

THE EXPANSE OF THOUGHT: KANTIAN IMAGINATION, DIFFÉRANCE, AND CREATIVITY

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1. Introduction

Kant's theory of the imagination may be one of his crowning achievements. Despite this fact, there is remarkably little consensus about the meaning of various of its aspects. Consequently, it has spawned an impressive literature of its own, containing both exegetical and interpretive accounts of various arguments that Kant develops.

This essay is not exegetical in the sense that it attempts to reconstruct what Kant exactly meant or did not mean when he developed his theory of the imagination. Instead, for the purpose of my argument, I intend to highlight some particular points of Kant's theory of the imagination and compare-&-contrast them with Derrida's concept of *différance*, thereby juxtaposing two accounts of what happens in the process of imagining. I shall argue that in creative production, the imagination is a capacity *that opens up new spaces of thought*, in effect realizing what Kant broadly characterized as "transitions of the mind". Derrida addresses the idea of opening new spaces of thought in a different way, but he echoes Kant in a surprising fashion, enabling us to reinterpret Kant with a broader conception of imagination in mind. This reinterpretation will be illustrated with examples from the creative disciplines, such as fine art and design.¹

2. Kantian Themes: Imagination, Synthesis, Affinity

In the first instance, Kant's explicit definitions of imagination appears quite sober: it is the faculty for representing objects "without them being given in intuition" (A118-119, B151; Anth, 7:278). However, this sobriety is short-lived. In both the first *Critique* and the *Anthropology*, the distinction between productive and reproductive imagination introduced directly afterwards demonstrates already that the faculty of the imagination stretches well beyond this sparse definition.

The so-called reproductive imagination is governed by the "empirical laws of association" or "conditions of experience" and is relegated to the province of psychology. On the other hand, the productive imagination is explicitly equated with spontaneity (Anth, 7:278). While the productive imagination is inventive, the reproductive imagination is recollective (Anth, 7:278). The reproductive imagination takes past experiences as point of departure, while the productive imagination exercises a larger degree of freedom.²

¹ I hold the view that this account of Kantian imagination stretches well beyond the creative disciplines, but in the practices found in these disciplines the activity and structure of the imagination can be vividly yet concisely demonstrated.

² See (Matherne, 2017:55–56) for a clear exegesis.

It is spontaneity that suffuses all experience which exercises Kant in his theorizing about the various specific functions of the generic or all-purpose imagination. This focus on the importance for imagination for all experience can be clearly discerned in this passage:

consequently, the empirical power of cognition of human beings necessarily contains an understanding, which is related to all the objects of the senses, though only through means of intuition, and to their synthesis by means of imagination, under which, therefore, all appearances as data for a possible experience stand. (A118-119)

Having reserved this central role for the imagination, Kant writes that the imagination is the faculty of synthesis of the manifold. The action of this imagination directly on perception is called apprehension (A120). The imagination brings the elements of the manifold (given through intuitions) into a unified image, representing a manifold of intuitions, which in turn directly represent worldly objects. In a subsequent stage of the cognitive process, the understanding applies concepts to these manifolds of intuitions, and by means of them, to worldly objects.

This description endows the faculty of imagination with several quite different tasks: on the side of the sensibility it must apprehend sensuously-given worldly objects. On the side of the understanding, it has to provide (still disparate) elements in the form of manifolds. This makes the imagination a bridge between the sensibility on one hand and understanding on the other.³

The imagination produces “images” (A120). To my mind, the use of the term “image” here does not just connote a merely visual means of representation, but a type of individuated, imaginable entity that may be visually represented, but need not be. Matherne notes that there is some evidence in Kant that allows us to interpret the word “image” more broadly.⁴ An image consists not only of content that is visually perceived, but it is an end product of various faculties exercising their capacities on material perceived through the senses. If I look at an apple, my imagination must “fill in” the part I do not directly perceive, creating an “image” of the perceived part enriched with imagined or reconstructed content. If I perceive the same apple from different angles and distances, the various influences on the apple, such as light, colouring, shading etc. are continuously filled in by the imagination, resulting in a complex of images that jointly make up the object “apple” in all its fullness, a kind of “enriched object”.

A similar line of thought is taken up by Sellars, who extends the definition by calling such images “sense-image models of external objects”.⁵ After this introductory move, he progresses quickly to an even broader definition:

The most significant fact is that the construction is a unified process guided by a combination of sensory input on the one hand and background beliefs,

³ (Bertram, 2013:34–35; Horstmann 2018:28–31).

