

Emotion and the beautiful in Art

MARIA BORGES¹

Federal University of Santa Catarina, Brazil

Abstract

In this paper, I aim at explaining the difference Kant makes between emotion, the beautiful and the sublime. I begin by explaining what an emotion is, showing that it refers to feelings that are related to desire. In contrast, I show that the feeling of beautiful and the sublime give us an inactive delight, that is not related to an interest in the object. The feeling of beautiful is related to the judgment of taste, and it has a universal validity for everyone.

I ask then if we can judge art without any emotion at all. According to Kant, not only one can, but one should, since pure judgment of taste is independent from charm and commotion. At the end, I ask if it is possible to enjoy music without emotion. For a lover of music, perhaps the emotion it provokes is the main reason to like it. I show that this is probably the reason why music is considered to have the last place in the beautiful arts for Kant.

Key words

emotion, art, beautiful, music

The legendary pianist Arthur Rubinstein, while trying to explain the feeling of playing, after using other expressions finally admits “When I play, I make love, and it is the same thing”. What is the meaning of this metaphor? That in other to play, one has to feel emotions? Or does he refer to a kind of feeling of pleasure, almost a physical pleasure that one feels when one plays? Perhaps he was saying that one should feel some passion in order to play well and to excite in the audience some emotion. But to arouse the feeling of

¹ Maria Borges is full Professor at the Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, Brazil. E-mail for contact: mariaborges@yahoo.com

the beautiful is not enough? Should music be performed in an emotional way, in order to have some aesthetical value?² Or the aesthetical value of music is always an emotional value? Or the player should play in an emotional way only when it is written in the partition *Molto appassionato*, such as in the Mendelsohn violin Concerto in E Minor, op. 64.

In a recent video, I have asked a pianist about the emotion in his interpretation of Chopin. He said that Chopin wanted to put his emotion in his compositions, and it was a way to express his feelings and sadness. When I asked the pianist if he also put his emotions while interpreting Chopin, he answered that he was only an instrument to express the emotions that were already in the *Noturno* sheet music. To which emotion was he referring to? Chopin original emotion or the emotion the composer wanted to bring to the audience? Usually, we believe that emotion is something that someone feels during a limited time, and I could not bring about others' emotion but my own. And music, by itself, is not a sentient being, then it cannot have emotions.

And, if this relation between music and emotion is necessary, would the same apply to all arts? One of the most influential choreographers of modern dance, Merce Cunningham holds a different position. He once claimed that "Motion is not Emotion", as a critique to modern dance groups that understood dance as essentially related to narrative and emotion. Is *motion without emotion* enough in dance to arouse in us an aesthetic feeling? Is sound without emotion enough to make us enjoy music?

What can Kant tell us about that? Is emotion in art necessary or an impediment to the judgement of taste?

Emotions, feeling and desire

Much has been discussed about emotions in Kant in the last years. While I recognize the outstanding work that has been done in this field, I still keep my understanding about this issue expressed in my article *What can Kant teach us about emotion?* (Borges 2004), where I claim that what we nowadays call emotion does not refer to a single kind of inclination. Kant talks about affects and passions, and also about moral feelings. In an insightful article, Alix Cohen stresses that emotions are essentially feelings (Cohen 2020), position that are agreed by many Kant scholars. Although I do not really disagree with that interpretation, I think that it does not solve the problem of emotions in Kant, since there are many kinds of feelings.

In the *Anthropology*, he explains that feelings of pleasure and displeasure can be caused by a sensation, imagination or a concept. Emotions are only one kind of feeling. Besides emotions, one has feelings of sensation alone and also aesthetic feelings. What is the difference between these feelings and emotion?

