

## **The Problem of Art and Nature: An interpretation of a section in Kant's Critique of Judgment**

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### **Abstract**

*The relation of art and nature is an important problem in Kant's aesthetics. This paper will attempt to describe the inner connection of art, nature and human living by interpreting Kant's aesthetic presented in his third critique which will reveal its modern phenomenological significance.*

**Key Words:** Art Nature Kant's Aesthetics

The relation of art and nature is an important problem in Kant's aesthetics, but existing research mainly focuses on Kant's discussion about natural beauty, and pays little attention to Kant's understanding of art. This restricts Kant's view of art and his whole aesthetic system. This paper will try to describe the inner connection of art, nature and human life in Kant's aesthetics through explaining a section of Kant's third critique, which will lead to an understanding of Kant's aesthetic thought as a whole, and reveal its modern significance. In section 45 of the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant proposed a statement about beautiful art, "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." ("Die Natur war schön, wenn sie zugleich als Kunst aussah; und die Kunst kann nur schön genannt werden, wenn wir uns bewußt sind, sie sei Kunst, und sie uns doch als Natur aussieht.") This statement seems strange and far from clear. How did nature "look like" art? And how did art "look like" nature? How did the two of them have this similarity? Yet earlier in Section 43, Kant contrasts Art and Nature, clearly making his statement in section 45 appear stranger and even more surprising. Why did he make this statement? Maybe there is some secret quality about art, nature and their relationship deep in Kant's aesthetic. We will begin our thinking from here. It should be noticed firstly that, Kant used a strange, uncertain form of expression here: "looked like" (aussehen). Actually, Kant has used this strange phrase in his first two critiques, leading Howard Caygill to state that, this perspective "is central to all areas of Kant's philosophy".

Indeed, this phrase is full of mysterious significance, which implied a certain break in Kant's thought. If, Kant seems to use this way occasionally and by accident in his first two critiques, then, during his third critique, Kant began to use this phrase frequently, which is very rare in his first two critiques. And if we take notice of the consistent rigorous and careful characteristic of Kant's thought and terminology, then this new phrase is even more surprising. Why does Kant use this phrase so many times in the third critique, which he uses so rarely before? Is it only a problem of his terminology? Thinking about his choice of terms and his form of presentation may lead us deeper into Kant's thought, Kant's aesthetics and Kant's opinion about the relation of art and nature.

In Sophist, when he discussed the imitation of art / skill, Plato said, "This appearing, and this seeming but not being, and this saying things but not true things-all these issues are full of confusion, just as they always have been. It's extremely hard, Theaetetus, to say what form of speech we should use to say that there really is such a thing as false saying or believing, and moreover to utter this without being caught in a verbal conflict...."

“Because this form of speech of ours involves the rash assumption that that which is not is.” Here, Plato has implied that, “seeming”(“looks like”) has an existential structure, which indicated the complicated relationship between true being and false being, or being and not being. This thought provided us the theoretical basis to research the structure of “looks like” and its ontological significance from the phenomenological perspective. “.....Looks like.....” means analogy and a mutual relationship. It connects the two to each other, and distinguishes them and at the same time tries to eliminate or obliterate their differences, and reveals their inner unity. Therefore, it is a unity through distinguishing, in which the “thing itself”(Sache Selbst) hides and appears.

When we say“.....looks like.....”,in this linear way, the former at first appeared as presence. But as the “looks-like” spreads, the former began to transform from presence to non-presence, and the latter; the absence, began to appear as presence. But “looks-like” indicates the difference between the former and the latter explicitly; which tells us the former is real presence with existence. Now, the former being present again and the latter began to be non-presence. So the former and the latter is in a continuous cycle through the replacing of each other, in which “looks-like” appears. Its significance is not in the former or the latter, but in the circle of replacing each other, and their complicated relationship. In Kant’s presentation, art and nature are together in the structure of “looks-like”, they reflect each other, and construct a mutual relational interactive “play”. Obviously, looks-like is decisive in this process. It transcends and constructs the presence and non-presence as an original condition in which presence and non-presence are possible.

Next, “looks-like” seems to be a subjective attitude at first glance, but according to our analysis above, it is not just an occasional, dispensable subjective attitude. When Kant said, “nature must be considered in terms of the sort of unity it would have if an understanding (even if not ours) had likewise given them for the sake of our faculty of cognition”, in other words, nature had “looked like” a unity with an understanding, he has changed the general meaning of the concept of nature, or changed the way of nature’s presence. Nature is not an objective being which is outside of and opposite to the human. It is present in a closer, more intimate, more original fundamental way. Therefore, “looks-like” is not a “subjective attitude”, rather, it is actually ontological, and makes objects present in a more essential way.

