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KANT'S AESTHETIC FORMALISM: FORM, MATTER, AND JUDGEMENTS OF TASTE

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Kantian aesthetics; aesthetic formalism; universal communicability; judgements of taste; Liza Lou.

Abstract. This paper examines Kant's aesthetic formalism, focusing on the claim that universal communicability in judgements of taste arises solely from the form of objects, excluding sensory content or matter. At the core of this argument is Kant's concept of "purposiveness without purpose", which facilitates the harmonious interplay of imagination and understanding. The paper evaluates this formalist approach, addressing Paul Guyer's critique that colours and tones, traditionally linked to sensory content, can also elicit aesthetic responses, engaging the free play of imagination and understanding.

By analysing artworks such as Liza Lou's *Carbon Gunmetal/Divide*, the paper argues that sensory elements enhance form, shaping depth and harmony. It proposes a refined Kantian formalism, where sensory elements gain aesthetic significance only through their contribution to form. Ultimately, the study defends the relevance of Kant's aesthetic theory for contemporary debates on aesthetic judgement.

Introduction

This paper explores central aspects of Kant's aesthetic formalism, particularly the notion that only the form of objects, as referenced in judgements of taste, can achieve universal communicability. Kant's aesthetic formalism asserts that judgements of taste are universally accessible only if the response they evoke arises from the object's form, not its content or "matter". This principle will be examined in three stages. First, we discuss Kant's dual grounding of judgements of taste in aesthetic responses to presentations (*Darstellung*): namely, disinterested pleasure and the "form of purposiveness" they exhibit. Second, we analyse Kant's claim that presentations support judgements of taste in virtue of their form alone, not their "matter", because only the former, not the latter, is universally communicable. This thesis—that aesthetic responses depend solely on form—sets the stage for discussing contemporary critiques of Kant's formalism. Third, we examine Paul Guyer's critique, which questions the communicability of judgements of taste based solely on the universality of the aesthetic response. Overall, the plausibility of Kant's formalism—that universal accessibility stems from the response of cognitive faculties to form—hinges on how cogent Kant's analysis of aesthetic response proves to be. This investigation assesses whether Kant's formalism withstands scrutiny in light of contemporary questions surrounding judgements of taste.

From Aesthetic Pleasure and Form of Purposiveness to Judgements of Taste

Kant (2007) argues that if an object appears beautiful to one subject, it should appear beautiful to any subject encountering it under the same conditions. He explores the conditions that make judgements of taste possible in the chapter *Analytic of the Beautiful*, particularly by investigating the nature of the aesthetic response underpinning these judgements. In Kant's view, the aesthetic response consists of a disinterested pleasure derived from the "free play" of our cognitive faculties—imagination and understanding—which occurs independently of

personal interests or conceptual constraints. This free play is central to Kant's aesthetics because, in his theory of knowledge, it serves as a prerequisite for cognition itself. Although aesthetic responses are subjective experiences, they nonetheless form the basis for judgements of taste, which, by analogy with cognition, claim universal communicability.

Kant (2007) offers a dual grounding to the universality of judgements of taste in the aesthetic response. The first aspect of the aesthetic response is the universally communicable disinterested pleasure that pertains to it. Kant argues that, in purely aesthetic experiences, the cognitive faculties (i.e., understanding and imagination) are engaged in what he calls a free play—a harmonious interaction occasioned by the presentation (*Darstellung*). A judgement of taste grounded in such experiences arises from the faculties' natural tendency to find order and harmony in presentations (*Critique of Judgement*, §§ 9–15).

As Henry Allison (2001, p. 127) argues, the free play of imagination and understanding is "subjectively purposive", meaning that the faculties experience harmony in the presentation without needing a specific purpose. The imagination synthesizes sensory input (the "manifold of intuition") into a coherent structure, while the understanding seeks unity in this synthesis. However, unlike cognitive judgements, where understanding imposes a determinate concept to structure experience, the free play of faculties occurs without a guiding concept. This absence of conceptual determination allows the faculties to operate in a state of spontaneous harmony, creating a feeling of subjective purposiveness—a sense that the presentation is meaningful even though it serves no specific purpose.

This free play of imagination and understanding correlates directly with aesthetic pleasure. As Allison (2001, p. 127) explains, this harmonious interplay generates a uniquely pleasurable experience because it reflects the natural tendency of the faculties to cooperate in a way that feels both ordered and free. The pleasure arises from the natural functioning of these faculties in a way that is intrinsically satisfying. Therefore, as Ginsborg (1991) explains, Kant grounds aesthetic pleasure in the perception of purposiveness, which engages the shared faculties of imagination and understanding. This experience of aesthetic pleasure, accompanying the free play of the faculties, is in principle universally communicable to any judging subject, since imagination and understanding are constitutive of being a judging subject.

