Metaphor and Symbol in the Interpretation of Art

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At the intersection of aesthetics and epistemology lies the idea that works of art can convey knowledge of a kind, and can enrich our understanding of the world. The many theories that have devolved from this central notion include those seeking to explain art in terms of a theory of metaphor: if art can be shown to be metaphorical, art can therefore generate new meaning, and so lay claim to epistemic legitimacy. This approach can be found in the work of Arthur Danto, Mark Johnson, and Carl Hausman, but more recently in articles by A. T. Nuyen and Kirk Pillow, who claim that the notion of art-as-metaphor can be traced in nascent form to Kant's *Critique of Judgment*.

Nuyen writes that "it is the Kantian theory that gives epistemological legitimacy to the visions of poets and artists .... [I]t is the Kantian theory that places those visions at the center of human rationality" (KM, 108). Both he and Pillow wish to find in Kant an early, and bona fide, articulation of the epistemological function of art.

I will argue that they cannot do so, and that their contentions rest on an incomplete reading of, particularly, sections 49 and 59 of the Third *Critique*. Kant’s goal, I will claim, is more modest than they allow. His conceptions of beauty and the aesthetic ideas of genius function not as metaphors providing new insight, but as symbols serving to represent rational ideas we already have, enabling us to demonstrate and concretize concepts for which no direct intuition is possible. While Kant does provide insight into how artworks come to have meaning for us, he is not, in the end, breaking ground for a theory of art as metaphor or for a defense of art’s function in the acquisition of knowledge. My purpose in this paper is twofold: first, I seek to correct what I regard as an overly ambitious reading of sections of the Third *Critique*; second, I shall use Kant’s discussion of art to explore what happens in the interaction between a spectator and a work, and to make some (very modest) proposals about the nature of interpretation. These proposals will emerge largely through an analysis of Nuyen’s and Pillow’s arguments, and a reading of Kant’s text.

I will begin with Nuyen’s article, which presents the weaker of the two arguments for a Kantian theory of metaphor. He focuses on §59 of the *Critique of Judgment*, entitled “Of Beauty as the Symbol of Morality.” Here Kant makes a number of observations on symbolism. Symbols are one of three types of “hypotyposis”—presentations, or what Paul Guyer defines as the “rendering of concepts in terms of sense.” Concepts must be connected to something we can experience in order to have real meaning; intuitions are just what establish the objective reality of our concepts. Yet the
connections between them vary. For determinate empirical concepts, for instance, sensible intuitions serve as *examples* (as in this cat, Fluffy), while for concepts of the understanding, the intuitions are *schemata* (such as temporal succession standing for the concept of causation\(^3\)); but for rational ideas, such as "freedom," "God," or "monarchy," Kant notes that if we try to establish their objective reality "we are asking for something impossible, because absolutely no intuition can be given which shall be adequate to them" (*CJ*, §59, 197). We cannot form a determinate concept of rational ideas because they refer to something that extends beyond the bounds of experience. Thus, we cannot have knowledge of them. The best we can do is provide a symbol, an "indirect" presentation of the idea, as it is not the direct object of sensible intuition. Rational ideas are *indemonstrable* in this regard: while they can be defined in the abstract, they cannot be directly shown in intuition. Providing a symbolic presentation of them is the best we can do.

Symbols, however, are not arbitrary. Kant suggests as an example that a handmill can represent a despotic state, not because there is a resemblance between the properties of each, but because "there is a similarity in the rules according to which we reflect upon these two things and their causality" (*CJ*, §59, 198). The mind, as it reflects on the image, is led to a similar train of thought, which Paul Guyer describes as follows:

In both these cases [the handmill and the despotic state], presumably one thinks in a similar chain: of objects (grain, persons) being subjected to operations entirely outside of their control (being ground, being dictated to) and being converted into whatever the mechanism (the mill, the despot) is designed for, or designs to produce (flour, slaves).\(^4\)

The actual content of the symbol is neither an example nor a schema of what it symbolizes. There is instead an analogy between the way the ideas in each case are connected. While nothing but a cat will serve as an example of the empirical concept, other things *can* serve as symbols of despotic states if a similar line of thought can be traced through each. The success of the use of a given symbol lies in our ability to grasp its appropriateness or "fit" by a chain of thinking such as Guyer describes.

