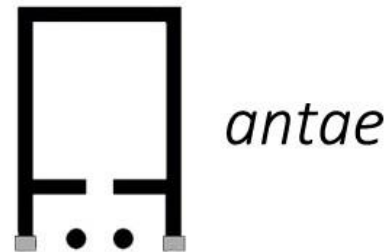


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Introduction

In his *Critique of Judgment*, Immanuel Kant considers that the assignment of the label “beautiful” to a certain object does not refer so much to the physical object itself, but to the way in which the representation of this object acts on the mood of the one who judges it, awakening in the individual a feeling of pleasure or displeasure.¹ It is on the basis of what the subject feels that he or she could say whether what is being judged is beautiful or not. For Kant, beauty—whether of nature or of art—would have less to do with what the object *is*, and more with the way it *affects* us; for him, an aesthetic judgment on beauty is not a determining but a reflecting judgment. By giving up the notion of determining what the object-of-judgment is, the subject, in an aesthetic judgment-of-taste, reflects purely and simply on what is intuited, disposing his or her cognitive faculties in a state of free play, in a lingering and calm contemplation, which ‘strengthens and reproduces itself’, and from which the feeling of pleasure or displeasure derives (*KU*, 5: 222). A genuine aesthetic judgment on nature or art is not based on knowledge of what kind of flower it is, or what that painting objectively represents. Rather, the less we pay attention to those concepts, the purer the experience of beauty which nature or art gives us.

In his essay *Seeing the Invisible*, Michel Henry, one of the major proponents of the so-called “theological turn” in contemporary French phenomenology, praises Wassily Kandinsky, the Russian painter and art theorist, for his innovative formulation of abstract art—an art which seeks to turn the artist and the spectator radically inward.² Henry argues that, after Kandinsky, art no longer seeks to represent the world and its objects, and thus ceases to focus on visibility and shifts its focus onto invisibility, or what Kandinsky calls the ‘inwardly’.³ Henry’s claim is that the purpose of art becomes a way of allowing us to see what is not and cannot be seen. The means are only resources for this showing, used in order to give access to that which is invisible. Ultimately, his predominant aim is to take phenomenology into

¹ See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans by Paul Guyer (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000). For quotations from Kant’s work, the English translation [of Immanuel Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften and Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1902ff)] indicated here will be used. However, in order to facilitate the localisation of the passages within the *Kant-Korpus*, the in-text abbreviations indicated by the *Kant-Gesellschaft* and the *Akademieausgabe*’s page numbering will be used as follows: *KU*, *Akademieausgabe*’s volume: page. The abbreviation *KU* corresponds to the *Critique of Judgment*, that is, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*.

² See Michel Henry, *Seeing the Invisible*, trans. Scott Davidson (London: Continuum, 2009).

³ Wassily Kandinsky, ‘Point and Line on Plane’, in *Complete Writings on Art*, vol. I, ed. by Kenneth Clement Lindsay and Peter Vergo (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), p. 547.

uncharted terrain, into the depths of pre-reflective, non-intentional self-experience. The world, for Henry, turns out to be empty of the real substance of Life.⁴ To find its essence, the self must dive completely inward, away from the exterior movements of intentionality and the world. For Henry, the real, the truth and the substance of Life, lies in non-intentional self-experience. Life itself is, for Henry, understood as auto-affection, which means that affection is a self-relation completely immanent and radically independent and autonomous.

This paper revolves around Kandinsky's argument in favour of non-representational art, and aims to show to what extent it is possible to draw a connection between his art and theory through Kant's notion of pure aesthetic judgments and Henry's radical phenomenology. Thus, in this paper we will first present Kant's theory of aesthetic judgments and Henry's phenomenology of life, separately. Then, we will bring both theories in dialogue and in relation to Kandinsky's abstractionism with the aim of highlighting and conserving the crucial inward turn in art.

Kant: Art as Nature

It is not fortuitous that, in his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant dwells more on beauty in nature than on beauty in art. This is because only the former could be the object of an authentic, pure aesthetic judgment-of-taste: a judgment in which the judge does not take into account any interest in the object-of-judgment—whether it be an interest of reason or of the senses—nor intends to assign a concept to it.

