

DISINTEREST RECONSIDERED: THEORIES
AND PRACTICES, PRESENT AND PAST

doi: 10.54103/2039-9251/29698

**TECNICHE DI DISINTERESSE.
PIACERE ESTETICO E AZIONI ORIENTATE ALLO SCOPO
DA KANT A SIMONDON**

Nicolò Pioli

Independent researcher

Contacts: nicolo.pioli@uniroma1.it

ABSTRACT

L'estetica kantiana è stata spesso interpretata come un tentativo di fondare sul piacere disinteressato la differenza tra l'esperienza estetica dell'opera d'arte e l'azione orientata allo scopo, che può al massimo essere combinata con il piacere interessato. Sia George Dickie che Thomas Hilgers, sebbene partendo da letture diverse, concordano sul fatto che il disinteresse esclude l'attività pratica. Intendo dimostrare che un'estetica che prende spunto da Kant può considerare gli esempi di attività pratica come casi in cui si verifica il piacere disinteressato. Ciò accade nei casi in cui l'esperienza è legata all'interesse degli esseri umani nel trovare un accordo tra natura e libertà. Il fatto che Kant utilizzi la tecnica come esempio per spiegare alcune caratteristiche del giudizio estetico dimostra che la differenza kantiana tra tecnica e arte è meno netta di quanto possa sembrare. Sulla base del rapporto tra tecnica e arte, è possibile riflettere su casi in cui il piacere estetico non è puro e quindi è consentito un rapporto tra interesse e disinteresse. Sottolineerò che la tecnoestetica di Gilbert Simondon approfondisce ulteriormente il legame tra interesse e disinteresse. Questo legame appare in modo esemplare quando l'operazione tecnica è accompagnata da un piacere che non può essere ridotto al semplice meccanismo delle impressioni, ma richiede un ripensamento dell'estetica come riflessione sulle condizioni di possibilità della nostra operazione.

Parole chiave: Kant, Simondon, tecnica, disinteresse.**TECHNIQUES OF DISINTERESTEDNESS.
AESTHETIC PLEASURE AND PURPOSE-ORIENTED ACTIONS FROM KANT TO SIMONDON**

Kantian aesthetics has often been read as attempting to ground on disinterested pleasure the difference between aesthetic experience of the work of art and purpose-oriented action, which can at best be combined with interested pleasure. Both George Dickie and Thomas Hilgers, though from different readings, agree that disinterestedness excludes practical activity. I intend to show that an aesthetics that takes its cue from Kant can consider examples of practical activity as cases in which disinterested pleasure occurs. This happens in cases in which experience is linked to the interest of human beings in finding agreement between nature and freedom. The fact that Kant uses technique as an example to explain some features of aesthetic judgment shows that the Kantian difference between technique



and art is less clear-cut than it might appear. On the basis of the relationship between technique and art, it is possible to reflect on cases in which aesthetic pleasure is not pure and thus a relationship between interest and disinterest is allowed. I will highlight that Gilbert Simondon's techno-aesthetics further deepens the link between interest and disinterest. This link appears in an exemplary way when the technical operation is accompanied by a pleasure that cannot be reduced to the simple mechanism of impressions but requires a rethinking of aesthetics as reflections on the conditions of possibility of our operation.

Keywords: Kant, Simondon, Technique, Disinterestedness.

A commonly held reading of the history of concepts in modern European aesthetics argues that disinterestedness as an essential component of aesthetic experience was first developed in eighteenth-century philosophy, only to be taken up and modified by Kant in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. This leap would not be a simple passing of the baton, for Kant would develop a conception of disinterestedness as a distance from practical life – understood in a broad sense – that would influence all following aesthetic theories¹. This reading became associated with a reductive conception of Kantian aesthetics, that was interpreted as a propensity to regard aesthetic experience – an issue that Kant never thematized – as a detachment from purpose-oriented activity that determines a contemplative attitude. Disinterestedness would consist of this disentangled attitude of the subject toward the practical implications of what they experience.

This interpretation leaves no room for thinking an aesthetic theory that reflects on the experience that occurs in the performance of the technical activities. Kantian aesthetics is, thus, read under the banner of a sharp distinction between participation in the experiences that interest us and detached contemplation, devoid of any interest, the only one that can legitimately be called aesthetic. Such a reading is further endorsed by a corrupted reading of the Kantian distinction between art and technic, according to which the former can be the object of aesthetic pleasure, since it is produced for the sole purpose of being contemplated, while the latter is reduced to a means to an end².

Not only is this distinction not clear-cut, but the analogy between aesthetic judgement and technique, which is fundamental in Kantian aesthetic theory, shows a space to rethink the link between aesthetic pleasure and interest that is not a mere juxtaposition. I will argue that by starting from a resumption of the relationship between aesthetic pleasure and technic it is possible to criticise reductive readings of Kantian disinterestedness in order to think of something as disinterestedness within the performance of technical operations.

I will take up Gilbert Simondon's aesthetics, considering it as an effort to rethink the link between interested pleasure and disinterested pleasure. Simondon, in his attempt to give philosophical dignity to technical thought, has hinted at a perspective he calls techno-aesthetics. He proposes examples through which he highlights instances of overlap between contemplation and action that prompt us to rethink these fundamental categories of modern aesthetics.

