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The pretense of an economic cosmos and the aesthetic sense: some reflections on “spontaneous orders”

Abstract

This essay claims that the recent literature about “artistic capitalism” mostly overlooks the twin roots of aesthetics and economics, particularly in its neoliberal version. By comparing some of Immanuel Kant’s main theses about aesthetic experience and artistic practices with Friedrich Hayek’s deep intuitions about the market as “spontaneous order”, it aims at identifying the theoretical locus where philosophical aesthetics and neoliberal theory reach their highest degree of intimacy and, at the same time, may depart from each other. It attempts to expose the equivocal roots they have in common, which can shed light on their twin paths, their conflicts, but also their de facto subsequent intertwining.

Keywords

Artistic capitalism, Spontaneous order, Kant and Hayek

1. Aesthetics and (neoliberal) economics: a common root?

The idea that contemporary capitalism has metabolized artistic and creative practices and products in order to extract value from them – as from everything else – has become common sense. In the last decades, many scholars have described the omnivorous appetite of contemporary capitalism and its success in assimilating the demands of their critics. Twenty years ago, for instance, Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiappello offered a remarkable portrait, in their eponymous book, of the “new spirit of capitalism”, which encompassed the commodification of the demand of authenticity coming from what they dubbed “the artistic critique” of the Sixties:

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By helping overthrow the conventions bound up with the old domestic world, and also overcome the inflexibilities of the industrial order – bureaucratic hierarchies and standardized production – the artistic critique opened up an opportunity for capitalism to base itself on new forms of control and commodify new, more individualized and “authentic” goods. (Boltanski, Chiappello 1999: 467)

While Boltanski and Chiappello highlighted the contamination between artistic practices and the new organization of work and management, Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy have recently claimed the need to expand and update the picture and to focus on another aspect of the so-called aestheticization of the world:

Artistic or trans-aesthetic capitalism is not only the system that introduces artistic values or ideology into the corporate world. It is, foremost, the system that expands and embodies in its very functioning the activities which depend on the artworld, making them a fundamental dimension of economic life. More than an organizational model bound to mobilize the creativity of lives, the kind of art we analyze is a vector of economic development and a process that increasingly penetrates into the universe of production and services. (Lipovetsky, Serroy 2013: 64, my translation, here and below)

Analyses of this kind, more or less accurate and incisive, abound. Therefore, I will not pursue further the task of describing or denouncing the complicity between fashion industry and visual arts, creativity and precarity, “beautification” of reality and advertisement, “fun morality” and fleeting “sentimental solidarity” with the people excluded from the advantages of this spectacular and sensational version of exploitation (Lipovetsky, Serroy 2013: 426)². In these sociological studies, the multifarious phenomenon of aestheticization is often very vaguely and repetitively sketched. Usually, its analysts focus on the increasing attention paid, in everyday life, to beauty and attractiveness of bodies and products, to sensationalism and spectacularization of every sphere of life, to the commodification of the arts and the specular “artistization” of the commodities. Indeed, in studies of the kind I mentioned, the meaning of terms like “aesthetic”, “beautiful” or “artistic”, along with their old and new derivatives, is taken for granted, often used interchangeably, as if we all grasped their historical function and theoretical structure. Most of the time, the reader is led to accept confounded, misleading or circular chains of equivalences, susceptible to

² “Vie esthétique et valeurs morales”.

be listed in different orders: artistic = beautiful = aesthetic = sensational = attractive = creative = pleasant = worthy = appealing = entertaining = exciting = spectacular = luxurious = exclusive etc. Using these common sense equivalences prevents any analysis that could go beyond the very common sense it claims to analyze.

As I anticipated, I am not aiming to offer a purportedly more refined phenomenology of the complicities between aesthetics and economics. My aim is not sociological, but theoretical. It is more limited and punctual than the kinds of large sociological frescoes I mentioned, and at the same time, perhaps, more ambitious: I would like to identify the theoretical locus where philosophical aesthetics and neoliberal theory reach their highest degree of intimacy and, at the same time, may depart from each other. I would like to expose the equivocal roots they have in common, which can shed light on their twin paths, their conflicts, but also their *de facto* subsequent intertwining.

If my approach is plausible, then the contamination of economics and aesthetics in its contemporary form could be better understood, along with some shortcomings of our social life and of the artistic undertakings. The gist of my argument rests on a comparative analysis of the idea of “spontaneous order”, which is the theoretical axis around which Friedrich Hayek – surely one of the most prominent figure of so-called neoliberalism – built his views of the free market and of human society, and that of “purposiveness without purpose”, which is one of the keys of Immanuel Kant’s aesthetic thought. However, before tackling some of the crucial passages where Hayek explains his conception of spontaneous order – along with the difference between *taxis* and *cosmos*, the “game of catallaxy”, etc. – and where Kant explains his version of aesthetic spontaneous order – along with the “free play of understanding and imagination”, natural and artistic beauty, etc. – some preliminary historico-theoretical considerations are in order.