Nuyen argues that, for Kant, "since intuition is inadequate to represent a rational concept, the best we can do is to *invent* or *create* a similarity" between the two. It is this creativity that leads Nuyen to suggest that "what Kant calls 'symbol' we [should] call 'metaphor,'" understood along Interactionist lines (*KM*, 97, 98). The interactionist conception of metaphor—as first
advanced by Max Black, and later articulated by Nelson Goodman, Paul Ricoeur, and Eva Kittay—suggests that a metaphor sparks a semantic interaction when a concept is transferred from its customary domain to an alien one, producing new links between previously unrelated phenomena. Black uses the example of “man is a wolf,” and claims that our understanding of both concepts is transformed through their interaction: the collision between disparate semantic or experiential domains expresses something that literal wording cannot capture, thereby offering new insight. A metaphor is not simply a deviant use of language, one that departs from its basic function of literal description, but is instead a legitimate form of expression which provides a unique opportunity for epistemic gain.

What Ricoeur calls metaphor’s “impertinence” in projecting “new possibilities of redescribing the world” results in an indeterminacy of meaning as both speaker/artist and audience contribute to its significance. Connotations about wolves that are conjured up in the metaphor “man is a wolf” may be different for you than for me; you may see implications I miss, add layers of meaning to the metaphor that I fail to see or do not think relevant. Thus, the metaphor may mean something different to you than to me. Kirk Pillow notes that the meaning of metaphors “varies with the interpretive finesse of their audience and so cannot be specified by any interpretive rule” (JE, 198). Instead, metaphors are understood through a creative and imaginative process whereby we are enjoined to “do something” with the juxtaposition of ideas presented to us.

Nuyen claims that the Kantian symbolical process is in fact metaphorical. The similarity between the two relata—despot and handmill—is not, he says, “already in existence or antecedently given” to us (KM, 99). The judgment instead creates a resemblance between them by filling in the gap with a similar train of thought. The result is both original and insightful, and the power of metaphor lies partly in this: if metaphors produce new affinities between entities that are actually disjoint, they ascribe new qualities to the subjects in the metaphor and transform our understanding of those subjects in ways that could not have come about otherwise. Metaphors do not merely compare existent components of the world, or flesh out their meanings. Rather, they help craft that meaning and so contribute to our understanding.

Pillow seeks to find an interactionist theory of metaphor in Kant’s text as well, while taking issue with Nuyen’s interpretation of §59 as its locus. Pillow argues that symbols are metaphors only if “one accepts that metaphors are fundamentally analogical”: despot and handmill may indeed be “radically disjoint” notions, but the rule-boundedness of our reflection on the two requires the mind to work in a similar way as we consider each. This not only limits the possibilities at which we will arrive, but actually fixes the
meaning that will result. A despot is not a handmill in the way that man is a wolf; our reflection on the two does not ascribe new qualities to each, but sorts out the similarities between them. A despot is like a handmill and the mind is led to supply the reason why, in the way we supply the middle term in an Aristotelean enthymeme. If, as Pillow notes, Kant's remarks "merely repeated Aristotelean doctrine," they will not have advanced our understanding of either metaphors or art (JE, 196, 196, 196).

Further, it follows from this that an analogy can be reduced to a comparison or "complex simile." But if a metaphor "merely compares entities to point out their similarity," rather than generating new meaning, it will at best create "a new awareness of an antecedently given but unnoticed commonality" between the two hidden in the set of rules that fix the meaning of each element (JE, 196, 196). A handmill would not be an apt symbol for a despotic state were this commonality between the two not already existent and waiting to be discovered.