¹ A. Berleant, *Beyond Disinterestedness*, in "The British Journal of Aesthetics", XXXIII/3, 1993, pp. 242-254; G. Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic. An Institutional Analysis*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, London, 1974; P. Guyer, *Kant and the Experience of Freedom. Essays on Aesthetics and Morality*, Cambridge University Press, New York, Melbourne 1996; T. Hilgers, *Aesthetic Disinterestedness: Art, Experience, and the Self*, Routledge, New York, London 2017; J. Stolnitz, "On the Origins of 'Aesthetic Disinterestedness'", in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, XXI/4, 1961, pp. 131-143.

² For a critique of this reading: S. Velotti, *Making Sense: Disinterestedness and Control*, in L. Berger (Eds.), *Disinterested Pleasure and Beauty: Perspectives from Kantian and Contemporary Aesthetics*, De Gruyter, Berlin, Boston 2023, pp. 103-128.

For Kant, technic plays an essential function in providing an analogy through which to exhibit some features of reflective judgment³. I will attempt to show that taking a cue from Kant's distinction between technical and mechanical, it is possible to show that Kant did not conceive disinterestedness as contemplation without relation to purpose-oriented activity. By using technic as an example for thinking something at once free and embedded in sensible experience, Kant provides us with a prompt for thinking about the relationship between disinterestedness as a distance from determined purposes and interest as a desire for the existence of an object. Simondon, in describing (techno)-aesthetic feeling as the pleasure for the technical object's tuning to uses that are not only actual but possible, shows a tentative formulation of disinterestedness embedded within a technical operation and yet still distinct from the mechanical pleasure that Kant would define as interested.

1. DISINTERESTEDNESS AND PRACTICAL LIFE

In his famous article about the beginning of aesthetic disinterestedness in British thought, Jerome Stolnitz claims that disinterestedness occurs when one experiences something without any other interest than perceiving it⁴. George Dickie criticised his position, as Stolnitz has superimposed a Kantian perspective on the whole history of the term⁵. A key feature of the Kantian legacy of disinterestedness is, according to Dickie, the isolation of the object of contemplation from any relation it entertains to anything else. Dickie uses the term relation in two senses, both as the relation of the object of contemplation to other objects and as the relation of the subject to their own desires.

Dickie has highlighted the ambiguity of disinterestedness. This notion confuses a question concerning *perception*, which can be interested or disinterested; with what we might call a *motivational or intentional distinction*, considering something as an end in itself or as a means to something else⁶. The author, however, believes he can resolve this ambiguity by arguing that neither of these two ways of understanding disinterestedness is sufficient to grasp aesthetic feeling. The only way of escaping this ambiguity is to focus on attention as an aesthetic category⁷.

Dickie lists instances in which works of art of different kinds, from music to poetry, may appear as objects of interest, but are, in fact, simply outside the attention of the supposed subject enjoying them⁸. Following this approach, Dickie makes a very wide range of cases fall within episodes of absence of attention. For example, if I were reading a novel for the purpose of learning about the language in which it was written, I would be paying attention to that aspect of the work and not to the artwork itself.

This reading of Kantian disinterestedness makes sense only if the paradigm of aesthetic experience is the experience of the work of art. Not only, however, does Kant not elaborate his conception of disinterested pleasure on the basis of art – at least not in the sense of considering art as *the only* exemplary case for clar-

³ Cf. F. Aigner, *Kant and Technics: from the Critique of Pure Reason to the Opus Postumum*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London, New York, Dublin 2024, see especially pp. 32-45, that deals with Simondon's relation to Kant. See also P. Montani, *Imagination, Performativity, Technics. A (Post)Kantian Approach*, in A. Pennisi, A. Falzone (Eds.), *The Extended Theory of Cognitive Creativity Interdisciplinary Approaches to Performativity*, Springer, Cham 2020, pp. 151-162.

⁴ J. Stolnitz, "On the Origins of 'Aesthetic Disinterestedness'", cit.

⁵ G. Dickie, "Stolnitz's Attitude: Taste and Perception", in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, XLIII/2, 1984, pp. 195-203.

⁶ G. Dickie, "The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude", in *American Philosophical Quarterly*, I/1, 1964, p. 58

⁷ Ibid., pp. 61-65.

⁸ Ibid.

ifying aesthetic judgment. Kant uses art as an example for a non-pure aesthetic judgment in which disinterested pleasure is connected to the interest with which the object was produced by the artist⁹. Art already constitutes an example through which the free play of the faculties is sensitively exhibited, which, however, in its purity, is given only in the experience of a representation in which the concept by which the object of representation is known is disregarded.

Art – and also technic – serves an analogical function. Art shows inside experience, without clarifying it once and for all, a way in which we can reflect on the agreement between the faculties that is produced in aesthetic judgment, which we *feel* as a disinterested pleasure, but which we cannot *know* as such. Both art and technic are necessarily linked to the concept of an end. Producing a work of art requires that the artist has the intention of producing something. Technical activity requires the operator to set an expected result¹⁰.

One should not confuse disinterestedness with a state of attention in which one is not distracted by one's personal interests or beliefs, argues Thomas Hilgers, who, on the contrary, has attempted to recover this notion¹¹. The point, for Hilgers, is to understand which interests can fall within a disinterested experience. There are interests that derive from someone's social status, the role they play within a time-limited activity, that are fundamental in someone's conception of life, or indispensable to survival¹². These can be part of disinterested pleasure. However, he claims that disinterestedness is incompatible with any practical activity, as disinterestedness occurs when one relates to the world in a non-practical way and sees it from multiple perspectives¹³. But do we really need to distinguish between practical attitudes and perspectives?

