

Kant's Multifaceted Aesthetic Legacy in the 20th Century

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I.

Immanuel Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* is one of the founding works of Western aesthetics, being among the most cited (and also most discussed) texts in modern and contemporary philosophy. Above all, the autonomy of the aesthetic dimension and its separation from the cognitive and moral spheres, the relation of the fine arts to genius, and the disinterested character of aesthetic pleasure, can be included in the elements that have remained among the most debated topics in aesthetics. The volume *Kant's "Critique of Aesthetic Judgment" in the 20th Century*, edited by Stefano Marino and Pietro Terzi, aims to focus on the different readings of the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* that have been offered in the 20th century, in particular of its first part. This book represents a *desideratum* in the field. Surprisingly, as the two editors explain in their *Introduction*, several studies have been dedicated to the reception of Kant's aesthetics in the 19th century, but not as many for the 20th century. Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* shows a multiplicity of aspects, being "complex, multi-

layered, heterogeneous, discontinuous and, so to speak, 'patchy' work" (p. 4). Marino's and Terzi's book has therefore the merit of bringing back this plurivocity, holding together scientific rigor and breadth of vision.

It is possible to speak, in general, of a hermeneutical approach of the book that stems from the undeniable openness of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, namely from the fact that it is not a text open to a single interpretation but rather open to multiple readings, as highlighted by scholars such as Emilio Garroni, who stated that the third *Critique* is a "thematically and theoretically non-compact book" (p. 317). Marino's and Terzi's volume follows the possible threads that unravel from this intrinsic manifoldness. In contrast to the ossified readings of Kant that characterized some figures of post-Kantianism, the underlying method of this volume can be defined as a vivid demonstration of a hermeneutical approach, highlighting the importance of the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of Kant's work.

Indeed, departing from the original text can actually enrich the text itself and show its new facets, in "an enrichment, a refinement and a renovation of the work itself: sometimes even little misunderstandings can be fruitful and enriching" (p. 318), without strongly diverging from the contents of the text or forcing it. Moreover, in their *Introduction* Marino and Terzi brilliantly recall that "texts are not passive items that simply lend themselves to close or distant readings, to different interpretation and more or less accurate translations. They seem to be endowed with a sort of intentionality of their own, and as such they contribute to the elaborations of concepts, images, discourses and framework" (p. 5). This is one of the merits of this book: putting into practice a hermeneutical process by letting a classic text of philosophy breathe and opening it up to new perspectives.

As the editors point out, the aim of the entire collection "is descriptive and interpretive rather than merely classificatory" (p. 32): the volume is indeed able to present the variety of possible readings and paths opened up by the third *Critique*, investigating its most challenging topics from different viewpoints, including the question of the role played by aesthetic judgments in the Kantian system, the theme of

disinterestedness, the *sensus communis*, the relationship between natural beauty and genius, and the relationship between the beautiful and the sublime – just to mention some of the most relevant ones. Especially relevant is the *Introduction* written by the two editors, where they outline the main lines of interpretation of Kant’s aesthetics in the 19th century as a foundation (pp. 5-27). With their *Introduction* Marino and Terzi thus provide a fundamental root for their work, which simultaneously holds together excellent synthesis and methodological rigor, in order to show the lines of development of such readings in the 20th century.

II.

The order of the essays included in *Kant’s “Critique of Aesthetic Judgment” in the 20th Century* is chronological and geographic, analyzing the reception of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* in the German context (neo-Kantianism, hermeneutics, philosophical anthropology, critical theory and political thought), the French context (post-structuralism, deconstruction, post-modernism), Italian philosophy (semiotic), and the Anglo-American traditions (pragmatism, art criticism, analytic philosophy) up to strictly contemporary readings with a focus on current debates concerning improvisation and Everyday Aesthetics.

The first contribution in the collection, authored by Arno Schubach, concerns the Marburg Neo-Kantian School, in particular Cohen’s and Cassirer’s readings of Kant’s aesthetics, showing how these relate to the systematic aspirations underlying post-Kantian philosophy. Cohen’s aim is, in fact, to show how art is one of the various systemic manifestations; in doing so, he interprets Kant’s aesthetics “in the narrow sense of a philosophy of art” (p. 41). Furthermore, Cohen shows how in reality aesthetic feelings are not distinct from cognitive and moral sentiments. Cohen thus establishes a connection between these different fields, stating that art begins with the objects of science and morality and then creates a new content of aesthetic experience. Unlike Cohen, Cassirer does not focus on the relationship between aesthetics and the system, but rather analyses the system within the *Critique of the Power of*

Judgment, understanding the latter not as the missing piece of the system, but rather as an evolution of the system itself.

