



OSCILLATING IDEOLOGIES: KANTIAN AND HEGELIAN INFLUENCES ON ART HISTORY

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Abstract

Kantian and Hegelian aesthetic theory has been instrumental in the development of art history as an academic discipline, particularly with regards to its function as a canon. This 'canonical' tradition within which art history occurs as a sequential, Eurocentric timeline, incorporates certain understandings of the function of art—which links further back to the Enlightenment split between knowledge-forms, i.e., the bifurcation between 'logic' (objectivity) and 'aesthetics' (subjectivity). This paper seeks to explore the Kantian/Hegelian influence on art history's trajectory in light of this aforementioned split and to scrutinize wider debates between form/content that characterize art history as a discipline.

Keywords: *Art History, Canons, Knowledge, Hegel, Kant.*



Introduction

At the outset I confess that it is difficult to situate art history within a singular developmental trajectory. If we are to consider Kant and Hegel's influence on art history, this proves an even heftier task. This is in part owing to the breadth and complexity of their differential treatments of art and its function— and to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of these is certainly an uphill task. But exploring this complexity is the point. After all, art history manifests as solutions to fabricated 'problems' of how art-objects are to be understood and historicized¹. This involves a tug-of-war between an 'internal' and 'external' historiography as Preziosi (2009) puts it, which we can understand more simply as the problem of objective universal versus subjective particulars. This conflict links back to the bifurcation of knowledge forms into logic and aesthetics, wherein aesthetics is 'sensory knowledge' while logic is 'rational thought' (Preziosi, 2009). In this essay, I will explore briefly how Kant and Hegel's aesthetic theories influenced oscillations between 'form' and 'content' in the development of art history as a discipline. Further, I will posit the idea that although these theories—Kant's in particular—attempted to non-hierarchize sensation and rational cognition², art history as a discipline ultimately developed so as to reinforce difference. This I will show, manifests itself more clearly in a reading of Wolfflin and Gombrich, where the latter leans towards materialism, and the former towards a more historicist mode of comprehension.

A Kantian Aesthetics: 'Subjective Universality' and Relativism

Preziosi situates the split between sensory and rational knowledge as a longstanding

1 'Historicized' being understood, within this context, as the systematic act whereby art-objects are placed within a historical timeline. Within this chronological trajectory posited as 'History' proper, they may also be perceived as emblematic of a certain culture or tradition.

2 This attempt at negotiating a 'non-hierarchical' or relativist viewpoint links back to the split between knowledge forms into 'logic' and 'aesthetics'. This 'split' arises from the Enlightenment tradition whereby rational or instrumental reason—i.e. objective 'logic'—was deemed superior to (subjective) sensation, which was irrational until translated into thought (Preziosi 2009). Kantian aesthetics sought to dismantle this.

notion within the European tradition. Leibniz for example, saw sensation as being subordinate and inferior to rational thought which was “lucid” as opposed to “confused” (Preziosi, 2009, p. 55). Baumgarten and Kantian theory in contrast posited a non-hierarchized view of knowledge. For Baumgarten, the argument was rooted within the ‘perception of perfection’ or ‘taste’. Kant viewed ‘taste’ as ‘common sense’ although his *modus operandi* was to analyze aesthetics in relation to ‘judgment’. According to Kant, pure judgment cannot be ‘reflective’ since it coincides with desire or that which is ‘agreeable’ to us but not necessarily ‘good’. To be ‘good’ or purposeful moreover is a deterministic judgment if informed morally. Nevertheless, judgments of what is ‘good’ in art are not always informed in such a way. In effect, Kant posits a notion of art for art’s sake or ‘purposiveness without purpose’. Beauty for Kant is meant to be analyzed in terms of an art-object’s formal value. It is therefore ultimately relative although not purely so. Ergo, although Kant’s views in the *Critique of Judgment* are inextricably complex, his aesthetic theory is built on the idea of a ‘subjective universality’. That is while a judgment of good taste is one that is universal not everyone may possess the cognitive faculties to be able to make that judgment therefore it is also, paradoxically, subjective.