2. Croce, the “two worldly sciences”, and the question of “sense”

In 1931, Benedetto Croce published an article entitled *The two worldly sciences: aesthetics and economics*. Croce maintains that the two sciences marked the distinctive trait of modernity thanks to their “radical antiascetic, antitranscendent, wordily, profane nature”, and warned “the learned priests, the candid friars, and other devout people, who

had accepted and were incautiously handling modern aesthetic concepts": "Be careful, you are dealing with the devil" (Croce 1931: 403-5, my translation, here and below). The rationale of this danger is identified by Croce in the new prominence given to "sense": "What, in the final analysis, do these sciences do? In short, they mean to theoretically legitimate [...] what was called 'sense'". Hegel, in his lectures on aesthetics, had written that

"Sense" is this wonderful word which is used in two opposite meanings. On the one hand, it means the organ of immediate apprehension, but on the other hand, we mean by it the sense, the significance, the thought, the universal sense or meaning of the thing. (Hegel 1988: 128-9)

In his essay, Croce develops a similar reflection:

"sense" had two linked and yet distinct meanings, designating, on the one hand, what within our cognition is not logical and ratiocinative but sensible and intuitive, and, on the other, what in practice is not moral or dutiful in itself, but simply willed because loved, desired, useful, and pleasant. [So that] the doctrinal justification resulted, on the one hand, in the logic of the senses or poetic logic – the science of the pure intuitive knowledge or Aesthetics – and, on the other, in hedonistic, the logic of the useful – the Economics in the broadest sense of the word. And this was no more and no less the philosophical and theoretical redemption of the flesh [...], i.e. of life as life, of worldly love in all its forms. (Croce 1931: 404)

The key notion, here, is "sense", in its "wonderful" ambiguity, meaning at the same time both what is "sensate" (perceived or felt), and what is purposeful or "makes sense". More than in other languages, though, using "sense" in English could be not only "wonderfully ambiguous", but nebulous: in Italian, we can distinguish between meaning (*significato*) and sense (*senso*), like in German (*Bedeutung* and *Sinn*), and in French (*signification* and *sens*). This distinction cannot be literally reproduced in English: the Italian "sensate", for instance, means "something that makes sense", but the analogous English term "sensate" means rather "perceived by the sense" ("sensible" could be a better alternative). Although in English "sense" is used sometimes in a different acceptance (as in "it makes sense", "the sense of the world", "a person without any sense", "what is the sense of doing x?", etc.), "meaning" is more common, and it covers, approximately, the extension of "sense" as purpose, as in the expression "the loss of

meaning”, “a meaningful life”, “a meaningless universe”, etc. I will use both “meaning” and “sense”, depending on the context.

Aesthetics and economics (the latter encompassing for Croce also the political dimension) are two “devilish” modern disciplines because they presuppose and promote the loss or the impracticability of the idea of “an ultimate sense” or purpose of the universe or of life. The cosmos is just a world, and we can (or ought to) find only a (penultimate) “sense of experience”, conceived both as an adaptive species-specific condition for our survival, and for our meaningful practices or experiences. We cannot give up the regulative idea of “sense”, but “the sense of our experience” is indeterminate, is not given, granted or known in advance.

3. *Sense and rules*

The distinction between the meaning of a sentence and its “sense” is rather obvious: the sentence could be well-formed, the meaning of each word might be clear, and yet the sentence could make no sense, be meaningless, incomprehensible, absurd. Perhaps the sentence seems out of context, or one cannot grasp its purpose in a given situation, as if it were isolated from a bigger picture, be it the indeterminate totality to which it belongs (the totality of language) or the indeterminate totality of experience (something like its “total context”, indefinitely expandable). Perhaps this is what Wittgenstein meant, when, in *On certainty*, he invokes “a totality of judgments” in order “to make an empirical judgment” (Wittgenstein 1969: §140)³. Without the tacit presupposition that the sentence belongs to the indeterminate totality of a language (i.e., that it is a sentence, and not just noise) and that it relates to an indefinite number of actual or possible experiences, the sentence wouldn’t make sense.

Language is indeed one of Hayek’s favourite examples of a “spontaneous order”, a dynamic *cosmos* which embodies abstract rules that each speaker must presuppose without being able, *in principle*, to

³ Here is the entire passage: “We do not learn the practice of making empirical judgments by learning rules: we are taught judgments and their connexion with other judgments. A totality of judgments is made plausible to us” (Wittgenstein 1969: §140). Similar quotations could be multiplied *ad libitum*, yet they would need an interpretation I cannot pursue here.

make explicit. In his monograph on philosophy of mind, *The sensory order: an inquiry into the foundations of theoretical psychology* (1952), Hayek maintains that “any apparatus of classification [like the human brain] must possess a structure of a higher degree of complexity than it is possessed by the objects it classifies [...] and therefore [...] the human brain can never fully explain its own operations” (Hayek 1952: 185).

