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# THE ALGORITHMIC GAZE: AI AND THE SYNTHETIC A PRIORI OF BEAUTY

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**Abstract:** This article examines the Kantian account of aesthetic judgment amid the generation and circulation of images through computational systems. Building on Immanuel Kant's view that judgments of beauty depend on an a priori structure of reflective judgment, the paper advances two related theses. First, contemporary generative models can produce outputs that reliably elicit human experiences of beauty; yet they do so without the subjective purposiveness and intentional directedness that Kant associates with artistic genius. Their operations follow statistical inference and pattern optimization rather than reflective intention. Second, a more consequential transformation occurs at the level of reception: recommendation systems and platform feeds reorganize which forms become visible, repeatable and culturally normative, thereby shaping the dispositions through which aesthetic judgments arise. What appears beautiful is increasingly conditioned by infrastructures that predict, rank, and circulate images at scale. By placing Kant in dialogue with debates on intentionality, media theory and neuroaesthetics, and by drawing on empirical research on algorithmic curation in music streaming and social platforms, the article proposes understanding the aesthetic a priori as technogenetic—historically plastic and increasingly externalized into systems of prediction, optimization and digital mediation. Beauty, therefore,

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does not disappear but is judged and shared under reconfigured conditions.

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## 1. Introduction

Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* directly addresses the question of whether a machine can "know beauty." For Kant, aesthetic judgment—for example, 'This artwork is beautiful' –is a *synthetic a priori* judgment of a very special kind. While the same "disinterested pleasure" and a feeling of the "free play" of the imagination and the understanding that is common to both are at work, aesthetic judgment is not rule-governed (§9). It is not based on concepts, unlike cognitive judgments, which follow concepts and serve to fill out empirical knowledge. Although these judgments are subjective, they ironically demand universal agreement since the cognitive architecture that allows for this "free play" is believed, as Kant maintains, to be possessed by all rational beings.

Artificial intelligence, however, fundamentally disrupts this aesthetic schema. A system like DALL·E or Midjourney does not experience pleasure or the harmonious free play of the faculties. The probabilities of such a network can be sampled; in the case of style transfer, it does so to create new art after it has seen a large amount of training data, i.e., extensive databases of preexisting human artworks. As Agüera y Arcas suggests, machine-made art "arises from computational patterns that do not partake in the intentional or affective dimensions of creation" (3). Yet, it results in images that can provoke feelings of deep aesthetic and emotional response when viewed by humans. From this angle, AI art is not a work of the "free play" of the faculties but of a prefabricated statistical model—a mimicking of aesthetic form devoid of 'phenomenological' substance.

This leads to an important philosophical distinction. At the same time, the Kantian position can still be defended. The fact that AI cannot experience either disinterested pleasure or intentional harmony allows us to conclude that beauty requires

embodied, conscious subjectivity. On this interpretation, aesthetic judgment is grounded in finitude, mortality, and the existential situation of human existence. Manovich, for example, characterizes digital tools as "prostheses for the imagination" that augment rather than replace human capacity (221). Enter AI as an external scaffold — a transplantation of creative potential into something that is by no means a creator in the sense that we know it.

On the one hand, the claim of aesthetic judgment toward universality—its insistence on transcending the merely subjective—is put under new stress. If a viewer finds an image beautiful and doesn't know it's computer-generated or doesn't mind that it is, is the experience of beauty concerning its nonhuman source invalidated? If human viewers experience genuine aesthetic emotions in response to AI art, then the synthetic a priori seems more like a structure of reception than a structure of production. Kant's conception of "genius," as "the innate mental aptitude through which nature gives the rule to art" (§46), can be algorithmically recreated if what counts here is no longer the inner spontaneity of the artist but the ability to stir up the free play in the beholder. The genius, in that sense, is not the AI but rather a catalyst for aesthetic response — a tool that triggers aesthetic response in the beholder.

This encounter with machinic art resembles the post-Kantian challenges to transcendental idealism. Adorno, for example, cautioned that the fetishization of beauty results in an 'aesthetic semblance' (*Kunstschöne*), whereby artworks merely duplicate appearances without subjective depth (87). Likewise, Lyotard's idea of the *figural* subverts the supremacy of the conceptual by demonstrating how the aesthetic spills outside of linguistic or rational enclosure (Lyotard 78–79). From these perspectives, AI-generated beauty could not be a mere imitation of the rich original but rather a rupture in our inherited categories, indicating a shift in the ontological states of aesthetic experience.

