

Cultural Paths and Aesthetic Signs: A Critical Hermeneutics of Aesthetic Validity

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Abstract: Contemporary philosophical stances toward 'artistic truth' derive from Kant's aesthetics. Whereas philosophers who share Kant's emphasis on aesthetic validity discount art's capacity for truth, philosophers who share Hegel's critique of Kant render artistic truth inaccessible. This essay proposes a critical hermeneutic account of aesthetic validity that supports a non-esoteric notion of artistic truth. Using Gadamer and Adorno to read Kant through Hegelian eyes, I reconstruct the aesthetic dimension from three polarities in modern Western societies. Then I describe aesthetic validity as an horizon of imaginative cogency governing the exploration, presentation and creative interpretation of aesthetic signs. The essay argues that aesthetic processes, so construed, are crucial to cultural pathfinding, and that aesthetic validity-claims in art talk contribute significantly to this pursuit. Aesthetic validity, cultural orientation and art talk constitute the hermeneutical matrix from which questions of artistic truth emerge.

The idea of artistic truth has fallen on hard times. It has received few sustained visits in Anglo-American philosophy since mid-century analyses by John Hospers (1946) and Monroe Beardsley (1958).¹ Even continental philosophers after Martin Heidegger and Theodor W. Adorno have come to doubt its viability. One must think twice before entering theoretical ruins where even philosophers fear to tread.

Yet the issues traditionally addressed under the label of 'artistic truth' have not disappeared. If anything, they have intensified: the role of artists in society, relations between art and knowledge, and questions about validity in cultural interpretations. What has changed is the paradigm with which philosophers work. Whereas philosophers used to sort out such issues in terms of a mediation between (epistemic) subject and (epistemic) object and whatever transcends this mediation, now they emphasize language, intertextuality and context. To revisit the idea of artistic truth is to test the potential and limitations of a postmetaphysical paradigm in contemporary philosophy.²

This cannot be done, however, without revisiting Immanuel Kant. Contemporary

philosophical stances toward ‘artistic truth’ derive from Kant’s aesthetics. Kant recognizes that validity encompasses more than epistemic truth: validity is multidimensional. In distinguishing aesthetic validity (‘beauty’) from epistemic validity (‘truth’) and moral validity (‘goodness’ or ‘rightness’), however, Kant gives an ambiguous account. On the one hand, he demarcates an unusual zone of experience and activity where imaginative cognition and creative conduct can occur. He emphasizes an irreducible dimension of valid aesthetic judgment and, by extension, of aesthetic experience and aesthetic objects. And he defines the fine arts with reference to this dimension, as those areas of production and reception in which ‘aesthetic ideas’ and ‘taste’ prevail. On the other hand, Kant’s descriptions of this zone untether it from his usual anchors of validity, namely, intellectual concepts and rational ideas. Hence aesthetic experience and activity, as aesthetic, are neither theoretical nor practical and are not fully constituted in a Kantian sense. His account of the subjective universality and exemplary necessity of taste-judgments reflects this untethering, as does his account of the beautiful as purposiveness without purpose. To be sure, Kant’s subsequent descriptions of (aesthetic) reflective judgment as a ‘common sense’ and of beauty as ‘the symbol of morality’ try to establish ties from the aesthetic to the epistemic and the moral. Yet his demarcation of the aesthetic does not allow him fully to secure the aesthetic dimension as one in which *valid* experience and activity occur. Many followers of Kant do not expect to find truth or goodness in aesthetic matters, nor in those arts where aesthetic considerations prevail. How to anchor aesthetic validity remains obscure.

When Hegel, criticizing Kant, reintroduces truth and goodness into art’s vocation, he simultaneously cuts art loose from ordinary aesthetic experience and activity (i.e. the realm of natural beauty, in Kant’s account), and he makes art subservient to philosophical interpretation. For the most part, recent philosophers in the English-speaking world have followed Kant rather than Hegel, even though they focus on art rather than on natural beauty or on other aesthetic phenomena. They approach art as primarily aesthetic. By contrast, 20th-century German philosophers such as Gadamer³ and Adorno⁴ prefer Hegel’s emphasis on artistic truth to Kant’s emphasis on aesthetic judgment. Not surprisingly, they also make art seem esoteric. One challenge facing a nonesoteric account of artistic truth, then, is to establish a notion of aesthetic validity that neither collapses it into either epistemic or moral validity nor renders it irrelevant or impotent with respect to ordinary cognition and conduct. The challenge is to retain a Kantian emphasis on the irreducibility of the aesthetic while giving an account of aesthetic validity that connects it with artistic truth.

My response to this challenge takes four steps. First, I propose a critical hermeneutic conception of aesthetic processes. Second, I develop a notion of aesthetic validity as ‘imaginative cogency’. Third, to show the relevance of aesthetic experience and activity for questions of truth and goodness, I explore the relation between aesthetic validity and what

I shall label ‘cultural orientation’. Fourth, given the role of language in the raising of validity-claims and the prominence of questions of aesthetic validity in the arts, I examine how the arts enter into ordinary conversation and discourse. Aesthetic validity, cultural orientation and what I shall label ‘art talk’ provide the context in which one can move from a Kantian emphasis on aesthetic autonomy to a postmetaphysical conception of artistic truth. This essay aims to describe the hermeneutical matrix from which questions of artistic truth emerge.