In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, feeling of pleasure and displeasure is divided, on one side, a feeling connected to a desire, called practical pleasure, and on the other, a pleasure

² I would like to thank the pianist Pablo Rossi, with whom I've discussed the relation between music and emotion.

which is not connected with a desire for the object, but simply with its representation, referred to as contemplative pleasure or taste:

That pleasure which is connected with desire (for an object whose representation affects feeling in this way) can be called practical pleasure, whether it is the cause or the effect of the desire. On the other hand, that pleasure which is not necessarily connected with desire for an object, and so is not at bottom a pleasure in the existence of an object of representation but is attached only to the representation by itself, can be called merely contemplative pleasure or *inactive delight*. We call feeling of the latter kind of pleasure taste. (MS, AA 6:212)

Taste is then an inactive delight, without a desire for the object of the feeling. In turn, practical pleasure is necessarily related to desire. To grasp the difference between contemplative pleasure and practical pleasure, Kant gives us an example to show that the satisfaction in the judgment of taste is without any interest:

If someone asks me whether I find the palace that I have before me beautiful, I may well say that I don't like that sort of thing, which is made merely to be gaped at (...); in true Rousseauesque style I might even vilify the vanity of the great who waste the sweat of the people on such superfluous things, finally I could even easily convince myself that if I were to find myself on an uninhabited island, without any hope of ever coming upon human beings again, and could conjure up such a magnificent structure through my mere wish, I would not even take the trouble of doing so if I already had a hut that was comfortable enough for me. (KU, AA 5: 204, 205)

All these answers will be inappropriate to the question whether the subject finds the object beautiful or not: "one only wants to know whether the mere representation of the object is accompanied with satisfaction in me, however indifferent I might be with regard to the existence of the object of this representation" (KU, AA 5: 205). The judgment of taste is independent of the interest in the object of desire.

Is there a place for emotion in the judgement of taste? Emotions are related to practical pleasure, in the sense that it involves the desire for an object. This is the meaning of an active pleasure, an interest in the object of the representation, not only in the representation itself. It is easy to grasp the difference if we take the emotion of love or greed. But may we say that all emotions in Kant are about something and imply some kind of action directed to that object?

What is an emotion in Kant? What we call emotion refers to at least three distinct kinds of phenomena in Kant: affects, moral feelings and passions. These inclinations can be mainly related to two faculties: the faculty of feeling pleasure and displeasure and the faculty of desire.

Affects are sometimes presented as belonging to the faculty of feeling:

Affects belong to feeling (*Gefühl*) insofar as, preceding reflection, it makes this impossible or more difficult. (...) A passion is a sensible desire that has become a lasting inclination (e.g., hatred as opposed to anger). The calm with which one gives oneself up to it permits reflection and allows the mind to form principles upon it and so, if inclination lights upon something contrary to the law, to brood upon it, to get it rooted deeply, and so to take what is evil (as something premeditated) into its maxim. (MS, AA 6:408)

In the *Anthropology*, affects are examined in the first paragraphs of the faculty of desire. One reads in the § 73: “Inclination that can be conquered only with the difficult or not at all by the subject’s reason is passion. On the other hand, the feeling of pleasure or displeasure in the subject’s present state that does not let him to rise to reflection ...is affect.” (Anth, AA 7: 251)

We may say that emotions are related to faculty of desire, even if they are feelings, while the feeling of pleasure in the beautiful is not related to the faculty of desire.

Aesthetic feelings and emotion

Is there any emotion related to the beautiful and the sublime?

When referring to taste, Kant claims that “is not the property of an organ (the tongue, palate, and throat) to be specifically affected by certain dissolved matter in food or drink” (Anth, AA 7:239). Here Kant is making a distinction between taste and the mere feeling of agreeable.

He says that “there is also a taste that savors, whose rule must be grounded a priori, because it proclaims necessity and consequently also validity for everyone as to how the representation of an object has to be judged in relation to the feeling of pleasure or displeasure” (Anth, AA 7:240). Taste is then indissociable from universality, and “one could call this taste rationalizing taste, in distinction to the empirical taste that is the taste of the senses.” (Anth, AA 7: 240). The taste related to the beautiful and the sublime is not the taste of the senses. You may say that some kind of wine is tasteful because it arouses in you a sense of pleasure, involving the tongue, the palate and the throat, but it lacks the universality required by a judgement of taste.