Secondly, for Kant, a judgement such as "this is beautiful" presumes that the object or presentation (*Darstellung*) possesses qualities making it universally appreciable by any judging subject. Nevertheless, judgements of taste are not defined by any specific concept or rule, and no concept of beauty can fully determine which presentations (*Darstellungen*) will elicit such a judgement. Thus, Kant must show why judgements of taste, lacking conceptual determination, can still claim universal communicability, grounded in the aesthetic responses they evoke. He further explores how judgements of taste, as reflective evaluations of specific objects, can convey universal significance.

To explain this relationship, Kant (2007) introduces the notion of purposiveness—a quality by which an object appears as if it serves a purpose, even when it has no actual purpose or practical function. He describes "purposiveness" in terms of the causal relation a concept has to its object, whereby an object is perceived as fulfilling a purpose when apprehended through certain cognitive faculties. For instance, human-made objects are purposive because they fulfil intended purposes (e.g., tools or artworks serving particular functions). In such cases, the concept informing the object serves as the "cause" of its form and existence.

Kant extends this idea to objects without any inherent purpose or function, referring to them as possessing "purposiveness without purpose". Even when an object lacks a practical or conceptual purpose, it can still be perceived as purposive if it exhibits regularity or order—qualities that our cognitive faculties apprehend as harmonious or coherent. This is crucial for Kant's theory, as it allows us to interpret an object as fulfilling a purpose, even though this purpose is purely formal and not tied to any specific concept.

For Kant, it is less important to isolate objects with intentional purpose (such as artefacts) than to show that any object can appear purposive through its presentation alone. Thus, even natural objects, such as a mountain range or a flower, can evoke aesthetic responses, engaging the free play of imagination and understanding and allowing the mind to interpret them as meaningful.

Since judgements of taste concern specific individuals or presentations, they are grounded in this perceived purposiveness. Kant further distinguishes between two kinds of purposes: subjective and objective. Subjective purposes concern objects serving individual interests or preferences, where appreciation depends on personal feelings or desires. Objective purposes conceptually determine objects, for example in moral judgements based on concepts like "good" or "just". Subjective purposes do not apply to judgements of taste because, as Kant (2007, p. 54) argues, these judgements must transcend individual preferences to achieve universal validity and thus cannot be "mingled" with subjective interests. Judgements of taste also cannot rely on objective purposes, since aesthetic objects are not appreciated through a guiding concept, such as goodness in moral judgements. Instead, Kant argues that aesthetic objects possess what he calls the "mere form of purposiveness"—perceptible in their structure but lacking a specific end or goal.

The free play of faculties that discovers the "mere form of purposiveness" is universally communicable because it reflects the transcendental conditions of cognition, accessible to all subjects capable of rational thought. The relation between an individual presentation and the judgement is not based on subjective preferences but on this formal purposiveness, which any subject with cognitive faculties can apprehend. Since the feeling of subjective purposiveness emerges through the faculties' operation, it reflects the shared structure of human cognition, though it remains tied to the individual's experience. In short, judgements of taste are enabled by the form of purposiveness discovered in a presentation

(*Darstellung*) through the free play of understanding and imagination. This allows judgements of taste to transcend personal preferences and claim validity.

To sum up, Kant argues that judgements of taste are grounded in the "mere form of purposiveness" exhibited by aesthetic presentations. He also maintains that judgements of taste are based on the disinterested pleasure we derive from pure aesthetic experiences, a pleasure that is universally communicable. The central task, then, is to explain the relationship between these two conditions relevant to judgements of taste—namely, the form of purposiveness and aesthetic pleasure. Kant rejects two alternative explanations for relating these conditions. One approach is to claim that the form of an object directly causes aesthetic pleasure. However, this reduces aesthetic pleasure to "mere agreeableness", which Kant (2007, p. 48) defines as pleasure dependent directly on sensory content rather than on the free play of cognitive faculties. If aesthetic pleasure were merely agreeable, it would lack the universal communicability essential to judgements of taste. Instead, it would be subjective and variable, linked to personal preferences or sensory responses rather than to universally accessible principles. Conversely, another approach could argue that aesthetic pleasure is entirely a product of the mind, an internal "fantasy" created without external input. Yet this interpretation reduces aesthetic presentations (objects) to private representations (purely internal mental experiences), severing the link to any shared or intersubjective confirmation. Judgements of taste would then lack the universal validity that Kant seeks to attribute to them, as each aesthetic experience would be confined to the individual's imagination.