1. Aesthetic signs

Despite the prevalence of ‘anti-aesthetic’ theories and artworks since the 1960s, it is a fact of contemporary life in North America and Europe that society and culture have an irreducible aesthetic dimension. This dimension’s differentiation and institutionalization are historical achievements, for better and for worse. A permanent reversal or subversion of such processes would require that the societal formation as a whole be transformed. Hence, as Adorno indicates, a critique of ‘the aesthetic’ that does not simultaneously criticize the political and economic systems framing the aesthetic would miss its target, because this lies too far away. So too, attempts to describe the aesthetic dimension that do not situate it in a larger societal formation would attribute features to objects as such that actually are functions of a complex socio- historical process. Since one cannot do everything at once, however, I shall restrict myself to giving a partial phenomenology of the aesthetic dimension, with an important caveat: I do not attempt an eidetic intuition aimed at some ahistorical essence. Rather, I provide a brief dialectical reconstruction of certain socio-historical patterns that have become prominent in Western societies since the 18th century.

Three polarities prevail in the aesthetic dimension of modern Western societies and cultures. All three can be found in Kant’s account of fine art. The fact that they surface there does not mean that they are peculiar to the arts as such, however. All three are versions of the dialectic between nature and freedom that pervades Kant’s entire *Critique of Judgments*. They help constitute the aesthetic dimension as a whole, and not simply those arts in which the aesthetic dimension becomes prominent. The polarities in question occur between play and work, between entertainment and

instruction, and between expression and communication. In each case Kant tries to ‘split the difference’, as it were, arguing that the fine arts are more like play than like work but are not merely play; that they serve neither entertainment nor instruction but a delightful cultivation of the mind; and that they must express aesthetic ideas with a view toward communicability. I shall propose that these three polarities are constitutive for the aesthetic dimension in modern Western societies: its content emerges from tensions between play and work, between entertainment and instruction, and between expression and communication. If it were constituted as a recognizable zone of experience and activity in a different societal formation, the aesthetic dimension would have a different framework and hence a significantly different meaning. Let me comment on each polarity.

‘Play’ has been a central concept of aesthetics since Kant and Schiller, re-emerging in the 20th century as the purported origin of all culture and as a semi-sacred alternative to the grim secularity of technocapitalist society.⁷ Gadamer tries to wrest ‘play’ from ‘the subjective meaning that it has in Kant and Schiller’ (TM 101, WM 97), making it an ontological concept from which to derive the structure of artistic truth. Adorno, by contrast, criticizes regressive elements in play and reactionary tendencies in theoretical celebrations of play, preferring to define art as a negation of play rather than its mere continuation (AT 317-19, AT 469-72). In both cases, however, an underlying tension between play and work remains in effect. The aesthetic (and, by extension, art) gets defined as a zone where serious play sublimates purposeful activity or where an illusory freedom from function provides a necessary critique of praxis.

What such theories have in common, and what makes up the positive content to the play/work dialectic, is an emphasis on exploration. It is less the prevalence of play or a liberation from work that marks the aesthetic than the opportunity or setting to explore, where an exploration’s goal emerges from the process of exploring and usually is not predetermined. The process of exploration is just as important to meaningful work as it is to lively play - as the problems caused by its absence in Taylorized industry and hyper-commercialized sport attest. Similarly, open-ended inquiry helps sustain substantial scholarship just as much as hypothetical role-playing provides impetus for Kohlbergian post-conventional morality.⁸ It is understandable that exploration gets framed by a play/work dialectic in a techno-capitalist society. Yet this framing, both in theory and in social reality, risks turning exploration into what Adorno calls a *Naturschutzpark*, a nature preserve where people go for relief, only to leave everything outside as it is. The same thing occurs when art becomes *the* bastion of exploration, as if the rest of life can do without it. A better alternative, it

seems to me, is to identify those elements of exploration that are indispensable across the board and to promote their flourishing within dominant institutions.

This cannot be done without a critique of such institutions and of the societal formation to which they belong.

Essential to such a critique would be to re-examine the dialectic between entertainment and instruction that also frames the aesthetic dimension. On Kant's analysis of taste-judgments, purely aesthetic experience serves neither to entertain nor to instruct. The definitive feature of taste-judgments is their resting upon a feeling of delight or 'favor' (*Gunst*) that arises in disinterested reflection upon an object of perception (CJ § 1—5, pp. 89-96; V: 203-11). This rules out sensory gratification and instrumental or moral achievement as primary goals for aesthetic experience. His subsequent description of fine art as promoting a delightful cultivation of the mind simply continues this delicate balancing act (CJ §43-5, pp. 182-6; V: 303-7). His description distinguishes fine art from 'agreeable arts', whose primary purpose is entertainment,⁹ from craft, which has primarily instrumental ends, and, implicitly, from religious and political art, whose ends might not be strictly instrumental but closer, perhaps, to what Kant defines as moral goodness.

Yet Kant also sees aesthetic experience and fine art as potential propaedeutics to the moral life. Morality is not their aim, but it could be one of their benefits under appropriate conditions. His contorted depiction of beauty as the symbol of morality indicates the importance he attaches to the non-entertaining and non-instructing 'cultivation of the mind' wrought by aesthetic experience and fine art (CJ §59, pp. 225-8; V: 351-4). Gadamer and Adorno continue this Kantian focus, through Hegelian lenses, in their appeals to *Erfahrung* and *Bildung*. The difference between them lies in their contrasting appraisals of how such formation should occur under contemporary conditions. Whereas Gadamer embraces the continuity of a classical humanist tradition, Adorno endorses modern art's critique of culture-industrial *Halbbildung*.

