

The Absent Presence of Community: Kant's Voice

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Résumé: *Est la philosophie capable d'écouter? Dans le texte de Nancy, le concept de présence acquiert des nuances diverses, en fonction de changements qui surviennent dans le texte. En lisant Kant selon Nancy, nous essayerons de définir la relation entre la philosophie et la présence.*

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We take our starting point from Nancy, who, in his recent text *À l'écoute*, asks the question: “is philosophy capable of *listening*?” Now interestingly, and to link up with the theme of this conference, this question will go to the very heart of the issue of *presence*: the question of presence, in Nancy’s text, will articulate itself through the auditory capabilities of philosophy; philosophy’s ability (or inability) to listen will at once entail a *displacement* of the relationship between philosophy and that without which it would seem to slide into meaninglessness: presence.

For to shift the focus of philosophy from the visual to the auditory would disrupt a privileged relationship between philosophy and presence. States Nancy: “Parmi cent distributions et combinaisons possibles des ‘sens,’ je peux, pour mon propos, esquisser celle-ci: le visuel (et le gustatif) en rapport avec de la *présence*, l’auditif (et l’olfactif) en rapport avec du *signal* (et le tactile en deçà des deux)” (26n).

Now to listen – to make philosophy listen – would not be to *destroy* philosophy’s relationship to presence. It would mean, rather, displacing this relationship. But what *form* would this displacement take? This paper will ask precisely this question, through a reading of one of the philosophers whom Nancy, in the very first pages of his book, mentions by name: Kant. Through a reading of Kant’s third critique, this paper will attempt to *listen* to philosophy, and subsequently ask what effect this listening has on the question of presence in philosophy – and specifically this philosophical text.

To arrive, eventually, at the question of presence, we must take a detour here, through another question that is dear to Nancy: the question of *community*; the question of being-together, of being-with. I will argue here that Kant’s third critique is *obsessed* with this question; and that his obsession with it articulates itself through a joint obsession with *sound*.

How, then, will this being-in-common, this being-together, this *we*, *articulate itself* in the third critique? Let us begin by recalling that Kant, in the first section of the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* – “The Analytic of the Beautiful” – describes the “quantitative moment” of aesthetic

judgment as one of *subjective universality*. What this means is that the one who judges an object *beautiful* is never speaking only for him or herself. For to judge an object beautiful is, according to Kant, simultaneously to demand that *everyone* agree with this judgment. To demand, in other words, a *universal* agreement or assent – to demand what Kant alternately describes as an *Einstimmung*, a *Beistimmung*, an *Übereinstimmung*.

Now on what is this demand – this demand to agree, this demand of unanimity or *Einstimmigkeit* – based? The response to this question is located in Kant's formulation of how a judgment – a judgment on the beautiful – takes place. For Kant, if we take pleasure in a beautiful object, it is not because of a *conceptual* understanding of the object. Conceptual understanding, he states, belongs to logical and not to aesthetic judgment. Our feeling of pleasure before the beautiful, on the contrary, precedes and even renders possible conceptual cognition. For this pleasure is based on the fact that when we look upon the beautiful, our presentational powers – imagination and understanding – enter into a certain relationship with one another: Kant describes this relationship as one of *free play*. The pleasure that we seem to take in the object is in fact a pleasure in this free play, this free interplay, between our imagination and our understanding.

Now Kant does not exactly describe this free play as a “relationship” between the imagination and the understanding. He describes it, rather, as an *attunement* between these presentational powers. He describes it, in other words, as a *Stimmung*.

Now this particular attunement – this free play between imagination and understanding – is one, Kant states, that is *universal*: if we are able to make cognitions, to think conceptually (and concepts are, by definition, universal), then the *substratum* that underlies this ability must also be universal. And it is thus that we demand universal agreement, the universal *Einstimmung* or *Übereinstimmung*: if our pleasure before the beautiful is based on a certain attunement (*Stimmung*) of our presentational powers, and this attunement is determined to be universal, then that which produces this attunement – our pleasure in gazing upon the beautiful – must also be universal.

This is why we *demand* universal agreement. But there is still one more question we must ask here: *how* is this demand made? Kant writes: “[I]f we call [an] object beautiful, we believe we have a *universal voice*, and lay claim to the agreement of everyone.” A universal voice: a universal *Stimme*. And it is this *Stimme* (voice) which, based on a *Stimmung* (attunement), demands the universal *Einstimmung* or *Übereinstimmung* (agreement, assent).

What we find, then, in the “Analytic of the Beautiful,” is that universality – the whole, the all, the *we* – is constructed in and through the language of the German root *stimm*: the *we*, in this first section of the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, is articulated in and through the displacements and transformations of the *stimm*.

