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Kant and Bullough on Beauty and Instagram

In Immanuel Kant's "A Theory of Aesthetic Judgement" from his much larger "Critique of Judgement," Kant puts forth a few rather astute and provocative claims about the nature of our experience of Art. These claims about perception and judgement, when talked about in consideration with the "modern experience" and current engagement with art, have severe consequences and implications. In a world of technology and digital media, sensory experience becomes the captain of the ship, guiding our understanding of the world we live in, steering us to a hedonistic state of being. It is in hedonism, that we cannot see true beauty, it is in hedonism that we cannot truly see art.

The reason Kant's claims hold such weight is because they don't only discuss external factors, but internal experience and its direct relationship to the external world. Kant's claims influence the way we understand the very barrier between us and the world, the way that we are the judge of our own experience. Kant states that "in order to play the judge in matter of taste, we must not be in the least biased in favor of the thing's existence but must be wholly indifferent about it." (The thing being an object of consideration). Another way to say this would be that valid critiques of an object may only be made when we do not have any interest or involvement in the thing. To "like" or to "dislike" something thus means that we have an interest in the existence of the thing in question, because in one way or another, we have a sensory engagement with it that yields either a positive or negative response. Thus, sensory experience that is agreeable

(meaning it yields a pleasure) or disagreeable (displeasure) creates an “interest” in it. This does not however mean that sensory experience of something is alone responsible for discounting or demoting the validity of judgement, just that when feeling is involved, sensory experience is demoted to that of the subjective. Kant gives us an example: “The green color of meadows belongs to *objective* sensation i.e., to the perception of an object of sense; but the color’s agreeableness belongs to *subjective* sensation, to feeling, through which no object is presented, but through which the object is regarded as an object of our liking (which is not a cognition of it).” Cognition is different than judgement, we can identify the color green without an interest in it. Kant further discusses how in fact we can be “disinterested” in something. To judge something as beautiful, makes a claim that it must be true for everyone else as well, to say it is beautiful *for me* demotes the validity of the statement because it implies that it may be untrue for someone else, “for he must not call it *beautiful* if [he means] only [that] he *like it*.” What this tells us is that true beauty is devoid of taste, devoid of agreeableness. Not to say that pleasure cannot be experienced but that it is not what drives the experience. To be able to see beauty requires disinterest, “all interest either presupposes a need or gives rise to one,” thus we must be able to experience something without the need of something from it, beauty must exist without use. This gives rise to the idea of the freeplay of the imagination. When we have a preconception of a thing, a definition of what it is or should be, a determining concept or a bias, we therefore need something from it, and thus we are interested. The “free play of the imagination” is when we do not have a determining concept that creates laws of cognition, we are hence

able to see something not under any one defining concept, but rather in the imagination, which does not presuppose any interest or need. It is the free play that allows for valid claims of beauty. Pleasure can be derived from beauty, but only through a reflection on the experience of it, it cannot presuppose it. If an experience of pleasure came before recognition of beauty, the free play of the imagination is therefore impossible.

Modern day platforms for consuming art and objects of beauty are becoming increasingly digital. Platforms such as Instagram have become a stage for artists to showcase their work, but the platform itself, through its construction and design, prevents true engagement and appreciation of beauty. Instagram is anti free play of the imagination. Three reasons explaining this point will be discussed here. The first reason rests in the nature of the difference between a digital screen and a printed photo. A printed photo is viewed in the light of the space in which it is viewed, may it be natural light through a window or lamp, the source of light is external from the work. The viewers experience of the photo is thus separated from the light source, they are not viewed as related. The viewer's experience of the photo is thus driven more by the content of the photo than it is by the physical object. On Instagram, photos are viewed on digital screens which conjoin the presentation of the photo and the content of the photo. The photo is projected out from the screen and sensory experience becomes part of the image itself. The light that radiates from the phone creates a sensation and therefore an interest in the work. The second reason in which Instagram is anti the free play of the imagination is that the platform encourages interest in the work through a literal imposition of a "like" button, viewing the image is presupposed by the question of

a physical engagement with “liking” it. “Liking” a photo on Instagram begs the question of “do I derive a pleasure from this image” / “do I have interest in this image” / “will I engage and “like” this image?” The concept of “liking” is the predetermined concept.

