Genius as a Chiasm of the Conscious and Unconscious: 
A History of Ideas Concerning Kantian Aesthetics

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In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790) Kant argues, “art can be only called beautiful if we are aware that it is art and yet it looks to us like nature” (5:306).\(^1\) At first glance Kant appears to specify the conditions under which art can be beautiful. It would follow that there could also be non-beautiful art, but we would then miss Kant’s meaning. By art Kant understands art in the broadest sense, including the craft in art, not limiting art in the modern sense of *fine* art. Kant’s thesis determines the criteria under which art in the modern sense is to be distinguished from art in the broad sense, the specific difference of *fine* art. For Kant *fine* art should be beautiful without exception. Apart from Hegel,\(^2\) Konrad Fiedler (1841–95) first questioned the connection between *fine* art and beauty.\(^3\)

The Kantian thesis is based on a principle of classical rhetoric prohibiting speech from betraying the hidden intention of the speaker. Aristotle argues that “authors should compose without being noticed and should seem to speak not artificially but naturally. The latter is persuasive, the former the opposite.”\(^4\) Aristotle does not relate this poietic argument in the *Rhetoric* to his natural-philosophical proposition in the *Physics* that “art imitates nature,”\(^5\) by which he means that nature is the model guiding the principal structure of art in the broad sense of the word. By late antiquity, however, this natural-philosophical proposition in the *Physics* was already associated with the critique against artificial speech proposed in the *Rhetoric*.\(^6\) Several lines from Pseudo-Longinus’s first century A.D. ar-

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1 All references to Kant’s work appear in parentheses in the text. Page references are to the *Akademie-Ausgabe*. For quotations from Kant, unless otherwise indicated, I use *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*.
2 See Gethman-Siefert (2000, 37).
3 See Fiedler (1991, 9).
6 See Otabe (2009, 8).
ticle, “On the Sublime,” serve as a quintessential example: “the best prose-writers . . . imitate nature and achieve the same effect. For art is only perfect when it looks like nature; and Nature then succeeds when she conceals what assistance she receives from art.” Kant agrees with Pseudo-Longinus in emphasizing the symmetrical or complementary relationship between nature and art: “Nature [is] beautiful, if at the same time it look[s] 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” (5:306). The Kantian proposition, corresponding with that of Pseudo-Longinus after an interval of seventeen centuries, provides evidence of the mighty tradition of classical rhetoric.

We are not concerned with the influence of classical rhetoric on Kant though. Our concern is considering what Kant meant by his proposition, what extent he innovated in the tradition of classical rhetoric, and what reverberations his theory met with.8

1. Kant’s Reflection on the Relationship between Nature and Art Before the Critique of the Power of Judgment

Before publishing the Critique of the Power of Judgment, Kant expresses his view on the relationship between nature and art in a number of notes in preparation for his logic and anthropology lectures. In notes written between 1776 and 1778 we find the seeds for his theory.

In R 962 Kant mentions the symmetrical or complementary relationship between nature and art, as did Pseudo-Longinus: “Beautiful nature is that which seems to be art and yet is nature. Hence also art which appears like nature . . . is beautiful art” (15:424). The question is what Kant understands by nature in this context. In R 1855 we read, “Nature signifies what is unforced [das Ungezwungene] in beauty, art what is purposive and orderly [das Zweckmäßige und Ordentliche]. What is painstaking is, however, artificial [gekünstelt]. Everything is natural that seems to have arisen in accordance with a universal law of efficient causes. / If art resembles the contingent [Zufall] and the contingent art, this is the unexpected” (16:138—slightly modified by the author). Kant here equating nature with the contingent does not mean that nature lacks laws. On the contra-