If aesthetic practices serve neither to entertain nor to instruct, and if they are not identical with mass-mediated 'infotainment', which often neither amuses nor informs, how should aesthetic 'cultivation' or 'formation' be understood? Perhaps as a training in creative interpretation. This suggestion does not lie so far afield from Kant as it might first seem.¹⁰ Once one strips mentalist trappings from his account of reflective judgment, one can see 'taste-judging' as a process of interpreting signs before, alongside, or against their established usages and significations. The same 'object' which in other contexts functions as a conventional signal or symbol acquires or displays

multiple layers of possible meaning in the aesthetic context. Kant would say that the object in such a context gives occasion for imagination and understanding to engage in freely harmonious play. On my own critical hermeneutic approach, it would be preferable to say that aesthetic practices let the meaning of the sign become an open question, or that they let the openness of meaning be constitutive for the sign. It is not so much the case that meaning in such contexts is endlessly deferred (Derrida) as that meaning is multiply referred beyond the sign's established usages and significations."

To forestall misunderstandings, however, let me introduce three qualifications. First, such creative interpretation is not monological, on the Kantian model of a judging subject and a perceived object. Rather it is dialogical, involving communities and practices of interpretation within which different interpreters interact. Second, creative interpretation is not unbounded. There are limits to the possible meanings that can 'make sense' for any particular sign, even though the limits often are discovered in the process of interpretation. Third, creative interpretation itself calls upon pre-understandings and vocabularies that are intrinsic to aesthetic practices as these have developed in socio-historical settings.

If my proposal is on the right track, then framing the aesthetic within a dialectic of entertainment and instruction is both understandable and inadequate. Understandable, because the creativity in aesthetic practices makes them intrinsically 'entertaining', and the interpretation they involve can be 'instructive'. Yet inadequate, both because creative interpretation exceeds the confines of conventional entertainment and instruction and because these conventions themselves need the expansion and disruptions that occur under the impetus of creative interpretation. Hence, as I have argued with respect to exploration, so creative interpretation too should not be safely cordoned off in a special zone outside ordinary cognition and conduct. Rather it should be recognized and promoted within the ordinary as an indispensable ingredient for human flourishing under contemporary conditions.

The third polarity occurs between expression and communication. Kant articulates this as a tension between genius and taste in which 'genius', as an uncommon gift for fashioning and expressing 'aesthetic ideas', must give way to taste, as a 'common sense' that makes such feeling-laden and creative intuitions publicly accessible or 'universally communicable' (CJ §49, p. 195; V: 317). More specifically, Kant concludes that taste, not genius, is 'the primary thing to which one must look in the judging of art as beautiful art', since the richness and originality of (aesthetic) ideas

‘is not as necessary for the sake of beauty as is the suitability of the imagination in its freedom to the lawfulness of the understanding’ (CJ 50, p. 197; V: 319).¹² If forced to choose, Adorno would come down on the side of genius and Gadamer on the side of taste, even though Adorno rejects Kant’s subject-centered notion of expression, and Gadamer criticizes Kant for denying taste ‘any *significance as knowledge*’ and for failing to define taste ‘positively by what grounds commonality and creates community’ (TM 43, WM 40-1).

What both authors retain from Kant, by way of Hegel, is the notion of aesthetic presentation (*Darstellung*).¹³ Presentation, I would suggest, makes up the positive content to the aesthetic-framing dialectic of expression and communication, where ‘expression’ concerns what an agent presents to others, and ‘communication’ pertains to what others interpret the presenting agent to have ‘said’. Although modern aesthetic practices have an expressive side, such that contemporary explorations and creative interpretations cannot avoid asking who or what some object or product or event expresses, the aesthetic sign cannot be reduced to a mere expression. Similarly, modern aesthetic practices have a communicative side, such that people engaged in aesthetic experience and activity cannot help wondering about the significance of an aesthetic sign. Yet aesthetic signs cannot be reduced to mere means of communication. Instead aesthetic signs are presentations. They make multiple meanings available in ways that either exceed or precede both idiosyncratic expressions of intent and conventional communications of content. What aesthetic signs present can be called their import. Although media of imagination play a special role in the formation of aesthetic signs, the import of aesthetic signs need not be equated with Kant’s ‘aesthetic ideas’.

Yet Kant’s conception of ‘aesthetic ideas’ does provide hints in the direction I propose, as Rudolf Makkreel has shown. Kant makes discovering and expressing aesthetic ideas central to the fine artist’s work.¹⁴ Even our finding non-artistic objects beautiful involves taking them as expressions of aesthetic ideas.¹⁵ Aesthetic ideas are themselves presentations, regardless of whether fine artists present them in works of art.

As perceptually based intuitions whose meaning exceeds the grasp of ordinary language and concepts, they can suggest rational ideas and ‘present rational ideas to sense’. They ‘add to our interpretation of experience by suggesting significant affinities even when direct conceptual connections are lacking’.¹⁶ Read in this way, Kant assigns to imagination, in conjunction with reflective judgment, an ability to present ‘the meaning of something’ in a pre-conceptual and pre-linguistic way. Whereas the schemata of imagination directly present conceptual categories, making

them perceptually applicable, aesthetic ideas, as symbolic presentations, 'are indirect modes of expressing certain [rational] ideas that cannot be directly articulated by means of concepts'. They provide 'a nonreferential type of meaning' and 'allow us to arrive at a reflective interpretation of things that surpass nature'.¹⁷

If one substitutes 'aesthetic practices' for Kant's 'imagination', 'aesthetic signs' for 'aesthetic ideas', and 'import' for 'rational ideas', one comes close to the notion of presentation I wish to propose. When 'objects' function as aesthetic signs, they are already caught up in inter-subjective processes of exploration and creative interpretation. These processes allow them to be meaningful in ways that are not so much inexplicable as ever in need of explication. Such explication presupposes that aesthetic signs are about something other than themselves, and that such 'aboutness' is both sharable and shared by various interpreters. A 'reading' of aesthetic signs, while exploratory and creative, is neither private nor arbitrary, even when what is read lacks the apparent settledness of lexical meanings or the apparent definiteness of asserted propositions. It is so, of course, that aesthetic signs have an important propensity to unsettle language and disturb thought. Yet this is only possible because they are not private and are not arbitrary. Aesthetic signs - i.e. 'objects' in their functions as aesthetic signs - present nuances of meaning on which the vividness of language and the acuity of thought depend, as does the attunement of conduct to complexities and uncertainties in concrete situations.

