

How has the transformation of art dismantled Kant's theory of objectivity in favour of viewer subjectivity, contextual interpretation, and the collapse of traditional aesthetic values?

Abstract

This paper explores the transformation of Immanuel Kant's aesthetic theory in response to modernist and contemporary attitudes towards art. Kant's notion of impartial beauty and universal preconceptions is contrasted with later critiques emphasising context, viewer interpretation, and cultural dynamics. In *Critique of Judgement* (1790), Kant asserts that true aesthetic judgments are independent of personal taste and environment. However, modern and contemporary critiques, from Clement Greenberg (1982) and Marcel Duchamp (*Fountain*, 1917), contend this, arguing that the meaning of an artwork is shaped by context and individual perception. This study investigates Kant's concept of 'disinterested judgement' and its influence on formal analysis, highlighting how artists like Duchamp and Frank Stella (*Black Paintings*, 1958-1960) reject traditional aesthetic values. Additionally, the participatory nature of work by Félix González-Torres (*Untitled [Portrait of Ross in L.A.]*, 1991) is assessed, where viewer engagement is integral to meaning. Roland Barthes' *Rhetoric of the Image* (1964) and the recontextualising of the crucifix in pop culture illustrate how evolving cultural contexts influence interpretation. Findings suggest that while Kant's theory laid the foundation for formal analysis, art is increasingly subjective and viewer oriented. This paper invites greater investigation into how art's judgement has shifted from objective standards to an interactive dialogue between the artwork, artist, and audience.

Keywords

Immanuel Kant, aesthetic theory, disinterested judgement, formal analysis, subjectivity, objectivity, Clement Greenberg, Modernism, Dadaism, Marcel Duchamp, Félix González-Torres, Roland Barthes, semiotics, Frank Stella, popular culture, interpretation, contemporary

Introduction

The key argument in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement* (1790) is his concept of aesthetic judgement, which asserts how true judgements of taste are independent from personal prejudices (Kant, 1978). Formal analysis is the evaluation of an artwork based solely on its formal qualities, such as composition, colour, shape, and texture, without emphasis on external context or personal emotional response (Tate, n.d.). This method encourages an objective approach to art critique. Advocating for an untainted judgment of taste, autonomous from emotional and personal connections, Kant championed the concept of the impartial viewer. Strictly adhering to established universal conventions upon the interpretation of artwork, the impartial viewer embodies Kant's belief that "the liking that determines a judgement of taste is devoid of all interest" (Kant, 1978, p.45). A disinterested viewer is uninfluenced by personal feelings or bias, appreciating the work not for the artists reputation, or its effectiveness in their home, but simply because it offers a sense of pleasure (Robert, 2022). However, he acknowledged that the process of interpretation could still be subtly influenced by personal experience, asserting that "a judgment of taste is not a cognitive judgment, and thus not a logical judgment, but an aesthetic one, meaning a judgment whose determining basis is inherently subjective" (Kant, 1790, p.44). Kant argues that taste is not grounded in factual analysis or rational decision-making. While viewers may cognitively recognise elements of a piece, such as its shape or colour, judgments of taste are not concerned with these facts. Instead, they are based on the emotional response of pleasure or displeasure upon encountering such elements (Kant, 1978). This paper explores Kant's theories of aesthetic judgment and traces its diminishing impact from modern art onwards. It investigates how the subjective experience of the viewer interacts with formal, contextual, and interpretational qualities of art to shape meaning in an evolving cultural landscape.

Modernism on Aesthetic Judgement

This ongoing tension between subjectivity and objectivity would later influence the modern art movement, particularly Dadaism, which actively rebelled against traditional standards of "good" art (Kristiansen, 1968). Dadaism embraced "a negative attitude to everything that has become" (Kristiansen, 1968, p.459), championing the 'art for art's sake' philosophy and challenging established norms in the process. Clement Greenberg, a prominent art critic of the time, rejected the political and cultural influences, such as the social upheaval and political activism seen in movements like realism and expressionism (Costello, 2007). Instead, he focussed on visual and material factors. Greenberg maintained that the meaning of an artwork is formed by its formal qualities and the characteristics of its medium, as opposed to the viewer's subjective engagement with the piece:

The essence of Modernism lies...in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence. Kant used logic to establish the limits of logic, and while he withdrew much from its old jurisdiction, logic was left all the more secure in what there remained to it.
Greenberg, 1982, p.1

He suggests that Modernism used the art itself to critique and examine the discipline, much like Kant used logic to define its boundaries. Rather than completely rejecting traditional and representational forms, modern artists focused on the artwork's formal elements, highlighting their intrinsic value and making them central to artistic practice (Greenberg, 1982). This approach reinforces formal analysis, as meaning is derived from the internal structure of the work rather than from external influences such as social, historical or political contexts (Greenberg, 1982). The viewer engages with the work disinterestedly, appreciating its visual and formal qualities rather than any social or political context.

