

NATURE AND CULTURE REVISITED: PRAGMATIZING FREE VS ADHERENT BEAUTY IN KANT

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Abstract. *Beauty, in Kant's Critique of the Power of Judgment, is the object of a judgment grounded solely upon the subjects' feeling of pleasure, which, however, claims universal validity. In this paper I begin with an interpretation of such pleasure-based subjective universality as the most emblematic form of the human capacity for orientation in the realm of the contingent (1) and I then pursue this interpretation through Kant's distinction between «free» and «adherent» beauty (2). Afterward, I develop this distinction in the direction of a pragmatist, deflationary understanding of the nature/culture divide (3), instantiating and substantiating it in the conclusion through a brief discussion of «pleasure gardens» in Kant (4).*

Keywords. *Kant; Aesthetic Judgment; Free and Adherent Beauty; Nature and Culture; Gardens*

1. Aesthetics as Orientation in Contingency

Kant's critical philosophy is, among other things, an all-embracing project of mapping the possibilities and limits of the human¹. The space of the human is a very precise space of possibilities, delimited by equally precise boundaries, a space and boundaries the knowledge and control of which Kant aims to secure, for both theoretical and practical purposes. This concern takes two main forms: the first is that of establishing the boundaries set for us as rigorously as possible, thus reducing the risk of our efforts being thwarted in unattainable

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¹ This first section builds upon and reutilizes material I have already published in in the first chapter of A.L. Siani, *Landscape Aesthetics. Toward an Engaged Ecology*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2024, as well as Id., *Spazi kantiani, «Aesthetica Preprint»*, CXVIII, 2021, pp. 177-188.

goals while compromising attainable ones. The second is the opposite, not to preclude ourselves from reaching legitimate and attainable goals. In his project of critically mapping the limits and possibilities of human knowledge, Kant is not only concerned with preventing illusion from looking like truth (i.e., with the danger of dogmatism), but also with preventing an excessive fear of illusion from paralysing human theoretical and practical enterprises in the space of their legitimacy (i.e., with the danger of scepticism). The two concerns are complementary and so are their remedies. It is a question, on the one hand, of establishing precise boundaries to the space of the human (remedy to dogmatism) and, on the other hand, of providing a guide, or at least a reliable track for moving, exploring, and establishing secure possessions within it (remedy to scepticism). In this contribution, I focus on the second aspect, connecting it with the role played by the aesthetic judgment in its different configurations².

The space of empirical contingency is, unlike that of *a priori* domains, not organized according to the necessary objective rules of legislative concepts³. This, however, does not mean that such space is governed by an absolute chaos, with no hope of orientation for human beings. On the contrary, Kant's goal is exactly to trace a guiding thread allowing us to inhabit the space outside our *a priori* legislative faculties. So, the issue is the institution of a meaningful order and web of connections in a contingent realm that may deny any hope of ordering. In the latter case, humans would only be able to fumble around in the darkness of a literally inhumane chaos.

² Already here, and even more so with regard to the next sections, I should make explicit that both my reading of Kant and the thereupon based proposal I will advance on nature and culture are broadly inspired by pragmatism and by the second Wittgenstein. For some methodological considerations see the second chapter of Siani, *Landscape Aesthetics*, and, more specifically on the sense of pragmatism employed in this paper, see the first part of section 3, below.

³ «Our cognitive faculty as a whole has two domains [*Gebiete*], that of the concepts of nature and that of the concept of freedom; for it is *a priori* legislative through both. Philosophy is also divided accordingly into the theoretical and the practical» (I. Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, AA 05, p. 174; Eng. trans. by P. Guyer and E. Matthews *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. by P. Guyer, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 62; from now on I will refer to this work as KU). Here I am fully leaving aside the philosophical 'proper', i.e. the domain and the *a priori*, and investigating the space of empirical contingency, instead.

How do we make connections and find rules in the realm of contingency? How do we know, to put it more technically, that a given phenomenon is the case of a general law?

All we have at the outset is a thread of hope: the hope that our freedom does not remain a *noumenon*, a pure *a priori* construct, but is effective in the empirical world, the potentially absolute contingency of which, we hope, will not confirm the doubts of radical scepticism, but will let the possibility of a humanly accessible sense be construed. As we all know, «what may I hope?» is the question moving Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. This question cannot strive for objectivity, exhausted in Kant's first two *Critiques*, moved, respectively, by the questions: «What can I know?» (*Critique of Pure Reason*) and «What should I do?» (*Critique of Practical Reason*), to both of which a stable and objective answer can be offered that relates, respectively, to nature and freedom, thus fully covering the two «domains» of philosophy. The third *Critique* only considers what human subjectivity can realistically aim to achieve outside the domains of objectivity. The search for an answer to the hope-question opens up an uncertain, dimly lit space at the intersection of the two strongly illuminated domains of nature and freedom. It is the space of the presence of freedom in nature, a presence we cannot objectively ascertain, but for which we can have some subjective grounds, i.e., precisely, some hopes. The principle regulating and substantiating these (realistic) hopes is what Kant calls «purposiveness» (*Zweckmäßigkeit*), acting as a non-objective umbrella-rule allowing us to conjecture and search for a sense in the contingent empirical manifold.

