

# Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art

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Aesthetic Experience



# In this lecture...

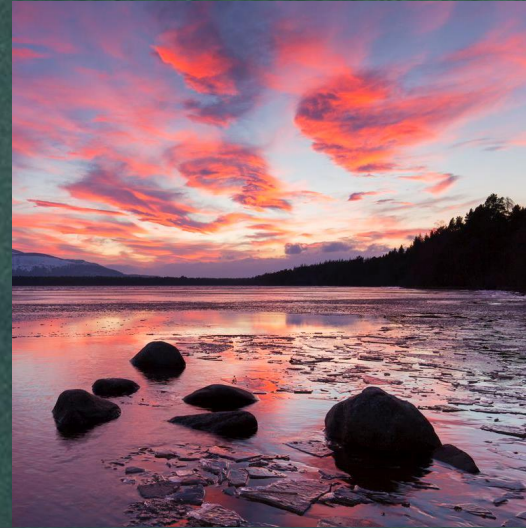
- What is aesthetic experience?
- Aesthetic experiences take many different forms. Some involve natural objects, other ones are centered around artifacts (often artworks).
- Is there anything that these experiences have in common? How to distinguish aesthetic experiences from similar experiences (e.g., an experience of pleasurable sensory stimulation).
- After having considered some solutions, we briefly discuss the notion of aesthetic value, asking whether aesthetic experiences are valued intrinsically or instrumentally.



# Some examples...



Marcel Duchamp,  
*Fountain* (1917)



Raphael,  
*Madonna of the  
Goldfinch*  
(1506)



# Experiences, not objects

- In discussing the nature of aesthetic EXPERIENCE, we need to keep in mind that we are not talking about particular OBJECTS, asking whether they are “aesthetic” objects.
- Aesthetic experiences are normally aesthetic experiences of some object or event, but these objects and events may be encountered in experiences that are not aesthetic.



# Kant on beautiful vs. agreeable

- Immanuel Kant's (1724-1804) *Critique of Judgement* (1790) is a foundational book in Western aesthetics.
- Kant distinguishing between the **AGREEABLE** and the BEAUTIFUL.
- The agreeable depends on a subjective reaction of pleasure to a given object, but does not presuppose universal agreement – for example, I like vanilla ice-cream, but I do not expect anyone to do so.
- The JUDGEMENT OF TASTE (品味的判断) is the type of judgement that ascribes **beauty** to an object. When we judge an object to be beautiful, we feel a kind of pleasure, but we also expect anyone to be able, in the right conditions, to have the same experience (SUBJECTIVE UNIVERSALITY).



# Kant on Free Beauty

- More generally, Kant characterizes what he calls FREE BEAUTY as possessing some distinctive features. The most important ones are:
  - (1) UNIVERSALITY (as we have seen, this is supposed to distinguish the beautiful from the agreeable).
  - (2) DISINTERESTEDNESS (a judgement that something is beautiful does not presuppose the existence of that something).
  - (3) FREE BEAUTY involves the FREE PLAY of imagination and understanding.
- Although Kant talks about beauty, he thinks of beauty as constituting a large part of the aesthetic domain.







“In order to decide whether or not something is beautiful, we do not relate the representation by means of understanding to the object for cognition, but rather relate it by means of the imagination (perhaps combined with the understanding) to the subject and its feeling of pleasure or displeasure. The judgment of taste is therefore not a cognitive judgment, hence not a logical one, but is rather aesthetic, by which is understood one whose determining ground **cannot be other than subjective.**”

为了区分某种东西是不是美的，我们不是通过知性把表象与客体相联系以达成知识，而是通过想象力（也许与知性相结合）把表象与主体及其愉快或者不愉快的情感相联系。因此，鉴赏判断不是知识判断，因而不是逻辑的，而是审美的，人们把它理解为这样的东西，它的规定根据只能是主观的。

(Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §1)



“But if the question is whether something is beautiful, one does not want to know whether there is anything that is or that could be at stake, for us or for someone else, in the existence of the thing, but rather how we judge it in mere contemplation (intuition or reflection).”