⁴ (Matherne, 2017:738).

⁵ To be precise: I see these sense-image models of external objects not just as agglomerates of sensible impressions: they are considerably more complex than that. I am in agreement with Matherne here that such sense-image models are made up of complexes of synthesized sense-impressions, hence sensible impressions that are affected already by the imagination from the very beginning. This does not mean that they are through-and-through conceptual.

memories, and expectations on the other. The complex of abilities included in this process is what Kant calls the "productive" as contrasted with the "reproductive" imagination.⁶

Both productive and reproductive imagination are synthetic in the precise sense of "putting different representations together with each other and comprehending their manifoldness in one cognition (*Erkenntnis*)" (A77/B103). However, not all these representations are given at that moment through the senses—a mental representation or memory of a non-present object may also form an integral part of a synthesized manifold. Kant himself draws attention to this point in the elaborate discussion of three types of imagination (or, alternatively, three functions of the imagination) in the *Anthropology* (Anth: 7:279-280). Because of this, both types of imagination must cooperate in the unified process of cognition.

The capacity of synthesis (of apprehension) plays a decisive role in presenting a barrage of disparate sensory intuitions into a unified image-moment, or imagistic representation:

for each representation [*Vorstellung*], in so far as it is contained in a single moment, can never be anything but absolute unity. (A99)

It is possible that Kant meant that we separate out individual sensory intuitions in order to unite them later on in an orderly and intelligible fashion. To us, the world appears strange enough as a unity—it is exactly at the moment that the world *fails* to appear as such that normal cognition breaks down. Our representations curiously appear as united in single consciousness, and as contained in a single moment. We can observe this if we let our eyes run over a beautiful landscape, for instance. We cannot help but notice several features at once, without having the impression that these features occur completely separately—the landscape is united in one single stream of continuous impressions, although the way we received its features through our senses was distributed in time and space. After all, it took time to let our eyes run over its features that were distributed in space. Kant addresses this theme explicitly, as it introduces the theme of *affinity* (A108, A121-122).

Kant provides two grounds for this affinitive, integrated understanding: one subjective and one objective. The subjective ground we encountered already – the rules of association determine the correct ordering of images and goes by the name of "reproductive imagination." However, an objective ground is necessary, because Kant introduces a further problem: even if a multitude of sensory intuitions were ordered into sequences of meaningfully connected representations, then these sequences would still need a single consciousness or centre for which they were ordered. The better part of the landscape I perceive may pass me left and right, but I ascribe what my senses select as a sensory intuition belonging to *my* consciousness. And this necessitates a kind of unification, or self-conscious recognition of unity, that surpasses mere side-by-side juxtaposition or sequential ordering. The law that is valid for all appearances and which makes them associable and accessible to me is the affinity of the manifold.

We must ask a question here: what problem is Kant seeking to circumvent? The problem seems one of achieving unity and relationality: in order to make sense of the barrage of temporally and spatially distributed sensory intuitions, a kind of uniting structure or capacity must be in place to order the incoming data—and this structure or

⁶ (Scharp and Brandom, 2007:549, §27).

capacity must be present and functioning over a given duration of time. If the sensory intuitions are ordered, they must be associable for a single mind, and so they need *a unifying structure* among them. This unity, moreover, is the product of the same mental activity that connects concepts to form judgements.⁷

It is important here to recall Sellar's point, as the need for unity applies not only to incoming sense data—actually, if we avoid the sense-datum model, sensory intuitions—but also to the background beliefs, associations, memories etc. that the observer already possesses and that are seamlessly integrated in the incoming intuitions. We can easily illustrate this with an example from architecture:

The gaze of the construction engineer surveys the landscape and recognizes that a certain valley may be crossed by a bridge with a large overarching structure, while a landscape planner appreciates the silence and untouched beauty of the same situation as its most valuable characteristic, and an architect imagines how beautifully embedded his settlement design would look in the same valley.⁸

The gaze with which we look to the world is never fully neutral or disengaged, a blank slate upon which new sensory intuitions are engraved. We encounter the world from a subjective perspective that includes what Gadamer called “pre-judgments”.⁹ These pre-judgements structure images that are being assembled in the mind.