Following this principle, we can orient ourselves in the territory of experience and establish a 'habitat' in it⁴. The latter, as opposed to a domain, is a space we can inhabit, but over which we cannot impose an *a priori*, objective legislation: a sort of intermediate space halfway between the domain of the pure universal *a priori* and the possibility (which we may call Humean) of a completely arbitrary, recalcitrant world. It is delimited on one side by the temptation of

⁴ On «habitat» in Kant see first R.A. Makkreel, *Kant and the Need for Orientational and Contextual Thinking: Applying Reflective Judgement to Aesthetics and to the Comprehension of Human Life*, «Kantian Review», XXVI (1), 2020, pp. 53-78, p. 60: «The third *Critique* [...] also considers those parts of the territory of experience where we have not discovered universal laws and where the most we can hope for are empirical concepts or vague notions. These are local habitats where order is 'contingent' [...]. Habitats exhibit [...] the order of familiarity of where we happen to be».

dogmatism and on the other by the risk of radical scepticism. If we fell prey to either of them, we would not be able to orient ourselves in the world, and even less to inhabit it: in the case of dogmatism, because we would keep attempting to build sky-rising towers without having adequate material and projects, in a babelish chaos of constant collapses; in the case of scepticism, because no place would look safe enough to establish a living.

The groundwork for the possibility of this «order of familiarity» and thus for the legitimacy of the hope not only to find a place in it, but also to be able to modify, communicate, inhabit it, is, for Kant, an aesthetic one⁵. In pure aesthetic judgments, we are confronted with the fact of the claim to a universal consensus, which however lacks any objective and conceptual basis. If I call a rose «beautiful», I cannot base this judgment on any objective property of the rose nor on any concept from which I can deduce its beauty, yet I expect other subjects to share my evaluation, otherwise it would just be the expression of a wholly subjective preference. The universality claim and the subjective ground, we are told right at the outset of the *Analytic of the Beautiful*, separate the pleasure for the beautiful, respectively, from the pleasure for what is merely «agreeable», i.e., a matter of sensitive subjective preference, and from cognition-tied forms of pleasure, including the pleasure for the moral good. Calling an object beautiful, rather than saying something about that object, expresses a subjective feeling of pleasure stemming from the ability to evaluate things in a way that can be shared and, ideally, approved by fellow human beings, even without being able to bring any object-related evidence in support of that evaluation. The beautiful is at the same time the archetype and the epiphenomenon of the human capacity to orient oneself *as if* there were necessary objective indications or rules, even where the latter are absent, i.e. in the space of empirical contingency.

Therefore, the beautiful takes on a paradigmatic role in the search for stability in the instability, of the universal in the individual instance, and of the necessary in the contingent: it bears testimony to the possibility of actualising freedom in the realm of nature. This also means that, despite its singularity, subjectivity, and lack of determinate concepts, the judgment of taste is not a mere

⁵ See also L. Amoroso, *Kant e il problema di una regola delle regole*, «Nuova civiltà delle macchine», III (3-4), 1985, pp. 5-8, p. 7.

individual reaction to a punctual feeling, but, on the contrary, its very possibility is grounded upon the claim to a universal consensus. Taste and beauty burst open the private limitations of individual feeling, which would otherwise be the only motive of orientation in the empirical world⁶. They, therefore, provide legitimacy to the hope of attributing meaning to the facts and objects within it, thus establishing their communicability: «The predicate ‘beautiful’ is a mere placeholder for a more considered assessment that needs to be made in conjunction with those who experience the world like us. It invokes a human communicability without appealing to ready concepts. [...] Kant regards [this] as the core function of the imagination, namely, to project a figurative meaning on things»⁷. The capacity to evaluate the beautiful manifests not only the possibility of mapping the territory of the absolutely contingent, but also of building a sufficiently stable habitat within it. Even where our concepts are not enough to legislate in a necessary and objective way, we can still discern, institute, and communicate meanings, thereby finding, and giving the space we find ourselves in, an order or familiarity that is realistically not recalcitrant to our freedom.

Admittedly, for Kant such space is not a philosophically central, indeed not even a properly philosophical, one. Philosophy only reaches as far as our *a priori* concepts can apply, thus only the two domains of nature and freedom, and at most the attempt to bridge the gap between them through an *a priori* principle, i.e., purposiveness. Even this attempt is presented in a somewhat puzzled and embarrassed⁸ way, as an adventure into a fictional, non-extended space, almost a non-place with the only function to provide a passage between the only two properly philosophical ones, i.e., the domains of nature and freedom⁹. Nevertheless, this deviation undeniably ends

⁶ «Domains and habitats are both parts of the territory of human experience and fields can be said to border on its edges. The local region in which we feel at home counts as a habitat. Similarly, what is obscurely felt in inner sense can be regarded as a private habitat. However, not all feelings are so delimited in scope. Indeed, the feelings aroused by beauty can transpose us outside ourselves» (Makkreel, *Kant and the Need for Orientational and Contextual Thinking*, p. 62).

⁷ Ivi, p. 61.

⁸ See e.g. KU, AA 05, p. 169; Eng. trans., p. 57.

⁹ As we saw, philosophy proper is for Kant either theoretical or practical: only the domains of knowledge and morals are the fully legitimate spaces of philosophy. In this sense, habitats are, strictly speaking, philosophical non-places

up changing the aim and the nature of the journey. Having established the possibility of a bridge between the two domains, the issue becomes more and more the bridge itself, which becomes the philosophically central, though only partially controllable, space, in Kant himself and in the philosophy after him. From a liminal, dubious quasi-non-place, this space of meaningful, surveyable contingency ends up being the space of the already concretely reconciled dualism: not just the space of physical being, not just the space of the moral «ought to be», but the space of the «familiar», of consensus, of horizontal human interaction, and contingent order and regularity. A space that is a human construction, i.e., in which the human being constructs itself, yet not in the sense of domination, but of openness to the contingent, the non-human, the other¹⁰.

