

Uncontrollable Beauty

Toward a New Aesthetics

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Freud with Kant? The Enigma of Pleasure

HUBERT DAMISCH

I HAVE ALREADY STATED THAT THIS READING OF FREUD, AND OF WHAT HE COULD have had to say about beauty, will be oriented and framed by his implicit reference to Kant's third *Critique*, more specifically to the analytic of the beautiful that opens its "Critique of Aesthetic Judgment." There is nothing in Freud's text that calls for this reference or explicitly justifies it.¹ In an attempt like this one to assess historically the passages in which Freud evokes the problem of beauty, other names also have some claim to consideration, beginning with that of the "divine Plato." Kant was certainly not the first to bring what Lacan called the "pleasure index" to bear on aesthetic matters, but his formulation of the question of the judgment of taste is echoed in Freud's text; these echoes are decidedly problematic, but I will undertake to amplify them, to set them reverberating, in hopes of revealing something that otherwise would have remained obscure.

First, the thesis consistently advanced by Freud that the object of the drive is, at least initially, of no importance, its only point of interest being its capacity to provide satisfaction (at least initially: the problem consisting in part of determining at what moment, under what conditions, in what context, as a result of what evolution, and in virtue of what displacement the object ceases being, as Lacan would have it, a matter of total indifference). Would we be justified in comparing

Freud's uncoupling of the question of beauty, insofar as it is derivative of the drive, from its object with the "Copernican revolution" operated by Kant with regard to the faculty of judging "beauty"; The analytic of the beautiful posits that the judgment of taste is not logical but aesthetic, with the latter term designating "that of which the determining principle can only be subjective"; To decide whether something is beautiful or not, we do not relate the representation to the object but by means of the imagination to the subject and its feeling (Gefühl) of pleasure (Lust) or uppleasure among themselves but the subjective relation of representation to the feelings of pleasure or uppleasure accompanying them, feelings that designate nothing in the object itself but rather the positive or negative affect produced by its representation itself.

The question of affect: While Diderot already maintained that beauty is relational, what counts for Kant is no longer the objective relation of representations among themselves but the subjective relation of objects that affect by their own intrinsic qualities (Lebensgefühl), from that Wollegfalle crucial to the judgment of beauty excluded from satisfaction, from that Wollegfalle that grounds the faculty of pleasure as well as all links with the realm of desire, taste, all connotations of drive or libido as well as all links with the realm of desire. The paradox and enigma of what Kant terms "pure" pleasure begins here. Speculation of feelings of pleasure and uppleasure might be another way for Freud to designate the subject's "feeling of life", the Lebensgefühl that grounds the faculty of discrimination (*Unterscheidungsvermögen*) and judgment (*Berüterliningsvermögen*). In determining whether or not something is beautiful, the judgments very often has anything to do with taste—indeed of the faculty of desire (Begierden) wherein: If there is any such thing as this little feeling, it is and must be—imsofar as it is of discrimination (*Unterscheidungsvermögen*) and judgment (*Berüterliningsvermögen*).

The parallel would make sense if the analytic of the beautiful did not explicitly exclude from satisfaction, from that Wollegfalle crucial to the judgment of beauty, the parallel would make sense if the analytic of the beautiful did not explicitly within the subject.

(das mindeste Interesse) plays a role is decidedly partial (*sehr partileich*) and cannot be considered a judgment of "pure" taste; to play the role of judge in matters of taste, one must first silence within oneself all desire, and be not the least bit (in mind) interested with regard to the object's existence but rather totally indifferent to it.²