Of course, we can articulate parts of this structure with an indefinite number of rules, and yet we have to rely always on a further, higher level indeterminate “rule” in order to use the language (or the mind) through which we articulate its lower level rules:

It is important not to confuse the contention that any such system [as the mind] must always act on some rules which it cannot communicate with the contention that there are particular rules which no such system could ever state. All the former contention means is that there will always be some rules governing a mind which that mind in its then prevailing state cannot communicate, and that, if it ever were to acquire the capacity of communicating those rules, this would presuppose that it had acquired further higher rules which make the communication of the former possible but which themselves will still be incommunicable. (Hayek 1967: 62)

Scholars who refer to Hayek’s *The sensory order* usually stress its proto-connectionist view and the analogy between Hayek’s construal of the mind and that of economics and society: both characterized by a distributed, not centralized sources of information, both dynamic, unpredictable and so on. And yet, as far as I know, nobody has focused on the specific importance of these epistemological passages for his view of the market as *cosmos*. From an epistemological point of view, Hayek’s thesis responds to the ancient and modern skeptic problem of infinite regress, addressed by many philosophers (see Popkin 2003), not least by Hayek’s second cousin, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and, for our present purpose, Kant. I am not maintaining that Hayek’s and Kant’s (or for that matter, Wittgenstein’s) theses are reducible to one another, but only that they are different solutions to analogous problems related to skeptical argument of the infinite regress of rules: i.e., if a rule is what allows us to give an order to reality or to our practices, its application requires another rule, and so on *ad infinitum*. In order to block this regress, different solutions have been attempted. Both Hayek and Kant suggest that the regress is blocked by an indeterminate rule which is responsible for an order that cannot be consciously and

intentionally mastered, and that, following Hayek, we could call a “spontaneous order”. What is even more significant is that, as we will see, they both link this indeterminate rule to what we called “sense”, as what is purposeful (or meaningful) and yet irreducible to a determinate or particular purpose.

For Kant, as it is well known, this indeterminate rule is called first of all “common sense” (*Gemeinsinn*), to be understood not as a “vulgar sense”, but as “a sense we have in common”, an intersubjective and public feeling, characterized as “a universal rule that one cannot produce” (“eine allgemeine Regel die man nicht angeben kann”), and which “is assumed in every logic and every principle of cognitions that is not skeptical” (Kant 2000: §18). For Hayek – who in this context will refer often to Michael Polanyi’s work on “tacit knowledge” (Polanyi 1958)⁴ – these kinds of indeterminate rules are called “abstract”, meaning that they cannot be articulated, but only put to work or exhibited in particular instances:

the fact that language is often insufficient to express what the mind is fully capable of taking into account in determining action, or that we will often not be able to communicate in words what we well know how to practise, has been clearly established in many fields. It is closely connected with the fact that the rules that govern action will often be much more general and abstract than anything language can yet express. Such abstract rules are learnt by imitating particular actions, from which the individual acquires “by analogy” the capacity to act in other cases *on the same principles which, however, he could never state as principles*. (Hayek 2013: 73-4, emphasis added)

In a Kantian language, one could say that these “particular actions”, which embody and exhibit abstract rules or principles that can never be explicitly stated, are “exemplary”: not because they are examples of a class of objects or actions defined by a concept or a rule (a table as an example or exemplar of the class of tables), but because the (indeterminate) concept or rule they embody cannot be expressed but in a particular instance (object or action). That is why, according to Hayek, they can only be learnt “by imitating particular actions”, where imitating does not mean “copying”, but it requires from the imitator the original and creative use of “analogy”.

Kant attributes this kind of “exemplarity” to the “necessity” or normativity that aesthetic judgments derive from their “non-producible”

⁴ See especially chapters 5 and 6 on *Skills and Articulation*.

rule: “as a necessity that is thought in an aesthetic judgment, it can only be called exemplary, i.e., a necessity of the assent of all to a judgment that is regarded as an example of a universal rule that one cannot produce” (Kant 2000: §18). The same “exemplarity” is required by the artist: “Succession, related to a precedent, not imitation, is the correct expression for any influence that the products of an exemplary author can have on others, which means no more than to create from the same sources from which the latter created, and to learn from one’s predecessor only the manner of conducting oneself in so doing” (Kant 2000: §32). What Kant calls “succession”, as opposed to “imitation”, corresponds to the “the capacity to act in other cases [by analogy] on the same principles” invoked by Hayek.