To say, on the one hand, that a pure aesthetic judgment-of-taste does not take into account an interest of reason or senses means that when an object is judged aesthetically, this judgment considers neither a moral criterion nor the (mere) pleasantness of the sensations, which is idiosyncratic and therefore valid only to the one who judges. Therefore, at least in theory, “beautiful” could be used for both something morally reprehensible and something that does not concern the personal preferences of those who judge.⁵

To say, on the other hand, that in these judgments one does not intend to attribute a concept to the judged object implies that the object is not considered from an epistemological point of view. Under these circumstances, a flower could be considered “beautiful” without regard to whether it is a daisy, a rose, a sunflower, or any other species of flower; rather, it is so judged simply on the basis of what is sensibly intuited and whose representation awakens in the judge a feeling of pleasure: an aesthetic pleasure. Nature would then be, for Kant, the object

⁴ Henry proposes a phenomenology of Life in stark contrast to a phenomenology of being-in-the-world; a life which is felt, as absolutely invisible, understood as an *a priori* condition for all conscious experience.

⁵ “In theory” because, on the one hand, in the *Analytic of the Beautiful* [§§ 1-22] of the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant claims that judgments-of-taste on beauty have to do neither with moral judgments nor with judges' interests; on the other hand, both in the *Deduction of Pure Aesthetic Judgments* and the *Dialectic of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment*, he talks, at least indirectly, not only of empirical and intellectual interests in the beautiful [§§ 41 and 42], but also of ‘beauty as a symbol of morality’ [§ 59]. For now, attention will be paid to the first part: not only because it is there that Kant points out what makes a judgment-of-taste on beauty an aesthetic judgment, but also, and especially, because the core of the *Analytic of the Beautiful* [§ 9] encloses, according to him, ‘the key to the critique of taste, and [is] hence worthy of full attention’ (*KU*, 5: 216).

par excellence of pure aesthetic judgments-of-taste because its beauty is ‘self-subsisting’ (*KU*, 5: 229). According to him:

in order to decide whether or not something is beautiful, we [...] relate the representation [i.e., what is being judged] to the subject and its feeling of pleasure or displeasure [...], by means of which nothing at all in the object is designated, but in which the subject feels itself as it is affected by the representation (*KU*, 5: 203-04).

Thus, the self-subsistence of the beauty of nature would concern the fact that a judgment-of-taste on it ‘is merely contemplative’ and only takes into account the feeling of pleasure or displeasure that awakens in the subject. However, Kant goes on to argue that ‘this contemplation itself is also not directed to concepts; for the judgment-of taste is not a cognitive judgment (neither a theoretical nor a practical one), and hence it is neither grounded on concepts nor aimed at them’ (*KU*, 5: 209). And that, ultimately, would make the ‘taste for the beautiful [...] a disinterested and *free* satisfaction; for no interest, neither that of the senses nor that of reason, extorts approval’ (*KU*, 5: 210).

In fact, Kant considers that it is nature—not art—which is proper to pure aesthetic judgments-of-taste because its beauty is free (*pulchritudo vaga*); that is, it ‘presupposes no concept of what the object ought to be’ (*KU*, 5: 229). Rather, in a judgment-of-taste, nature and its objects are judged only in terms of what their representation arouses in the mood of the one who judges them. This means that the purity, or aestheticity, of such judgments concerns the fact that, in them, one does not bear in mind neither something that involves a conceptual (re)cognition of the object-of-judgment nor its mere sensory charm; rather, those are judgments in which we pay attention to what happens to our state of mind/mood [*Gemütszustand*], that is, to the way in which the object-of-judgment vivifies our mood, arising from this vivification a feeling of pleasure. Therefore, ‘flowers are free natural beauties’, since:

[h]ardly anyone other than the botanist knows what sort of thing a flower is supposed to be; and even the botanist, who recognizes in it the reproductive organ of the plant, pays no attention to this natural end if he judges the flower by means of taste (*KU*, 5: 229).

Now, the reason why Kant claims that art cannot be the object of a pure aesthetic judgment-of-taste concerns the fact that ‘art is distinguished from nature as doing (*facere*) is from acting or producing in general (*agere*), and the product or consequence of the former is distinguished as a work (*opus*) from the latter as an effect (*effectus*)’. Thus, according to him, ‘if something is called a work of art without qualification, in order to distinguish it from an effect of nature, then by that is always understood a work of human beings’, that is, with a ‘cause that produced it’ and that ‘conceived of an end, which [it] has to thank for its form’ (*KU*, 5: 303).