“One only wants to know whether the mere representation of the object is accompanied with satisfaction in me, however indifferent I might be with regard to the existence of the object of this representation.”

但现在，既然问题是某种东西是否美，人们就不想知道事情的实存对我们或者任何一个人是否有某种重要性，或者哪怕只是可能有重要性；而是想知道，我们如何在纯然观察（直观或者反思）中评断它。

人们只想知道，对象的纯然表象在我心中是否伴随有愉快，哪怕就这个表象的对象的实存而言我总是无所谓。

(Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §2)



# Problems

## (1) Doubts about DISINTERESTEDNESS:

Is it really the case that aesthetic experiences are indifferent as to the actual existence of their objects?

EXAMPLE: appreciating plants and animals.

## (2) Doubts about FREE PLAY:

Is it really that case that aesthetic experiences always involve the free play of imagination and the understanding?

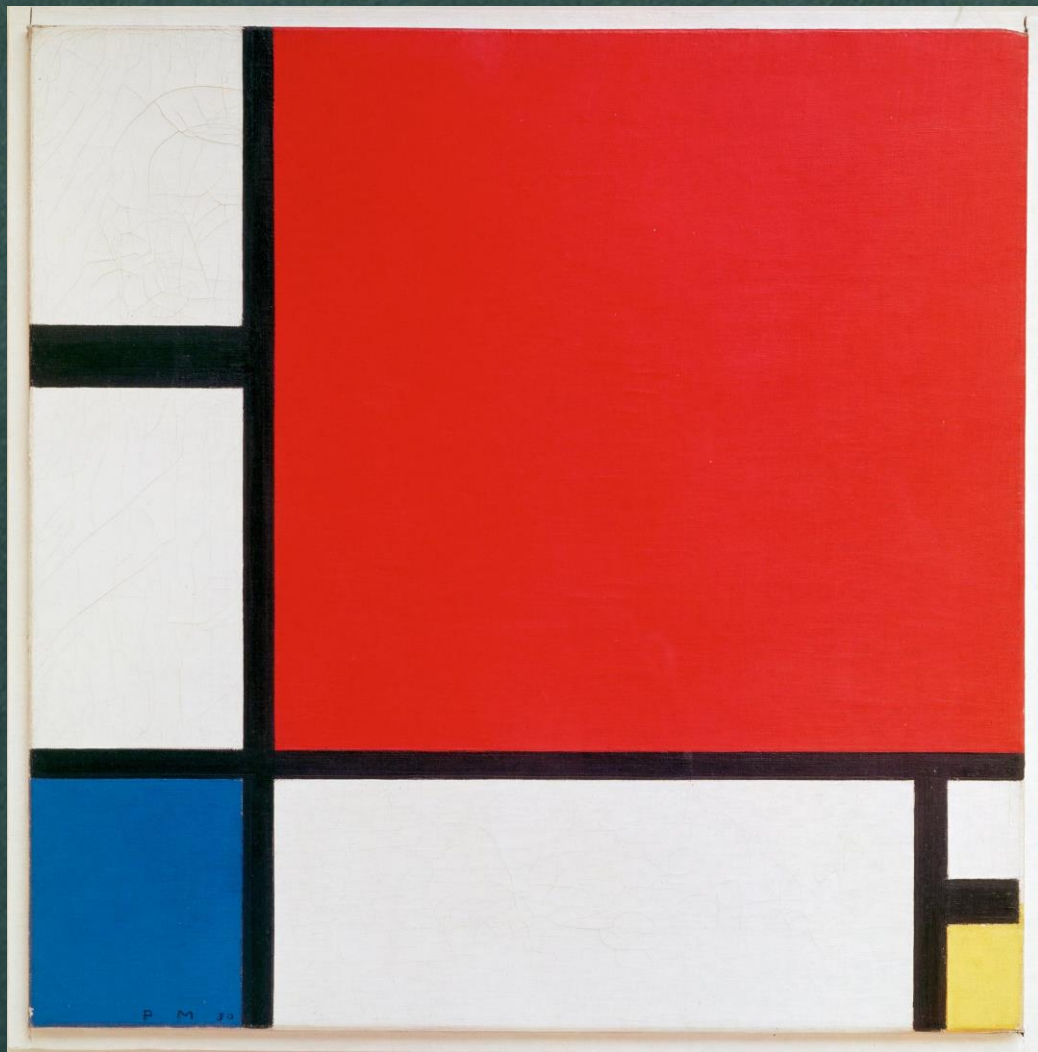
EXAMPLE: appreciating a sunset.