Next, “looks-like” always exists as “looks-like” for somebody or someone; that is to say, there is a spectator or audience for the former and the latter in the structure of “looks-like”. The looking is not external or dispensable to the play of “looks-like”, rather, it participates as the hidden presence of the spectator. It makes the circulatory play of “looks-like” complete. Just as Gadamer said, “Rather, openness toward the spectator is part of the closedness of the play. The audience only completes what the play as such is.....In fact, it is experienced properly by, and presents itself (as it is "meant") to, one who is not acting in the play but watching it.”

Looking or watching has original significance in ancient Greece. The ancient Greeks thought, meditation is the noblest life, just as in the Greek Olympic Games, the audience, who come simply to look on, not the man who competes, is the priority. Obviously, meditation belongs to Greek watching, which indicated the pursuit of the origin. In the *Republic* volume 7, Plato mentioned the famous “cave metaphor”: prisoners were bound in a cave. They can only see the shadow on the wall in front of them, with the firelight behind them. It is important to note that, the prisoner in the cave cannot turn their head, so their watching is not the real watching because it is not the “fullness” of watching and is limited to mere illusion.

They cannot distinguish between reality and illusion. Plato noted, the only way past this limitation is turning their head, walking outside the cave and looking up toward the light. Walking outside the cave, means getting rid of the false illusion, and approaching the clearing space (Lichtung) illuminated by light. At that time, watching was real, seeing in its fullest sense.

As Plato said, “In the knowable realm, the form of the good is the last thing to be seen, and it is reached only with difficulty,.....Once one has seen it, however, one must conclude that it is the cause of all that is correct and beautiful in anything, that it produces both light and its source in the visible realm, and that in the intelligible realm it controls and provides truth and understanding, so that anyone who is to act sensibly in private or public must see it.” So to speak, Plato indicated the originality of watching in his “cave metaphor” which has important significance for our discussion below. At the beginning of *Metaphysics*, Aristotle said, “All men by nature desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses; for even apart from their usefulness they are loved for themselves; and above all others the sense of sight.

For not only with a view to action, but even when we are not going to do anything, we prefer seeing (one might say) to everything else, too all the other senses. The reason is that sight above all the other senses, helps us know and brings to light many differences between things.” Obviously, in Aristotle’s opinion, watching (looking) is connected with human nature, and helps people discern the truth, “makes us know and brings to light many differences between things.” This kind of knowing is a way of forming knowledge and gives us the ability to understand objects, that is to say, it provides a type of wisdom. So, in Aristotle’s context, watching is a basic way to gain wisdom and understand the world, which is essential and is embedded in our nature as human beings.

According to the analysis above, “looks-like” developed an original theoretical space, in which art and nature reflect, intertwine and play with each other under a watching, and in a constructive dynamic process. Now, we can describe the structure of “looks-like” as Kant’s significance: as the dynamic participation of watching, art and nature playing with each other, each one’s presence illuminating “the” or “an” absence in the other, at the same time revealing presence itself in a dormant way. The watching, as the original action, is silent, dormant, non-present presence in the circulatory play that makes the circle of art and nature not closed, alone, casual, but a clear, metaphysical space, in which truth and beauty occur. All of this was contained in the mysterious and uncertain “looks-like”

Let us come back to Kant. In Kant’s expression, besides the “looks-like” we just analyzed, there is another important concept, beauty. “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”. It is beauty connecting art and nature through the process of the “looks-like”. Beauty became a space that both art and nature belongs to. Then, what is the relation of this space of beauty and the space produced by this theoretical “looks-like” we just analyzed above? If beauty is fundamental in the same way we have determine “looks-like” is, what influence does the relation of “beauty” and “looks-like” have on our understanding about beauty, art and nature?

Before answering these questions, we need to investigate Kant’s basic understanding of “beauty”, discussed mainly in the four moments of the analytic of the beautiful in his *Critique of Judgment*. Now, it’s necessary to think about Kant’s four moments again from a phenomenological view, and reveal the connection between “beauty” and “looks-like”.

According to the phenomenological perspective, Kant’s four moments didn’t provide a definition of beauty, but investigated the transcendental condition which makes beauty possible. In his specific analysis, Kant paid attention to specific aesthetic activities throughout. He distinguished aesthetic satisfaction in the first moment, and analyzed the characteristic of aesthetic satisfaction carefully by comparing it with satisfaction in the agreeable and in the good. We should say that, Kant’s analysis embodied phenomenological significance from the very beginning: seeking pure, aesthetic satisfaction without interest through divesting the utility and interest in satisfaction continuously. Kant said, the first moment “is of the utmost importance”, its reason is that it provided the premise and basis of the possibility of other moments.