Sellars notes quite rightly that images we form in the mind are not (normally) perceived as *images* by us.¹⁰ They are spontaneously re-interpreted and enriched with the background beliefs and values. As such, they are not mere or “flat” images, but imagistic entities possessing a special type of “depth.”¹¹ It should be noted here that those images are not merely conglomerates of concepts or propositions. Imagistic content straddles as it were both the conceptual and non-conceptual domains, and while concepts can be applied to them, they are not reducible to them. The judgements that can be derived from such imagistic content can considerably richer than the sum of their visual contents—and they are not limited to concepts and/or propositions. Here, Sellars extends the idea of an enriched object in a direction that allows us to say

(i) that both the productive and reproductive imagination are as much at work on external objects as internal, mental representations, and

(ii) that the resulting images straddle both the conceptual and non-conceptual domains.

⁷ (Horstmann, 2018:14),

⁸ (de Bruyn and Reuter, 2011:89, my translation).

⁹ (Gadamer, 2013:236, 317).

¹⁰ (Scharp and Brandom, 2007:460, §27).

¹¹ I hold that concepts can be applied to sensible representations, but not to all of them. A certain domain of experience cannot be reached by concepts as it were. It does—I think—not necessarily follow from this that imagination is itself non-conceptual. A different take would be to say that imagination as mode of sensible representation straddles the split of conceptual/nonconceptual altogether, a line of thought that seems possible as well. It would be supported at least by the wide array of functions Kant ascribes to the imagination, some of which seem to require concepts, while others don't.

Kant connects the presence of ordered, enriched objects (“unified manifolds”) with the meaning or intelligibility they hold for an interpreting or knowing subject. Such unified manifolds are at least minimally informative in the sense that they represent the world “as it is encountered” in an ordered format. However, the layer of added conceptual content enables us to “know” and “judge” in a qualified sense, and not merely to “sense” a change in the environment or to “respond” to a change in conditions. This makes manifolds not merely minimally informative, but sufficiently informative for dealing with conceptually-represented contingencies and complexities. Dealing with contingencies is a feature of everyday life, in its basic, Darwinian sense of surviving and moving around in the world, like a conscious non-rational animal, but also in a more mundane sense of conceptually anticipating the moves of other car drivers, wondering what goes on in someone else’s mind, or capitalizing on a hitherto unnoticed chance.

However, such enriched objects are not just tools for survival. As they extend well beyond being minimally informative, they carry layers of meaning far beyond their Darwinian value. To judge a symphony or to witness the sunset does not directly impact on survival, but that contribute to the richness of subjective experience nevertheless.

One could come away with the impression that the imagination, bound as it is to laws of association, and wedged in between the senses and the understanding has but a limited and relatively fixed role to play.¹² Conversely, the multiplicity of roles and tasks that Kant ascribes to this faculty does not sit well with this conception. If the imagination is so versatile as Kant implies, is it not much freer than the first *Critique* appears to suggest?¹³ A similar question is posed by Bertram:

In the second edition of the transcendental deduction, then, Kant takes care to state that there are only two sources of human cognition: sensibility and understanding. Even though the imagination is somewhat downgraded by this move, Kant nevertheless still makes use of it at an important juncture in the transcendental deduction. One may wonder whether the important role that Kant still attributes to the imagination justifies the apparent downgrading of its status.¹⁴

At this point, we can formulate two overlapping questions, the answers of which bear on each other:

(I) The Question of Imaginative Action

What roles are left for the imagination if it is wedged in-between sensibility and understanding? This is an issue that Kant revisits in the *Critique of Power of Judgement*. What answer can be provided to describe the type of freedom the imagination exercises? The productive and reproductive imagination may play roles in creating enriched objects, but what kind of freedom is exhibited in this process?

¹² (Horstmann, 2018:55)

¹³ (Horstmann, 2018:55; Bertram, 2013:35).

¹⁴ (Bertram, 2013:35).

(II) *The Question of Generative Capacity*

Human beings deal with contingency and novelty all the time. In order to deal with the unpredictability inherent in these contingencies and novelties, we can speculate, imagine or engage in scenario-thinking. If we have an answer to (I), how does this help in understanding the productive role of the imagination in facilitating this process and how does it unfold? In responding to this question, I resort to Derrida's concept of *différance*.¹⁵

3. The Question of Imaginative Action

The imagination and acts of synthesizing are revisited in the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, where Kant reserves a role for the “freedom” of the imagination from law-like structures. The following passage appears almost as a reworking of the synthesis of reproduction, but with considerably more emphasis on freedom and spontaneity:

Now if we add to a concept of the imagination that belongs to its presentation, but which by itself stimulates so much thinking that it can never be grasped in a determinate concept, hence, which aesthetically enlarges the concept itself in an unbounded way, then in this case the imagination is creative, and sets the faculty of intellectual ideas (reason) into motion, that is at the instigation of a representation it gives more to think about than can be grasped and made distinct in it (although it does, to be sure, belong to the concept of the object) (KU, 5:135)

The imagination is involved in the limitless production of new possibilities, based on current representations, whether they are given in the form of a mental “image” or as a representation of a physical object.