## (3) No role for COGNITION:

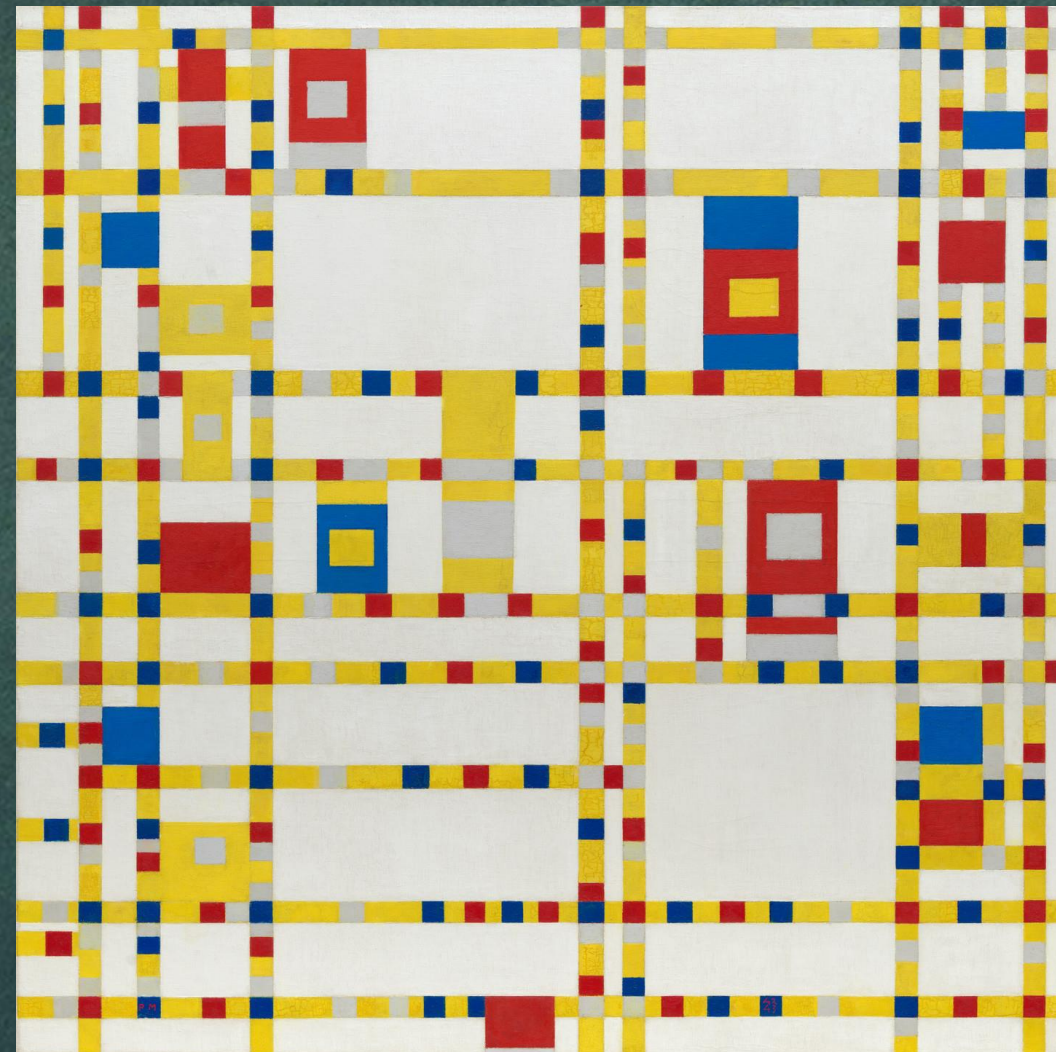
Is the domain of concepts always irrelevant to aesthetic appreciation?