In the second moment, Kant further indicated that aesthetic satisfaction has “subjective universality”, and analyzed the problem: whether in the judgment of taste the feeling of pleasure precedes the judging of the object or the latter precedes the former. He states “The solution of this problem is the key to the critique of taste”, because in Kant’s opinion, the aesthetic is possible only if judging is first, that is, insisting that judging with subjective universality always precedes sense pleasure in aesthetic activity. Sense pleasure comes from the free play of imagination and understanding in aesthetic activity, which determines the subjective universality of aesthetic satisfaction. Obviously, Kant has begun to investigate the inner workings of aesthetic satisfaction. In the third moment, Kant’s thought further grounds the subjective universal satisfaction in the judgment of taste, that is, the a priori grounds of the judgment of taste.

In Kant’s opinion, the grounds of judgment of taste didn’t depend on charm, emotion, or the concept of perfection, but comes from the form of the purposiveness of an object without purpose. “The consciousness of the merely formal purposiveness in the play of the cognitive powers of the subject in the case of a representation through which an object is given is the pleasure itself”,so, Kant actually has referred to the inner grounds of aesthetic satisfaction. At last, in the forth moment, Kant stated that the aesthetic satisfaction, which exists in the form of the purposiveness without purpose, along with subjective universality, should have necessity. The reason is “common sense”.

In Kant's opinion, "common sense" is not a description about the real, but the idea or "ideal norm", which is the precondition of the possibility of a judgment of taste. We can see that, Kant's analysis of four moments, on the basis of describing aesthetic satisfaction and its inner grounds, researched the deeper basis of aesthetic activity and revealed the a priori condition of aesthetic activity through removing empirical limitations step by step. In fact, Kant emphasized getting rid of the individual differences and seeking the universal condition of aesthetic activity throughout his analysis. His concepts, such as "satisfaction without any interest", "form of the purposiveness without purpose", "common sense", etc, all represented this thought. Actually, this thought has the characteristic of phenomenological reduction. From this, the aesthetic area revealed its a priori grounds and became a particular area fusing the experience and the a priori, phenomenon and noumenon.

Furthermore, the concept of purposiveness is important as the a priori as the grounds and premise of aesthetic activity. In the introduction of *The Critique of Judgment*, Kant pointed out that: "The principle of the formal purposiveness of nature is a transcendental principle of the power of judgment". The concept of purposiveness belongs to the "reflecting judgment", just as the process of understanding belongs to the "determining judgment". But, Kant seems to show a certain hesitation about the relation of the "reflecting judgment" and the "determining judgment". "On one hand, 'reflecting judgment' was suggested as a supplement of 'determining judgment'; But on the other hand, 'reflecting judgment' seems to become the ground or premise for 'determining judgment' and incorporate 'determining judgment' in its system. This complicated, paradoxical relationship actually reflects Kant's attempt to seek a deeper basis for people's experiences beyond the limitations of a 'determining judgment'." So, we can find that, Kant's analysis about beauty not only revealed a priori grounds of aesthetics, but more importantly, touched the a priori basis for the empirical world and the process of understanding, even the a priori basis for human experience. Aesthetics coming from this analysis has an (inner) relationship with the area of "looks-like". The two areas represent the same fundamental ground or origin.

If the space of "looks-like" represented an original arena which is constructed by art, nature and watching, then this arena is the arena of beauty, whose inner mechanism is the a priori principle in the analysis of beauty, which guarantees the original and unique significance of aesthetics. We can say, "looks-like" mainly describes the presentation of this arena, and the analysis of beauty mainly sought its a priori grounds. Therefore, the "looks-like" and "beauty" are different ways of describing the same arena. Kant's understanding about aesthetic activities transcended the binary pattern of the subject object relationship. He didn't take beauty as an existing objective object, but a dynamic activity or process, and represented the characteristics of ontological modern aesthetics.

According to the analysis above, when nature "looks like" art, or when nature indicates art potentially and arouses art's presence, it's beautiful, and vice-versa. That is to say, art and nature "played", reflected each other, and constituted the original arena of beauty by "looks-like's" mechanism. This is a surprising conclusion, because we had been accustomed to the difference between art and nature. So the problem is, what is the inner connection of art and nature in the original arena of looks-like? What is the influence of this connection on the understanding of aesthetics? And what is the theoretical significance of Kant's expression. Here, it is necessary to look back upon the developing of western aesthetic thought, especially ancient Greece's aesthetic. Maybe, it is through this looking back that Kant's significance can be revealed.