Hilgers seems to assume that one cannot perform an activity and, at the same time, experience disinterested pleasure, because disinterestedness has no implications for practical life, only for our conception of life. We might ask whether a perspective on our life can exist without simultaneously transforming our way of being in the world and acting within it. Kant did not pose the question in these terms. He investigated, within his critical philosophy, the possibility for reflecting on this complex intertwining of disinterested aesthetic pleasure and practical activity, understood as the domain of actions produced by interest.

2. THE MANY FACES OF INTERESTED PLEASURE

Kant is not clear in distinguishing disinterestedness and practical activity. Although in the *Analytic of the Beautiful*, he shows that disinterestedness is required to define pure judgment of taste, this does not rule out a combination of aesthetic pleasure and interested pleasure¹⁴.

Disinterestedness is the first moment of the *Analytic*, the quality of the judgment of taste. Kant defines disinterestedness *via negationis*. In his first definition, Kant considers interest as the pleasure which derives

⁹ I. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement* (1790), en. tr., P. Guyer, E. Matthews, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000, § 16, pp. 114-116.

¹⁰ I. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, cit., § 43-44, pp. 182-185.

¹¹ T. Hilgers, *Aesthetic Disinterestedness: Art, Experience, and the Self*, cit., pp. 60-93.

¹² Ibid., pp. 63-68.

¹³ «The emotions, then, that a person feels while disinterestedly attending to a work are not only disconnected from her individuality, but are also disconnected from her ordinary, practical life: they, so to say, are *practically inert*» (Ibid., p. 77).

¹⁴ See P. Guyer, *Disinterestedness and Desire in Kant's Aesthetics*, in "The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism", XXXVI/4, 1978, pp. 449-460; id., *Interest, Nature, and Art: A Problem in Kant's Aesthetics*, in "The Review of Metaphysics", XXXI/4, 1978, pp. 580-603.

from the existence of an object¹⁵. Disinterested pleasure, which he then claims to be determined by the «free play»¹⁶ of imagination and intellect triggered by representation, is distinguished from two other types of pleasure, which are both interested. The *agreeable* on the one hand is the sensible pleasure determined by the impression that an object gives to the senses, and which determines an inclination towards it; interest is then caused by desire of objects of the same sort. *Pleasure of the good*, on the other hand, whether we are dealing with the *good for something* or the *good in itself*, is to be considered interested because it stems from «a satisfaction in the existence of an object or of an action»¹⁷. Although the good is the product of a being in the exercise of its freedom to determine the will, the resulting pleasure is not itself free. Within the *Third Critique's* framework, both the agreeable and the good are a «pathologically conditioned satisfaction»¹⁸, which affects the senses because of the existence of something pleasurable.

We must keep in mind that the notion of interest was first developed by Kant within his practical philosophy, which is, indeed, the area in which historically the philosophical notion of interest emerged before Kant¹⁹. But what exactly is interested pleasure? Interest is the product of a determining judgment; in contrast, pleasure, since we are dealing with sensible pleasure, cannot be the product of the power of judgment, but only of its object²⁰. Consequently, the pleasure that accompanies the judgment that something is the object of interest is not the product of interest itself. Something can be said to be of interest as long as it is pleasurable according to the senses, but pleasure does not depend on interest, but on the impression given by the senses.

Interested judgment puts the subject who makes it in a condition of passivity because the pleasure asserted is not produced by the autonomy – or rather «heautonomy»²¹ – of the faculty of judgment but depends on the way the object affects the subject's feeling. The freedom of the subject does not intervene, but only its receptivity. Pleasure is mechanically produced by the object, and interested judgment is a determining judgment. In disinterested judgment it is the very activity of the faculties that determines pleasure, which does not depend on the way the object affects the subject, but only on the way its representation animates their cognitive faculties.

The second definition provided by Kant concerns interested pleasure as something derived from «concepts»²². Pleasure is disinterested if it does not take into consideration the concept by which something is known, but only the form of its representation, which, however, agrees with the lawfulness of the intellect. In the *Analytic*, Kant unbinds aesthetic pleasure from reference to an object, but not from the form of its representation, which is what enables the agreement between imagination and intellect that determines disinterested pleasure. We will see that starting from the *Deduction of Pure Aesthetic Judgements* onwards, the question becomes more complicated.

¹⁵ I. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, cit., § 2, pp. 90-91. See N. Zangwill, *Kant on Pleasure in the Agreeable*, in “The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism”, LIII/2, 1995, pp. 167-176.

¹⁶ Ibid., § 9, p. 102.

¹⁷ Ibid., § 4, p. 93.

¹⁸ Ibid., § 5, p. 94.

¹⁹ See J. Grenberg, *Feeling, Desire and Interest in Kant's Theory of Action*, in “Kant-Studien”, XCII/2, 2001, pp. 153-179; J. Nauckhoff, *Incentives and Interests in Kant's Moral Psychology*, in “History of Philosophy Quarterly”, XX/1, 2003, pp. 41-60.

²⁰ Cf. I. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), en. tr. M. Gregor, J. Timmermann, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2012, p. 27

²¹ I. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, cit., V, p. 72

²² Ibid., § 5, pp. 94-96

Interest is the desire for the existence of similar objects. In this sense, we can link the two definitions. The existence of the object is required so that impressions affect me by causing pleasure. In order to have an interest in similar objects, it is necessary for me to know which object has caused sensible pleasure in me. Accordingly, we could say that interested pleasure is a pleasure mechanically produced by the existence of an object, which takes on the status of interested because the subject possesses a concept through which they desire similar objects on the basis of their assumption that they are able to mechanically cause pleasure. Interest is a consequence of pleasure, but it does not guarantee that similar objects will be pleasurable, because pleasure does not depend on the judgment by which we assert that a thing is pleasurable, nor on its concept, but only on the way in which the object impresses the subject.