Now the second section of the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* – the “Analytic of the Sublime” – will in some way constitute the *ruin* of this *we*. The sublime, we could say, paraphrasing Blanchot, will *ruin* this *we*, all the while leaving it intact.

In what does the feeling of the sublime consist? In his very first paragraph on the sublime, Kant writes that while the sublime and the beautiful have much in common, one of their significant differences is the following:

The beautiful in nature concerns the form of the object, which consists in [the object's] being bounded. But the sublime can also be found in a formless object, insofar as we present *unboundedness*, either [as] in the object or because the object prompts us to present it, while yet we add to this unboundedness the thought of its totality. (98)

One of the specific characteristics of the sublime, then, would lie in a certain intersection of totality and unboundedness, *Unbegrenztheit*. The feeling of the sublime, Kant writes, arises when we gaze upon objects that we cannot “take in” in one glance: pyramids, mountains, oceans. We cannot take them in in one glance because of their immensity: they seem, to our gaze, limitless, unbounded. In the sublime, however, we add to this unboundedness a thought of totality. How is this possible?

Let us note at this point, only in passing, the intersection of these statements about *totality*, and our concern in this paper with the question of the *we*. To say “we,” to speak about universality, about a whole, would seem to demand totality – would seem to demand, that is, the drawing of certain limits, a boundary separating the whole from its outside. What ramifications, then, will this intersection of totality and *unboundedness* have for what we identified as a Kantian thinking of the *we*?

And let us also note here that the question of the *stimm*, in all its forms, will, as it was for the beautiful, be central to the thinking of the sublime.

For a judgment on the sublime, like a judgment on the beautiful, again demands a universal *agreement*, a universal *Übereinstimmung*. And again, this agreement is based on a certain attunement (*Stimmung*) that is proper to the sublime. Now of what does this *Stimmung* consist?

When we gaze upon an enormous object, Kant writes, a *displeasure* ensues: for we are unable to “take it all in”; our imagination is unable to present the seemingly boundless object as a totality – and hence we feel a displeasure at the *inadequacy* of our imagination.

An inadequacy, because what Kant calls the *voice of reason* – *die Stimme der Vernunft* – again *demands* totality of every presentation given by the imagination. And the imagination, faced with a boundless object, is unable to respond to this demand to totality.

But this very displeasure – and this is the particular *Stimmung* that is proper to the sublime – gives rise to a certain pleasure: for the imagination’s inadequacy before reason’s demand makes us *intuit* an awesome power on the part of our reason: a power, that is, to think the unbounded as a totality. To think totality and unboundedness simultaneously.

We take pleasure from this displeasure, then, because we come to feel this seemingly boundless power of our reason, to simultaneously think totality and unboundedness; and even though we cannot gain direct access to this power, we presuppose that it is there within us.

The problem thus seems solved: it is within *reason* that the conjunction of totality and unboundedness occurs.

Yet Kant gives us very little indication as to what this might *mean*. In a way, he asks us to take him at his word: that even though we cannot conceive of this conjunction of totality and unboundedness, our reason – to which we have no direct access – is able to do just that.

Yet this does not point to the poverty but rather to the *interest* of the text. For in order to bring together these two seemingly irreconcilable notions – totality, unboundedness – Kant does not *transform* the one or the other: he leaves each notion intact, suspended in mid air, as it were; he forces neither to cease to be itself, to try to fit itself into the logic of the other.

Now this co-suspension – this paradoxically non-contradictory co-existence of totality and unboundedness – demands that we mistrust Kant. It demands that we not take him at his word when he tells us that totality and unboundedness meet in a realm of reason to which we are granted no access. It is as though Kant – by laying out the terms in such an interesting and rich way – begged us to betray him, to interrogate, as it were, that which he posits as the uninterrogatable.

It is a demand – a demand made by Kant himself, though unbeknownst to him – to cross a limit. Or rather: to explore that aspect of the limit itself – the bound, the boundary – which itself constitutes its own beyond.

And this strange non-beyond of the limit itself would be nothing other than unboundedness, unlimitedness.

Unbegrenztheit: for unlimitedness (and from here to the end of the essay, I will be following Nancy's essay, "The Sublime offering," very closely) is not that which lies to the *outside* of the limit. It is rather (to quote Nancy) the *edge* of the limit. It is that aspect of the limit which puts the limit into motion, that aspect of the limit by which the limit *puts itself* into motion. For there are two aspects of the limit: there is that aspect of the limit which *de-limits* (a form, a figure, an entity); and that aspect of the limit which *un-limits*, which removes the limit from itself, as it were, and puts it into relation with the outside. And these aspects are but a single moment: each occurs in and by the other, in the very act of the tracing of the limit.