4. *Sense and spontaneous order*

“The central concept around which the discussion of this book will turn is that of order, and particularly the distinction between two kinds of order which we will provisionally call ‘made’ and ‘grown’ orders” (Hayek 2013: 34). Hayek calls the two kinds of order he is referring to, respectively, *kosmos* and *taxis*, the crucial distinction that characterizes his thought.

The made order which we have [...] referred to as an exogenous order or an arrangement may again be described as a construction, an artificial order or, especially where we have to deal with a directed social order, as an organization. The grown order, on the other hand, which we have referred to as a self-generating or endogenous order, is in English most conveniently described as a spontaneous order. Classical Greek was more fortunate in possessing distinct single words for the two kinds of order, namely *taxis* for a made order, such as, for example, an order of battle, and *kosmos* for a grown order, meaning originally “a right order in a state or a community”. (Hayek 2013: 36)

Language, morals, organisms, law (as opposed to legislation), and “self-organizing or self-generating systems” studied by “cybernetics” – and, of course, “the markets order” – are all examples of “spontaneous order”.

What are the main characteristics that distinguish *taxis* from *kosmos*?

<i>Taxis</i>	<i>Kosmos</i>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Brought about deliberately. 2. Relatively simple = confined to such moderate degrees of complexity as the maker can still survey. 3. Concrete = intuitively perceived by inspection. 4. Having been made deliberately serve (or served) a particular purpose of the maker. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Brought about spontaneously. 2. Complex = its degree of complexity is not limited to what a human mind can master. 3. Abstract = doesn't need to manifest itself to our senses; may be based on pure abstract relations which we can only mentally reconstruct. 4. Not having been made it cannot legitimately be said to have a particular purpose.

Features 1-3 are very important, and we will come back to them, but “most important – remarks Hayek – is the relation of a spontaneous order to the conception of purpose” (Hayek 2013: 38). This relation is particularly important, in this context, also because it allows a closer comparison with Kant’s texts. While it is relatively easy, for both Hayek and Kant, to link a deliberate purpose – a teleological determinate *concept* – to the production of a certain order, a kind of order without a deliberate purpose is more difficult to grasp, because it implies, for Hayek, the intervention of “forces” that are not ascribable to “an outside agency” (a mastermind, human or divine), who could plan, design, survey or control it. As we know, the claim to plan such an order, or to intervene in it, represents for Hayek the “road to serfdom”. Let’s read one of Hayek’s most relevant passage on this point: “Since such an order has not been created by an outside agency, the order as such also can have no purpose, although its existence may be very serviceable to the individuals which move within such order” (Hayek 2013: 38). It is clear that when Hayek says that “the order as such can have no purpose” he is just ruling out that its existence is due to a *determinate* purpose, i.e. a concept or an articulable rule according to which the order is brought about. Dealing with this issue, Hayek and his interpreters refer often to Kant’s moral and political writings:

If “purpose” refers to concrete foreseeable results of particular actions, the particularistic utilitarianism of Bentham is certainly wrong. But if we include in

“purpose” the aiming at conditions which will assist the formation of an abstract order, the particular contents of which are unpredictable, Kant’s denial of purpose is justified only so far as the application of a rule to a particular instance is concerned, but certainly not for the system of rules as a whole. (Hayek 2013: 108)

In this context, it is surprising that Kant’s *Critique of the power of judgement*, where the nature of purposes and of teleological reasoning is deeply investigated, receives a marginal attention, both by Hayek and his interpreters. Since for Hayek the existence of the abstract order “may be very serviceable to the individuals which move within such order”, we could say that it shows a “favor” towards the agents that create it unintentionally. I used the word “favor” following Kant’s third *Critique*, when he, rejecting the idea of a purposiveness of nature purportedly “designed” by a supreme architect, argues against the realism or objectivity of natural ends:

For in such judging what is at issue is not what nature is or even what it is for us as a purpose, but how we take it in. It would always be an objective purposiveness of nature if it had created its forms for our satisfaction, and not a subjective purposiveness, which rests on the play of the imagination in its freedom, where it is a favor [*Gunst*] with which we take nature in and not a favor that it shows to us. (Kant 2000: §58)

This “favor with which we take the nature in” is an equivalent of the kind of pleasure we feel when we judge something “beautiful” (beauty being nothing without this feeling), but at the same time is the feeling that what we perceive “makes sense” and it is therefore, if not a “promise of happiness”, a promise of our possibility to act sensibly and implement our free plans: although we cannot know the ultimate reason why – and up to what point –, yet it happens that nature shows no hostility towards our plans, which stem from the principle of freedom that cannot be found in the world of natural phenomena (to reformulate the famous “bridge” between “*the manner of thinking* in accordance with the principles of the one [nature] to that in accordance with the principles of the other [freedom]” (Kant 2000: § II), which is one of the main systematic objectives of the third *Critique*).