I would add to Pillow's objections that the relata of a symbol must be, first, a rational idea, and second, a sensible intuition as its indirect representation, whereas the relata of a metaphor can both be concrete—men and wolves, for example—such that through their juxtaposition they produce a new concept. Nuyen claims that Kant's theory is "rich enough" to account for these other kinds of cases, but while we may be able to extend it in various ways, this is beside Kant's original point: the purpose of a symbol is to provide indirect representation to a rational idea for which no sensible intuition is adequate (KM, 100). Pillow concludes that Nuyen's reading of §59 provides us with, at best, "weak" metaphors that do not offer new insights, or more likely with similes that compare existing phenomena for the purposes of exemplification (JE, 203).

Pillow, I believe, is correct in his assessment of Nuyen's reading. Section 59 will not yield a theory of metaphor along interactionist lines. But Pillow also dismisses too quickly the purpose of Kant's discussion here. I will return to this below. For the moment, however, let me turn to §49 and the notion of aesthetic ideas. This is where Pillow finds interactionist metaphors operating, and where Nuyen sees an elaboration of his reading of §59. By an aesthetic idea Kant means "that representation of the imagination which occasions much thought, without however any definite thought, i.e. any concept being capable of being adequate to it" (Cl, §49, 157). An aesthetic idea is what Kant calls a "counterpart" to a rational idea. Whereas a rational idea can be made intelligible by reason and represented by means of a symbol, an aesthetic idea is presented as a sensible intuition which, Kant says, "cannot be completely compassed and made intelligible by language" (Cl, §49, 157). These forms are the products of artistic genius. Not only "painting
or sculpture” but “poetry and rhetoric” in like ways stimulate the imagination to “spread itself over a number of kindred representations that arouse more thought than can be expressed in a concept determined by words” (CI, §49, 158). Aesthetic ideas are so abundant in intuitive content that no single empirical concept is adequate to capture them. Like rational ideas, they reach beyond cognizable experience, but while rational ideas are indemonstrable because of a paucity of intuitive content, aesthetic ideas are inexplicable because they are too intuitively rich to be nailed down.

According to Pillow, aesthetic ideas are also “the expressed content of works of art,” and indicate a role for the imagination as an “artistic ‘constructor’ of the world through metaphor.” He writes that art “shares with metaphor this invitation to an unlimited elaboration of meaning,” since art “brings together disjoint materials to express a new perspective that transforms our understanding of ourselves and our world. Works of art have this power, in Kant’s aesthetic theory, because they express through metaphor in the interactionist sense” (JE, 202, 206, 202). Kant’s primary example of the operation of an aesthetic idea in art is as follows:

Jupiter’s eagle with the lightning in its claws is an attribute of the mighty king of heaven.... [It does] not, like logical attributes, represent what lies in our concepts of the sublimity and majesty of creation, but something different.... [It] furnishes an aesthetical idea, which for that rational idea takes the place of logical presentation; and thus, as [its] proper office, [it] enlivens the mind by opening out to it the prospect into an illimitable field of kindred representations (CI, §49, 158).

For Pillow, the operation of the mind is similar to the case of “man is a wolf”: the result of the “enlivening” of the mind by the representation of disjoint material is a new insight ineffable in its richness. Unlike logical attributes, which are already present in the pregiven content of a concept, the representation here “aesthetically enlarges the concept itself in an unbounded fashion” (CI, §49, 158). Aesthetic ideas play a broader role than symbols, Pillow claims, because their meaning is “illimitable”—because they are created by the imagination and cannot be reduced to rational ideas or expressed through discursive language, and because they transform our literal, empirical intuitions into something new. For both Nuyen and Pillow, reading §49 as an early theory of metaphor points not only to a greater creative dimension to cognition but to a greater cognitive role for art.