AI art compels us to reevaluate the role of the synthetic a priori in the realm of aesthetics. Is this analogy a universal that can be believed in, an epistemological condition based on human ways of knowing, or is it historical fiction based on

anthropocentric assumptions? If the latter, then AI art isn't a forgery so much as a provocation — a philosophical object that questions our expectations about the firmament from which beauty comes. There is the possibility that aesthetic pleasure is neurobiologically rooted and sensitive to entities such as symmetry, novelty, and pattern, regardless of their metaphysical origin (Zeki 16). The machine here does not *know beauty* — but it makes us question what we can ever know about ourselves.

**2. The *Aesthetic A Priori***

In *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant establishes a distinct realm for aesthetic experience that defies conceptual subsumption and utilitarian instrumentality. He specifies aesthetic judgment as 'reflective' rather than 'determinative'— that is, it does not subsume an object under a concept (for instance, the recognition of a flower as a 'rose') but searches for universal communicability in the subjective feeling that an object brings about in the subject (§5). That is, for Kant, the judgment of beauty is not derived through the application of rules but from a spontaneous "free play" (freies Spiel) between the faculties of imagination (*Einbildungskraft*) and understanding (Verstand), resulting in a feeling of "disinterested pleasure" (*interesseloses Wohlgefallen*)—pleasure unalloyed by desire, possession, or purpose (§9). This indifference is key, for it means that the aesthetic response is neither empirical nor moral but relatively autonomous and by a universal yet non-conceptual norm. The aesthetic object seems to be conceived with immaculate equipoise for human cognition but not for any particular purpose—what Kant famously designates as "purposiveness without purpose" (*Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck*) (§ 10). This experience presumes a specific stock of familiar, embodied, and transcultural invariable faculties, or what Kantian aesthetics calls the synthetic a priori conditions of aesthetic judgment.

The question is, could artificial intelligence be part of this delicately balanced cognitive-emotional system? And the answer, in a Kantian frame, is a resounding *no*. An AI system like DALL·E or Midjourney functions by deterministically following algorithms, not through reflective judgment. They do not engage

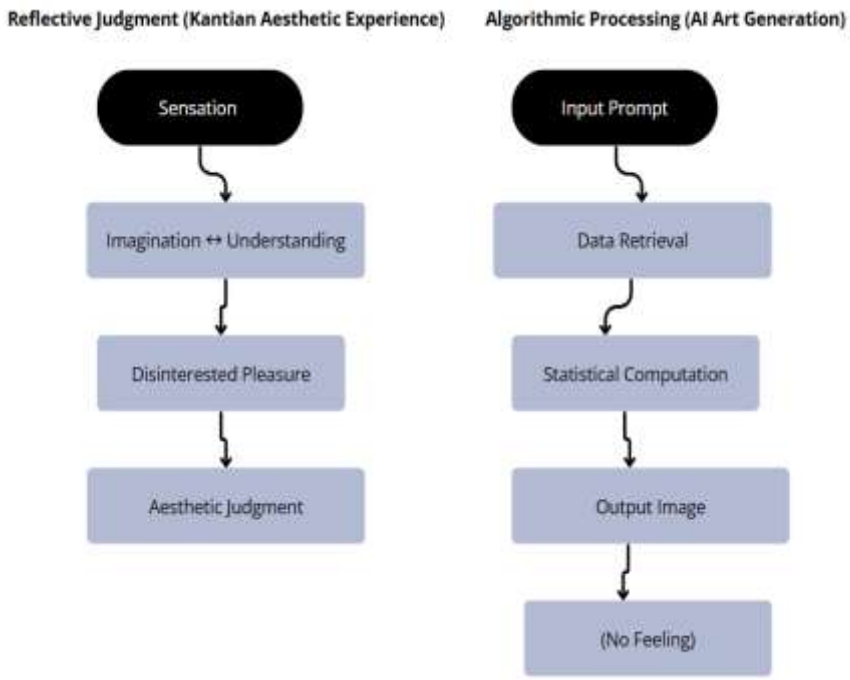
in a free play of representations; their behaviour is teleologically driven — always working towards an end, be it maximizing user engagement or minimizing computational loss. It is not a lack of purpose but a mathematical dearth of it. As Elgammal et al. write in their paper on creative adversarial networks, "the generation of art is framed as an optimization problem, guided by a discriminator trained on labeled data" (217). AI's creative logic is precisely the kind that Kant rules out of the realm of aesthetic autonomy—it is determinate, derivative, and beset by interests.

And AI does not have a phenomenal groundwork for aesthetic perception. It cannot experience disinterested pleasure because it lacks subjectivity, desire and an inner "I" capable of reflective synthesis. There is no play in its operation, only procedural efficiency. For Kant, the aesthetic is non-cognitive yet non-rational; it involves a rational being experiencing a feeling about something in such a way that an individual, as a sensible being, can only have that feeling if they believe that everyone else must feel the same way, despite there being no objective constraint on their ability to have that feeling.