So it is difficult to see, at first glance, what might be the meaning within a Freudian context of a “satisfaction” such as that posited by Kant as the basis of the judgment of taste: one that is “pure and disinterested”—disinterested to an extent inconsistent with the nature of the drive. For there to be a judgment of “pure” taste, the subject must pay no attention to the object and what he might think of it, heeding only the feeling of pleasure or unpleasure awakened in him by its inner representation. A work of art might well be, as Walter Benjamin maintained, a document of barbarism as much as of culture, and, to use Kant’s example, a palace might bear simultaneous witness to the vanity of the great and to the exploitation of the working class; but Kant maintains that “such is not the subject at hand” (*nur davon ist jetzt nicht die Rede*): “The important thing in declaring an object beautiful and demonstrating that I have taste is not my relation to the existence of the object, but what I do with this representation within myself” (*was ich aus dieser Vorstellung in mir selbst mache*). The representation is related not to the object but to the subject. But what the latter “does” with it does not adhere to the register of knowledge, not even that through which the subject knows himself (*auch nicht zu jemjenigen, wodurch sich das Subjekt selbst erkennt*): Judgments of taste convey nothing about the object in question, and they likewise tell us nothing about the pronouncing subject, except that the latter has—or does not have—taste, which is to say that he is capable of declaring an object “beautiful” on the sole basis of affect, of the satisfaction he derives from it.³

In Kant’s view, where there is *Interesse*, whether positive or negative, there can be no “pure” judgments of taste, anymore than there can be *free* judgments of taste, freedom being paired here with purity and vice versa. Interest of any kind either presupposes or produces a need (*ein Bedürfnis*), and this precludes the pronouncement of judgments that are truly “free.” The same holds for satisfaction deriving from the “graceful, lovely, delightful, enjoyable,” etc., and generally for “everything pleasing to the senses in sensation.” Whereas *feeling* (*das Gefühl*) must remain subjective and manifest itself in simple approval, in pure assent (*Beifall*), *sensation*, by contrast, corresponds to an objective representation that determines an inclination, a penchant (*eine Neigung*)—the sole criterion of the value of things being pleasure, in the sense of the enjoyment (*das Vergnügen*) they procure, or that they promise (*welches sie versprechen*). “Of that which is agreeable, we don’t say ‘I like it’ (*es gefällt*) but ‘it gratifies me’ (*es vergnügt*).” *Annehmlichkeit* is *Genuss*: “The agreeable is pleasure”; and pleasure (*jouissance*) goes beyond assent, implying use

The paradox here is that the effect seems to bracket the subject as much as the "pure" pleasure as in its link to feeling, to affect. How can we have a "feeling of reasoning and animal aspect". The enigma doesn't lie so much in its being a "pure" pleasure as in the subject's desire that the subject can properly play no other "life" so utterly unconcerned to desire that the subject can properly play no other "life"; How can we have a pleasure in which gratification plays no part, when it's function to the existence of an object whose representation is a source of pleasure for reason?

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function as a feeling of pleasure—“pure” pleasure.

measured by its discursive effects (the effect is “to be spoken”, and spoken in its function of experience, but rather of pure effect—so pure that it can only be really in this case, as the index of an enunciatory task) as a pleasure that's not pleasure must be posited as pure, which is to say (a phrase to be understood literally) that makes me speak (judge), because the first condition (the a priori principle) of the judgment of taste stipulates that in this discursive act the utterance: It is what makes me speak (judge), because the first condition (the a priori principle) of the judgment of taste stipulates that in this discursive act the property speaking, there is no “beauty” that isn't spoken, declared to be such beautiful, but the discursivity inherent in the very structure of the beautiful, question, namely, the discourse on the beauty—not only a discourse about the question posed by this pleasure must be assessed in light of what's in that the enigma posed by this pleasure must be assessed in light of what's in that bear in mind is that judgment is forbidden—not only a discourse about the pleasure—above all, that pure pleasure free of any taint of gratification, the one spoken except between the lines⁵). But we must go further, at least as regards what one musicable while judgment is not (Bartes cites Lacan on this point: “What one criterion for distinguishing pleasure from judgment. Pleasure is verbally com-