In the field of hermeneutics, numerous philosophers have addressed Kant's aesthetics. Contrary to certain readings that tend to view Kant as the philosopher of subjectivism, Günter Figal's contribution develops an original interpretation that connects Kant's aesthetics to the objectivity of the work of art. According to Figal, aesthetic experience is only possible on the basis of a work of art and the most elaborate version of this reading is to be found precisely in Kant's aesthetics. In this vein Figal opposes an "aesthetic that is essentially objective" (p. 69) to some critiques that had been raised by influential hermeneutical thinkers like Heidegger and Gadamer. For Heidegger, aesthetics as such is characterized by a fallacious way of understanding art as a mere object of emotional experience; moreover, in the Heideggerian conceptual framework, "considerations on Kant's aesthetics are a blank space" (p. 61), since a genuine approach to Kant's work would have risked putting into question Heidegger's historically based reading of aesthetics as a reduction to an emotional object. Instead, it was Gadamer who made explicit the objection against Kant of having subjectivized aesthetics, which, for Gadamer, is a thoroughly modern fact. Gadamer links aesthetics to the concept of "aesthetical differentiation", contrastively affirming the essential continuity between real life and representation.

From a different hermeneutical point of view, Dennis Schmidt's contribution aims to show a continuity between Gadamer's and Kant's aesthetics, going so far as to argue that the first part of *Truth and Method* constitutes a kind of continuation and implementation of the Kantian project. Gadamer's intention, for Schmidt, would be to show the limitation of the *Geisteswissenschaften* based on the objectivist model of the *Naturwissenschaften* and its grounding on the basic concepts of humanism: the basis of the latter relies on the Kantian concepts of "*Bildung*", "taste", "judgment", and "*sensus communis*". However, Kant would develop his project in a direction that was later criticized by Gadamer, "as he radically subjectivizes and isolates" aesthetic experiences (p. 79). For Gadamer, Kant would therefore be the initiator of a project not

carried through to the end, leading to the denial of the cognitive value of aesthetic experience, with the outcome of the “aesthetic consciousness” and “aesthetic differentiation”, characterized by an idea of experience as *Erlebnis* that stands at the basis of 19th-century aesthetics. From this point of view, if Kant constitutes for Schmidt the starting point of the Gadamerian approach, he is also the one that most diverges from it. Gadamer, indeed, has canonized a reading of Kant’s aesthetics as the beginning of the isolation of art and its subjectivation.

Hans-Peter Krüger’s contribution is focused on the interpretation of Kantian aesthetics in the context of Plessner’s philosophical anthropology. Krüger concentrates on the 1920s and, in particular, on Plessner’s text *Investigations towards a Critique of Philosophical Judgment*. Indeed, the reflection on judgment is central to the theme underlying Plessner’s philosophy, namely the search for a procedure that makes it possible to resolve the following circle: “those standards we must always use to make judgments in research can only be generated in research” (p. 96). In this direction, Plessner reverses the relationship between determining and reflective judgments, re-functionalizing the latter for the discovery of phenomena and the invention of methods of representation (aesthetic judgment) and for gaining and explaining hypothesis (teleological judgment). This goes in the direction of a rethinking of the general understanding of the modern sciences as based on procedures that guarantee not only the foundation of the natural sciences but also that of the cultural and biological sciences by reassessing the Kantian idea of dignity.

III.

When it comes to the reception of Kantian philosophy by the authors belonging to the tradition of critical theory the focus is on the subjectivist conception of aesthetics and on its social and political implications. In his contribution Tom Huhn takes into examination various aspects of Kant’s thinking that Adorno, mostly considered as an interpreter of Hegel, reads through this influence, above all on the question of subjectivism. In fact, Adorno’s main concern is that “the objectivity of beauty is a gateway to the objectivity of subjective experience” (p. 116). An

objectivity that, however, is not opposed to subjectivity, but which “resists subjectivity [...] by installing itself between the pores of subjectivity” (p. 116). For Adorno, aesthetic experience is a historically dynamic phenomenon. Therefore, Kant’s attempt to introduce a universal concept such as that of disinterestedness results in a potential detachability of pleasure from subjectivity. According to Huhn, the limit of the Kantian account of aesthetics lies in the “objectivity of resistance” that is already found in subjective consciousness: resistance is, in fact, the element at the basis of art itself.