In a word, Hayek’s idea is that the spontaneous order, characterized by an indeterminate purposiveness “to the individuals which move within” it, is the unintended consequence of the actions of its

unaware “elements”, who, *through* their deliberate purposive actions, but not *thanks to* them, perform its “maintenance”:

But in a different sense it may well be said that the order rests on purposive action of its elements, when “purpose” would, of course, mean nothing more than that their actions tend to secure the preservation or restoration of that order. The use of “purposive” in this sense as a sort of “teleological shorthand”, as it has been called by biologists, is unobjectionable so long as we do not imply an awareness of purpose of the part of the elements, but mean merely that the elements have acquired regularities of conduct conducive to the maintenance of the order. (Hayek 2013: 38)

Kant’s view of genius (the artist, the author) is more elaborate, but it relies on a similar concept of unintended consequences. “Intending” of producing (desirable) unintended consequences would be a self-defeating strategy, like planning to be spontaneous. Both for Hayek and Kant, something else must be produced by the agents, something that makes their actions “examples” of the very rule that cannot be determined, the embodiment or exemplary exhibition of a “sense” that an intentional purposeful action would fatally spoil. The production of “sense” of an action (of a spontaneous order, an unexpected “favor”), beyond its determinate meanings, cannot entirely depend on the intentions of the agents, and it is rather a state that is an “essentially by-product” (see Elster 1983: ch. 2) of their actions:

If, after these analyses, we look back to the explanation given above of what is called genius, then we find: [...] *that the unsought and unintentional subjective purposiveness in the free correspondence of the imagination to the lawfulness of the understanding presupposes a proportion and disposition of this faculty that cannot be produced by any following of rules, whether of science or of mechanical imitation, but that only the nature of the subject can produce.* (Kant 2000: § 49, emphasis added)

As we learned from Max Weber, at the beginning of modernity this production of a supplementary but crucial “sense” was not attributed to “the nature of the subject” (Kant) or to other immanent “forces” (Hayek), but to divine grace.

The religious believer can make himself sure of his state of grace either in that he feels himself to be the vessel of the Holy Spirit or the tool of the divine will. In the former case his religious life tends to mysticism and emotionalism, in the latter to ascetic action; Luther stood close to the former type, Calvinism

belonged definitely to the latter. [...] The power of religious asceticism provided him [the bourgeois business man] in addition with sober, conscientious, and unusually industrious workmen, who clung to their work as to a life purpose willed by God. Finally, it gave him the comforting assurance that the unequal distribution of the goods of this world was a special dispensation of Divine Providence, *which in these differences, as in particular grace, pursued secret ends unknown to men.* (Weber 1992: 68, emphasis added)

Here we find another important confirmation of Croce's idea of the twin "worldly sciences", aesthetics and economics. Whilst, according to Weber, in Calvinism economic success becomes the only means to detect and confirm the presence of divine grace, this theological idea becomes a key aesthetic notion, at least from Baldassarre Castiglione's *Book of the courtier* (1528) up to the numerous European anti-classicistic treatises dedicated in the 17th and 18th century to the interrelated notion of *nescio quid, je ne sais quoi, no se que, non so che*, etc. (D'Angelo, Velotti 1997). It is not "perfection", or the application of known, learnable and determinate rules that guarantees the success of a work of art, but something else unknown, which is the crucial ingredient that confers "sense" upon our actions or creations. Thinking of controlling the enormous complexity of the market exchanges or that of art is an illusion: the success of our actions (both economic and aesthetic) can only depend, ultimately, on a non-controllable factor. Yet, if not theological, what kind of factor is it? Marx, in his appendix to volume I of *Capital* on value-form, mentions the "sensible-supersensible" (*sinnlich-übersinnliche*) character of commodities, invoking – "to find an analogy with this" – the "religious world". Both Hayek and Kant will rely on something "sensible-supersensible" for explaining, respectively, the nature of the market and of the work of art but determine this relation in a different way.

5. *Natural and artificial*

"The nature of the subject", mentioned by Kant in his passage on genius quoted above, refers to the unfathomable totality of her/his faculties. It does not refer to some "innate" or "inherited" features, but to what Kant calls "the supersensible" (*das Übersinnliche*, i.e., the non-sensuous: what sensate perception has no access to, like the indeterminate idea of a totality).