Formal Analysis in Practice

Frank Stella

The minimalist works of Frank Stella, such as *Black Paintings* (1958-1960), embody a formalist approach, prioritising visual appreciation of the work over personal expression (Wolfe, n.d.). Characterised by their bold, geometric forms and black paint, Stella removed any personal narrative or spontaneity from the series. He used uniformed stripes which run across the canvas and create rhythmic compositions, and industrial materials reflect his commitment to formalism (Goodbody, 2024). By famously stating “What you see is what you see” (Stella, quoted in Rubin, 1970, p.14), a phrase which eventually became the minimalism mantra (Wolfe, n.d.), he emphasised his rejection of symbolic or emotional interpretation in favour of a streamlined aesthetic experience.



Fig.1 Stella, F. (1959) *The Marriage of Reason and Squalor, II* [Enamel on canvas] New York: The Museum of Modern Art.

Available at: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/80316>

[Accessed: 8th March 2025]

By proposing that meaning is not rooted in subjective emotional responses or symbolism, but rather in the direct visual experience offered by the artwork, he reinforces his formalist perspective, emphasising the pleasure found in the inherent qualities of shapes and compositions. This approach removes any external influences or artistic identity, allowing the viewer to focus solely on the visual experience. It presents a pure, objective encounter that remains universally accessible.

Marcel Duchamp

Fellow modern artist Marcel Duchamp adopted a more ironic approach to objectivity in art. In *Fountain* (1917), he presented a mass-produced urinal as an artwork in part of his series of readymades. By selecting ordinary, commercial objects and labelling them as 'retinal art,' Duchamp emphasises their purely visual nature, distinguishing them from their functional, manufactured origins (MoMA, n.d.). The artist subverted traditional notions of aesthetic appreciation and craftsmanship, challenging Kant's principles of formal harmony directly. The viewer's decision to accept or reject *Fountain* (1917) as art is integral to its meaning, requiring active engagement in constructing its significance (MoMA, n.d.).



Fig.2 Duchamp, M. (1964) *Fountain Replica* [porcelain urinal] London: Tate Modern.

Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/duchamp-fountain-t07573>

[Accessed: 13th March 2025]

Paul B. Franklin, for example, considers *Fountain* (1917) a legitimate work of art, discussing it within the broader context of avant-garde movements and queer art history (Franklin, 2000). He emphasised its radical nature and challenge to traditional art definitions, noting that "scholars consistently cite *Fountain* as one of the most significant and radical contributions to the history of modern art..." (Franklin, 2000, p.26). On the contrary, its rejection by the Society of Independent Artists in New York in 1917 on the grounds that "*Fountain* was not art and was indecent" (Camfield, 1987, p.71) highlights

the contested quality of its status. This perspective stresses the idea that meaning is fluid and dependent on the viewer's interpretation.

The Participatory Gaze

American visual artist Félix González-Torres similarly engaged the viewer's perspective, but his work was uniquely defined by its emotional depth, personal resonance, and social context. *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* (1991), features a pile of sweets on the gallery floor, inviting viewers to participate by taking from it. As the pile diminishes, it symbolises the declining health and weight of his partner, Ross Laycock, who was battling AIDS during the height of the epidemic (Woodley, 2022). This work, created the year González-Torres lost his partner, carries a deeply personal connection to both his experience and the larger social crisis (Woodley, 2022).



Fig.3 González-Torres, F. (1991) *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* [Candies in variously coloured wrappers]

Available at: <https://www.felixgonzalez-torresfoundation.org/works/untitled-portrait-of-ross-in-l-a>
[Accessed: 8th March 2025]

Without the artist's direct engagement with the epidemic and the invitation to interact, the installation could be dismissed as simply a pile of sweets. However, González-Torres' assertion, "My work is all my personal history...I can't separate my art from my life," (González-Torres, quoted in Weintraub, 1996, p.110) highlights the transformation of the piece when viewed through the lens of his lived experience. It becomes a metaphor for loss, memory, and the personal impact of the AIDS crisis. The concept that art is not a static object, but a dynamic process shaped by audience engagement is reinforced by this installation. As explained by González-Torres, "I need public interaction. Without the public these works are nothing. I need the public to complete the work" (Gonzalez-Torres, quoted in Steer, 2023, para.6).

The participatory relationship between viewer and artwork opposes Kant's belief that aesthetic judgment should remain detached from personal experience. Instead, it aligns with the view that meaning is constructed through dialogue with the observer. Art is no longer defined by rigid formalism dictated by universal standards but is understood as a co-creation of meaning between the artwork and its audience (Lin, 2025). This shift highlights a fundamental change in how art is experienced, emphasising the fluidity and adaptability of meaning to the individual, as well as the growing importance of personal context in shaping the understanding of art. While grounded in modernism's experimentation with material and form, the participatory gaze reflects a broader transformation in the public's approach to art.

Semiotics and Interpretation

Shaped by cultural, historical, and ideological shifts, the way that art conveys meaning is constantly evolving (Battistini, 2005). Semiotic theory, developed by Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Pierce, produces a paradigm for understanding how symbols function and transform over time. Saussure's dyadic model describes the sign or symbol as the signifier, this is the physical form, and the signified as the concept it represents (Bal and Bryson, 1991). Unlike Kant's notion of universal understanding, semiotics suggests that meaning is inherently fluid, dependant on the

temporal and cultural contexts in which the observer is experiencing the sign (Bal and Bryson,1991).

