

Back to Kant after Gadamer and Derrida: Some New Considerations Concerning Art and its Truth

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ABSTRACT. The saying “Back to Kant” is linked with the neo-Kantianism of the Marburg and Baden School at the beginning of the twentieth century. This neo-Kantianism sought to work out and enlarge the domain of understanding (“Verstand”), with a focus on epistemology over ontology.

In this paper I do not argue for a restoration or continuation of this former movement. I will deal with the question how we can go back to Kant (and critical thinking), after Gadamer and Derrida, i.e. going back to the critical project starting from interpretations of the third Critique.

My text consists of five parts: I first present Gadamer and Derrida as exponents of a broader aesthetical movement, characteristic for the twentieth century. Secondly, I analyse the Kant-interpretations of Gadamer and Derrida as interpretations arguing against the critical Kantian project. Thirdly, I question the merits of the anti-Kantian positions Gadamer and Derrida are developing. I defend the opinion that Gadamer and Derrida keep on being tributary to the Kantian critical project. In my fourth point, I return to Kant, on the basis of Paul Guyer’s analysis of the interaction between imagination and understanding. Guyer considers the aesthetic judgement as being “metacognitive”. In my fifth and last point, I reflect on the meaning of the return to Kant after Gadamer and Derrida. This return brings us to a more positive cognitive relation to works of art and a more moderate truth-claim.

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1. Introduction: Gadamer and Derrida as Exponents of a Broader Aesthetical Movement

During the twentieth century, many and very different texts about aesthetics have been published. Because of this, the Italian philosopher Mario Perniola claims we can characterize the twentieth century as a century of aesthetics (Perniola 1998). He presents the history of aesthetics in the twentieth century as follows: in the first half of the century Kant and Hegel are the central points of reference of aesthetic theory. Towards the second half of the century there is a sort of culmination of the aestheticisation in philosophy, moving away from aesthetics in the narrow sense and the Kantian heritage (Perniola 1998).

The aestheticisation process has been associated with an “aesthetic world view” (Vuyk 1992), and is often characterised as “postmodernist”. French theory has played an important role here, but we can also think of the American pragmatist Richard Rorty, and the Italian legacy of Luigi Pareyson, with Umberto Eco, Mario Perniola and Gianni Vattimo. What is most typical for this movement (mainly happening at the end of the twentieth century) is that aesthetic feelings and works of art become prominent in exposing our relationship with truth. Through them we can learn more about reality than e.g. through science.

Although Perniola claims aesthetics is moving away from a Kantian perspective from the 1960s onwards, many of the so-called postmodern thinkers have developed their thinking in relation to Kantian aesthetics, e.g. Jean-François Lyotard. This gap between referring to Kant and moving away from Kantian critical thinking will be my main point of focus.

I will primarily discuss the philosophy of Gadamer and Derrida as exponents of this broader aesthetical movement. These important philosophers of the second half of the twentieth century, have explicitly referred to Kant’s third Critique, and have considered works of art as a starting point to get access to truth or to the lack of truth. Although quite different from each other, both Gadamer and Derrida have reacted against the dominance of the first Critique (with its focus on cognition) and the ambition of Kant’s critical project: to systematize philosophically the way we can have knowledge of things. The reaction against Kant’s methodical critical thinking enables us to organise a return to Kant. In this sense

we can go back to Kant after Gadamer and Derrida, after a development starting from Kantian aesthetics, because in that development at least a part of the critical project has been forgotten.

2. *The Kant-Interpretations of Gadamer and Derrida*

I will first present the Kant-interpretations of Gadamer and Derrida and then reflect on their similarities and differences.

In *Truth and Method* (1960), Gadamer's main philosophical work, Gadamer develops a philosophical hermeneutics: a philosophical reflection on how understanding is possible. Gadamer takes the work of art as a starting point. According to Gadamer works of art create a truth-experience in relation to a community. This truth we have to interpret over and over again, and that is also the way Gadamer thinks understanding works. The focus on works of art brings Gadamer necessarily to an attention for Kantian aesthetics, as Kant's analysis forms the basis for all modern understanding of art. Gadamer explicitly criticizes Kant for having subjectified aesthetics and for having insufficient attention for works of art (Gadamer 1999a, 48-87).