Roland Barthes has demonstrated that psychopathology provides us with a

image dispensing with judgment.⁴

ment of taste is no longer in question: those in search of such gratification will—Gentessen: . . . das ist das Wort, womit man das Jenseits des Vergnügens beschreibt; judge becomes most intimate, when it attains a certain level of creaturely pleasure (das of providing analogous gratification. Beyond a certain point, when the enjoyment always induce a desire (étre Besieherte) for objects of the same kind that are capable or consumption. Gratification of this kind is so impure, so interested, that it will

satisfaction in which—to use Kant's term—there is nothing "pathological," which is to say, nothing passive, a satisfaction that's not induced by a stimulus? How can we have an affect stripped of all accompanying emotion which, while pure, belongs to the register of activity (the free play of the faculties)? A pleasure, a satisfaction, an affect whose "purity" is commensurate with that of the judgment of taste, in discursive terms? If these questions have a bearing on the discursive element in the structure of the beautiful, they also concern the relation of pleasure, satisfaction, and affect to the very discursivity that produces them in all of their "purity," insofar as this latter is a condition of the judgment of taste.

Formulated in this way, these questions prompt a reconsideration of one of the most difficult passages in the analytic of the beautiful, section nine, where Kant investigates whether the feeling of pleasure precedes judgment (*die Beurteilung*) of the object or derives from it, the solution to this problem constituting for him the key to the critique of taste (*der Schlüssel zur Kritik des Geschmacks*). If pleasure comes first, it is reduced to a simple sensory gratification and is immediately dependent on the representation in which the object is given. To sensory taste (*Sinnsgeschmack*), which has a purely individual value, is opposed considered taste (*Reflexionsgeschmack*), which issues judgments with pretensions to universality: The very foundation of the judgment of taste, the condition of its subjective condition, is unanimity with regard to satisfaction (*die allgemeine Stimme, in Ansehung des Wohlfallens*), the universal communicability of this "mental state" (*die allgemeine Mitteilungsfähigkeit des Gemütszustandes*), each individual considering that the satisfaction he experiences is rooted in something he can take for granted as being shared by everyone, and so can speak of beauty as if it were a property (*Eigenschaft*) or a structure (*Beschaffenheit*) of the object, something determined by a concept. Insofar as it is universally communicable, the "mental state" or *Gemütszustand* is a thing of words. So a purely subjective (aesthetic) act of judgment logically precedes the pleasure induced by the object and provides the basis for the pleasure proceeding from the harmony of the powers or faculties of knowledge and their free play (free because not limited by a concept) in a representation. But the pleasure experienced in communicating, the interest (*Interesse*) inherent in sharing the state of mind that is its point of departure, is not sufficient to account for the judgment of taste in its most intimate manifestation, which is not intersubjective. However dependent on verbal expression it is and must be, beauty, like pleasure, even when

upon a double displacement, that of the genital organs onto so-called secondary nonetheless rises to consciousness. Positive, approving judgments are predicated deminutition thanks to which a representation of the excitation they stimulate "bearing on the genitalia must be replaced by a judgment of denial or cancellation" is a substitute: For judgments of taste to be possible, first of all the organic reference of the repressed.⁸ Judgment goes in tandem with the repression for which it is a symbol of negation, under whose cover thought acquires a semblance of independence with regard to the repression and achieves a kind of intellectual acceptance of the symbol of negation, under whose cover thought acquires a semblance of independence whether a property does or doesn't belong to a thing depends on the creation of capacity to make an impartial judgment (*die unparteiische Urteilsgfähigung*) as to the function here performed by negation (the genitalia are not judged to be beautiful). This might well make us pick up our ears once we know that, for Freud, the

The displacement preliminary to the attribution of beauty is inextricable from between "the beautiful" and the repressed;