AI, in contrast, lacks feelings and simply generates outputs. According to Bishop, "AI art is not the product of subjective experience; it is the outcome of training, not reflection" (74). It copies the syntax of aesthetic form—composition, harmony, contrast—but it is cut off from the semantics of lived intuition and the ontology of being in the world that the aesthetic experience presumes.

Even when human observers judge AI-generated images to be beautiful, such images do not arise from the synthetic a priori structure that Kant considered fundamental to aesthetic judgment. The AI makes no aesthetic judgment whatsoever; it merely produces outputs whose aesthetic status depends entirely on the viewer's subjective experience. In this sense, the system does not participate in beauty but only generates forms that invite human projection of beauty. These images are not beautiful in the strict Kantian meaning but function as simulations that parasitize our aesthetic faculties from the outside. AI art thus represents a kind of *ersatz* beauty—technologically impressive, perceptually engaging, yet philosophically hollow.

**Figure 1:** Reflective Judgment vs Algorithmic Processing




**3. Simulation or Creation? AI and the Aesthetic Illusion**

In *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant creates a space of experience that is neither merely empirical nor outright rational. Aesthetic judgment, he contends, is reflective rather than determinative (it does not place something under a general concept à la "this is a rose"). It aims at a universal communicability of its *subjective universal* (§5). Such judgements matter because, although we do not derive them from concepts, they nevertheless demand assent from others, as though they were subjectively universal (Kant §20). The aesthetic judgment of beauty arises from the "harmonious free play of imagination and understanding" (*das freie Spiel der Erkenntniskräfte*), a free and unforced coordination of cognitive faculties generating *disinterested pleasure* (*interesseloses Wohlgefallen*) that is free from desire, personal possession, and purposive consumption (§9).

What makes this judgment possible, for Kant, is not something in contingent experience but the material of a synthetic a priori structure—a fixed cognitive schema held in common by

all rational beings that lies at the basis of the possibility of aesthetic experience itself. Beauty, he is famously reported to have said, exhibits purposiveness without purpose (*Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck*), by which we are to understand that the beautiful object seems to fit our faculties just perfectly without fitting any particular concept or use (§10). Beauty's experience, we might thereby infer, is neither purely epistemic nor ethical; it is a kind of "cognition without knowledge," as Paul Guyer would have it, a mediating structure showing the bounds of our faculties while not subordinating it to them (46).

Enter bot-created art, and its structure is immediately destabilized. Technologies such as DeepDream, DALL·E, and Midjourney do not function based on imaginative spontaneity but instead rely on probabilistic recombination. They are trained on massive sets of images and text created by humans, and they utilize neural networks and latent diffusion models to comprehend and replicate artistic styles in various ways.

**Table 1:** *Kantian vs AI-Generated Aesthetics*

| Dimension | Kantian Aesthetics | AI-Generated Aesthetics |
|---|---|---|
| Origin of Judgment | Reflective synthesis of faculties | Statistical pattern recognition |
| Intentionality | Grounded in conscious subjectivity | Lacks intentional states |
| Pleasure | Disinterested and purposeless | Engineered affect; not experienced by the system |
| Subjectivity | Embodied rational being | Disembodied computational model |
| Sublimity | Experience of formlessness and finitude | Cannot experience awe or finitude |
| Cultural Role | Cultivates shared sensibility | Curates, reinforces, and reshapes taste via algorithms |

As Elgammal et al. observe, models such as CAN (Creative Adversarial Networks) are intended not to reproduce certain

styles procedurally but to statistically deviate from their structures, i.e., to create a statistical simile of creative newness through computational morphings (218). However, this novelty is not due to internal freedom; it is a result of data density and statistical inference. The results of AI, however convincing, are not simply the product of a "free play" of the faculties but rather the fulfilment of predefined optimization objectives.

This is not only a procedural difference but also an ontological one. The issue is intentionality: how mental states can be about something, unlike the physical. As Searle maintains, intentionality cannot be reduced to pattern recognition or data processing, for it is accompanied by subjective consciousness, that is, by the existence of an "I" that points at an object or meaning (161). AI, on the other hand, does not have intentionality. Its outputs are not about anything: they are not felt, not reflected upon, or evaluated by the machine. In Kant's understanding, this lack is deadly: the aesthetic judgment of the beautiful depends on a subject's free ability to integrate sensation and knowledge into a reflective, purposeful judgment. Kant says the *genius* is not the AI, and he associates it with the capacity to create art that transcends rule-bound imitation (§46).