7 Longinus (1932, 193), slightly modified by the author.
8 For the influence of classical rhetoric on Kant, see Österreich (1992) and Paetzold (1995).
ry, nature is determined by universal natural laws. Kant simultaneously opposes a teleological worldview, denying that nature has any intention. Therefore, we can certainly inquire into the causes of natural phenomena, but not into their grounds. In this sense Kant regards nature as contingent in itself. For art, we can certainly consider it as contingent because art depends on human capacity for choice. As far as art presupposes human intention or purpose though, we can ask for its grounds. In this sense art is not contingent, but purposive, which is why Kant describes beautiful nature in the Critique of the Power of Judgment as that which “shows itself as art, not merely by contingency [durch Zufall], but as it were intentionally [absichtlich]” (5:301—itals are mine; slightly modified by the author). If art which is essentially grounded on a determinate purpose is not bound by the purpose, and presents itself as contingent, as with nature, or conversely, if nature which is essentially contingent presents itself as intentional, as with art, we are faced with the unexpected. To Kant the unexpected is the beautiful.

Nature and art should coexist in beauty. Art without nature, art bound by rules, degenerates into artificiality; nature without art, nature that lacks order, cannot be beautiful. In R 823 Kant contrasts nature with art:

Nature and art. [Art and contingency]. The contingent is opposed to that which is contrived [das Gesuchte]. Gout baroc. The contingent [Zufall] and intention [Absicht]. Natural play.\(^9\) Nature combines art and the contingent. Art: nature and contingent.\(^10\) The contingent is in free motion and in the action of the powers of the mind. There is nevertheless method therein; in the conflict or change of representation: that something is art and yet only contingent, that it is nature and yet seems to be art, etc.: that is where the gratification actually lies (15:367–368—slightly modified by the author).

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\(^9\) What Kant understands by natural play corresponds with what Addison argues in “The Spectator” (No. 414, 25 June, 1712): “we find the Works of Nature still more pleasant, the more they resemble those of Art. . . . Hence it is that we take Delight in a Prospect which is well laid out, and diversified with Fields and Meadows, Woods and Rivers, in those accidental Landskips of Trees, Clouds and Cities, that are sometimes found in the Veins of Marble, in the curious Fret-work of Rocks and Grottos, and, in a Word, in any thing that hath such a Variety or Regularity as may seem the Effect of Design, in what we call the Works of Chance.” See Addison (1965, 549–550). See the unconscious concerning the Critique of the Power of Judgment, see Bloch (1976, 97–99) and Nicholls and Liebscher (2010, 16–18).

\(^10\) Kant probably wrote “the contingent” where he should have written “intention.”
The question now arises as to how Kant appreciates the baroque taste. In a marginal note to *Anthropology* written between 1796 and 1797, Kant regards the *gout baroc* as false taste together with “[t]he grotesque, . . . the *a la Grec*, and the *arabesque*” (7:409). However, in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* he approves the “baroque taste in furniture” which is akin to “the grotesque” (5:242) and refers to “designs à la grecque” as a typical example of “free beauty” (5:229). From this perspective Kant positively mentions the baroque taste in R 823. This note, criticizing what is contrived, anticipates his proposition in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* that “everything contrived and laborious in [beautiful art] must be avoided” (5:321).

In his anthropology lecture (1781/82) Kant says, “If art looks like nature, even though we are aware of it as art, it pleases much more. English gardens please because art is driven so far that it looks like nature. Similarly the eloquence that looks like natural expression is the best one” (25:1101). The reader first notices that Kant is under the influence of classical rhetoric, but Kant referring to English gardens is more noteworthy. This passage reminds us of his mentioning English gardens in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*: “the English taste in gardens […] pushes the freedom of the imagination almost to the point of the grotesque, and makes this abstraction from all constraint by rules the very case in which the taste can demonstrate its greatest perfection in projects of the imagination” (5:242). Kant contrasts the English taste in gardens with a “pepper garden where the stakes on which the plants [are] trained form[] parallel rows” which can be compared to French gardens because of the geometrical order (5:242–243). Kant argues, “All stiff regularity (whatever approaches mathematical regularity) is of itself contrary to taste” (5:242).

As these examples show, Kant expresses his opinions on the relationship between nature and art in notes from the 1770s and 1780s. In 1790, in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, he examines the issue. Now we turn to his theory of beautiful art in §§ 43–54 of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.