As was the case with exploration and creative interpretation, my account refuses to restrict the occurrence of presentation to art, proposing instead that presentation is a constitutive function within ordinary cognition and conduct. This also pertains to modern perceptions of 'nature', which Adorno makes thematic in ways that neither Hegel nor Gadamer would allow. Despite, and amid, the advancing exploitation of creatures and habitats for technological and commercial ends, they retain their capacity to astonish, to shock and to confuse and, in that capacity, to function as aesthetic signs. A sensitivity for such features might not indicate moral proclivities, as Kant thought, but it does suggest an openness for what Adorno calls 'the nonidentical' and for alternative interpretations of such creatures' importance.

From my partial reconstruction of three modern polarities, exploration, creative interpretation and presentation emerge as central to the aesthetic dimension in contemporary Western society. These are not peculiar to art, for they occur in many areas of culture, even when neither recognized nor encouraged. They are best understood as inter-subjective processes rather than as the capacities

or contents of a subjective consciousness facing either independent or subjectively constituted objects. Although 'objects' enter such processes - or, better, various creatures, events and products enter such processes as 'objects' - they do so as aesthetic signs. That is to say, the 'objects' of exploration, creative interpretation and presentation simply are creatures, events and products in their capacities to sustain discovery, to call forth reflective readings, and to acquire import in intersubjective contexts. While such capacities would remain dormant if people did not together engage in the relevant experiences and activities, it would be a mistake, and a reversion to the subject/object paradigm of so much modern philosophy, to think that aesthetic experiences and activities simply assign, impute, or create the objects' capacities. Moreover, when aesthetic practices concern the agents or results of exploration and the like, aesthetic initiative often resides in the 'objects' themselves. Either, in the case of some animals and all humans, these 'objects' are able to engage in aesthetic experiences and activities. Or, in the case of cultural events and products, access to their 'objective' aesthetic capacities requires an acknowledgement of their having arisen, in part, from prior intersubjective processes of exploration, creative interpretation and presentation.

2. Imaginative cogency

Given this account of 'the aesthetic', what sense can be made of the notion of aesthetic validity - for example, Kant's notion that taste-judgments raise a claim to subjective universality and exemplary necessity? One cannot simply assume that all intersubjective processes raise claims to validity. When people wordlessly share a certain mood (what Heidegger thematizes in his discussion of 'attunement'), they typically raise no such claim. In the absence of any reference to an epistemic or moral end that the mood 'should' or 'should not' serve, people would find it odd or insulting to be told that the feeling they share is somehow incorrect or inappropriate. Is there a plausible sense in which intersubjective exploration, interpretation and presentation can have more or less merit and can give rise to intrinsic validity-claims?

Not only do I wish to answer yes, but also I hold that neglecting aesthetic validity impoverishes both philosophical theories of validity and ordinary aesthetic practices. Initially I plan to develop this answer without reference to art, where most philosophers who acknowledge aesthetic validity tend to locate it.¹⁸ To simplify the discussion, I shall henceforth use 'imagination' and its derivatives as a shorthand for the processes I have identified as central to the aesthetic. 'Imagination' should be understood as referring to intersubjective processes rather than to a mental capacity, and as

involving aesthetic signs rather than mental contents. I shall summarize the notion of aesthetic validity with the term ‘imaginative cogency’. Let me explain.

At first it sounds paradoxical to say of aesthetic experiences and activities that they can have more or less merit or can give rise to validity-claims. Is it not definitive of imaginative processes in contemporary settings that they are exploratory, allusive and transgressive? Do they not, in that sense, defy any expectation of validity? And does not such defiance lend them weight as a site of opposition to prevailing norms and institutions?

On second thought, however, it is precisely these features of imagination that prompt the question about validity. This becomes apparent when one reverses the rhetoric of the previous paragraph. Can a site of opposition be genuinely oppositional (and not simply anarchic or reactionary) if it lacks boundaries and direction? Can expectations of validity be defied by something that cannot claim any validity for itself? Can exploration, allusion, and transgression occur if the processes in question are completely unlimited? Is not the concept of complete lack of limitation itself thoroughly paradoxical?

As a matter of fact, the vocabulary people use to talk about aesthetic processes and signs is loaded with evaluative terms. These go beyond simple labels for private preferences (‘like’/‘dislike’) or for consumerist attitudes (‘interesting’/‘boring’). We say, for example, that certain jokes ‘pack a punch’ while others ‘fall flat’. One metaphor is ‘trite’ or ‘forced’ while another is ‘original’ or ‘convincing’. One story is ‘profound’, another ‘mere fluff’. Some decorations are ‘attractive’, others are ‘tawdry’. Some public celebrations are ‘tedious’, others are ‘exciting’. Some landscapes are ‘gorgeous’ and others are ‘ugly’. And we find much more agreement in these assessments on specific occasions than the myth of individual ‘taste’ would lead one to expect. Indeed, conflict in the usage of such terms is no more an argument against the notion of aesthetic validity than differences about facts or values are arguments against the notions of epistemic or moral validity.