It is to the artist that art owes its form, since the former intentionally organises the raw material in order to produce a work of art. Nonetheless, whether, in its background, ‘art always has a determinate intention of producing something’, that is, an intention ‘aimed at the

production of a determinate object, then [...] the object would please only through concepts' and, in this case, 'the art would not please in the mere judging, i.e., it would not please as beautiful but as mechanical art' (*KU*, 5: 306).

To say that an art pleases as something 'mechanical' means to say that it pleases to the extent that the artist 'performs the actions requisite' to carry out their intentions (*KU*, 5: 305). Thus, since we identify and recognise this concept, that is, the intention of the artist materialised in the work of art, the work pleases us.

Now, if Kant considers that 'the judgment-of-taste is [...] not a cognitive judgment, hence not a logical one, but is rather aesthetic, by which is understood one whose determining ground cannot be other than subjective', to identify something as 'beautiful' has nothing to do with recognising the artist's intentions and what they objectively meant objectively with the work (*KU*, 5: 203). Instead, it concerns the way that this representation refers to the subject who judges it, that is, how it affects his or her mood, awakening in the individual a feeling of pleasure or displeasure 'that contributes nothing to cognition but only holds the given representation in the subject up to the entire faculty of representation, of which the mind becomes conscious in the feeling of its state' (*KU*, 5: 204). And it is nothing but this that Kant intends with his claim that 'beautiful art is an art to the extent that it seems at the same time to be nature' (*KU*, 5: 306).

That beautiful art should appear to be nature does not mean that art should be limited to the reproduction of nature in its forms; rather, although Kant states that 'in a product of art one must be aware that it is art, and not nature', whether it is meant to be 'beautiful art', it 'must still seem to be as free from all constraint by arbitrary rules as if it were a mere product of nature', that is, free from any recognisable intentionality, such as a free natural beauty (*pulchritudo vaga*) (*KU*, 5: 306).

As a matter of fact, since pure aesthetic judgments-of-taste do not rest on concepts, Kant states that 'if one judges objects merely in accordance with concepts, then all representation of beauty is lost', so that 'there can also be no rule in accordance with which someone could be compelled to acknowledge something as beautiful' (*KU*, 5: 215). Therefore, he goes on, in a judgment-of-taste on beauty—above all, on beauty of nature—'the powers of cognition that are set into play by this representation are hereby in a free play, since no determinate concept restricts them to a particular rule of cognition' (*KU*, 5: 217).

That being the case, if it is with nature and not with art that one could carry out genuine aesthetic judgments-of-taste—and, nevertheless, art is beautiful insofar as it resembles nature—this means nothing other than that art should provoke (or seek to provoke) that peculiar harmonious relation of the cognitive faculties, which Kant calls free play and from which comes the feeling of aesthetic pleasure. And this, ultimately, would be achieved to the extent that the artist does not let transpire their intentions, that is, to the extent that we do not recognise 'any sign that the rule has hovered before the eyes of the artist' (*KU*, 5: 307).

Thus, for Kant, judgments on beauty would concern neither the recognition of the object-of-judgment nor what it represents; rather, they would have to do with how this object-of-judgment reverberates within the one who judges it.

Henry: Art as Life

It becomes clear, from a Kantian perspective, that when we look at a work of art we do not choose to see its materiality—the cracks of the canvas, the splits in the wood, or the patches of colour spread across the painted surface. Instead, we choose to perceive what is being represented. The means of painting are thus resources used to show something.