According to Hayek, the dichotomy between “natural” and “artificial” is a false one. The dichotomy is misleading because it conflates human action with human design. Mandeville, Hume, Smith and Ferguson are the authors to whom Hayek gives the merit to have dispelled this misconception: “Nations stumble upon establishments, which are indeed the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design”, wrote Ferguson, quoted approvingly by Hayek (Hayek 2013: 20). Smith’s “invisible hand” would be a metaphor for the same concept, and it would have been appropriate to consider Vico as well. I will not address the possible theological or providential implications of some of these eighteenth-century authors’ theories, as long as one keeps in mind that the absence of a human design should not be replaced by a divine design. Hayek talks of “forces” that cannot be ascribed to an agency external to the growth of a spontaneous order, which is supposed to limit itself to offer the condition of possibility of the largest spectrum for the free pursuit of individual purposes. These forces are similar to those that fuel natural evolution, although, according to Hayek, it is the eighteenth-century “twin conceptions of evolution and spontaneous formation of an order [...] which provided the intellectual tools which Darwin and his contemporaries were able to apply to biological evolution”, and not the other way round. I will not go into the very problematic idea of group selection, apparently advocated by Hayek (Gaus 2006: 242). What interests me here is, again, a certain analogy with Kantian aesthetic perspective.

I will highlight only a couple of important passages, among many possible, in the third *Critique* where the problematic interconnection between nature and artifice comes to the fore: the first one follows immediately the quasi-deduction of a “common sense” (*Gemeinsinn*) as the principle of aesthetic judgments and necessary condition of possibility of knowledge, that we already mentioned. Soon afterwards, Kant adds a question that seems to cast doubt upon the conclusion just reached: “This indeterminate norm of a common sense is really presupposed by us: our presumption in making judgments of taste proves that. [Nonetheless] Whether [...] taste is an original and *natural* faculty, or only the idea of one that is yet to be acquired and is *artificial*, [...] this we would not and cannot yet investigate here” (Kant 2000: § 22). This faculty cannot be just *natural*, as a sort of guarantee that every experience will make sense, but it cannot be either just *artificial*, because it is not only the product of culture, but also its condition of possibility. The next passage is famous and often misunderstood: “In a

product of art one must be aware that it is art, and not nature; yet the purposiveness in its form must still seem to be as free from all constraint by arbitrary rules as if it were a mere product of nature” (Kant 2000: § 45). The sentence has often been taken as a statement in favor of a neoclassicist poetics, or as a variation on the ancient adage *ars est celare artem*. It is clearly specular to the other Kantian thesis, according to which in judging nature we should be aware that it is nature, and not art (or *techne*); yet, we should consider its form *as if* it were the product of a design, in order to orient ourselves and build more powerful scientific theories. But the import of this position is probably revealed in the passage already quoted regarding “the nature of the subject”, which only can produce “the unsought and unintentional subjective purposiveness in the free correspondence of the imagination to the lawfulness of the understanding”: *through* intentional actions of the subject-artist – which implies the knowledge and application of rules and artificial tools – but not *thanks to it, but thanks to its nature* –, the subject-artist might succeed in endowing the particular thing she/he makes (a work of art) with the power to reveal the indeterminate rule that gives an intersubjective or public sense to our experience. This point is made clear by Kant in the second and third feature of the genius:

If, after these analyses, we look back to the explanation given above of what is called genius, then we find: [...] *second*, that, as a talent for art, it presupposes a determinate concept of the product, as an end, hence understanding, but also a representation (even if indeterminate) of the material, i.e., of the intuition, for the presentation of this concept, hence a relation of the imagination to the understanding; *third*, that it displays itself not so much in the execution of the proposed end in the presentation of a determinate concept as in the exposition or the expression of aesthetic ideas, which contain rich material for that aim, hence the imagination, in its freedom from all guidance by rules, is nevertheless represented as purposive for the presentation of the given concept. (Kant 2000: § 49)

In a beautiful essay written in the academic heyday of deconstruction (see Michaels 1987: 215-44), Walter Benn Michaels offered a brilliant analysis of Edith Wharton’s *House of mirth* (the nickname of a firm on the New York Stock Exchange), showing how the novel embodies and reveals the logic of the market. Gamblers, photographers, and market speculators share the same logic of risk, where chance plays a

key role in making one's actions "interesting", i.e. endowed with a residual portion of what we called "sense": "it is this internal opacity [common to rolling dice, photographing, speculating on the market, etc.] – the fact that you cannot know exactly what you are doing until it is done – that makes the act interesting". Quoting formalists' intentional fallacy, De Man and Derrida, Michaels drew this conclusion:

I began this essay by describing the efforts of certain photographers to save photography from chance by imagining it as a kind of writing; I want to end by suggesting that it has recently become more common to think of writing as a kind of photography. I mean by this that the market criteria of interest established by such practices as speculation in commodities and by texts like Wharton's *House of mirth* have been extended beyond the practices of the stock market itself, beyond the more general speculative interest at work in virtually any market transaction, beyond even photography, to what Stieglitz imagined as photography's salvation: writing. Indeed, the internal epistemological opacity of the act – its opacity not only to the spectator but also to the agent – and the ontological indeterminacy of the act – the impossibility of determining exactly what act it is – have come to be regarded as almost uniquely characteristic of writing. [...] Deconstruction, like poker dice, makes the speech act both undeterminable and indeterminate, not only to readers but to writers as well, and thus marks one of the deepest penetrations into the market of the market. (Michaels 1987: 235)