What then occurs in disinterested pleasure? The subject, in this case, is not interested in the existence of similar objects, because the pleasure they feel is not based on the impression given by the object in question, but on the form of its representation when it produces free play between imagination and intellect that shows their mutual agreement that prescind from a determinate concept. The subject is not interested in the object that produces such representation because there is no reason to believe that objects that correspond to the same empirical concept will cause a similar play between their faculties.

We see that in Kant's perspective disinterestedness is not related to the internal perfection of an object conceived as a unity. This way of understanding disinterestedness emerges in some of the formulations of British aesthetics set forth by Stolnitz and is shared by German aesthetics that predates Kant. The exemplary case of which, besides Alexander G. Baumgarten, who based the notion of the beautiful on that of perfection, is Karl P. Moritz, who in his famous article of 1785 conceives the pleasure of beauty precisely through such a notion of disinterestedness, using it to distinguish it from what is useful²³.

For Kant, aesthetic pleasure does not arise from the conceptual determination of the object or from mere sensible appearance. There needs to be an interaction between faculties that the subject feels (without knowing it) as freedom from any determinate concept of an end, but that, nevertheless, is in harmony with the possibility of knowledge in general.

3. TECHNIC AND ITS ANALOGY WITH THE AGREEMENT BETWEEN FREEDOM AND NATURE

In this relationship between freedom and harmony Kant finds the basis for criticizing the mechanism that governs the operation of interested pleasure and to grasp the free play that defines aesthetic pleasure. Significantly, such characteristic was described in the *First Introduction* to the *Third Critique* through the analogy between the power of judgement and a technique²⁴. In this text, the principle of the reflection of the power of judgement is called «technique of nature»²⁵.

²³ K. P. Moritz, *Versuch einer Vereinigung aller schönen Künste und Wissenschaften unter dem Begriff des in sich selbst Vollendeten*, in C. Wingertszahn (hrsg. v.), *Schriften zur Ästhetik*, Reclam, Ditzingen 2018

²⁴ See F. Hughes, *The Technic of Nature: What is Involved in Judging?*, in H. Parret (hrsg. v.), *Kants Ästhetik / Kant's Aesthetics / L'esthétique de Kant*, De Gruyter, Berlin-New York 1998, pp. 176-191; G. Lehmann, *Die Technik der Natur*, in Id., *Beiträge zur Geschichte und Interpretation der Philosophie Kants*, De Gruyter, Berlin 1969; U. Santozki, *Kants "Technik der Natur" in der Kritik der Urteilskraft: Eine Studie zur Herkunft und Bedeutung einer Wortverbindung*, in "Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte", XLVII, 2005, pp. 89-121.

²⁵ I. Kant, *First Introduction to the Critique of the Power of Judgment*, in Id., *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, cit., p. 17

In this case, the technical is distinguished from the merely mechanical, that is, that which follows the strict continuity between cause and effect. The analogy with technique is instrumental in understanding in what sense the power of judgement can operate according to a principle of its own and not derived from something else. Thinking of judgement as a technique makes it possible to illuminate the operation of a judgement occasioned by sensible experience and yet autonomous in its judging. In this sense, the heautonomy of the power of judgement is analogous to the mode of operation of a technique, which presupposes adaptation to the laws of natural phenomena and yet intervenes freely to modify them²⁶.

The distinction between beauty and what is useful is fundamental in Kant as much in this part of the *Analytic* as in the parts of the *Deduction*. Moreover, although beauty is to be distinguished from the useful, we do not rule out the possibility of connecting beauty and what Kant calls interest of reason. The interest of reason does not concern a determinate object, such as the other types of interest we have discussed so far. It is the interest of reason itself to lean toward the idea that the freedom that moral action requires can be reconciled with happiness, which only the empirical laws of nature can guarantee.

Without going into a discussion of the peculiarity of this interest in the architecture of critical philosophy, this is enough for us to show that disinterestedness, a notion that is not reducible to the suspension of practical activity, is how Kant in the *Analytic* attempts to define the pleasure of the free play of Judgment by juxtaposing it to a mechanically caused pleasure. But while in the *Analytic* the issue seems to be resolved by distinguishing disinterested pleasure as a pleasure without interest, in the course of the *Third Critique* the matter becomes more complicated, showing a strong, albeit indirect, link between disinterestedness and practical philosophy.

It is in the *Deduction*, that is, a legitimisation of the claim of aesthetic judgment, that it is possible to show that a relation between disinterestedness and interest is allowed in aesthetic judgement so that the reference of a judgment to pleasure determined by the existence of an object does not prevent it from being a judgment pronounced heautonomously. In the *Deduction*, a «fresh beginning»²⁷ of the *Critique*, Kant shows cases in which interest is not simply excluded from the judgment of taste.

Pure aesthetic pleasure does not combine with interest, but an indirect connection with an interest is permissible to provide a ground for aesthetic judgement²⁸. Are there therefore two parallel pleasures, which simply occur simultaneously and independently of each other? According to Kant, not only is the judgment of taste not based on an interest, but it also does not even produce one. However, there is an interest of reason in seeing in nature the traces of a principle that enables the agreement that determines aesthetic pleasure²⁹.