Such space, together with the aesthetic judgment grounding it, is characterized both by the absence of preordained concepts, interests, goals, etc., hence by contingent, undisciplinable singularity, *and* by the (conditional) necessity and universality of the consensus it demands, hence by our capacity and disposition to cross the narrow borders of our individualities to enter and contribute to a public, shared space. In our natural drive to establish and inhabit this typically human space, we accept a game with certain rules of which we can make sense and which we can communicate and modify, spurred by a hope that is essential for our meaningful existence and the possibility of which is granted by our capacity to perceive, judge, and communicate aesthetically. The game we play, I suggest, is that of ‘culture’ as a local habitat or domicile with changing borders, constituting, without locking us in it, a horizon in which we can orient ourselves, within the limits of our possibilities. I claim that such aesthetics-based understanding of culture leads to a deflation of the border with ‘nature’ and a pragmatic reassessment of the

connecting philosophical places (like a bridge connecting two lands is not a place in either of them). This corresponds to the fact that, whereas the first and the second *Critique* are propaedeutic, respectively, to a metaphysics of nature and a metaphysics of morals, i.e. to the doctrinal parts of the system, this is not the case with the third *Critique*, in which «the critique serves instead of theory» (KU, AA 05, p. 170; Eng. trans., p. 58) and there is no space for a doctrinal-metaphysical counterpart, i.e., there is no domain.

¹⁰ For a broader discussion see A.L. Siani, *Kants ästhetische Urteilskraft als nicht-ästhetisches Wissen und das Ende des modernen Subjekts*, in *Ästhetisches Wissen*, ed. by C. Asmuth and P. Remmers, Berlin-Boston, de Gruyter, 2015, pp. 95-110.

relationship between the two terms. The remaining of this paper will be devoted to developing this claim via an exploration of Kant's distinction between «free» and «adherent» beauty.

2. *Free and Adherent Beauty*

Having schematically highlighted the general orientational role of aesthetics, my aim is now to develop the point by discussing it with regard to Kant's distinction of «free» and «adherent»¹¹ beauty. The goal here is not so much a detailed Kant-immanent exegesis of the two terms and their relationship per se, but rather to investigate how they redefine the general orientational role of aesthetics discussed in the previous section. More specifically, I want to explore the potential of this reading to contribute to a pragmatist conception of the nature/culture divide that goes beyond Kant¹². A preliminary disclaimer might be in place here. Since Kant distinguishes not only between free and adherent beauty, but also between natural and artistic one, one might object that the latter distinction is more relevant to the discussion of the nature/culture divide. I can only state, without being able to substantiate this claim here, that I take the artistic/natural beauty distinction in Kant to be not only derivative from the free/adherent one, but also less conducive to the overall aim of this article¹³. Kant himself is interested in

¹¹ Sometimes translated as «dependent».

¹² It would of course be impossible to even begin unravelling the debate on such broader topic in an adequate way and I certainly do not raise any claim to exhaustivity or detail. My aim is just to propose a reading of certain Kantian terms that can hopefully help delineating a possible way of understanding 'nature' and 'culture' in their interrelation.

¹³ At least a short note is necessary here. It would seem obvious to regard artistic beauty as equi-extended with adherent beauty, and natural beauty as equi-extended with free beauty. Some Kantian examples, odd as they may seem to the contemporary reader, effectively illustrate why this is not the case (see also A. Reiter, I. Geiger, *Natural Beauty, Fine Art and the Relation between Them*, «Kant-Studien», CIX (1), 2018, pp. 72-100, with the useful appendix). There are both free beauties that are artistic and not natural (wallpapers, à la grecque designs, music without text or theme), and adherent beauties that are natural and not artistic (humans, horses, insofar as they seem to presuppose a concept of their perfection). In short, we can *freely* evaluate artefacts if they do not embody concepts (or if the

the ‘sentimental’ (albeit transcendental) standpoint of the subject rather than in objective properties per se and, correspondingly, the nature/culture distinction I am ultimately concerned with has to do with the subject’s mode of consideration rather than with the object’s properties. I am hence leaving the distinction of artistic and natural beauty aside and, in pursuing the different configurations of beauty represented by the pair «adherent» vs «free», I will focus instead on the variations in the subject’s aesthetic judgment and ensuing feeling of pleasure. Such sense of pleasure is indeed a function of a universal capacity to judge and communicate, as Kant clearly states: «Thus it is the universal capacity for the communication of the state of mind in the given representation which, as the subjective condition of the judgment of taste, must serve as its ground and have the pleasure in the object as a consequence»¹⁴. In what follows, the exploration of the free/adherent beauty pair will therefore be guided by a consideration of the more or less universal scope of the corresponding judgement and communication.

Kant deals with the distinction between free and adherent beauty in the third moment of the *Analytic of the Beautiful*, i.e. the «relation» one:

There are two kinds of beauty: free beauty (*pulchritudo vaga*) or merely adherent beauty (*pulchritudo adhaerens*). The first presupposes no concept of what the object ought to be; the second does presuppose such a concept and the perfection of the object in accordance with it. The first are called (self-subsisting) beauties of this or that thing; the latter, as adhering to a concept (conditioned beauty), are ascribed to objects that stand under the concept of a particular end¹⁵.

latter are unknown to us), and we can only *adherently* evaluate certain natural objects that seem to be inseparable from a concept of perfection/purpose.