Gadamer stresses that Kantian aesthetics are about the judgement of a subject, while neglecting the properties of the object. Kantian aesthetics are subject-orientated and dependant of the philosophical knowledge-analyses of the first Critique. The third Critique investigates our ability to judge, and according to Kant it does not have a domain of knowledge of its own, unlike the first two Critiques (the first Critique is associated with theoretical knowledge, the second with practical knowledge).

The analysis of Kant is the result of his transcendental method, which searches philosophically for a scientific legislation of knowledge. Gadamer criticizes this method for having a lack of interest in reality. When aesthetics is analysed by this transcendental method, it loses its embeddedness in the world. Although, according to Kant aesthetic judgement brings us to an intersubjectivity, Gadamer argues, this is only happening within an analysis of the thinking process. A more worldly approach is lost.

Gadamer also stresses that Kant is not interested in works of art. In Kant, aesthetic judgement concerns nature and the work of art follows the same analyses as the appreciation of (beautiful) nature. According to

Gadamer, Kant introduces art (fine art) in order to arrive at his teleological vision about nature. In teleological judgement, the second part of the third Critique, we judge nature as if it is a work of art.

To understand this, we need to work out Gadamer's explanation of the subjectification of aesthetics a little bit further. For Kant, the work of art, if it is fine art, is the expression of our freedom to be moral. According to Kant, we recognize a work of fine art as the creation of something which looks as if it has a purpose in itself. In Kant an artistic judgement is not a pure judgement, since there is a conscious intention of the artist and the spectator in relation to works of art. According to Gadamer, in Kant, the idea of art needs to be transposed to nature to return to a pure judgement. This brings us to a judgement of nature as if it is a work of art, as something which has a purpose in itself. In judging nature as if it is a work of art, we experience ourselves as conscious and moral beings and as being the purpose of nature. This reasoning makes it clear for Gadamer that Kant's thinking about nature and art is conceived entirely in terms of human consciousness.

Gadamer believes the Kantian perspective is historically crucial. He is convinced it has led to an ongoing subjectification of aesthetical matters. A non-scientific truth-dimension is lost: an understanding of our being-in-the-world. To arrive at this truth, we can not follow a scientifically inspired method as Kant is doing. Gadamer refers to the forgotten dimension of the humanistic tradition to illustrate this. Humanistic concepts like "Bildung" and "sensus communis" stand in relation with the experience of a real community, as being part of the world.

Now I will present Derrida. We know Derrida of the famous word "deconstruction" and Derrida has deconstructed the first part of the third Critique of Kant: the critique of aesthetics. This text of Derrida is called "Parergon" and is one of the four parts of the book *La vérité en peinture* (Derrida 1978, 44-168) (*The Truth in Painting*).

Deconstruction differs from an analysis or a critique. Deconstruction is a way of reading texts which makes clear how the content and truth-claims of that particular text are constructed in order to undermine them. The construction of truth is deconstructed by bringing the construction to the fore and showing how it differs from the content which it is creating. It is

a way of interpreting, which does not lead to new truth-declarations.

The title of Derrida's text about Kantian aesthetics is "Parergon". In Kant "parerga" refers to what might be circumstantial to a work of art, as e.g. its frame. Derrida inverts this: showing how the frame, which is considered circumstantial, is in fact constituting the content. In other words: Derrida deconstructs Kant's aesthetics.

In order to show how Kant is constructing his content about aesthetics, Derrida follows the reasoning of Kant, while he reads the Kantian text as if it is a work of art. Derrida puts the content of Kant's analysis to the test using the text of Kant itself. Doing this, it becomes clear for Derrida that Kant's aesthetics is determined by the ambition of his first Critique. As I have already mentioned, the first Critique focuses on our faculty of knowing. But this knowledge-driven approach has, according to Derrida, nothing to do with aesthetics, since Kant himself argues that an aesthetic judgement is without concept. Kant analyzes aesthetics in analogy to conceptual knowledge, even though aesthetic feeling is not conceptual.

But Derrida does not throw away all of Kant's analysis. In fact, it is his goal to follow Kant, and to show how his text is actually working. While reading Kant, Derrida himself experiences aesthetic pleasure, but never an absolute and pure pleasure, as Kant suggests (according to Kant aesthetic judgement is disinterested and pure). And here Derrida introduces an interesting description: "mise en crypte". There is no pure pleasure as a consequence of the disinterestedness in an absolute sense, but there is, for Derrida, a possibility of a neutralization of myself and the world. This brings Derrida to taking pleasure in what is not interesting him.