In his chapter Nicola Emery analyses the references to a critique of Kant that can be found in Horkheimer’s essay *Art and Mass Culture*, focusing in particular on the meaning of the judgment of taste, conceived in relation to the notions of *sensus communis* and communicability. Rather than strictly aesthetic issues, what Horkheimer sees in Kant’s theorization is the possibility of overcoming the primacy of the private sphere and opening to the other in us. With the advent of Nazism, however, “the possibility of an aesthetic community in the Kantian sense seemed to vanish way beyond the transcendental, to be historically dismissed, brutally annihilated by an aesthetic manipulation capable of saturating even all the pores of *sensus communis*” (p. 144). The impossibility of such a community, and the conflict and resistance between the individual and society, become linked to the Kantian concept of the sublime, up to the elaboration of the disenchantment with modern art, whose potential has been reabsorbed by the system itself.

Serena Feloj’s essay analyses the fundamental significance of Arendt’s interpretation of the third *Critique*. Despite certain limitations of Arendt’s reading, which ends up understanding Kant as a sort of empiricist, she re-elaborates some elements that are still central to the Kantian reflection today, such as the *sensus communis*. Moreover, from a historical point of view, her reading provided a stimulus for mid-20th-century debates, from Habermas to Gadamer to Lyotard. Arendt “defines the aesthetic community gathered around the judgment by giving up on the regulative aspect [...] in favour instead of an actual community” (p. 160). Feloj rightly recalls how the issue, for Kant, is not the call for an actual agreement, but only for the

basis of its possibility, a basis that is therefore not constitutive but rather regulative. What is at stake is thus an ideal community, not already constituted, but understandable as “a mobile horizon constantly constituting and reconstituting itself” (p. 163). On this basis, Arendt reads Kant’s aesthetics, as developed in the third *Critique*, as the foundation of his political thought. Moreover, Arendt shows that Kant’s conception of judgment is based on the human need to communicate with others, i.e. his sociality is the prerequisite for the power for judgment. Feloj underlines that, in this way, Arendt overlooks the possibility of a deduction of the rooting of judgment in common sense: the *a priori* relation between the faculties of those who are part of that community is thus missing.

Patrice Canivez’s contribution is dedicated in a very original way to Eric Weil’s reading of Kant’s third *Critique*. He focuses on the role that Kant’s aesthetics plays in Weil’s thought as the moment of transition from a philosophy of being to a philosophy of meaning. The *Critique of the Power of Judgment* represents for Weil the moment when the world of facts is reconciled with that of meanings, since the existence “of facts that are meaningful in themselves” is precisely what is discovered (p. 179). However, according to Weil, this aspect is not made explicit by Kant, due to his “conceptual language”. The beautiful and the sublime, in particular, manifest an interplay between faculties which shows their universality and shareability. What distinguishes the beautiful and the sublime from the living organism, however, is the fact that the latter is an end for itself, and not in itself (as with the beautiful and sublime). With the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* the world becomes not only knowable but also comprehensible. In Weil’s interpretation, the fact that the world has meaning implies that human action is possible in it.

IV.

In the context of the so-called French Theory Kant often plays the role of a sort of adversary, as the founder of a classical philosophical system, whose points of non-tightness must be highlighted. It is not by chance that the concept of sublime is investigated with particular attention in this context. Anne

Sauvagnargues, in her essay, discusses the fundamental role of Kantian aesthetics in Deleuze's reflection, especially in two main directions: the elaboration of a theory of the faculties (elaborating a "paradoxical transcendental empiricism") and the investigation of the role of the sublime (in his later works dedicated to cinema). Kant's third *Critique* acquires a central role with respect to the other two *Critiques*, because no single aesthetic common sense that moderates the agreement between faculties can be postulated, thus generating the need for their reorganization. The greater emancipatory freedom, in comparison to the faculty of understanding, that belongs to the imagination also allows the free play of the faculties. Sauvagnargues identifies a difference between Deleuze's book on Kant (*Kant's Critical Philosophy*), that reflects a desire for systematicity, and an article of the same year (*The Idea of Genesis in Kant's Aesthetics*), that focuses on the question of art, thus leading Deleuze to pay attention to the sublime and the dysregulation of the arts. It is precisely the concept of the sublime, in this Deleuzian reading, that forms the image that goes beyond our capacity for response and explanation, thus taking the faculties to their limits (an aspect that is scattered throughout his reflections on cinema).