Kant (2007, p. 52) proposes a solution that integrates both conditions. While the experience of beauty arises from free play, it is made possible only by the object's formal purposiveness, to which our faculties naturally respond as harmonious. Not every presentation (*Darstellung*) stimulates an aesthetic response; only those exhibiting a form of purposiveness (distinct from practical or determinate purposes) can occasion aesthetic pleasure. In this view, an object does not directly cause the aesthetic response; rather, the purposive nature of the cognitive faculties is activated when a presentation is perceived as purposive, even without an explicit purpose. The subject does not create the form from nothing, as in pure fantasy, nor does the object impose its form deterministically on the subject.

As Allison (2001) suggests, the relation between subject and object in judgements of taste is reciprocal. On one side, there is the harmonious free play of cognitive faculties, a latent capacity in any judging subject. On the other side, there is the purposive form of the presentation, which allows the subject to perceive it as meaningful without attaching a specific concept. Following Hughes (2007, 2010) this reciprocal relation can be understood as a dual harmony: the harmony within the subject's faculties and the harmony perceived in the object's form. As Guyer (1997) emphasizes, this interplay between faculties and form provides the foundation for the universal communicability of aesthetic pleasure.

Aesthetic pleasure is thus experienced as universally communicable, grounded in the form of the object that occasions the free play of faculties rather than in sensory content alone.

Kant's Aesthetic Formalism

The analysis of Kant's dual grounding of judgements of taste raises further questions regarding the formalism of his theory. As mentioned, the form of purposiveness cannot be objectively defined and cannot be derived from any general or fixed criteria. Kant (2007, pp. 62–67) argues that beauty is not determined by belonging to a particular category of objects or by fitting a specific configuration. Therefore, one cannot know in advance whether a given presentation will exhibit a form of purposiveness capable of occasioning aesthetic pleasure. Although only those presentations that exhibit such a form are relevant to judgements of taste, this form remains indefinable in absolute terms. This raises an important question: why should we assume that every subject can grasp the purposive form of a presentation in the same way as the subject who makes an aesthetic claim? Two claims are relevant here. First, Kant asserts that only the form of a presentation is universally communicable. Form, Kant argues, "is moreover all that can be universally communicated with certainty about these presentations" (Kant, 2007, p. 55). Correlatively, he claims that only the form of a presentation—not its matter or sensory content—can evoke an aesthetic response, as it is the form that engages the free play of imagination and understanding and is relevant for assessing the beauty of a presentation. Judgements of taste are determined by "the liking we judge to be universally communicable" (p. 52).

The distinction between "form" and "matter" offers further clarification. Kant (2007, pp. 54–57) claims that matter in presentations consists solely of sensation, while form concerns the organisation of these sensations into a unified whole. In other words, matter can be understood as the raw sensory data—what Kant calls the "bulk" of sensations—whereas form refers to the structure and coherence that transforms these sensations into a meaningful presentation. In aesthetic contemplation, imagination combines the "manifold in intuition", while the understanding provides the unity needed to recognize a coherent presentation. Importantly, in aesthetic experiences, understanding does not impose a determinate rule on how presentations must be united, allowing imagination and understanding to engage freely in a harmonious interplay. This unifying collaboration—free from guiding concepts—underpins the universal communicability of judgements of taste, as it reflects the shared cognitive faculties of all rational beings. Kant thus associates form with a capacity for universal communicability, since form embodies the structural coherence that our cognitive faculties can apprehend collectively. The mental state produced by the free play of imagination and understanding is

"universally communicable" to any subject capable of cognition. Because both imagination and understanding are necessary for cognition, Kant suggests that the harmonious free play that defines aesthetic contemplation is accessible to all judging subjects.

To sum up, even though the collaboration of imagination and understanding occurs freely in aesthetic judgements, the presentation must still exhibit a form of purposiveness to enable this free play. Because the free play of faculties is universally communicable, the form of purposiveness within an aesthetic presentation is also universally accessible to any judging subject.

Kant's Aesthetic Formalism and the Question of Matter

So far, we have examined how Kant justifies moving from the conditions of aesthetic response to claims about the universal communicability of judgements of taste. Kant's formalism relies on the idea that only the form, not the matter, of objects enables this universality, which in turn grounds judgements of taste. However, a significant objection arises in contemporary aesthetic theory, particularly in the work of Paul Guyer, who challenges Kant's exclusion of matter from aesthetic relevance. This section explores Guyer's argument and considers whether Kant's formalism can accommodate the aesthetic significance of matter—especially colours and tones—while preserving the universality of judgements of taste.