Phenomenology, from its inception, has been concerned with the first person lived experience in contact with a world, imbued with meaning, which shows itself. Alongside other contemporary phenomenologists, Henry's work can be understood as a form of "new phenomenology" because of its interest in extreme, excessive, or invisible phenomena that show themselves at the very limit of our experience.⁶ When reading Henry, it becomes immediately clear that throughout his works lies a consistent mission: to disentangle interiority from exteriority in an absolutist way. For him these poles are two radically different modes of manifestation which should not intersect, and he denotes the former as the invisible and the latter as the visible, or, respectively, the 'Truth of Life' and the 'Truth of the World'. The visible world, for Henry, turns out to be empty of the real substance of Life, and, to find its essence, he maintains that we must dive completely inward, away from the exterior movements of our intentional relation with the world. Henry's predominant aim is to ultimately explore the depths of pre-reflective, non-intentional self-experience by challenging phenomenology as it is traditionally conceived, redefining its boundaries, limits, and possibilities.

Henry argues that exteriority harbours within it the possibility of deception. He believes that this can be clearly shown in language, including representational art, since it is always referring to something external. The separation in language between "what is said" and "what is meant", for Henry, allows falsity and deception to interfere. In one of his works, *I am the Truth*, Henry argues that it is not the text which has the power to give us access to the Truth of which it speaks of; rather, it is 'Truth and Truth alone that can offer us access to itself'.⁷ For Henry, the notion that language is a means of communicating the Truth is an illusion since the single Truth is a Truth independently of and prior to language. In his last work, *Words of Christ*, Henry explores the possibility of a language in which this distance would not exist, and that would therefore exclude the possibility of lying and deception.⁸ This would

⁶ One of the central themes which stand out in contemporary phenomenology is how it takes as its very starting position the critical stance of questioning the limits and possibility of phenomenology itself. This can be found in works of prominent phenomenologists, such as Jean-Luc Marion and Jean-Louis Chrétien.

⁷ Michel Henry, *I am the Truth: Toward a Philosophy of Christianity*, trans. by Susan Emanuel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 9.

⁸ See Michel Henry, *Words of Christ*, trans. by C.M. Gschwandtner (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2012).

have to be a word of Truth—a word of Life—which is radically different from the word of the World.⁹ Thus, for Henry, the true meaning of Life is wholly separate from the truth of the world, which merely simulates it but does not give genuine access to it.

By employing this sharp dichotomy of World and Life, Henry maintains that Truth is not found in the World but within Life, whereby this Truth does not point to anything exterior to itself since it is non-intentional Life itself. Henry's claim is that truth is accessed through its irreducibility to thought, and one does not know it through the effect of some knowledge or learning against the background of the truth of the world; rather, we know it, and can only know it, within and through Life itself, and hence through absolute interiority.

Henry's philosophy of art follows this same train of thought, and hence the division between World and Life. This dichotomy divorces the inner sense from the outer sense, whereby the immanent self has unlimited affect at its disposition without the need to intuit any external reality. Thus, the independent, self-sufficient artist, or viewer, does not need to encounter exteriority at all, and, according to Henry, it is abstract art which manages to capture this absolute interiority—that which is void of any exteriority, whereby the visible, natural world is abandoned completely. Abstract art is, for Henry, equivalent to invisible interiority, whereby meaningful experience here is not dependent on any exterior influence outside the subject but, rather, on the subject's unique interior realm.

Abstract art no longer seeks to represent the world and its objects, and thus ceases to focus on the visible. Rather, it shifts its focus on the invisible and the internal. Henry's claim is that the purpose of art becomes a means to give access to that which is invisible. In relation to this inward turn in abstract art, Henry asks the following questions: 'Does our world—the world of European nihilism in which all values are undone and self-destruct—provide the most appropriate site for disclosing the source of all values, especially aesthetic values?', and 'should we affirm that, in spite of its revolutionary character, abstract painting leads us back to the source of all paintings, and moreover, that it alone discloses the possibility of painting and allows us to understand it?'¹⁰

In *Barbarism*, Henry maintains that 'art is an activity of sensibility, the fulfilment of its powers, whereas modern science, with the elimination of sensible qualities from nature, defines its own field and defines itself through the exclusion of this sensibility'.¹¹ He actually defines scientism as an act of barbarity, which he takes up from, and further radicalises, Husserl's critique of the Galilean paradigm in the latter's last work entitled *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*. Henry uses such harsh labels in that he argues that modern science negates and denies the being and development of the true meaning of Life. Barbarism, for Henry, appears precisely as a consequence of the attempt to negate subjectivity and to reduce it to the sphere of visibility by objectifying and quantifying it. Reducing life to the objectifiable and the quantifiable is precisely a negation of life as invisible affectivity.