Unbegrenztheit, then, is that which puts the *Grenze*, the limit, in contact with its own outside (is that which *opens* the limit to its outside). Yet this outside is not that which lies "beyond" the limit. For the beyond *is* unlimitedness (and hence is inseparable from, occurs at the very same place as, the limit itself). Unlimitedness is that aspect of the limit which, *in unlimiting* itself to the outside, is at once the trace of this outside, its imprint. The limit, that is – *in* this act of de-limiting itself (in the infinity of the beginning of this act, its incessant birth) – is at once the act of un-limiting itself: and hence is at once the mark of the *whole*, the *all, against* which it traces itself. *In its tracing*, the limit carves out a certain *place* in the all – and hence *opens* itself to the all: is the mark of this all, the entirety of this outside, *with which* it has entered into relation in the very act of tracing itself. The limit – its unlimitedness – is that place *at which* the all remains always present, that place at which the all maintains its relation with the limit and that which the limit de-limits. And the outside, therefore – the *all* – is not "somewhere else": the all is precisely the *unlimitedness of the limit*, that edge of the limit which is at all times marked by the totality of the whole. The unlimited is that aspect of the limit which is both the limit and its outside; the unlimited is the boundlessness of the all, the totality of boundlessness.

Unlimitedness: that site at which the limit – *in its* very overflowing of itself – opens itself to the whole... and thus opens itself to that unexpectedness, that unforeseeability, that belongs

only to this openness, that belongs to the openness of the unlimited limit. This is why Nancy will say that the all – which is not outside the limit, which is the limit's unlimitedness – is thus the *movement* of the limit – is that aspect of the limit which leaves itself open to the unforeseeable motion of its own outside. Between the limit and its own unlimitedness, then, what we find is a certain *tension*. And let us note that we have never left the terrain here of the Kantian sublime. What Nancy describes as the beating, the pulsation, of the limit and its unlimitedness is precisely the *attunement* of the sublime: this taking-place of totality in and through the unbounded, this taking-place of unboundedness in and through the totality. A *tuning* of the limit by the all that is its unlimitedness.

But what the limit opens itself up to in its opening, its exposure, to its own unlimitedness is not merely the rhythmic movement of this beating, this pulsation, this dehiscence: what it exposes itself to is precisely what Nancy calls the *syncope* of this beating. The *syncope*: the missed beat, the quickened pulse, a pounding cut short, a shortness of breath. And again, we are still on the terrain of the sublime here. For the sublime attunement, writes Kant, is precisely one of *agitation*: the agitation of the unforeseeable, of the irregular, of the vibration that cannot be contained or controlled. Kant says nothing else in describing the sublime *Stimmung*:

In presenting the sublime in nature the mind feels *agitated* [*bewegt*]... this agitation (above all at its inception) can be compared with a vibration [*Erschütterung*], i.e., with a rapid alteration of repulsion from, and attraction to, one and the same object. (115)

Rapid alteration, attraction/repulsion, missed beat or missed interval between beats – by which the limit is transformed in its very exposure to the all; by which the all changes in and by the unlimitedness of the limit. By which – to paraphrase Deleuze – (*the*) everything changes.

Such is the sublime *Stimmung*: the syncope of this agitation between unboundedness and totality. And it is this sublime *Stimmung* that thereby enacts a retroactive repetition of sorts – that comes to repeat itself in the *stimm* whose plurivocity had already insisted throughout the “Analytic of the Beautiful.” That thereby comes to aggravate, to agitate, that which has already been constructed in the section on the beautiful: this *Stimmung* which gives rise to – whose voice demands – the *Übereinstimmung*. In the section of the beautiful, in other words, this sublime *Stimmung* – its agitation, its aggravation – will already have been at work (the voice of this sublime *Stimmung* is hence the voice of the future perfect...): the agitation (the syncope) that reveals itself as the most proper moment of the sublime *Stimmung* will already have spoken itself, insisted, through the very *Stimme* which was the injunction to subjective universality, the injunction of this certain *we*.

Ruining it, all the while leaving it intact.

The sublime *stimm* is a film of Martin Arnold. *Ravaging* the whole with its unforeseeable vibrations, its terrifying movements, its arrhythmic variations. All the while revealing itself to have been, to always have been, the most essential moment of this whole which it nonetheless

ravages. Voice which keeps silent *in* its very demanding of a certain whole¹... voice which ruins this whole in exposing it to its outside. Voice, that is, of the sublime *stimm*.

NOTE

¹ And could the sublime voice do anything *but* keep silent? Or rather; is the most essential moment of the sublime voice (as opposed to the merely beautiful voice) not precisely the silences that punctuate it, that keep its rhythm in a constant relation which the arrhythmic, that open it to its outside? Is this not precisely what is at stake when Barthes discusses the *grain* of the voice?

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