The reintroduction of interest in aesthetic judgement entails for Kant the resumption of the question of aesthetics as an intermediary, which he summarised in the introduction as «transition from the pure faculty of cognition, i.e., from the domain of the concepts of nature, to the domain of the concept of freedom»³⁰. This is why the interest of reason in not finding itself in the «swarm of appearances»³¹ is put in relation with

²⁶ Comparing the technique of nature to what he calls «Inventionstechnik», G. Lehmann insists on this point. Id., *Die Technik der Natur*, cit., p. 291

²⁷ J.H. Zammito, *The Genesis of Kant's Critique of Judgment*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, London 1992, p. 130

²⁸ I. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, cit., § 41, p. 176

²⁹ Ibid., § 42, pp. 178-182

³⁰ Ibid., § 3, p. 66

³¹ Id., *Critique of Pure Reason* (1787), en. tr., by P. Guyer, A. W. Wood, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998, p. 234

the moral interest in the accord of freedom and *summum bonum*. This question is taken up again at the end of the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, when Kant defines the symbolic way of reflecting on ideas, showing that the link between beauty and moral action is analogical³².

Consequently, disinterested pleasure, even if it does not itself produce an interest, can be thought of as an example through which to reflect on reason's need to think the agreement between freedom and nature. In the *First Critique* Kant had spoken of the interest of reason as an interest in staying in the conflict of antinomies, leaning toward the thesis, without imposing a lasting and final peace between them³³. This interest for the thesis stems from the necessity for human beings to admit that phenomena are not in perpetual oscillation, but in accord with their way of judging, so that knowledge of nature is possible. Aesthetic pleasure is the sensible evidence of the possibility of a transition from phenomena to freedom. But this evidence is not a conclusive proof that the interest of reason accords with every experience we have. Consequently, aesthetic pleasure simply «promotes the receptivity of the mind for the moral feeling»³⁴ but does not ground it once and for all.

On the one hand, pure aesthetic judgment is disinterested; on the other hand, aesthetic pleasure can be intertwined with the interest of reason in admitting that nature can accord with its needs. Starting from the *Deduction*, Kant does not rule out the conjunction of interested activity and aesthetic judgment, without thereby confusing the determining ground of judgment, which remains disinterested.

In the experience of the technical operation an exemplary case is shown to analyse the intertwining of freedom and interest. In the paragraphs in which he defines fine art, Kant briefly refers to an example of technical activity. He mentions Petrus Camper, who, in his treatise *Abhandlung über die beste Form der Schuhe*, analysed the optimal structure of the shoe, describing how the sole must adapt to the individual structure of each foot, the motion of walking, and the various diseases caused by poorly made footwear. Kant uses this example to argue that art cannot be the result of an operation for which it is sufficient to know everything that needs to be done to achieve the desired result³⁵. Camper described how to make the ideal shoe, but he was not able to make one. It takes what Kant later calls a «talent»³⁶ to technically apply his theory to shoemaking. Kant goes so far as to argue that in all the arts there is something constrained, a mechanism, as well as freedom; implying that, perhaps, even in the most mechanical craft some degree of talent is required. In this way, Kant thins the distance between art and technic, while separating both from pure aesthetic judgement. Making a shoe is certainly an interested activity, because the technique one applies, albeit with talent, must eventually give us a shoe. But this does not mean that the technical operation is mechanically determined. In this operation, which requires talent so that theory accords with nature, Kant attempts to think of an analogy with the freedom we find in aesthetic judgement. This example is particularly interesting because art, in this case, is not characterised by the production of an object that is not determined before it is made³⁷, but by the production of an object that is determined by a theory, but whose production requires talent. Therefore, what is analogous to aesthetic judgement is the technical operation itself, not the result, as in the case of art – at least as it is understood in the parts of the *Critique* dedicated on fine art.

³² Id., *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, § 59, pp. 225-228

³³ Id., *Critique of Pure Reason*, cit., pp. 496-503

³⁴ Id., *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, cit., VIII, p. 82

³⁵ Ibid., § 43, p. 183

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Later in defining beautiful art Kant says that «if the intention were aimed at the production of a determinate object, then, if it were achieved through art, the object would please only through concepts» (Ibid., § 45, p. 142)

In technical activity, in which scientific knowledge accords with nature through a talent, we find a case in which to reflect differently on the relationship between aesthetic judgement and interest. After admitting that reflecting on beauty is at the same time being interested in it³⁸, Kant compares art to the application of a theory through technic. In technical production, we find an exemplary case through which to reflect by analogy on the fact that from the disinterested pleasure of aesthetic judgement springs an interest of reason in discerning «some sort of ground»³⁹ through which to think the agreement between freedom and nature. Technical activity is a case through which disinterestedness and interest show a complex entanglement that, rather than prompting us to abandon the Kantian perspective, refines it. Looking at this case we see further that the reduction of disinterestedness to the absorbed contemplation of the object's internal perfection, rather than being the burden left by Kant to aesthetics, constitutes what his perspective allows us to question. This is because disinterestedness is not properly the elimination of the subject's relation to the world that determines interest, but the quality of pure aesthetic judgement that, in the ordinary way in which we judge, can find a ground even in a purpose-oriented action. But this can happen only if this action is not reducible to a mechanical operation but requires a talent that is analogous to that with which the power of judgement judges according to its own principle.

4. TECHNO-AESTHETIC FEELING: THE HARMONY BETWEEN OBJECT AND *MILIEU*

It is within the domain of technic that one can identify a crucial juncture at which interest and disinterestedness converge in a state of profound ambiguity, though never in absolute congruence. There are cases in which the use of a technical instrument causes pleasure in the operator. Should we necessarily bring these cases within the realm of interested pleasure, or is it possible, holding firm to the picture traced so far, to reflect on cases in which interest and aesthetic pleasure show a fruitful interweaving for the understanding of what we mean by disinterestedness.