Indeed, Arthur Danto’s well known example of Napoleon represented in paint as a Roman Emperor is designed to argue the case for art-as-meta-
He writes that "to understand the artwork is to grasp the metaphor that is, I think, always there." There is a clear juxtaposition of ideas in this case that yield a metaphor of "dignity, authority, grandeur, power and political utterness ... as if the painting resolved into a kind of imperative to see a under the attributes of b," in the way we understand man as a wolf in a verbal metaphor. Without directly applying Kantian theory, Danto maintains the same thesis as Nuyen and Pillow, that the meaning of art is metaphorical, and that unpacking it can enrich our understanding.

I wish to argue that Nuyen's and Pillow's reading of §49 is incomplete, and that art cannot be neatly defined as metaphor in the way that they, and Danto, wish. Aesthetic ideas, as indeterminate sensible intuitions, have an inexhaustibility of meaning. However, it does not follow that they are metaphors or that all art is metaphorical and a product of them. I will take the second point first. Genius, the faculty of the imagination responsible for the production of aesthetic ideas, is present in some, but not all, art. Kant states that "in some works ... asserted to be works of beautiful art we find genius without taste, while in others we find taste without genius" (CJ, §48, 156). While it is genius that produces aesthetic ideas, it is "on account" of taste that art is beautiful (CJ, §50, 163). It is a peculiarity of some products of the imaginative mind that they express aesthetic ideas, but this does not make them art. In fact, for Kant, it is taste and not genius that is an "indispensable condition" and "the most important thing" to which we must look in judging art. He notes that the freedom of genius, if untempered by taste, can produce "nonsense," a kind of unfettered and formless originality of the imagination (CJ, §50, 163). We simply do not find in Kant an essentialist definition of art as metaphor, whatever later theorists may claim, nor can we conclude from §49 that all art has an epistemic function analogous to the function of metaphor, even while this may be the case for some products of the imagination.

Moreover, while aesthetic ideas are "illimitable" in their meaning, they need not be construed as metaphors, and doing so unduly restricts Kant's account of them. Even if, as Pillow claims, art expresses aesthetic ideas, this does not make them metaphors. A metaphor, in interactionist terms, is sparked by a collision between two relata where one is transferred to an alien domain and thereby enriched, as with Napoleon seen as a Roman Emperor. But all that Kant offers in his account of aesthetic ideas is that they are sensible representations of empirical particulars, a "talent" of the imagination that creates "another nature" out of the empirical material that nature gives it (CJ, §49, 158, 157). Aesthetic ideas are "ideas" because, as Kant notes, they "at least strive after something which lies beyond the bounds
of experience” in their novelty (CJ, §49, 157). But they are also discrete, sensible representations.

With aesthetic ideas, we have no concepts, only intuitions that seem heavy with indeterminate meaning. We have, in general, no collision between ideas. These intuitions provoke the mind to move freely along various paths in an attempt to conceptualize and understand them, rather than to seek a connection between two disjoint but specifiable notions. Kant, in his discussion of genius, seeks to explain the freely creative aspect of the imagination whereby we can produce images for which we do not have concepts. Metaphors, while they too extend beyond determinate conceptualization, begin with understanding and with wholly specified ideas. What makes them interesting is what happens when we put these ideas together in unique ways. What makes aesthetic ideas interesting is that we have no specified ideas in the first place. The determinate judgment does not function in this instance. It seeks to apply a concept to a representation, but it cannot because no concept is adequate.

