

Aesthetic Disappointment in Danto and Kant

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This paper compares and critically evaluates Danto and Kant on the theme of aesthetic disappointment. There are, of course, many ways that we could be disappointed aesthetically speaking. The sort of aesthetic disappointment I am interested in here involves the sudden and irreversible loss of aesthetic interest in and appreciation of a given object or event due to the discovery that what we had formerly admired is not the kind of thing that we had taken it to be. It is precisely the kind of disappointment that, for Danto, might occur if one were to discover that a much admired artwork had been replaced by its identical twin from the world of ordinary objects. What I hope to show is that Kant and Danto are actually much closer in their accounts of aesthetic disappointment, and thus aesthetic appreciation, than one would initially suppose. From Danto, we learn that our aesthetic response to art is deeply conceptual in ways that our aesthetic response to mere objects is not. From Kant, we learn, through his elucidation of two cases of aesthetic disappointment that full appreciation of natural beauty crucially presupposes the capacity to view natural beauty “as if it were nature’s art.” Read in light of Danto’s discussion of the crucial differences between appreciating art and appreciating beauty in Chapter 4 of *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Kant’s treatment of cases of aesthetic disappointment in §42 of *The Critique of the Power of Judgment* yields rich insights into what it means to appreciate the beauty of nature once one is cognitively prepared to interpret something as a work of art.

I. Aesthetic Disappointment in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*

In Chapter 4 of *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Danto discusses a number of cases designed to highlight crucial differences between aesthetics and the appreciation of art. In one of these cases, Danto asks us to imagine a group of “sensitive barbarians” who lack the concept of art, but for whom it is possible to discern beauty. Danto explains that his barbarians “do in fact respond to just the things that we would offer as paradigms: to fields of daffodils, to minerals, to peacocks, to glowing iridescent things that appear to have their own light.”ⁱ Danto contends, however, that the barbarians would be unable to recognize the characteristic “luminosity” of an old master painting or drawing. Where we would perceive a haunting inner light emanating from Rembrandt’s canvas, the barbarian sees, at most, a pretty or charming thing.ⁱⁱ In order to discern the qualities that the Rembrandt possesses as a work of art, our sensitive barbarians would need to have, at the very least, the concept of an artwork.

Danto further asks us to imagine that these barbarians go on a rampage, during which they take for themselves all of the artworks in “the civilized world” which “happen to have beautiful material counterparts.”ⁱⁱⁱ Danto here provocatively wonders how many of the world’s recognized masterpieces would end up in with the barbarian’s loot. Lacking a concept of art, Danto reasons, the barbarian eye (and ear) would be likely to overlook any art which failed to display its beauty on the surface in a way readily

discernible to all. That is, the barbarians lack the “cognitive apparatus” to differentiate between a work of art and its identical material counterpart.^{iv}

Another way of describing the condition of Danto’s sensitive barbarians would be to say that they lack the capacity for what I am calling aesthetic disappointment. Since they are by definition without the concept of an artwork, they would, for example, experience no dismay upon learning that over half of the artworks that they had plundered were not artworks at all, but objects materially indistinguishable from art.

For our unfortunate barbarian brethren there is only one world of aesthetic appreciation: the world of beautiful objects, in which all beauty is on the surface of things. This being so, there is nothing for them to be disappointed about if they discover that an object they are admiring is an ordinary object rather than a work of art. They would simply go right on appreciating the same beauty-making qualities that they had been enjoying before the deception was discovered.^v

Danto’s barbarian case suggests something important about aesthetic disappointment that is connected to the overall project of *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. What the case makes plain is the point that in order to have an experience of suddenly losing interest in an admired object because it is not a work of art, one would first have to have a set of beliefs tying appreciation of the object to its specific manner of being in the world. Thus one is capable of aesthetic disappointment of the sort under consideration here only if one has the conceptual resources to attach significance to the fact that an artwork has qualities that its identical material counterpart lacks. Danto’s sensitive barbarians are not able to be aesthetically disappointed in this way precisely because they lack the rich conceptual framework which allows us to appreciate the

meaning of works of art. And, try as we might, we could not construct a trick involving an art doppelganger from the world of mere objects that would disappoint them.