And yet, the idea that "the market criteria of interest [...] have been extended beyond the practices of the stock market itself" should be corrected or reversed: "the market criteria of interest" have not been extended into new territories, since these practices have aimed since the beginning, like their twin aesthetic-artistic practices, at revealing an unpredictable or spontaneous order, i.e. a *cosmos* endowed with some sense, on the very condition that it is produced by our actions *without* being designed by us, since any design would reduce its effects to mere, unsurprising and disenchanting illustrations of what we already know, leaving us with the feeling that we are solipsistically just playing alone.

6. *Ignorance, cosmos, and catallaxy*

In both Hayek's and Kant's works, ignorance plays an essential role. In the first pages of his *Law, legislation, and liberty*, Hayek repeatedly stressed this point which characterizes his position since the beginning

of his career: “What we must ask the reader to keep constantly in mind throughout this book, then, is the fact of the *necessary and irremediable ignorance* on everyone’s part of most of the particular facts which determine the actions of all the several members of human society” (Hayek 2013: 13). But Hayek does not claim the importance of only factual ignorance, which is easily acceptable, but also of normative ignorance, i.e. relative to the ends of a certain economic or social order. The very necessity of “abstract rules” – conceived of as general-purpose tools – descends directly from the fact that we are not omniscient beings, and that therefore we cannot set a common “ultimate aim”:

Like a knife or a hammer they [the abstract rules of conduct] have been shaped not with a particular purpose in view but because in this form rather than in some other form they have proved serviceable in a great variety of situations. [...] The knowledge which has given them their shape is not knowledge of particular future effects but knowledge of the recurrence of certain problem situations or tasks, of intermediate results regularly to be achieved in the service of a great variety of ultimate aims. (Hayek 2013: 187-8)

However, as we will see, this normative ignorance will reveal itself to be very partial, and intolerant towards different views of the cosmos.

As for Kant, his intent to set the limits of our knowledge, not only as a matter of fact, but as a matter of principle, is well known. Talking with admiration about Hume, he nevertheless criticizes him because “he merely *limits* our understanding without drawing boundaries for it, and brings about a general distrust but not determinate knowledge of the ignorance that is unavoidable for us” (*der uns unvermeidlichen Unwissenheit* (Kant 1998: B 795, A 767).

An assessment of the nature of ignorance and of its cognitive and social role is beyond the scope of this essay (see Arfini 2019, Velotti 2003). What interest me here is the different relation to reality that ignorance comes to establish in Hayek and Kant. My hypothesis is that the question can be assessed not primarily by comparing Hayek’s thought with Kant’s moral-political writings – as it has been legitimately done by many (see Mack 2006: 259-86) – but *by looking, on the one hand, at the relationship between the particular catallactic exchanges and the cosmos in Hayek, and, on the other, at the one between works of art and the supersensible in Kant*. The great intuition they share is the distinction between particular purposes and the revelation of a spontaneous order: the former brings about a *taxis* (Hayek)

or a “technical-practical” outcome (Kant); the latter a standard for human flourishing, a *kosmos* (Hayek), or a feeling of “purposiveness without purpose” (Kant). By introducing this distinction, *in principle* they both bring to the fore the difference between any *de facto* established order, and the sphere of human potentiality (cosmos or the supersensible), which is the locus where the “sense” of our life is revealed and attested. Although we cannot *know* this locus, there are yet actions that a given society considers the exemplary embodiment of it. Borrowing the term from his mentor Ludwig von Mises, Hayek captures the exemplary value of our actions with the expression “catallaxy” or “catallactics”:

The term “catallactics” was derived from the Greek verb *katallatein* (or *katallassain*) which meant, significantly, not only “to exchange” but also “to admit into the community” and “to change from enemy into friend”. [...] From this we can form an English term, catallaxy, which we shall use to describe the order brought about by the mutual adjustment of many individual economies in a market. (Hayek 2013: 268-9)

Being admitted into a community and becoming friend, though, seem at first to be conceived as by-products of pure free market exchange:

The suggestion that in this wide sense the only ties which hold the whole of a Great Society together are purely “economic” (more precisely “catallactic”) arouse great emotional resistance. Yet the fact can hardly be denied; nor the fact that, in a society of the dimensions and complexity of a modern country or of the world, it can hardly be otherwise. Most people are still reluctant to accept the fact that it should be the disdained “cash-nexus” which holds the Great Society together, that the great ideal of the unity of mankind should in the last resort depend on the relations between the parts being governed by the striving for the better satisfaction of their material needs. (Hayek 2013: 272)