Actually, the relation of art and nature has been noticed since ancient Greece. Aristotle's thought about art and nature is especially inspiring for us. In *physica*, Aristotle's thought about nature and artificial products, according to its purpose, "Where a series has a completion, all the preceding steps are for the sake of that. Now surely as in intelligent action, so in nature; and as in nature, so it is in each action, if nothing interferes. Now intelligent action is for the sake of an end; therefore the nature of things also is so.....If, therefore, artificial products are for the sake of an end, so clearly also are natural products." So, according to Aristotle's opinion, nature and art / skill united on the basis of purposiveness, which is the origin of beauty.

In nature, "each and all will reveal to us something natural and something beautiful. Absence of haphazard and conduciveness of everything to an end are to be found in Nature's works in the highest degree, and the resultant end of her generations and combinations is a form of the beautiful. " So according to Aristotle, art and nature are united in beauty. Aristotle's thought is important and significant for us to understand Kant further. At a footnote in *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant describes the meaning of nature carefully, "Nature, taken adjectivally (formally), signifies the coherence of a thing's determinations according to an internal principle of causality.

By nature taken substantively (materially), on the other hand, we mean the sum of appearances insofar as, by virtue of an internal principle of causality, they are in thoroughgoing coherence. In the first meaning we speak of the nature of fluid matter, fire, etc., and we then use the word adjectivally. On the other hand, when we talk about the things of nature, then we have in mind a subsisting whole.” That is, nature is not an external gathering of various phenomena, but a whole formed within the context of causality (of cause, this causality rule is reflective). Therefore, nature submitted to the principle of purposiveness, but this purposiveness cannot be set objectively. So nature is represented in this subjective purposiveness in a human being’s reflection. According to our analysis above, this subjective purposiveness indicates the original aesthetic basis of Kant’s aesthetics. So the title of section 58 in *Critique of Judgment* is “On the idealism of the purposiveness of nature as well as art, as the sole principle of the power of aesthetic judgment”, that surveys the unity of art and nature from the view of purposiveness.

Kant said, “The self-sufficient beauty of nature reveals to us a technique of nature, which makes it possible to represent it as a system in accordance with laws the principle of which we do not encounter anywhere in our entire faculty of understanding, namely that of a purposiveness with respect to the use of the power of judgment in regard to appearances, so that this must be judged as belonging not merely to nature in its purposeless mechanism but rather also to the analogy with art.” It is through the principle of purposiveness that art and nature can unite and play, reflect each other in the structure of “looks-like”, so that it is represented as beauty. So the principle of purposiveness is the inner condition of the arena of beauty and “looks-like”.

Based on the teleological tradition of Aristotle and the concept of purposiveness, Kant revealed the play of art and nature which takes place from “looks-like”, the original aesthetic arena and the connection of the aesthetic with humanity’s limited existence. (the concept of purposiveness itself appears within the limitation of human existence). The concept of purposiveness not only became the common basis of art and nature, but also the common basis of any critique of aesthetic judgment and the critique of teleological judgment. This also reveals Kant’s belief that man unites the “natural world” with the “aesthetic world” and the “human world”.

In conclusion, “beauty” spread as an original, purposive space, which takes the form of “looks-like”. In the participation of watching; art, nature and the human life reflect each other in “play”. Human life guards’ nature through poetic and artistic creation, and nature continually spreads and appears in this guarding. Humanity lives in an artistic way and nature spreads and its appearance represents the artistic direction in its play with art. Art has the connotation of nature. So art, nature and human life is circular, and is reflected in this trilateral play. The arena of beauty is always generated instantly and is alive, which interacts with human life. Kant’s aesthetic represented modern significance with its ontological connotation, which has had a profound influence on modern aesthetics. Marx’s aesthetic thought, such as “nature humanization”, “thorough naturalism is thorough humanism”, “aesthetic rule” etc in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts in 1844*, all touched the inner connection of art, nature and human life. Heidegger’s thought during his later years, such as his “poetic understanding about being”, “guarding nature” and the “human being’s poetic dwelling”, all have a latent relationship with Kant.

Kant’s thinking about the relation of art and nature has contained ontological connotations. Researching these ideas, not only can further our understanding of Kant’s aesthetics by representing its connection with modern aesthetics, but it can also break through the epistemological structure of traditional aesthetics by reflecting the aesthetic in a unity of art, nature and human life while seeking the original basis of aesthetics. In this way, thinking about Kant’s aesthetics is thinking about aesthetic activity and human life itself. At this time it has importance and real significance.

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