza¹¹ or to reconstruct his theory of beauty. As noted, Spinoza did not formulate an aesthetic theory in the modern sense, and given that Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* postdates Spinoza's death by seventy-three years, situating him directly within the history of modern aesthetics would be anachronistic. Instead, my concern is to employ his system as a critical lens for interrogating the hijacking of sensation by mainstream aesthetics, and the consequent confinement of sensibility to the epistemological pursuit of

¹¹ This is not to say that his system is not useful for a philosophy and/or an aesthetics of art; cf. indicatively Rawes 2012; Thomas 2018; Uhlmann 2011. For an overview of recent scholarship on Spinoza and aesthetics, cf. Romagni 2021.

beauty, as eminently exemplified in works of art. Moreover, Spinoza's "subjectivity without a subject" (Williams 2012) proves indispensable here: rather than aspiring to the perfection of the Baumgartian "aesthetician," a Spinozist redefinition of aesthetics points beyond the ends of human subjectivities to encompass the affective relations between all individuals (Spinoza's term for all complex bodies, cf. his digression into physics after E2p13s). For, as Spinoza notes, "all beings are, albeit to different degrees, animate" (E2p13s) and thus partake in aesthetic—that is, affective—relations. Before detailing the aspects of Spinoza's system most pertinent to this project, I will briefly outline a Spinozist critique of Baumgartian aesthetics.

3.1. A Spinozist Critique of Baumgarten's Introduction of Aesthetics

As discussed above, Baumgarten's science of sense cognition is organized around beauty as its perfection. Spinoza, however, relativizes the notions of beauty and ugliness in the appendix of the first part of the *Ethics*. He writes that numerous "prejudices have arisen concerning [...] beauty and ugliness, and other things of this kind," and men "had to form these notions, by which they explained natural things: good, evil, order, confusion, warm, cold, beauty, ugliness" (G II 78). He then clarifies that "if the motion the nerves receive from objects presented through the eyes is conducive to health, the objects by which it is caused are called beautiful; those which cause a contrary motion are called ugly" (G II 82). Crucially, such notions are "nothing but modes of imagining, by which the imagination is variously affected; and yet the ignorant consider them the chief attributes of things, because, as we have already said, they believe all things have been made for their sake, and call the nature of a thing [beautiful or ugly], as they are affected by it" (G II 82). In short, "although human bodies agree in many things, they still differ in very many. And for that reason, what seems good to one, seems bad to another; what seems ordered to one, seems confused to another; what seems pleasing to one, seems displeasing to another, and so on" (G II 82-83). If values are thus purely relational and do not correspond to intrinsic properties of objects, then aesthetics in the conventional sense can only be understood as a subjective enterprise depending on the singular imaginative and affective encounters of each individual, its scope reduced to a kind of psychological casuistry (Rice 1996, p. 478).

As these passages suggest, Spinoza's relativization of value concepts is part of his general critique of first-order normativity; "perfection," Baumgarten's technical term for beauty as the end of sensible cognition, also falls under this critique.¹² Spinoza develops this point in the preface to the fourth part of the *Ethics*, which begins with an argument of judgments of perfection. This argument doubles as a genetic account of abstract universals—"models" of man-made things—that individuals construct and then use for comparison and ranking. Objects judged to correspond more closely to such models are deemed more perfect, and these comparative judgments are subsequently projected onto natural objects and nature itself, which are thereby anthropomorphized and endowed with volitional and teleological features. Beauty and perfection are therefore, for Spinoza, abstract universal terms formed subjectively through evaluative judgments that depend entirely on an individual's preconceived notions.¹³ Although such concepts may function as convenient placeholders for describing certain states, they cannot account for their causes; they therefore yield only inadequate imaginary ideas and cannot figure in a genuinely descriptive, explanatory account.

This critique rests on what Spinoza identifies as the fundamental prejudice of teleology,¹⁴ which he locates within imaginative cognition. First, he argues, "men think themselves free, because they are conscious of their volitions and their appetite, and do not think, even in their dreams, of the causes by which they are disposed to wanting and willing, because they are ignorant of [those causes]." Second, "It follows [...] that men act always on account of an end, viz. on account of their advantage, which they want. Hence, they seek to know only the final causes of what has been done, and when they have heard them, they are satisfied, because they have no reason to doubt further." This inclination leads them to attribute ends to God—or to the gods—and to natural things, in a fundamentally anthropomorphic inversion of reality. Such a "doctrine concerning the end turns nature completely upside down" (G II 80), treating effects as if they were causes. In this sense, Baumgarten's teleological constitution of aesthetics can be anachronistically regarded as problematic from the outset, since its unquestioned appeal to teleological concepts relies on precisely this fallacious mode of explanation. Spinoza's critique

¹² Baumgarten actually defines the faculty of judgment itself as coextensive with the perception of perfection or imperfection in things (*Metaphysica* §606).

¹³ This usage clashes with the implicit definition of perfection provided in E2d6: "by reality and perfection I understand the same thing." Perfection in this sense is a genuine metaphysical property that can be rationally conceived. I cannot address here the issue of the two, seemingly contradictory senses of perfection in the *Ethics*.

¹⁴ Montag (2020, p. 415) notes the double meaning of *prejudicium*, not only as a preconception, but also in the sense of "a legal precedent, a decision that determines subsequent decisions."

therefore undermines any attempt to ground aesthetics in a correlation between a subjective feeling of beauty and an object's supposed formal purposiveness (Montag 2020, 416).¹⁵

Given the foregoing, beauty and perfection cannot function as adequate conceptual foundations for aesthetics as the “science of sense cognition,” since these notions are themselves products of the imagination, rather than components of its philosophical analysis. What is needed instead—and what Spinoza provides—is a descriptive account of sense cognition that does not in itself entail any normative dimension. I will now provide a rough outline of the basic elements of such a Spinozist aesthetics.

3.2. Outline of a Spinozist Aesthetics

In congruence with the foregoing analysis, Tom Sparrow has argued that if we understand aesthetics in an expanded sense—one that prioritizes the ubiquitous materiality of affective relations rather than the narrow conception of a philosophy of art and beauty introduced by Baumgarten—then Spinoza has much to offer (Sparrow 2011, p. 74). Sparrow identifies three main doctrines of Spinoza's system that can help redefine aesthetics beyond art and beauty: (1) Spinoza's monistic ontology, which treats bodies as modes of the unique substance—God or Nature—rather than as independent substances or autonomous subjectivities; (2) the identification of freedom with the knowledge of the necessary determinations pervading all of nature, including human beings; and (3) Spinoza's radical downplaying of “consciousness, intentionality, and interiority,” in favor of conceiving individuals as embedded in their materiality (Sparrow 2011, p. 67). Although Sparrow is certainly right to identify these features as crucial for a redefinition of aesthetics, a systematic development of this project very much remains a desideratum. Given the constraints of the present paper, I will only outline several central elements that require further elaboration.

i. Monism. Spinoza's monism is expressed in the doctrine of the existence of a unique substance (E1p10 & E1p14), namely God (E1d3 & E1d6), identified with nature (*Deus sive Natura*). All things depend on this substance for their existence and conception (E1p15) as well

¹⁵ Regarding the sublime, Montag claims that its rejection by Hegel has the latter as “regarding Spinoza as having refuted Kant in advance” (417).

as for their essence (E1p25); these finite things¹⁶ he calls “modes” (E1d5). Monism thus entails a system of immanent causal relations (E1p18), a legacy that subsequent philosophical tradition inherited from Spinozism, and that has been expanded into broader notions of immanence, as in the work of Gilles Deleuze. Monism and immanence provide the metaphysical groundwork for a Spinozist aesthetics, insofar as they shift attention away from the subjectivity/objectivity axis toward a plane of univocal relationality among modes.

ii. Extension as an attribute of God. A central feature of Spinoza’s system is the inclusion of extension as an attribute of God (E2p2; cf. E1p15s), which comes as a necessary consequence of his monist metaphysics. By elevating extension to the status of divine attribute, Spinoza grants materiality and corporeality a significance historically denied them. Extension and thought are the only attributes accessible to human beings, and this structure is mirrored at the level of modes: all modes of extension—in what concerns us here, bodies (E2p1)—including human individuals, correspond to ideas (E2p7), and are therefore “to different degrees, animate” (E2p13s). A Spinozist aesthetics is thus both non-subject-centred and, at the same time, cosmic in scope. Spinoza’s emphasis on corporeality is well captured by the famous passage in E3p2s: “of course, no one has yet determined what the Body can do, i.e., experience has not yet taught anyone what the Body can do from the laws of nature alone, insofar as nature is only considered to be corporeal, and what the body can do only if it is determined by the Mind.” Lastly, although each body has a corresponding idea, bodies and ideas differ in their properties; most importantly, there is no perceivable “universal” body—bodies are always apprehended as singular, as opposed to the imaginary formation of abstract universal ideas. This constitutive singularity is essential for a Spinozist aesthetics.

iii. The inherent relationality of modes. Because the modal¹⁷ expressions of the attributes of thought and extension are not “ontologically” distinct either from God or from each other, every object examined through a Spinozist framework is already embedded in a nexus of relations and interdependencies (following from E1p28). This doctrine informs Spinoza’s accounts of individuality and individuation, of relationality and relational autonomy, and of transindividuality, all grounded in his theory of corporeality in the physical digression after E2p13s. As Sparrow notes, “for Spinoza, a body is never a pure individual. It is always a

¹⁶ There also exist infinite modes (E1p21-23), but this is not the proper place to go into the details of Spinoza’s understanding of mode in general.

¹⁷ Modal in the sense of pertaining to modes, i.e. to *natura naturata*, and not in the general philosophical sense of modal relations of necessity, contingency, etc.

composite, an aggregate or ecology of bodies working together as an individual” (Sparrow 2011, p. 68). This inherent relationality is vital for a descriptive aesthetics concerned with what it means to be a body among bodies.

iv. The critique of anthropomorphism and the non-substantial nature of modes.

Closely linked to the foregoing doctrines is Spinoza’s critique of anthropomorphic conceptions of God, nature, and agency. Human beings share the same ontological plane as all other modes, and affective exchange—understood as the totality of nexūs of relations among conative powers—is ubiquitous. Spinoza offers a far-reaching critique of anthropomorphism that avoids collapsing into a fully flattened ontology (E1app, cf. section 3.1 here). He insists that “the being of substance does not pertain to the essence of man” (E2p10); instead, “the essence of man is constituted by certain modifications of God’s attributes” (E2p10c). This processual understanding of human beings is generalizable to all modes and underscores the non-substantial, dynamic character of individuality.

v. The dynamics of Spinoza’s theory of affectivity. For Spinoza, all modes of extension occupy positions on spectra—degrees of animatedness (E2p13s), corporeal complexity (E2p13sL7s & E2p13sP1), affective capacity (E2p13sP3 & E2p13sP6), commonality of properties (E2p39cor & E4p45s) and perceptual power of their corresponding ideas (E2p14). These spectra reflect each mode’s essential constitution, defined by its particular proportion of motion and rest that constitutes its form. More complex beings possess greater interactional capacities and share more properties with other modes than less complex ones, which, among other consequences, yields greater power. This is the basis of Spinoza’s theory of interhuman affective relations—but it is generalizable to affective relations among all modes.

vi. The relativity and singularity of affective states. Spinoza’s account of affective reality in the third part of the *Ethics* is also central to a Spinozist aesthetics. One striking feature is his insistence on the relativity and singularity of affective states. All affects, strictly speaking, are singular to their bearer (E3p57), nominal (E3p56), and unrepeatable (E3p51) with respect to their “subject,” their “object,” and their “context.” This strong nominalism effectively avoids the pitfalls of an aesthetics grounded in normative generalizations, such as Baumgarten’s notion of “beautiful thinking.”

vii. Spinoza's theory of imagination. Imagination, the first of three “kinds of knowledge” (E2p40s2), lies at the intersection of Spinoza's theories of corporeality, knowledge and affectivity, and thus forms the conceptual core of a Spinozist redefinition of aesthetics. Imagination is a general term¹⁸ encompassing the totality of ideas of bodily affections that present external things as present to us.¹⁹ These affections are called images, and their ideas are called imaginations. This is derived from E2p17: “If the human Body is affected with a mode that involves the nature of an external body, the human Mind will regard the same external body as actually existing, or as present to it, until the Body is affected by an affect that excludes the existence or presence of that body.” Imagination is a positive, productive power, but its ideas are always at least partially confused and must be supplemented by more adequate ideas. It also opens onto numerous other aspects of Spinoza's philosophy, including his theories of language and his political philosophy.

4. Conclusions

Aesthetics has always been a contested concept, though its foundational presuppositions have rarely been interrogated. Why has a term that literally denotes the philosophical investigation of sensibility—*aisthesis*—been historically narrowed to the philosophy of beauty and the arts? What became of sensibility proper—and its attendant constellation of imagination, corporeality and affectivity—once the idealist tradition restricted the meaning of aesthetics to fine art, beauty and sublimity? Why should beauty have a greater claim than any other aesthetic quality to serve as the proper object of a theory of sensibility? And, more fundamentally, why should *any* aesthetic property, in the current sense of the term, determine the field's content in the first place? If this is what “aesthetics” has come to mean, what term should we use for a philosophical discipline concerned with affective relations as such: their structures and dynamics, their metaphysical backdrop and epistemological repercussions, the types of objects they involve, and so on? This is not to suggest that all qualities, objects, and relations have equal significance, but rather that a founding arbitrariness underlies our inherited understanding of aesthetics. We

¹⁸ Imagination is not a faculty, since Spinoza wholesale rejects the concept of faculty as an abstract universal; cf. E2p48s: “these and similar faculties are either complete fictions *or* nothing but Metaphysical beings, or universal, which we are used to forming from particulars.”

¹⁹ “Next, to retain the customary words, the affections of the human Body whose ideas present external bodies as present to us, we shall call images of things, even if they do not reproduce the external figures of things. And when the Mind regards bodies in this way, we shall say that it imagines” (E2p17s).

must therefore—borrowing a turn of phrase from a work deeply aligned with the present project—take seriously the equal claim of all activities, processes, and entities that participate in affective and/or aesthetic relations to be included under the very signifier that ought to designate the branch of philosophy that studies them (Berleant 1992, 9).

Spinoza's theories of affectivity and imagination have already been taken up across a wide range of disciplines.²⁰ What unites these diverse applications is a sustained effort to *think through and about corporeality*, and their very possibility underscores the need for a Spinozist aesthetics. Consider an example from an ardent admirer of Spinoza —though not, strictly speaking, a Spinoza scholar. John Berger writes: “When the camera reproduces a painting, it destroys the uniqueness of its image. As a result its meaning changes. Or, more exactly, its meaning multiplies and fragments into many meanings.” (Berger 1977, p. 19). This is a quintessentially aesthetic problem, but not because it concerns fine art, judgments of beauty, or the ontology of artworks in the narrow sense. Rather, it is aesthetic because it exposes the shifting structures of feeling and differentiated distribution of the sensible (to use Rancière's expression) that emerge when we take the body seriously. Thinkers like Berleant and Berger have long advocated an aesthetics reaffirming the materiality of sensation, the ubiquity of sense, the priority of singular encounters over universal criteria, and the material dimensions of cultural, semiotic, environmental and technological entities—all while foregrounding relations among bodies-as-agents rather than the operations of free willing, intentional human subjectivities. Spinoza provides a powerful framework for articulating such an aesthetics and for overcoming the dominant idealist aesthetic tradition's (c.f. Gordon 2017) longstanding neglect of its material basis.

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²⁰ Indicatively: Antonio Damasio's work in neuroscience; Arne Naess' deep ecology and Jane Bennett's materialist ecology; Toni Negri & Michael Hardt, Étienne Balibar and Frédéric Lordon at the interface of political philosophy and political economy; Genevieve Lloyd, Moira Gatens and Hasana Sharp in (affective) feminism; Chiara Bottici and Martin Saar in the politics of social ontology.

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Rethinking the Aesthetics of Photography Through the Lens of the Philosophy of Technology

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Abstract. The aim of this paper is to rethink the relationship between automatism and artistic agency in photography through the lens of the philosophy of technology. In critical response to the realist theories of photography that have been focused on the material condition of the medium, recent theoretical approaches have increasingly insisted on artistic agency. Against this turn towards fictional inventiveness and human-centred creativity, I argue that we should focus more, not less, on the technical dimension of photography in order to defend its aesthetic status. While my position aligns with the basic realist claim that photography operates independently of human intervention, I remain critical of their substantialist assumptions about medium and reality. Drawing on, what could be called, a relational and process-oriented philosophy of technology, I advocate for a different understanding of both reality and technical objects, namely as dynamic and open-ended rather than fixed entities. Consequently, this perspective allows us to locate agency at the very heart of photographic automatism and to interpret the aesthetic dimension of photography as a result of its techno-material nature.

1. Introduction: A New Theory of Photography?

In the first decades of the 21st century, several edited collections and academic journals,² on both the analytic and continental sides, attempted to relegate realist and ontological theories of

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² *Études photographiques*, 34, Spring 2016; *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 70/1, Winter 2012; *Critical Inquiry*, 38/4, Summer 2012; Elkins (2007), among others.

photography to history.³ Even though these publications brought together various strands of photographic theory, some more critical of realist arguments than others, the overall framing of these collections conveyed a sense that it was “time to move on”, from “trace-image” to “fiction-image” (Dubois 2016).

This development can be explained by the fact that, in the second half of the 20th century, the causal hypothesis had become so inflated and essentialised that it had reached its limits, while the emergence of digital photography, at the same time, seemed to fundamentally undermine photographic causality. In other words, notions such as indexicality, transparency, or punctum, which had been used to explain photography’s ability to capture reality through causal relations, came to appear as naïve misconceptions and mystifications of the medium – an idea that some critics traced back to the earliest 19th-century essays on photography (Barrett 1843; Eastlake 1857). In response to this development, by the turn of the century, critics proposed shifting the focus away from the mechanical aspects of the medium or its specificity – especially as the boundaries between different media had become increasingly blurred (Costello & Lopes 2012, p. 1–2) – towards artistic intention and the fictional dimension of photography, and thus towards human agency.

While it is undeniable that critics have rightly identified several important weaknesses in realist accounts and recognised the need for a renewal of photographic theory,⁴ I argue against the complete abandonment of the question of causality and the medium’s specificity. Instead, I propose that we should explore photography’s technicity more, not less, and re-articulate the question of causality and automatism through a different philosophical framework inspired by the philosophy of technology.

2. Automatism and Agency: A False Dichotomy

One of the main reasons a new theory of photography has become necessary is the persistent framing of photography in terms of a binary opposition between its mechanical nature and artistic intention. From Lady Eastlake’s notion of the “picturesque agent” to the most recent

³ Benjamin (2012), Bazin (1945), Barthes (1980), Krauss (1977), Kracauer (1960), Scruton (1981), Walton (1984) and others.

⁴ For an excellent overview of this subject see Pouillaude (2020).

journal issues, this tension endures. As Lopes rightly observed, in philosophy, both those who defend photography as art and those who deny it tend to share the same premise: that art cannot be an “obedience mechanism” (Lopes 2012, p. 855; Eastlake 1857). Generally speaking, this debate has been structured around the assumption that machines cannot be agents and that agency is a necessary condition for artistic production. Even though the editors of these various journal issues tried to avoid “reviving the older question by asking what is special about photography now” (Costello & Lopes 2012, p. 2), this very question continued to haunt their work like a shadow. This is perhaps an inevitable consequence of a dualistic framework, in which each extreme serves (even negatively) to define the other: art is *not* mechanical. But, contrary to the most common solution, namely rejecting the “zero-sum” relationship between automatism and agency (Costello & Phillips 2009), I argue that the dichotomy itself must be interrogated. Are automatism and agency in fact opposites at all?

Paradoxically, the only thinker who was truly sceptical about the artistic status of photography—Scruton (1981)—may have set the terms for nearly an entire generation of theorists. By attempting to refute Scruton, they have, in fact, often ended up reinforcing his central premise: that art is intentional. Nevertheless, there is nothing absolute or necessarily true in the claim that art is intentional, fictional, or expressive. Moreover, if we look closely, many realist or ontological accounts of photography do not explicitly reject photography as art, or its aesthetic dimension; instead, they often try to offer a different argument for its aesthetic value, beyond the more common artistic agency thesis. More importantly, these accounts still dare to ask how something mechanical or automatic can produce art. While it is true that this is a difficult and perhaps uncomfortable question, I argue that it must not be avoided.

This is not to say that notions such as indexicality, transparency or photography’s supposed grip on reality were not problematic or overused, often in dogmatic ways, as many critics have rightly pointed out. Maynard, for example, aptly summarises these tendencies as “reification, dualism, essentialism” (Maynard 1997, p. 15). Yet the opposing camp is not free of its own essentialist tendencies, summarised in Geimer’s (2018, p. 320) words as “‘construction’, ‘invention’, ‘subjectivity’”.⁵ It is also interesting that some critics not only challenge the theoretical argumentation of ontological approaches, but question the very idea of physical causality in photography, reducing it, for example, to a mere (illusory) reading of the image

⁵ My translation from French: “la ‘construction’, l’‘invention’, la ‘subjectivité’”.

(Gunthert 2016). This kind of reasoning sometimes stems from disciplinary divides and sometimes from conceptual confusion, as, for instance, when the empirical fact of causality seems conflated with the visual realism of the photographic image (Snyder 2016). While I generally support the idea that philosophy, art history and theory should engage in deeper dialogue when it comes to photography (Costello & Iversen 2012), such interdisciplinary exchanges must be carried out with an awareness of methodological differences. Without this, important arguments risk being misunderstood or losing their critical relevance.