Guyer, among others (e.g., Phillips, 2022; Reiter & Geiger, 2023), questions Kant's assertion that only the form of objects is aesthetically relevant, suggesting that Kant unjustifiably dismisses the matter (sensory content) within presentations as merely agreeable. Guyer (1997, pp. 204–205) argues that certain sensations—such as colours and tones—can elicit aesthetic responses and meet Kantian aesthetic requirements, even though they are nothing but sensations themselves. For instance, Guyer refers to Josef Albers' *Homage to the Square*, a series of paintings in which colours, rather than specific forms, create a harmony between imagination and understanding. These paintings evoke an aesthetic response not solely through their form but through the interaction of colours that satisfy the faculties' demand for unity. If colours alone can harmonize imagination and understanding, Guyer suggests, Kant's restriction of aesthetic relevance to form alone may be too narrow.

Additionally, Guyer (1997, pp. 205–206) argues that Kant's assumption that matter lacks universal communicability is ungrounded. In Kant's view, matter (such as colours and tones) varies subjectively, with different individuals potentially perceiving the same colours differently, which would preclude shared judgements of taste. However, if colours and tones do contribute to the beauty of a presentation, then either Kant's assumption about subjective variation in sensory matter is flawed, or the matter within presentations genuinely varies across subjects. In the

latter case, judgements of taste would lack universal validity, as an object might evoke an aesthetic response in one person but not in another.

In summary, Guyer's critique posits that colours and tones are aesthetically relevant, as they can elicit aesthetic responses independently of form, challenging Kant's emphasis on form as the sole basis for judgements of taste. If this is correct, the free play of faculties that grounds aesthetic pleasure could be occasioned by matter as well as form, suggesting that Kant's formalism may not fully account for the complexity of aesthetic experience.

Guyer's critique is compelling in highlighting the aesthetic significance of colours and tones. We acknowledge that colours and tones contribute to our perception of beauty and play a role in shaping the aesthetic experience of an object. However, this does not necessarily imply that Kant's aesthetic formalism is flawed. As will be shown, Kant's formalism can accommodate the aesthetic relevance of colours and tones if these elements are understood in terms of their contribution to form, rather than as isolated sensations.

Kant (2007, p. 55) discusses Euler's theory of colour and raises the possibility that colours and tones are not purely sensations but "vibrations of aether". Under this view, the mind could perceive colours through "the regular play of the impressions", suggesting that colours and tones might function as formal determinants of aesthetic unity rather than merely as sensory stimuli. While Kant does not fully endorse this theory, his openness to the possibility indicates that colours could influence the aesthetic response by contributing to the purposive form within presentations, engaging the free play of imagination and understanding. Building on Kant's suggestion, we propose that colours can be appreciated in two ways: aesthetically and non-aesthetically. In the non-aesthetic sense, colours are mere sensations that influence mood or sensibility, affecting our psychological state without contributing to judgements of taste. In the aesthetic sense, however, colours shape form and suggest spatial relationships, depth, and harmony within the presentation. This aesthetic use of colour aligns with Kant's notion of form, as it contributes to the object's purposive unity rather than merely providing individual sensory satisfaction.

The non-aesthetic relevance of colours for subjects is well-documented. The psychological impact of colours on mood is supported by empirical research (e.g., Elliot & Maier, 2007; Pazda et al., 2024). Colours can immediately influence our dispositions, which is why colour psychology examines how specific colours are associated with particular moods. For example, blue might evoke calmness, while red can energize or stimulate. These psychological effects have practical applications, as seen in interior design, where colours are selected to elicit specific emotional responses.

Colour appreciation in purely aesthetic contexts is categorically distinct from the mood-based effects which are non-aesthetic in Kant's sense. In aesthetic judgement, the concern is not with how colours affect our emotional state but with

how they contribute to the perception of form, depth, and unity. For example, in abstract art, colours operate beyond mere sensory agreeableness. In Josef Albers' *Homage to the Square* series, the example cited by Guyer, colours create spatial relationships and visual harmony that transcend simple mood stimulation. A similar effect is observed in Liza Lou's *Carbon Gunmetal/Divide*, part of her *Solid/Divide* exhibition. Initially, the painting appears as a straightforward juxtaposition of two colours separated by a line. However, sustained contemplation reveals an unexpected depth: a calm sea and sky are implied, divided by a faint horizon. The darker shades below suggest the subtle movement of waves, while the lighter hues above indicate the sky fading into the distance. This spatial impression arises not from imaginative projection or fantasy, but from the interaction of colours that suggest form and depth. In such cases, the aesthetic effect depends critically on the specific colours and their relationships. The impact and aesthetic pleasure do not derive from the intrinsic pleasantness of the colours themselves but from the way they coalesce into a cohesive visual form. If, for instance, the blue-grey of the sky were replaced with bright green, the entire aesthetic unity would be disrupted, and the illusion of space and depth would vanish. This dependency on the arrangement of colours demonstrates that, in aesthetic contexts, colours function as elements of form rather than as mere sensory stimuli.