Evidently, imagination is not a subservient faculty that is merely subordinated to the laws of association or wedged in between the functions of other faculties. Instead, it has a degree of autonomy, and it thereby stimulates thinking and sets off chains of associations to such a degree that determinate concepts cannot grasp it. This echoes the argument, made by Bertram, that Kant conceived of the productive imagination too much in terms of aiding the understanding or conceptualization. The productive power of the imagination is underestimated because its activity is shoehorned into a conceptual scheme that leaves it little leeway to imagine future possibilities or scenarios that extend well beyond the realm of concepts or empirical reality.

For instance, I could imagine visiting Valencia one day, imagine green giraffes, or—closer to home—what a planned city expansion could look like. In all these cases, there is a link between my personal and present store of background beliefs, concepts, and memories. By applying them to both the world and to possible futures (or the counterfactual past, as I could imagine how things *could have* unfolded), the imagination stretches well beyond merely making sense of the world in naive empiricist terms.

¹⁵ Actually, at this point a third question might be raised, namely the matter of affinity could be revisited in order to support answers to (I) and (II). If I engage in imagining future courses of action for a given or imaginatively posed problem, representations produced in the mental reasoning process must have a certain affinity among them: but how does one argue for this type of affinity, given the fact that Kant is not too forthcoming about it? This, however, will not be a topic for this essay.

However, the capacity of the imagination stretches also beyond the realm of the conceptual. A dramatic illustration could be the paintings of Mark Rothko or Barnett Newman.¹⁶ These canvases have a direct and affective impact on observers. However, they are not figurative or pictorial, and neither do familiar concepts suffice to describe their artistic and subjective impact in its often-unsettling fullness. It is as if these works open up a new experiential expanse that concepts cannot colonize—and to which the very application of concepts seems even meaningless.

Kant seemed to have grasped the vast experiential expanse beyond the reach of concepts. The creative imagination gives more to grasp or think than could be made distinct in a direct sense, and “enlarging the concept in an unbound way”.

The order of cognitive functioning is revised here: the imagination does not merely provide manifolds to the understanding (as may be inferred from the first *Critique*), but it also moves reason itself to such a degree that the implications of this supercharging function cannot be made distinct by understanding alone. Intellectual grasping runs into its limits through the exercise of the imagination, by opening up new conceptual spaces for which even determinate concepts cannot be found. For all means and purposes, the imagination extends deep into the non-conceptual domain.

The exercise of the generic or all-purpose imagination is inherently productive and creative, which strongly suggests that we are even free from (necessarily underdetermined by) the laws of association that Kant in the first *Critique* assigned to the reproductive imagination. Creativity is felt as a liberating experience from the seemingly mechanistic laws that structure cognition. This provides Kant an answer to the Question of Imaginative Action: the imagination is creative, surpassing the cognitively mechanistic structure to which it seemed confined in the first *Critique*. On this point, Kant foreshadows already what in the 20th century would become known as “the sciences of the artificial”, namely the realm of artefacts produced by human beings that derive their materials from nature, but at the same time advance beyond it (KU, 5:314).

The imagination is not just an intermediate faculty that provides material for the understanding, but it engages in what Kant calls “free play” with the understanding. Simply put, in the cognitive process of object-constitution, intuitions are connected to a determinate concept. In this scenario, the subject comes away with a determine cognition of a given object. In aesthetic experiences sensuous intuitions cannot be restricted to a determinate concept, and the question with what kind of object we are dealing remains open until a solution is found – or not.¹⁷

If I see a Hungarian oak (*Quercus frainetto*) and this particular specimen exhibits all the typical characteristics of this genus of oak, then my imagination and understanding jointly provide a fit between my background knowledge and the current specimen. Consequently, it can be recognized by a process of determination in which it is subsumed under a variety of concepts. I subsume it as “spatial object”, “organism”, “tree”, “oak”, “European species”, and finally “Hungarian oak”.