⁹ Henry uses Truth and Life interchangeably.

¹⁰ Henry, *Seeing the Invisible*, pp. 2, 3.

¹¹ Michel Henry, *Barbarism*, trans. Scott Davidson, (London: Continuum, 2012), p. 23.

Moreover, according to Henry, the scientific domain does not overlap—not even partially—with the domain of art. Aesthetic value does not lie in the former but wholly in the latter, whereby ‘the laws that make these scientific documents beautiful are the aesthetic laws of sensibility; they are not the mathematical or physical laws that the scientist seeks to decipher in them’.¹² The artwork is thus, for Henry, radically distinct from its materiality; as the canvas, the copper, or wood belong to the exterior world of objects which is a reality of a different order. The moment aesthetic seeing takes place, the materials withdraw for the artwork to reveal itself. The artwork is, then, no longer an object of the world but an entity whose purpose is to show the reality represented in the artwork itself.

For Henry, the work of art belongs outside of the real world and, hence, to a dimension of ‘irreality’.¹³ Thus, the authenticity of a work of art cannot in any way overlap with the authenticity of its material components. This irreality of the work of art is not only understood as in direct contrast to the real world but, moreover, must be thought of in connection to the essence of life. Henry claims that:

If the work of art is never in this world, if it is not truly situated where its support is—right there on this wall in front of us, in this context—it is not that it is foreign to sensibility, but instead that its essence is located in sensibility and that its being unfolds where sensibility unfolds, in life, in the radical immanence of absolute subjectivity.¹⁴

Henry claims that the artwork is outside of the world, detached from anything that belongs to exteriority. It belongs to a realm which allows us to feel, a place in which both the artwork and our true selves stand. Art is thus, for Henry, a representation of life which does not show its reality in the world but, instead, is represented in the form of an unreal representation. This is why, for Henry, art needs imagination—the faculty to represent something in its absence. Art denies the world as it cannot live in the world but only beyond it, and that is why works of art present themselves to us as an enigma. In *Seeing the Invisible*, Henry puts forth these two ideas:

1. The content of painting, of all paintings, is the Internal, the invisible life that does not cease to be invisible and remains forever in the Dark, and
2. The means by which it expresses this invisible content—forms and colours—are themselves invisible, in their original reality and true sense, at any rate.¹⁵

Henry’s claim is that the purpose of art becomes a way that allows us to see what is not cannot be seen. He argues that when art tries to imitate the visible world, it becomes subordinated to a pre-established model of which it cannot be anything but a mere replica. Explicitly, Henry draws influence from the Platonic idea of art as *mimesis*, whereby that which is shown in the light of the world is always already given in this way—the artist only

¹² Henry, *Barbarism*, p. 24.

¹³ Henry, *Seeing the Invisible*, p. 12.

¹⁴ Henry, *Barbarism*, p. 35.

¹⁵ Henry, *Seeing the Invisible*, p. 10.

has to copy it. Thus, the value of the work of art becomes tuned to the value of the greater or lesser commitment and reliability to the model being copied (and hence to the visible/ exterior). The only way out, according to Henry, is for art to cease being interested in the visible and focus solely on the invisible—and, hence, the interior. Hence, his formulation: 'Interior = interiority = invisible = life = pathos = abstract'.¹⁶

Kant and Henry: Kandinsky and Abstract Art

Even though one cannot simply overlook the important differences and originality of their work, both Kant's and Henry's theories on art seem to highlight and endorse a necessary shift from the world of representation (the exterior world) towards the world of subjectivity (the interior world). As already noted, Kant claims that the beauty of art is not (or at least should not be) judged in terms of what art represents, but, rather, in terms of the feeling of pleasure it arouses—meaning that it is not a question of recognising what a work of art portrays, but, instead, how it reverberates in our state of mind. As for Henry, the 'Truth of Life' (the invisible/interior) and the 'Truth of the World' (the visible/exterior) are two radically different modes of manifestation which must remain separate. The visible world, for Henry, turns out to be empty of the real substance of Life, and, to find its essence, he maintains that one must dive completely inward, away from the exterior movements of our intentional relation with the world. Both of these thinkers' ideas on art could be further understood in light of Kandinsky's Abstractionism.