I will take up Gilbert Simondon's reflection on the pleasure he defines as techno-aesthetic, and which, I believe, can be seen as an attempt to rethink the nexus between interest and disinterest that we have seen. My intention is not to highlight a continuity with Kantian aesthetic theory, but to show that the examples of techno-aesthetic pleasure that Simondon provides, when reinserted into the framework of Kantian aesthetic theory, bring out the complexity of the relationship between disinterestedness and interest that we are investigating⁴⁰.

We could interpret techno-aesthetics as an attempt to think of a disinterestedness that arises from the interaction between object and *milieu* – although Simondon does not adopt this terminology and prefers

³⁸ Ibid., § 42, p. 180

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Beaubois has recently shown how some notions of Simondonian aesthetic thought have a Kantian legacy, particularly that of *scheme*. Beaubois correctly argues that sometimes this inheritance is prolonged against Kant himself. I will try to put more emphasis on the continuity between the two, that emerges if one emphasises the analogical role of technics, rather than its opposition to the notion of art. V. Beaubois, *La zone obscure du design. Une pensée des pratiques de conception (d')après Gilbert Simondon*, Thèse de doctorat, Université Paris Nanterre 2019

to speak of contemplation⁴¹. Simondon introduces techno-aesthetics in a 1982 letter⁴². The protagonist of techno-aesthetics is not the spectator but the operator. It is a subject that feels the agreement of an object with its *milieu* within the operation they are conducting⁴³.

For Simondon, aesthetics performs the task of enabling a transition between different species of thinking. We can think of techno-aesthetics as a case in which the different species of thought, such as technical, religious, and aesthetic, presented in the final part of *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Object*, are intermingled.⁴⁴ The aesthetic object *par excellence* is the work of art, which works as a «unique intermediate reality»⁴⁵ that tries to unify human experience by using analogy. In techno-aesthetics this link with art is severed. What remains is a feeling, more primitive than the aesthetic one, of an object's agreement with its *milieu*⁴⁶. This feeling performs a double intermediary function, showing the different uses to which an object can be put and optimising it for a specific function.

If we concentrate on the letter, techno-aesthetics seems a very labile and open-ended theory, as its main framework consists of examples. One would misunderstand Simondon, however, if one considers these examples as functional in recognizing a typology of objects. Techno-aesthetics is not only concerned with technical objects. Simondon favours examples that show ambiguity between aesthetics and practical life; he gives examples of tools, machines, landscapes, paintings, cinema. He also states that techno-aesthetics is not only concerned with objects, but also with purposive gestures and conducts⁴⁷. This confirms that techno-aesthetics is a theoretical paradigm that does not pre-emptively select the objects it can legitimately be applied to.

The grip of a wood or metal file, the bite of a saw with clean teeth, are a joy for the hands and the forearms, a pleasure of action. In the same way, the dynamic regime of the axe or the adze gives a very particular pleasure of sensation.⁴⁸

⁴¹ The relationship between contemplation and technics was already discussed in Simondon's first works, when he speaks of «un sentiment esthétique de beauté technique» (G. Simondon, *Place d'une initiation technique dans une formation humaine complète*, in Id., *Sur la technique (1953-1983)*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 2014, p. 204)

⁴² G. Simondon, «On Techno-Aesthetics», in *Parrhesia*, 14, 2012, pp. 1-8. Simondon had introduced something similar in his *thèse complémentaire*, when describing the aesthetics of technical objects. «But in certain cases there is a beauty proper to technical objects. This beauty appears when these objects become integrated within a world, whether it be geographical or human: aesthetic feeling is then relative to this integration; it is like a gesture. The sails of a ship are not beautiful when they are at rest, but when the wind billows and inclines the entire mast, carrying the ship on the sea; it is the sail in the wind and on the sea that is beautiful, like the statue on the promontory.» (G. Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* (1958), en. tr. by C. Malaspina, J. Rogove, Univocal Publishing, Minneapolis, 2017, pp. 196-197)

⁴³ I rely mostly on the following studies of Simondon's aesthetics: P. Carrozzini, *Esthétique et techno-esthétique chez Simondon*, in J.-H. Barthélémy (éd. par), *Cahiers Simondon III*, L'Harmattan, Paris 2011, pp. 51-60; A.C. Dalmaso, *Techno-aesthetic Thinking: Technicity and Symbolism in the Body*, in «Aisthesis», XII/1, 2019, pp. 69-84; L. Duhem, *Thinking Aesthetic Reality (with Simondon)*, in «SubStance», XLI, 2012, pp. 16-31; Y. Michaud, *The Aesthetics of Gilbert Simondon: Anticipation of the Contemporary Aesthetic Experience*, in A. de Boever, J. Murray, J. Roffe, A. Woodward (Eds.), *Gilbert Simondon: Being and Technology*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2012, pp. 121-134; G. Tenti, *Estetica e morfologia in Gilbert Simondon*, Mimesis, Milano-Udine 2020

⁴⁴ Simondon himself admitted cases of contamination between different species of thought, when he affirmed that «Aesthetic judgment generally remains a mixture of technical judgment and pure aesthetic judgment» (G. Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, cit., p. 205)

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 200.