In aesthetic judgments, this neat fit cannot take place as in the example above, as there is no concept available (or necessary or sufficient) to subsume the sensible experience. There is as it were a surplus of sensuous content that is conceptually uncategorizable. Horstmann notes that such an open object holds a promise: it could

¹⁶ Newman’s work in particular sparked remarkable responses: his paintings *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III*, *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue IV* and *Cathedral* were purposively and violently vandalized by gallery visitors.

¹⁷ (Horstmann, 2018:71–72).

become a cognitive object, something that can be fully subsumed, but is as of yet open and undecided. The “free play” of imagination and understanding is necessary to arrive at an interpretation of this sensible content at all. It should be noted that both faculties work well within their own limits, but that the outcomes of their free interaction surpass what either of them could accomplish in isolation. Both faculties must cooperate in a free and reciprocal play towards a determination that lies beyond the sphere of objective experience itself. Such a determination can only take place through intuitions but must necessarily surpass the sum of their contents. What is “given as such” is a starting point for reflection and determination, because it is open-ended. From this point on, the process of determination continues through a mutual harmony and/or productive tension between the imagination and understanding.

This account introduces a new question that Kant does not answer entirely or explicitly, although he provides a direction and an implicit route. As noted, the imagination strives towards something that lies *beyond* the bounds of objective experience, but these attempts (confusingly called “Ideas”) are presented as concepts of reason. This type of presentation gives them the appearance of objective reality. Ideas straddle a strange gap: on one hand, they represent what is beyond the bounds of objective experience, while on the other, they present it in a conceptual (visual) language that is at least to some degree intelligible. However, the conceptual frame is not exhaustive and does not completely describe the content. This is so, because no determinate concept can be fully adequate for such ideas of the imagination (KU, 5:314). This results in a special type of “openness”. This open-ended character of such ideas supercharges thinking – so much in fact, that some of it must remain implicit, or, as Kant writes “can be grasped and made distinct”.

Exactly at this point, the imagination starts to function as a generator of new *Gestalten* and possibilities: it allows for the creation of enriched objects that appear as fully within the confines of reality—even if one rationally knows that the imagined object cannot exist or is incomplete, holding a promise of completion. The drawings of Escher brilliantly exploit this potential and render it visible, but it is just as much at work in other creative processes. An architect working on the concept of a new building must already—and dimly—perceive some of the qualities that are as of yet not derivable from his sketches or models. On the other hand, the sketchy outlines on paper must “enlarge the idea in an unbounded way” to be generative and useful. The promise of an object is the indeterminate and open kernel of a process of creation and exploration. The “openness” inherent in such processes stirs their capacity as drivers of creative generation.

4. The Question of Generative Capacity

From the above, we can conclude that there are some objects that possess as it were a surplus of sensible (intuitional and imaginal) content. This content either cannot be conceptually categorized at all, or at least it cannot be fully conceptually categorized. As such, the mind is stimulated to “fill in the gaps” and find or create a new concept or category to come to grips with the content presented to it in intuition – often stumbling in the process of doing so.

As to how the imagination accomplishes this feature, we remain rather in the dark. Kant often suggests intriguing options but leaves crucial details open. In response to the question how the imagination generates new options, I turn to the account of *différance* by Derrida, paradigmatically developed in an essay of the same name.¹⁸ For

¹⁸ (Derrida, 1973).

Derrida as for Kant, spacing and temporalization are two key aspects of *différance*. When reading a text, for instance, we read it in real-time, spacing the contact of our eyes with the written signs, a process that is necessarily sequential and thus temporally structured. This spacing-and-temporalization produces continuously different meanings. The paradigmatic example of this type of difference is someone who re-reads some book ten years after the first time he read it and interprets it completely differently. The re-reading produces new meanings, but the person reads the book also with a different mindset and different background beliefs. For Derrida, *différance* is not just as work with 10 year intervals but works continuously—and it might even produce multiple meanings simultaneously. The openness of the book defers its real meaning. The question of the real meaning or significance is left open for the moment, and provisionally filled in with an account that seems reasonable at that moment.¹⁹

Following Sellars, we can maintain that due to changes in background beliefs and concepts, interpretations develop and evolve over time. In the example of re-reading the book, ten years of additional life experience might significantly influence the new interpretation, as the experience provides a latent background for cognitive activities. This latent background straddles both the conceptual and nonconceptual domains.