Contrary to a common objection, I argue that the weakness of realist (or ontological or indexical) theories of photography lies *not* in their attention to the medium, but rather in their privileging of the image. As Maynard (1997) similarly pointed out, theorists tend to speak about *photographs*, not about *photography*, and even less about photography as a *technology*. Analytic philosophy of photography, in reality, is concerned with the epistemic value of the photographic image (as picture), which, within an empiricist framework, is supposed to guarantee (indirect) access to reality. On the more continental side, photographs are often treated as if their (material) genesis were immediately legible through visible traces, shifting the focus from the question of the medium to the reception of the image (as a trace). Thus, interestingly, those concerned with automatism and those concerned with agency in fact both privilege the image – which necessarily centres the discussion on the human element in photography, because the content of the image is what we, as humans, can engage with. The real problem, then, is not that we focused too much on the “material condition” (we, in fact, focused too much on the image), but rather that we did not focus enough (to recognise its aesthetic relevance). And contrary to the widespread belief that digitalisation has rendered the question of the medium’s nature obsolete, I argue that it has instead made this question impossible to avoid.

Furthermore, we could ask: is this recent shift towards the fictional a truly new approach? Not quite. If we look at the history of photography, we can see that despite its long-standing exclusion from the fine arts, photography’s artistic use was present from the very beginning. Kracauer identified this tension as a split between realist and formative tendencies in photography and noted that, as early as 1853, Sir William Newton had already proposed that photographic images could, and should, be altered in accordance with the principles of fine art (Kracauer 1960, p. 6). Moreover, the assumption that art should be modelled on the fictional inventiveness is itself a fairly traditional one, rooted in the concept of *mimesis* (as possible

worlds),⁶ reaching its modern height in the figure of the Romantic genius. Yet, contemporary art, with the help of photography itself, and different approaches in art theory have already demonstrated that this is not the whole story. While these latter approaches strive to think art without, or “relieved” of, artistic control (Costello & Iversen 2012, p. 687) and are more concerned with processes of selection, assemblage, and material transformation than with the invention of fictional worlds, the new wave of aesthetics of photography tends to return to more traditional conceptions of the creative process. Finally, if we add to that the fact that since the 1990s, with the proliferation of digital technologies – and even much prior to that – many theorists, for various reasons and from differing perspectives too numerous to detail here, have already critiqued photographic realism and its supposed access to reality, we understand that this is not a new perspective.⁷

Nevertheless, it should also be noted that a number of texts in these journals still prolong the realist tradition, attempting to account for the aesthetic and artistic dimensions of automatism. While I cannot go into the specific developments of these arguments here, a few key points relevant to my analysis should be noted. First, automatism is rightly recognised as a condition of contingency in photography, often in connection with surrealism, and as such, a condition for creation (parallel to mental automatism and the unconscious). Second, it is significant that in these analyses, theorists often quote artists (not only photographers) who, through automatism, express a kind of self-distance from their artistic intention, comparing it, for example, to a journey, “a paradoxical intention to abandon oneself to chance, to launch oneself into the unknown” (Iversen 2012, p. 807). Richter, who aspired to “paint as a camera”, remarked: “I’m not trying to imitate a photograph, I’m trying to make one” (Laxton 2012, p. 787). Also, in Wilson’s analysis of the photographic self-portrait, the possibility of a portrait without a mirror – and without complete artistic control – can arise only through photography as a technology that can capture without our intervention (Wilson (née Phillips) 2012). All this points to the importance of the work’s genesis, as though the photo-machine itself enables and reveals human creation. This suggests that automatism, in a certain way, supports agency, or even renders it artistic.

However, one further clarification is needed: how should we understand contingency or chance in this context? For example, for Lopes (2012, p. 858), we should distinguish chance as

⁶ See, for example, Pouillaude (2020), p. 171-172.

⁷ See, for example, Snyder & Allen (1975), Burgin (1982), Flusser (1986), Mitchell (1992), Maynard (1997), etc.

(objective) randomness and (subjective) happenstance. In the first sense, chance is understood as a physical phenomenon, such as that which science measures through probability. In the second sense, chance is the product of limited human knowledge. Yet, in both cases, chance may be unpredictable but remains within the domain of material nature: either as objective randomness or as apparent contingency arising from our inability to track all changes. As such, it is not itself conceived as a source of agency. Others, on the contrary, following the modern continental philosophical tradition, see chance or contingency, as opposed to necessity and determinism or to intended action, as a condition of freedom, creativity and agency. Consequently, these different philosophical traditions and ontological frameworks lead to different understandings of chance or contingency as a dimension of automatism.

In addition, many have invoked Aristotle's *automaton* as accident (something contingent), but few have noticed, as Maynard (2012, p. 731) did, its inherent ambiguity, namely, that automatism (self-action) simultaneously denotes both chance and mechanical regularity (the opposite of chance). I argue that this layered ambiguity within the *automaton* – which, as *self*-action, is also in a way autonomous – is more significant than a simple dichotomy between (human) agency and automatism (as chance). I also argue that this tension should be articulated through the Kantian conceptualisation of contingency as the spontaneity of nature and as something that enables its *non*-intentional agency that can be read as creative and as a model for artistic agency.

3. The Non-Human and Agential Machines

As we have seen, one way to aesthetically account for this somewhat paradoxical tension within automatism was to recognise that the mechanical nature of the medium is, in reality, the very condition through which the contingency of the world can intervene in photography. Classic street photography would likely hold little interest if its subject were not street life itself – often surprising and always contingent. In other words, both theorists and photographers came to understand early on that the mechanical character of the medium need not be an obstacle to creation; rather, the world, in some sense, creates itself through photography. But we may ask whether it is possible to go even further. I argue that a certain limitation of this argument lies in the fact that technology is still understood here solely in mechanical and deterministic terms, as is typically the case within our tradition.

However, certain philosophies of technology, particularly those inspired by the philosophy of becoming, as well as some posthumanist approaches, offer tools to deconstruct our conventional understanding of technology. They also allow us to question both our substantialist approach to photography and our anthropocentric preference for the image, thereby opening up the possibility of a new philosophical framework for the aesthetics of photography. In one sense, this approach remains indebted to realist and ontological theories of photography and their emphasis on the non-human element, albeit emerging from a very different theoretical background. Since the beginning of the 21st century, the social sciences and humanities have undergone a broader decentring of the human subject, in light of which some ontological perspectives on photography – with their early insistence on what lies beyond human control – may now appear almost avant-garde. For that reason, rather than shifting our focus towards human agency, I propose a more radical engagement with automatism, one that seeks to uncover the agency of machines themselves.

Up to this point, we have treated automatism and mechanism as synonymous. However, the key to understanding the position developed here is recognising that not everything within what Simondon calls “technical objects” is deterministic or mechanical. In his now well-known book *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, Simondon argues that technical objects also possess a genesis; their development is, in a certain sense, akin to that of living beings. A technical object is not simply a specific machine, but rather a trajectory of evolutionary development, “that of which there is genesis” (Simondon 2017 [1958], p. 26). This does not mean, of course, that technology emerges entirely autonomously, or that it is equivalent to living beings, let alone to humans. Rather, it allows us to understand that machines are not neutral, deterministic instruments that passively obey our commands or designs without resistance, but are instead products of an evolutionary process marked by “convergence and self-adaptation” (Simondon 2017, p. 26). Even if we adopt a more restricted understanding of genesis as an actual functioning of the technical individual, Simondon maintains that every machine adapts, through a margin of indeterminacy, to its environment, within the associated milieu generated through the process of “concretisation” of the technical object.⁸ All of this suggests that we can speak of a certain autonomy, and even agency, beyond human intention, on the part of automatism itself, and that technology is not pure instrumentality.

⁸ For a more detailed analysis of Simondon’s philosophy in the context of photography, see Simic (2027).

Still, some theorists have argued that although photographic automatism appears non-intentional, it is ultimately intentional in human terms, since behind every technology lies a human intention to design it for a specific use. They argue that this opposes, for instance, natural processes which are independent but are not typically described as “automatic” (Costello & Phillips, 2009). While it is undeniable that technology is largely invented by humans for defined purposes, technology cannot be reduced to those purposes, since many of the material and natural processes through which it operates occur without human intention. In this sense, Geimer reminds us of Heidegger’s well-known insight: when a tool breaks down, it becomes conspicuous (Heidegger 1993 [1927], p. 73; Geimer 2018, p. 72), in other words, its transparent functionality is called into question, revealing the machine’s material resistance. This can be illustrated by Kertész’s photograph analysed at the beginning of Geimer’s book, *Négatif sur verre brisé*, so named because the glass-plate negative was broken, thereby undermining the transparency of photographic representation through the techno-materiality of the medium itself and, paradoxically, adding to its aesthetic value. Geimer also notes that in the context of photography, the terms invention and discovery are often interchangeable. This is a consequence of the fact that many aspects of photographic technology stem from natural processes discovered largely by chance and prior to technology itself, as, for example, the photosensitivity of silver salts observed by Schulze in 1727 (Geimer 2018, p. 17-42). Moreover, the effects of strong sunlight on fabric or surfaces can also be considered photographic, even though they are not technological and are entirely non-intentional (Phillips 2009, p. 339). Yet, despite these examples showing us its non-intentional character, photography has long been institutionally defined, as Geimer points out, as the “intended image” – an anthropocentric view already formalised in a definition from 1903 (Davanne and Bucquet 1903, p. 9; Geimer 2018, p. 22) and seemingly continuing in the latest approaches to photography.

By contrast, Zylinska, a media and photography theorist who is also critical of realist approaches, nevertheless finds it important to focus more (not less) on the non-human and the techno-material dimension of photography. She concludes that “it is precisely in its nonhuman aspect that photography’s creative, or world-making, side can be identified” (2017, p. 9). But what does “creative” mean in this context? Zylinska is influenced by recent posthumanist philosophy, as well as by the philosophy of becoming. In both cases, the focus lies in conceiving reality, the medium and the image as spaces of transformation and ongoing processes. Although Zylinska does not explicitly reference Simondon, his philosophy of technology, and indeed, his

entire ontology of relation, is highly relevant here. His concept of individuation functions as a principle of reality that can be read as the ongoing genesis of being: not essence, but the becoming of things. Here, the techno-material embeddedness of the photographic medium, the partial independence and indeterminacy of the photographic process, and the agency of the non-human contribute to the aesthetic value of photography.

This is possible because, while the aesthetic tradition has long accepted the highly subjective and internalised nature of what we call aesthetic judgement, the philosophy of becoming has extended the aesthetic domain beyond mere subjectivity, aesthetic experience, and its provisional universality. Within this framework, the aesthetic is not simply a matter of subjective reception or of the “beautiful” but is rather a synonym for the ontological process of becoming. This is likely why Simondon sought to move beyond the contemplative aesthetic paradigm, arguing that every technical object could possess its own aesthetic epiphany once integrated into the material and/or human world (Simondon 2017). In other words, the aesthetic character of technical objects should be sought in their functioning, not (only) in their human use, or, in the case of photography, (only) in its images. Simondon further expanded this perspective in his (unfinished) work on technoaesthetics, the principal aim of which was to develop an aesthetics of technology, not merely about it (Simondon 1982). This is possible because no concretised technical object is entirely predetermined; put differently, every machine contains a contingent aspect, which in fact supports its functioning, makes it in a sense agential and (at least partly) creative and aesthetic.

Following this, technology reveals itself as part of the natural world, indeed, as part of life itself. This is important, for if we adhere to the Kantian distinction between nature as determinism, governed by necessity, and nature as life and spontaneity, governed by contingency, then within this paradigm technology aligns more closely with the latter than the former. Adding to this the fact that Kant’s aesthetics is also grounded in the paradigm of contingency, I would argue that this opens the way to account for “technical beauty” as analogous to natural beauty, even if doing so requires us to move beyond Kant’s own framework. In her book *Before Tomorrow: Epigenesis and Rationality*, Malabou suggests that, for Kant, life resists determination and self-organises without the transcendental (Malabou 2014). I argue that, on the aesthetic level, this spontaneity and independence of life is precisely what is perceived as natural beauty. If technical objects possess a comparable form of self-organising independence, what prevents us from recognising their functioning and their products – as with those of nature – as beautiful?

Moreover, a new generation of theorists and philosophers of technology has taken this idea even further by asserting that contingency is equally characteristic of computation (Fazi 2018), of recursivity (Hui 2019), and of the very plasticity of artificial intelligence through machine learning (Malabou 2017). While classical philosophy of technology concentrated on the material dimension of machines, these thinkers argue that software too, through incomputability, error, or its quasi-organic forms of organisation – in short, through its own contingency – is also in a state of becoming, and that there is a form of “life” even at the most abstract levels of machinic processes. Although I cannot explore the full scope of their arguments here,⁹ this insight is nonetheless crucial: it enables us to challenge, and indeed render obsolete, the notion of photographic technology as merely mechanically deterministic and fundamentally divorced from aesthetic or creative dimensions, at all levels. Consequently, it urges a rethinking of the aesthetics of photography, and invites us to recognise, as Hui (2019, p. 263) has suggested more broadly for all technology, that it still remains “all too human”.

4. Conclusion

Thus, rather than viewing photographic automatism as antithetical to agency and creation, we can now recognise that automatism, through its own contingency, ensures a kind of relative autonomy and (non-intentional) agency. Beyond the conventional frameworks, where automatism, as deterministic, simply brings the chance of the material world into photography, or where psychological automatism (as the unconscious) serves as a paradigm for understanding technological automatism as creative, we can now propose a third possibility: the spontaneity inherent to the camera's own automatism (self-action), its self-organisation. What, nevertheless, unites these three interpretations is the underlying hypothesis that automatism may, in each case, enable creation. The last one, pointing to a kind of technological autonomy, or its lifelike behaviour, demonstrates that this is made possible by the contingent nature of technological automatism itself. It is important to repeat that contingency here is not simply the opposite of regularity or order, but rather a kind of surplus or emergent spontaneity of the (technological) system, which continually adjusts to itself. Finally, if, as in Kantian-inspired aesthetics, the spontaneity of technology mirrors that of nature, then technology may paradoxically fulfil the

⁹ For a more detailed analysis of this aspect of my research, see Simic (2025).

very ideal of genius: that which creates in the image of nature itself. In photography, this means that we can dispense with human, intentional, artistic agency and still defend its creative potential.

This logic could be illustrated by two photographic projects in which artists deliberately employ highly automatised procedures or images to maximise spontaneity. In *The Camera is God*, Trent Parke photographed people waiting at a red light every day at the same hour and location. While this could have been just conventional street photography, Parke introduced a crucial twist: he used a shutter release firing continuously at high speed, mimicking surveillance cameras. Through this setup, the camera effectively became a god-like creator by virtue of its own automatism. Mishka Henner, in a parallel but distinct approach, used solely Google Street View images in his project *No Man's Land* – images neither taken by the artist himself nor intentionally framed, but rather produced through a highly automatised process, with cameras capturing scenes automatically. In both projects, automatism does not merely serve as a transducer for human agency, let alone as its obstruction; rather, automatism itself becomes (lifelike) agency, forming the core of the artistic project.

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The Notion of the Maximum in Kant's Aesthetic Ideas

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ABSTRACT. Despite the rich scholarship on Kant's theory of aesthetic ideas, the full thrust of the Kantian notion has not yet been fully revealed. I argue that aesthetic ideas are defined as counterparts of rational ideas, because they share a formally analogous constitution, defined by the notion of the maximum. Starting from Kant's statements that explicitly link imagination to the maximum, I propose two senses in which productive imagination attains to a maximum in the creation of an aesthetic idea. The first is the symbolic or analogical demonstration of a maximum in intuition through the generation of a counter-image of a rational idea. The second is found in the maximal extension that an aesthetic idea bears as an unbounded field of representations. The notion of the maximum fully justifies the status of aesthetic ideas as counterparts of rational ideas, and restricts what can be presented through an aesthetic idea. Therefore, an amendment of the inclusive interpretation of aesthetic ideas is warranted.

1. Introduction

Despite the immensely rich scholarship on Kant's theory of aesthetic ideas, the full thrust of the Kantian notion has not yet been fully explored. In explaining the relation between aesthetic and rational ideas, existing accounts refer to two aspects explicitly mentioned by Kant in §49 of the Critique of the Power of Judgment. First, their inverse nature in the intuition-concept dipole: just as ideas of reasons are concepts that do not have a corresponding intuition (indemonstrable), aesthetic ideas are intuitions that cannot be captured by any determinate concept (inexponible). Second, the necessary role of the former in making the latter sensible: it

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is through aesthetic ideas that rational ideas can acquire objective reality and can be exhibited in intuition. However, as long as a justification for both of the above aspects is not given, the relation between the two kinds of ideas lacks full elucidation. Why is an aesthetic idea the counterpart of an idea of reason? Why (and not how) does an aesthetic idea make a rational idea sensible? What legitimizes the relation between them?

In what follows, I will attempt to specify the grounding condition of the relation in the notion of the maximum. I claim it is that very notion which eventually justifies the position that each is the counterpart of the other. The cue that leads to the above thesis is constituted by two statements given by Kant in §49: in the creation of an aesthetic idea, productive imagination is said to “emulate the precedent of reason in attaining to a maximum” (CPJ 5:314), and to transform nature “in accordance with principles that lie higher in reason” (CPJ 5:314).² The question of how the maximum features in aesthetic ideas has not been investigated, with the above crucial statements explicitly linking productive imagination to the maximum being minimally (if not at all) discussed in the literature.

I propose two senses in which productive imagination attains to a maximum when creating aesthetic ideas. The first draws on Kant’s account of symbolic presentation, where intuition and concept operate as relata of an analogy. In the symbolic presentation of a rational idea, the analogy rests on the notion of the maximum, with imagination fostering in intuition an analogical counter-image of the maximum connoted by the rational idea. The second sense emerges when attending to the extension an aesthetic idea grants to the idea of reason it presents. According to Kant’s account in §49, an aesthetic idea is an incalculable field of representations that aesthetically enlarges the presented concept. An aesthetic idea constitutes, therefore, the maximal extension of a concept, mirroring thus the maximal conceptual intention of a rational idea.

Finally, the proposed reading invites a reconsideration of the inclusive interpretation of aesthetic ideas, which is popular within Kant scholarship. Since the link between an aesthetic

² All quotations from Kant’s original works follow the English translations in *The Cambridge Edition* series, unless otherwise noted. Pagination and volume number of the *Akademie* edition is cited, with the exception of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where A and B editions pagination is used. Abbreviations: CPJ for the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (2000), CPR for the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1998), Pr for the *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics* (2002), Refl for the *Reflections on Anthropology* from Kant’s *Nachlass* (vol.15-16 of the *Akademie Ausgabe*), and Met-L1/Pölitz for the transcript from the *Lectures on Metaphysics* (vol.28 of the *Akademie Ausgabe*).

idea and its semantic content rests on the notion of the maximum, any candidate for presentation through an aesthetic idea has to bear an idea-like formal structure. I call this the condition of adequation. That is paradigmatically satisfied by a rational idea, but it can also be satisfied by other representations if transformed accordingly. I argue that the inclusive interpretation, as it stands, is not attentive to this condition and needs to be amended.

2. Symbolizing the Maximum

The first sense in which productive imagination attains to a maximum in the creation of an aesthetic idea comes to the fore by virtue of the symbolic or analogical way of relating intuitions to concepts, which Kant develops in §59. There, the power of judgment is claimed to be able to present or exhibit [*darstellen*] a concept in intuition through a symbol – an object that indirectly presents according to “mere analogy” (CPJ 5:352). In an analogy, the power of judgment applies the mere rule of reflection on an object to an entirely different object, and, when this happens, there is a “transportation of the reflection” (CPJ 5:352) from the first to the second.³ According to the above definition, a despotic state ruled by a single absolute will is symbolized by a mere machine, like a handmill. Whereas there is no similarity between a despotic state and a handmill, there is one in the rule for reflecting on both (CPJ 5:352): the causal nexus of the contents of a handmill in operation is identical to the causal nexus imposed on the citizens of a despotic state by the single absolute will. While the mechanical structure of a tool and the political organization of a state are wholly dissimilar domains, the patterns of relation (the causal determination) witnessed within each are perfectly similar. Analogy can thus be said to be an isomorphism between two different entities belonging to different domains, as long as a totally similar pattern of relation between elements comprising each domain holds.

In §49, Kant uses the term ‘aesthetic attribute’ (CPJ 5:315) to denote precisely an intuition that symbolically or aesthetically presents a concept, while in his various anthropological lectures and notes one finds the very apt term ‘counter-image’ [*Gegenbild*] for any sign in general that stands in for another, or represents something else.⁴ An image, therefore, that exhibits a concept

³ In similar fashion, Kant claims in the *Prolegomena* that analogy does not signify an imperfect similarity between two things, but rather “a perfect similarity between two relations in wholly dissimilar things” (Pr 4:357-8).

⁴ The term *Gegenbild* can be found in his early Reflections (Ref1 15:123-4), and lectures on Metaphysics (Met-L1/Pölit 28:237), as part of explaining the faculty of characterization [*Bezeichnung*], or *facultas signatrix*.

through an analogy in the rule of reflection could then be interchangeably called a symbol, a counter-image, and an aesthetic attribute of that concept.