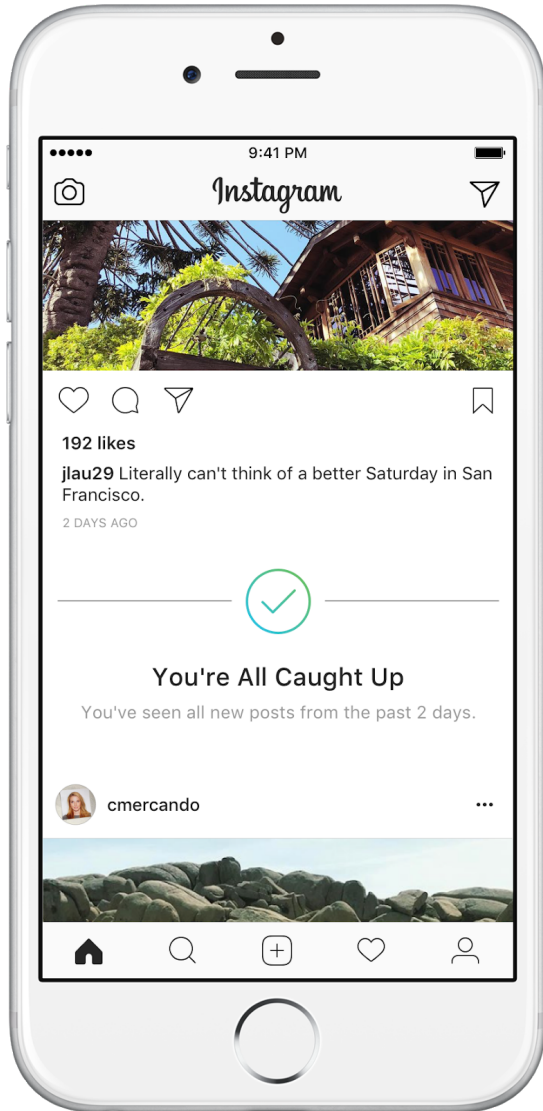
The third and final reason comes in the form of what is the only way out of pragmatic or interested perception, it comes in the form of Edouard Bullough’s concept of the ship in a sea of fog. In a sea of fog, nothing is recognizable and your eyes are constantly looking to focus, looking for something that can be latched onto as a determining concept, such as a boat, a buoy, or a landform. In a sea of fog you are searching for a validity to your perception. The free play of the imagination is akin to being at sea in a thick fog. In free play, you are able to perceive without constraint, you are able to see without definition. To return to something or to relook at something can allow you to view something in a new and free way, just like your eyes straining at sea. In doing so, you are able to move beyond immediate sensory experience and beyond preconception and into the imagination. This however is the nail in the coffin for the average consumer of Instagram. The very design of it, through the constant scrolling through of media, and through the algorithms that choose what images to show you, discourages you to return to an image but rather to see a greater number of images. Instagram recently added a feature that in fact discourages the viewer from reviewing photos they have already seen by indicating that “You’re all caught up” through a banner that creates a literal barricade from the rest of your feed. (See figure 1.) Instagram itself encapsulates the “anti free play” stance in one blog post that explains an update in their algorithm, stating “We’re also making changes to ensure that newer posts are more likely to appear first in feed.

With these changes, your feed will feel more fresh, and you won't miss the moments you care about.”¹ Here Instagram presupposes an investment in the content you are viewing anew by assuming “moments you care about,” defines positive sensory experience by calling it “fresh,” creating “interest,” and thereby discouraging the user from revisiting images by always presenting something new.

Although Instagram is one of the more popular examples, and deals directly with visual content, the trend of binge consumption is common. YouTube has an autoplay feature, Netflix has “watch next,” news websites have “related stories,” and many are even adopting a “feed” design, where you are encouraged to scroll through story after story, encouraged to always consume more. These features would have particularly severe consequences in the eyes of Kant and Bulloughs. Our engagement with art is being pushed into hedonism. By presenting us with so much, companies, journals, magazines, and other platforms that deal with art media and distribution are encouraging only first looks. This not only detrimental to our experience of beauty and of art, but to our very own ability to make judgements. Art is the playground for ideas, a place to let the imagination be exercised and to roam free. In the encouragement of the consumption of digital in mass quantity, we are being tricked into sensory experience and we are being slowly taught that the judgements we make are valid. But maybe it's time to take a second look.

Figure #1

¹ “Changes to Improve Your Instagram Feed.” *Instagram*, 22 Mar. 2018, instagram-press.com/blog/2018/03/22/changes-to-improve-your-instagram-feed/.



An image showcasing the “all caught up” feature on Instagram.