⁴⁶ «Aesthetics is not only, nor first and foremost, the sensation of the “consumer” of the work of art. It is also, and more originally so, the set of sensations, more or less rich, of the artists themselves: it's about a certain contact with matter that is being transformed through work.» (G. Simondon, *On Techno-Aesthetics*, cit., p. 3)

⁴⁷ G. Simondon, *Supplément 1. Sur la techno-esthétique*, in Id., *Sur la technique (1953-1983)*, cit., p. 392

⁴⁸ G. Simondon, *On Techno-Aesthetics*, cit., p. 3

Techno-aesthetic pleasure can occur as type of perceptual-motor intuition in which «the body of the operator gives and receives».⁴⁹ The materiality of the object, that is, the way in which it simultaneously accompanies and resists the operative gesture, is crucial in determining this exchangeable play that produces pleasure in the operator. Simondon presents techno-aesthetic feeling as that which operates as a «pre-selector»⁵⁰ of an object's acceptability. One does not focus on the technical object itself, but on how it appears or, at any rate, how it fits with the body when it is used and when it appears as something one could use. But this accordance is not just a question of achieving a purpose, it is about accompanying the operator in a process in which the instrument is tuned to their sensible needs. For this reason, Simondon offers examples of objects that might accord with the user's purposes, but which the operator accepts only because the sensible surface they encounter accompanies or rejects their expectations⁵¹. Techno-aesthetic feeling does not arise from the suitability of an object to the purpose set by the operator, but from the sensible encounter, which can only be verified within the purpose-oriented operation⁵².

Speaking of the product of the industrial technical object, he writes: «there exists a margin of liberty that enables it to be used for ends that were not foreseen. Inversely, aesthetic sensibility can be used to optimize a machine»⁵³. The point seems to be that in the technical operation freedom is situated in the encounter between the materiality of the technical object, which is suitable for many purposes, and the indeterminate needs of the operator. The freedom of this interaction is, in a way, analogous to that which Kant describes for the judgment of taste, which he depicts as free play. However, while, for Kant, free play is shown in its purity in the representation of a form; in techno-aesthetic pleasure it is the sensitive encounter between object and possible uses that presents itself as free play. Techno-aesthetic pleasure has to do with the way an object accords with our needs to use it, not only for determinate uses but also possible and indeterminate ones.

The fact that an object accommodates our way of acting is not something we recognise through intellectual knowledge of its mechanical functioning, but something we feel when an object does not merely perform its function but provokes pleasure in the way it fits into its *milieu* – and the *milieu* in question may be the context, the landscape or our own bodies. It is therefore not utility as such that determines techno-aesthetic pleasure, but the way in which the encounter between the object and the *milieu* is facilitated by an agreement that we feel. Therefore, the affective dimension of experience plays a mediating function between the human being and the technical object, and it is configured as the condition of possibility for purpose-oriented action⁵⁴.

Techno-aesthetic pleasure, which Simondon calls «*épiphanie*»⁵⁵, can only be grasped through analogy between the examples he gives us; it is analogous to the pleasure experienced by the user of a tool when the

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 4; Cf. G. Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Object*, cit., pp. 202-203

⁵¹ G. Simondon, *On Techno-Aesthetics*, cit., p. 4

⁵² In the course he gave at the Université de Poitiers in 1962-1963, he spoke of aesthetics as the discovery of a harmony that occurs during «l'expérience pré-noétique de la correspondance entre deux structures» (G. Simondon, *Étude de quelques problèmes d'épistémologie et de théorie de la connaissance*, in N. Simondon, I. Saurin (éd. par), *Sur la Philosophie 1950-1980*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 2016)

⁵³ G. Simondon, *On Techno-Aesthetics*, cit., p. 5

⁵⁴ In the résumé of the 1974-1975 general psychology course, he assigns affectivity the task of mediating the choice between different uses of intellectual knowledge: «Mais un même savoir peut servir à plusieurs actions; il manque en l'homme, entre l'entrée d'information et les effecteurs de l'action, quelque chose qui soit capable d'orienter et de faire communiquer ces deux extrêmes: ce médiateur est encore mal défini; c'est l'affectivité, ce sont les motivations de la conduite.» (G. Simondon, *L'homme et l'objet 1974-1975*, in Id., *La résolution des problèmes*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 2018, p. 55)

⁵⁵ G. Simondon, *Supplément 1. Sur la techno-esthétique*, cit., p. 393

tool is suitable to its intended purposes, but also when the use of an instrument shows the possibility of that instrument tuning to other possible purposes. This ambiguity, which Simondon leaves open, shows the connection with the Kantian perspective. We might say that pleasure experienced in the use of a technical instrument is not merely an interested pleasure, as sensible pleasure can be, because it is accompanied by the feeling that shows the agreement of the instrument to other possible and yet indeterminate purposes. Therefore, techno-aesthetic pleasure is analogous to aesthetic pleasure, for which the principle of determination can be defined purposiveness without an end, but which can occur concomitantly with sensible pleasure caused by the existence of an object, thus by purpose-oriented action.