Pietro Terzi's contribution analyses how Derrida approaches the third *Critique* in the essays *Parergon* and *Economimesis*, underlining the fact that Derrida's real interest does not lie in art or aesthetics, but rather in broader philosophical or meta-philosophical problems which are also affected by the critique of a peculiar situation in French culture. Derrida follows Hegel (criticizing, however, his tendency to turn art back into the circle of the system) and Heidegger (who, notwithstanding his intentions, actually remains within metaphysics) in identifying Kant as the founder of aesthetics, and thus a representant of metaphysics, insofar as he "uses" the notion of art by turning it back into the circle of the system, i.e. understanding it as the middle term between freedom and nature. For Derrida, Kant's approach ultimately highlights a practice that is present in philosophy, which relates itself to external forms, namely art, by assimilating them and submitting them to the primacy of the logos. This operation of critiquing the

limits of rationality summarizes and testifies the Derridean practice of deconstruction itself as the shedding of light on the frame and the denaturalization of the conceptual frame.

Dario Cecchi's contribution focuses on Lyotard by recalling the idea of "critical realism" which does not question the relationship between thought and reality, but rather considers it under the different perspectives of epistemology, politics, ethics, and art. It is through Kant (and Wittgenstein) that Lyotard discovers a philosophy characterized by the multiplicity of forms of judgment, linked to the various ways of making sense of experience. Kant's reflection on the sublime provides Lyotard with a favorable standpoint of judgment, because the relationship between universals and particulars is considered from an oppositive point of view. In general, what Lyotard emphasizes is that the synthesis of the sublime is not an intellectual synthesis of representations, thereby criticizing the Kantian conception. Lyotard's interpretation is uncertain about reflective judgment and thus "has quite a different purpose than the epistemological status of the object" (p. 239). This also relates to the criticism of the risk of aestheticization of politics linked to certain readings of the *sensus communis* that have been developed, for instance, by Arendt, and, differently, by Habermas and Apel.

Claudio Paolucci's essay focuses on Umberto Eco's reading of the transformation of the concept of schema from the *Critique of Pure Reason* to the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. The latter is connected by Eco, on the one hand, to certain issues in the cognitive sciences, while, on the other hand, Eco also emphasizes the presence of certain analogies between the Kantian conception of reflexive judgment and Percian concept of "abduction". As Paolucci convincingly shows, this can eventually lead to develop the Kantian conception of the power of judgment and taste in an enactivist direction.

V.

Dewey's pragmatism also seems to constitute a direct alternative to the Kantian conception of art and aesthetics, as Scott Stroud points out. The author's intention in this contribution is to show how, behind the critique against Kant's

supposed separation of art from other human activities and his association of reflective judgment to mere contemplation and disinterestedness, we can actually see that Dewey drew some elements from Kant, although without properly acknowledging it. Indeed, for Stroud, Dewey sees Kant's philosophy as opposite to his own project, which is founded on a naturalistic basis where the organism is always understood in close relation to its environment. However, this does not exclude the possibility to highlight some aspects of commonality between Dewey and Kant when it comes to understanding the experience of the beautiful and sublime. On the basis of the four definitions of the judgment of taste, Kant stated that beauty is a symbol of moral goodness: it internalizes ends by means of experience, and this is an aspect that can also be detected in Dewey's aesthetics, in which an interconnection of means and ends is precisely identified in the "consummatory experience". Although their philosophical aims were different, Kant and Dewey seem to converge in the way in which means and ends are integrated into experience.

Diarmuid Costello concentrates on the history of the critique of Kant's philosophy as developed in the context of "arts theory", characterized since the 1980s by a rejection of aesthetic reflection and, in particular, of Kant's aesthetics. Costello analyses how this occurred via the influence of Greenberg, who had an impact among both Kant's critics (Danto) and supporters (de Duve). Greenberg reduced Kant's conception to a critique of taste, not considering him as an author that was capable to offer a positive contribution to a discourse on the arts, while Danto, in particular, sees in Kant a crushing of artistic beauty over natural beauty. On this basis, Costello highlights some of Greenberg's basic convictions, in order to show how Kant's theory must not be confused with a purely formalistic aesthetics, striving for an opening up and a rethinking of it by art theorists as well.