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11 For English Gardens, Kant says in R 298 (1762–63?) that “English gardens give alternation” (15: 115).
2. Art in General and Beautiful Art

In § 43 Kant determines art in general in contrast to nature. Nature exists in a chain of causes and effects in which an end or purpose does not share. While a work of art also has a cause, this cause is distinguished from the cause of an effect of nature in that art presupposes an end. The cause that produces a work of art conceives of an end, which determines the form of the product. Only human beings who have freedom, a capacity for choice, can conceive of an end. A work of art is always understood as a work of human beings (5:303).

In § 44 Kant classifies art in general as follows:

If art, adequate for the cognition of a possible object, merely performs the actions requisite to make it actual, it is mechanical; but if it has the feeling of pleasure as its immediate aim, then it is called aesthetic art. This is either agreeable or beautiful art. It is the former if its end is that pleasure accompany the representations as mere sensations, the latter, if its end is that it accompany these as kinds of cognition (5:305).

Kant’s definition of mechanical art reminds us of the Aristotelian definition of skill [technê]. In Nicomachean Ethics Aristotle argues, “Every skill is to do with coming into being [genesis], and the exercise of the skill [technazein] lies in considering [theôrein] how something that is capable of either being or not being, and the first principle of which is in the producer and not the product, may come into being.”12 Skill in the Aristotelian sense is activity accompanied by cognition to realize a possible purpose; this determination of skill corresponds to Kant’s definition of mechanical art.

Mechanical art is distinguished from aesthetic art. By aesthetic, Kant understands that the art in question has no connection to cognition or concept. Aesthetic art is not identified with beautiful art; aesthetic art is classified into agreeable and beautiful art. This classification is based on Kant’s theory of the agreeable and the beautiful. While the agreeable depends on the “matter of the representation, namely mere sensation” (5:225), for example, colors and tones, and is based on passive feeling, the beautiful “concerns merely form” (5:223) that makes a “subjective play of the powers of representation” (5:238) possible and thus presupposes active feeling. The beautiful is distinguished from the agreeable in that its reception requires the powers of representation to act.

Kant distinguishes beautiful art from mechanical art (see § 44) while simultaneously claiming that “there is no beautiful art in which something mechanical, which can be grasped and followed according to rules, and thus something academically correct, does not constitute the essential condition of the art” (5:310). Something mechanical means proficiency or skill in accordance with rules; without skill beautiful art is impossible. Excellence only in skill or demonstrated proficiency is, however, insufficient for beautiful art. According to Kant art that clings to rules is merely mechanical and “would not please as beautiful but as mechanical art” (5:306) because such art simply aims at the specific purpose of accordance with rules. Kant explains what characterizes beautiful art:

[T]he purposiveness in the product of beautiful art, although it is certainly intentional, must nevertheless not seem intentional; i.e., beautiful art must be regarded as nature, although of course one is aware of it as art (5:306–307).

Beautiful art differs from art in general in reaching accordance with rules “without the academic form showing through, i.e., without showing any sign that the rule has hovered before the eyes of the artist and fetters his mental powers” (5:307). Even if skill underlies beautiful art, the skill should not stand out, but should escape the attention of the recipients.

From this poietic perspective, Kant’s argument agrees with classical rhetoric, but his thesis that “art can only be called beautiful if we are aware that it is art and yet it looks to us like nature” (5:306) cannot be fully explained from this poietic perspective. In the next section we address Kant’s theory of aesthetic ideas: the nucleus of his theory of art.