¹⁴ KU, AA 05, p. 217; Eng. trans., p. 102.

¹⁵ KU, AA 05, p. 229; Eng. trans., p. 114. For a review of the main interpretative directions on the subject and an outline of a viewpoint reconciling them, see P. Guyer, *Free and Adherent Beauty: A Modest Proposal*, «British Journal of Aesthetics», XLII (4), 2002, pp. 357-366. For an alternative interpretation also based on a historical reconstruction of the antecedents of the Kantian dichotomy see A. Rueger, *Beautiful Surfaces: Kant on Free and Adherent Beauty in Nature and Art*, «British Journal for the History of Philosophy», XVI (3), 2008, pp. 535-557, and for an exhaustive historical discussion of the origin of Kant’s idea of an adherent

Judging ‘freely’ means disregarding any purpose as well as any concept as possible guides for the judgement. Judging ‘adherently’ means incorporating an evaluation of the ‘adherence’ of the represented object to certain purposes/concepts and its ensuing perfection in regard to the latter¹⁶. Now, such a ‘relational’ difference is reflected, first of all, in a ‘purity’ difference. Since pure judgments of taste are only those that are not based on purposes/concepts, judgments of adherent beauty are necessarily limited in purity. This, in turn, translates into a ‘quantity’ difference: adherent beauty is less universal than free beauty. Put another way, when judging adherently, the scope of my ability to communicate my pleasurable state of mind is less universal than when judging freely. This is because, firstly, the appreciation of adherent beauty entails the consideration of a purpose/concept, i.e. a cognitive act or acquisition. In order to aesthetically appreciate a church in an appropriate way, I need to know what a church is, i.e. I need to be familiar with the concept/purpose of the building I am evaluating. Second, at a broader level, the judgement of adherent beauty also presupposes knowledge of and participation in a collective practice, however conceived, be it linguistic, social, etc.: in short, a culture¹⁷.

beauty see R.R. Clewis, *Beauty and Utility in Kant's Aesthetics: The Origins of Adherent Beauty*, «Journal of the History of Philosophy», LVI (2), 2018, pp. 305-335. Here I do not aim to adjudicating the different positions in the literature, as my own interpretation's ultimate goal lies beyond an immanent clarification of the terms at issue in Kant.

¹⁶ The notion of «perfection» is a central one for the exegesis of Kant's distinction of free and adherent beauty and more in general for the understanding of his conception of beauty. Since, however, it is not strictly relevant to my own interpretive proposal and given the space constraints, I will not discuss it. See, among others, M.J. Fletcher, *Dependent Beauty and Perfection in Kant's Aesthetics*, «Philosophical Writings», XXIX, 2005.

¹⁷ See also D. Dutton, *Kant and the Conditions of Artistic Beauty*, «British Journal of Aesthetics», XXXIV (3), 1994, pp. 226-239, p. 238: «The account of free and dependent beauty given here explains why Kant says that a taste which has been enhanced by the connection of the aesthetic with intellectual liking is ‘not universal’ [...]. Such an aesthetic appreciation would presuppose training or enculturation in artistic rules and structures, and with them expectations, comparisons to be made within a genre, historical precedents, and so forth». See also p. 232: «If we interpret the free/dependent beauty distinction as not only about the assignment of an object to a category (with its particular perfections), but also about the general background conditions for artistic practice, [...] the

The aesthetic judgement of adherent beauty has an orienting function in the sense that its possibility vouches for the possibility of meaningful, expressive participation in a specific social context. Agreement on the aesthetic evaluation of a church enables and strengthens the communication and expression of ideas, meanings, etc. within a group constituted by a number of individuals, all of whom are more or less competent in what a church is. In a rather precise sense, then, adherent beauty is 'not free': I am not free to aesthetically evaluate a church as I please, disregarding its purpose/concept and all the cultural practices and institutions associated with it. If I disregard all these aspects in my evaluation, I will in fact be judged as not 'competent' and as a stranger, at least in this respect, to that particular group. Just consider the case of someone who, in an unfamiliar country, comes across a building the nature and function of which are unknown to him: this subject would be free in his aesthetic evaluation of the building precisely because he knows nothing about it.

Based on the difference in the scope of communication, I propose to interpret the pair free vs. adherent beauty as the opposite directions or scopes in which aesthetic judgement fulfils its orienting function. Free beauty warrants a potentially universal agreement that is, however, quite unspecified and unqualified. Its only condition of possibility, both necessary and sufficient, is membership in the human species. Instead, adherent beauty warrants an always more or less restricted agreement, but one that is specific and qualified, and therefore, we might add, more 'meaningful'. The more meanings are associated with the represented object, the more limited is the group capable of aesthetically appreciating it in an appropriate way, and vice versa, up to the extreme (and certainly non-Kantian) case of an object that has so many meanings for me that only I can appropriately (and solipsistically) appreciate it. Free and adherent beauty can then be seen as the ideal extremes of a continuous line: on one side, extension and thinness (free beauty); on the other, intension and thickness (adherent beauty). Every aesthetic judgement falls

free/dependent distinction slides according to whatever aspect of a work is being attended to: what, therefore, counts as 'free' or 'dependent' is contextually determined. This does not psychologize the distinction, but it does make its application contextually dependent to the extent that it makes it in part an issue of aspect-recognition». I guess my own reading emphasizes even more than what Dutton does the 'cultural' variability of adherent beauty.

somewhere on this line, with completely free and completely adherent beauty being horizons of asymptotic approximation.