These examples suggest that discrimination and assessment are intrinsic to aesthetic experiences and activities. The examples need not suggest, however, that the standards to which such experiences and activities appeal are universally binding, either in the sense that they obtain regardless of social, cultural, or historical setting, or in the sense that they are obligatory for every human being. In Kantian language, the implicit standards do not have either epistemic or moral validity. Within the Kantian framework, which anchors validity in concepts of understanding and ideas of reason, this apparent absence of epistemic or moral validity gives rise to the so-called

‘antinomy of taste’ (CJ §56, pp. 214-15; V: 338-9). The antinomy is a conflict between two incompatible claims, each of which is equally well founded: (1) there is *no* rational basis for aesthetic evaluations, otherwise we could prove which of two conflicting evaluations is correct; (2) there *is* a rational basis for aesthetic evaluations, otherwise we would not argue about them when they differ.

If, however, one does not anchor the validity of all standards in human rationality as described by Kant, and if one detaches the question of a ‘rational basis’ from the question of ‘aesthetic standards’, then this antinomy need not arise. In keeping with the etymological roots of ‘standard’ in the old French *estandard*, aesthetic standards can be regarded as ‘rallying-points’ around which people congregate in order to recall, project, contest and attain identity-constituting commitments. Aesthetic standards are more or less widely shared expectations concerning the outcomes of aesthetic processes in which people engage. As such, aesthetic standards (and perhaps other standards as well) will not be universally binding in a Kantian sense.¹⁹ Each one can be contested, moved, or replaced. Yet the very process of contesting a standard requires that people appeal to some notion of validity. Hence it makes sense for people to argue about conflicting aesthetic evaluations even if they cannot point to some ‘rational principle’ on the basis of which the conflict could potentially be settled. Arguments about conflicting aesthetic evaluations primarily appeal to shared expectations concerning intersubjective processes,²⁰ not to a universal principle of abstract reason. What gives rise to the apparent antinomy of taste is too narrow a conception of what counts as validity, one that ties validity too closely to a restricted notion of rationality.

Indeed, within the context of modern aesthetic processes, it is possible to articulate a general idea of aesthetic validity that is less vague and less mentalist than the Kantian notion of taste as a ‘common sense’ pointing toward a ‘supersensible substrate’ connecting nature and freedom. The idea I want to postulate is that of imaginative cogency. Returning to my previous examples, one can say that, from an aesthetic vantage point, what distinguishes a pungent joke from a flaccid one is that the successful telling of a joke weaves its story together well, builds up to its punch line, and then delivers this with a surprising consistency and flair. A trite metaphor lacks the innovative connections that would characterize an original one, and a superficial story lacks the depth of insight provided by one that is profound. Poorly ‘orchestrated’ public celebrations lack the dramatic pacing, ceremonial setting and vigorous interactions that would make them less tedious. And so on.

In such cases what makes for a greater degree of aesthetic validity is the complexity, depth and intensity with which the imaginative process unfolds. Or, to say this more carefully, when

evaluating the relative aesthetic merits of modern cultural events and products, people employ implicit standards of complexity, depth and intensity, and the horizon of such standards is something like imaginative cogency. Not surprisingly, given the reciprocation between theory and practice in modern Western cultures, these standards resemble the marks of aesthetic merit identified by aestheticians since the 18th century: Nicholas Wolterstorff's unity, internal richness and 'fittingness-intensity', for example,²¹ or integrality, articulation, intensity and depth in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* (AT 186-92, AT 277-87).¹²

Two qualifications are required here, however. First, such standards cannot be abstracted from the imaginative character of the processes in question without losing much of their content. This would occur, for example, if one regarded them as mere analogues of the consistency, coherence and explanatory power scholars might expect in the context of empirical investigations and theoretical arguments. The 'cogency' to which people appeal when they expect complexity, depth and intensity in aesthetic processes is a cogency of exploration, creative interpretation and presentation, all of which are inherently open-ended, although neither directionless nor infinite. Second, imaginative cogency is an horizon rather than merely a rule or principle.²³ It can be approximated in a theoretical description but cannot be pinned down in an axiomatic statement. Although this might appear problematic for theorists who wish to secure categorical clarity, it might also suggest the limits of inquiry, not only with respect to aesthetic processes but also with respect to epistemic and moral processes where theoretical success has seemed more likely in the past.

3. Cultural orientation

All of this becomes relevant for a theory of artistic truth when one recognizes, with Habermas, that art has become an expert culture in which aesthetic validity-claims can be thematized. Unfortunately this development in Western societies has brought with it three tendencies, both in theory and in practice, that isolate such expert thematization, to the impoverishment of both art and culture, and to the detriment of artistic truth. First, the pursuit of aesthetic merit gets channeled overwhelmingly into the art world, in compensation, as it were, for the ongoing exploitation of everyday life and environments for non-aesthetic purposes. Second, non-aesthetic concerns become marginal within the art world itself, so that the relevance of art for science or politics or morality becomes opaque. Then, as a final step in art's self-involvement, aesthetic merit becomes a questionable goal within art itself, giving rise to an anti-aesthetic expert culture where the

last resistance to ‘business as usual’ threatens to disappear, albeit with a transgressive gesture. Hence contemporary Western societies face either the much-heralded ‘death of art’ or art’s much-less-heralded rebirth. Since my critical hermeneutic approach aims to contribute to art’s rebirth, I refuse to restrict the pursuit of aesthetic merit to the art world, to make non-aesthetic concerns marginal to art, or to embrace the de-aestheticization of either art or culture.

‘Cultural orientation’ is a crucial concept in this regard. Although the concept carries echoes of Kant’s ‘cultivation of the mind’ and ‘symbol of morality’,²⁴ it is closer to Hegel’s conception of art as a sensuous appearance of the (culturally embedded and culturally unfolding) idea. Following Hegel, I do not restrict the process of cultural orientation to art itself, although, following Adorno’s critique of Hegel, I also do not retain Hegel’s construction of a progressively self-actualizing absolute spirit. Cultural pluralism and historical contingency are unavoidable features of contemporary society. Any theory of cultural orientation should take these features into account.