Simultaneously, the openness of the text produces differences as each reader at each time can come away with a different interpretation.²⁰ This is a continuous play (*jeu*) of continuously produced differences that subsequently influence each other.²¹ What is needed then, is that these new possibilities and ideas become present in the mind, through reading or observing.²² This becoming-present has Kantian overtones. First, *sensible representations* make fictitious objects or themes (visually) present, just as graphs or paintings present an array of different possibilities for interpretation to the imagination and understanding, opening up the possibility of free play. And second, the text invites and stimulates thinking beyond the words of which it consists. Through this characteristic, it exhibits an open-ended character picked up by the mind of the reader. This is caused by its sensible content that cannot simply be subsumed in a concept. This surplus serves as an unresolved tension that puts the imagination and understanding to work. It enforces them to complement, but also contradict each other.

¹⁹ Correspondingly, here is a sidebar note on relativism: this does not imply that Derrida held that texts (or alternatively artefacts like paintings, sculptures or films) have no meaning or that their true meaning can never be deciphered. Derrida's claim is simply that every text or artefact is open to some degree of interpretation in the future. The meaning we attach in the present to them may be completely reasonable given our background knowledge, beliefs and best sources of external information. However, in the case of changing background beliefs or incoming new information, it may be superseded at any given moment. Derrida is not an absolute relativist with regard to meaning but adopts a skeptical attitude towards the question of *ultimate* meaning and its attainability.

²⁰ The additional question here is whether this difference-producing characteristic is a property of the text or artefact or whether it is simply perceived by the reader or viewer—or their interaction. I agree with Gadamer here that the interplay is a likely cause, although that viewpoint would merit a defense of its own. There is also some support for this claim in (Derrida, 1973:130) when he states that *différance* is the “middle voice” that sets the conditions for the emergence of passivity and activity. Alternatively, he maintains that *différance* creates the conditions for conceptuality as such (Derrida, 1973:140).

²¹ (Derrida, 1973:130–131).

²² (Derrida, 1973:134).

Derrida puts a similar idea in different words when he observes that such works are characterized by an “absence” or “lack”.²³ In the absence of an ultimate meaning, the object appears frustratingly incomplete or satisfyingly open, depending on one’s perspective. The absence or lack is both a stimulant for creativity, but at the same time a source of contradictions and tensions.

While the early Derrida was concerned mainly with signification and textual criticism, the concept of *différance* can be readily applied in areas outside its original scope of application. It can be applied to creative processes and to perception in a broader sense. An example of how difference functions in practice can be observed in the fine arts. The absence or lack is a feature of all kinds of objects or purposively produced artefacts (books, drawings, sculptures). This openness can be exploited as a creative strategy and can become a key method in practicing fine arts. How this process functions in visual representation can be illustrated in an account of painting by Matisse:

When I paint a portrait, I come back again and again to my sketch, and every time it is a new portrait that I am painting: not one that I am improving, but a quite different one that I am beginning over again; and every time I extract from the same person a different being.²⁴

In this short quote, interpretive differences emerge through a repetition of a similar activity. The drawing or painting is made and re-made, but even if the pictorial content of each image is the same or nearly the same as its predecessor, its underlying content shifts, changes and expands, leading to a host of different inferences that can be made about it. Derrida uses different words to describe the same phenomenon as he writes: “The same is precisely *différance* (with an a) as the diverted and equivocal passage from one difference to another”.²⁵

Such artistic drawings do not fix the relationship between lines and interpretation. The space of the drawing allows for a reading *between* the lines: it is for this reason that Berger notes that in the best drawings, the depicted objects appear to exist in a real space.²⁶ The spectator is drawn in and can wander as it were around in the drawing, adopting different perspectives towards its elements, perceiving new connections and forming new ideas. Here, again, we encounter the Kantian idea of the “enriched object.” A series of drawings serves as an archive of different perspectives on a given topic. In this sense it is an “image” in the Kantian sense, except that it is distributed among several different physical objects that have been produced over a given amount of time.

Because the drawing is perceived as a picture as well as a space, the positioning of the spectator enables him to produce different readings of it. In the words of Fitch:

I put down something on paper and then react to it. Once I make a line, it becomes a condition: does it look like what I thought? Does it make me want to draw another or shall I erase it? It encourages me to make decisions only I can

²³ (Derrida, 1973:139).

²⁴ (Pallasmaa, 2015:92).

²⁵ (Derrida, 1973:144).