Simondon uses the pleasure generated by the interaction between technical object and *milieu* to highlight instances of possible ambiguity between technical thinking and aesthetic feeling. He allows us to put back at the centre of aesthetics the link between contemplation and practical activity. A long tradition in the history of aesthetics has argued that Kant separated aesthetics experience from practical life through the notion of disinterestedness. Showing that Simondon is in continuity with the Kantian perspective also shows that Kantian disinterestedness cannot be reduced to a detached contemplation in which the object of perception is isolated from all reference to possible uses. Kantian aesthetic feeling thus shows room for a techno-aesthetic feeling as an epiphany in which the agreement of our activity with external objects gives us the opportunity to reflect on the purposiveness without an end of the operator-instrument relationship. This purposiveness is expressed in the pleasure we take in feeling that an instrument is not only attuned to the use we are making of it, but also to other possible uses. Accordingly, it is possible to reread parts of the *Third Critique* as an attempt to investigate the complex link that is established between disinterestedness as the determining principle of aesthetic judgement and interest in the object that occurs in purpose-oriented action. Technic, therefore, can be elevated to an exemplary case in which the interweaving of freedom and natural laws shows itself in an agreement that allows aesthetic feeling to be relocated within practical life.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aigner, F., *Kant and Technics: From the Critique of Pure Reason to the Opus Postumum*, Bloomsbury, London-New York-Dublin 2024.
- Beaubois, V., *La zone obscure du design. Une pensée des pratiques de conception (d')après Gilbert Simondon*, Thèse de doctorat, Université Paris Nanterre, Paris 2019.
- Berleant, A., *Beyond Disinterestedness*, in “The British Journal of Aesthetics”, XXXIII/3, 1993, pp. 242-254.
- Carrozzini, P., *Esthétique et techno-esthétique chez Simondon*, in J.-H. Barthélémy (éd. par), *Cahiers Simondon III*, L'Harmattan, Paris 2011, pp. 51-60.
- Dalmasso, A.C., *Techno-aesthetic Thinking: Technicity and Symbolism in the Body*, in “Aisthesis”, XII/1, 2019, pp. 69-84.
- Dickie, G., *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca-London 1974.
- Dickie, G., *Stolnitz's Attitude: Taste and Perception*, in “The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism”, XLIII/2, 1984, pp. 195-203.
- Dickie, G., *The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude*, in “American Philosophical Quarterly”, I/1, 1964, pp. 56-65.
- Duhem, L., *Thinking Aesthetic Reality (with Simondon)*, in “SubStance”, XLI, 2012, pp. 16-31.
- Grenberg, J., *Feeling, Desire and Interest in Kant's Theory of Action*, in “Kant-Studien”, XCII/2, 2001, pp. 153-179.
- Guyer, P., *Disinterestedness and Desire in Kant's Aesthetics*, in “The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism”, XXXVI/4, 1978, pp. 449-460.
- Guyer, P., *Interest, Nature, and Art: A Problem in Kant's Aesthetics*, in “The Review of Metaphysics”, XXXI/4, 1978, pp. 580-603.
- Guyer, P., *Kant and the Experience of Freedom: Essays on Aesthetics and Morality*, Cambridge University Press, New York-Melbourne 1996.
- Hilgers, T., *Aesthetic Disinterestedness: Art, Experience, and the Self*, Routledge, New York-London 2017.
- Hughes, F., *The Technic of Nature: What is Involved in Judging?*, in H. Parret (hrsg. v.), *Kants Ästhetik / Kant's Aesthetics / L'esthétique de Kant*, De Gruyter, Berlin-New York 1998, pp. 176-191.
- Kant, I., *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), transl. by P. Guyer, E. Matthews, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000.
- Kant, I., *Critique of Pure Reason* (1787), transl. by P. Guyer, A. W. Wood, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998.
- Kant, I., *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), transl. by M. Gregor, J. Timmermann, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2012.
- Lehmann, G., *Die Technik der Natur*, in Id., *Beiträge zur Geschichte und Interpretation der Philosophie Kants*, De Gruyter, Berlin 1969.

- Michaud, Y., *The Aesthetics of Gilbert Simondon: Anticipation of the Contemporary Aesthetic Experience*, in A. de Boever, J. Murray, J. Roffe, A. Woodward (eds. by), *Gilbert Simondon: Being and Technology*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2012, pp. 121-134.
- Montani, P., *Imagination, Performativity, Technics: A (Post)Kantian Approach*, in A. Pennisi, A. Falzone (eds. by), *The Extended Theory of Cognitive Creativity*, Springer, Cham 2020, pp. 151-162.
- Moritz, K.P., *Versuch einer Vereinigung aller schönen Künste und Wissenschaften unter dem Begriff des in sich selbst Vollendeten*, in C. Wingertzahn (hrsg. v.), *Schriften zur Ästhetik*, Reclam, Ditzingen 2018.
- Nauckhoff, J., *Incentives and Interests in Kant's Moral Psychology*, in "History of Philosophy Quarterly", XX/1, 2003, pp. 41-60.
- Santozki, U., *Kants "Technik der Natur" in der Kritik der Urteilskraft*, in "Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte", XLVII, 2005, pp. 89-121.
- Simondon, G., *La résolution des problèmes*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 2018.
- Simondon, G., *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* (1958), transl. by C. Malaspina, J. Rogove, Univocal, Minneapolis 2017.
- Simondon, G., *Sur la philosophie (1950-1980)*, éd. par N. Simondon, I. Saurin, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 2016.
- Simondon, G., *Sur la technique (1953-1983)*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 2014.
- Stolnitz, J., *On the Origins of "Aesthetic Disinterestedness"*, in "The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism", XX/4, 1961, pp. 131-143.
- Tenti, G., *Estetica e morfologia in Gilbert Simondon*, Mimesis, Milano-Udine 2020.
- Velotti, S., *Making Sense: Disinterestedness and Control*, in L. Berger (ed. by), *Disinterested Pleasure and Beauty*, De Gruyter, Berlin-Boston 2023, pp. 103-128.
- Zammito, J.H., *The Genesis of Kant's Critique of Judgment*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 1992.
- Zangwill, N., *Kant on Pleasure in the Agreeable*, in "The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism", LIII/2, 1995, pp. 167-176.
- .