Derrida concludes Kant's thinking process is anthropocentric: everything is analysed in analogy with the way we construct (human) knowledge.

There are some similarities and differences between Gadamer and Derrida in the way they interpret Kant and define the truth of art.

Gadamer takes works of art as a starting point for his hermeneutics, while Derrida reads Kant's text as if it is a work of art. Both Gadamer and Derrida have attacked the importance of the first Critique and wish to free aesthetics from an analysis based on human consciousness. Gadamer and Derrida are anti-subjective. In fact, with Gadamer and Derrida, we can no longer be critical in a Kantian sense, a larger idea of truth opens up, going

beyond human rational control. However, both elaborate this in different ways, bringing us to different perspectives on art and its relationship with truth.

Gadamer's goal is a broader and more embedded understanding. It concerns an understanding beyond a scientific method. For Gadamer aesthetic experience has to be embedded in the world and the work of art creates "truth" in relation to the experience of embeddedness. In this way, works of art create a common world. According to Gadamer, art consolidates and invents the truth of a community. In the essay "The relevance of the beautiful" (Gadamer 1999b, 94-142) Gadamer refers to "happenings" as an art form exemplifying his vision. Indeed, in a happening something is experienced by a community, and the relation with the environment is questioned.

Derrida associates the aesthetic with what cannot be known, and elaborates it as a feeling which continuously escapes and questions our conceptual understanding. Aesthetic experience is given, but no pure formal understanding of it is possible. Also, a work of art is unavoidably influenced by its frame. Derrida's deconstruction has inspired a lot of (visual) artists, critics, curators, architects, etc. to question and attack the context in which they present works of art. Within a museum this can lead to art installations questioning the context while participating at it.

Experiencing works of arts (as Gadamer does), or experiencing "things" as if they are works of art (as Derrida does), brings us to a constantly evolving truth, which can never be fixed in an absolute sense. This can bring us again and again to the experience of a world (as is the case with Gadamer) or, again and again to the insight every understanding is orchestrated by its frame or context (as is the case with Derrida).

3. Where Have Gadamer and Derrida Brought Us?

The positive effect of the attention for aesthetics and works of art, is the opening up of Enlightenment thinking (of which Kant is an exponent) towards other dimensions than its programme based on human rationality. It opens up human rationality for more diversity and for what cannot be known. As Gadamer stresses, the prejudice of the Enlightenment is a prejudice against prejudices. If we take prejudices into account, we can come

to more understanding and to understanding with more respect for diversity. The deconstruction of Derrida has also shown the limits of rational thinking, by demonstrating how truths are created in texts, as e.g. in Kant's aesthetics.

However, this opening up of Enlightenment thinking inevitably remains in relation to the critical project based on human rationality. Gadamer as well as Derrida do not only offer a Kant-interpretation, they position themselves in relation to Kant and Enlightenment-thinking. In his later work, Gadamer has regularly referred to Kant in a positive way, arguing that Kant still inspires our thinking and that the third Critique can be the start of a new philosophy for the future (Gadamer 1999b, 189-205). In deconstructing Kant, Derrida too remains dependent of Kant's text and thoughts. While Derrida shows the paradoxes of them, these very paradoxes thank their existence to the Kantian context.

According to me, the problem with the philosophy of Gadamer and Derrida is that they have disconnected aesthetic experience on the one hand from theoretical knowledge on the other. I do not think both have to be equated, but I do think we need to bring them in relation to each other in a positive way. To my idea, with Gadamer and Derrida we lose the ability for a constructive and fruitful interaction between a more scientific method of thinking and a more artistic experience of things.

4. Aesthetics in Relation to the Kantian Critique: an Analysis by Paul Guyer

If we want to return to Kant after Gadamer and Derrida, we will have to try to reconnect the third with the first Critique. In the Kantian analysis of aesthetics, there are a lot of relations with the first Critique. Gadamer and Derrida have referred to this, but wanted to free the aesthetic from the cognitive dimension of the critical project. To think further about the relation between cognition and aesthetics (within the third Critique) some of the more recent analyses of Anglo-American Kant-specialists (e.g. Henry Allison and Paul Guyer) can be helpful.

In Anglo-American tradition, the third Critique was considered as a less important work for a long time, or as a work only relevant for those specialising in philosophy of art. This has changed since the 1970s. Since

then the third Critique has been considered as an important part of the critical project (Kukla 2006).