However, it is not just a matter of the subjective lack of experience in AI. But it can also still drive effects that are paradigmatically indistinguishable from aesthetic effects. If an observer undergoes the "free play of faculties" in gazing upon an AI-generated image, does it matter whether a mind or a machine produces the image? Here, the crack in the structure of Kant's system begins to appear. As Manovich argues, AI functions as a "prosthetic for the imagination," expanding the scope of the visual experience and removing its subjective foundation (221). The machine gives form, if you like, to an echo of aesthetic experience—one that is ever more difficult to distinguish from its human analogue but that nonetheless remains, in ontological terms, outside the very conditions that make aesthetic judgment possible in Kant.

This asymmetry between beauty and the act of looking at beauty compels us to question the very basis of aesthetic theory. If beauty is fundamentally tied to human intentionality and

freedom, then AI art is necessarily just an artifact. But if beauty is instead the product of a structural congruence between form and perception—any form at all—then it may be the case that the Kantian framework has been too anthropocentric to capture the richness of our modern aesthetic experience. The point, then, is not simply whether machines can perceive beauty but whether we even understand what beauty is in a world where machines can create it.

**4. Reprogramming the A Priori? Cognitive and Cultural Shifts**

Having established the Kantian baseline above, the question now is not what reflective judgment is, but what changes when aesthetic encounter is routed through AI generation and platform recommendation. Indeed, the experience of beauty is not in subjective taste but in an attitude of judgment that carries a claim for universal agreement. This assumes a standard cognitive structure of rational agents—a synthetic a priori structure, which makes aesthetic experience possible among any sensible beings. As Guyer argues, this structure is "the precondition of our ability to appreciate purposiveness in nature and art alike" (59). Kant's system retains a transcendent form of humanism where aesthetic judgment is grounded in an embodied rational subject with reflective capacities beyond the empirical given.

A peculiar aspect of art created by AI is that it operates through logic, which is the opposite of the typical Kantian pattern. Systems like DeepDream, DALL·E, Midjourney, or Stable Diffusion are not about imaginative synthesis, nor are they based on free play; they work by statistical recombination, at best by probabilistic optimization. These models, trained on massive visual and textual corpora, predict outputs that fit into learned aesthetic patterns by providing the most likely arrangement given previous examples (218). The creative act, in practice, becomes a kind of recursive interpolation: a second-order mockup of human aesthetics.

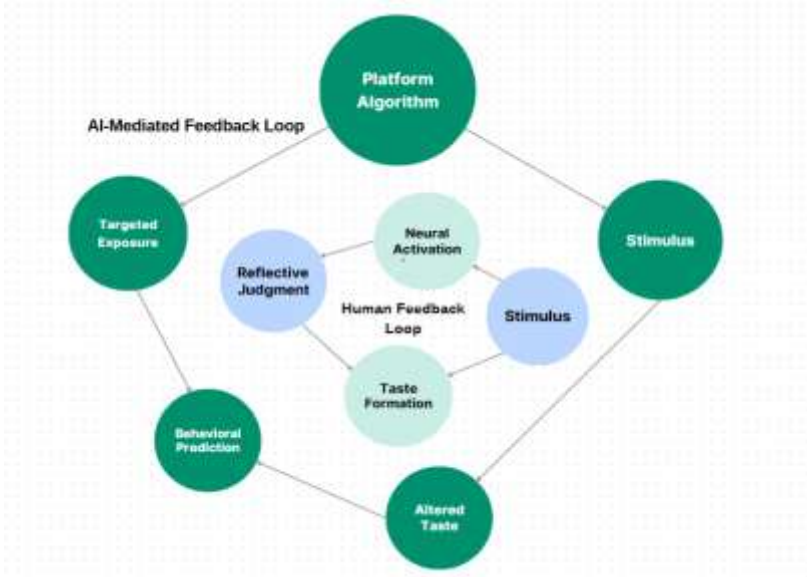
The question then shifts from the affective intensity of AI art to its ontological validity. Could these products be considered "art" in the Kantian sense, or are they merely high-class trinkets? The difference here turns crucially on intentionality, the

directedness of mental states toward an object that AI systems, by their nature, lack. According to Searle, intentionality is a key characteristic of consciousness that cannot be simulated by computation alone: "Syntax is not semantics" (Searle 207). An AI can build images that match something humans would like, but the AI didn't feel or reflect or intend that. From a Kantian perspective, this creates an intense asymmetry: the aesthetic judgment is a subjective synthesis, and the AI-generated outputs are formal simulations.

The challenge does not end with production because, under platform conditions, the field of aesthetic encounter is itself curated. Empirical work in music streaming shows that recommendation systems can measurably change patterns of exposure and diversity. On Spotify, large-scale analysis finds that algorithmically driven listening tends to be less diverse than user-driven exploration, and that shifts toward more diverse listening correlate with moving away from algorithmic consumption (Anderson et al. 2020). A randomized field experiment similarly reports that personalization increased engagement while decreasing individual-level diversity, suggesting an engagement–diversity trade-off when optimization prioritizes consumption (Holtz et al. 2020). On Instagram, creators describe a "visibility game" in which they infer and respond to ranking signals, adapting content to what they believe the algorithm rewards (Cotter 2019).