It is in the figure of Kandinsky that Western Abstractionism has its pioneer and one of its main heralds. Not only is the first abstract work of Western art history attributed to this Russian painter but, moreover, in his work *On the Spiritual in Art*, published in 1911, Kandinsky provides a theoretical basis for this new visual language.¹⁷

The early draft version of this book¹⁸ states that 'nature's language remains her own', so that 'if music wishes to express exactly what nature expresses to man in her own tongue, then it takes merely the inner value of nature's speech and repeats this inward reality in the external forms peculiar to music, i.e., musical speech'.¹⁹ To say that nature expresses itself in its own language denotes that nature affects us in a way that is absolutely particular, and, although Kandinsky asserts that 'this language cannot be imitated', he believes that 'this sort of mood'—that is, this reverberation of nature's language in us—could be 'created by every art, not by the external imitation of nature, but by the artistic re-creation of this mood in its inner value' (*OSA*, 155).²⁰

¹⁶ Henry, *Seeing the Invisible*, p. 11.

¹⁷ Wassily Kandinsky, 'On the Spiritual in Art', in *Complete Writings on Art*, vol. I, pp. 114-219. Henceforth cited in text and footnotes as (*OSA*, page number).

¹⁸ Which was read aloud at the Pan-Russian Congress of Artists, in December 1911, by Nikolai Kublin. See the editors' introductory commentary in (*OSA*, 115).

¹⁹ Wassily Kandinsky, *Complete Writings on Art*, vol. II, ed. by Kenneth Clement Lindsay and Peter Vergo (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), pp. 876-77, endnote 39.

²⁰ Unnumbered footnote.

Kandinsky claims that ‘every object is a being with its own life and, inevitably, with its own effect flowing from it’, so that we are ‘constantly subject to this psychological effect’ (*OSA*, 168). Now, to say that we are steadily under the influence of what surrounds us is to say, metaphorically, that ‘the ever-changing external environment of man [...] continually sets the strings of the piano (the soul) in vibration, by means of the keys (objects)’ (*OSA*, 169). And this would apply not only to objects of nature, but also to objects created by human hands—above all, works of art.

Among all the artistic languages, Kandinsky takes music as the ideal exemplary because it ‘externally is completely emancipated from nature’ and ‘does not need to borrow external forms from anywhere in order to create its language’. In contrast to other art, music seems to affect us by itself, *as* music, because ‘with few exceptions, and deviations, [it] has for several centuries been the art that uses its resources not to represent natural appearances, but [...] to create a unique life of musical tones’ (*OSA*, 154).

And it is precisely because of this that Kandinsky calls music ‘the most immaterial of the arts’ of his time: because its ability to affect us does not depend on the content it represents (*OSA*, 154). Indeed, it is not for the plot that a *Passion* of Bach touches us, for it may be the case for someone to hear it, to feel its soul vibrate, without knowing that it refers to some Gospel. In short, it is only (or at least, mainly) by its own tools (i.e., notes, pauses, sounds and silences) that music reverberates directly across the enjoyer’s soul, without resorting to a cognitive recognition of what it could or should mean.

Now, if, on the one hand, Kandinsky claims that every art should seek to follow ‘the path of saying what they are best able to say, through means that are peculiar to each’, he argues on the other hand that the different arts could compare their means (*OSA*, 153). However, when comparing their resources with each other, an art could only learn from the other successfully ‘if not only the external but also the principles are learned’. He explains: ‘one art has to learn from the other how it tackles its own materials and, having learned this, use in principle the materials peculiar to itself in a similar way, i.e., according to the principle that it belongs to itself alone’; in this case, ‘the richest lessons are to be learned from music’ (*OSA*, 154). Indeed, just as music through mere sound ‘has direct access to the soul [and] finds there an echo’—because humanity ‘hath music’ in itself—painting, ‘with the help of the means at its disposal’, could ‘become an art in the abstract sense, and eventually achieve purely pictorial composition’ (*OSA*, 161-62).