II. Kant's Nightingale

I turn now to a pair of cases of aesthetic disappointment analyzed by Kant in §42 of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. This section of the third *Critique* finds Kant meditating on an alleged connection between appreciating beauty and the development of good moral character, the superiority of natural over artistic beauty in this regard, and the specific roots of an interest in nature's beauty that we can expect to find in those whose moral feeling is highly developed. Briefly, Kant argues that due to a deep analogy between the faculties of moral and aesthetic judgment it is of interest to reason that nature's forms seem in their beauty to harmonize with our capacity for disinterested aesthetic judgment. Importantly, for Kant, one takes such an "intellectual" interest in natural beauty only if one is interpreting that beauty in light of the thought that "this beauty is of nature."^{vi}

My purpose here is not to discuss this alleged analogy between moral and aesthetic judgment, a task that is well beyond the scope of this paper.^{vii} Rather, I wish to focus on two cases Kant discusses in connection with it that will have a familiar ring to readers of *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. Both are cases in which two materially indistinguishable objects or events evoke markedly different aesthetic responses. Both are also cases of what I have been calling aesthetic disappointment.

The first case Kant presents centers on a lover of beautiful nature for whom "the beautiful shape of a wildflower, a bird, or insect" is immediately and intrinsically

interesting.^{viii} Kant asks us to imagine a case in which such a lover of natural beauty is deceived into admiring a scene composed of artificial flowers, birds, and foliage, and who subsequently discovers the deception. Kant holds that being tricked in this fashion would bring about an immediate dissipation of interest in the beautiful scene. As Kant makes plain, our disappointed nature lover may still respond aesthetically to the scene, in that the pure judgment of taste underlying the more complex aesthetic experience under discussion would not be affected.^{ix} Nevertheless, this is a case of aesthetic disappointment because the richness of the initial aesthetic experience has entirely evaporated due to a revelation about the kind of object it is that is being admired.

The aesthetic disappointment Kant describes here takes a complex form. First, Kant claims, the immediate interest produced by the thought that “this beautiful scene is a product of nature” would vanish. Kant holds that we can take an intellectual interest in the beauty of nature only if we are aware that what we are admiring “is not art but nature”; while at the same time noticing that it nevertheless “looks like art.” This thought then inspires an open-ended reverie concerning an unanticipated harmony between nature’s forms and our freedom.^x Once this train of thought is no longer possible, the rich aesthetic experience it inspired would cease. What remains would be either a “mere judgment of taste”, or a judgment of taste combined with what Kant calls an “empirical interest” in the beauty of the objects.^{xi} I might view the artificial flowers and carved birds, for example as valuable as decorations, but I would no longer find the mere fact of their existence interesting. Again, the reason that finding the flowers false is so deflating, for Kant, is that the beautiful scene in question can no longer be seen as if it were

“nature’s art.”^{xii} The objects may be beautiful, they may even be useful, but they are not deeply interesting in the way that they were initially.

The second case Kant proposes is similar. This time a group of guests staying at an inn are listening in rapt attention to the sound of what at first is taken to be a nightingale “...in a lonely stand of bushes, on a still summer evening, under the gentle light of the moon.”^{xiii} The deception, which is the work of a “jolly landlord” in some nightingaleless region wishing to amuse his guests, is perpetrated by a concealed human imitator of a nightingale. The mimic gets the nightingale song exactly right, as the listeners at first mistake it for the real thing. As soon as the deception is discovered, however, all of the aesthetic pleasure afforded the guests by the landlord’s trick would cease.