Now, Kant claims in §59 that ideas of reason, like God, can only be presented indirectly in intuition through symbols, since a logical or direct presentation is impossible (CPJ 5:351-3). However, ideas of reason are defined in the *Critique of Pure Reason* not merely as concepts lacking a corresponding intuition, but as concepts with a specific logical structure or form. They are formed in the attempt of reason to syllogistically comprehend the whole series (the absolute totality) of conditions subordinated to each other for a given condition, and thus capture the unconditioned (CPR A321-32/B378-89). Because of such logical form, any direct exhibition in intuition is impossible. In Kant's words, ideas are "concepts of a *maximum*," for which "nothing congruent can ever be given *in concreto*" (CPR A327/B384). Thus, the rational idea of the world is defined as the absolute whole or the unconditioned of appearances – the infinite or maximal totality of appearances – and, as such, it can never be brought into an image. Despite the different content that can be stipulated for a rational idea, one can always assume that the content connotes some kind of maximum, because it must bear the logical form of a comprehended unconditioned. For instance, the Platonic republic rests on the rational idea of the "*greatest* human freedom," and the "idea of this *maximum*" (CPR A316/B373) is employed as an archetype in judging human legislative constitutions.

Therefore, if an intuition is to symbolically present an idea of reason, if an intuition is to become a counter-image or an aesthetic attribute of an idea of reason, it has to analogically bear the form of the unconditioned or the maximum in intuition. That is the necessary trigger in order for the power of judgment to transport its reflection to a wholly dissimilar domain, and to eventually deem the former as a symbolic presentation of the latter. Such an analogical relation between an intuition and an idea of reason based on the maximum is prefigured before §49. For instance, in Kant's account of the mathematical sublime, the formal constitution of a maximum in intuition – in the magnitude of certain objects – evokes the bare idea of the maximum within the faculty of reason as the logical form of an idea of reason (CPJ 5:250). The evocation is precisely the transportation of reflection Kant talks about in §59, prompted by the analogical relation between an intuitable magnitude that is absolutely great, beyond comparison (potentially infinite number of units to be apprehended), and the bare logical form

of the conceptually unconditioned (a conceptual whole made up by an infinite number of grounding conditions).⁵

In the relevant sections in §49, the examples of images sensibilizing ideas of reason bear the same rationale: Jupiter's eagle with the lightning in its claws is an aesthetic attribute of the mighty king of heaven, giving symbolic manifestation to the rational idea of the sublimity of creation; Juno's peacock, likewise, is an attribute of the splendid queen of heaven symbolizing the idea of the majesty of creation (CPJ 5:315-6). Each image constitutes an aesthetic attribute, or a counter-image, of the corresponding rational idea, precisely because it manages to present a form of some maximum that analogically relates to the maximum connoted by said idea. The eagle, for example, as the most powerful (of the greatest strength) being in the kingdom of birds, analogically evokes the ideal of a being of maximal power or might in general – found in the very idea of God and his utmost sublimity; while the greatest finery (in the context of animals) of the peacock analogically evokes the ideal of a being of utmost magnificence.⁶

One can see why the second aspect in the relation between rational and aesthetic ideas – namely the ability of the latter to sensibilize the former – is grounded in the notion of the maximum: since a rational idea connotes by definition some kind of maximum, and since the presentation of rational idea in intuition is conducted by the power of judgment on analogical grounds, then the intuition in question has to also be formed according to a maximum. Thus, it becomes the analogical counter-image, aesthetic attribute, or symbol, of the rational idea.⁷

3. The Maximal Extension of a Concept

However, the content of an aesthetic idea is not restricted to a singular symbolic image, to the original intuition given in sense perception.⁸ According to Kant's definition of an aesthetic idea,

⁵ The symbolic presentation of the maximum in intuition also features in Kant's treatment of the Ideal of Beauty in the often-neglected §17, which I will omit here due to length limitations.

⁶ Similar qualifications can be given for the other examples of rational ideas in §49, such as the rational idea of cosmopolitan disposition, or the ones Kant mentions in passing – “the kingdom of the blessed, the kingdom of hell, eternity, creation” (CPJ 5:314) – since each one denotes some kind of maximum (greatest virtue, greatest blessing, maximum suffering, infinite time, etc.).

⁷ See Makkreel (1990, 122-8) for similar view of the aesthetic idea as analogical counter-image of the rational idea, without reference to the role of the maximum though.

⁸ The point has been frequently made. See Pillow (2001, 200) Chignell (2007, 423-4) and Geiger (2021, 189-90) for instance.

the free activity of productive imagination brings about a “multitude of related representations [*verwandten Vorstellungen*]” (CPJ 5:315), or a “manifold of partial representations [*Teilvorstellungen*]” (CPJ 5:316), or “supplementary representations [*Nebenvorstellungen*]” (CPJ 5:315) in inner intuition, which in turn occasion a host of indescribable and ineffable thoughts. The above formulations indicate that the aforementioned representations are part of the content of an aesthetic idea.⁹ Thus, in the above example, the aesthetic idea presenting the rational idea of the sublimity of creation is not merely the image of the eagle with the lightning in its claws, but that image coupled with all the related supplementary representations that the productive imagination brings about on the occasion. The related representations Kant alludes to range from emotions to empirical images, and are brought about in the mind of the beholder, as long as they are unified by the theme in question.¹⁰ Hence, an image of an eagle soaring higher than all birds and of the night sky during a powerful thunderstorm may be the first such related representations with which the beholder’s imagination accompanies the initial intuition of Jupiter’s statue featuring the eagle and the lightning. However, countless other empirical images (including personal memories) can also be evoked, as long as they are instances of an utmost power or might, together with their respective feelings of awe resulting from an overwhelming dominion (even derived from personal experiences of the beholder). The freedom of productive imagination amounts to the absence of restrictions – apart from the thematic – as to the kind of intentional content generated or re-created in association with the initial representation.

Let me now return to the starting question. If an aesthetic idea constitutes such a multitude of related representations, what legitimizes its status as a counterpart of a rational idea? I believe the key to the answer lies in Kant’s characterization of the field of representations of an aesthetic idea as “immeasurable [*unabsehlich*]” (CPJ 5:315), and of the aesthetic enlargement the presented concept undergoes through them as “unbounded [*unbegrenzte*]” (CPJ 5:315). Put differently, an aesthetic idea constitutes a field, whose limit (*Grenze* in the stem of *unbegrenzte*) one is not able to discern or see, made up of elements one is not able to foresee or calculate (*absehen*

⁹ I can only briefly note there are highly exclusive accounts of the contents of an aesthetic idea – see typically Guyer (1997, 358-9), who argues that the partial representations created by imagination are not part of the aesthetic idea proper – as well as overly inclusive – see typically Berger (2024, 8-9), who sees even the rational idea itself as part of the aesthetic idea. I use a not overly thick, but not entirely thin either, definition of an aesthetic idea: it does not include concepts (even though it occasions them), but strictly lower-level representations, like empirical images and emotions; the characterization of an aesthetic idea as a counterpart of a rational idea can, in my opinion, stand only under this definition.

¹⁰ See Pillow (2001, 199-203) and Berger (2024, 8-15) on the role of the beholder in completing the contents of an aesthetic idea.

in the stem of *unabsehlich*). Both formulations converge to the point that the constituent elements of the field cannot be enumerated or run through, as they are indeterminable, and in principle unlimited; thus, an aesthetic idea, as a totality of representations, does not have a defined limit, and is, thus, in principle, inexhaustible.

Kant does not give an explicit justification for the above thesis, but an explanation can be inferred from what has already been said about the supplementary representations. As stated above, the supplementary representations are unified by the theme in question – thus, by the rational idea that the original representation of the artwork strives to express in intuition. That is the reason Kant calls them ‘related’ [*verwandten*] representations. Hence, they themselves are part of the process of exhibiting the rational idea in question. In the guiding example, the empirical images of an eagle soaring higher than all other birds, and of the night sky during a powerful thunderstorm, as well as the feelings of awe in the sight of an overwhelming dominion, are related precisely because they serve the same purpose of aesthetically enlarging (of offering sensible manifestations to) the principal idea of an utmost power or might.

Nevertheless, such a process of generating related representations does not have a defined endpoint, and the field has the propensity to expand boundlessly. There is no fixed number of representations that completes the task of aesthetically enlarging the rational idea in question: more (and different, depending on the beholder) such representations can always be added, only on the condition that they are thematically related and that they sensibelize the concept in question. Even more than that, the task is never completed, no matter the number of representations generated. The last point is inherent in the nature of a rational idea: its cognition (even in a symbolic manner) can never conclude, but is rather an asymptotic process of approximation.¹¹ Even the most productive and inventive imagination cannot claim the ability to exhaust the field of representations aesthetically manifesting a rational idea. Thus, the field is, in principle, inexhaustible. Therefore, the beholder is able to sense the partial and incomplete nature of their introspective experience of the field; its very inexhaustibility and boundlessness are implicated. Yet, at the same time, the beholder has become acquainted with the very field that sensibilizes the idea in question; the field has opened up for them.

¹¹ Halper (2020, 859) makes a similar point on the asymptotic access to the supersensible given by aesthetic ideas.

Defining an aesthetic idea thus yields the second, and crucial, sense in which the notion of the maximum features in it: an aesthetic idea is a field comprising, in principle, an infinite (an absolutely maximal) number of constituents. That aspect in the nature of an aesthetic idea holds the answer to why the latter is the counterpart of an idea of reason. Kant highlights their inverse nature in the definition of ideas of reason as indemonstrable concepts (concepts that cannot be demonstrated in intuition), and of aesthetic ideas as inexponible intuitions (intuitions that cannot be expounded to concepts) (CPJ 5:342-3). One can reformulate the definitions in the language of logic, where the intention of a concept is called its logical content – in terms of conceptual marks – while the objects it applies to constitute its extension. Rational ideas can, then, be defined as concepts of infinite or maximal intention, but of no logical extension (thus indemonstrable). Aesthetic ideas, on the other hand, are intuitions of an unbounded (maximal) extension that cannot, nevertheless, logically become the extension of any determinate concept (thus inexponible). Hence, each kind of idea inversely mirrors the other in the intuition-concept dipole. Commentators have paid attention only to one side of that mirroring: the fact that the absence of logical extension (absence of corresponding intuition) of a rational idea is mirrored in the absence of conceptual intention (absence of corresponding concept) of an aesthetic idea.¹² However, the other side is equally important: a rational idea's maximal intention is mirrored in the maximal extension (of a potential concept) of an aesthetic idea.

Their inverse symmetry prompts their connection in the case of an aesthetic or non-logical presentation. An aesthetic idea offers aesthetic extension to a concept that has no logical extension, while a rational idea offers intention to an intuition that has no logical correspondence to any conceptual intention. That connection occurs because each one provides the other with what is lacking. But it also occurs because each one connotes a maximum in the pole it possesses. The inverse of a concept of maximal intention and no extension is no other than a concept of maximal extension and no intention (which is no concept at all, but an intuition). By virtue of such complete mirroring, an aesthetic idea is legitimized and named the “counterpart [*Gegenstück*]” (CPJ 5:314) of the rational idea.¹³

¹² Lüthe (1984), despite being one of the first Kant commentators who talked about the “structural parallelism [*Strukturparallelität*] in the form” (70-1) of the two kinds of ideas, saw only the one side of the parallelism.

¹³ Interestingly, the entry *Gegenstück* in Grimm's dictionary reads: “two figures of one size, which are placed as if they were looking at each other” (Grimm 1984, Bd. 5, Sp. 2270), and proceeds to cite Kant's very passage that defines the aesthetic idea thus as an example of the term.

4. Amending the Inclusive Interpretation

In scholarship on Kant's aesthetic ideas, the inclusive interpretation, proposed by Matherne (2013), has become very influential. According to it, there are aesthetic ideas that present rational (and moral) ideas, as well as the so-called experience-oriented aesthetic ideas that present empirical concepts, or affects and emotions, associated with our ordinary experience of the world and deepen our understanding of it (Matherne 2013, 29-30).¹⁴ The scope of what can be presented through an experience-oriented aesthetic idea is declared to be substantially wide: almost anything exemplified in experience, apart from that which arouses loathing, qualifies for such a presentation (Matherne 2013, 30; 33).

In line with the argument presented so far in this paper, I object to the wide scope assigned to the so-called experience-oriented aesthetic ideas. An aesthetic idea, by definition, does not merely constitute a certain way of presentation that can be applied to any representation whatsoever. An aesthetic idea presents, first and foremost, only the kind of representation which admits – which is *adequate* (not in a logical sense) – to that type of presentation; the presentation through an inexhaustible (maximal in number) field of related representations, and through an intuition analogically manifesting a maximum. As the preceding sections illustrated, the paradigmatically suitable – or prototypically adequate – representation for that kind of presentation is the rational idea due to its symmetrical and complementary nature as the counterpart of the aesthetic idea. I call this the condition of suitability or adequation and claim it must always be met by a representation in order to qualify for a potential presentation through an aesthetic idea.

The inclusive interpretation is correct, though, to argue that not only rational ideas can be presented through aesthetic ideas. Kant's explicit inclusion of empirical concepts in §49 attests to the fact. A careful reading, nevertheless, shows that the aforementioned condition of adequation not only remains intact, but is the very reason the specific empirical concepts Kant mentions become suitable. Kant notes that there exist some empirical concepts, like “death, envy, and all sorts of vices, as well as love, fame” which can very well be rendered sensible

¹⁴ For the opposite claim that aesthetic ideas must always either present, or be eventually linked to, rational or moral ideas, see typical examples in Guyer (1978, 63), Allison (2001, 256-9), Chignell (2007), Rogerson (2008, 26-9), Reiter and Geiger (2018).

through aesthetic ideas, but in such a case they are made sensible “beyond the limits of experience, with a *completeness* that goes beyond anything of which there is an example in nature” (CPJ 5:314).¹⁵ Now, if Kant’s sentence is translated into the above language of concept-logic, we can say that a concept that has no example in nature is a concept without a logical extension. But a concept without a logical extension can only be a concept connoting a maximum – the only concept that cannot have an extension. That means that the empirical concepts referred to in the passage are not merely the empirical concepts of envy or love, for instance, in their usual employment, for which empirical examples can be found. Rather, the concepts of maximal, utmost, or absolute envy or love, which cannot have empirical examples, are implied. In other words, the nominal empirical concepts have been transformed. While they do not nominally belong to the faculty of reason, they have acquired a formal structure that resembles the formal structure of a rational idea. They have turned into quasi-ideas.¹⁶ That is why they can be presented with a completeness that defies empirical examples – meaning the maximal degree of completeness, which only productive imagination (and not nature) can attain in a representation. The argument here repeats the already-discussed justification of the link between aesthetic and rational ideas, between intuition and concept, based on formal mirroring.

In the expansive transformation of empirical concepts into quasi-ideas, the condition of adequation is met. An empirical concept that cannot be thus expanded cannot likewise be presented through an aesthetic idea.¹⁷ I contest that the condition applies even to representations like emotions or affects;¹⁸ what is important is not the kind of representation, but whether it can meet the standards paradigmatically set by reason through transformation. The inclusive interpretation is not attentive to the condition of adequation, as evidenced by the position that almost any representation, apart from that which arouses loathing, is suitable for presentation through an experience-oriented aesthetic idea. Hence, it needs to be amended.

¹⁵ Matherne (2013, 29) quotes this passage, but, as many commentators do, without drawing an interpretative clue from it, or explaining what kind of condition it stipulates. Similarly, she mentions in passing (Matherne 2013, 29 fn32) that she understands all aesthetic ideas to involve a rational element, without explaining what this element is, and how it features in the experience-oriented aesthetic ideas. My proposed amendment to the inclusive interpretation can be seen as an attempt to rectify that omission.

¹⁶ Commentators have not developed this point. Several – e.g., Halper (2020, 859), Berger (2024, 8) – note that these empirical concepts are somehow linked to rational ideas, but they do not explain how they are linked and why this link exists.

¹⁷ Although I cannot pursue this here, it seems that certain abstract concepts are particularly susceptible to that kind of transformation. See Küplen (2019) for an informative discussion.

¹⁸ There is no space to develop the point in detail, but I read Kant’s wording regarding the theme of the dominant affect in music (CPJ 5:329) as implying its expansion into an idea-like representation.

Nevertheless, I would like to conclude by declaring that my criticism does not suggest a dismissal of the inclusive interpretation, which deserves a lot of merit for highlighting the cognitive role of art in deepening our understanding of the often-overlooked empirical concepts and emotions of ordinary experience (Matherne 2013, 33-8).¹⁹ A question for further investigation, based on the argument defended here, is the question of why certain empirical concepts or emotions require the said transformation or expansion into idea-like representations in order to be fully or completely understood or cognized. That, however, shall be a topic for future consideration.

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Multiple Indexicality: a New Perspective in Photography

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ABSTRACT Just as smoke is an index of the presence of fire in nature, so too a photographic picture traditionally involves its subject in a causal and counterfactual relationship; it records its subject and, normally, by observing the photograph, one can say that that subject exists and looks more or less as it appears in the photograph. Photography has been historically considered an indexical art form. This feature is related to one of the steps involved in its mode of reproduction, which mechanically captures and records configurations of objects in space. Due to this indexical component, photography seems to struggle more to generate metaphors than intentional art forms like painting and drawing. By analysing a peculiar kind of photograph — the so-called multiple exposure photographs, which are generated by a combination of multiple shots — I will provide some reasons to support the idea that photographs belonging to this specific category are suitable candidates for being considered as photographic metaphors.

1. Introduction

This paper's goal is to reflect on how the indexical and counterfactual component involved in one of the steps of the photographic process does not preclude the possibility of creating photographic metaphors. To do so, I will focus on the pictures generated by the superposition of multiple photographs, the so-called multiple-exposure photographs.

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² This work forms part of the ERC-StG Project 101040535 ("PEA – The Philosophy of Experiential Artifacts").

The paper opens with a brief history of indexicality in the art (1). In the second, section I explain what multiple-exposure is and why it is worth analysing this technique (2). In the third section, I draw on Carroll's idea of visual metaphor (3). Finally, in section four, I explain why I believe multiple-exposure photographs are good candidates for being considered to be photographic metaphors and what distinguishes them from linguistic and visual metaphors (4).

2. Indexicality in the Arts

Since the last decades of the 20th century, and even more strikingly during the 21st, a transition has taken place that has seen works of art increasingly move away from the role of mere icons to that of indexes: objects whose aim is to witness, to signify something, and stand as a concrete signal of it (Krauss, 1977). Just as smoke, in nature, is an index of the presence of fire, similarly, a photographic image has a causal and counterfactual component within its process of production; it reports and records its subject, it shows a realistic representation of it, and, by observing the photograph, one can say that that subject exists and looks more or less as it appears in the photograph. From the 1970s onwards, the purpose of a work of art — be it a photograph, a performance, a sound recording — is not so much to be a copy of something, but rather, increasingly, to be the testimony of a fact, to be the bearer of an intrinsic meaning, to exist to say something to those who get in contact with it. Among the arts, photography has traditionally been regarded as the paradigmatic indexical medium. Such a characterisation, however, captures only one aspect of the photographic process and risks reducing photography to its causal relation with the world. This paper instead adopts a conception more closely aligned with the New Theory of Photography, according to which photographs are the outcome of a multi-stage process and cannot be reduced to their indexical dimension alone. Within this broader framework, the analysis focuses specifically on the indexical component involved in one stage of the photographic process — the *photographic event* (Atencia-Linares, 2012; Lopes, 2016). The aim is to show that this indexical component, far from being incompatible with metaphorical meaning, plays a crucial role in making photographic metaphors possible.

3. What Multiple-Exposure is

The photographic technique I refer to, multiple-exposure photography, can be achieved in two ways. First, it can be achieved through the analogue photographic process of multiple-exposure, by which the camera automatically records two or more images, thanks to the multiple exposure of the sensitive medium (film) to light, at the moment of shooting (the shutter is opened several times, but the film is not advanced). In this case, we speak of superimposition: the creation of the image is counterfactually dependent on the two (or more) states of affairs we grasp together when developing and then printing the photo. Second, it can be achieved through the process (more usually digital) of post-production of the photographs, which are, in this case, manually juxtaposed at a time after the shot. In this case, it appears more accurate to speak of juxtaposition, as the two (or more) elements that constitute the picture are juxtaposed only after its creation, although they initially existed independently of one another.

A third and rather peculiar case can also be included within the broad category of multiple-exposure photographs (hereafter MEPs). This case may be regarded as a hybrid version of the two techniques discussed above. I am referring to the images collected in the photographic book *Scarti* (Broomberg and Chanarin, 2013). These photographs are distinctive because they result from the accidental superimposition of previously printed images, produced during the printing process itself. More specifically, *Scarti* is composed of waste sheets — the paper used to clean the printing rollers between successive print runs, in Italian “*scarti* di produzione” — from an earlier publication by the same artists. The resulting pictures can plausibly be classified as multiple-exposure photographs, even though the process differs from more conventional techniques. Moreover, it is not immediately clear whether authorship should be attributed exclusively to the artist duo or, at least in part, to the printing process that physically generated the superimpositions.

This example is particularly relevant because it recalls the hybrid form of image production associated with contemporary AI systems. As Young and Terrone (2024) argue, users never exercise complete control over AI image generators. Rather, they resemble gardeners who guide the development of an autonomous process without fully determining its outcome. Similarly, the images in *Scarti* emerge from the interaction between intentional human

actions—the production of the original photographs—and the contingent operations of a non-human process, namely the printing mechanism that randomly superimposes them. The difference, of course, is that Scarti remains entirely within the domain of analogue photography, whereas AI image generation is fundamentally digital. In both cases, however, the creative process is distributed across human and non-human forms of agency, making the identification of the proper maker of the final picture far from straightforward.