Freudian terms: What is the relation between "taste" and repression—and attraction, which is declared to be "pornographic"? To reframe the question in prohibits us from judging them to be "beautiful" and discourages their representation. This prompts a question that might be formulated as follows: Is it "taste" that the genitalia, however exciting to the eye, are rarely judged (*bentheit*) to be beautiful "the beautiful" originally designated what was sexually stimulating, even though to displace the question toward that of the attribution of beauty: The concept of feelings to avow, does not have much to say about beauty. But this is immediately source, its root, in the speaking subject. Likewise with Freud: Psychoanalysis, he should establish what is necessary to declare an object "beautiful" and clarity its whether something is beautiful or not: the analytic of the judgment of taste itself, but rather taste, defined as the power or faculty of discriminating (*unterscheidend*) essentially has the value of a predicate. Kant does not investigate beauty in and for that, for Freud as for Kant, beauty is a matter of judgment, and "the beautiful" subject is separated from a portion of its representations; The essential thing here of beauty to the unconscious and the repression thanks to which the unconscious separated from itself. What relation can possibly obtain between the attribution overlap with Freudian analysts, which tends to depict the subject as split, divided, It is principally in this respect that the analytic of the beautiful might seem to

feelings of the subject, it is nothing.

shared, is not a matter of consensus: In itself, independent of its relation to the

sexual characteristics, and that of the stimulus (*Reiz*) prompted by seeing them onto the "interest" awakened by these "charms" (*Reize*), which—it is worth repeating—are so-called because of "the particular quality of excitation whose cause, when it occurs in a sexual object, we designate as 'beauty'"—the discrepancy between the two meanings of the word *Reiz* being indicative of an evolution, perhaps even a history, belonging not only to the sexual object but also to the subject here constituting itself, discursively, by uttering an aesthetic judgment.

Thus Freud's text renews, within a perspective that is not critical but rather genetic, the question of the role of "discursivity" in the structure of the "beautiful." Judgment as such is a matter of the "ego"—which, under the cover of negation, sets itself apart from the unconscious even as it frees itself from the constraints of the pleasure principle. The judgment of taste in the Freudian sense is so paradoxical as to presuppose, in its capacity as *judgment*, the passage, by the ways and means of discourse, from a strictly subjective position in which the subject adheres to its internal representations—that of the pleasure-ego, the *Lust-Ich*—to an objective position—that of the *Real-Ich*, the reality-ego—from which a question arises as to the reality of these representations, of their correspondence to the external world. The paradox, which we have seen also finds its echo in visual art, resides in the fact that judgment of taste cannot be perfectly disinterested, even though it corresponds to a sublimation of the drive through withdrawal of its libidinal components. The very act of judging implies the reality principle's dominance over the pleasure principle, if only, as Freud says, as a way of serving it, of assuring its continued supremacy over the long term.⁹

* * *

It would be absurd to maintain that the solution to the enigma of the judgment of taste is to be found in psychoanalysis. And yet this enigma is present and operating whenever the question of beauty arises in Freud's work—an enigma that, once again, must be understood in discursive terms. Kant's project was not genealogical but critical: He set out to build a bridge between understanding and reason by introducing judgment as a third term, a *Mittelglied*. Freud's project, by contrast, was psychoanalytic, and thus genetic. He set out to determine whence the very concept of "beauty" proceeded, or from what it derived. The paradox consists in the fact that this process or derivation is at the origin of, or, at any rate, contemporary with, the passage from nature to culture inherent in the acquisition of an

The problem here doesn't concern the potential pathways to sublimation, to persist in subsequent stages of development. Doubts begin to arise when we observe how fearlessly Freud associates in a single emotion of sufficient purity to satisfy Kant's criteria for the judgment of taste; ing: Can sublimation or "idealization", however diverted, lead to an aesthetic essentially discursive character of the process. The important question is the necessary "idealization" of the drive, though it is perhaps worth stressing once more the necessity and charm. Kant writes: "Taste needing a mixture of charms (Reize) and emotions to attain satisfaction will always be barbaric, all the more so if it makes these the standard of its approval".¹⁰ If, as the third Critique would have it, beauty derives from the two terms Kant took such care to distinguish from one another: beauty and charm, Kant writes: "Taste needing a mixture of charms (Reize) and emotions to attain satisfaction will always be barbaric, all the more so if it makes these the standard of its approval".¹⁰ If, as the third Critique would have it, beauty derives from the two terms Kant took such care to distinguish from one another: beauty and charm, Kant writes: "Taste needing a mixture of charms (Reize) and emotions to attain satisfaction will always be barbaric, all the more so if it makes these the standard of its approval".¹⁰ If, as the third Critique would have it, beauty derives from the two terms Kant took such care to distinguish from one another: beauty and charm, Kant writes: "Taste needing a mixture of charms (Reize) and emotions to attain satisfaction will always be barbaric, all the more so if it makes these the standard of its approval".¹⁰ If, as the third Critique would have it, beauty derives from the two terms Kant took such care to distinguish from one another: beauty and charm, Kant writes: "Taste needing a mixture of charms (Reize) and emotions to attain satisfaction will always be barbaric, all the more so if it makes these the standard of its approval".¹⁰