²⁶ (Berger, 2000:122)

make. It has instantly become something that already exists and it draws me into the world of its own need to be drawn.²⁷

This little chain of inferences, conceptual leaps, observations, and questions illustrates an interplay between the physical presence of the drawing and its consequences for the perceiver (and in this case, its author). The lines being perceived are taken as point of departure for reasoning – they are taken as given. At the same time that they are given as such, they open up beyond themselves and what they at that moment in time depict.

Here, art theory touches on Kant’s point that the ideas of the imagination reach for those representations that lie beyond the boundary of objective experience itself, as constrained by the natural laws and logical rules of the exact sciences. The surplus experienced here creates a strange paradox: it is a part of objective experience, yet concepts fail to grasp it in its fullness, leading to an argument in favour of non-conceptualism: at least a portion of experience eludes the usage and application of concepts, yet this emptiness is curiously felt.

Nonetheless, we can talk about such experiences, and often do so using a language of concepts and/or propositions. This has the advantage that propositions about such experiences can easily be formed and evaluated. However, no set of propositions can succeed in grasping objective experience in its completeness. To hold so would be a form of propositionalism—,i.e., the doctrine that the whole of reality can be accessed through discrete propositions. Conceptualism makes a roughly equivalent claim, but in the realm of concepts.

Simultaneously, it has the disadvantage that either the “surplus” of experience must be reduced to concepts or propositions, or that—as Wittgenstein lamented—we must pass over this surplus in silence, at least if we stick to a propositionalist/conceptualist line of thinking.

Of course, even experiences that are literally hard to describe can be put in an idiom that enables one to communicate—a translation for which concepts are indispensable, yet not sufficient (KU, 5:216-219).²⁸ When Derrida defines a sign as “deferred presence” he echoes Kant’s definition of the imagination as the faculty for representing an object that is *not* present.²⁹ In this example, the drawing represents something that is not present (either that which it depicts and/or its sensuous surplus that cannot be conceptualized).

This requires a process in which content that is beyond the reach of conceptualization is translated or reconstructed into a new language foreign to its nature. From the viewpoint of creative practices like drawing, painting or composing, it takes multiple iterations to achieve a faithful transition from non-conceptual to conceptual content. This process can be best described by borrowing a concept from the philosophy of science, namely, that of *progressive reconstruction*.³⁰ As each science reflects on its shared corpus of knowledge (papers, books, articles) and its experimental practices, the boundaries of what it accepts as valuable or true are redrawn in a continuous process of collective and progressive reconstruction. This

²⁷ (Fitch, 2011:147).

²⁸ Kant supposes a relation between communicability and the feeling of pleasure. Although a lot could be said about this topic in regard to the main line of thinking set out here as it is an aesthetic experience, I leave this line undeveloped for the sake of clarity.

²⁹ (Derrida, 1973:138).

³⁰ (Knorr, 1977:689).

reconstruction is progressive in the sense that older ideas may be discarded, or long-established concepts may be relegated to obscurity, while new and more fitting ideas are integrated in the body of accepted knowledge.

In a similar process, the imagination reaches for non-conceptual content that must be put in a conceptual form. It accomplishes this strenuous task by progressively reconstructing the content in a series of iterations—a process that leads from a Kantian perspective necessarily to a parallel series of judgements. One series of judgements is about the products of this process, the other about what to keep and what to change or discard.

In this connection, Swiss architect Peter Zumthor has emphasized the necessity of incompleteness and openness in architectural design: the drawing or model has to contain blank spaces in which the imagination can wander around. Such blanks are niches for something new to be created at all, be it through imagining what should be in the blank, or by considering the (conceptual) elements surrounding it.³¹ Zumthor speaks of the perception as “*Besitzernehmend*”, a term that has no direct English equivalent, but that can be rendered as “taking-in-possession” or along the lines of inhabiting or grasping possessively. Hence the accurate observation that “each drawing is made from the inside out, leaving a trail for others to follow from the outside in.”³² The signs that make up the drawing draw the observer in, allowing him to wander around in it, to inhabit the drawing, focusing on different aspects every time a tour is made.