The universality of the judgement of beautiful is related to a law:

But the universal validity of this feeling for everyone, which distinguish tasteful choice (of the beautiful) from choice through mere sensation (of what is merely subjectively pleasing) carries with it the concept of a law; for only in accordance with this law can the validity of satisfaction for the person who judges be universal. (Anth, AA 7:241).

The third Critique brings the idea that one can have a priori principles related to the faculty of feeling. In a letter to Carl Leonard Reinhold of December 1787, Kant admits that he has discovered a new kind of a priori principles related to the feeling of pleasure and displeasure, and these principles will be the basic subject of a third Critique:

I am currently working on a Critique of Taste and have discovered a new type of principles a priori, different from those examined earlier. For there are three faculties of the mind: the faculty of cognition, the faculty of feeling pleasure and displeasure, and the faculty of desire. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, I found a priori principles for the first of them; in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, a priori principles for the third. I tried to find them for the second too, and even though I thought it was impossible to find such principles, the analysis of the faculties of the mind mentioned allowed me to discover a systematicity, giving me ample material about which to marvel and, if possible, enough material for the rest of my existence. (Br, AA 10: 514-5)

The letter seems to indicate that Kant sought a priori principles for the faculty of pleasure and displeasure, only having found it late in life. Thus, he maintained the tripartition of the faculties throughout the course of his *Anthropology*, even though he did not mention this same division in two first Critiques. As Frierson points out:

Kant came to see feeling as capable of a priori, transcendental investigation. Kant saw the pleasures humans take in what is merely “agreeable”- food, sex, reputation- as empirically rooted and thus incapable of a priori investigation. But as he continued to teach and study aesthetics, he came to see that judgments about beauty are at once subjective because they are rooted in feeling and taken to be universal and normative; to claim that something is beautiful is to claim that all others should find it beautiful. (Frierson 2013, p. 32, 33)

Frierson indicates a plausible reason why the faculty of pleasure and displeasure, and with it the entire structure of the faculties, did not appear in the two Critiques. Since the faculty of pleasure and displeasure is linked to empirical elements, it did not seem possible that feelings could have any relation to a priori judgments. What Kant announces to Reinhold is the discovery of a priori judgments linked to the feeling in his Critique of Taste.

Since the judgment of taste should be universal, it is difficult to say that they are related to emotions, because these ones are related to the particular desire of a person. But is there any emotion that comes along with the judgment of beautiful? If this happens, Kant says, it will make the taste barbarous, because the judgment of taste is related to the form, not to charms and emotions.

Sublime and the feeling of surprise

Kant mentions some feelings connected to the sublime: surprise and commotion. In the *Anthropology*, Kant defines the sublime as follows:

The sublime is awe inspiring greatness (*magnitudo reverenda*) in extent or degree which invites approach (in order to measure our powers against it); but the fear that in comparison with it we will disappear in our own estimation is at the same time a deterrent (for example, thunder over our heads, or a high, rugged mountain). (Anth, AA 7: 243)

The act of measuring our powers in comparison with the object of sublime (be it a thunder or a mountain) provokes one feeling, that is called the feeling of surprise:

And if we ourselves are in a safe place, the collecting of our powers to grasp the appearance, along with our anxiety that we are unable to measure up to its greatness, arouses *surprise* (a pleasant feeling owing to its continual overcoming of pain). (Anth, AA 7: 243).

Besides surprise, a pleasant feeling, Kant also relates the sublime to commotion (*Rührung*):

The feeling of the sublime is a pleasure that arises only indirectly, being generated, namely, by the feeling of a momentary inhibition of the vital powers and the immediately following and all the more powerful outpouring of them; hence as an commotion (*Rührung*) it seems to be not play but something serious in the activity of imagination.(...)The satisfaction in the sublime does not contain positive pleasure as it does admiration or respect, i.e., it deserves to be called negative pleasure. (KU, AA 5: 245)

Is commotion an emotion? Since it is a negative pleasure, I will put it under the general concept of emotion. However, it is not this emotion that produces the feeling of sublime, but it is a consequence of this feeling. The feeling of sublime, as well as the feeling of beautiful, should be considered a feeling that does not accept any emotion as its ground of determination. Commotion is then a consequence, not the cause of the sublime.