Following this blueprint, we could imagine a line of possible objects of aesthetic judgement, from Kant's flower example (maximum extension, minimum thickness), through Kant's examples of 'free' art (mosaics, etc.) and world-famous artistic masterpieces, to more 'local' works of art, down to small community works and even family objects (minimum extension, maximum thickness). Now, it may seem absurd to attribute more thickness (i.e. more layers of meaning) to community or family objects than to world-famous masterpieces. Recall, however, that I am not talking here about aesthetic quality or value, or even the quality or value of those meanings per se: for Kant artistic substantiality and purity/freedom of aesthetic evaluation not only do not imply, but do in fact limit each other¹⁸. Rather, the point is that the more universal the appreciation, the freer the beauty. Globally acclaimed masterpieces are more universal exactly because they are 'thinner' in the sense that they require competence in less context-specific concepts/purposes, as in «everyone likes the Monna Lisa». Again, one might object that mass preferences are far removed from Kant's conception of taste. I would reply that the Monna Lisa has become the object of massified preference precisely because it can be appreciated as a freer, more universal, less context-dependent (or «adherent»), and therefore also thinner, beauty than more particularistic, context-dependent artworks. Ultimately, I think it is possible to say that great masterpieces strike the right balance between freedom and adherence, i.e. between the accessibility and the substantiality of their meaning(s), or, as I will argue in short, between 'nature' and 'culture'. I, as an empirical individual, may

¹⁸ See among others what A. Halper, *Rethinking Kant's distinction between the beauty of art and the beauty of nature*, «European Journal of Philosophy», XXVIII (4), 2020, pp. 1-19, p. 10, writes about free artistic beauties: «These last are of a low rank on Kant's scheme for organizing the various kinds of artwork in §53. What is more, they are of such low rank precisely because they are free beauties. For Kant, ranking of the various artistic genres is in accord with the way that such genres cultivate mankind or give us something to think about. But free artistic beauties cannot accomplish any of that, because they do not express aesthetic ideas, the very thing to which Kant looks to accomplish this task. That is, free artistic beauty is possible, but it is always of a low rank because it does not very well express an aesthetic idea. Again, great works of art are great precisely insofar as they express an aesthetic idea».

attach more meanings to a poster hanging in my room than to the Monna Lisa, but my poster's meaning has no chance of being comparable with the Monna Lisa in terms of reach and impact. Here, the kind of aesthetic appreciation tends toward the insuperable privacy and empirical superficiality of the merely agreeable.

In adherent beauty, pleasure is partly derived from knowledge of, familiarity with, and participation in a specific, contextually limited form of life¹⁹. Such pleasure is, in fact, derived from the 'adherence' of our imagination to a specific, contextually limited and familiar concept or purpose. The backflip is the limited scope of such appreciation. Free aesthetic appreciation, on the other hand, means combining in a single experience the full acceptance of the absence of purpose with the awareness of the general possibility of pleasure grounded in aesthetic judgment. In other words, we evaluate a given representation, whether of a natural or an artistic object, that does not as such communicate or express a determinate purpose or concept, and yet we can play with the idea of its purposiveness. Here, the imagination does not (and cannot) adhere to anything, but it is, in a distinctive sense, *free*. This freedom is only restricted when our appreciation is motivated or guided not only by a principle of universal, unspecified purposiveness, but also by the assumption, whether conscious or unconscious, of specific purposes. This is the case, as we have seen, not only for most artefacts, but also for some natural objects, as in Kant's example of the horse²⁰. Since we (and, even more so, the 18th century readers of Kant) are *culturally* accustomed to evaluating horses in terms of their suitability for certain purposes, we cannot help but evaluate their beauty, at least to some extent, in terms of their suitability for such purposes. What this means empirically, if

¹⁹ I take my proposal to be compatible with, though broader than, the suggestion by G. Scarre, *Kant on Free and Dependent Beauty*, «British Journal of Aesthetics», XXI (4), 1981, pp. 351-362, pp. 357-358, that Kant's idea of an adherent beauty is motivated by consideration of «decorum», i.e. «when we mean to judge something aesthetically, we should look at it not only from the point of view of its free beauty, but should also ask ourselves whether it is fitting that an object of its type should possess whatever features make it beautiful». Admittedly, the concept of decorum puts a special emphasis on morality and its relationship with the beautiful, whereas in my reading this point is but one of the factors making up a culture or form of life (although a particularly important one). But then again, the notion of decorum itself is evidently context-dependent, hence I do not see reasons why it cannot be incorporated in my reading.

²⁰ See KU, AA 05, p. 230; Eng. trans., p. 114.

I am right, is that just as it is virtually impossible to positively evaluate a building intended to be a church that does not seem to fit the usual purposes of churches, so it is virtually impossible to positively evaluate a horse that does not seem to fit the usual purposes of horses. So, for example, we would find it hard to appreciate as beautiful a horse that for some reason cannot jump or is maimed: our judgement is (partly) unfree in this sense, whereas a free or pure judgement of taste should completely disregard the horse's disability.

