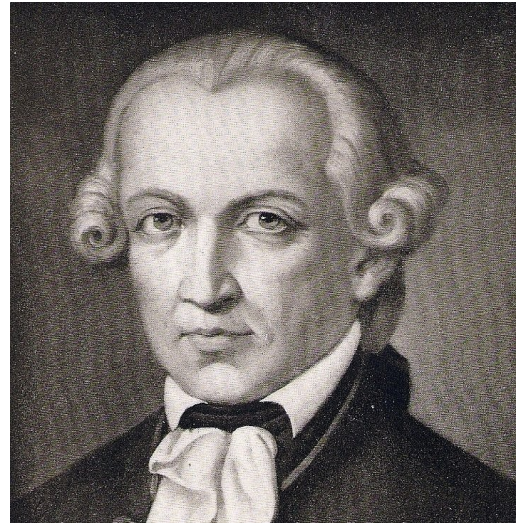




The Critique of the Power of Judgement

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804)

Immanuel Kant, German Enlightenment philosopher whose original and powerful philosophy has shaped most subsequent western thought. He was a popular lecturer, and was capable of a lively, readable style; although his major works are as dense and difficult as they are influential. (Kant defended this as a deliberate choice, since he wanted to examine what could be known about the mind in itself, or a priori, without depending on particular examples.)



Kant produced an early treatise on æsthetics, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1763), and did not write on the subject again until the end of his career, in the *Critique of Judgment* (1790). In between the two works came the development of his influential critical philosophy. Although Kant saw the *Critique of Judgment* as the key work which connected his writings on epistemology (the theory of knowledge) in the *Critique of Pure Reason* with his writings on ethics in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, it is not necessary to know these other works in order to understand the most influential parts of Kant's æsthetics.

Like many other writers on æsthetics before him, Kant's main interest was not in art per se, but in Beauty (and along with other eighteenth century writers, in the Sublime). Thus most of his remarks are as relevant to the beautiful or sublime in nature as in art. Like other Enlightenment writers, (e.g. Hutcheson and Hume), Kant also thought that Beauty or Sublimity were not really properties of objects, but ways in which we respond to objects. (So they all wrote, not about the Form of the Beautiful, as Plato or a medieval philosopher would have done, but about Taste.) And like these other writers, Kant was concerned to show that this focus on the subjective æsthetic response did not make æsthetic value a mere function of individual or personal taste.

Kant's way of working out these problems is what makes his æsthetics original and influential. He claimed that judgments of taste are both subjective and universal. They are subjective, because they are responses of pleasure, and do not essentially involve any claims about the properties of the object itself. (What matters is not the picture I see; rather it is the pleasing effect of the picture on me.) On the other hand, æsthetic judgments are universal and not merely personal. That's because in a crucial way they must be disinterested. When I am appreciating a painting æsthetically, I am not thinking about how much money it's worth, or whether it is a portrait of a family member, or even about who painted it, except in so far as knowing the painter helps me see

what's in the work. These non-æsthetic interests are extraneous to my appreciation of the painting. Rather I am pleased by the painting just for what it is, apart from anything I may get out of it. In fact I do not even take an ethical interest in the painting's subject (that is, any ethical interest is separate from this disinterested pleasure I take in the painting). *"Taste that requires an added element of charm and emotion for its delight, not to speak of adopting this as the measure of its approval, has not emerged from barbarism"* (CJ 13).

Kant thought that for æsthetic judgements to be both subjective and universal, they had to be about form. Beauty should be *"a question merely of the form"* (CJ 13). More specifically, the object being contemplated (e.g., a work of art, or an actual landscape) must display a kind of undefined purposiveness, such that it seems to be organised with a final purpose in mind, although it is not possible to say what that purpose is. Thus a work of art, or a beautiful natural object, displays a kind of free play of forms, consistent with the presence of a purpose to which we don't have access. So intent was Kant on emphasising the formal properties of the objects of æsthetic attention that he was unwilling to include color among the æsthetically relevant properties of an object. Color, in his view, is mere decoration; design and composition are what really matter (CJ 14). To sum up this point about form in Kant's own words: *"A judgment of taste which is uninfluenced by charm or emotion (though these may be associated with the delight in the beautiful), and whose determining ground, therefore, is simply finality of form, is a pure judgment of taste."*

Kant divided the kinds of æsthetic response into responses to the Beautiful and the Sublime. The one represents a pleasure in order, harmony, delicacy and the like. The other is a response of awe before the infinite or the overwhelming. While the beautiful presents the appearance of form, the sublime may often seem formless. The pleasure it gives us derives from our awareness that there is something in us that transcends the overwhelming power or infinity outside us. Finally, Kant had things to say about genius. In short, he thought that genius has its own rules, and one cannot dictate to it.