Freud's text, the opposition between nature and culture has no operative value: It though the moment of passage from the one to the other is clearly marked in declared to be—as soon as they're designated "artistic";—“more elevated”. Freud, as we think, as psychoanalysts would have us do, in terms of derivation, or better yet of sublation (to use a Hegelian one), we soon realize the impossibility of precisely what amorous interests have overwhelmed or obscured the primary source of excitement, the possibility now presenting itself of a fixation on strictly scopic pleasure and, through this same means, of a libido toward goals unless it declares itself as such in the form of a judgment, the “charms” of the turn, presupposes that, through the operations of desire, the “charms” of the unless it declares itself as such in the form of a judgment, but this judgment, in the schism between the eye and the gaze. There can be no aesthetic motion of desire and emotion, and perhaps even of aesthetic judgment, is to be sought in transfer of “interest” from sexual excitation to the realm of desire. And the origin erect posture: The judgment of taste is predicated upon an initial displacement, a

beauty when it is not integral to the representation but rather a mere addition, ornament, external trapping—or, to employ a Greek term used by Kant and recently given renewed currency by Derrida, a *parergon*.

It remains that, as Kant himself admitted, such misunderstandings often have “some basis in truth” (*etwas Wahres zum Grund*). Here again we must operate on the level of discourse: If indeed there is a misunderstanding, the only way to avoid it would be through rigorous conceptual definition; in which case the only judgments to qualify as pure judgments of taste would be those in which charm and emotion play no part and whose sole determining principle is form.¹¹ But Freud’s thesis is, precisely, that it is impossible to anticipate the derivation of concepts. And isn’t the “basis in truth” of which Kant speaks linked to the fact that if the beautiful, if “that which pleases,” is meaningful only for man because he is endowed with reason, this same man is also an animal being and thus just as subject to the pull toward “gratification” as animals not endowed with reason? In Freud, it is beauty itself that is presented, at least initially, as a *supplement* ultimately intended to reinforce sexual excitation, to support and reinvigorate it despite the ever-present risk of deviation. The problem, again, is to discern whether sublimation can have as its aim beauty in itself, abstracted from any possible link with the sexual realm—a matter, as Kant would have said, of “conceptual rigor.” For if, in the wake of the transition to an erect posture, the coprophilic component of the sexual drive is revealed to be incompatible with what we might call the “aesthetic exigencies” of our civilization, these developments concern only the superior forms of beauty, while the basic processes leading to amorous excitation remain essentially unchanged. “The excremental is all too intimately and inseparably bound up with the sexual; the position of the genitals—*inter urinas et faeces*—remains the decisive and unchangeable factor. One might say here, modifying a well-known saying of the great Napoleon, ‘Anatomy is destiny’ (*Die Anatomie ist das Schicksal*). The genitals themselves have not taken part in the development of the human body in the direction of beauty: They have remained animal, and thus love, too, has remained in essence (*im Grunde*) just as animal as it ever was.”¹²