Kandinsky’s desire for painting to become abstract reflects his conviction that the successful imitation of nature’s phenomena cannot be the purpose of art. Now, if the purpose of art is, according to him, the refinement of the human soul,²¹ and this refinement is achieved by the vibration of the latter,²² painting, as an art that serves its purposes, should focus on the triggering of this vibration, not on a representation of nature. Arguing, therefore, in favour of an autonomy of painting, Kandinsky considers that the painting moves toward this independence to the extent that it ‘examine[s] its forces and its materials’, ‘become[s]

²¹ See (*OSA*, 212).

²² See (*OSA*, 219).

acquainted with them, as the music has long since done', and 'attempt[s] to use these materials and forces in a purely painterly way for the purpose of creation' (OSA, 155).

Kandinsky's preference for the abstract lies in the fact that, according to him, 'purely abstract entities [...] have their own existence, their own influence, and their own effect', which are inherent to form itself and do not depend on what it represents (OSA, 165). However, on the one hand, if he is aware that the artists of his time 'cannot manage exclusively with pure abstract forms'—since they are 'too imprecise for him [or her]' and could apparently 'impoverish one's means of expression'—it is, on the other hand, to the extent that composition does not depend on superfluous elements, operating 'by purely abstract forms, or by corporeal forms that have been completely abstracted', that it manages to potentiate its vibrant effect on the human soul, since it thus focuses not on what is external, but internal to composition itself, that is, to its internal necessity (OSA, 166, 169).

Now, it is, according to Kandinsky, this 'double interiority' that art must have before its eyes: (a) the compositional interiority of the work, that is, the organisation of its forms in a more abstract way, and not to the detriment of the representation of something; and (b) the reader's inner sense, the reverberation of their soul and not the mere pleasure of sight.

Kandinsky, in fact, believes that painting has what one might call two levels of contact with the viewer: a retinal level and a spiritual level. The former would be the level of the physical effect of colour. He says that 'the eye itself is charmed by the beauty and other qualities of the colour', so that 'the spectator experiences a feeling of satisfaction, of pleasure, like a gourmet who has tasty morsel in his mouth'. This physical satisfaction, however, 'can only be of short duration [...], superficial, leaving behind no lasting impression if the soul remains closed'. Nonetheless, he goes on, it 'can also be developed into a [deeper] form of experience' (OSA, 156-57). And this is where the second level of the colour effect comes in: the psychological, spiritual one.

It is at this level that art fulfils its real function, 'calling forth a vibration from the soul' (OSA, 157). For if, as argued above, the purpose of art is to make the human soul vibrate, then the pictorial composition, the harmony of colours, could 'only be based upon the principle of purposefully touching' it (OSA, 160). Indeed, in one of the most poetic passages of *On the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky claims:

Colour is a means of exerting a direct influence upon the soul. Colour is the keyboard. The eye is the hammer. The soul is the piano, with its many strings. The artist is the hand that purposefully sets the soul vibrating by means of this or that key (OSA, 160).

He calls this 'principle of purposefully touching the human soul' a 'principle of internal necessity' (OSA, 160)—and if 'whatever arises from internal, spiritual necessity is beautiful' so that 'beautiful is that which is inwardly beautiful', then 'beauty' concerns that which 'refines and enriches the soul', making it vibrate (OSA, 214).

One could ask how close Kandinsky and Kant are to each other, and of course, some differences cannot be disregarded. The first—and most obvious—is the fact that they are

separated from each other by more than a century: Kant writes from the twilight of the Enlightenment; Kandinsky, from the awakening of modern avant-garde. Furthermore, their approaches entail different perspectives: Kant speaks of a reception theory whilst Kandinsky, in turn, speaks of the works of art themselves and how they could reach the soul of the viewer in a more affective way. Besides that, it is the beauty of nature which is Kant's subject of great interest, as he does not see a passage from the agreeableness of the senses to the pleasure with the beautiful. Kandinsky's analysis, in turn, is not only about art (and, as he himself asserts, about 'painting, in particular'), but he also sees physical satisfaction in colour as a possible trigger which can reverberate in the soul of the viewer (*OSA*, 121).

Still, it seems valid to draw attention to the fact that, for Kant, a judgment about the beauty of a thing does not rest on certain concepts or moral values, but, rather, on the way this thing affects the subject's mood, arousing in the subject a feeling of pleasure. Similarly, for Kandinsky, 'a "well-painted" picture is in reality not one that is correct in values (the inevitable *valeurs* of the French) or divided up almost scientifically into cold and warm, but rather one that leads a full inner life', and that, by these means, can produce a 'spiritual vibration within the soul' of its viewer (*OSA*, 211).