Thomas Teufel analyses the reference to Kantian aesthetics that are present in Cavell's thought and, in particular, in *Aesthetics Problem in Modern Philosophy*, focusing on Cavell's reading of the relationship between "what we say and what we mean". Kant's pure judgment of taste is understood here as a partial analogy with meta-linguistic statements: as Teufel explains, "Cavell centers his account around Kant's idea that in

the absence of empirical verification, the judgment of taste nevertheless speaks with a ‘universal voice’” (p. 304). The main claim is based on the fact that, if aesthetic and semantic judgments can speak with such an “air of dogmatism”, namely authority, then if our aesthetic judgments are legitimized, so too will be “the force and import of our claims about ‘what we say’ and ‘what we mean’” (p. 304). Cavell thus sees in Kant the possibility of justifying a sense of necessity in the ordinary language of meta-linguistic statement.

VI.

The volume concludes with two contributions specifically focused on the influence of the Kantian text in contemporary aesthetics, which show how the engagement with the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* is living and still operating today. Alessandro Bertinetto and Stefano Marino develop an original paper dedicated to Kant’s possible contribution to a philosophical understanding of “the logic of artistic improvisation”. Bertinetto and Marino stress the affinity between the fact that an improvisation always starts from a specific situation and the presence of a genuinely inventive component in reflective judgment. Thus it is impossible to refer taste to a prefixed universal rule. Indeed, improvisation is understood as a practice that must not be limited to art, but must be rather considered as an aspect that emerges in various aspects of everyday life as well. Along these lines, the two authors reassess the relationship between the power of judgment and genius, claiming that creation and performance are not just separate moments, but actually coincide in a process of self-regulation. The fact that reflective judgment does not refer to a norm implies here that it depends on the specific situation and that therefore it can be defined as “performative”. Contrary to some “Platonist” readings that demoted improvisation to imperfect practice, Kant’s legacy seems to support instead the idea that perfection is not something that can be found outside or before experience, but emerges within the latter. Improvisation is therefore an inherently transformative experience, originating in a specific situation and interacting with its surroundings. Following this reasoning, Bertinetto and Marino argue that improvisation

“makes sense (in the performative meaning of the world) the same way aesthetic (reflective) judgment invents general norms put of the single case” (p. 327). Being negotiated every time, the normativity ties in with the social aspect of art, which therefore requires a communicability and sociality that is always *in fieri*. This relates to the recovery of the Kantian concept of genius, not understood as the romantic genius, but as the creator of the work of art as he/she improvises. Normativity itself is not a prescriptive norm but is produced *in itinere*, that is, in an autopoietic way.

Thomas Leddy's essay closes the volume by opening *Everyday Aesthetics* (which has in Dewey the main author of reference) to Kant's thought. Leddy questions the idea that the multiple “objects” of everyday aesthetics would fall into the realm of the agreeable, because in reality we cannot clearly discriminate between the agreeable and the beautiful. Moreover, even the agreeable can be shared and is not merely an individual prerogative. This relates to disinterestedness, very often the focus of criticism against Kant in pragmatist studies. Again, for Leddy, drawing a clear distinction between the (disinterested) beautiful and the (interested) agreeable in the same object would be fallacious: referring to the example of a rose, “it seems that the rose could be approached either as something agreeable and as something beautiful” (p. 344). Leddy then proceeds by investigating other aspects of the Kantian conception in relation to *Everyday Aesthetics*, such as the concept of adherent beauty and that of the ideal, enacting a true pragmatist operation where opposites are rethought in a relational sense: *Everyday Aesthetics* would not be concerned with what Kant considered as the agreeable (as opposed to the beautiful) or with adherent beauty (as opposed to free beauty), but Kantian categories can in fact explain some phenomena of *Everyday Aesthetics* (such as the ideal in the case of a loved one's face). Indeed, in attempting to reconcile *Everyday Aesthetics* with Kantian thought, Leddy speaks of a development “from a thin to a thicker form of everyday aesthetics”, developing in a “multifarious” sense Kant's reflection in the direction of his project of thinking the extraordinary in the ordinary. All of this and much more can be found in Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, as Marino's

and Terzi's book, in conclusion, suggest to the readers of this book.

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