Returning to the present argument, multiple-exposure photographs (MEPs) allow viewers to perceive scenes that challenge familiar ways of interpreting photographic images. Within the framework of the New Theory of Photography, this challenge does not arise because MEPs cease to be photographs, but because they incorporate more than one photographic event into a single image. Whereas an ordinary photograph typically derives from a single photographic event, multiple-exposure photographs are grounded in two or more such events. As a consequence, the image embodies multiple indexical relations, each corresponding to a distinct state of affairs. This plurality of indexical relations may initially make it difficult to arrive at a coherent interpretation of the depicted scene. Yet viewers are often able to do so. I suggest that this interpretative achievement resembles the process involved in linguistic metaphor, where apparently incompatible concepts are brought together and reconceptualised within a unified framework. As will become clear, the distinction between the three kinds of MEPs introduced above — superimposition, juxtaposition, and hybrid forms — is merely taxonomic. Regardless of the procedure through which they are produced, images belonging to all three categories can function as photographic metaphors.

Conversely, just as not every juxtaposition of words gives rise to a linguistic metaphor, and not every combination of objects gives rise to a visual metaphor, not every multiple-exposure photograph gives rise to a photographic metaphor. This issue will be further elaborated in the next section.

4. A Forced Coexistence

In general, when viewing a photograph, we tend to form beliefs about the scene it depicts. This tendency is deeply rooted in our ordinary engagement with photographic images and reflects what has often been described as the epistemic privilege traditionally associated with

photography: “We tend to concede certain epistemic authority to photographs” (Atencia-Linares, 2012). This point remains significant even in the case of multiple-exposure photographs. Although such images may initially appear unusual or even puzzling, viewers are nevertheless inclined to seek a coherent interpretation of their content. I suggest that one fruitful way of accounting for this interpretative effort is to understand these images as photographic metaphors. To develop this proposal, I begin by considering Noël Carroll's theory of visual metaphor (1994) and explore how it can be adapted to the case of multiple-exposure photography.

Let us consider Pablo Picasso's *Head of a Bull* (1942). This artwork can be recognised as a visual metaphor because it brings together two elements — the saddle and the handlebars of a bicycle — which, in ordinary circumstances, belong to separate domains and would not be perceived as parts of the same object (Carroll's principles of *homospatality* and *non-compossibility*). In other words, the two elements originally possessed a different meaning — or, more precisely, given that we are dealing with artifacts, a different function: they were designed to enable the riding and steering of a bicycle. Through the process of reconceptualisation enabled by *homospatality* and *non-compossibility* principles, however, they acquire a new and unprecedented meaning. Within the metaphorical configuration, the saddle and the handlebars become respectively the head and the horns of a bull. Using the terminology commonly employed in metaphor theory, the combination of the saddle and the handlebars constitutes the *vehicle* through which the *topic* of the visual metaphor — the bull — is presented.

A question that may spontaneously arise is the following: can every association of elements that operates according to the principles of *homospatality* and *non-compossibility* be considered a visual metaphor? This possibility seems problematic. It is precisely for this reason that Gal's view (2019), according to which any unusual pairing of objects generates a visual metaphor, appears unconvincing. Just as not every juxtaposition of words results in a linguistic metaphor, and not every combination of visual elements results in a visual metaphor, not every instance of *homospatality* and *non-compossibility* gives rise to metaphorical meaning. In my view, only those cases in which elements that originally possessed a specific function or meaning acquire a new and unprecedented one through metaphorical reconceptualisation can properly be considered visual metaphors. The mere fact that one object takes the form of another is not sufficient to initiate a metaphorical process. Gal's example of Claes Oldenburg's *Giant Soft Drum Set* illustrates this point. This work is not convincing as a visual metaphor because the

drum-shaped pillow was conceived and produced as such from the outset. It was, so to speak, created in this form. The two elements did not possess independent meanings or functions that were subsequently transformed or enriched through their juxtaposition. Rather, this is simply an object (a pillow) designed in the shape of another object (a drum). Since no reconceptualisation is involved, no metaphorical process takes place. Returning to Picasso's *Head of a Bull*, it is precisely the unusual coexistence of visual elements that previously belonged to different functional and semantic domains that enables a new conception of the artwork and constitutes the basis of its metaphorical character. Analogously, multiple-exposure photographs bring together two (or more) states of affairs that would not ordinarily coexist within the same spatial and temporal configuration, by embedding them within the same surface. It is from this unusual coexistence — only in the cases in which an interpretative reconceptualisation invites it — that photographic metaphors may emerge.



Picture 1

5. Multiple-Exposure Photographs as Photographic Metaphors

What is a photographic metaphor, and why can multiple-exposure photographs be considered suitable candidates for this category? I propose that photographic metaphors should be understood as a specific subset of visual metaphors: a subset constituted of pictures that originate from a photographic process that involves an indexical component in the photographic event. This does not imply that photographs are reducible to their indexical dimension; rather, it highlights the fact that the causal relation established during the photographic event constitutes one of the components through which photographic pictures are produced. Within this framework, multiple-exposure photographs represent a particularly interesting case because they bring together two or more photographic events (and, therefore, two or more indexical components) in coexistence within a single picture. As a result, interpreting the picture requires an active process of reconceptualisation: the viewer must find a way to make sense of the coexistence of multiple photographed scenes within a single visual space — a situation analogous to that of the viewer of Picasso's *Head of a Bull*.

Borrowing the principles developed in Carroll's theory of visual metaphor (homospatiality and non-compossibility), and applying them to MEPs, I argue that these principles provide a useful and neutral framework for interpreting such uncanny images. The concepts of homospatiality and non-compossibility allow us to account for how apparently incompatible states of affairs can coexist within the same pictorial space and become the basis for a metaphorical reconceptualisation. At the same time, photographic metaphors appear to represent a distinctive way of generating metaphorical meaning. Unlike linguistic metaphors, which rely on the conceptual interaction between terms, and visual metaphors, which generally depend on the perceptual features of their elements, photographic metaphors involve the coexistence of multiple photographed realities within a single image. Their metaphorical potential therefore emerges from the interaction between the interpretative mechanisms typical of visual metaphor and the specific conditions introduced by the photographic process.

Analysing Picture 1, we encounter the picture of a patient in a psychiatric hospital juxtaposed with a picture of a room filled with weapons and ammunition. By simultaneously endorsing a unified interpretation of the scene, in accordance with Carroll's visual metaphor principles of

homospatiality and non-compossibility, we can associate the elements of mental illness, evoked by one of the two layers, with those of war, evoked by the other layer. Thereby the viewer will see the picture through a new lens: “mental illness is like a war”. The reconceptualisation made possible by the visual juxtaposition of the two pictures have created an enrichment of its meaning. The viewer is aware of the juxtaposition, but can also entertain the illusory scenery made possible by it. As Christian Metz notes, talking about superimposition in cinema, the spectator (of a superimposition) is not a victim of deception to the point of ignoring its existence, but is not aware of it to the point that it loses its effectiveness. (Metz, 1968). In our case, for those who are able to engage with the illusion created by the coexistence of two distinct scenarios within the same spatiotemporal framework, the image acquires a new, metaphorical significance: mental illness can be experienced as a form of warfare.

What appears to be particularly unconventional and innovative in photographic metaphors is that, unlike linguistic metaphors, which require access to the concepts associated with the two coexisting elements, and unlike visual metaphors, which rely primarily on the perceptual and aesthetic features of the elements involved, photographic metaphors seem to require the simultaneous activation of both perceptual and conceptual processes in order for their metaphorical meaning to emerge. In visual metaphors, for instance, the metaphor of the bull arises from the formal resemblance between the bicycle saddle and handlebars and the head and horns of a bull; if these elements had exhibited different visual properties, the metaphor would not have been perceived. By contrast, the metaphor “Mental illness is like a war”, generated through the coexistence of different elements within the same spatio-temporal frame, can only be fully interpreted if the observer both (a) perceives the visual composition and its salient features, and (b) possesses the conceptual knowledge associated with both ‘mental illness’ and ‘war’.

Second, photographic metaphors display a peculiar form of medium-specificity. A comparison with another medium in which superimposition is widely employed—cinema—highlights this distinctive feature. In film, superimposition typically guides the viewer towards a relatively determinate interpretation of a scene. For instance, it may signal that a character is recalling a different temporal dimension, as in *The Ballad of a Soldier* (Grigori Chukhrai, 1959), where the protagonist remembers his beloved, or that the scene belongs to a dreamlike or oneiric dimension. In such cases, the superimposition primarily performs a narrative or representational function rather than a metaphorical one. By contrast, within the domain of

photographic multiple exposure, superimposition appears to facilitate the construction of metaphors more readily, and its interpretative function is not governed by equally stable conventions. Rather than directing the viewer towards a single predetermined reading, multiple exposure in photography opens up a range of possible interpretations, thereby creating favourable conditions for metaphorical meaning to emerge.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, multiple-exposure photographs appear to be particularly strong candidates for photographic metaphors. This proposal is original insofar as photographic metaphors seem to differ from both linguistic and visual metaphors. Moreover, the product of multiple exposure in photography appears to elicit a mode of interpretation that differs from that associated with the same technique in other media, such as cinema.

A possible objection may concern *painterly* metaphors, namely whether replacing the two superimposed photographs with two painted images would produce the same metaphorical effect. What seems to make photographic metaphors possible is precisely the indexical and counterfactual component (the photographic event) which can be found through the photographic process, and which is absent from painting. The metaphorical meaning of photographic pictures appears to emerge more readily for two reasons: epistemically, because of the epistemic privilege traditionally associated with the photographic medium, and phenomenologically, because of the lifelike appearance of photographs that triggers the immediate formation of beliefs about its content. These features provide further grounds for considering photographic metaphors as a distinct type of metaphor.

Finally, photographic metaphors demonstrate that the juxtaposition or superimposition of multiple photographs can give rise to an open-ended range of metaphorical meanings, relatively unconstrained by fixed rules or conventions. As argued throughout this paper, the indexical and counterfactual components involved in the photographic process, from which the images composing the different layers derive, do not undermine the emergence of metaphorical meaning. On the contrary, they constitute the very conditions that make this form of metaphor distinctive.

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Return of the Political and the Aesthetics of the Anthropocene

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ABSTRACT The central aim of this paper is to trace how the conditions and purpose of artistic commitment have shifted from the modernist paradigm, through the neoliberal cultural logic, and the current pressures that are associated with the Anthropocene. Beginning from Adorno's account of autonomy—where art's political force lies not in direct engagement but in the negative dialectic internal to form—the paper argues that the avant-garde's legacy of structural critique became progressively absorbed by what is here called neoliberal aesthetics. The recent prominence of the Anthropocene signals further reorientation. Its double demand to render sensible scales of ecological devastation while clarifying differentiated agency, as well as the inevitability of its political embeddedness, resets the dialectic of commitment. Rather than reviving avant-garde manifestos or abandoning autonomy, contemporary practices negotiate infrastructures, milieus, and temporalities that bind aesthetics to material and geopolitical realities. Works that operate within this horizon reconfigure commitment as formally mediated and materially situated, resisting both didacticism and complete subsumption under neoliberal logic. The paper proposes that this constitutes a qualified “return of the political”: not a return to direct address or saturation of its autonomy, but a renewed capacity to stage frictions where responsibility, scale, and agency become thinkable again.

Commitment after Neoliberalism

Among the various ways to understand the political predicament that art brought about in the modernist framework of the 20th century, one approach came from Adorno. He famously posed art's role as opposing social functions, and, at the same time, being socially mediated. Hence, his insight in his *Aesthetic Theory* that "art criticizes society by merely existing." (Adorno 2002, 225-226) At the time of writing, Adorno conceived of art as part of a continuous post-war social democratic order – he never thought it would come to an end, let alone turn into something completely different. Therefore, his notion of political commitment for art is precisely in avoiding direct political gestures because art's ability to criticize society lies in "crystallizing in itself as something unique to itself," (Ibid.) meaning that it should not succumb to the pressures of direct engagement in social and political life.

The avant-garde movements of the time posed their political commitment quite directly, and almost by definition, they carried the modernist promise to change society for the better. The turn towards postmodern cultural logic, as well as the neoliberal socio-economic paradigm, has shifted the notion of politics to a certain post-historical mode of thought. This paper develops a claim that aesthetics, by and large, is returning to a more direct relationship with politics. However, this should not be understood as an attempt to revive the old claims and manifestos of the avant-garde movements, or to oppose claims towards the notion of artistic autonomy with any direct political commitment. The aim here is to articulate a shift in conditions under which works are made, circulated, and received, as well as describe how those conditions bear on the rather classical dialectic between autonomy and commitment. Thus, I start from a fairly simple and stipulative hypothesis: that late modernity and the avant-garde cultivated a strong emphasis on political commitment, but did so – especially in the Adornian register – by making commitment legible negatively, within their form, rather than by instructive address. Neoliberalism did not completely cut this dialectic off but rather reconfigured the ground on which it could operate. In the last decade, when the concept

of the Anthropocene has saturated discourse and logistics, the terms of that dialectic are being reset.

Before moving on, I should like to make a couple of clarifications. Firstly, by “the return of the political,” I do not directly reference Hal Foster’s “return of the real,” though there is a certain elective affinity between these two notions as they both note a realignment that makes it possible to see continuities with, rather than simple departures from, the avant-garde (Cf. Foster 1996). Secondly, the argument is not a general one about “art”, but one about a tendency and configuration that becomes visible and is highlighted here at the level of form, institution, and address. So, the Anthropocene discourse’s entrance (or rather symbiosis) with the art field is part of a wider realignment, and not its sole case (if we can even put it as a cause at all). Despite that, I see it as certainly in a privileged relationship; Anthropocene and the discourse around it combine an epistemic rupture – which indeed rescales our perception and causality – with a material pressure, which pushes us to reform logistics, our footprint, and risks.

The methodology here is a combination of genealogical elements with a dialectical approach. I provide a brief outline of how autonomy and commitment functioned within the modernist paradigm, how neoliberalism displaced or absorbed these terms within the managerial frontier of culture, and how Anthropocene pressures necessitate a reimagining of autonomy as a condition of critique, rather than as a form of detachment. Autonomy, as understood in the Adornian sense, i.e., when art is understood as autonomous and socially mediated at the same time, remains important. It does not follow a purist logic but rather gives a form of resistance against instrumentality, while the notion of commitment must be reconfigured in relation to infrastructures, temporalities, and agencies that exceed the coordinates of postwar industrial status quo.

I will follow in four stages. In the next section, I will focus on the modernist dialectic, emphasizing Adorno’s position, which also started this paper – that art’s political strength appears where works refuse direct political engagement and that they must stage their contradictions within themselves. Another section will trace how neoliberalism affects artistic practice. Essentially, the traits that become the symbols of the new cultural logic, i.e., privatization, market metaphors, art fairs, freeports,

relational managerial forms, assetization, and metrics – all of which pertain to metabolizing dissent as content and hence sabotaging and blunting the avant-garde's committed ethos. This is followed by articulating the Anthropocene turn and why it matters, even if the term is promiscuous, essentially reorienting aesthetic problems toward scale, responsibility, milieu, and temporality in which all the practices exemplify this shift. The last section contains a proposition of how to see the return of political commitment as a formally mediated, materially situated practice. By locating the stakes of such a return amid resurgent reactionary appropriations of transgression, and an art world still saturated by neoliberal infrastructures.

Modernist Autonomy and Negativity

The notion we have already invoked as a modernist framing – which also orients this paper – is that artistic autonomy emerges in the eighteenth century and coincides with the emergence of capitalism and romanticist aesthetics. It names neither isolation nor indifference. Rather, it claims that the work and its organizing laws are immanent to form rather than dictated by morality, religion, or any other externality. Modernism brings this claim to the extreme – the work is formally self-sufficient, but at the same time always socially mediated. Its resistance to society, its refusal of immediate function, and its way of being social constitute a refusal that exposes contradictions at work in what Adorno calls an administered world (Adorno 2002, 31).

This dynamic is at the core of Adorno's position and articulation of the 'function' of art in general. For him, the difficulty (the enigma) posed by an artwork is not a posture – it is the signature of a situation in which direct address risks becoming what he deems culinary, meaning it is capable of being consumed and is directly didactic (Adorno 2018). Commitment can only succeed negatively, i.e., when it works against social antagonism within its own logic, within the tensions and dissonance that are brought forward by its form. Adorno delineates this as a dynamic between semblance [Schein] and truth-content [Warheitsgehalt]. Most importantly, art's autonomy is historical, and not metaphysical. Art is always a product of social contradictions whose critical potential lies in the inner tensions of form – hence Adorno's saying that "art is what it has become, its concept refers to what it does not contain" (Adorno 2002, 3).

Let me follow with a corollary. The avant-garde in its twentieth-century iterations—be it Dada, Futurism, or later Fluxus—appears as a “double.” On the one hand, these movements insist on autonomy as a refusal of instrumental reason; on the other, they formulate politics, engage with technology, and, most importantly, aim for social transformation. Art has to be abolished or fused with life, but both aims have been shown to have historical limitations. What I focus on is the legacy of this structural critique: a commitment to forms that resist easy consumption, that demand reflection, and that make the conditions of appearance – the frame, the institutions, the media – explicit. In Adorno’s account, there is no desire to abolish the artwork, only a sharpened insistence that the artwork as such is where critique can be mounted without succumbing to immediacy. This is why, famously for Adorno, music plays a privileged role. It does not represent, and thus, musical modernism can articulate historical tensions through structure. The formal difficulty inherent in musical works resists commodification not by refusing circulation, but by interrupting sense where the world demands transparency. Importantly, this does not bring us to formalism as *l’art pour l’art*, but rather a way to hold open a space for the non-identical to be inferred, even if negatively.

So, this version of modernist dialectic sees autonomy as a negative form of resistance. Commitment then becomes possible only as a formal contradiction. I argue that it does not belong to a closed past but rather to a paradigm of postwar industrial social order, where media ecology is relatively limited, and where art and its function of autonomy can be posed and defined against a certain consensus. What I aim at here, though, is not to confirm or reject this as either right or wrong, but to claim that it helps us to see how it travels when the world shifts from industrial to postindustrial, from modern to postmodern, and, concurrently, where platforms take over broadcasting while national welfare has been privatized. I insist that the insights coming from Adorno specifically travel farther than the paradigm that produced them, and at the same time find their limits in adaptive capital and the breadth of how it appropriates any form.

From Dialectical Modernism to Neoliberal Aesthetics

Many of the avant-garde's ambitions persist throughout a shift in conditions, as it has not been a clean break from the previous paradigm. David Harvey theorizes neoliberalism as firstly a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being is in direct relation and is achieved by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills. The institutional framework that secures these procedures is characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade (Harvey 2005, 2). According to Harvey, "Neoliberalism has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world." (Ibid., 3) Neoliberal doctrines, such as privatization, which replaced Keynesian welfare and led to market metaphors permeating social life, have had palpable effects in the art world. Fairs and biennials synchronize calendars; Art Basel becomes an emblem of circulation, whereas freeports and vaults warehouse artworks that function as stored value, are insulated from public view, and are aligned with the logics of finance. This resonates with Peter Bürger's critique of the avant-garde's failed institutional sublation (Cf. Bürger 1984). The role of postmodernism in this transition is best read symptomatically, because one can be critical of any periodization and still recognize that, by the time platform capitalism coheres, novelty has been operationalized into a cycle of constant updating, whereas critique becomes just another form of content.

Appropriation has been characterized by the theoretical explications of what is postmodern. Fredric Jameson defines pastiche as one of the most important features of postmodernism as a new cultural logic of capitalism, which renders postmodern culture as a kind of generalized stylistic cannibalization (Jameson 2008, 16-22). Lyotard stressed the incredulity toward metanarratives and the delegitimization of grand narratives (Lyotard 2002, xxiv-xxv).

In Adorno's framework, which corresponds to high modernism, a lot of this is still present. The critical distance has not vanished; it has been folded into the commodity, i.e., the market learns to anticipate and price in dissent. The notion of autonomy, even if conditional, provides distance. Now it turns into a rare interruption, and a situation where artistic refusal of instrumental logic is either valorized as a brand asset or dismissed for its lack of engagement. Both of these outcomes are actually coordinated by managerial cultural style, which is embodied in *Relational Aesthetics*, as articulated and

valorized by Nicolas Bourriaud, who explicitly frames the artist as a facilitator or “coordinator”. In fact, when Bourriaud says that “the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real,” (Bourriaud 2009, 17-19, 31-36, 39) he does so by extending the task already prescribed to architecture by Lyotard (Lyotard, *opt. cit.*, 13).

What I term “neoliberal aesthetics” refers to a set of forms that have become legible over several decades. They are managerial in that they mirror service-economy models of facilitation and networking. What is embodied in Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics is actually an emblematic case of how neoliberal aesthetics may look, especially from a theoretical-curatorial perspective. Temporary cafes, workshops, and micro-encounters are formats whose horizon could be said to be sociality itself. Artworks can be said to become much less an object than a structure of pop-up governance. That being said, this is not to dismiss art as being without content or care. Rather, this is the way this format of aesthetics comes about under neoliberal conditions and turns them into aesthetic predicates. Furthermore, as Lucy Lippard noted, the “dematerialization of the art object” in conceptual art was conceived as a critique of the commodity form (Lippard 2007, pp. vii-xiii). Yet, as Buchloh later observed, its administrative and linguistic procedures made it susceptible to new institutional and economic framings (Buchloh 1990, 143). In the contemporary landscape, forms such as NFTs push this logic further, transforming dematerialized artworks into explicitly financialized assets. Stallabrass argues that conceptual and post-conceptual practices, despite anti-market intentions, were steadily reabsorbed into the market through certificates, editions, and documentation (Stallabrass 2004). It returns as an asset creation, most recently this is embodied in NFTs, which actually prompted art to be destroyed to create more value (Steyerl 2025, 103). Hence, authorship becomes an even more obscene saturation of intellectual property, with data as its second substrate. If we return to the notion of autonomy, while it has always been entangled with social mediation and the commodity character of an artwork, its embeddedness now becomes even more acute—any example where a complete capture is exceeded is rare.