EXAMPLE: *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, appreciated *as a Mondrian painting*.





Piet Mondrian, *Composition with Red, Blue and Yellow* (1929)



Piet Mondrian, *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942-43)



# Kant on Dependent Beauty

- There are aesthetic experiences that Kant's account of FREE BEAUTY seems unable to capture.
- But Kant also offers an alternative conception of beauty, and it is clear that he thinks it applies to the "Fine Arts".
- This is DEPENDENT BEAUTY, in which a beauty judgement depends upon the application of the appropriate concept.

EXAMPLES: To appreciate something *as an oil painting*, or to see a painting *as a work by a certain artist*, etc.)

- But even this broader conception does not solve problems (1) and (2) discussed earlier.



# Object-directed sensuous pleasure

- A possibility is that of modifying Kant's account so as to avoid some problems.
- DISINTERESTEDNESS and FREE PLAY caused trouble, but they were also necessary in order to distinguish the BEAUTIFUL from the AGREEABLE. Can we do so in some other way?
- We can attempt to draw a distinction between pleasurable sensations, and pleasurable sensations that come from an ability to appreciate the features of the object we are experiencing.
- The latter experience is "object-directed" (Stecker 2010, 48).



# Object-directed sensuous pleasure

“Thus, if the pleasure of a meal consists simply in the sensation of one’s hunger being dissipated or the sheer pleasure of indiscriminated tastes in one’s mouth, this is not aesthetic pleasure. But if the experience is focused on the object of the experience – the food and its various qualities of texture and tastes in relation to one another – then it is an aesthetic experience, which is also a source of sensuous [...] pleasure.”

(Stecker 2010, 49)





# PHYSIOLOGIE DU GOUT

PAR

**BRILLAT SAVARIN,**

ILLUSTRÉE

**PAR BERTALL**

PRÉCÉDÉE

D'UNE NOTICE BIOGRAPHIQUE

PAR ALPH. KARR.

Dessins à part du texte, gravés sur acier par Ch. Geoffroy

Gravures sur bois, intercalées dans le texte, par Middrigh



GABRIEL DE GONET, ÉDITEUR, RUE DES BEAUX-ARTS, 6.

**1848**



# The Two-Level Conception

- We have considered several views of aesthetic experience. Many seemed correct, but only partly so. Can we unify them into a single, coherent conception?
- Jerrold Levinson suggests the following one:

“To appreciate something aesthetically is to attend to its forms, qualities and meanings for their own sake, and to their interrelations, but also to attend to the way all such things emerge from [a] particular set of low level perceptual features.” (Levinson 1996, 6)



# The Two-Level Conception

- EXAMPLE: The diagonal composition of a painting grounds its dynamic quality.



Rubens, *The Elevation of the Cross* (1610)



# The Two-Level Conception

- PROBLEM: Perhaps the two-level conception is too demanding: there are aesthetic experiences that lack any focus on how low-level features are responsible for higher-level ones.