The “cash-nexus” should not be disdained, according to Hayek, because each single transaction is supposed to reveal and maintain *the very sense of human life*: seeing-through each exchange, an enlightened eye can have a glimpse of the spontaneous order taking shape, of the supersensible *kosmos* revealing itself and purportedly making its inhabitants feeling at home in it. The structure of the *kosmos* remains unknown, and yet the normative ignorance advocated by Hayek rules out at least one single truth: “The truth is that catallactics is the science

which describes the only overall order that comprehends nearly all mankind, and that the economist is therefore entitled to insist that conduciveness to that order be accepted as a standard by which all particular institutions are judged” (Hayek 2013: 272). This “insistence”, by the way, could shed some light on Hayek’s repulsive appreciation – to say the least – of Pinochet. The suspicion that “being admitted into a community” and “becoming friend” are not by-products of “game of catallaxy”, but that the market requires a previous, forced and – ultimately – violent acceptance of the rules of the game, has become stronger and stronger: in a word, “at the heart of the conundrum is the fact that actually existing, as opposed of ideologically pure, neoliberalism is nothing like as devoted to free markets as is claimed. It is, rather, devoted to the dominance of public life by the giant corporation” (Crouch 2011: viii). Or, in other words, in order to receive a recognition of one’s own life’s value, sense, and dignity, one should “become friend” with the *actual established order* (De Carolis 2017: 293). The difference between *kosmos* and *taxis*, which is the pillar of Hayek’s neoliberal project, is denied by its very implementation, which some of its critics would rather call neofeudalism (see De Carolis 2017: 122-37).

One of the consequences of conflating the established order with the *kosmos* is that the *exemplary* value of actions (of exchanges) disappears, and every action does not reveal at all a spontaneous order but becomes the mere and inevitable *exemplar* of a very concrete and meaningless life. The *kosmos*, the standard of human flourishing, the horizon of a meaningful existence, is supposed to coincide with the meaninglessness of the contingent order of the world.

Economics and aesthetics were born together, and they both concurred in redeeming “sense”; however, “the *game* of catallaxy”, by fatally conflating the *kosmos* and the established order, has been unable to displace and substitute the Kantian “free *play* of imagination and understanding”. Yet, in the actual artworld things do not look much better. Where does an artwork get its value from? Are we still confident in considering the most valued and publicly recognized artworks (contemporary and non-contemporary, traditional “masterpieces” included) still *exemplary* in the strong Kantian sense of the word? Are not they losing their exemplarity (their very anthropological/*transcendental raison d’être*) by merely rehearsing the actual (dis)order of the world? Is the age of art – conceived as that “family” of practices and works that for a couple of centuries have been the best candidate to

exhibit our sense of human experience – coming to a slow albeit vociferous end?

An attempt to answer these questions would require a new research. Of course, everyone could mention artists (visual or multimedia artists, writers, etc.) who are able to convey through their works the sense of our experiencing the (contemporary) world, expanding our awareness, giving a form or a name to our most urgent and unfathomable needs and feelings. Artists (or works) without which our life would be poorer. And everyone could mention so called artists, art fairs, galleries, museums, publications biennials, etc., where (art)works are, at most, what give their authors 20 seconds ego-boosting.

Here is where the economic *cosmos* and the aesthetic sense may part their ways: based, as it is, on the (betrayed) promise that each of our actual economic exchange would contribute to the life of a *kosmos* about which we don't know anything and on which we, as citizens, have no control, the "game of catallaxy" leaves no room or time for thought, discussion or critique. Despite its claim to foster an "open society", the neoliberal order is ready to repress, by any means necessary, what it cannot suffocate from the start.

Art practices should lead us in the opposite direction: opening up space and time for thinking and discussing, building and negotiating relations, reorganizing our priorities and our minds as citizens of a (Kantian) *cosmo-political* order to be built (see De Carolis 2017: 287-95). In their varieties, they do not mandate the way by which a cosmos is supposed to emerge (the economic exchange). Each artistic action is susceptible to be evaluated in its singularity, contrary to the economic transactions, which are supposed to be all indistinctively "good", as long as they take part in "the game of catallaxy" and abide by its "abstract" rules.

If making sense of our experience is both a species-specific anthropological condition of our adaptation and an existential need, the spheres where this condition might be represented, acknowledged and contested is not necessarily that of art. "Sense" might migrate in other spheres or take other forms. Art practices *can* be an extraordinary laboratory of sense exploration but, although their value does not depend on good intentions only, they are doomed to meaninglessness if artists and the public surrender to the rigged logic of the market. After all, on these terms, aesthetics and economics are not "reconciled".

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