Is it possible to enjoy art without emotion?

Can we judge art without any emotion at all? Can we enjoy art without emotion?

Kant will answer positively to all these two questions. The beautiful is the pure enjoyment without the help of emotions, and as he warns us in the paragraph 13 of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*- “The pure judgment is independent from charm and commotion”:

Any interest spoils the judgment of taste and deprives it of its impartiality, especially if the purposiveness does not precede the feeling of pleasure, as in the interest of reason, but is instead grounded on it, which always happens in the aesthetic judgment about something insofar as it is gratifying or painful. Taste is always still barbaric when it needs the addition of charms and commotions for satisfaction. Let alone if it makes these into the standard for its approval (KU, AA 5: 223).

In a pure judgment of taste, charm, and commotion don't have any influence as the determining ground of the satisfaction in the beautiful, since what determines it is the purposiveness of the form.

Kant distinguishes aesthetic judgments into empirical and pure ones:

Aesthetic judgments can be divided, just like theoretical (logical) ones, into empirical and pure. The first are those which assert agreeableness or disagreeableness, the

second those which assert beauty of an object or the way of representing it; the former are judgements of sense (material aesthetic judgments), the latter (as formal) are alone proper judgments of taste. (KU, §14, AA 5: 223).

Kant admits that these sensible attractions can be summed up to beauty in order to create the interest to the mind. Although many people consider that the agreeableness of a sensation is sufficient to beauty, it is not helpful for the pure judgment of taste. A color or a sound can be agreeable for some people, but they can only be considered beautiful if they are pure.

A mere color, e.g., the green of a lawn, a mere tone (in distinction from sound and noise), say that of a violin, is declared by most people to be beautiful in itself, although both seem to have as their ground merely the matter of representations, namely mere sensation, and on that account deserve to be called only agreeable. Yet at the same time one will surely note that the sensations of color as well as of tone justifiably count as beautiful only insofar as both are pure, which is a determination that already concerns form. (KU, AA 5: 224).

It is easy to understand that we can enjoy a painting, or a sculpture by their form and its perfection: “In painting and sculpture indeed in all pictorial arts, in architecture and horticulture insofar as they are fine arts, the drawing is what is essential, in which what constitutes the ground of all arrangements for taste is not what gratifies in sensation but merely what pleases through its form.” (KU, AA 5:225)

In dance, Kant would agree with Cunningham’s sentence “Motion is not emotion”, showing that it can be appreciated as pure movement. “All forms of the objects of the sense (of the outer as well as, mediately, the inner) is either **shape** or **play**: in the latter, either play of shapes (in space, mime, and dance), or mere play of sensations (in time)” (KU, AA 5: 225).

But is it possible to enjoy music by its pure form, without emotion?

Is it possible to enjoy music without emotion?

Kant’s answer is ambiguous. On the one hand, the beautiful in music should be judged only by its form; on the other hand, this is not the way people usually judge- and enjoy- music. For a common lover of music, perhaps the emotion it provokes is the main reason to like it.

On the one hand, there is a place in art for music, if one disregards the charm of music’s adornments and focus on the composition itself:

The charm of colors or the agreeable tones of instruments can be added, but drawing (*Zeichnung*) in the former and composition (*Composition*) in the latter constitute the proper object of the pure judgment of taste; and that the purity of colors as well of tones as well of their multiplicity and their contrast seem to contribute to beauty does not mean that they as it were supply a supplement of the same rank to the satisfaction in the form because they are agreeable by themselves, but rather they do so because they merely make the latter more precisely, more determinately, and more completely

intuitable, and also enliven the representation through their charm, thereby awakening and sustaining attention to the object itself. (KU, §14, AA 5: 225, 226)

The attention to the form of music, that is, its composition should be the sole object of the pure object of taste; the agreeable only makes the music more enjoyable and keeps the attention to the object. Kant seems to answer positively to the question: “Can we judge music without emotion? However, there is the other question: Can we enjoy music without emotion?”