The influence of Kantian aesthetics is evinced notably in the work of Heinrich Wölfflin (1915) and E.H Gombrich (1916). Traces of Kantian influence can also be found within Clement Greenberg’s espousing of form over content in American modern art. Essentially, critics such as Greenberg considered the formal attributes of an artwork—the technique—to be more significant and for that alone to speak for what the artwork meant. For Wölfflin as well, aesthetic judgment was relegated to form or—as in Gombrich’s case, to style—wherein the style of one period did not trump another in terms of its value. Wölfflin sought to classify art ‘objectively’ hence he developed a systematic framework for stylistic analysis and development. In contrast Gombrich placed an emphasis on individual style, rather than a pervasive or general style defining a certain historical period. That is to say, style should not be fixed into a specific historical context where said history unravels in a chronology of style epochs. He explains that “there is no real common gauge by which to compare the skill of Picasso with that of a conservative Chinese master. Once more, therefore, the evaluation of expressiveness will largely depend on a knowledge of choice situations” (p. 137). Hence, Gombrich makes an argument against Wölfflin’s dependence on contextual linkage or formal ‘shifts’ in ‘style’ as attributable to a historical timeline. Arguably, a Kantian perspective is also manifested in Gombrich’s dialogue on

technology. He identifies technology to influence the form of art expression. For example, as in the case of functionalism, “the conspicuous look of technological efficiency, has become a formal element of expression in architecture and, as such, sometimes influences design at least as much as genuine adaptation to a purpose” (p. 133). The utilitarian aesthetic of a technological form is, for example, apparent in Bauhaus art³. While Gombrich’s views are, in light of the above discussion, ultimately materialist, Wolfflin’s ideas on style falter to a certain Hegelian logic of the unfolding of time hence implicated by a historicist materialist worldview. I shall return to this point later in the essay for now it is better to redirect this conversation towards Hegel.

Hegelian Aesthetics and Hierarchies of Form

Unlike Kant and Baumgarten, Hegel’s aesthetic theory rests on Platonic and Leibnezian foundations where sensory knowledge is held subordinate to logic or rationality. The artwork as art-object hence serves only as ‘vehicle’ or medium for an ‘Ideal’. Hegel’s notion of ‘Ideal’ beauty stems from his notion of human freedom and of a transcendental or divine spirit. This stands in opposition to the idea of mimesis (in the Platonic tradition) of the natural world that Vasari also espoused. The real function of art for Hegel was to depict this Ideal or divine Spirit (divinity). Although a complete summation of Hegel’s aesthetics is not possible within the limited scope of this essay it is important to point out that Hegel held a certain teleological view of history wherein each age was dominated by a *Zeitgeist*. As opposed to a strictly evolutionary view —such as that held by Vasari and Winckelmann—that a certain epoch was the apex for ‘great art’ Hegel classified art into ‘stages’ which aspired towards ‘true beauty’ although not necessarily always achieving it (Preziosi, 2009). Symbolic or ‘pre-art’, which was in his view largely non-European (for example, Turkish or Egyptian art), failed to capture ideal beauty because of its inability to capture sensuous expression fully. Classical art, while encapsulating ideal beauty in terms of its technical and expressive capacities did not express an ‘inwardness’ which Hegel located as

3 Bauhaus (1919-1933) was an art movement that sought to present a utopian aesthetic through the integration of technology, design, art and life. The ‘materiality’ of Bauhaus can be situated in the axiom ‘form follows function.’ That is to say, it is the functionality or utilitarian nature of an artwork that lends it its form. An example of such an artwork is Marianne Brandt’s Tea Infuser and Strainer, or Marcel Breuer’s various armchair ‘compositions’ (Winton 2007).

being more genuinely expressed within Romantic art. Further, Preziosi writes that Hegel's notion of aesthetics was primarily structural. Ergo, unlike Kant, Hegel conceives art as a 'signifier-form' for 'signified content'. He writes that 'defectiveness of form results from defectiveness of content' (p. 83). Preziosi explains Hegel's theodicy in this regard established a difference between Europe

and the 'Other' as encapsulated within the 'pre-art' classification:
"Europe's self-fashioning as not only the 'brain of the earth's body', but the apex of human spiritual evolution, is materially demonstrated by its art. ... To leave Europe would be to enter the past—the past as prologue to (Christian) European technological, cultural, aesthetic, and (above all) spiritual superiority. (p. 59)

Not only was content—of a divine or ideal category—deemed superior to form, the teleological unfolding or human march of the spirit contextualized this content within a European center. Hegel's ideas thus contributed to the development of stylistic categories where, "stylistic change over time and place was symptomatic of broader or deeper (and generally, pre-existing) changes in meaning or significance; changes in individual or collective mentality or will" (p. 151).