We can also consider how different attitudes arise when interacting with colours in aesthetic versus non-aesthetic contexts. For example, purple is sometimes described as intellectually stimulating, which might make it suitable for a study environment. In an artwork, however, our response to purple would not centre on this stimulating effect; rather, it focuses on how the colour contributes to the visual structure or spatial harmony of the piece.

In summary, while Guyer rightly observes that works composed of colour alone can elicit aesthetic responses, he may have overlooked the nuanced way in which we experience colour in aesthetic contexts. Here, colour does not merely provide a pleasurable sensation; it functions as an integral part of the form within the presentation, contributing to the purposive unity that shapes space, depth, and visual coherence, thereby engaging the free play of imagination and understanding. Colours and tones are aesthetically significant when they contribute to form, aligning with Kant's formalism by serving a structural role rather than merely an affective one. This distinction clarifies how Kant's formalism can accommodate the role of colour in aesthetic experience, emphasizing that aesthetic responses arise from the harmonious engagement of imagination and understanding rather than from mere sensory agreeableness. Consequently, while acknowledging the aesthetic potential of colour, we can still uphold a qualified version of Kantian formalism. Colours and tones are aesthetically relevant only insofar as they contribute to form, enabling the free play of cognitive faculties. Considered purely as sensations, colours lack this aesthetic function. In this qualified formalism, colours gain significance by helping to create the purposive unity necessary for judgements of taste.

Conclusion

This paper examined the central aspects of Kant's aesthetic formalism, focusing on his claim that only the form of an object can occasion universally communicable judgements of taste. Through Kant's notion of "purposiveness without purpose", we explored how judgements of taste rely on the harmonious free play of imagination and understanding in response to an object's form, rather than its sensory content or "matter". This distinction is critical to Kant's argument for the universality of judgements of taste.

We then considered contemporary critiques, notably Paul Guyer's challenge that colours and tones—elements often associated with matter—can themselves elicit aesthetic responses, suggesting a possible limitation in Kant's formalism. Guyer's observations raise pertinent questions about the roles of colour and tone in our experience of art. By examining works such as Josef Albers' *Homage to the Square* and Liza Lou's *Carbon Gunmetal/Divide*, we saw that colours can indeed shape our perception of form, depth, and spatial relationships. However, rather than treating these sensory elements as contradicting Kantian formalism, we proposed that they can enhance it. Colours and tones contribute to aesthetic experience when they function as part of the form within the presentation, creating coherence and structure rather than acting as mere agreeable sensations.

This interpretation of Kant's aesthetic formalism accommodates the role of colour in structuring form without compromising the foundational Kantian distinction between form and matter. This qualified understanding preserves Kant's emphasis on universality in judgements of taste, suggesting that his insights remain relevant for contemporary debates on the nature of aesthetic experience and the conditions for universal communicability in judgements of taste.

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Алекс-Флавијус ДЕАКОНУ

Западни универзитет у Темишвару
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Кантов естетички формализам: форма, материја и судови укуса

Резиме

Рад испитује естетички формализам Имануела Канта, са посебним осврtом на тврдњу да универзална комуникативност о судовима укуса произилази искључиво из форме објеката, а не чулног садржаја или материје. У средишту овог аргумента јесте Кантов концепт „сврсисходности без сврхе", који омогућава хармоничну интеракцију маште и разумевања. Рад се осврће на савремене критике, посебно на аргумент Пола Гајера да боје и тонови, традиционално повезани са чулним садржајем, такође могу изазвати естетске реакције, активирајући слободну игру маште и разумевања.

Анализом уметничких дела као што је *Carbon Gunmetal/Divide* Лизе Лу, рад показује да чулни елементи обогаћују форму, утичући на дубину и хармонију. Предлаже се ревидирани кантовски формализам у којем чулни елементи добијају естетичку релевантност једино због свог доприноса форми. На крају, студија стаје у одбрану релевантности Кантове естетичке теорије у савременим расправама о естетском суду.

Кључне речи: Кантова естетика; естетички формализам; универзална комуникативност; судови укуса; Лиза Лу.