Danto offers as an example a painting that features a clear juxtaposition of specifiable ideas. But is this the case with all art? Counterexamples abound, from the nonrepresentational works of Newman, Pollock, and Christo, where there are no determinate concepts at all, to the complex canvasses of Titian, Picasso, and da Vinci, where we cannot find (only) two clearly represented ideas that collide. Let us look more closely at one of these: Titian’s The Flaying of Marsyas. At first, the painting suggests a scene in a story that can easily be recounted: the satyr Marsyas has challenged the god Apollo to a music contest, the rules being that the winner can do whatever he likes to his opponent. Apollo, having won, decrees that Marsyas is to be flayed alive, and it is the meting out of this punishment that is the central action of the picture. But the merit of this work lies in its being much more than an illustration of a story. Richard Wollheim, for instance, claims that this painting is Titian’s “great tribute to art conceived of as a struggle against the direst odds.” He suggests that “if it is the victory of the soul over the body we are watching, what makes it possible is the victory of the body over itself,” as displayed in the expression on Marsyas’s face. For Robert Yanal, Wollheim’s remarks provide “not a single thought ... but what amounts to a philosophy of suffering.” Yet for me, this painting tells us that to be an artist—a great artist—is to dare to challenge the gods and (inevitably) lose. Where Wollheim sees acceptance in the face of Marsyas, and Yanal sees suffering, I see triumph: Marsyas’s eyes are bright, as if to say, “I’ve done it. I’ve gone the whole way as an artist, been stripped bare and exposed, challenged the gods with my music, and this is the best I could have done.”
No determinate meaning, articulable in a single concept, will result from a study of the painting; it is not an example of an empirical concept. The painting offers up a number of possible meanings and is open to a variety of interpretations—suggesting, for example, that defeat can be victorious, or that suffering can be triumphant, or warning against the perils of the life of an artist, and so on. But whatever this painting means is not the result of a juxtaposition of wholly specifiable notions. The eye is not drawn toward a clear collision between the ideas of god and man, or divinity and artistry, or suffering and triumph, in the way that a metaphor juxtaposes man and wolf to reap new insight from them. The painting is hermeneutically richer, more ambiguous, than a simple juxtaposition of two clearly disjoint elements. One may wish to argue that the painting is an interactionist metaphor, as Danto claims of the portrait of Napoleon, but this cannot be the case. The Titian is complex; the description already provided does not exhaust the analysis of the painting. What of the dog, lapping up Marsyas’s blood, and the larger dog restrained by the child? What of the other satyr with the bucket of water, or the butcher assisting the torture? We do not, in a canvas of this sophistication, have two clearly juxtaposed notions that interact in the way that Black suggests metaphors operate. If the painting expresses aesthetic ideas, it does not configure these ideas into the neat package a metaphor requires. This painting, in that it does portray recognizable figures, is less problematic a counterexample than nonrepresentational works which do not portray anything familiar at all.

Let me now return to Kant’s account of symbol in §59 and ask why, if he had provided a full account of metaphor in §49, as Pillow suggests, he would then in §59 simply “repeat Aristotelean doctrine” and offer a second, and weaker, explanation of the same notion? I would suggest that Kant’s account of symbol is richer and more complex than either Nuyen or Pillow allows, that it has a function in the process of interpreting art neither of them has fully grasped—and that even if they had, it does not net them the theory of metaphor or of art that they wish to find in the Third Critique.

Nuyen asks a pertinent question: If aesthetic ideas are “inexponible,” in that they cannot be conceptualized, how are they to be communicated and understood? What role do they play in understanding art? Metaphors at least begin with specifiable concepts that can lead to new insights. But aesthetic ideas, if they cannot be made determinate at all, are seemingly of little cognitive use. Were these the “expressed content of works of art,” as Pillow suggests, we would be faced with an array of sensory images that we seek to interpret in an activity that will result, consistently, in failure. Metaphors may have an inexhaustibility of meaning, as we are aroused to multiply the concepts we attach to the juxtaposition of images, but aesthetic ideas would
be meaningless in that no concepts at all would do. If the Titian’s meaning lies in the aesthetic attributes of the images that arouse the mind to extend beyond conceptualization of any kind, the Titian will defy any attempts at interpretation. Kant’s notion of genius may explain creativity and originality, but as a theory of art it is incomplete if it cannot account for our reception and interpretation of works of art. What is needed to complete Pillow’s account is an explanation of how we as an audience can grasp the expressive artistry of aesthetic ideas. It is this problem that Nuyen has articulated.