In his article “The Harmony of the Faculties Revisited” (Guyer 2005, 77-109) Guyer researches the relationship between the first and third Critique. His main argument is that we need a reference to concepts to be able to judge aesthetically and artistically. We *know* what we are talking about, when we judge of something as being beautiful (be it nature or a work of art).

According to Guyer, the harmony between imagination and understanding, which happens when we find something beautiful, can be interpreted as metacognitive, because aesthetic judgement also tells us something about the relationship between our experience and our conceptual knowledge. In relation to nature, we judge more intuitively, than in relation to works of art. When we judge a work of art, more knowledge is present in the judgement-process: we know an artist had an intention to produce something. In relation to nature, there is no knowledge about any intention of the creation.

Guyer is convinced the metacognitive interpretation of the harmony of the faculties is the only one consistent with Kant’s epistemology and our own assumptions of aesthetic judgement. But, as Guyer shows, Kant’s aesthetic has also given rise to two other possible interpretations, which he names “precognitive” and “multicognitive”. In the precognitive interpretation, there is a stress on considering the object free from any conceptual determination. In the multicognitive interpretation, there is the stress on the many possibilities of interpretations (forms of understanding) that become possible. Guyer does not argue that these interpretations are wrong. He even admits we can find textual evidence for both in the Kantian text. But Guyer does think that both the precognitive and the multicognitive interpretation can and should be incorporated within the metacognitive perspective, otherwise we lose the connection with concepts and end up with open-ended or free-floating suggestions about the way we can surpass these concepts.

According to me, we can recognize the precognitive approach in Derrida’s reading of Kant, as Derrida tries to free the aesthetic from its relation with conceptual thinking. Guyer himself suggests that the multicognitive approach can be recognized in the philosophical hermeneutics of

Gadamer. The philosophy of Gadamer and Derrida show how aesthetics can escape a cognitive determination. But both approaches can be integrated in Guyer's analysis, which means they can be brought back to an interpretation of Kant, without taking distance from the critical ambition.

I believe we can recognize Guyer's analysis in conceptual art. In conceptual art, a work of art always refers to the concept of art as well, as Guyer suggests. To my idea, we need to keep examining the way present-day works of art, in the 21st century, are treating the concept of art.

Guyer's analysis also alters the truth-dimension associated with aesthetics and works of art. We get an attention for the interrelatedness of truth associated with the first Critique (focused on knowledge) and truth associated with the third Critique (focused on aesthetic experience). When aesthetic judgement is interpreted as being metacognitive, it tells us something about the way we experience a particular concept in nature or art. We get to a truth 'in between' conceptual determination and aesthetic freedom.

5. The Meaning of the Return to Kant after Gadamer and Derrida

I would like to conclude with the following considerations.

Whereas Kant's critical thinking aimed to be formal and pure, a demonstration of truth independent of circumstances, Gadamer searched for the reality of art in relation to the world and Derrida demonstrated how the context forms our aesthetic experience. By bringing into account the world or the context, Gadamer and Derrida both have shown how actual reality conditions our understanding.

What then does it mean to return to Kant after Gadamer and Derrida? It was Kant's ambition to create a science of metaphysics and with his three Critiques he was preparing to lay the foundations for that science. We can use the interpretation of Gadamer and Derrida to enlarge the science of metaphysics, specifically in relation to aesthetics and art. According to me Guyer offers a possible format to work on this.

Returning to Kant is an ongoing project, both cognitive and aesthetical. It is my opinion that the science (of metaphysics) as proposed by Kant, needs to be reinterpreted and elaborated over and over again, enriched by new historical facts and conditions.

I think it is still worth to defend our subjective development of cognition, and to enlarge our understanding of it. Bringing into account a hermeneutical and deconstructive aspect within that (metaphysical) science of aesthetics, makes us more self-conscious about the specificity and relativity of its claims.

This brings us to a deeper understanding of art and its truth-dimension. If we accept that a context is structuring our judgement, we know that no aesthetic judgement, be it of nature or art, is an expression of absolute truth. Put positively, each aesthetic judgement is an affirmation of its context and is making clear how we can relate to that context. Maybe this perspective can inspire our view on art and also the making of art itself, making them more self-conscious and with a more moderate truth-claim.

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