This places synthesis immediately on the centre stage: in the example of Matisse, he had to literally repeat all the procedural steps that were involved in producing one portrait. In a sense, he had to perform the synthesis that was the portrait again – not merely physically, but also mentally. The creative process is as it were instantiated again, however, this time with the advantage of the earlier attempts that structure the new inquiry. Again, in Sellars’s terms, the background beliefs change with each process iteration. Every time a painting is remade, a text is re-read, or a film is re-watched, small changes might occur, as a new perspective is added to the enriched object. It is important to recognize what this actually amounts to: such iterations are a type of conceptually re-framing one’s imaginative representation.³³

What happens is an accumulation of meanings throughout the process of perceiving and re-perceiving. New meanings are stacked on top of the existing ones, allowing for multiple and richer interpretations. While meanings accumulate, the openness of an object does not disappear. It remains at the edge of awareness, at the periphery of the sensible domain. Returning now to Derrida, we can see how the idea of deferring that underlies the concept of *différance* functions in practice. A final or ultimate description is continually deferred because there is a nonconceptual surplus of experience that cannot be described by concepts. The openness of a text, artefact or object continues to exist because the object as such is not exhausted by the concepts that can be applied to it. The space of thought expands infinitely, even if an object is

³¹ (Zumthor, 2014:13).

³² (Moore, 2011:35).

³³ This process has been described from the angle of decision-theory as well, and a roughly analogous account of conceptual reframing is described broadly with the term *heuristics*. Although it would lead too far to consider all the overlaps between Kant’s theory of imagination and contemporary decision theory, it suffices to say that for the account as sketched above, there is a robust scientific literature (particularly in cognitive science, image theory, imaginal representation) that is compatible with Kant’s account.

interpreted multiple times. The expanding space of thought forms a kind of unconceptualized negative that contrasts with the conceptualized domain. Kant must have had an inkling of this when he wrote in 1786:

By analogy, one can easily guess that it will be a concern of pure reason to guide its use when it wants to leave familiar objects (of experience) behind, extending itself beyond all the bounds of experience and finding no object of intuition at all, but merely space for intuition; for then it is no longer in a position to bring its judgments under a determinate maxim according to objective grounds of cognition, but solely to bring its judgments under a determinate maxim according to a subjective ground of differentiation in the determination of its own faculty of judgment. (WDO, 8:136)

Kant wrote the *Orientation* essay in response to the pantheism controversy of his day. Its subject broadly deals with the foundations of rational faith and theoretical speculation.³⁴ In passages like the one cited above, Kant further opens up a new space that took shape throughout the three *Critiques*. Notably, the theme that one can orient oneself beyond the bounds of experience could be interpreted as a Kantian version of the non-conceptual—although it is not worked out in detail. The distinction that Kant draws between the “objective grounds of cognition” and the “subjective ground of differentiation” provides an entry point for reconstruction.

Kant equates the “subjective” as the pressing existence of “the need of reason” (WDO, 8:136-137). This need emerges because “through the mere concept, nothing is settled in respect of the existence of this object and its actual connection with the world” (WDO, 8:137). Reason, therefore, needs a subjective ground (or “principle”) for assuming something that it cannot presume to know at all, at least not by objective (or conceptual) means. This doctrine of Kant can be read with a religious point of view in mind, and that would be valid, since Kant seemed to have had more sympathy for personal forms of religion focused on one’s own subjective experience than institutionalized forms of religion. However, the language Kant uses is continuous with his account of the imagination in the first and third *Critiques*. Only this time, the faculty of imagination seems to have made room for the “subjective ground of differentiation”. Differentiation is intimately linked with speculation – or at least the absence of determinate guidelines for reason’s judging capabilities. Differentiation is the term that denotes the multiplication of possibilities inherent in the free play of the imagination.

New spaces of thought are opened up through a kind of differentiation. Like Zumthor’s “blank spaces” in a drawing, the new space of thought expands beyond the limits of the conceptual, and every time new ideas, concepts and judgments are made to colonize this vast expanse, its horizon shifts once again out of focus. The drawing practice of Matisse was an example that showed how this expansion of the space of thought can be used in a creative process. By re-presenting and thereby re-perceiving a given idea, new manifolds are synthesized and the imagination, straddling the domains of the conceptual and the nonconceptual, is activated, enlarging a thought in an unbound way. That this process is intensely subjective is clear: the mind and the hand of the individual artist have to do the work, as they must work together. The artist cannot presume to know the outcome, nor can a reader presume to know the final

³⁴ This may explain why Kant does not work out a full theory of the application of concepts and the limits of reason here. In the second half of the essay, he quickly starts discussing the concept of God and its relation to rational faith. This is understandable, given the political pressure on the scope of philosophical thought at the time. See (WDO, 8:137-143).

meaning of a text by an objective standard. However, in the act of purposive speculation, the demand for objectivity is replaced by the subjective ground of differentiation, forever striving to advance beyond the bounds of sense.

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