3. A Surplus of Representation of the Imagination

Kant defines aesthetic ideas as the “representation of the imagination that occasions much thinking though without it being possible for any determinate thought, i.e., concept, to be adequate to it, which, consequently, no language fully attains or can make intelligible” (5:314). An aesthetic idea is a representation of the “imagination, as a faculty of intuition” (5:292), which is distinguished from a representation of the imagination in general in that the aesthetic idea has a specific relationship to a concept.
Kant says that, first, an artist “presupposes a determinate concept of the product, as an end, hence understanding, but also a representation . . . of the material, i.e., of the intuition, for the presentation of this concept, hence a relation of the imagination to the understanding” (5:317). That is, artists should have a determinate concept of their product to achieve sensible imaginative representation. A specific plan must precede execution. To this extent, however, such activity belongs to mechanical art because it merely aims at realizing a determinate purpose. Therefore, according to Kant, what is required of an artist is, second, that “the imagination is free to provide, beyond that concord with the concept, unsought [unge-sucht] extensive undeveloped [unentwickelt]13 material for the understanding, of which the latter took no regard in its concept” (5:317—italics are mine). Artists presuppose a specific plan, but their work extends beyond merely intuitively realizing the plan through adherence to instructions of the understanding. Rather, an artist’s imagination brings forth extensive material that surpasses understanding. Such a representation of the artist’s imagination is to “let one think more than one can express in a concept determined by words” (5:315). No concept can be “adequate to it” (5:314). The artist’s representation is too opulent to be adequately determined by understanding.

Kant names such a representation an aesthetic idea because of this discrepancy between a representation of the imagination and a concept of the understanding. This idea is the “counterpart (pendant) of an idea of reason,” which is “a concept to which no intuition (representation of the imagination) can be adequate” (5:314), which cannot be adequately intuited. Cognition is acquired when a representation of the imagination is subsumed under a concept of the understanding. However, for ideas, such a subsumption never occurs because no concept is sufficient for aesthetic ideas, and no representation of the imagination is sufficient for ideas of reason. According to Kant, an artist is characterized by the abil-

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13 Development is a technical term of logic. In Acroasis logica (1761) Baumgarten explains it as follows: “Propositio ex affirmante et negante cryptice composita, exponibilis (ein zu entwickelnder Satz) dicitur (A proposition that is cryptically composed of an affirmative and a negative proposition is called an exponible proposition, i.e. a proposition that is to be expounded or developed).” See Baumgarten (1761, 47; §162). Development generally consists in making explicit those elements which are implicitly contained in a concept or proposition. In Logic (1800) Kant writes, “Implicitly identical propositions … clarify the predicate which lay undeveloped [unentwickelt] (implicite) in the concept of the subject through development (explicatio) [Entwicklung]” (9:111).
ity to bring forth an “inexponible” representation of the imagination” (5:342).

This artistic ability is free from the “constraint of the understanding” (5:316) and cannot be determined by the understanding. Therefore, it is not by an intentional, but an unsought process that an artist provides extensive material for the understanding. That is, an artist “does not know himself how the ideas for [the product] come to him, and also does not have it in his power to think up such things at will or according to plan” (5:308). An artistic creation cannot be reduced to a conscious activity, but is based on “nature in the subject,” or on an “inborn productive faculty of the artist” (5:307). Therefore, Kant’s proposition that “art can only be called beautiful if we are aware that it is art and yet it looks to us like nature” (5:306) concerns more than beautiful art looking to us, the recipients, like nature. His proposition means that artistic creativity “belongs to the nature” (5:307) of the artists and breaks free from their consciousness.

We may reasonably conclude that Kant’s definition of beautiful art escapes clear dichotomic classification. First, beautiful art is, as far as it is a subdivision of art, “distinguished from nature” (5:303), and yet “looks . . . like nature” (5:306). Second, beautiful art is, as far as it is a subdivision of aesthetic art, opposed to mechanical art (5:305), and yet “there is no beautiful art in which something mechanical, which can be grasped and followed according to rules, . . . does not constitute the essential condition of the art” (5:310). This paradox underlies beautiful art.

4. Reverberations of Kantian Theory

In this section, examining Schelling and Schiller, we address the reverberations Kantian theory met in post-Kantian aesthetics. Being based on Kantian proposition, Schelling introducing the concept of the unconscious is noteworthy.