How Kant arrived at his conclusions is not easily shown; and it is no surprise that the philosophical reasoning that grounds those conclusions did not follow them into the cultural mainstream. But the conclusions themselves proved quite influential. His remarks on genius, and on purposiveness in art and nature, had an impact on the development of Romantic æsthetics.

Summary

The Critique of Judgment, often called the Third Critique, does not have as clear a focus as the first two critiques. In broad outline, Kant sets about examining our faculty of judgment, which leads him down a number of divergent paths. While the Critique of Judgment deals with matters related to science and teleology, it is most remembered for what Kant has to say about æsthetics.

Kant calls æsthetic judgments “*judgments of taste*” and remarks that, though they are based in an individual’s subjective feelings, they also claim universal validity. Our feelings about beauty differ from our feelings about pleasure and moral goodness in that they are disinterested. We seek to possess pleasurable objects, and we seek to promote moral goodness, but we simply appreciate beauty without feeling driven to find some use for it. Judgments of taste are universal because they are disinterested: our individual wants and needs do not come into play when appreciating beauty, so our æsthetic response applies universally. Æsthetic pleasure comes from the free play between the imagination and understanding when perceiving an object.

Kant distinguishes the beautiful from the sublime. While the appeal of beautiful objects is immediately apparent, the sublime holds an air of mystery and ineffability. While a Greek statue or a pretty flower is beautiful, the movement of storm clouds or a massive building is sublime: they are, in a sense, too great to get our heads around. Kant argues that our sense of the sublime is connected with our faculty of reason, which has ideas of absolute totality and absolute freedom. While storm clouds or a massive building might stretch our minds, they are nothing compared with reason’s ideas of absolute totality and freedom. Apprehending sublime objects puts us in touch with these ideas of reason, so that sublimity resides not in sublime objects but in reason itself. In a second part of the book, Kant wrestles with the concept of teleology, the idea that something has an end, or purpose. Teleology falls somewhere between science and theology, and Kant argues that the concept is useful in scientific work even though we would be wrong to assume that teleological principles are actually at work in nature.

Analysis

While much of what Kant writes about æsthetics might strike us now as a bit dated, his work is historically very significant. Kant’s Third Critique is one of the early works in the field of æsthetics and one of the most important treatises on the subject ever written. Æsthetics differs from literary criticism and art criticism, which have existed for millennia, in that it attempts to explain not only why things are or are not beautiful but also the concept of beauty and how the perception of beauty arises in us. Kant takes on the considerable task of making room for the concepts of the beautiful and the sublime in the complex account of the mind he gives in his first two Critiques. Unfortunately for Kant, the success of this project can be understood only in the context of his complex and abstruse philosophical system, while its failures are immediately apparent. The close relationship between art and politics, which became clear in the twentieth century, casts doubt on Kant’s assertion that our response to art is disinterested, and his claim that our sense of beauty is universal makes less sense in a world in which we are exposed to the diversity of artistic products of different cultures. Although his work continues to influence work in æsthetics, Kant falls victim to the same problem that touches everyone who tries to make general claims about art: the very concept of art has great historical fluidity so that we can never nail down for all time exactly what it is.

Kant's account of beauty as based in subjective feeling as well as his struggles with teleology stem from his desire to refute all metaphysical proofs of God. Kant is by no means an atheist, and he makes forceful arguments for why we ought to believe in God. However, God is the ultimate thing-in-itself, and so, according to Kant's epistemology, the nature and even the existence of God are fundamentally unknowable. In the Critique of Pure Reason, Kant provides refutations for all the main "proofs" of God's existence, one of which is the Argument from Design. According to this argument, the patterns and formal perfection in nature suggest the presence of an intelligent designer. Kant argues that our judgment of beauty is a subjective feeling, even though it possesses universal validity, in part because arguing that beauty is objective would play into the hands of those who make the Argument from Design. If beauty were an objective property of certain objects in nature, the question would naturally arise of how these objects were bestowed with beauty. This question would provide a toehold for the Argument from Design, an outcome that Kant is determined to avoid.