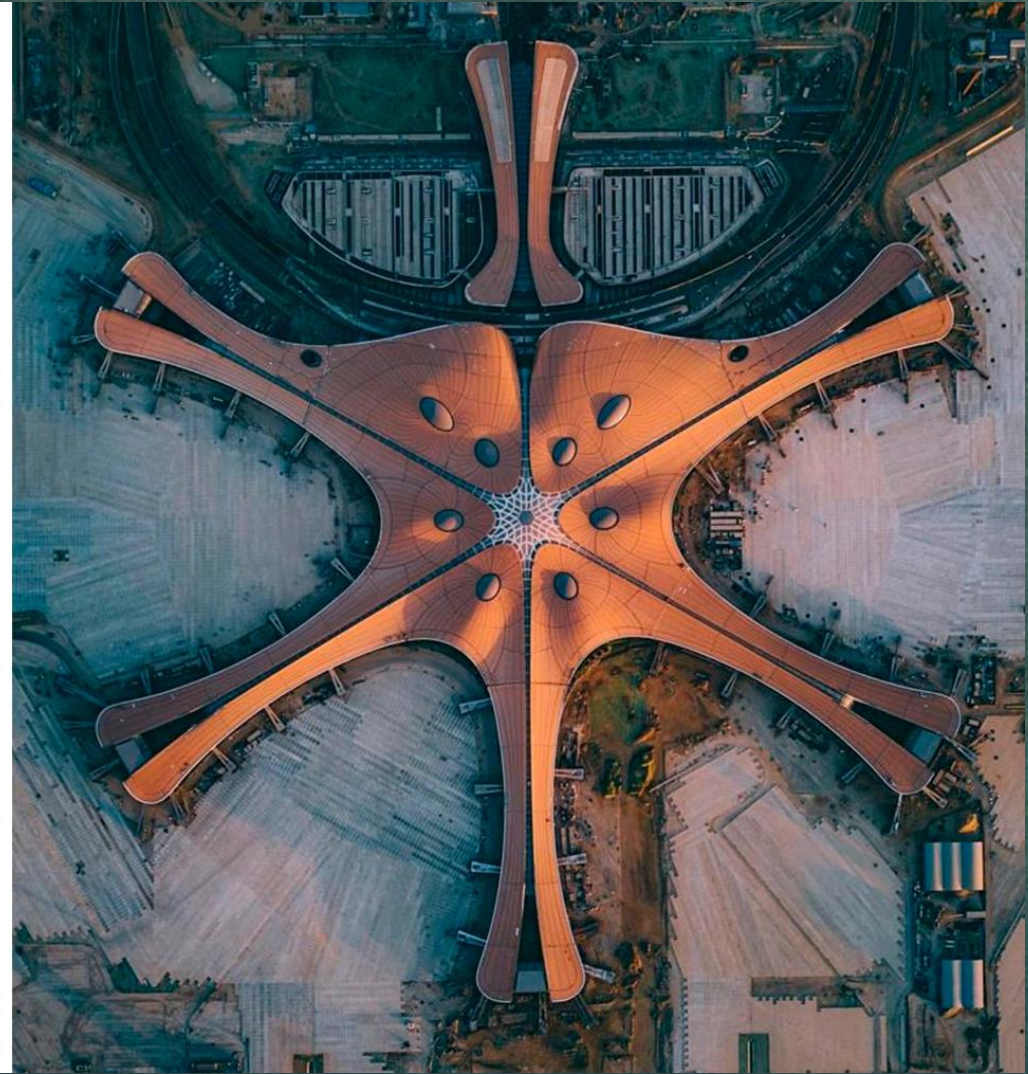
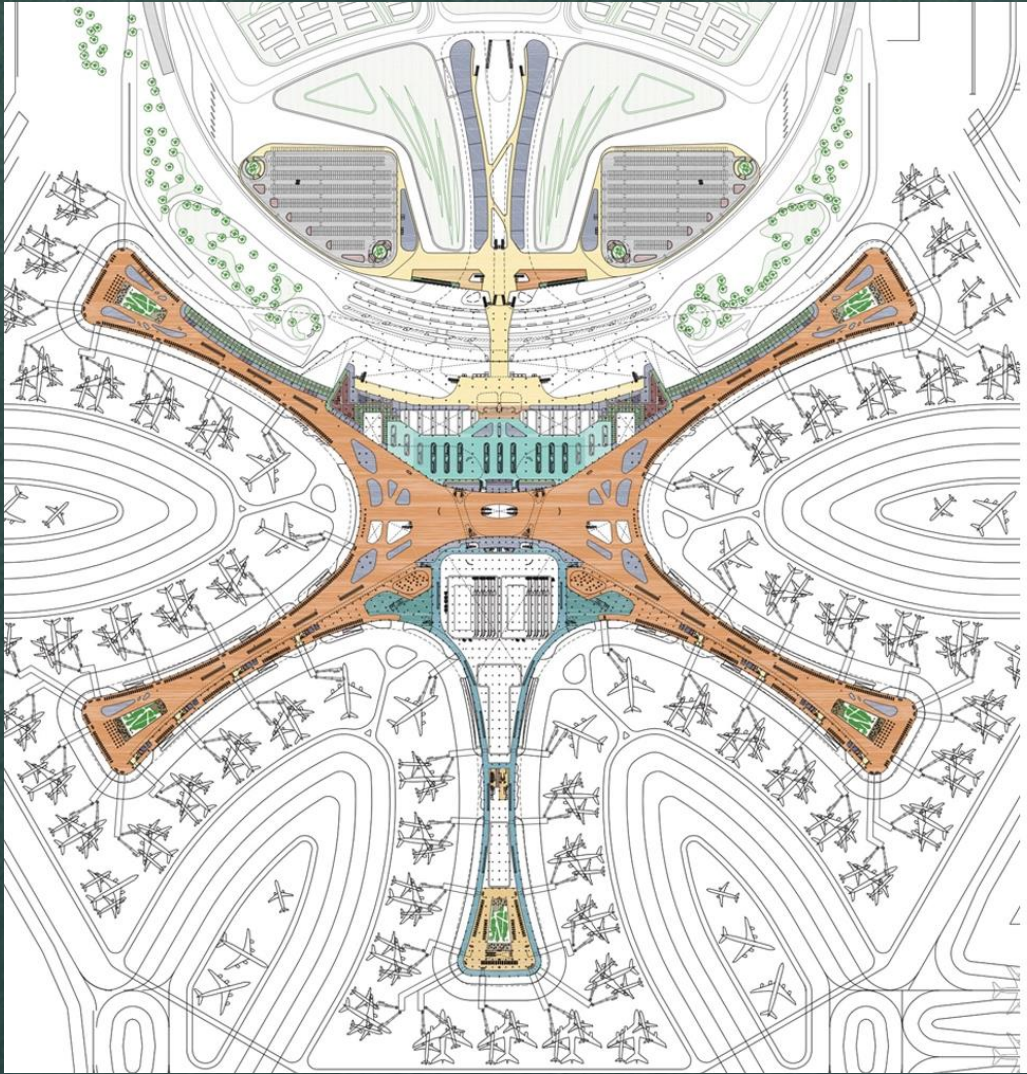




# The Minimal View

- Perhaps we can avoid the problem faced by the two-level conception if we adopt a less demanding view – the MINIMAL VIEW. (Stecker 2010, 52)
- According to the Minimal View, aesthetic experience is:  
“[...] the experience derived from attending in a discriminating manner to forms, qualities or meaningful features of things, attending to these for their own sake or the sake of a payoff intrinsic to this very experience.” (Stecker 2010, 52)
- PROBLEM: Aesthetic experience seems possible in FUNCTIONAL CONTEXTS, where we attend to something for the sake of what it can do, and not for its own sake.





Zaha Hadid Architects, *Daxing international airport*, Beijing (2019)



# The value of aesthetic experiences

- Is *being valued for its own sake* a necessary feature of aesthetic experience?
- INSTRUMENTAL VALUE is the value of objects/experiences that we value for the sake of whatever else they can bring about or provide us.

EXAMPLE: Money is valued because it buys food, shelter, and other things, but it is not valued intrinsically.

- INTRINSIC VALUE is the value of objects that are valued for themselves (independently of anything else they may help obtain or achieve).

EXAMPLES: "Pleasure, knowledge, freedom, happiness, intimacy, certain achievements [...]." (Stecker 2010, 54)