Kant argues that a work of art is “certainly intentional, must nevertheless not seem intentional” (5:307). Schelling calls these two moments, namely the intentional and the unintentional, conscious and unconscious

14 For the adjective “inexponible,” see note 13.
15 As has been indicated, Kant argues in the Critique of the Power of Judgment that “everything contrived [alles Gesuchte] and laborious in [beautiful art] must be avoided” (5:321).
activity. In the *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800), Schelling explains: The “conscious activity” is “usually called art [Kunst],” but “merely one part of art.” This art is “practiced with consciousness, deliberation, and reflection, which can also be taught and learned, received from others, and attained by one’s own practice,” in a word, “the merely mechanical features [das bloß Mechanische] of art.” Therefore, conscious activity cannot be identified with art in the proper sense of the word. What is needed here is unconscious activity. This is what “cannot be learned, cannot be attained by practice or in any other way, but can only be inborn by the free gift of nature,” that is, “what we may call in one word the poetry [Poesie] in art.” Art consists of art and poetry, or conscious and unconscious activity. Schelling says, “neither poetry nor art can produce a perfected work singly each by itself,” but “only the two in conjunction can bring forth the highest.” What Kant denoted by beautiful art in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790) is what Schelling ten years later simply called art, without any qualification.

The question then arises as to what distinguishes art without poetry (the merely mechanical features of art) from art in the true sense of the word; how art in the proper sense of the word is to be distinguished from mechanical art. Schelling answers that the product of art without poetry is “nothing other than a faithful impression of the conscious activity of the artist,” because “intention and rule lie on the surface.” Both artist and recipient can certainly understand the meaning of the product, which means that such a product “simulates the character of a work of art” and the result is “a semblance of poetry.” The lack here is infinity:

… the artist, however specifically purposeful [absichtsvoll] he may be, nevertheless, in regard to what is truly objective in his creation, seems to stand under the influence of a power that sets him apart from all other men and

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16 Page references to Schelling’s *System of Transcendental Idealism* are to the *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 3, Stuttgart and Augsburg 1858. For quotations from Schelling, unless otherwise indicated, I use the *System of Transcendental Idealism*, translated by P. Heath, Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia 1978. For the place of the unconscious in Schelling’s philosophy see Völmicke (2005, 118–194).

17 Schelling (1858, 618).
18 Schelling (1858, 618).
19 Schelling (1858, 618).
20 Schelling (1858, 618).
21 Schelling (1858, 620).
22 Schelling (1858, 620).
23 Schelling (1858, 619).
compels him to express or represent things he does not himself fully see through and whose meaning is infinite...The artist seems to have presented in his work, as if instinctively, apart from what he has put into it with obvious intent, an infinity which no finite understanding can fully develop [entwickeln]... each [work of art] is susceptible of infinite interpretation, as though there were an infinity of intentions within it.\textsuperscript{24}

Art is worthy of being designated as art when it is free from the finite intention of mechanical art and presenting an infinity that cannot be unambiguously interpreted by finite understanding. The possibility of infinite interpretation characterizes true works of art. A work of art can present infinity when the “ego” of the artist “begin[s] with consciousness (subjectively) and end[s] in the unconscious, or objectively.”\textsuperscript{25} When the artist’s conscious activity results in unconscious activity, he or she “puts into his work involuntarily” the “inexhaustible depth”\textsuperscript{26} that cannot be developed by finite understanding.

Kant argues that, first, an artist “presupposes a determinate concept of the product, as an end” (5:317) and that, second, the artist’s imagination is “free to provide, beyond that concord with the concept, unsought extensive undeveloped material for the understanding, of which the latter took no regard in its concept” (5:317—italics are mine). To this extent Schelling’s argument that the intersection of the conscious and unconscious characterizes art agrees with that of Kant. Both argue that art, which is Kant’s beautiful art, ought to be more than art, which is Kant’s mechanical art.