By contrast, we feel completely unbound in our judgement of certain crustaceans, either because we assume that the appearance of the shell has no purpose, or because such a purpose is so unfamiliar to us that it is very easy to disregard it for the purpose of the judgement²¹. We can therefore surmise that a human group with little or no knowledge and use of horses, but with great knowledge and use of crustaceans, would provide examples specularly opposed to Kant's. On this reading, at least theoretically, even the rose might become an adherent beauty, if it is aesthetically evaluated in a context making it virtually impossible to disregard its suitability to specific, largely familiar purposes and concepts (such as in the case of horses). Once again, no object per se belongs univocally to either free or adherent beauties: what matters is its cultural embedment. The only notable, though ultimately self-explaining, exception, is constituted by human beings themselves, for which an evaluation in terms of free beauties *always* seems precluded. In Kantian terms, this is because only the human being «has the end of its existence in itself, [...] determines his ends himself through reason, or, where he must derive them from external perception can nevertheless compare them to essential and universal ends and in that case also aesthetically judge their agreement with them»²². In other terms, this is because when both the judging subject and the judged object are human beings, contextual dependence is simply impossible to disregard²³. If this

²¹ See KU, AA 05, p. 230; Eng. trans., p. 114. «Lobsters and hummingbirds are deemed free beauties, and horses dependent beauties because in Kant's thinking the former are remote from human practices and intentions, and the latter intimately involved with them» (Dutton, *Kant and the Conditions of Artistic Beauty*, p. 232).

²² KU, AA 05, p. 233; Eng. trans., p. 117.

²³ It should be added, however, that the very unsoundable gap between universal human-specific, non-empirical purposes and empirical human variability allows an extremely broad spectrum of possibilities of aesthetic evaluation of human

is correct, all beauties can, depending on the context, each time be either free or adherent, except for the beauty of the human being, which is always adherent²⁴. Two things can be observed here. The first, rather obvious, is that adherent and free beauty, and correspondingly impure and pure aesthetic judgements, do not fall into rigid categories, but are culturally, historically, geographically variable. The second, less obvious, is that adherent and free beauty only make sense in their co-implication. The next section will address both points in their relationship, outlining the main tenets of a conception of the nature-culture divide based on this reading of Kant.

3. *Nature and Culture: An Attempt at Deflation*

Free beauty stands for the universal capacity for non-instrumental, non-cognitive, non-moral judgement, i.e. for the possibility of universally meaningful and unrestrained imaginative and communicative processes, whereby the flipside of universal meaningfulness is the transparency and thinness of meaning: in the distinctively Kantian sense of a *free* aesthetic evaluation, a rose is just a rose. Adherent beauty, on the other hand, stands for the capacity for partially purpose- and concept-bound judgements, the content of which, however, cannot be reduced to specific purposes and concepts (otherwise the judgement would simply cease to be aesthetic). Such judgments have a more determined, i.e. also more limited, scope, in which imagination and communication are partly bound to belonging to/knowing a certain 'form of life': a building is never just a building, but always «a church, a palace, an arsenal, or a garden-house»²⁵, etc. Beauty in general points toward the conditions of possibility of the expression and *communication* (i.e., the establishment of a 'community') of ideas that are not bound to specific purposes and concepts, i.e., of orientation, as presented in the first section. While free beauty stands for the universal (with Kant: transcendental) capacity for orientation belonging to the human subject

beings, so that, even though full evaluative freedom remains precluded, the patterns of adherence are virtually unlimited.

²⁴ This further implies that there cannot be an objectively *absolute* free beauty, other than as an ideal approximation, or, in a sense to be better explained, as a contrastive, though not purely negative, foil. I will come back to this point in short.

²⁵ KU, AA 05, p. 230; Eng. trans., p. 114.

qua human subject, adherent beauty stands for the capacity for orientation of the human subject as *already* part of a community or a way of life. Both forms, in my reading (and, I believe, in Kant's own spirit if not letter), are to be understood as functions of the use of the power of judgment, rather than as objectively different forms of beauty. I will now elaborate such an anti-essentialist, pragmatist understanding of free and adherent beauty in the direction of an aesthetically grounded conception of the nature-culture divide. What follows can hopefully also serve as a partial operational clarification of the pragmatist approach adopted in this paper.

Clearly, without the kind of reflective and evaluative capacity embodied in free beauty, human beings would not be able to orient themselves communicatively in the absence of fixed concepts, purposes, and interests. However, every instantiation of the use of such a universal orienting capacity is at the same time the institution of a community, however small and provisional, of subjects who not only share a specific evaluation, i.e. a cultural practice, but also at least partially a reflective awareness of that community of form of life²⁶. When such a specific cultural practice and the community associated with it stabilise around such an evaluation, the result is the formation of a common concept/purpose, in which case the meaning of such a practice becomes thicker and its scope more limited, following an 'adherent' rather than a 'free' blueprint. But it is only when the concept/purpose is stabilised that it becomes possible to recognise a universal orienting capacity through and beyond it. In other words, free beauty has to do with the universal community-instituting capacity for orientation, adherent beauty with the capacity for orientation in the context of an existing community (this term taken in its broadest meaning). It is the possibility of the former that grounds the reality of the latter, but it is the reality of the latter that makes sense of and enables the emergence of the possibility of the former.