It was Kant’s explicit intention to isolate the question of pleasure from that of desire. By contrast, Freud set out systematically to constitute desire as an autonomous energy by freeing it of any immediate dependence on gratification: According to his schema, desire is educable but the sexual drive is not. Excitation finding release in discharge does not always go hand in hand with desire, and vice

versa. We have seen how, for Freud, the institution of the family facilitates a transition from sexual behavior that is reflexive, and thus intermittent, to a desire independent of sustaining itself continuously to the extent that it manages to remain or etical construct, the genesis of the ethical dimension is rooted precisely in desire itself, a thing's value being commensurate with its desirability.¹³ The same could be said of the aesthetic dimension, with the following caveat: Here something analagous to a censor detaches itself from the energy of desire, such that the beauty of its repression: The ideal of beauty maintains a genitalization of desire stands in opposition to attraction to the secondary sexual characteristics, which are declared to be "beautiful." But the paradox is only apparent: beauty can sustain a relation with that which gives "body" to sexual desire only on condition of the partial drive's first being detoured away from the sexual "parts"—just as, it's tempting to add, "taste" itself detaches from its gustatory component to assume another, strictly discursive form of reality. Such are the detours of metonymy echoed by discurse jndgments that the genital organs are beautiful, however exciting they are and objective were identical to that between cause and effect) haven't become sight of them, and furthermore (as if the relation obtaining here between subjective and objective were not one of simple substitution), nor is it one of unambiguous say—to the realm of the unformed, the infantile longing—by a kind of necessity in which anatomy, figuring as destiny, also has a part to play, if not its word to beauty and objectivity is a matter of form, the genitalia belonging—by a kind of necessity to the very mechanism of "sublimation," presupposes that the reign of the unformed will persist, as an undercurrent, in Grendle, throughout that of form.

NOTES

1. References to Kant are rare in Freud's work; they evidence his concern to clarify how the hypothesis of the unconscious might be substituted for that of the Kantian a priori by "going beyond" it and articulating it in genetic terms. Thus, spatiality is conceived of not as pure intuition but as deriving by projection from the extension of the psychic apparatus as such: "The psyche has extension but knows nothing about it" (cf. Freud, *Résultats, idées, problèmes*, vol. 2, 1921–38 [Paris, 1985], 288).
2. "Man muss nicht im mindesten für die Existenz der Sache eingenommen, sondern in diesem betracht ganz gleichgültig sein, um in Sachen des Geschmacks, den Richter zu spielen." See Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, part 1, section 2 ("In order to play the judge in matters of taste, we must not be in the least biased in favor of the thing's existence but must be wholly indifferent about it." Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar [Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987], 46; hereafter cited as *Judgment/Pluhar*).
3. Ibid.
4. "Diejenigen, welche immer nur auf das Geniessen ausgehen . . . sich gerne alles Urteilens überheben." Ibid., section 3 (*Judgment/Pluhar*, 47–48).
5. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 21; trans. altered.
6. Jacques Derrida, "Parergon," in *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 48.
7. "Da doch Schönheit ohne Beziehung auf das Gefühl des Subjekts für sich nichts ist!" Kant, *Kritik*, part 1, section 9 (*Judgment/Pluhar*, 61–64).
8. Cf. Freud, "Formulierungen," in *Gesammelte Werke* (GW), vol. 8, 233 ("Formulations," in *Standard Edition* (SE), vol. 12, 221); and "Die Verneinung," in GW, vol. 14, 12 ("Negation," in SE, vol. 19, 235–36).
9. "In Wirklichkeit bedeutet die Ersetzung des Lustprinzips durch das Realitätsprinzip keine Absetzung des Lustprinzips, sondern nur eine Sicherung desselben." See Freud, "Formulierungen," in GW, vol. 8, 235–36 ("Actually the substitution of the reality principle for the pleasure principle implies no depositing of the pleasure principle, but only a safeguarding of it." See "Formulations," in SE, vol. 12, 223).
10. Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, part 1, section 13 (*Judgment/Pluhar*, 68–69).
11. Ibid.
12. Freud, "Beiträge zur Psychologie des Liebeslebens. II. Über die allgemeinste Erniedrigung des Liebeslebens" (1912), in GW, vol. 8, 90 ("On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love (Contributions to the Psychology of Love II)," in SE, vol. II, 189).
13. Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire*, vol. 7, 11 (*Seminar*, vol. 7 [*The Ethics*] [New York: W. W. Norton], 3).