Ethnographic research on YouTube production shows that recommendation algorithms shape content indirectly through visibility, as consultants and creators build "algorithmic imaginaries" that translate into practical content strategies (Walter and Friesike 2025). TikTok's algorithm-centric "For You" feed has likewise been analyzed as structuring everyday modes of encounter and creativity, precisely because the personalized feed becomes the primary environment of aesthetic contact (Schellewald 2025). These studies do not reduce taste to algorithms, but they support a narrower philosophical claim: algorithmic selection changes the range and repetition of aesthetic exposure, and repetition is one mechanism by which "shared" taste is stabilized.

**Figure 2:** Neuroaesthetic Feedback Loop: Human vs. AI-mediated Aesthetic Processing

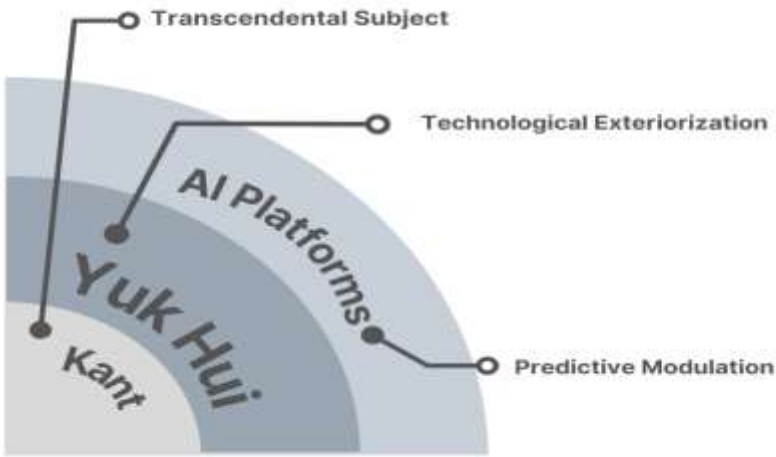



Here is where the neuroscience comes in. This kind of neuroaesthetic offers some support for the idea of a biologically based a priori, as it postulates that reactions to symmetry, contrast, and complexity are preprogrammed into the visual cortex (Zeki 71; Ramachandran and Hirstein 25). But these natural desires are, with growing frequency, being reshaped or screwed with by computational recommendation systems, putting some audiovisual patterns into people's fields of view (or earshot) while suppressing others. The aesthetic domain is no longer a realm of independent judgment but a theater of algorithmic control, in which predictions and market demands reset the grounds of beauty.

This situation creates a profound paradox: while AI art is devoid of the intentional production central to Kantian aesthetics, it, in fact, actively expands the horizon of human aesthetic judgment. What was once considered an invariant and a priori structure of cognition is now being manipulated by programmable technology. What we see is not beauty's decay but the decay of the conditions that allow it. In a world where aesthetic standards are ever more shaped by algorithmic

encounter and machinic patterning, Kant's enlightened subject with the ability to judge disinterestedly, with communicable universality, threatens to dissolve into what Pasquinelli terms "a predictive subject of data capitalism" (Pasquinelli 119). In this world, the reflective judgment of taste is replaced by reactive swiping of preference, and the aesthetic a priori becomes, paradoxically, a result of real-time personalization.

**Figure 3:** Kant, Yuk Hui and AI Platforms




In this way, AI art does more than critique the production of beauty—it remakes the very architecture of aesthetic subjectivity. If the synthetic a priori is no longer invariant but is historically and technologically mutable, then Kant's central presupposition is in ruins. As a result, beauty might, far from functioning as a transcendental category, end up as a proliferating feedback loop of platformed preference.

**5. The Problem of Sublimity and AI's Limit**

Kant presents a new (and some might say) radically contrasting definition of aesthetic experience. Contrary to determinate judgments that subsume particulars under universal concepts (e.g., calling a flower 'rose'), aesthetic judgment is reflective. They start from a specific sensory experience and seek universal communicability for a subjective feeling (rather than a concept). So the assertion "This painting is beautiful" is not just a matter of

personal taste, according to Kant, but rather a claim to the conformity of others' tastes with the innately subjective structure of sensibility we share (*Kritik der Urteilskraft* §1-5). The consensus of beauty arises from the *der harmonische freie Spiel der Einbildungskraft und des Verstandes*, in which neither faculty rules nor determinate concept is involved (Kant §9). This aesthetic enjoyment is disinterested—i.e., it does not depend upon the practical use or gains of the object—and is categorizable not in terms of concepts but in terms of a non-conceptual yet widely sharable feeling, one that discloses a latent 'purposiveness without purpose' (Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck) in the object perceived (Kant §10).