The transcendently pure evaluative capacity embodied in free beauty, I argue, is fully revealed in its negative relation to the concrete culture from within which it is exercised. That is, in the

²⁶ This reading, then, puts an emphasis on the emblematic, foundational way in which aesthetic judgments are 'reflective' judgments: they seem to address objects, but they ultimately always reflect back a picture of the judging subject(s). Such picture can tend, each time and even for the same subject(s) at different times, towards freedom and universality or towards adherence and contextuality, just like the image of myself in the mirror changes as my focus shifts.

exercise of this capacity, the human subject provisionally negates ‘adherence’ to its specific form of life and adopts the universal perspective of the human subject qua human subject²⁷. It is only through this provisional negation, which is part of Kant’s notion of disinterest, that the freedom of the power of judgement is revealed in its full potential²⁸. It is only from within the specific form of life in which the human subject lives at any given time that the possibility of a free universality emerges in its full sense: it is only from within culture that the universal power of nature emerges. On the other hand, of course, it is only because humans have this ‘natural’

²⁷ I hence, on the one hand, agree with Dutton that, concretely, free beauty as such is nowhere to be found, acting ‘only’ as the «attempt to identify a decontextualized beauty which exists independent of the desires and designs of human beings» (Dutton, *Kant and the Conditions of Artistic Beauty*, p. 232). See also p. 238: «Where then does this leave that sense of free beauty with which Kant began the *Critique of Judgement* – the presuppositionless, ‘self-subsistent’ form to be experienced in a conceptual vacuum, known only through its power to excite the otherwise empty faculties of mind? One could almost say, nowhere. It virtually drops from sight, except as an unrealizable, limiting condition of aesthetic experience. Free beauty was a convenient notion for Kant as a foil against which to measure the corrosive influences on aesthetic judgement of self-interest, desire, charm, sentimentality and prejudice». On the other hand, even though Dutton then acknowledges that «the aesthetic purity (and even moral truth) [free beauty] represents persists for Kant in the capacity of artistic imagination to rise freely above the determinations of history, tradition, and the context of interest and desire» (p. 239), I do not agree to limiting the role of free beauty to that of an ideal, negative counterfoil. On my reading, free beauty epitomizes and grounds the human capacity for orientation in the contingent and in the absence of fixed structures. It is transcendently prior to and necessary for the deployment of *all* aesthetic judgments, however ‘adherent’ they turn out to be.

²⁸ Similarly, A. Rueger, *Kant and the Aesthetics of Nature*, «British Journal of Aesthetics», XLVII (2), 2007, pp. 138-155, argues that, for Kant, artistic beauty is the basic form and natural beauty a derivative one. What pleases us aesthetically is, at a basic level, the product of our imagination in its free play, i.e. something created with the purpose of pleasing us, i.e. art. We appreciate nature aesthetically when we can represent it as if it were purposeful like art, even though we know that it is a blind mechanism. Precisely because our appreciation of nature is based on our knowledge that it is a mechanism without any purpose, such an appreciation can claim full universality and necessity. As Kant clearly shows, our appreciation of nature ceases (or at least ceases to claim universality) the moment we understand that it was art (i.e., a purposeful creation) that we were appreciating, not nature (i.e., a blind mechanism). It is only based on the human practice of and familiarity with art, that nature can be judged as purposeful or finalistic and hence be appreciated aesthetically, even though (and just because) we know it to be governed by mechanistic laws with no ideas to express (see also Halper, *Rethinking Kant’s distinction*).

power that they can institute culture in the sense explained in the first section. To put this result into a formula: to the extent that adherent beauty is 'cultural', free beauty is 'natural', and the two concepts only make sense in relation to each other.

Interpreted this way, the oppositional pair of free/adherent beauty points to a development of the nature/culture dichotomy that is not essentialist but pragmatic, and ultimately to the undermining of a rigid boundary, and indeed to the deflation of the divide between nature and culture. That is, the two terms represent different directions of a continuous line rather than essentially separate compartments. In fact, they are different configurations of the human capacity for orientation, which could not exist without each other, inasmuch as, as I have shown, adherent beauty is only possible on the basis of free beauty, but it is only through adherent beauty that free beauty reveals itself as meaningful for human beings. Beauty refers to a universal capacity to experience and evaluate without having ready-made concepts or aiming at predetermined goals, i.e. in a way that is open to the contribution and scrutiny of all human beings qua human beings. This capacity can work in a more universal but thinner way, or in a more contextual but thicker way. For the simple reason that we are human, we have this 'natural' capacity (call this: transcendental precedence of free beauty), but every time we use it, we specify this capacity, thus instituting 'culture'. At the same time, it is only by instituting culture that the universal capacity is revealed as a condition of possibility (call this: epistemic precedence of adherent beauty).

The use of this capacity can tend towards universality+thinness or towards contextuality+thickness. In the first case, the use of the capacity tends to overlap with the capacity itself (without ever reaching it): a free aesthetic judgement is nothing but the instantiation of a universal rule that cannot be presented. Here we might say that we are simply relying on nature. In the second case, the use of the capacity tends towards the incorporation of determinate concepts or purposes: here we have to rely on culture. Through this aesthetically based understanding of the nature-culture divide, human beings are shown to be poised between the necessity of 'adhering' to a relatively stable horizon and way of life, and the 'freedom' of adopting a universal point of view, qua human subjects: quasi a «view from nowhere», if we wish. The two horizons, that of adherence and that of freedom, make sense in their constant reference to each other, between the necessity of attachment and the

possibility of detachment: it is at the crossroads between these two directions that humans develop their capacity for orientation in the realm of contingency.

4. *A Way through Pleasure Gardens*

I would like to conclude this paper by substantiating this reading of the nature-culture divide with reference to a concrete aesthetic example by Kant, namely the «art of pleasure gardens». Although such art is treated only incidentally and is not accorded any particular value by Kant, it is interesting in the context of this paper because it combines features of both adherent and free beauty, and thus represents a significant expression of the precarious balance between the two horizons of nature and culture between which human beings move. Curiously, but in fact consistently with the ‘pictorial origin’ of the landscape concept²⁹, Kant disentangles the art of pleasure gardens from the plastic arts, suggesting instead that it «could be considered as a kind of painting, although of course it presents its forms corporeally»³⁰. This is because «it actually takes its forms from nature (the trees, bushes, grasses and flowers from woods and field, at least to begin with), and to that extent is not an art like the plastic arts»³¹. More importantly, the art of pleasure gardens

also has no concept of the object and its end (as in architecture) as the condition of its arrangement, but merely the free play of the imagination in the contemplation, to that extent it coincides with merely aesthetic painting, which has no determinate theme (which puts air, land, and water together by means of light and shadows in an entertaining way)³².