Kant’s answer to the last question seems to be negative. Music moves the mind in a very vivid way because of emotions. For that reason, Kant puts this art in the lowest place in the beautiful arts, because it is considered more agreeable than beautiful. Music- he claims- “yet it moves the mind in more manifold and, though only temporarily, in deeper ways; but it is, to be sure, more enjoyment than culture” (§ 53, KU, AA 5: 328).”

Music is considered the last of the fine arts, because it mostly refers to the field of the pleasant, not of the beautiful:

If, on the contrary, one estimates the value of the beautiful arts in terms of the culture that they provide for the mind and takes as one’s standard the enlargement of the faculties that must join together in the power of judgment for the sake of cognition, then to that extent music occupies the lowest place among the beautiful arts (just as it occupies perhaps the highest place among those that are estimated according to their agreeableness), because it merely plays with sensations. (§ 53, KU, AA 5: 329)

The difference between the pictorial arts and music is that the first could please in the judgment and that music pleases in sensation. Music may please, but this agreeableness is almost physical.

One asks which music Kant was referring to. He surely knew Baroque music, but not yet German Romanticism in music. Beethoven would certainly leave the field of mere agreeableness. But could his music be judged formally?

Whose emotions are these?

One problem to admit that music can be appreciated by its emotion is the question: whose emotions are these? According to the pianist I have interviewed it was Chopin’s emotion, not his. He was sensible enough not to attribute emotion to the music itself. Music is not a sentient being, then cannot have its own emotions.

Samantha Matherne claims that one of the central issues of music is the problem of expression:

Frequently, when you hear a piece of instrumental music, we express it as expressing an emotion, for example, Ludwig van Beethoven’s *Eroica* symphony sounds triumphant or Frederic Chopin’s *Étude in E major (op. 10, No3)* sounds sad. Yet even though we *do* describe music in these expressive terms, there is a question of whether we should. After all, we normally regard emotions as something expressed by someone or something that feels that emotion. (Matherne 2014 p.129)

Matherne asks: if music is non sentient, how emotions can be expressed in it? Although this is still a well -discussed question, Matherne claims that the idea that music should be understood as a form of art that expresses emotion was common in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Kant also considered music in expressivist terms, as a language of affects (*Sprache der Affekten*) (KU, § 53, AA 328). At the same time, however, Kant sponsors a formalist view regarding the judgment of taste, since only the form of the composition may ground the aesthetic judgment. If music is seen in an expressivist way, and fine arts should be judged formally, this unescapably leads to a relegation of music to the last position in the rank of fine arts.

Conclusion

Emotion does not belong to the field of pure taste, according to Kant. If it is easy to see how one can judge a painting or a sculpture - or even dance- in terms of form, it is difficult to judge music without having its expressivist aspect into account. That is probably the reason why the pianist who I interviewed, when asked if one could judge the music of Beethoven formally, replied: I don't understand how one could do that, formal judgement is probably a concept of philosophy, and it is beyond my understanding.

Perhaps to judge music in a formal way will be always beyond the understanding of any music lover.

References

- BORGES, M. (2004), "What Can Kant teach us about Emotions?", *The Journal of Philosophy*, 101, pp. 140-58.
- COHEN, A. (2020), "A Kantian Account of Emotions as Feelings", *Mind*, Volume 129, Issue 514, pp. 429-460.
- FRIERSON, P. (2014), *Kant's empirical psychology*, Cambridge University Press, UK.
- KANT, I. (1900-), *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*. Kants gesammelte Schriften, Band 7, Königlich Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Walter de Gruyter, Germany.
- KANT, I. (1900-), *Briefe*, Kants gesammelte Schriften, Band 10-13, Königlich Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Walter de Gruyter, Germany.
- KANT, I. (1900-), *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Kants gesammelte Schriften, Band 5, Königlich Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Walter de Gruyter, Germany.
- KANT, I. (1900-), *Metaphysik der Sitten*, Kants gesammelte Schriften, Band 6, Königlich Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Walter de Gruyter, Germany.
- MATHERNE, S. (2014), *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Volume 72, Issue 2, pp. 129-145