This is where the next turn takes shape. The financial crash of 2008 exposed the neoliberal social order as fragile and, at the same time, cynical. I argue that, despite much of the politicality that emerged afterwards, with growing consciousness of the

imminent climate problems, these issues indeed have entered the public perception and therefore have also turned towards awareness of extraction and precarity. Even though the neoliberal agenda has not been rejected, the pressure under the name of “Anthropocene” has become more apparent.

The Aesthetics of the Anthropocene: Scale, Responsibility, Milieu

The use of the term “Anthropocene” here is pragmatic. As is well known, it was coined to mark human-induced geological change and has become a household term and, at the same time, a very contested one. It does risk universalizing agency and also masking colonial, racial, and economic differences in responsibility for harm. Other terms, such as Capitalocene, Plantationocene, and others, correct for that. There are two main reasons for me to maintain this term. The first one is that the term “Anthropocene,” since its inception by Paul J. Crutzen, Eugene F. Stoermer and Will Steffen (Crutzen et al. 2000), has become a household concept, recognized across disciplines. While I embrace the effort of scholars like TJ Demos and Donna Haraway to emphasize different agents that are responsible for climate collapse through introducing different terms, I think the discussions that have happened have already brought these concerns into awareness. In contrast, more discussion derails many of the conversations that target the core of the matter. Secondly, since the methodological basis here relies on Frankfurt School critical theory, and particularly on the thought of Adorno, I tend to accept the terms as historically transient, and in this sense, “Anthropocene” can very well capture the dialectic that is in play when it is invoked. I argue that it forces a double task on aesthetics: to render sensible scales of devastation that outstrip individual perception and to restore differentiated agency, resisting narratives of a flat “we”.

If neoliberal aesthetics cultivated relational encounters mirroring market logic, then what I call Anthropocene aesthetics reorients encounter toward ecological structures: toward infrastructures and milieus in which art and politics are co-implicated. My own work here intersects with thinking of milieu in the sense of Gilbert Simondon (Cf. Simondon 2020), but the emphasis in this paper is narrower. I focus on how the

Anthropocene brings the political aesthetic back into view by binding form to environments in ways that go beyond mere description.

I would like to emphasise several pressures that come into play when art engages the Anthropocene. Obviously, the first one is scale, because the Anthropocene pertains to disciplines and data from atmospheric chemistry to glacial dynamics, and hence the processes at stake are trans-scalar. Works that take this seriously do not simply illustrate catastrophe; they develop formal means such as montage, indexical layering, temporal braiding that allow the spectator to inhabit the scales that are otherwise inaccessible.

Another pressure is responsibility, which already arose in the debates about the term “Anthropocene” itself. If climate discourse dissolves into a generalized guilt, the aesthetic task is to make visible the broader distribution of violence, including the colonial, postcolonial, racial, and economic. Thinking about practices such as that of Forensic Architecture, verification becomes another pressure. Their work breaches the boundary between art and research, in fact sharing the infrastructure of presentation but being much less about aesthetics. It resists being a commodity as it is not part of the art market. It carries a remainder – claims that demand an address from institutions beyond art (Weizman 2017). Their work exhibits procedures and resists the traditional notion of autonomy, but it is not propaganda either. It may be called evidentiary aesthetics, in which spectatorship is also public reasoning. Other artists such as Hito Steyerl, Trevor Paglen, and Ursula Biemann, to name a few, have worked along adjacent vectors, examining surveillance, data centers, and geopolitical issues. They all share in addressing the Anthropocene’s particular challenge: to scale up perception without washing out accountability.

Commitment Reconfigured: Situated Autonomy, Formal Difficulty, Accountable Worlds

The discourse around commitment under the modernist paradigm is largely negative. Art’s autonomy is understood as a possibility of immanent opposition to the dominant social order and, at the same time, to instrumental reason. We saw neoliberalism

displacing that paradox by folding dissent into content and logistics. I propose that we witness a certain return of the political, where works reexamine infrastructures beyond art while acknowledging art's imbrication in them. I would like to distinguish several traits that become visible in such a shift under the horizon that is brought about by the Anthropocene.

The political dimension of the Anthropocene is not simply a theme – it delineates an epistemic rupture which renders invisible what neoliberal discourses of efficiency and marginal utility usually try to conceal. They are externalities that do not abandon autonomy but rather react to it negatively. This also marks the return of formal difficulty, which blocks instant legibility. But the difficulty brought about by artistic form is no longer a matter of stretching material to its limits in the modernist manner, as we find in the case of the modernist novel or total serialism in music. It is a matter of acknowledging the mutual entanglement while resisting being labeled as a mere signal in the feed.

It is also important to stress that this terrain is contested by reactionary forces. Ultranationalist and alt-right movements have learned to appropriate transgression. We know that the initial historical avant-gardes have had reactionary politics, but later historical iterations have been almost unequivocally progressive. Currently, meme détournements, flash mobs, and other tactics that recall those employed by the historical avant-garde are redeployed to reactionary ends. What this shows is that shock value itself has no inherent political valence, and politics must aim to specify its ends and addressees, thereby demanding that art likewise be way more specific.

A third factor is the redistribution of subjectivity. The liberal subject, which has been essential for both modernist autonomy and neoliberal entrepreneurialism, is dislodged by the emergence of posthumanist discourse. This redistribution pertains to the new emphasis on multi-agency and distributed cognition, which yields practices that are specifically situated – archives built with communities, claims assembled across legal and para-legal registers, investigations that are iterative rather than singular. Autonomy, thus, can be understood as a way to keep open a site where reasons can be given, tested, and contested without immediate subsumption to policy or metrics. It follows that the notion of commitment can be defined less as a program than as a

practice of assembling forms that compose frictions between scales, times, and agencies in such a way that responsibility can be articulated differentially. The artwork's political dimension is not guaranteed by its thematic emphasis; it is secured by decisions about index, montage, procedure, and address. In other words, under conditions where everything can be packaged as content, the durability of commitment depends on withstanding this capture long enough to reshape what counts as appearance and what passes as proof.

Thus, the contemporary art scene in the late 1990s and 2000s has worked with the "current state of affairs" under a banner of critical institutional practice; now it faces narrowed spaces of resistance. Neoliberal infrastructures display their deep entanglement with carbon extraction and social precarity. The repertoire of immanent manoeuvres of turning systems against themselves has grown thinner. Against this, some practices aim at material accountability, which does not promise a solution but a criterion for judging when a work composes a world in which judgment is possible. Furthermore, the value of art in this alignment is not instrumental but constitutive. Art stages frictions where competing temporalities and agencies collide, holds open spaces where perception can still matter, and finds points at which worlds can be recomposed – even if slightly – through critique. This mustn't be nostalgia for the avant-garde, nor ironic play with neoliberal debris. It insists that autonomy, negatively construed, remains a condition for commitment, and that commitment, having undergone a reconfiguration, must be materially situated and exposed to the infrastructure that binds aesthetics to the most pressing political actualities. It must bind aesthetics to carbon, capital, and colonial residues while refusing the short circuits of moralizing immediacy.

The claim that politics is returning to aesthetics risks being misunderstood if one takes it as a direct switch from autonomy to activism. On the one hand, art has always had political content in the same way, for Adorno, it is critical by "merely existing." (Adorno 2002, 225-226). The argument made here is narrower and, I hope, more exact. Neoliberal aesthetics did not eliminate the dialectic of autonomy and commitment; it transformed it by turning critique into a metric. The Anthropocene did not save art from its situation; rather, it pressured the field by forcing questions of scale, responsibility, milieu, and time to the surface. Within that pressure, a more direct notion

of commitment returns not as a program of propaganda, but as formally mediated, materially situated practice.

To speak of a return is to risk circularity. This return is a reconfiguration and a reopening of the space where autonomy can do its critical work by refusing immediate function, while refusing as well to retreat to modernist purity. What high modernism has shown us, and what should be retained, is that complexity is important, and it prevents capture by ready-made sense. Neoliberalism has shown that format and structure are not neutral, and the Anthropocene has given an understanding that art should stick to one of its few remaining strengths – the capacity to compose appearances adequate to the world’s wounded complexity. Hence, the return of the political does not mean that art proclaims solutions. It cultivates sites of judgment, where responsibility can be seen and argued over. The notion of its (negative) autonomy can still yield the slow work of commitment.

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On the Art of Aesthetic Ideas: The Kantian Background of Jacques Rancière's Aesthetic Ontology of Art

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ABSTRACT. This paper revisits Kant's notion of aesthetic ideas in order to reconstruct the Kantian background of Jacques Rancière's aesthetic ontology of art. In Kant, aesthetic ideas are imaginative representations that exceed conceptual determination while still orienting thought; they mark an expansion of the mind where reason, imagination, and sensibility enter into free but indeterminate play. I argue that Rancière reactivates this indeterminacy through the concepts of pensiveness, the aesthetic unconscious, and dissensus to describe artworks as sites where unthought thought, surplus meaning, and undecidable relations between art and non-art are staged. By tracing Rancière's reflections on method, the distribution of the sensible, sensus communis, and the anti-systematic "art of systems", the paper proposes that his so-called ontology of art is best understood as a fictional or operational ontology: a poetics of how art constructs its own modes of being by configuring spaces, times, and forms of appearance. In this sense, the ontology of the dissensual is not a metaphysics of art, but a way of mapping aesthetic practices that reconfigure what can be seen, said, and felt. The Kantian heritage thus appears less as a doctrinal source and more as a methodological and conceptual matrix for thinking the aesthetic as a transformation of the sensible world.

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1. Introduction: From Kant's Aesthetic Ideas to Rancière's Ontology of Art

This paper investigates the Kantian origins of several of Jacques Rancière's conceptual contributions to aesthetics. I will focus on Kant's conceptualization of aesthetic ideas, whose strangeness Michel Chaouli aptly emphasizes: "One of the strangest conceptions in Immanuel Kant's writing about aesthetics ... is that of aesthetic ideas" (Chaouli, 2017, p. 173). Rancière offers an incisive reading of Kant insightfully and understands the art of aesthetic ideas as a distinctive ontology of art, which recasts through concepts developed in his own work. Rancière's reading reactivates key Kantian positions while simultaneously providing a new framework for understanding aesthetics' relationship with the history of art, political theory, and contemporary artistic practices. The guiding hypothesis of this paper is that Rancière's ontology of art can be more fully understood if we foreground its Kantian premises, especially as they emerge through the notion of aesthetic ideas and their relation to genius, *sensus communis*, and the distribution of the sensible. A secondary claim is that the "ontology of the dissensual" is the ontological model most consistent with Rancière's account of art, precisely because it remains fictional, operational, and anti-foundational.

Kant uses 'ideas' to designate concepts of reason, which are distinct from concepts that can have an object in experience, namely, the concepts of the understanding. On the one hand, then, we have ideas, which refer to objects that cannot be directly experienced, such as the idea of freedom or the idea of the soul. On the other hand, we have concepts of the understanding, such as causality, necessity, and possibility, which apply to objects in experience and help us organize what we perceive. In Kant, 'ideas' are not just vague thoughts; they are concepts of reason that reach beyond the bounds of possible experience and yet still guide how we think. They function as regulative principles rather than constitutive ones. Accordingly, Kant states that an aesthetic idea is "a representation of the imagination that occasions much thinking though without it being possible for any determinate thought, i.e. concept, to be adequate to it, which consequently, no language fully attains or can make intelligible" (Kant, 2000, p. 192).

In the same paragraph (§49 of *The Critique of the Power of judgment*), Kant further characterizes an aesthetic idea as follows: "A representation of the imagination, associated with a given concept, which is combined with such a manifold of partial representations in the free use of imagination that no expression designating a determinate concept can be found for it" (Kant, 2000, p. 194). I argue that this kind of indetermination is a form of aesthetic enlargement of a given concept

or, more generally, of a given context or situation. This enlargement is not simply a matter of ornament or emotional intensification, but rather implies a surplus of sensible and imaginative content that cannot be fully captured in conceptual terms. This excess is precisely the point where Rancière's notions of pensiveness, the aesthetic unconscious, and dissensus become relevant as different articulations of Kantian indetermination.

2. Pensiveness, Aesthetic Unconscious, and Dissensus

My argument relies primarily on two crucial remarks by Rancière. The first concerns his idea of *pensiveness*, a term implying that “the act of thinking seems to be encroached upon by a certain passivity”, that is, the fact that works of art “contain unthought thought, a thought that cannot be attributed to the intention of the person who produces it and which has an effect on the person who views it without linking it to a determinate object” (Rancière, 2009a, p. 107). Pensiveness thus refers to a “zone of indetermination between thought and non-thought, activity and passivity, but also art and non-art” (Rancière, 2009a, p. 107). Rancière's conception of pensiveness draws on (a) his account of the aesthetic unconscious in relation to genius: “The genius is the active power of nature who sets his own creative power against any model or norm. The genius, we might say, becomes a norm for himself. But at the same time, he is the one who does not know what he does and is incapable of accounting for his own activity” (Rancière, 2009b, p. 24), and (b) the Kantian definition of the beautiful as “what is represented as an object of universal delight apart from any concept” (Kant, 2000, p. 96).

Rancière thus radicalizes the Kantian insight that aesthetic experience involves a free play of imagination and understanding that cannot be fully conceptually grounded. Pensiveness is the name he gives to this *operative surplus* of the artwork: the way it exceeds any intentional program or symbolic coding. In this sense, pensiveness, the aesthetic unconscious, and dissensus are not simply metaphors but conceptual operators within the aesthetic regime of art, figural entities that displace and redistribute meaning. The second remark concerns the distinction between two kinds of forms and the operational role of aesthetic ideas: “Kant had already pointed to the distance between artistic form, the form determined by the intention of art, and an aesthetic form, the form that is perceived without a concept and declines any idea of intentional purpose. Kant called those inventions of art that are capable of making this connection between two

‘forms’, which is also a leap between two regimes of sensible presentation, aesthetic ideas” (Rancière, 2009a, p. 131). In other words, aesthetic ideas are not simply ‘contents’ but operations that connect and disconnect regimes of form, intention, and non-intention, concept and non-concept, art and non-art.

What is at stake in Rancière’s appropriation of Kant is precisely this leap between regimes of the sensible, a leap that he will describe in terms of *dissensus*. The importance of aesthetic ideas in Rancière’s thought becomes even more clearer when Rancière explicitly relates them to what he calls the ontology of art. This requires us to examine how Rancière derives from Kant his notion of dissensus and its associated critical operations. In two different instances, Rancière makes explicit the close link between an ontology of art (or an ontology of the dissensual) and aesthetic ideas: “Aesthetic ideas are inventions that transform the willed and the unwilled, the known and the unknown, the fact and the non-fact. These are the inventions that give art its sensible quality, what we might call its ontology” (Rancière, 2010, p. 219). Elsewhere, he describes the ‘play of aesthetic ideas’ as an ‘ontology of the dissensual’ which is actually a ‘fictional ontology’ because “the set of relations that constitutes the work operates as if it had a different ontological texture from the sensations that make up everyday experience” (Rancière, 2009a, p. 67).

Now, I will try to elaborate further on the connections between these crucial remarks and passages in an attempt to support the idea of a Kantian background in Rancière’s aesthetic ontology of art. The question of the ontology of art in Rancière might be paradoxical given the tensions between ontology and critical theory, that is, the tension between the need for fundamental principles and the need for a critical approach to the given. Thus, it is important to highlight before continuing that Rancière’s concept of ontology is mainly methodological and it draws on several respects from Kant’s aesthetics and philosophy of art and especially the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*. In other words, one of this paper’s aspirations will be to show that Rancière’s ontology of art can be understood by discerning its Kantian premises. A subordinate thesis will be that the ontology of the dissensual is Rancière’s preferred ontological model among the various ontologies of art.

3. Method, Topology, and the Aesthetic Practice of Philosophy

Rancière's emphasis on method appears in various forms, from titles that summarize the essence of his work (*The method of Equality*, *The method of Scene*) to the self-reflexive essay *A few remarks on the method of Jacques Rancière*, wherein we are told: "this idea of what 'method' means should never be forgotten when it comes to Jacques Rancière" (Rancière, 2009c, p. 114). But what is this idea of method? At a first level, method concerns the production of a thinker's ideas, "the issues they address, the materials they select, the givens they consider significant, the phrasing of their connection, the landscape they map, their ways of inventing solutions (or aporias)". More precisely, "a method means a path: not the path that a thinker follows but the path that he/she constructs, that you have to construct to know where you are, to figure out the characteristics of the territory you are going through, the places it allows you to go, the way it obliges you to move, the markers that can help you, the obstacles that get in the way" (Rancière, 2009c, p. 114). Rancière's method of thought is evidently topological in a double sense: there is a path under construction charged with a mapping activity, and there is a systematic search for a set of points from which it would be possible to distribute what belongs to politics, art, or their respective theories. From this perspective, the presuppositions of a system, the very forms of distribution that make it possible to think a system, are very close to the idea of topology.

In his discussion with Laurent Jeanpierre and Dork Zabunyan, Rancière stresses the fact that his method begins by examining the conditions that allows us to define domains of competence such as philosophy, politics, art, science, and others. Defining these domains entails "a certain cutting of possible territories" (Rancière, 2016, p. 51). Here, the notion of the *scene* is crucial to understanding how a topological organization of points is recognized as such. Instead of beginning with a foundational topology or a primary rationality, Rancière proceeds in the opposite direction; he starts from scenes that function as laboratories for observing, defining, and verifying actions, dispositions, and the choices that produce the distributions through which performances and acts of thought become identifiable. For Rancière, space denotes, first, a material or symbolic place understood in terms of disposition, distribution, or set of relations. Secondly, space is a form of co-existence, a certain topography that emerges from the disposition and distribution of the possible.

The idea of distribution is thus closely linked to *possibility* and *difference in the sensible*. A topography of possibilities means that, against the model of the strict Platonic distributions of places within a community, different places and positions enable different sensible experiences. Distribution can be seen as a counterforce to any hierarchical regime. Rancière developed this idea in reaction to Althusser's concept of ideology and, to some extent, to Foucault's analyses of disciplinary dispositifs, especially the panoptic apparatus. While Foucault seeks to systematize territories of thought and perception by delineating their borders, Rancière attaches greater value to chance, possibility, and multiplicity. His broader project concerns "the possibilities for reconfiguring a field of possibilities" (Rancière, 2016, p. 64), a project he explicitly links to his critical stance toward Foucault: "After all, what I've constructed has been both in reference to, and in reaction to, Foucault; I wanted to say that, in any given world of experience, there are several ways of systematizing this experience precisely because that world is made up of several worlds, of several lines of temporality, of several lines of possibilities" (Rancière, 2016, p. 65).

For Rancière, philosophy is 'a chance, supplementary activity' that can be defined as "a certain dissensual practice," an activity of declassification, dehierarchization, and despecification that seeks to "think the lines according to which boundaries and passages are constructed, according to which they are conceivable and modifiable". Philosophy is a name shared across several fields, but its different meanings do not coincide; this idea of homonymy and the conflicts that it engenders over homonyms, is a conflict, according to Rancière, "between one who says white and another who says white" (Rancière, 2010, p. 226). Against this backdrop, philosophy can be seen as a topology that has to invent its own space in order to think the difference between homonyms rather than accepting a radical indetermination. In *Dissenting Words*, Rancière again approaches philosophy in spatial terms: "What we'll have to do, instead, is think of philosophy as a space in which thoughts lose their specificity, such that thought is no longer identified as the thought of an activist, a politician or worker" (Rancière, 2017, p. 319). He underscores the role of chance: "We can think of philosophy, we can cultivate a practice of it, as the space wherein discourses, words and ideas that should never have met, met" (Rancière, 2017, p. 320).

Philosophical practice must therefore proceed from an understanding of the composite structure of the world: "A world is made of interpretations, it is composed and held together by a certain structuring between the perceptible, the thinkable and the sayable, and of course, of what is possible as a consequence of these" (Rancière, 2017, p. 320). Changing the world is inseparable from "struggling over interpretation" (Rancière, 2017, p. 320). The central task is

“mapping what can be seen, thought and said”. Such mapping is indissociable from the creation of new perceptions, new affects, and new possibilities of life. “In sum, what we can imagine, what we can endeavor to produce, is a philosophical practice that can be part of this transformation of the perceptible and this remapping of the possible” (Rancière, 2017, p. 320).

4. Art , Aesthetics and Sensus Communis in Rancière

In ‘The Aesthetic Dimension: Aesthetics, Politics, Knowledge’ Rancière states from the outset that “what aesthetics refers to is not the sensible. Rather, it is a certain modality, a certain distribution of the sensible” (Rancière, 2009d, p. 3). He also acknowledges that the text “that has framed the space of aesthetics” is Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, which serves as his “guiding thread in the construction of a tentatively more comprehensive concept of aesthetics” (Rancière, 2009d, p. 1). Against this backdrop, Rancière extracts from the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* the constitutive elements of his well-known formula of the distribution of the sensible. The apprehension of a form according to Kant entails a doubling of sense; there is the sense of the given and a sense produced out of it. This also implies a certain relation between the senses that can take the form of a reconfiguration of the given. This is what Rancière calls ‘the aesthetic dimension’ or ‘dissensus’: “It is another kind of relation between sense and sense, a supplement that both reveals and neutralizes the division at the heart of the sensible” (Rancière, 2009d, p. 3).