The reason for the aesthetic disappointment in the nightingale case is, for Kant, similar to the case of the artificial flowers discussed earlier. Although in this case it is nature’s “charms” rather than its beautiful forms that had provoked the initial interest, what is missing once the ruse is discovered is the thought that the nightingale song is part of nature.^{xiv} Without the concept of an unlooked for accord between nature’s beauty and our cognitive faculties, there is nothing specifically interesting about natural beauty for Kant. Indeed, somewhat surprisingly given his basic account of aesthetic pleasure as disinterested contemplation, Kant appears to claim that the artificial birdsong would not even be a pleasant distraction: once the deception is discovered the formerly pleasing sounds are an annoyance that “no one would long endure listening to.”^{xv}

In contrast to Danto’s cases, the two instances of aesthetic disappointment that occupy Kant are cases in which an admired thing of nature ceases to be aesthetically

engaging once we realize that it is not nature but art (of however humble a sort). The flowers and trees that had seemed to proclaim some wondrous mystery of nature are uninteresting now that we know that they are mere artifice, and the sound of the nightingale mimic is odious compared with the sound of its natural counterpart. Interestingly, these experiences are immediately disappointing for the same kind of reason that, for Danto, it would be disappointing for an art lover to discover that an artwork she was admiring was actually its identical material counterpart. Both disappoint because the respective objects of appreciation, having been revealed as fakes, no longer help to sustain an aesthetic reverie that was from the start deeply interpretive.

III. Danto's Barbarians and Kant's Jolly Landlord

How, exactly, do Kant's cases bear on Danto's interpretation of the relationship between art and the aesthetic appreciation of the beauty of objects in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*? This can perhaps be made clearer by constructing a case of aesthetic disappointment that places Danto's sensitive barbarians at the Inn operated by Kant's jolly landlord. Let us suppose that the barbarians of Danto's thought experiment fall prey to the mischievous landlord and his false nightingale song. I think that here we would be forced to say that the barbarians would not experience the disappointment seen in the Kant's version of the case. This is true precisely because, lacking a concept of art, they would also lack the conceptual resources to take an intellectual interest in natural beauty. In Danto's scenario the barbarians fail to experience the works of the old masters as possessed of a striking inner luminosity because they lack the conceptual resources to distinguish an artwork from its identical material counterpart. Similarly, their kin who

pay a visit to Kant's jolly landlord would not be "bewitched" by the song of the nightingale because they could not entertain the rather more complex thought that here nature appears to us to be art while at the same time we are fully aware that it is mere nature. Consequently, the deception that so disturbed the guests in the case that Kant gives us would not produce aesthetic disappointment in the barbarians. Their enjoyment of the imitation birdsong may be superficial, based as it is on a "mere judgment of taste", but it would at least be uninterrupted.^{xvi}

Kant's account of the intellectual interest in the beautiful significantly modifies the apparent formalism of his basic account of taste. Full aesthetic appreciation of nature's beauty, it turns out, involves an unexpected conceptual component. We may, for Kant, find nature beautiful apart from any such interest, but it is only when natural beauty fully engages our interest that we in turn will be fully responsive to that beauty. Interestingly, part of what is required in order for us to display an intellectual interest in natural beauty is a concept of art.^{xvii} In order to interpret natural beauty as something that looks like art while not being art one must possess the conceptual framework to distinguish between an artwork and its identical counterpart in nature. Lacking a concept of art, Danto's barbarians inhabit a world in which it is their fate to enjoy natural beauty without the experience of deep engagement with it.

Danto and Kant are thus actually closer on these matters than might initially be supposed. For Kant, our interest in a particular instance of natural beauty is the result of a series of reflections that presuppose a concept of art.^{xviii} For Danto, full appreciation of the beauty of a given artwork depends crucially on reflections that can only occur if we can appreciate the difference between the work and an identical material counterpart.

Both Kant and Danto examine instances in which being deceived about the origins of an admired work or object leads to aesthetic disappointment.^{xix}

What Kant's interpretation of aesthetic disappointment contributes to Danto's inquiry into the relationship between art and aesthetics is the insight that our experience of the beauty of nature may significantly change once we have acquired the conceptual framework necessary for the appreciation of art. Being disappointed that a beautiful thing does not belong to nature is, for Kant, a disappointment that is only possible with reference to concepts that, to revert to Danto's language, belong properly to the artworld.

ⁱ Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), p.103.