Kant's system is rooted in elements that he describes as the s*ynthetic a priori* —structures of the mind that are necessary and universal, making the very activity of aesthetic judgment possible. In Kant, these are not formations gained by experience but are themselves the condition of experience. As Ginsborg claims, Kant's reflective judgment is "subjective in origin but normative in function" (289). It is premised on a permanent cognitive structure that is common to all rational beings. Therefore, beauty is not simply a mental projection but a judgment that involves a transcendental subject.

In contrast, artificial intelligence is based on an entirely different ontological foundation. Rather than engaging in a phenomenological experience of disinterested pleasure or imaginative synthesis, AI systems such as DALL·E, Midjourney, and DeepDream rely on *probabilistic recombination*. These generative models are trained on large corpora of labeled human-made data and generate images by computing the most statistically coherent linear combination of the learned filter responses (2019). The aesthetic value they produce is emergent, not designed, and is the product of a series of recursive computations meant to approach human visual preferences—not to experience them. The result of this process may look aesthetically pleasing to humans, but the system cannot feel or appreciate that pleasure.

This asymmetry creates a fundamental issue: intentionality. That is, it is the "aboutness" of thought, as Searle

has eloquently argued, that defines the phenomenal life of consciousness, and computational systems can only simulate (mimic) mental states, not have intrinsic intentionality (204). By contrast, Kantian aesthetic judgment assumes a subject who not only perceives but also reflects, accentuated by a motivating impulse from without. No matter how gorgeous they are, AI-generated images are not achieved through such contemplation but rather through the minimization of a loss function. Hence, what AI creates can be beautiful to a human observer, but it does not have an ontological aesthetic intention. This creates a split in Kant's system: an aesthetic object that does not correlate with an aesthetic subject — thus, an inversion of the very relationship upon which the judgment of taste was supposed to rest.

Kant's aesthetics also draws a second and vital distinction between the beautiful and the sublime. Whereas beauty emerges from form, proportion, and limit, the realm of the sublime is associated with boundlessness, formlessness, and magnitude—the feeling one experiences when confronted with a storm-tossed sea, a mountain range, or the starry heavens (§§23–29). The sublime, unlike beauty, makes the subject realize the limits of imagination and the power of reason. It is, as Lyotard would later say, "a violence done to the faculties," a tearing asunder that leads to the incomparable (92). Crucially, the sublime is a profoundly existential experience—it assumes mortality, vulnerability, and finitude. A non-embodied computational being or AI cannot feel awe, fear, or a sense of boundary. It does not experience awe before magnitude; it processes scale computationally. Its very structure exempts it from the sublime, as its lack of subjective reflection exempts it from the beautiful.

However, the undermining of aesthetic judgment stems not only from AI's inability to create intentionally but also from the way AI influences human perception. Placed in a world of algorithmic curation, aesthetic consumption is increasingly carried out via digital infrastructures that customize content on the fly. Instagram, TikTok, and Spotify are not merely content platforms but desire machines driven by predictive analytics. As Bucher writes, algorithms "preconfigure the possibilities of meaning-making" (30). The result is not passive consumption but

an epistemic modulation of taste in its entirety.

Neuroaesthetics research has sought a biological basis for aesthetic responses in neural regularities, such as the preference for symmetry, contrast, or curvature (Ramachandran and Hirstein, 2002; Zeki, 2001). Such findings may hint at a *biological a priori* that corresponds to the transcendental schema of Kant. This naturalized *a priori* is now increasingly being instrumentalized. Feedback loops strengthen exposure to certain aesthetic forms, not in the service of contemplative engagement but of compulsive interaction. The machine has no capacity for thinking, but it ends up programming the conditions in which human thinking takes place.

This process produces a remarkable paradox: while AI lacks the faculties that Kant felt were necessary for aesthetic production, it is remolding the faculties we had imagined to be universal and invariable. Where cultural tastes were once understood to be shaped by *Bildung* and dialogical transmission, they are now modeled according to machine-learning protocols that optimize click-through rates and retention metrics. Under this regime, the synthetic *a priori* risks being transformed into a historically contingent *a posteriori* formation, which are characterized by their volatility, anecdotal nature and reliance on machines.

As Hui provocatively argues, what we call the *a priori* may itself be the result of a long process of technological exteriorization" (134). If this is the case, then AI is not simply not invited to the party of aesthetic judgment, but potentially undermines its prerequisites. The reflective "I" of Kantian aesthetics becomes, in this way, a predictive node, a consumer of pre-cooked stimuli rather than a free co-arranger of thoughts about taste.