In ‘What aesthetics can mean’ Rancière defines aesthetics as a kind of knot that ties together “a sense of art to an idea of thought and an idea of the community” (Rancière, 2000, p. 33). We can identify in this definition a kind of architectural function of the aesthetic, an approach to aesthetics as a tripartite architecture that effectuates the relations between three distinct components: a sense of art, an idea of thought, and an idea of the community. From a methodological point of view, it becomes possible to trace a path towards an ontology of art by starting from an ontology of the aesthetic. Drawing on Kant’s methodological innovations in designing the outline of his philosophy of critique, we can approach ontology here as architecture and as fiction, that is, as an *as if* construction with special attention to mapping the relations between different parts. Ontology involves not only selecting a set of necessary components but also recognizing the provisional and constructed character of that selection,

especially regarding the connections that institute relations between ‘ontological’ components. This *as if* structure acknowledges unplanned connections and latent possibilities that undermine any attempt to construct a rigid ontological structure; it points toward the work of an aesthetic unconscious as a matrix for dissensus.

In *Disagreement*, Rancière offers another concise definition of aesthetics as “partition of the perceptible as well as discourse on the perceptible”; this discourse is autonomous, meaning that there can be “an evaluation of the perceptible that is distinct from any judgment about the use to which it is put” (Rancière, 1998, p. 90). Referring to Kant’s example of the palace in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, he underscores that aesthetic satisfaction derived from a mere representation of an object is indifferent with regard to the existence of that object (Kant, 2000, p. 90). In this way, a virtual community is constituted, a *sensus communis* that presupposes a principle of universality: “By ‘*sensus communis*’ [...] must be understood the idea of a communal sense, i.e., a faculty for judging that in its reflection takes account (*a priori*) of everyone else’s way of representing in thought, in order as it were to hold its judgment up to human reason as a whole” (Kant, 2000, p. 173).

While Aristotle’s *sensus communis* refers to a physiological power coordinating the senses, Kant transforms it into a reflective principle: the imagined universality of aesthetic judgment grounded in shared sensibility and communicability. Rancière, in turn, treats this as a model for thinking an aesthetic community structured not by identity or function but by a shared mode of perceiving and judging, a community sustained by a specific distribution of the sensible. It is also useful to recall here the difference between the aesthetic and the artistic as introduced by Rancière in his discussion with Mark Foster Gage: “The artistic is about the implementation of an idea [...] Instead, the aesthetic means that you don’t exactly know what will be the effect of what you are doing” (Rancière, 2019, p. 17). The difference between the artistic and the aesthetic is a matter of possible states of things. An artistic spatialization is more concrete than an aesthetic one, just as a topography is a more concrete actualization of a topological configuration. Although Rancière does not explicitly use the term topology, his approach relies on operations that are essentially topological. These topological operations become more explicit in Rancière’s account of the figure.

5. Figural Operations and the Community as Dissensus

In this light, operations such as the twist of sensations and the dialectic of embracing and splitting can be understood as configurations of ‘different senses of sense’, of multiple sensory realities stemming from the combination of sense data. This process is part of a larger one that participates in the architecture of the aesthetic community, which Rancière organizes around three forms or levels of community. The first form corresponds to the conceptualization of the community as “a certain combination of sense data: forms, words, spaces, rhythms and so on,” which, according to Rancière, is the base for the creation of a chain of sensory realities. The words of a poet are a sensory reality that suggests another sensory reality (such as the material aspects of a landscape, scene, image, etc.) which can be perceived in turn as “a metaphor for poetic activity”. Each sensory reality is a regime of sense, a *sensorium*, that is superimposed on another sensorium. This superposition creates a conflict that defines dissensus and gives specific form to the community of sense that Rancière calls ‘dissensual figure’ (Rancière, 2008, p. 4). In “Community as dissensus” Rancière specifies that a dissensual community inscribes a common world in another (Rancière, 2017, p. 142).

In the thought of Jean-François Lyotard, the figural is designated as an intermediary space between the respective spaces of signification and subject. In *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, Deleuze presents the figural as an opposing pole to the figurative, that is, to the illustrative and narrative character of the Figure (Deleuze, 1990, p. 2). The logic of the figural implies that the Figure is a body without organs, a figure freed from the constraints of representation and organicity. Rancière, for his part, elaborates his conceptualization of the figure in a topological manner; his approach is based on a spatial framing together with an account of the properties of that space. In *Les mots et les torts* Rancière assigns two contrasting functions to the figure: the general and perhaps more widespread one according to which the figure indicates a semantic displacement rather than the invocation of a visual form; and, a second function in which figural interpretation reveals an abstract meaning in a sensible presence (Rancière, 2021, p. 86). Understood in this way, the figure presents a dissensual function in the sense that it does not reinforce the given and apparently self-evident semantic content of a sensory reality but, on the contrary, produces dissensus through semantic displacement and an interpretation that prevents consensus on the definitive meaning of a sensible reality. The figure as presented here contributes to the refinement of the sensible texture of a community of sense. Accordingly,

figuration is a process of displacement within a system of relations between similarity and dissimilarity that enriches a given sense by producing different yet figuratively equivalent senses of it.

In another instance, Rancière provides the lines for understanding the displacement itself in the notion of the figure: “In its classical sense, the figure combined two meanings: it was a sensible presence and it was an operation of displacement that put one expression in place of another. In the aesthetic regime, however, the figure is no longer simply an expression that takes the place of another” (Rancière, 2009a, p. 122). In this new status of the figure it is possible “to conjoin two regimes of expression without homogenizing them” (Rancière, 2009a, p. 122). In a crucial passage from *The Emancipated Spectator*, Rancière brings together the notion of pensiveness as both a resistance to thought and an escape line for art, with Kantian aesthetic ideas and the figure as conceptual ground for an art of aesthetic ideas. These remarks suggest a configuration of forces in which figuration emerges through the interaction of an instituting force and a force that simultaneously defigures and refigures it.

6. Fictional Ontology and the Art of Systems

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant’s well-known definition of the architectonic as “the art of systems” (Kant, 1998, p. 691) refers to the scientific character that emerges from a systematic unity. The architectonic marks the difference between a mere aggregation and a system. Rancière inherits this problematic but displaces it. He states that “the fundamental problem of method” is “determining a common ground in thinking” (Rancière, 2016, p. 34), a set of conditions and distributions that make politics, art, or philosophy thinkable in the first place. This concern with common ground is closely tied to his principle of non-hierarchy, which he sums up “in the idea of the distribution of the sensible” (Rancière, 2016, p. 29). Rather than grounding domains in the nature of things or in the history of Being, Rancière is interested in the ways in which territories are cut up and assembled, in the compositions of rationalities that make something appear as “art” or “politics”. If there is an “art of systems” in Rancière, it is therefore anti-systematic. As he puts it, systematicity, if it exists at all, is an “anti-systematic systematicity” (Rancière, 2016, p. 51). Not a will to chaos, but a search for forms of distribution

that make a system thinkable by foregrounding what precedes and conditions it. A system is always a division of territories, and there is “nothing in the nature of things that establishes the existence of an area of Being called art” (Rancière, 2016, p. 52). What there is, instead, are “systems of reasons” that allow us to link certain practices, skills, and forms of visibility to the idea of art as an activity that is an end in itself.

From this perspective, classical ontology, understood as a theory of being as such, no longer provides the relevant model. Rancière explicitly distances himself from any ambition to say what being is: “It all depends on what you mean by ontology. If you mean by ontology a theory of being as a being, or a theory of the being of being, I’ve obviously never concerned myself with that, since I know nothing about it and I have no means of knowing what being is as a being. Generally, I only get interested in things I have the means of knowing about, things I can make hypotheses about and then verify” (Rancière, 2016, p. 62). In a key passage, he characterizes his work not as a doctrine of being but as a ‘general poetics’, a general theory of “the multiple ways in which it’s possible to make the gap work, this non-concordance between multiplicities” (Rancière, 2016, p. 63). Ontology, in this sense, “is always in a way a poem” (Rancière, 2016, p. 63); not a discourse that tells the truth about difference and excess, but a way of constructing metaphors and allegories of a given distribution.

On this basis, we can speak of an ontology of art or literature, but only in a restricted, operational sense. Literature “constructs its own ontology” by inventing its modes of being, figures and temporalities. An ontology of literary or artistic being is therefore an “occasional discourse,” a way of weaving connections or building bridges between different regimes of rationalities without homogenizing them into a single system (Rancière, 2016, p. 63). In this sense, what I call Rancière’s “ontology of art” or “ontology of the dissensual” can be understood as a Kantian-inspired poetics: a fictional, operational ontology that does not claim to ground art in being, but instead maps how art’s aesthetic ideas, figures, and distributions of the sensible reconfigure what can be seen, said, and thought. It is an ontology that remains faithful to the indeterminate, expansive force that Kant identified at the heart of aesthetic judgment.

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Hume's Hogshead vs Spotify Wrapped. The "Test of Time" in the "Big Flat Now."

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ABSTRACT This paper critically examines David Hume's "Standard of Taste" from the perspective of contemporary cultural consumption. It argues that the epistemic viability of Hume's standard is undermined by the algorithmic and fragmented nature of modern media platforms. Using Rolling Stone's evolving "500 Greatest Songs of All Time" list as a standard of taste, I explore how digital platforms flatten temporal hierarchies, rendering cultural artefacts simultaneously accessible yet contextually devalued in "The Big Flat Now". With the advent of streaming culture where engagement metrics replace traditional gatekeeping and critical consensus as the dominant measure of value, I argue that Hume's standard fails to account for the technological mediation of taste. While Hume's ideal of cultivated, disinterested criticism remains a somewhat valuable aspiration, it is increasingly challenged by the immediacy and ephemerality of digital consumption. Furthermore, in privileging longevity, Hume's standard risks becoming a comforting fantasy that overlooks the aesthetic labour of the present.

1. Tasting According to the Standards of the Dead

"The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living." (Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 1852).

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David Hume's attempt to "seek a Standard of Taste" stems from a dual recognition of two premises. Taste is subjective yet there appears to be some consensus. In other words, you may not like The Beatles, but the jury is in. Hume's ingenious approach to the seemingly contradictory possibility of objective taste is to find a certain objectivity in the joint "approbation" of qualified reviewers over time. This test of time is the "joint verdict" of "true and virtuous critics."

Despite scepticism regarding aesthetic properties of objects (Hume, 1987, p. 230), Hume is not sceptical about the idea of aesthetic judgements. After all, we generally agree that in matters of art some people are better judges than others and accordingly some works are more critically recognised than others:

The same Homer, who pleased at Athens and Rome two thousand years ago, is still admired at Paris and at London. All the changes of climate, government, religion, and language, have not been able to obscure his glory. Authority or prejudice may give a temporary vogue to a bad poet or orator; but his reputation will never be durable or general. When his compositions are examined by posterity or by foreigners, the enchantment is dissipated, and his faults appear in their true colours. On the contrary, a real genius, the longer his works endure, and the more wide they are spread, the more sincere is the admiration which he meets with. (Hume, 1987, p. 233)

Hume's approach is a reflection on the nature of the standard. For him it is not elegance, coherence, pleasure, utility, or genius per se that are the mark of quality but rather durability in the judgement of qualified critics. Put otherwise, time stands for the wisdom of the informed and ideal crowd. For Hume taste is a delicate organ to be trained and it is only judges with a refined taste developed over time with significant practice that can appreciate the "universal" and moral appeal of quality art. Taste thus is a metaphor for good judgement. The appeal of a standard of taste is that you can confirm or condemn (Hume, 1987, p. 229) your individual taste according to the consensus taste of ideal critics.

Hume consequently details five criteria of the ideal critic: "Strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice [...]" (Hume, 1987, p. 241) The standard of taste is in fact a standard of the disinterested ideal critic, for "he must preserve his mind free from all prejudice, and allow nothing to enter into his consideration but the very object which is submitted to his examination." (Hume, 1987, p. 237)

In short, this amounts to a moralising practice of comparative analysis as the training for aesthetic judgement.

Hume's vivid example to illustrate this is his retelling of a story from *Don Quixote*.² In this scene:

Two of [Sancho's] kinsmen were once called to give their opinion of a hogshead, which was supposed to be excellent, being old and of a good vintage. One of them tastes it; considers it; and, after mature reflection, pronounces the wine to be good, were it not for a small taste of leather, which he perceived in it. The other, after using the same precautions, gives also his verdict in favour of the wine; but with the reserve of a taste of iron, which he could easily distinguish. You cannot imagine how much they were both ridiculed for their judgment. But who laughed in the end? On emptying the hogshead, there was found at the bottom an old key with a leathern thong tied to it. (Hume, 1987, p. 235)

Here we can see how Hume makes a distinction between mental (aesthetic judgements) and bodily taste (appeals to features in the object). In the faculty of taste, we appeal to features in the work to make a good / delicate aesthetic judgement. In other words, we appeal to the standards of wine to justify our taste and in this case the tincture of iron and leather are enough to pass negative judgement. Appealing here for Hume in this example is the fact that beyond all the bad critics, in time, we inevitably get to the end of the hogshead and the virtuous critic.

Philosophers and artists alike have been attracted to Hume's "Test of Time" argument. A virtue of Hume's emphasis on time is the liberty it affords art from immediate appraisal. One could not accuse Hume of being myopic insofar as his approach achieves the dual recognition that some art may transcend the worldview it was made under and other work that was once a breath of fresh air might rightly now be rank.

As such, Levinson (2002) appreciates the indicative power that the collective judgment of ideal critics affords. The virtue of the test is foremost as a guide and not doctrine. Or as Levinson memorably puts it: "Ideal critics, in short, are our best "truffle pigs" as regards artistic worth."

² Cervantes 1605/1615 *Don Quixote* part II, chapter 13.

(2002, p. 234) Elsewhere, Savile (1982) while acknowledging the role played by luck in the survival of works, appreciates the potential “convergence” of critical judgements over time.

Likewise, artists are perhaps understandably drawn to longevity as the measure of quality. Take for example Dermot Bolger’s vision for the reception of poetry:

[...] writing a poem is like dropping a pebble down a well, uncertain if you will hear a splash. Maybe in fifty years’ time someone will find a poem written now by a poet on a solitary walk. It won’t tell them the statistics of what hit Ireland in 2020. But maybe it will tell them what it felt like to be alive now, because poetry is news that stays news and people don’t change. (Bolger, 2020)

Similarly, the late poet Eavan Boland (2014) distinguishes what she calls the durable “vertical” audience across history from the (con)temporary “horizontal” audience enhanced by communication technology. For poetry she privileges the former over the latter. The impossible standard of more hierarchical vertical longevity, however, can be both the arrogant privilege of the survivor and the refuge of the resentful failure.

Avoiding the so-called “McNamara fallacy,” whereby the decision maker relies on the quantitative metrics at the expense of qualitative factors, Hume does not simply say that standards are about raw numbers or how long something has simply lasted but how long it has lasted in the minds of the best critics. A key virtue of Hume’s position thus is the recognition that taste is both subjective and a communal value grounded in a negotiated activity and that collective intelligence that requires a critical distance.

There have, naturally, been many criticisms of this argument. One approach is to focus on the shape of the argument, and another is to focus on the nature of critics and the resulting canon.

A longstanding philosophical debate has concerned the potential regressive circularity of Hume’s idea (see Kivy, 1967, Carroll 1984, Baceski, 2013, Windsor, 2023), i.e., great artworks are those endorsed by refined critics, refined critics are those who endorse great artworks etc. Accordingly, Costelloe (2019) argues that the standard is an impractical abstraction. For the purposes of this paper, I am not interested in this debate.

A second, more recent and powerful criticism has come from the increasing politicising of the critic and their credentials as a reaction to the ossified pale, male and stale canons of art (hooks, 1995) that privileges certain pasts at the expense of the contemporary.³ In other words, who counts as a valid critic? Phillipa K. Chong (2020) points out that works by famous authors are more likely to get reviewed and there is much opacity about key issues such as which texts get selected for review, how critics get selected, how they decide their ratings etc.⁴ There is in short, a politics to criticism itself and it is worth noting that the critical faculty of reason was not a quality that Hume extended to all.⁵ The danger of the standard is that even if new generations get to decide what is in the canon, they may be overwhelmed by the power of the canon and contrive to uncritically schlep the past into the future.

In this paper, informed, in part, by this second objection I am interested in the technological developments of testing taste over time and what this means for Hume's test. Accordingly, I propose a third type of criticism concerning the *epistemic viability* of Hume's standard in the current consumption of popular culture. In short, I argue that the test of time is undermined by the current nature of cultural consumption. I do this by focusing on the pop music charts and one list that purports to stand as a standard as Hume may have envisioned.

Any standard necessarily runs the risk of groupthink. Hence, we can legitimately question the figure of the critic and the canons of art that have developed over time as products of power and not only thoughtful consideration. In short, it is important that the dead remain silent, and their standards go unconsulted. This is even more critical in a cultural domain obsessed with its past (Reynolds, 2011) and at a time when "old music" is increasingly outselling "new music" (Gioia, 2023).

2. Will You Still Love Me In "The Big Flat Now"?

³ Gugelberger (1991), for example, drawing on thinkers like Frantz Fanon, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Paulo Freire, and Amílcar Cabral explains how the Western literary canon has systematically excluded and marginalized literature from the so-called "Third World."

⁴ Elsewhere, Weinstein (1993), for example, distinguishes between epistemic and performative experts. The same distinction can be critically applied to critics.

⁵ For details on Hume's racism see Garrett and Sebastiani (2017) and Dabhoiwala (2024).

In December 2004, *Rolling Stone* published a list “based on weighted votes from selected musicians, critics, and industry figures” of “The 500 Greatest Songs of All Time.” This is a list that the magazine would revise in 2010, 2021 and 2024. While each edition is necessarily a snapshot in time, as a collection they amount to a Humean ideal of collective assessment over time. In this way the notorious omissions of annual awards⁶ are less likely.

One of the songs to appear on all four editions so far⁷ is The Shirelles’ 1960’s version⁸ of “Will You Love Me Tomorrow” composed by Gerry Goffin (lyrics) and Carole King (music).

Tonight you're mine completely
You give your love so sweetly
Tonight the light of love is in your eyes
But will you love me tomorrow? (The Shirelles, 1960)

When “Will You Love Me Tomorrow” became the first US number one from an all-black female group it was revolutionary in portraying women in pop music as more than mere objects of male desire. The lyrics detail a girl contemplating if the one-night stand might be more than just that, and in so doing it positioned female adolescence as a period replete with romantic and sexual longing.⁹ Like Hume almost two centuries before, the song’s protagonist wonders whether the love she is enjoying now will last the test of time.

The song clearly ‘struck a chord with millions.’ However, does it matter when these millions had their chord struck? For something to have its place in history doesn’t mean it necessarily stands the test of time. It has been noted that “Because [The Shirelles] had their greatest success in that period between 1958 and 1964 which most rock historians treat as having nothing of

⁶ Famous examples include *Citizen Kane* losing to *How Green Was My Valley* at the Academy Awards in 1941 and the overlooking of Lise Meitner for a Nobel Prize in Chemistry or Physics.

⁷ 125th in 2004, 126th in 2010, 151st in 2021, 151st in 2024.

⁸ There are many versions of this apparently timeless standard, from Dusty Springfield (1964) to Kamasi Washington (2018). The songs success would even lead King and Goffin to write a self-explanatory answer song entitled “Not Now Tomorrow, But Always” recorded by Bertell Dache in 1960.

⁹ The song echoes the sentiment of “Tomorrow Night” by Coslow and Grosz (1939): “Tomorrow night, will you remember what you said to night? / Tomorrow night, will all the thrill be gone? / Tomorrow night, will it be just another memory/ Or just another song, that’s in my heart to linger on?” This earlier song would later be covered by Bob Dylan (1993). In contrast, Nick Lowe in “Only a fool breaks his own heart” (2001) offers a mature reflection, informed by painful experience, on the dangers of such longing: “There is no sense in holding on to an old love that is gone”. Crucially however, in the Shirelles version these are black and female “teenage dreams.”

interest in, they're almost ignored despite their huge influence on the musicians who followed them.” (Hickey, 1989) Who knows, with new critical attention (or viral TikTok trend), perhaps they may climb the charts once again.