Tracing Hegelian and Kantian Influences in Art History: Form versus Content

Earlier I mentioned that Gombrich criticized style as rooted in periodicity, emphasizing individual—and non-hierarchized—style. With Hegel we can see that the shift is towards content or idealism as captured materially. Hence, as with Wolfflin, a certain Kantian influence in Gombrich's analysis is apparent. But 'style' and 'stylistic change' were held to be indicative of and derived from a certain Geist or Spirit of a specific, chronologically situated age. As Preziosi (2009) argues, art was hence seen as a "marker of difference" (p. 10), signifying a unique and relative position to other art-objects in history. This conversation between the pole ends of form and content, occurs throughout and is formative to the trajectory of art history. It is also emblematic of how certain styles or forms are placed hierarchically in relation to others. Alois Riegl (1893), for example, criticized stylistic distinctions, rooted within Hegelian influence and instead posited the notion of a 'Kunstwollen' or the 'apt expressions of an artistic

Will to Form'. This, it can be argued is also reminiscent of Vasari's view of artistic technique as a 'logical unfolding', although for Riegl no one artistic form or technique superseding another.

Art critics and theorists who sought a relativist perspective were similarly posited on Kantian influence—however these viewpoints are also strewn with contradiction. Farago (2002) addresses this, pointing out that the diachronic attempts at ethnography, or art as archaeology, which interprets non-European art as 'primitive' hence subject to study are essentially exclusivist and fetishistic. It subsumes a multitude of voices into "overarching, totalizing structures" (p. 197), reinforcing a certain fetishism of the 'Other'. This goes far back into European history wherein non-European art is considered to be 'not yet art', since it is 'unenlightened'—that is to say, it lacks a capacity to distinguish between "subjective desire and objective causality" (p. 110), a distinction which theories of aesthetics endeavor to accomplish. As Summers (2003) indicates, theories that fall on either end of historicism, materialism, or idealism are ultimately limiting in their attempts to distinguish artistic function within a subjective/objective split. They write that such theories are "alternative principles of the highest generality" (p. 143).

The form/content and subjective/objective splits continue to be subjects of debate. Heidegger has written prolifically on the split between instrumental reason and pure reason. Great art for Heidegger no longer exists because content is subordinate to form although unlike Hegel, Heidegger characterises the artwork's decontextualization from its 'origin' as being a limiting and oppressive form of *Gestell* or 'enframement' (Young 2001). As with museumification⁴, or art as archaeology, fabricated categories are imposed on the artwork—so that it ceases to be artwork proper as Agamben is wont to point out in *Archaeology of the Work of Art*. This endeavour moreover he highlights to be primarily European. It is a retrospective attempt at sense-making that separates art from work in the 'shibboleth' that is modernity, and the ethnographic lens to which art is subjected to (Agamben, 2017, p. 7).

4 'Museumification', here, is in reference to the institutional phenomenon, typical of the modern nation-state, whereby art-objects are condemned to the "storied spaces" of museums. As Preziosi (2009) writes, museums thus function as a "disciplinary mode of knowledge-production in its own right, defining, formatting, modelling, and 're-presenting' many forms of social behavior by means of their products or relics" (p. 489).

I shall make a brief departure from the main body at this point with an example. Although, the form/content, subjective/objective oscillation is evinced in many art movements, I find that it manifests quite interestingly in works of Magic Realism—which rooted within a more literary as opposed to artistic context exemplifies the tug between content and form in interesting ways. Magic Realism, Ouyang and Hart (2005) write, has its origins in the Baroque; it exhibits a tension between ‘surface and innerness’ and paves the way for a ‘split-vision’ to emerge. Magic Realism, in effect, re-negotiates the gap between European realism and the mystified unintelligible which the non-West is deemed to be.

Conclusion

Kant and Hegel’s influence can be witnessed in the form/content split that remains a consistent—albeit ‘fabricated problem’—throughout art history. As way of conclusion, I will reiterate that it is a very broad berth to navigate but I find that it interconnects interestingly with the issue of objectivity/subjectivity which has remained a primary concern in the theorising of art history as a discipline.

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