In the light of this, Kandinsky's Abstractionism seems to update, one could say, some aspects of what Kant intended with his theory of pure aesthetic judgments of taste (although, for the latter, the art of his time would be incapable of being object of such judgments)—especially in terms of how what is at stake in judgments-of-taste is not the content of the judged object, but the way it inwardly affects the subject—his or her mood, soul, or state of mind.²³

On the other hand, unlike Kant, Henry lived to witness abstract art becoming a prevalent visual language of his time. Henry praises Kandinsky for his ground-breaking formulation of abstract art, an art which seeks to turn the artist and the spectator radically inward. According to Henry, Kandinsky's abstract paintings manage to disclose the Truth through their complete, radical emphasis on the invisible world (interiority) by in turn rejecting and annihilating all traces of the visible world (exteriority). Abstract art, for Henry, becomes the ideal means to elevate the status of an interiority void from any form of exteriority—understood as radical immanence.

Henry maintains that after Kandinsky art no longer seeks to represent the world. Rather, it shifts its focus completely on the invisible; and, hence, the interior. In *Seeing the Invisible*, Henry states:

This is the miracle of abstract painting: it constructs the unlimited monumentality of a work that no longer has a foothold in the visible world, that ignores its rules and does not seek anything from it, neither aid nor sanction, and that emerges with the pure force and infinite certainty of life.²⁴

²³ For another approach between Kant and Kandinsky, focusing on sublimity and abstraction in modern art, see Marina Silenzi, 'El juicio estético sobre lo bello: Lo sublime en el arte y el pensamiento de Kandinsky', *Andamios*, 11 (2009), 287-302.

²⁴ Henry, *Seeing the Invisible*, p. 107.

Henry praises the imagination as an immanent experience, the immediacy of which is never broken or separate. Imagination, for him, entails positing something 'other than what is and what is there right in front of us—something other than the world. To imagine is to posit life. The imagination belongs to life; it develops there entirely and does not leave it'.²⁵ For Henry, art's creative imagination does not give us smokescreens or tricks to contemplate, like the depth of a third dimensional vase or a tree where there is only a flat surface. Art thus ceases to be the faculty of representing a thing in its absence; instead, it becomes the magical power of making something real.

Conclusion

Although operating within different contexts and with different motivations, we tried to show that the theories of Kant, Kandinsky, and Henry on art have, at least, one dominant and mutual concern, namely: an inward turn, which can be captured through abstract art (or better, the experience of it) as it points towards the inner dimension of the subject. For Kant, this is in line with what is referred to as his "Copernican turn" in philosophy, whereby the subject is positioned in the centre of his epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics. For Kandinsky, this turn concerns his idea that art must be guided by a 'principle of internal necessity'.

Some aspects of Kandinsky's Abstractionism could bring us closer to Kant's aesthetics, since the former's theory, even without the Kantian transcendental argumentation, can serve as an empirical example to help us understand and visualise what the latter intends with his theory of pure judgments-of-taste. On the other hand, with his aesthetic theory turned to the way objects affect our state-of-mind, Kant could serve as an aid to better understand not only the breakdown of figuration proposed by Abstractionism, but also the very negation of art and classical beauty, as exemplified by, for instance, Duchamp's *Fountain*.

Furthermore, it was shown that, for Henry and Kandinsky, the essence of human beings and art is not found in exteriority/visibility, but in a radical and absolute interiority/invisibility. The proper name of this invisibility, for Henry, is 'Life'; a life which is lived and felt and yet remains invisible in an absolutist sense. For him all experiences are of this kind, whereby this feeling, or pathos, is wholly contrasted with visibility. Still, a radical shift towards interiority should not be understood as a complete denial and annihilation of the external world. In this sense, we can still maintain that the one doing the "turning" remains rooted in the world of ordinary humanity. Therefore, an inward turn in art can be understood as a means to capture and further enhance the essence of human life by positioning the world of affect and subjectivity at its centre.

²⁵ Henry, *Seeing the Invisible*, p. 108.

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