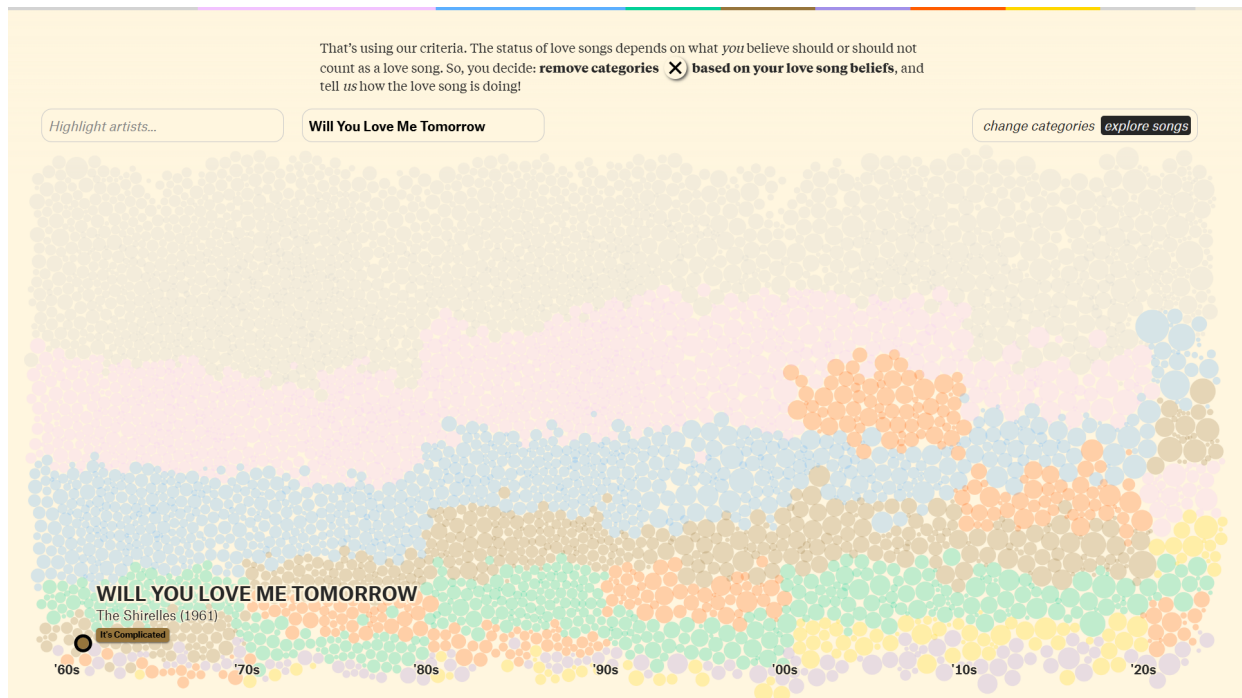


Figure 1, Mora and Jia “Is the love song dying” (Screengrab), 2024.

In Mora and Jia’s recent visual essay we can see the Shirelles in their place in the history of pop love songs, namely as early pioneers of the “It’s complicated” category (Mora and Jia, 2024). Their other categories are serenades, heartache, pursuit, good riddance, sexual confidence, and love song for the self. Here a bubble represents each of the 5,100 Billboard Top 10 hits from 1958 to September 2023. Almost like Wordsworthian “spots of time”, the bigger the bubble, the longer it spent in the Top 10. The reinforcing homogenised impact of streaming since the turn of the century has contributed to bigger and fewer hits. However, not visible in this visualisation is whether streaming platforms foster what Hume calls “temporary vogues” (Hume, 1987, 233) and a greater dissipation of enchantment. That would require a more detailed account of the verticality and horizontality of the “bubbles”.

Where the Shirelles can be seen to echo Hume’s wondering about what will last, Hume’s affirmation of the standards was echoed in a hit song from over a decade later. Stevie Wonder’s “Sir Duke” is somewhat ironically an R&B ode to jazz, albeit with some jazz flourishes (VOX, 2019). Replete with monarchist tendencies and racial potency, this homage is an expression of

pure “unadulterated joy” (Lavezzoli, 2001) that successfully mixes instrumental complexity with embodied accessibility:

Music knows that it is and always will be one of the things that life just won't quit.
But here are some of music's pioneers that time will not allow us to forget:
There's Basie, Miller, Satchmo and the king of all, Sir Duke!
And with a voice like Ella's ringing out there's no way the band could lose!
You can feel it all over! [...] (Wonder, 1976)

While this song went to number one in 1977 it has yet to grace *Rolling Stone's* top 500 list of songs.¹⁰ From the perspective of nearly half a century we can see both the strengths and weaknesses of the argument in Wonder's posthumous tribute to Ellington. The universality of “Sir Duke” and the other jazz pioneers is clearly time dependent, and Wonder chooses to honour them through a fusion of jazz, pop and rock. Respecting with gratitude the past, the trends of Wonder's generation ultimately must be privileged. Furthermore, the mere fact of Wonder's pleading yet upbeat tribute is *prima facie* testament to a certain forgetting of the classics. This nostalgia is compounded when listening to the album's next tracks, “I Wish”, which yearns for an unrecoverable, more innocent youth past and “Pastime Paradise” which criticises regressive escapism that hinders progress (particularly in terms of race relations). But within this verse there is a greater argument about the (post-racial) universality of beat and swing based music that still seems irrefutable.

Post-Hume, and particularly in the 21st century, the digital mediation of cultural artefacts such as songs presents certain challenges to the “test of time”. Put otherwise Wonder's homage could almost be heard as a melancholic premonition of what has come in the 21st century to be understood as the “Big Flat Now.” Cast adrift after the so-called “end of history,” (Fukuyama, 1992) cultural production and consumption is increasingly recognised as not timeless but rather ‘without time’ in the sense of chronological order. In part this is a result of the apparently endless accumulation of recorded texts, images and sounds. Coined by the media platform 032c to describe the temporal flatness of contemporary cultural production and consumption, in the words of Bettridge and Mascatello:

¹⁰ That said Stevie Wonder has been a consistent presence with four entries in each edition. These songs are respectively “Signed, Sealed, Delivered, I'm Yours”, “You Are the Sunshine of My Life”, “Higher Ground” and “Superstition”. The latter was placed as high as 12 in the most recent version.

The Big Flat Now is the infinite space on which our culture operates today. Its frictionless surface is composed of the obsolete hierarchies that have been melted by the Internet. (2018)

In short, all music is here now and it's increasingly distributed on a flat digital platform. The accompanying historical alienation produced by the apparent collapse of traditional cultural hierarchies, genre distinctions and spatial boundaries must surely stand as a challenge to any test of time. A further suspicion here is that when all music is playing simultaneously and everywhere, music today has become little more than a sonic wallpaper. No longer an event, music is an unimportant and ubiquitous soundtrack decoration in the background. They continue, "Film, music, fashion, visual art and the marketing machines that support them have been compressed into a unified slime called "content."" (Bettridge and Mascatello, 2018) In this model, all media is equally accessible and hence decontextualized. This idea is necessarily presented as total for rhetorical effect; in practice it assumes a Eurocentric global uniformity that may not yet match reality¹¹.

Another way of putting this temporal dislocation is to simply say that in an age when people are literally on different social media timelines: we no longer know what is even popular now. In the words of Broderick and Bumaz:

Before streaming, you could pull up records' sales data and easily figure out which pop girlie (or guy) had the biggest summer, but things are much more complicated now. There are Billboard charts, Spotify charts, social platforms like Instagram and TikTok, and, somewhere in there, a few people are even still buying albums. What's interesting, though, is how these leaderboards do — and do not — line up. (2024)

Spotify, the premier music subscription platform of our time, for example, presents music shorn not only of critical standards but devoid of historical and material order. In "The Big Flat Now," the traditional gatekeepers have lost full control of the canon or have closed (for example Pitchfork), and their copyright, and archivists are but "legacy media". Today songs are data points, taste is algorithmically curated to be consumed as memes and snippets on social media as viral trends and not traditional release cycles and material formats. Lists like *Rolling Stone's* are increasingly condemned to siloed irrelevance.

¹¹ Recall William Gibson's dictum that: The Future Is Already Here – It's Just Not Evenly Distributed' 2003.

Today, instead, the intimate immaterial data of individual charts generated by digital platform capitalism are increasingly privileged, be it through Apps like Strava, Goodreads and Duolingo and most famously through the sharing of one's private Spotify Wrapped on social media to demonstrate one's virtuous taste in a form of evidence-based digital collage humblebragging without selfies.¹² As such, these platforms are changing what it means to consume culture and the standard of success is no longer critical acclaim or popularity but "completion rates."¹³

The test of time is determined by the technological form and its chart manipulation¹⁴ of the art, not only the judgement of experts. The *Rolling Stone* list, and indeed the canon, itself may proceed with an ever-increasing inclusive make up of critics¹⁵ and entries, but the nature of hypermodern cultural consumption through the algorithmic gatekeeping of digital platforms means that it is necessarily bound to decreasing relevance each time.

A slightly cryptic criticism of our misguided enthusiasm for the old in art and the inevitable depreciation facing us all can be read in the line from another song on *Rolling Stone's* list, Bob Dylan's "Visions Of Johanna"¹⁶.

Inside the museum, infinity goes up on trial
Voices echo this is what salvation must be like after a while
But Mona Lisa musta had the highway blues
You can tell by the way she smiles [...] (Dylan, 1966)

¹² See Dean and Sandeman (2024) and Parham (2025). This does not mean that individually non-algorithmically curated lists are dead. See for example Pat Finnerty's (2025) comedic distinction between durable "the fucking songs" and more standard transitory "hits".

¹³ Using extensive user data from Storytel, a Swedish audiobook platform, Berglund (2024) has shown how digital subscription models, and algorithmic personalization have changed the terms of reading. Completion rates, what Berglund calls Average finishing degree (AFD) measures the readers' devotion to the book (pp. 61-62).

¹⁴ For details on the listening and thus chart-manipulating tactics of Spotify see: Pelly 2025 who explains that though an encyclopaedia of music is available, it is not equally visible. This is but the latest stage in long tradition of chart manipulation in arts and cultures lists. *The New York Times* Best Seller list is famously subject to a variety of manipulations. For details of resistance to the algorithmic logic of Spotify see Ng (2024).

¹⁵ The *Rolling Stone's* updated list is revealing in this regard: "Where the 2004 version of the list was dominated by early rock and soul, the [2014] edition contains more hip-hop, modern country, indie rock, Latin pop, reggae, and R&B." (*Rolling Stone*, 2024) In film, an equivalent poll of quality is the *Sight and Sound* list of the top 100 films of all time. It occurs every 10 years, starting in 1952. In 2022 there were 1,639 participating critics, programmers, curators, archivists and academics. Echoing the evolution of *Rolling Stone's* lists, the increasing representation of female and black directors and certain themes on the "poll signals an amazing shift in critical taste." (Mulvey, 2022)

¹⁶ In an interesting contrast to The Shirelles, this song placed 404th in 2004, 413th in 2010, 317th in 2021 and 317th in 2024..

Here Dylan has taken the almost unanimously agreed image of beauty and recognised in it a certain road weariness. Maybe too, the Beatles will be outdated. It is too soon to tell. Longevity is for dinosaurs, and we know what happened to them. Instead, it is more productive perhaps to see, like Dylan, that each artwork entails its own horizon. If even “Mona Lisa’s smile” could be eventually dated and worn out, then all bets are off. No doubt this is why Hume is never clear about whether ideal critics would agree or disagree or how much time is enough to determine a standard. For that matter it is equally never particularly clear when time starts. For *Rolling Stone*’s list time starts not with recorded music but in the 1930’s!¹⁷

A troubling feature of digital cultural products in the 21st century is the absence of strong archiving procedures. The physical copy is no longer the locus of consumption and on streaming platforms digital data can easily be deleted. This is routinely happening and denying work the possibility of becoming a so-called “sleeper hit” (Schonfeld, 2024).¹⁸ A high-profile example is Sony’s recent decision to remove the game *Concord* from people’s PlayStation libraries (Cimaglio, 2024). If anything this reality demonstrates further the disconnection between critical judgement and work that lasts. However, this is not a new phenomenon. In one way this is but the most recent incarnation of what Savile called the “pressures of time”, namely “Disturbance by erosion [and...] disturbance by accretion.” (1982, p. 122) For Savile, survival was more meaningful when work resisted these pressures. In the corporate controlled immaterial digital consumption of music (etc.) it is less clear that such a position can be maintained. Old titles exist beside new titles, erosion and accretion are no longer possible, but deletion is!

3. Ending the Comforting Fantasy of the Test of Time

Hume understandably does not consider the institutions of the modern artworld, the great democratisation of knowledge, the commercial preference for the “new,” fluctuating distinctions/hierarchies between the prestige and the popular¹⁹, and the changing technological

¹⁷ The earliest song on any of the lists is Robert Johnson, “Cross Road Blues”, 1937.

¹⁸ See also, Robey (2024). While this may apply in film and TV, the power of social media, however, reveals that this is not the case in music.

¹⁹ The very status of pop music itself has been a focus for such misguided debates. See for example the jumbled mess that is the debate between the popular so-called ‘poptimism’ and authentic so-called ‘rockism.’

modes of aesthetic experience (from recording to streaming) that would follow. Crucially we can see how these trends in cultural consumption contribute to the very sense of time itself evaporating. Furthermore, the list, insofar as it operates as a live tracker, is a useful example of the limitations of holding that the longer works endure the stronger claim they can have on beauty. Lists are, as we know, self-perpetuating.

Hume's privileging of judgement across time thus overlooks phenomena such as the "Lindy Effect" which holds that the longer a non-perishable item has survived, the longer it's likely to persist into the future or "first-mover advantage" which describes the advantages of the first company or person to act (Sobchuk et al, 2024). Hume's writing also predates the major developments in the recording of still and moving images and sound. Since the development of the recording process, music, for example, lives in a sort of eternal present.

In part, we could somewhat ironically say that Hume's position fails the test of time due to his eighteenth-century assumptions about the nature of art such as the hierarchy of artistic forms. It is telling that his examples are from poetry and novels. These are perhaps the most durable forms to begin with and can be transferred across time in a way that is not fixed to any materiality. If we are to take a more eclectic approach to artistic form, we see that the test of time for music, fashion, food, sculpture, architecture, painting etc. is necessarily bound to the vagaries of historical events and not simply the judgements of critics. No matter how good an ice-cream is, it is at a major disadvantage compared to a poem in terms of its temporal potential and generating a cult following. The first lick is privileged in a way that the first reading is not. This is before we even consider the role of different mediums. For example, comedy tends to suffer from repeated consumption when compared to music.

Returning to Hume's key example of Sancho's kin we can see that it is limited when compared to the practically infinite volume of art available today. While one may complete the works of Shakespeare, like the hogshead of wine, the critic today could never hope to get to the end of Spotify, Netflix or YouTube etc.

Here we may be reminded of the following debunked, though oft repeated, anecdote. In response to Henry Kissinger's question "What do you think of the French Revolution?" Zhou

Enlai, Premier of the People's Republic of China, supposedly replied: "It is too early to tell."²⁰ Similarly, by pushing the ultimate test of taste into the future, Hume's theory rests on a comforting fantasy that all disputes will ultimately be resolved (and in our favour!). There is, in short, a deep epistemological ambiguity in Hume's argument due to the infinite nature of time itself. Hume's test privileges an impossible wisdom of hindsight over what could be called the wisdom of foresight or even the wisdom of insight. As such, works are valued for lasting, not for being prescient or even perceptive and of the moment.

In privileging the past and what will last, we push the question of taste beyond personal preference to an only somewhat reasonable zone of critical consensus over time. Time is a dangerous refuge, a shelter even,²¹ from the taste and aesthetic labour of here and now. Privileging aesthetic longevity means that my own sensory experience is discarded in the name of an imagined objectivity, replete with nostalgia and comforting fantasies of the future. Hume's standard perpetuates a myth of context free history.²²

Perhaps the question is not to follow Gerry Goffin and Carole King "Will you still love me tomorrow?" or Hume's implied "what will stand the test of time" but rather "what tastes good today?"

"The Big Flat Now" as revealed in cultural digital platforms, such as Spotify, challenge the idea that aesthetic value is revealed over time. Instead, today, value is increasingly defined by engagement metrics: streams, completion rates, skip rates and virality. Yes, like Hume's critics, algorithms "learn" from repeated exposure and comparison, but they explicitly optimize for engagement and attention within filtered epistemic bubbles, not aesthetic value grounded in durational standards. In Hume we see that the ideal of reflective, practiced, and impartial critics still stands as a counterweight to the ephemeral, individualised logic of streaming culture. In the face of decontextualised algorithmic taste and viral judgements, the test of time is a reminder that not all value is visible in the moment, and that some pleasures require cultivation and an appreciation for standards, even if any standard is a potential straitjacket.

²⁰ If Zhou made these comments, he was most likely referring to the 1968 student revolution in Paris, rather than the 1789 Revolution. For a detailed discussion of how this apocryphal anecdotal quip is itself a "globalised meme" with oriental overtones see Park (2023).

²¹ See, Gospodinov (2022).

²² There is perhaps much to be said here about a potential test of space/ geography. My suspicion is that Hume's racism is a factor precluding him from proposing such a standard as it may necessitate a greater confrontation with competing standards.

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A Revision of Paul de Man's Reading of *Sign and Symbol* in Hegel's *Aesthetics*

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I would like to explore the position of the concepts sign and symbol in Hegel's lectures on the philosophy of art. After a brief introduction to Hegel's Kunstformenlehre, with particular emphasis on the symbolic – the first of the three art forms – I will critically examine Paul de Man's understanding of sign and symbol in Hegel. I will continue by mapping de Man's understanding of both terms onto Hegel's corresponding definitions in Enzyklopädie III. The knowledge gained in this process will be applied to a renewed reading of the passages on the symbolic in various lecture notes and transcripts from the semesters 1820–1829. It will be shown that the symbolic indicates a far-reaching relevance of the concept of the sign in Hegel's philosophy of art. My approach aims to support and supplement de Man's reading.

Prelude

The true protagonists of this story are two closely intertwined concepts – that of the sign and that of the symbol. We will take more than just one step back from the linguistic and semiotic developments and definitions in 20th and 21st century philosophies, as well as from the discourses on symbolic forms in the tradition of Ernst Cassirer, and take a closer look at what

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Peter Szondi called a “great disappointment” (c. f. Szondi 1974, p. 390, translation L.v.L.) – namely Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s examination of the symbolic in his philosophy of art.

However, the plot of this story is not carried forward by Hegel and Szondi, but by Hegel and Paul de Man – the latter of whom questions Szondi’s aforementioned statement in his own examination of Hegel’s philosophy of art (c. f. de Man 1997, pp. 94 ff.). It is a story full of detours, of which only a brief summary can be given here, yet at whose edges abysses will open up. Sign and symbol will appear in different guises and lights, and the course of events will at times be violent. Let us embark on a search for unification and differentiation, and hope that we do not stray too far from the path...

1. Act one: the Starting Point: the three Artforms in Hegel’s Philosophy of Art²

Before proceeding down this path, for those who have not yet ventured into the realm of Hegel’s philosophy of art, some of its areas should be outlined. This is a daring undertaking, because, indeed, it seems that Hegel’s philosophy of art is full of contingencies, nearly uncontrollable and simply *überkomplex* (c. f. Hilmer 1997, p. 3; Horstmann 1984, p. 253; Luhmann 1994, p. 45 f.). However, the question of the position of the sign and the symbol in Hegel’s philosophy of art favours a narrowing of the scope of consideration: namely, to those passages that are probably most relevant to current attempts to update Hegel’s philosophy of art: Hegel’s *Kunstformenlehre*, which Hegel, throughout the years of lecturing, assigns to different sections of his philosophy of art (Hilmer 1997, pp. 124 f.), which is only one example of the various changes, reconceptualisations and shifts that Hegel conducted over the course of his lectures.

² Over the past decades, the Hegel Archive at Ruhr University Bochum has initiated a series of editions that supplement the widely acclaimed three-volume edition of Hegel’s lectures on philosophy of art by Hegel’s student Heinrich Gustav Hotho (published in Germany by Suhrkamp as *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik I – III*). Those editions document post- and transcripts by Hegel’s students during the semesters of 1821–1829 – amongst them also one by Hotho. Partly fragmentary, these documents of Hegel’s lectures form an open text corpus that encourages new approaches to Hegel’s aesthetics. Quotations in this paper are mainly taken from these lecture documents of the semesters 1821–1829. In order to make the semester cited and the author of the transcript visible in the references within the main text, I have decided not to cite the lecture documents in the form (*author, year of publication, page*), instead of (*authors, year of lecture, page*). For example, in the case of Karl Gustav Julius von Griesheim’s transcript from 1826 and published in 2018, the reference will not be cited in the form corresponding to the publication date (*Hegel 2018, page*) but as (*Hegel/Griesheim 1826, page*). When referring to the entire text corpus composed of the various trans- and postscripts, I will speak, for instance, of *Hegel’s aesthetics*, *Hegel’s philosophy of art* or simply *Hegel’s lectures*. The Hotho-edition will be cited in the form (*VÄ I – III, page*) and referred to as *Hotho’s edition* in the main text. All Hegel-quotations will be in German.

The *Kunstformenlehre* contains the conceptual differentiation of art into three distinct forms: the symbolic, the classic and the Romantic.³ The three art forms represent three different “Weisen der Kunst” (Hegel/Hotho 1823, 34). Each of these art forms is based on a specific “Verhältnis des Begriffs in betreff seines In-die-Realität-Eingebildetwerdens” (ibid.). It becomes clear how closely the three art forms are linked to Hegel’s concept of art itself, since Hegel defines the aesthetic *Ideal* (*das kunstphilosophische Ideal*) as the complete “Einheit des Begriffs und der Realität” – and exactly this *Einheit* is then again “der Begriff der Kunst selbst” (Hegel/Hotho 1823, p. 202). This coincides with Hegel’s definition of art as the first form of *absolute spirit* in the last section of the *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften* – and the related formulation of the artwork as the concrete “Gestalt der Schönheit” (Enz III, §556, p. 367).

Whereas for Kant, *Ideal* remains an object of imagination, a “Richtmaß der Vernunft” (KrV II, B 598, 599) *that exists only in thought* (c. f. also KdU, B 55), Hegel responds: “Man muß vom Idealen nicht glauben, das [sic!] es ein bloßes Jenseits sey” (Hegel/Ascheberg/Treborg 1820/21, p. 38). Rather, according to Hegel, *Ideal* is “aus dem subjektiven Geist geborene[] konkrete[] Gestalt” (Enz III, § 556, p. 367) – the *convergence* of *Begriff* and *Realität*, of *Sinnliches* and *Allgemeines*, brought about in the artistic process. *Ideal* turns out to be the realisation and embodiment of *Idee* in the sensory reality of the artwork.