By ‘culture’ I mean the entire network of practices, products and institutions through which traditions are shaped and transmitted, social solidarities are generated and contested, and personal identities are molded and embraced. It is similar in some respects to Habermas’s conception of ‘the life-world’. I do not locate art outside of culture. Rather, art is a part of culture in a complex society, as are language, education, organized religion, and the network’s many other nodes. ‘Cultural orientation’ refers to how individuals, communities and organizations find their direction both within and by way of culture. As Gadamer has suggested, such cultural pathfinding is never pure or neutral. It is always already under way, drawing upon cultural resources that are historically effective to a greater or lesser extent. Accordingly, cultural orientation unavoidably involves both disorientation and reorientation.

Contrary to the tendency since Kant to divorce the aesthetic from the cultural, I wish to argue that aesthetic processes are intrinsic to processes of cultural orientation and have a special role to play in this regard. This is not to deny that epistemic and moral processes also play special roles, but to claim that their roles are not sufficient by themselves and that the aesthetic provides part of what the epistemic and the moral lack. Epistemic processes typically appeal to standards of empirical accuracy and logical consistency, giving rise to claims to epistemic correctness. Moral processes typically appeal to standards of obligation and appropriateness, giving rise to claims to normative legitimacy. In any given situation, however, a proposed course of action can be deemed both correct and right, ‘all things considered’, and yet be found ‘unimaginative’. Conversely, another proposed course of

action can be considered highly imaginative but either epistemically ill-founded or wrong in some moral or ethical regard. My suggestion will be that aesthetic failure is no less problematic than epistemic or moral failure, even though people may find it more difficult to specify in advance what would make for aesthetic ‘success’ in a given situation. The reason aesthetic failure is problematic has to do with the role of imaginative processes in cultural orientation.

‘Finding one’s way’, whether as an individual, a community, or an organization, is a multidimensional, complex and unending task in contemporary societies. The time is long past when widely shared ‘worldviews’ or dominant political or religious institutions, such as the nation-state or the church, mosque, or synagogue, provided comprehensive road maps that most people followed.²⁵ This does not mean, however, that the need for orientation has disappeared or that no other institutions have stepped into the breach. If anything, the burdens of ‘finding one’s way’ have increased, as each individual, community and organization must repeatedly uncover anew where it should be headed and why. At the same time, techno-capitalism has had the cumulative effect of prescribing direction while undermining a sense of worthwhile alternatives. Technological and economic imperatives have become dominant in culture.

Although such dominance does not eliminate the burdens of finding one’s way, it does increase the difficulty of recognizing this task’s multidimensionality and complexity and of pursuing orientation with sufficient nuance and vigor. It is precisely here that imaginative processes become crucial. In order not to pursue whatever is technologically feasible just because it is technologically feasible, people need to explore alternatives without a predetermined goal. In order not simply to do whatever the market-place seems to dictate, communities and organizations need to engage in creative interpretation that is open to multiple meanings. In order not to be seen either as frivolous time-wasting or as a salvific escape, such exploration and interpretation must have their own worth, and this worth must be tied to the worth of the presentations to which the interpreters attend. To pursue exploration and creative interpretation as ways of gaining (re-)orientation, participants must discriminate between better and worse aesthetic processes and must raise claims to aesthetic validity.

This does not mean that aesthetic processes suffice for purposes of cultural orientation in the face of techno-capitalist pressures. The exploration of alternative courses of action, for example, usually does not, by itself, provide an adequate basis for communal or organizational decisions. Other factors must enter the mix, such as a relatively accurate understanding of the situation and a practical weighing of what is right and appropriate, not to mention the omnipresent questions of

technical feasibility and economic viability. Yet sufficient emphasis on exploration can bring to the fore considerations that are easily suppressed, such as how participants might feel in relation to a proposed course of action.

It can also remind participants of hopes and needs that exceed the established vocabularies of decision-making - the plight of people who would not be immediately affected by the decision, for example, or aspirations for a good society that no single group or decision can realize. In this sense, although not entirely on their own, aesthetic processes can help retain the social-critical and utopian potentials that Adorno mistakenly limited to negative tendencies within art and philosophy.

It is useful in this connection to distinguish some tracks in the pursuit of aesthetic validity as a way of cultural orientation. Along one track, aesthetic validity-claims get raised with respect to the anticipated outcome of an aesthetic process. Along another track, aesthetic validity-claims arise with respect to the process itself. Imagine, for example, a non-profit organization that wishes to turn a run-down warehouse into a community center. Much of the planning and decision-making will focus on 'the final product' and how to achieve it. In an organization attuned to aesthetic considerations, one topic of discussion will be how the building can be redesigned to elicit those elements of exploration and creative interpretation that would make it an aesthetically rich environment for the organization and the people it serves. Another part of the discussion will be more reflexive, pertaining to the process of planning and decision-making itself. Is this process structured to support imaginative participation? Is it carried out in a way that elicits open-ended dialogue about what the building should be like and how it will function in its urban environment? Aesthetic validity-claims would rise along both tracks, as claims about not only the aesthetic merits of the envisioned building but also the aesthetic merits of the envisioning itself. Later, when the organization has completed its renovation project, a new track will arise: is the building actually an aesthetically rich environment for its users, and does it need further improvements in that regard? Traditional aesthetics has restricted its attention to the third track and restricted this track to the aesthetic merits of finished artworks. By expanding the notion of aesthetic validity beyond finished products of the artistic sort, I hope to have shown more clearly the importance of aesthetic validity for cultural orientation. Nevertheless, art remains an indispensable site for aesthetically laden pursuits of cultural orientation. To see why this is so, we must consider next how the arts enter into ordinary conversation and discourse.