The answer to Nuyen’s question, I suggest, is that symbolization has a role to play in the process of interpreting and understanding aesthetic ideas. Pillow holds that symbols, as similes, can be completely specified by reason. However, Kant claims that “the beautiful” — by which he means “beautiful objects of nature or art” — can also function as symbols (CI, §59, 198, 200). If a work of art that expresses an aesthetic idea (tempered by taste) can function as a symbol, a symbol itself is a richer and more ambiguous creation than Pillow allows. In his recent work, Sublime Understanding, he argues that the determination of meaning in a symbol is at odds with the inexhaustibility of aesthetic ideas, and claims instead that aesthetic ideas “express” a meaning that cannot be fully determined. While this may be an accurate description of their properties, it leaves us with an inadequate answer to Nuyen’s question, since it does not account for how we interpret or respond to such an expression. Pillow seems concerned that, in the process of symbolization, violence will be done to the inexhaustibility of aesthetic ideas. But if no determination of meaning is even attempted, what kind of response to, or discussion about, an artwork is even possible? If artworks are not metaphors, and if we reject the old notion that they are strictly representational, on what grounds do we claim that they have any meaning at all? Somehow, and however inadequately, concepts need to be applied to works for interpretation to get off the ground, and I suggest it is this role that symbol plays in Kant’s theory.

Consider Picasso’s Guernica, or Christo’s works that wrapped the Pont Neuf in Paris or the Reichstag in Berlin, or indeed The Flaying of Marsyas. Individually, these works are visually stunning and can be described as original and creative products of artistic genius. But our intuitions tell us that there is more to them than their visual presence: they have a significance, or what Danto has called an “aboutness,” that we seek to understand in the act of appreciation. It is about this significance that we sometimes agree, more often disagree; it is about this meaning that we debate in gallery visits, in critical reviews, and in conversation. That we do not immediately come to a determination of meaning for these works, and that we often do not agree on their significance, supports Kant’s notion of their embodying aes-
thetic ideas—they are sensory representations that are novel and escape immediate conceptualization. But they express something rather than nothing; they are not mere visual displays. It is this that first prompted Pillow and Nuyen to define artworks as metaphors. However, most artworks resist the preliminary conceptualization needed to spark the collision of ideas in a metaphor. The meanings of the works as they initially present themselves are already indeterminate.

I suggest that our attempts at understanding and appreciating these works are also attempts at finding the rational idea that is most “fitting” to them through interpretive act of aesthetic judgment, one that engages us in a process of symbolization. Guernica can be considered a sensible portrayal of the atrocities of war; Christo’s works have been described as being “about” impermanence or “about” the harmony of man and nature in the same way that a painting of a handmill is “about,” or “means,” or indeed symbolizes, a totalitarian regime. With abstract works such as Christo’s, Newman’s, or Pollock’s, we do not even have the extra-aesthetic elements that can be utilized as the relata of a metaphor since they have no representational content at all. Notice that the terms used by Yanal and Wollheim to articulate the meaning of the Titian were all rational ideas, notions such as suffering, triumph, godliness, artistry, and so on, which extend beyond the bounds of empirical experience, and so beyond the bounds of cognition on the Kantian view. An explanation is needed for how an audience comes to apply such ideas in the act of appreciation if not by metaphor. An explanation is also needed of why, in interpretation, whether by schooled critics or passing spectators, the meaning attributed to artworks is always couched in the abstract conceptual terms of rational ideas.

My claim is that the illimitability of a work of art, as it is appreciated and interpreted, symbolizes rational ideas, ideas that are not new, that are part of our vocabulary of abstract concepts, but that cannot find determinate intuition in our world of sensory experience. Art presents an analogue to a rational idea, but the rational idea does not fix the meaning of, or fully encompass, the work like the empirical concept “cat” fully determines Fluffy, because the act of interpretation, pace Pillow, does not operate according to determinate rules. Artworks are not reducible to specifiable rational ideas any more than the Titian is reducible to a single concept or assertion. But rational ideas do provide a means of getting a conceptual handle on art, and they create space for debate about its significance. The act of interpretation is a series of attempts to account for sensory images in conceptual terms, however inadequate we feel those attempts to be. Trying to understand art this way does not do violence to its richness. I suggest that it is this richness itself that prompts us to try to grasp it with the most sophisticated ideas at
our disposal. This does not imply a complete articulation, as Pillow fears, any more than a handmill comes to represent, only and forever, the rule of a despot.