Besides, despite presenting «corporeal extension» not just in illusion, like proper painting, but in truth, the art of pleasure gardens

²⁹ See among others V. Di Palma, *Is Landscape Painting?*, in *Is Landscape...? Essays on the Identity of Landscape*, ed. by G. Doherty and C. Waldheim, London-New York, Routledge, 2016, pp. 44-70.

³⁰ KU, AA 05, p. 323; Eng. trans., p. 200.

³¹ *Ibidem*.

³² *Ibidem*.

«gives only the illusion of employment and use for ends other than merely the play of the imagination in the viewing of its forms»³³. Although clearly an art form and discussed as such by Kant, pleasure gardens are at the same time constituted only by natural objects and lack any concept or purpose. In this respect, pleasure gardens seem to belong to those forms of art that are to be regarded as free beauties, like wallpaper, à la grecque designs, music without text or theme, and so on. I assume that Kant has such arts in mind when he speaks of pleasure gardens as «merely aesthetic painting, which has no determinate theme». Such an art form simply combines natural elements (air, land, water) with light and shadow, and therefore does not pursue any theme or representation, but simply a free play of the imagination. I would say that pleasure gardens are even less 'adherent' than what Kant calls «aesthetic painting». The latter still represents natural elements, albeit only in a way that entertains the imagination, without any reference to concepts and purposes. Pleasure gardens, on the other hand, do not represent anything at all.

Pleasure gardens, I suggest, thematise in a poignant way the coexistence of the two horizons, the natural and the cultural, that I have outlined above based on Kant's distinction between free and adherent beauty. This coexistence, however, cannot be thematised under the guise of a meeting point or a common border between two separate compartments, but rather as a movement of continuous slippage from one horizon to the other, insofar as both only make sense in relation to each other. While our attempts at orientation can each time lean more towards either 'freedom' (most, though not all, natural beauty) or 'adherence' (most, though not all, artistic beauty), pleasure gardens are more an expression of productive disorientation. We compare them to paintings, yet they are (made of) corporeally extended objects; we seem to be able to relate to them in very familiar – even ancestral – terms of cultivation, employment, and enjoyment, yet they are 'pointless' for anything other than the play of our imagination; in perceiving them as artefacts, we are led back to their being nature, and in perceiving them as natural, we are led back to their being artefacts. They can each time incline more toward culture (the French style) or toward nature (the English style), but they will never overlap with either, and will instead produce a pleasure imbued with the eeriness and bewilderment of

³³ *Ibidem*.

slipping between the two horizons. The more we try to follow the direction of *freedom*, the stronger the cultural, artificial pushback; the more we consider them in terms of *adherent* beauties, the more their purpose, even their very concept or essence, seems to slip away. It is not just that pleasure gardens combine two different conceptions of beauty, a cultural and a natural one, or offer a middle way between them³⁴; rather, they embody the impossibility of a neat, essential distinction between them³⁵, showing them to be two directions on the continuous line of the human attempt to orient oneself in the realm of contingency. They provide aesthetic evidence of the impossibility of both total adherence and total freedom, deflating the boundaries into a sense of disorientation from which our attempts at orientation can begin anew, each time more ‘judiciously’³⁶. In this way, despite or, indeed, because of their ‘low’ artistic ranking, they effectively and expressively embody the orientational role of aesthetics as well as the pragmatic flexibility of the nature-culture divide explored in this paper.

³⁴ See Halper, *Rethinking Kant's distinction*, p. 12: «The pleasure garden is a combination of nature and art. [...] A pleasure garden is in one sense natural: it is made up of the objects of nature. To that extent, Kant notes, it is beautiful according to the conception of beauty that Kant lays out for the beauty of nature, namely, that it occasions free play. But in a garden, these natural objects are arranged together by human artifice, and the garden as a whole is therefore to be judged by a rather different conception of beauty that applies properly to art, namely, that we judge whether it serves for ‘the expression of aesthetic ideas’ (KU, 5:323) The pleasure garden is judged to be beautiful qua natural beauty insofar as the pleasure garden is natural, and it is judged to be beautiful qua artistic beauty insofar as it is a work of art. On this latter conception, it may be added, Kant ranks pleasure gardens quite low among the arts, for precisely the reason that pleasure gardens are not particularly suited to expressing aesthetic ideas».

³⁵ This reading, which admittedly goes beyond Kant, looks to contemporary theories of the garden as a space where the dualism of art and nature becomes blurred and positively pliable, and points towards a human responsibility rooted not in detachment, but in immersion and multifaceted interaction. See, to begin with, U. Weilacher, *Is Landscape Gardening?*, in *Is Landscape...? Essays on the Identity of Landscape*, ed. by G. Doherty and C. Waldheim, London-New York, Routledge, 2016, pp. 93-114, and, more broadly on engagement, aesthetics, and ecology, Siani, *Landscape Aesthetics*.

³⁶ On the dialectics of orientation and disorientation, settling in and displacement, etc. see P. Furia, *Spaesamento. Esperienza estetico-geografica*, Milano, Meltemi, 2023.