ⁱⁱ In Danto's more recent work *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art* (Chicago: Open Court, 2003), he makes a helpful distinction between beauty that is internal to the meaning of a work of art and external beauty, or between artistic and aesthetic beauty. Thus the barbarians in the *Transfiguration* case would be capable of seeing only external beauty, and thereby miss out on the internal beauty that accounts for the "luminosity" of the old masters. There is much in *The Abuse of Beauty* that bears on the topic of this paper. It has been left out so as to focus more specifically on the arguments of *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, p.105.

^{iv} Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, p.107.

^v Since the barbarians have no concept of art in the first place, it is not even clear that they could so much as understand the deception involved in cases like this. They would almost certainly not be disturbed by it.

^{vi} My reading of Kant's account of the intellectual interest in natural beauty follows Rudolf Makkreel's suggestion that for Kant the appreciation of natural beauty, as well as that of artistic beauty, involves an interpretive element. See *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 127.

^{vii} One of the main issues here is that Kant's account of the intellectual interest in the beautiful in §42 seems at odds with the formalism of his account of taste. I follow Kirk Pillow who, in his recent *Sublime Understanding*, argues that it is important to distinguish between Kant's formalism about beauty and his wider theory of aesthetic appreciation. Kirk Pillow, *Sublime Understanding: Aesthetic Reflection in Kant and Hegel* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003) p. 52.

^{viii} *CPJ*, §42, 5:299.

^{ix} This account of the appreciation of natural beauty seems on the face of it inconsistent with Kant's earlier treatment of judgments of beauty about nature as paradigm cases of "pure judgments of taste." A discussion of this point is well beyond the scope of the present paper.

^x Kant contends that only a person of at least potentially good moral character would display this interest. For my purposes here, I am mainly interested in Kant's apparent claim that full appreciation of natural beauty has an interpretive component.

^{xi} *CPJ*, §42, 5:299.

^{xii} Kant makes it plain that he does not endorse a metaphysics of natural beauty according to which we find natural beauty interesting because it is God's art. Nature, for Kant, can be taken to have no specific purpose of ours in mind when it produces, for example, the song of the nightingale. At the same time, the visual and auditory pleasures afforded us by the existence of the bird makes it seem to us that nature had our contemplative pleasure "in mind" in including such a being in its scheme. The conclusion that nature actually does produce beauty for our contemplative pleasure, however, is unwarranted. See especially *CPJ*, §58, 5:350.

^{xiii} *CPJ*, §42, 5:302.

^{xiv} Kant often writes as if "charm", paradigm cases of which are color and tone, is wholly secondary to form in aesthetic appreciation. Here, however, he seems to be granting it a more important place.

^{xv} *CPJ*, §42, 5:303.

^{xvi} Importantly, for Kant the barbarians in the case discussed above would still be capable of hearing the beauty of the nightingale song. Recognizing beauty, for Kant, is a matter of the disinterested appreciation of form; and judgments of taste about nature that are combined in some way with a concept of the object are deemed by Kant "impure" or "dependent." One of the lessons of Kant's account of the intellectual interest in the beautiful, however, is that such "pure" judgments of taste do not account for our more profound aesthetic experiences—even of nature.

^{xvii} This is perhaps part of what Kant means when he remarks in §45 that “Nature was beautiful, if at the same time it looked like art; and art can only be called beautiful if we are aware that it is art and yet it looks to us like nature.” *CPJ*, §45, 5:306.

^{xviii} A comparison of Kant and Danto on what it means to have a concept of art is beyond the scope of this paper.

^{xix} There remain, of course, many real and important differences between Kant and Danto, and it is not my aim here to suppress those differences. In terms of the specific relationship each takes to hold between aesthetic judgment and artistic appreciation, I take Kant to be much more conflicted, and possibly even inconsistent, about these matters than is Danto. That being said, it still remains true that the cases of aesthetic disappointment that Kant canvasses in order to illustrate his theory highlight a dimension of the problems that occur in attempting precisely to delineate the boundary between the appreciation of natural beauty and that of art.