Kant expresses this clearly when he writes:

The poet ventures to realize to sense, rational ideas of invisible beings, the kingdom of the blessed, hell, eternity, creation, etc.; or even if he deals with things of which there are examples in experience—e.g. death, envy, and all vices, also love, fame and the like—he tries, by means of imagination ... to go beyond the limits of experience and to present them to sense with a completeness of which there is no example in nature (Cl, §49, 157–8).

A fully nuanced reading of §49 prefigures the later role that these aesthetic ideas will play in the process of understanding works of art. The discussion of symbol is not an afterthought, but an essential part of the notion of aesthetic ideas, and provides the means by which these ideas can be demonstrated and communicated to others.

While it is clear that the judgment operates in similar ways in its reflection on the elements of symbols, this reflection can transform our understanding of each in the way the interactionists claim only metaphors can do. To understand an expanse of fabric as a representation of harmony requires the judgment to “play” at different conceptions until a fit is reached, and this process will enrich our understanding as we consider and reject a number of possibilities. Kant notes that in the process of understanding a symbol the “mind is made conscious of a certain ennoblement and elevation” (Cl, §59, 199); it is not a simple matter of a symbol merely illustrating our prior conception of a rational idea, but in this case we must arrive at the rational concept through a creative interpretation of a sensible representation which moves the mind to action along a path that is not predetermined. While there may be a similarity in the rules according to which we reflect on the elements that become a symbol, the assignation of meaning requires a rational concept, and this is not given to the judgment at the outset, but is instead created by reflection on the representation. We do not approach a work of art with the rational idea already in hand, but arrive at it through an interpretive process. The similarity in the rules of reflection provides our best indication that we have “got it right.” Symbol, here, expands from Pillow’s notion of strict analogy to a creative trope whose meaning requires effort on the part of the aesthetic judgment to unpack. Conversely, the notions of “freedom,” “harmony,” or “triumph,” for example, may not be adequately symbolized by anything less than a fully conceived
and multilayered work of art. Rational ideas have no direct, sensible representations because of their depth of sophistication, and art may be the only form of intuition capable of matching them in this regard.

Even if §59 offers insight into how artworks come to have meaning for us, and even if I am correct in suggesting that the Third Critique provides an early theory of the interpretation of art, I must end with the following, very modest, conclusions. First, I have argued that art is not essentially metaphorical; only some works display the indeterminacy of meaning and juxtaposition of ideas Nuyen and Pillow ascribe to metaphors. Second, I have claimed that this indeterminacy of aesthetic ideas does not fit with the interactionist theory of metaphor; aesthetic ideas do not display the characteristics a metaphor requires. Third, art cannot be defined as symbol either. I have argued that the process of symbolization helps assign meaning to works of genius, but not that all art displays such genius, nor that symbolization fully encompasses the range of an aesthetic idea. The genius of art is richer than a rational idea can offer. Finally, we can see that while some products of the imagination can serve an epistemic function as symbols for the supersensible, we cannot extrapolate this function to count for all works of art. Some are simply beautiful.

I have tried to indicate that while Pillow is not mistaken in his description of the properties of aesthetic ideas, he neglects to account for our reception of them. His focus on their expressive qualities leads him toward an ontology of art as metaphor that cannot be sustained by the text. We must conclude that, for Kant, art is neither essentially metaphorical nor necessarily symbolical, and that the Critique of Judgment does not, in the end, give epistemic legitimacy to the vision of the artist, for all that it offers a possible cognitive role that vision can play.

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Notes

2. I will be using J. H. Bernard’s translation of Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* (New York: Hafner Publishing, 1972). All references to this text will be cited internally as *CJ*, followed by section and page numbers.


4. Ibid., 333.