Roland Barthes

The Panzani Pasta advertisement used in Roland Barthes' essay *Rhetoric of the Image* (1964) illustrates how the interpretation of a sign can shift depending on an individual's background and cultural knowledge. Drawing on Barthes' three-message theory of linguistic, coded iconic, and non-coded iconic messages, the advertisement constructs its meaning through a thoughtful combination of elements (Barthes, 1964). The linguistic message shapes interpretation by reinforcing the intended Italian associations and authenticity through the sound and appearance of the name "Panzani." Italy is further represented in the colours of the advertisement, with the coded iconic messages relying on semiotics and cultural knowledge. The ad plays on stereotypes of Italian cuisine, drawing on what Barthes called "Italianicity", utilising the audience's familiarity with tourist imagery (Barthes, 1964).



Fig.4 The Panzani's pasta picture [online image]

Available at: <https://aestheticsofphotography.com/rhetoric-of-the-image-roland-barthes/>

[Accessed: 18th March 2025]

Considering that it is a French advertisement adds a further layer of meaning, reflecting how French cultural perspectives and associations influence the interpretation of Italian cuisine, affirming the role of national identity in semiotic meaning. A viewer familiar with Italian culinary traditions might recognise the commercial nature of this representation, while another may interpret it as a genuine depiction of Italian cooking. On a literal level, the image shows fresh ingredients spilling from a rustic net bag, and the arrangement evokes traditional still life paintings (Aesthetics of Photography, n.d.). However, this meaning is not inhabited in the image itself but emerges through the cultural associations the viewer brings to it. Ultimately, signs require a general cultural knowledge to be fully understood, but this knowledge varies among viewers (Dai and Liu, 2024).

The Evolution of Symbols

This idea that symbols gain meaning through cultural context and changing associations is central to how we understand and interpret signs over time (Dai and Liu, 2024). Symbols have been used as tools of communication throughout history, from cave paintings and frescos to modern digital logos and road signs (Dai and Liu, 2024). As Matilde Battistini discusses in *Symbols and Allegories in Art* (2002), many traditional symbols have been “gradually emptied of their meaning” (Battistini, 2005, p.7) as the concepts they represent have evolved. This shift highlights how historical and cultural developments directly impact the perception of symbols.

A clear example of this is the recontextualising of religious symbolism in pop culture and fashion is evident in the repurposing of the Christian cross, traditionally a symbol of faith, in secular contexts (Battistini, 2005). Pop icons like Madonna have incorporated Christian iconography, as shown by her jewellery and the burning crosses in her 1989 *Like a Prayer* music video, to explore themes of rebellion, sexuality, and

cultural critique, sparking controversy among religious groups (Faith and Wasserlein, 1997).



Fig. 5 Madonna (1989) *Like a Prayer* [Music video still]. Directed by D. Fincher.

Available at: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3241792/mediaindex/>

[Accessed:21st March 2025]

Similarly, punk and goth subcultures have appropriated religious and political symbols to resist authority (Paris and Ault, 2014). While some symbols, like the Christian cross, can adapt to new cultural roles, others, such as the swastika, remain politically charged. Historically, the swastika was a symbol of peace and prosperity in Buddhism and other cultures, but it was tragically reinterpreted in the 20th century due to its appropriation by Nazi ideology, which has forever altered its meaning in the Western context (Zidan, 2020). Vivienne Westwood faced backlash for using the swastika in her designs, intending to protest authority, yet its connection to white supremacy and genocide prevented its redefinition (Gambetti et al., 2024). This contrast highlights a key semiotic concept where some symbols, because of their historical weight, are difficult

to reinterpret, as is evident with the swastika. In contrast, other symbols, such as the Christian cross, are more adaptable and can be reshaped through cultural integration.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the transformation of art has significantly undermined Kant's objectivity by embracing subjectivity, viewer engagement, and context of the artwork in its meaning. Kant's notion of a disinterested aesthetic judgment, which called for an objective, universal appreciation of beauty, has been increasingly challenged by modern and contemporary art movements. Artists like Marcel Duchamp and Félix González-Torres, through works that invite different levels of viewer participation and engagement, have shifted the focus from a universal and formal analysis to an interactive, fluid construction of meaning. The personalised experience and valued diversity of viewpoints reflect the broader cultural movement of art towards understanding the significance of the individual in shaping its meaning.

The rise of semiotic theory, as demonstrated in Roland Barthes' *Rhetoric of the Image* (1964), further supports this shift, emphasising that signs and symbols are interpreted differently depending on cultural and individual factors. Cultural and historical influences such as the context behind a piece have particularly become central to its interpretation and highlights its increasingly subjective nature.

These developments demonstrate that aesthetic experience is no longer a static evaluation of form, but a dynamic exchange between artwork, artist, and viewer. As the evolution of art continues, it increasingly resists fixed interpretations, favouring a more subjective, context-dependent understanding that allows for diverse and personalised experiences. These advancements from aesthetic hierarchies reflect a shift in art theory and criticism, away from universal standards and towards an experience which is being continuously reshaped by its interpretations.

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