4. Art talk

Once Kant had described aesthetic ideas as creative intuitions that exceed the grasp of ordinary thought, the relation between art and language became a contested topic in Western aesthetics. It is common knowledge, and a basis for much of analytic aesthetics, that language usage pervades experiences of art. Viewers, listeners and readers talk about art, write and read about it, watch videos and television programs about art, read reviews, listen to their acquaintances talk about art, and so forth. Let me introduce the term ‘art talk’ as a way of summarizing all these sorts of language usage. When art talk occurs as a relatively unproblematic use of language to reach an understanding, it can be called ‘art conversation’. When it enters a more ‘reflective’ mode where implicit validity-claims become an explicit topic of discussion, art talk can be called ‘art discourse’.²⁶ In everyday art talk people regularly and almost imperceptibly slide between conversation and discourse. There are many possible topics (depending on the artistic medium, the background and experience of the participants, and the setting and occasion), and many different dimensions to art can provide points of entry: technical, economic, political, ethical, etc. Like language usage in most other contexts, art conversation tends not to thematize the validity-claims implicit in speech-acts, but it does make dimensions of validity available for art discourse.

This initial description of art talk derives from Habermas’s theory of communicative action. Habermas’s theory suggests that three dimensions of validity have special significance in what I call conversation and discourse.²⁷ He identifies three validity-claims for which every speaker is accountable when she or he uses language to reach an understanding: truth (*Wahrheit*), normative legitimacy or rightness (*Richtigkeit*) and sincerity or authenticity (*Wahrhaftigkeit*). As is illustrated in the table, the three validity-claims correspond to three universal pragmatic functions of language: to represent something in the world, to establish interpersonal relations, and to express the speaker’s experience, respectively. These functions can be derived by considering the three types of illocutionary force that, according to Habermas, speech-acts can have: constative (assert, inform, etc.), regulative (promise, request, etc.), and expressive (wish, avow, etc.).

TABLE 1
Habermas's correlations of validity-claims, language-functions, and speech- acts

<i>Validity-claims</i>	<i>Universal pragmatic language-functions</i>	<i>Types of speech-acts</i>
1 propositional truth	representing a world	constative
2 normative legitimacy	establishing interpersonal relations	regulative
3 sincerity	expressing personal experience	expressive

Habermas regards propositional truth as the primary validity-claim that we attach to constative speech-acts. He says that language users raise a claim to truth whenever they make utterances as a way of asserting, informing, describing, and the like. In ordinary conversation this claim often accompanies language use without calling attention to itself. Truth becomes an issue, however, when an asserted proposition is called into question. At this point it becomes apparent that the speaker has raised a truth-claim when asserting the proposition. The only way to ‘redeem’ this truth-claim is to engage in discourse. Habermas distinguishes ‘discourse’ (*Diskurs*) from communicative action (*Handlung*). In *communicative action* we silently presuppose and accept the validity-claims implicit in our utterances. In *discourse*, by contrast, we engage in argumentation, thematizing validity-claims that have become problematic and investigating their legitimation (*Berechtigung*). In discourse we do not exchange ‘informations’ as we might in an ordinary conversation about the weather, but rather we exchange arguments that serve to ground or refute validity-claims that have been problematized. For the most part, ‘facts’ become a topic in discourse, not in conversation.²⁸

Habermas tends to view *aesthetic* validity-claims as expressive rather than constative or regulative. In other words, when people call something beautiful or publicly judge the quality of a musical performance or literary work, they are primarily²⁹ expressing their own experience and raising a claim to be sincere or truthful in that expression. Such a claim can, of course, be challenged by any conversation partner. The sorting out of such challenges would characterize aesthetic discourse. Habermas also tends to regard art and art criticism as a differentiated value sphere in which expressive validity-claims can be thematized. Science/technology and law/morality, by contrast, are differentiated value spheres for the thematizing of constative and regulative validity-claims, respectively.

Here my own departure from Habermas begins, despite my indebtedness to his theory of communicative action in many other respects. Like Martin Seel, I find it implausible to regard aesthetic validity-claims as primarily expressive.⁵⁰ My earlier account of aesthetic validity as imaginative cogency points rather in a hermeneutical direction. That direction includes a notion of artistic truth that neither restricts the general concept of truth to propositional truth *a la* Habermas nor limits art's validity to aesthetic validity *a la* Seel. Yet I do agree with Habermas that the raising of validity-claims occurs in intersubjective linguistic practices, just as I agree with Seel that non-expressive but aesthetic validity-claims are among those raised in this way. Art talk is not the only arena in which aesthetic validity-claims arise, however, nor are aesthetic validity-claims the only ones that commonly and legitimately arise in art talk. What distinguishes art talk in modern Western societies is not the occurrence of aesthetic validity-claims but the precedence these have there, whether explicitly or implicitly, over the other types of claims made in art talk. Aesthetic validity-claims have precedence because of the way the art world has developed as an institutionalized setting for promoting aesthetic processes and adjudicating aesthetic validity-claims.