**6. Toward a Post-Aesthetic Episteme?**

In *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant carves out his own space for aesthetic experience. This experience is neither the object of empirical knowledge nor governed by moral reason. Aesthetic judgment, according to Kant, is reflective rather than determinative: it doesn't subsume an individual under a pre-

existing concept (as when we judge something to be a "dog" or a "triangle"). Instead, it seeks a kind of universal communicability in the subjective feeling it evokes. When I say "this is beautiful," I am not merely reporting a private preference; I am making a claim that implicitly invites others' agreement. This request arises from the 'harmonious free play' of the imagination and understanding—a self-sustaining cognitive dance that is not constrained by conceptual determination—and leads to an experience of *interesseloses Wohlgefallen*, or "disinterested pleasure" (Kant §9).

One experiences this pleasure regardless of desire, utility, or function. It arises from the experience of purposiveness without a purpose (*Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck*)—an object presents itself as though made for our faculties but has no objective purpose (Kant §10). This aesthetic condition assumes what Kant calls the synthetic a priori: universal and necessary conditions of judgment that do not come from experience, but neither are they imposed upon it arbitrarily. These transcendental formations — imagination, understanding, and disinterestedness — are incarnate and unchanging in their status; they form the metaphysical foundation for aesthetic experience.

However, AI does not create art through alien logic. Its operations depend on statistically recombining patterns learned from large corpora of human-generated text and images. Generative models such as DeepDream, DALL·E, and Midjourney do not generate in the Kantian sense but amalgamate pre-existing elements through algorithmic association according to statistical likelihood (Elgammal et al. 217). The aesthetic object produced is not a matter of inner freedom or purposeless play but rather a well-thought-out result of human aesthetic preferences. AI systems, as Lev Manovich argues, act as "prostheses of the imagination," enhancing the domain of formal possibilities, but they do not possess any interior experience or reflection (Manovich 221).

The critical difference here is one of intent. As Searle argues, human mental states are oriented towards something—an "aboutness"—forcing us to think about something in the world. In contrast, artificial systems manipulate expressions while not

grasping the significance of these markings (204). Whereas Kantian aesthetics assumes a subject who feels and judges, AI lacks these faculties. Its outputs might produce aesthetically pleasing experiences in human observers, but that experience arises from us creating it, not the machine. Thus, we confront the paradox of creating an aesthetic object without a corresponding aesthetic subject. This ontological asymmetry can be read as a hole in the coherence of Kant's model—revealing what Costello has termed "an aesthetics without aesthetics," meaning that meaning is something that is received but not intended (49).

However, Kant's aesthetics harbours an even more radical category: the sublime. Whereas beauty is rooted in form, harmony, and limitation, the sublime lies in the encounter with formlessness, the infinite, or irresistible power—the kind of thing imagination cannot represent, but reason can at least think (§§23–29). It's a crisis of feeling, a shudder that is a sign of creaturely limits and rational dignity. By contrast, AI is devoid of that savagery. It not only remains diminished in the face of disturbance, but also reaffirms reason in the face of adversity. It apprehends the mathematically boundless without ever being overwhelmed. Thus, AI may be able to simulate beauty, but it cannot be part of the affective depth of the sublime—another layer of exclusion in Kant's architectural aesthetic.

However, this criticism presupposes the continued applicability and fixity of Kantian categories—a supposition that was already being questioned by post-Kantian critics. Adorno, for example, denounces the fetishization of harmony in Kantian aesthetics, maintaining that post-industrial society has rendered beauty a commodity of exchange, thus losing its dialectical power (65). For his part, Lyotard pushes the sublime to the limit by connecting it with the *differend*—a rift between discourses that cannot be translated into each other (13). From that vantage, AI art may not be beauty that fails but rather a new sort of post-human aesthetic: one that does not originate in human subjectivity or fit into the classical tradition. In this sense, it requires not judgment but orientation.

And this recasting raises a more profound question: Is the synthetic a priori of aesthetics truly eternal? Or, to use the terms

proposed by Yuk Hui, is it *technically historicized*, a newly emergent characteristic of our changing symbolic universe (Hui 134)? If so, AI is not just simulating beauty; it is changing what beauty is. To accept this move is to relinquish any claim of universality that Kant might make and to embrace pluralized technogenetic aesthetics. However, it also risks inviting a kind of aesthetic relativism, in which beauty is reduced to no more and no less than an effect of machinic logic in flux.