Schiller disagrees with Schelling about the proposition in the System of Transcendental Philosophy. In a letter to Goethe on March 27, 1801, Schiller reports his conversation with Schelling:

Only a few days ago I attacked Schelling about an assertion he makes in his Transcendental Philosophy, that “in Nature one starts from the Unconscious in order to raise it to the Conscious; whereas, in Art, one proceeds from the Conscious to the Unconscious.” ... [However], in experience the poet ... starts with the Unconscious... There can be no poetic work without an obscure, but mighty total-idea of this kind, which precedes all technical work; and poetry seems to me, in fact, to consist in being able to express and communicate that Unconscious state—in other words, to transfer it to some object.\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{24} Schelling (1858, 617, 619–620—italics are mine).
\textsuperscript{25} Schelling (1858, 613—slightly modified by the author).
\textsuperscript{26} Schelling (1858, 619—italics are mine).
\textsuperscript{27} Schiller (1890, 371–372).
While Schelling argues that artistic creation begins with consciousness (subjectively) and ends in the unconscious (objectively), Schiller emphasizes that artistic creation ought to be preceded by an obscure, but mighty total-idea. This argument seems to rest on his experience as a poet. “The musical (i.e. the harmonious tones) [das Musikalische] of a poem,” writes Schiller to Körner in a letter on May 25, 1792, “much oftener engrosses my being when I sit down to write, than any clear notion of what I purpose writing.”

Schiller’s position is also opposed to that of Kant who claims that an artist “presupposes a determinate concept of the product, as an end, hence understanding” (5:317). Schiller regards the unconscious as musical because there is “as yet no idea of what the poem will be, but a presentiment.”

However, Schiller is not against the participation of the conscious in artistic creation, regarding the creative operation itself as entirely conscious. He says that a poet “may consider himself fortunate if, by being most clearly Conscious of his operation, he gets to that point where he meets again in the work he has completed, with the first, obscure total-idea of his work, and finds it unweakened.” The conscious is necessary for a poet to realize his or her unconscious idea in a poem. Schiller concludes, “Unconsciousness combined with reflection constitutes the poet-artist.” To this extent, Schiller shares Schelling’s opinion that art is in the intersection of the conscious and the unconscious.

Schiller is quite familiar with Kant’s proposition that “art can be only called beautiful if we are aware that it is art and yet it looks to us like nature” (5:306), even proceeding so far as to argue that only his own theory can explain Kant’s thesis, as his letter to Körner on February 23, 1793 shows. However, Schiller applies Kant’s proposition to ethics against Kant to whom, as he correctly summarizes, “an action out of duty cannot be brought into harmony with demands of nature.” “A moral action,” writes Schiller to Körner in a letter on February 19, 1793, “might be only then a beautiful action if it looks like a spontaneous effect of na-

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28 Schiller (1890, 372).
29 Schiller (1890, 372).
30 Schiller (1890, 372).
31 Schiller (1890, 372).
32 In his reply to Schiller on April 6, 1801, Goethe writes, “I not only agree with your opinion, but go even further. I think that everything that is done by genius as genius, is done unconsciously” (Schiller, 1890, 374).
33 Schiller (1992, 209).
34 Schiller (2005, 161).
Such reinterpretation implies that by nature Schiller understands something quite different from what Kant does. That is, he no longer means something contingent, but “what is by itself.”

As discussed, Kant argues that the artist’s imagination is “free to provide, beyond that concord with the concept, unsought extensive undeveloped material for the understanding, of which the latter took no regard in its concept” (5:317). Based on Kant’s proposition Schelling argues, “The artist seems to have presented in his work, as if instinctively, apart from what he has put into it with obvious intent, an infinity which no finite understanding can fully develop.” Combining all this, a work of art whose meaning can neither be traced back to the intention of its author nor dissolved into each interpretation is open by its nature and has its own independent life. The Kantian proposition, “art can be only called beautiful if we are aware that it is art and yet it looks to us like nature,” would refer to this quality in a work of art.

References


35 Schiller (1992, 198—translation is mine).
36 Schiller (1992, 203—translation is mine).
37 Schelling (1858, 619).


Schiller, F (1890): *Correspondence between Schiller and Goethe from 1794 to 1805*, ed. by L. D. Schmitz, London.