Recent moralizing and transgressive art conversations, and the discourses they generate, provide interesting test cases for my conception. Let us suppose that a prominent elected official (Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani, for example) denounces an exhibition at a publicly funded art museum (the Brooklyn Museum in New York City, for example), calling the art offensive, immoral and sacrilegious. And let us say the museum's director and trustees, the exhibition's sponsors and some prominent art critics defend the exhibition as a well-curated provocation about which mature citizens should make their own judgments. Aesthetic considerations would appear to play little role on either side, except insofar as the phrase 'well-curated' implies them. If we probed such talk further, however, and arranged for the participants to explain their pronouncements - arrangements obviously difficult to achieve in mass-mediated public disputes of this sort - we would find that certain aesthetic prejudgments actually play a crucial role. The mayor, for example, thinks that art should be primarily 'aesthetic', but in a conventional way, such that exploration, creative interpretation and presentation do not 'get out of hand'. The exhibition's advocates, by contrast, take the disrupting of aesthetic conventions and the pushing of the imaginative 'envelope' to be marks of 'aesthetic' authenticity and badges of artistic courage. When prompted to say what makes art 'immoral' and why it should not be 'immoral', moral critics return to the primacy of the aesthetic in art, just as do advocates of transgressive art, when encouraged to say what makes specific products or events 'transgressive' and

why these should be ‘transgressive’. In the midst of such anti-aesthetic controversies the key players could decide, of course, that imaginative processes are not crucial to art and that questions of aesthetic validity are not worth discussing. Then, conceivably, the art world might collapse or turn into its opposite. But until that occurs, the raising of aesthetic validity-claims will be unavoidable and central to contemporary art talk. In addition, the raising of aesthetic validity-claims in other contexts will receive considerable impetus and content from the way these claims arise in art talk.

On my account of art talk, then, when aesthetic validity-claims arise in conversations about art, and when they are thematized in art discourse, this does not occur in separation from pursuits of cultural orientation. (That distinguishes my approach from a tendency toward aestheticism in much of post-Kantian philosophy of art.) Neither, however, does cultural orientation supplant aesthetic validity-claims. (This, in turn, distinguishes my approach from a tendency toward anti-aestheticism on the part of both moralizing and transgressive art critics.³¹) Rather, the implicit appeal to aesthetic standards such as complexity, depth and intensity, as it occurs in conversations about art, is part of a search for cultural orientation. This is so in two respects. First, talking about art with a view to aesthetic merits is indispensable to finding one’s way within art itself. Such talk helps individuals, communities and organizations understand art within their culture and reach decisions about how to use it and what to learn from it. Second, aesthetically focused art conversations serve the finding of one’s way in aesthetic matters outside of art. It helps people direct their attention to imaginative processes, and it gives them vocabularies and syntax for making ordinary aesthetic judgments. Moreover, in both respects a conversational raising of aesthetic validity-claims about art can follow the tracks I distinguished earlier, and can strengthen people’s movements along those tracks both within and outside art: (1) envisioning an aesthetic outcome; (2) participating in an envisioning process; and (3) evaluating a finished event or product. The first and second of these tracks are especially important in the interactive procedures characteristic of what Suzanne Lacy calls ‘new genre public art’.³²

In contexts of cultural pluralism and conflict, however, the appeal to aesthetic standards seldom remains implicit. When people have different understandings of the same artistic phenomena or reach contrary decisions about their worth, aesthetic validity-claims will rise to the surface and become topics for discourse. This can take a number of focuses. The discussion can focus on the *meaning* of aesthetic validity-claims (e.g. What do you mean when you say this novel is profound?), on the *status* of these claims (e.g. Calling this photograph prurient is aesthetically irrelevant, isn’t it?),

on their *motivation* (e.g. When you say that was a great dance performance, you're just expressing your own personal bias, aren't you?), or on their *justification* (e.g. Why do you think a musical composition should be original?). Discourses that never move beyond issues of status and motivation tend to be less illuminating with respect to the artistic phenomenon under discussion, since they easily evade questions about a product's or event's aesthetic merits. This does not mean that such issues have no legitimate role to play in art discourse, however: the status of a claim indicates whether it properly belongs to the original conversation, and a claim's motivation suggests whether discourse about it is worth pursuing. Accordingly, when it comes to art discourse, I do not accept Habermas's restriction of discourse to argumentation aimed at legitimation. Nor do I share Seel's view that claims to validity get raised and justified by maintaining and confirming theoretical assertions. Certainly argumentation in the strict sense and theoretical assertions properly so called can play a role in art discourse. Yet it would be inaccurate to say that art discourse as a whole is a process of argumentation or theorization, and inappropriately restrictive to say that it should be such a process. Kant already recognized this when he spelled out the apparent antinomy of taste.

One additional point about art discourse needs to be made. Art discourse also belongs to the search for cultural orientation, and this makes aesthetic processes doubly reflexive. Earlier I said that exploration, creative interpretation and presentation provide important ways in which individuals, communities and organizations find their direction both within and by way of culture. Because the art world has developed as an institutionalized setting for promoting aesthetic processes, art is a crucial site for the aesthetically laden pursuit of cultural orientation. That in itself gives art a certain reflexivity, making it a place where aesthetic processes can themselves be explored, interpreted and presented. As a constituent of art's institutionalization, art talk makes such reflexivity palpable by serving simultaneously to help find one's way in art and to help find one's way in aesthetic matters outside art. Double reflexivity occurs when discourse about aesthetic validity-claims, as raised in art conversation, points such talk toward the horizon of aesthetic standards. That happens, for example, when participants in an art talk say the talk itself is unimaginative. Saying this raises a different claim from the claim that this talk or some aspect of it is inaccurate or inappropriate. It has the effect of raising the stakes of art talk to an unsurpassable limit, similar to the effect of calling a theoretical debate illogical or a practical discussion illegitimate. Yet this metaclaim occurs fairly frequently within art talk, under various guises, and it contributes to double reflexivity.

The question of truth in art evinces the double reflexivity of aesthetic processes. The question