**7. Objection: Distributed Agency and Posthuman Aesthetics**

A strong objection to the claim "AI lacks intentionality, therefore it cannot produce beauty" is that it assumes an overly individualistic model of agency. On extended cognition accounts, cognitive activity is not bounded by the skull; tools and environments can become constitutive parts of thinking (Clark and Chalmers 1998). In parallel, recent work on AI art argues that authorship is increasingly distributed across artists, datasets, platforms, and model architectures, making it misleading to isolate "the machine" as the creator (Goodfellow 2024). Practitioner research also suggests that artists and computer scientists often frame AI as collaborator, constraint, or generator within hybrid creative workflows rather than as a mere instrument (Wingström, Hautala, and Lundman 2022).

***Reply.*** These approaches sharpen the analysis, but they do not eliminate the core Kantian asymmetry. Distributed production does not automatically yield distributed judgment. Kant's problem is not only how artworks are caused, but how judgments of beauty acquire their peculiar normativity and claim to communicability. Even if agency is extended across tools, the standpoint that can feel disinterested pleasure, take up reasons, respond to critique, and revise judgments remains essential. Present generative systems can participate in a distributed causal chain of production without occupying that normative standpoint. The more compelling conclusion is therefore not "AI is a genius," but that aesthetic life is increasingly infrastructural: platforms and models reshape the conditions under which human judgments become thinkable, repeatable, and socially persuasive.

And from creation to consumption comes the tension.

Although AI does not have aesthetic intentionality, it gradually comes to control more and more the conditions under which human aesthetic judgments are made. Social media platforms, such as TikTok, Spotify, and Instagram, function less as neutral intermediaries and more as algorithmic screeners that promote, demote, or eliminate aesthetic content based on often opaque feedback loops (Bucher 30). These engines are learning from our clicks, rewiring cultural preferences in real-time, and narrowing the field of aesthetic possibilities through microtargeted personalization. Neuroaesthetics has attempted to anchor matters of taste in matters of biology. Some are "hardwired" into the nervous system, even at the point where responses occur in the brain (Zeki 71). Ramachandran and Hirstein also suggest a neurological foundation for aesthetic universals through their articulation of rules such as "peak shift" and "grouping," which they claim are universal across cultures (21). Technical exposure increasingly mediates even these nominal constants. The aesthetic brain, conspiring to rule over universal judgment, now intervenes within algorithm-disciplined environments.

This brings us to a final and urgent paradox: AI cannot know or appreciate beauty, yet it can condition the very standards by which we understand beauty as humans. In the process, it doesn't just represent taste; it also recursively affects taste. As Stiegler suggests, we may be entering an era of "aesthetic proletarianization," where people's faculties of aesthetic judgment are being offloaded and automated (47). The Kantian subject — free, reflective, and universal — dissolves into feedback, a node of reaction in a network of prediction. The synthetic a priori is no more an a priori for the conditions of transcendental cognition than it is a battlefield in the war between human intentionality and machinic calculation.

## 8. Conclusion

This paper has mapped out the philosophical, cognitive and cultural fault lines opened up by AI-produced art, using the lens of Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. At the center of Kantian aesthetics is the synthetic *a priori*– a general, non-empirical cognitive structure that allows for reflective judgment. This is a

structure that implies a human subject capable of apprehending disinterested pleasure in the harmonious 'free play' of imagination and understanding. The AI system, disembodied, affectless, and non-intentional, is radically different from the ideal. It does not judge or feel, and, as such, its products lack the immanent purposiveness Kant deemed necessary for the beautiful.

And yet here we are, aesthetically stirred by machines producing outputs that aren't made, or even meant, in any humanly recognizable fashion. The paradox intensifies when we consider that these very machines now curate our aesthetic encounters, moulding the same dispositions and tastes that Kant conceived, fixed or given within a naturalized order. Previously assumed to be universal and reflective, aesthetic subjectivity is today being formatted not through philosophical argument but through algorithms, feedback loops, and platformed infrastructures of desire. In this new order, the a priori does not disappear, but it becomes *technogenetic*, no longer transcendent but contingent, mutable, and historical. Therefore, computer-generated art occupies a peculiar position. It neither simply simulates nor directly extends human artistic labour. Instead, it serves as a para-aesthetic force—an object that provokes aesthetic responses but negates the very nature of the ontological and epistemic structures that historically supported those responses. It destabilizes beauty, autonomizes judgment, and recalls the boundaries of the subject. Kant's metaphysical necessity may have become a historical contingency; what once seemed timeless may now become the condition of engaging in a recursive form of reinvention.

Against this aesthetic reprogramming, we must fight against both nostalgic reaffirmation and mindless surrender. The synthetic a priori should not be retained so much as reimagined. Whether this points toward a pluralized, post-aesthetic episteme or a deepened aesthetic proletarianization is still too close to call. One thing, however, is clear: the question of beauty can no longer be extracted from the systems that today mediate — and perhaps mutate — our ability to judge, circulate and understand it.

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