Let us now take a detour into the three *Kunstformen* to discover the respective relations between *Begriff* and *Realität* in each form to gain a better understanding of the status of the symbolic.

1.1. The Symbolic

The symbolic, as the first of the three forms, is a complicated and contradictory and inadequate constellation of *Begriff* and *Realität* (c. f. Hilmer 1997, p. 146). This inadequacy appears as an aporia, which consists in a radical difference between an indeterminate content to be represented and a particular sensory shape in which this content is supposed to manifest (c. f.

³ The Romantic refers in Hegel’s lectures to post-Hellenian, Roman, Christian art (c. f. de Man 1997, 93; Stekeler 2023, 102).

Rinaldi 2023, 87). We note that in this context, *content* and *Begriff* overlap just as much as *sensory shape* and *Realität*.

In all semesters, the *content* in the symbolic is described as infinite, *unbestimmt*, immeasurable, boundless or abstract (c. f. Hegel/Ascheberg/Treborg 1820/21, p. 18; Hegel/Hotho 1823, pp. 34 f.; Hegel/Griesheim 1826, pp. 556 f.; Hegel/Pfordten 1826, p. 67; Hegel/Heimann 1828/29, p. 938). However, the sensory appearance of an artwork – the artwork as a *Gestalt* – generally implies finiteness, determination and limitation (c.f. Rinaldi 2023, p. 87).⁴ And a *Gestalt* that would be appropriate, adequate and corresponding to an infinite content/*Begriff* would itself have to be infinite, *unbestimmt* and *maßlos*: “[D]ieses Äußerliche [the sensory shape] soll dem Unbestimmten angemessen sein, und zum Maaßlosen und Unermeßlichen gesteigert sein” (Hegel/Heimann 1828/29, p. 938, addition L.v.L.). However, such a sensory shape does not exist: “Dies Unendliche ist hier aber das Abstrakte, dem angemessen keine sinnliche Gestalt ist” (Hegel/Hotho 1823, p. 35). A specific striving (c. f. Hegel/Heimann 1828/29, p. 938) determines the symbolic: symbolic art performs the search for *Werkeinheit*. However, this search remains unfulfilled: “Die Idee sucht sich erst ihre Gestaltung und Form – die Gestalt ist noch außer ihr, der sinnliche Stoff überhaupt ihr noch nicht adäquat” (Hegel/Pfordten 1826, 67; c. f. Hegel/Hotho 1823, p. 35).⁵ We see how the symbolic differs from the convergence of *Begriff*/content and *Realität*/shape typical of the aesthetic *Ideal* (c. f. chapter 1). In contrast to this, the classic is defined as “völlige[s] Adäquatseyn des Begriffs und der Realität” (Hegel/Ascheberg/Treborg 1820/21, p. 19).

⁴ According to Hegel, the “fundamentum distinctionis” is to be found “in the sensual, i. e. empirical material of the artwork” (Rinaldi 2023, p. 61, translation L.v.L.). However, *Sinnlichkeit* is defined sufficiently broadly here, which is particularly relevant for the Romantic. The materiality of artworks is not limited to visual arts: elements such as immaterial, imaginative images, for example, are understood as artistic and creative material as well. On this subject, Hegel states: “Die Kunst bedarf zu den von ihr zu produzierenden Anschauungen [...] eines äußerlichen und gegebenen Materials, worunter auch die subjektiven Bilder und Vorstellungen gehören” (Enz III, § 558, p. 368).

⁵ A problem we have to contend with here is the terminological ambiguity that arises in the corpus of texts surrounding Hegel’s lectures, due to the fact that in the various texts, sometimes the term “Begriff” and sometimes the term “Idee” is used to indicate the specific *Versinnlichung* which is typical of the aesthetic *Ideal* – sometimes even in one and the same sentence: “Die zweite Form der Kunst: die klassische, [wird] so bestimmt, daß sie die adäquate Einbildung der Idee oder des Begriffs in die Äußerung, Erscheinung, Manifestation [ist]” (Hegel/Pfordten 1826, p. 67). However, this issue must be discussed elsewhere.

1.2. The Classic

In the vocabulary of the 1823 transcript, the convergence of the classic artwork with the aesthetic Ideal reads as follows: “Form [Realität/shape] und Inhalt [Begriff/content] sind absolut ein und dasselbe, keine Seite überwiegend, der Inhalt die Form, die Form den Inhalt bestimmend; die Einheit in reiner Allgemeinheit” (Hegel/Hotho 1823, pp. 38 f., additions L.v.L.). Pfordten’s 1826 transcript also emphasises this correspondence: “Die zweite Form der Kunst: die klassische, [wird] so bestimmt, daß sie die adäquate Einbildung der Idee oder des Begriffs in die Äußerung, Erscheinung, Manifestation [ist]” (Hegel/Pfordten 1826, p. 67). And Heimann notes as “Bestimmung des Klassischen, daß das Innere [Begriff/content] dem Äußern [Realität/shape] gleichkomme” (Hegel/Heimann 1828/29, p. 939, additions L.v.L.). This specific self-identity of the classic artwork (c. f. Hilmer 1997, p. 160; Over 2013, p. 162) is condensed in the formula “Einheit in der Selbstbedeutung” (Hegel/Heimann 1828/29, p. 1032). Within the classic, *Gestalt* and *Bedeutung* (which equals content/*Begriff*) of the artwork are one and the same. Therefore, within the classic, complete *Werkeinheit* is achieved. Here, the artwork is “als solches für sich”, “Ausdruck seiner selbst” (ibid., p. 940).

In the third art form, the Romantic, *Begriff/content* and *Realität/shape* diverge once again, just as in the symbolic – albeit this time as independent domains.

1.3. The Romantic

The Romantic is described as “ein Fortschreiten [der Kunst] über sich selbst hinaus” (Hegel/Hotho 1826, p. 36). The Romantic consists in “Hinausgehen über” the aesthetic *Ideal*; it is in fact “die Entzweiung des Begriffs und der Realität” (Hegel/Ascheberg/Treborg 1828/29, p. 115), and processes of delimiting the unity of the artwork are set in motion: „Im Romantischen geht es bis ins Formelle, bis in die Auflösung des Gegenständlichen fort“ (Hegel/Ascheberg/Treborg 1820/21, p. 113) The *Werkeinheit* as “Einheit in der Selbstbedeutung” (Hegel/Heimann 1828/29, p. 1032), characteristic of the classic and of the aesthetic *Ideal*, is overcome.

We now see our second plotter entering the stage. In his 1990s essay on ‘Sign and Symbol in Hegel’s *Aesthetics*’, Paul de Man claims that Hegel’s philosophy of art was “traditionally enough, a theory of symbolic form” (de Man 1997, p. 93). Given what has just been said about the three art forms, this sounds rather surprising to us, since the classic – as the region where the aesthetic *Ideal* is fully realised – and not the symbolic, seems to be the center of Hegel’s philosophy of art. Let us take a closer look at how de Man arrives at his assumption.

2. Act Two: Paul de Man’s Concept of the symbol(ic) in his Essay ‘On Sign and Symbol in Hegel’s Aesthetics’

De Man demonstrates his answer to our question *what the traditional definition of symbolic form was* that Hegel reproduced in his philosophy of art, by pointing to what he sees as a congruence between Hegel’s concepts of the *beautiful* and of the *symbolic* (c. f. *ibid.*). He therefore refers to Hegel’s frequently quoted phrase *sensory appearance of the idea* (*sinnliches Scheinen der Idee*), which is generally understood as Hegel’s definition of the beautiful (even though this phrase was never used directly by Hegel himself). According to Paul de Man, the respective phrase – *the sensory appearance of the idea* – translates the term “Aesthetics” (*ibid.*). We have no objection to this, because

1. we have seen in the former section that the aesthetic *Ideal* is the fusion of that which is particular (*Realität/Sinnliches*/shape/sensory appearance) and that which is universal (*Begriff/Allgemeines*/content/idea) and
2. we know that Hegel states that the classic – which is the region where the aesthetic *Ideal* manifests in the classic *Werkeinheit* – is simply that which coincides with his concept of art (c. f. Hegel/Griesheim 1826, p. 711). The classic artworks are “*sinnliche Allgemeine*” (Zimmer 2014, p. 142) in the full sense of the term
3. we see that Hegel leaves no doubt that the beautiful within the scope of his aesthetics always means artistic beauty (*das Kunstschöne*): “Diese Vorlesung ist der Aesthetik gewidmet d.h. der Philosophie der Wissenschaft des Schönen und zwar des Kunstschönen und nur des Kunstschönen” (Hegel/Griesheim 1826, p. 519; c. f. also e. g. Hegel/Pfordten 1826, p. 51).

But, going far beyond this, de Man suggests that the definition in question – the sensory appearance of the idea –, “could itself best be translated by the statement: the beautiful is symbolic” (de Man 1997, p. 93). This conceptual transfer is made possible by a specific concept of the symbol, which Paul de Man claims to have extracted from his reading of Hegel’s aesthetics. It is a notion of the symbol as “mediation between the mind and the physical world of which art manifestly partakes” (ibid.).

De Man’s consideration seems to be as follows: the sensory appearance of the idea (Hegel’s definition of artistic beauty, *Kunstschönes*) establishes a mediation between *Begriff/Allgemeines/content/idea* and *Realität/Sinnliches/shape/sensory appearance* just like the symbol establishes a mediation between “mind” and “physical world”. It follows that the definition of the beautiful – as the mediator of these two “poles” – is analogous to the definition of the symbol. However, the careful reader will have noticed that de Man makes another transfer, which he himself does not mention – namely from symbol to the symbolic. It will become apparent that this difference is crucial in the context of Hegel’s philosophy of art. We will come back to that in a few paragraphs.

2.1. Goethe’s notion of the symbol

For the time being, we notice that de Man’s concept of the symbol as “mediation between the mind and the physical world” (ibid.) corresponds almost literally to Goethe’s *Aperçu* as a sudden, holistic insight into the universal – an experience that Goethe also describes as “*Synthese von Welt und Geist*” (Goethe 1870, no. 903). Closely related to this is Goethe’s notion of the symbol, to which he also attributes a revealing power, since, according to him, the symbol shows the universal in and through the particular (Goethe 1833, no. 955; c. f. also ibid., no. 952). Most essential to our considerations of Hegel’s aesthetics is Goethe’s statement: “das Symbol [verwandelt] das Erscheinende [the appearing] unmittelbar in die Idee” (Goethe 1897, p. 172, addition L.v.L.) – a formula which is quite close to Hegel’s aesthetic Ideal.

However, based on what we know about the art forms, such a notion of the symbol would merely correspond to the classic. The symbolic, as the unfulfilled search for the intersection of *Begriff* and *Realität*, seems far too messy a matter to represent a model for the perfect unity of

Allgemeines and Besonderes. But if that is the case, how do the symbol and the symbolic relate to each other in Hegel's aesthetics?

To avoid getting stuck here, it is time to take a look at the passages that contain Hegel's own definition of the symbol – and we will find them in the Psychologie-section of Hegel's *Encyclopädie* (a section that Jacques Derrida subjected to a thorough reading in a seminar held by Jean Hyppolite in 1968 [Derrida 2023], which Paul de Man, in turn, took very careful note of.)

3. Act Three: Sign and Symbol in Hegel's *Enzyklopädie III*

In the study of the Psychologie des subjektiven Geistes, Hegel distinguishes “symbolisierende” (Enz III, § 457, ad., p. 269) and “Zeichen machende Phantasie” (ibid., § 457, p. 268). Despite the distinction that Hegel introduces here between symbol and sign, both are included in the third stage of development of Einbildungskraft, namely produktive Einbildungskraft (c. f. ibid., § 455, ad., p. 264). Produktive Einbildungskraft merges universal notions (“allgemeine Vorstellungen”) with the particular of the image (“das Besondere des Bildes”) (ibid.). The result is said to have the double form of the symbol and the sign (“doppelte Form des Symbols und des Zeichens”) (ibid., § 454, p. 261). This identification of the universality of notions with the particularity of images is not only conceptually close to de Man's and Goethe's notion of symbol, but, considering Hegel's aesthetic Ideal, opens up the space for a far-reaching analogy:

Since produktive Einbildungskraft achieves a mutual convergence of idea and image, “die Verbildlichung des Allgemeinen und [...] Verallgemeinerung des Bildes” (ibid., § 456, ad., p. 267), it's activities are comparable to the artistic process that produces the aesthetic Ideal. Consequently, Hegel says that this imaginative activity represents “das Formelle der Kunst; denn die Kunst stellt das wahrhaft Allgemeine oder die Idee in der Form des sinnlichen Daseins, des Bildes, dar” (ibid.). In this context, Jacques Derrida describes Hegel's productive Einbildungskraft as “a kind of natural art” (Derrida 2023, p. 103).⁶ However, as already noted,

⁶ Derrida thus refers to Hegel's exceptionally comprehensive affirmation of Immanuel Kant's vocabulary of productive imagination, which Kant describes as “eine verborgene Kunst in den Tiefen der menschlichen Seele” (KrV I, B 181, 182). On the relationship between Kant and Hegel with regard to the concept of *Einbildungskraft*, see also Fulda & Horstmann (1990).

produktive Einbildungskraft is also divided into symbolising and sign-creating activities. This difference should now be examined.

3.1. The symbol

In the *Psychologie*-section, the symbol is defined as an “Anschauung [intuition], deren eigene Bestimmtheit ihrem Wesen und Begriffe nach mehr oder weniger der Inhalt ist, den sie als Symbol ausdrückt” (Enz III, § 458, p. 270, addition L.v.L.). It thus ought to respect that which naturally accrues to the natural shapes and materials which are to become symbols (c. f. Enz III, § 457, ad., p. 269). Hegel refers to *independent meanings* of those shapes and materials:

[Die symbolisierende Phantasie] wählt zum Ausdruck ihrer allgemeinen Vorstellungen [Begriff/Allgemeines] keinen anderen sinnlichen Stoff [Realität/Besonderes] als denjenigen, dessen selbständige Bedeutung dem bestimmten Inhalt des zu verbildlichenden Allgemeinen entspricht. (Ibid., additions L.v.L.)

This concept of the symbol is also effective in Hegel’s philosophy of art: Hotho notes: “[Das Symbol enthält] in seiner Äußerlichkeit zugleich den Gehalt der Vorstellung [...], welchen es darstellen soll. Das Symbol also stellt sich zugleich selbst vor” (Hegel/Hotho 1823, p. 119). And Kehler notes: “Das Symbol ist sinnliche Existenz, die selbst die Eigenschaften enthält, die sie bezeichnen soll” (Hegel/Kehler 1826, p. 70).

This affinity thus limits the freedom of the symbolising activity in its assignment and transformation of “sinnliche Stoffe” and their independent meanings (c. f. Enz III, § 457, add., p. 269). In negative terms, this means that the symbolising activity, by remaining bound to the respective independent meanings in order to express its “allgemeine Vorstellungen”, is limited by the requirement of corresponding to the independent meanings of the natural shapes and materials that it deals with (c. f. *ibid.*, § 458, p. 270). The sign-creating activity in contrast has *any shape and material at its disposal* without having to worry about their independent meanings.

3.2. The Sign

Sign-creation expresses “eine freiere Willkür und Herrschaft im Gebrauch der Anschauung” (Enz III, § 458, *ibid.*, p. 270) than within the act of symbolising. As the term *Herrschaft* indicates, the arbitrary nature, typical of the *signifying* production of meaning, goes hand in hand with the *suppression of natural shapes and materials and their independent meanings*. Paul de Man has also read these passages, of course, and notes that “the sign illustrates the capacity of the intellect to *use* the perceived world for its own purposes, to efface [*tilgen*] its properties and to put others in their stead” (de Man 1997, p. 96, addition P.d.M.). Hence, according to de Man, the sign-creating activity “is both a freedom, since it is arbitrary, and a coercion, since it does violence, as it were, to the world” (*ibid.*).

We have seen that, according to Hegel, “das Formelle der Kunst” (Enz III, § 456, *add.*, p. 267) in consciousness – the activity of *produktive Einbildungskraft* – has the double form of the symbol and the sign (c. f. Enz III, § 454, p. 261). The relevance of the sign in Hegel’s philosophy of art is programmatically indicated in the encyclopaedia, where Hegel introduces artworks as “Zeichen der Idee” (*ibid.*, § 556, p. 367). But the meaning of this formula remains puzzling at first, since the arbitrary character of the sign seems to be opposed to the art-specific interpenetration of *Begriff* and *Realität*. At the same time, though, we recall the artistic striving for *Werkeinheit* in the symbolic that remains incomplete – and on closer inspection, this lack of interpenetration of *Begriff* and *Realität* within the symbolic turns out to be *a trace of the sign*.

4. Act Four: Sign and Symbol within the Symbolic

We slide a few more steps further and find that the symbolic in Hegel’s *Kunstformenlehre* appears to contain an equivalent to the violent dimension of the sign which we have just extracted from the *Enzyklopädie* with Paul de Man’s help.

It strikes us that the character of the symbolic striving and searching emerges as the negativity of artistic creation’s dependence on its proper sensory manifestation. We find that in the symbolic the material is held in tension, a conflict occurring between mind and nature, or, in

Paul de Man's words: "between the mind and the physical world" (de Man 1997, p. 93). The tensions escalate into conflict: "An ihnen [the symbolic artworks] selber ist der Zwist des Äußern und Innern sichtbar" (Hegel/Heimann 1828/29, p. 1001, addition L.v.L.). The conflict ultimately escalates into an open struggle, a "Kampf des Geistigen mit dem Sinnlichen [im] Kreis des Symbolischen" (Hegel/Pfordten 2005, 1826, p. 114; c. f. also Hegel/Griesheim 1826, p. 655). The drastic mode of this struggle is noted several times, for example in 1823:

In der symbolischen Kunst ist der Inhalt nicht frei und die Gestalt auch nicht [...]. Damit es bedeutend sei, muß es verzerrt werden; damit man dem Stoff ansehe, daß er bedeutend sei, muß ihm Gewalt angetan werden. (Hegel/Hotho 1823, p. 154; c. f. also *ibid.*, p. 35)

In 1826, there is also mention of a violent appropriation of natural shapes: "es erscheint als ein Gewalt Anthon, Mishandeln, Verzerren der Gestaltung" (Hegel/Griesheim 1826, p. 556). In the Hotho edition, the same situation is described using different vocabulary (c. f. VÄ I, p. 108).

However, repeated references to *distortions* indicate that, despite the offenses, the natural shapes and materials resist the attempts to transform them. From this perspective, the striving for *Werkeinheit* in the symbolic remains unfulfilled due to the fact that the natural shapes and materials and their independent meanings resist the "foreign" artistic principle that attempts to efface those meanings and appropriate the natural shapes, materials and meanings.

It could be said then that, in the symbolic form, the *sign-like attempt to transform and appropriate the natural shapes and materials* fails because of the resistance of independent natural elements – a figure which is familiar to us from our study of Hegel's encyclopaedic concept of the symbol. Within the symbolic, the *Begriff* treats natural shapes and meanings negatively, indeed, just like the sign-creating activity – but, in fact, it fails "to efface (*tilgen*) its properties [and meanings] and to put others in their stead" (de Man 1997, p. 96, addition L.v.L.). However, we have seen that at the heart of Hegel's philosophy of art – within the classic – lies the perfect unity of *Begriff* and *Realität* (c. f. chapter 1.2). From our new perspective, we must regard this unity as the result of a successful transformation and appropriation of natural shapes and meanings. We therefore recognise the dominance of the sign in the center of Hegel's aesthetics.

Fin de Partie

Paul de Man also explores the aesthetic relevance of the sign in his essay which was subject of our discussion. It has not been my aim to challenge his poetic suggestion that the sign should be considered a paradigm of Hegel's philosophy of art insofar as *the aesthetic ideal appears as the material inscription and yet memory-like and sign-like self-forgetting of spirit* (c. f. de Man 1997, p. 103). We are grateful to him for having undertaken a long and arduous journey through rough terrain, containing a detour into the *Gedächtnis*-section in the *Enzyklopädie* (de Man 1997, pp. 101 ff.; Enz III, §§ 461–464) and into the nimbus of the primordial foundations of Hegel's logic (de Man 1997, pp. 97 ff.; Enz I, § 20), in order to propose this reading to us. Our modest undertaking has aimed only to support de Man's interpretation by demonstrating the aesthetic relevance of the sign on a very basic ontological level. To do this, we no longer needed to venture *beyond* Hegel's philosophy of art, as de Man did, but rather followed the sign's traces in the midst of Hegel's theory of art forms. Time to present the *pointe*.

In the symbolic, sensory and natural elements oppose the artistic work process. However, each artistic process of creation is concerned exactly with the transformation of that which is naturally given (c.f. Hilmer 1997, p. 170): a productive negation takes place with the production of every artwork insofar as it is defined as being “distinguishable from mere facts, positive circumstances [*Gegebenheiten*] (that which exists in itself: the natural [*dem von sich her Daseienden: Natürlichen*]) (Hilmer 1997, p. 139, translation L.v.L.).

From this perspective, every artwork contains a trace of the sign, since it retains moments of negation towards that which is naturally given – since the process of its creation consists in transforming that which is simply given into something unnatural, artificial: into an artwork.⁷ Insofar as every artwork is always preceded by the negation of the given, every artistic work process is, according to Hegel, a (material) re-enactment of semiosis.⁸

⁷ This is also supported by the fact that, as mentioned in chapter 2, right at the beginning of his lectures, Hegel limits the scope of his philosophy of art to artistic beauty, excluding natural beauty.

⁸ For a related reflection on the connection between death, semiosis, and the artistic creative process in Hegel, c. f. Hilmer 1997, p. 144 f.

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