



Illustrating Kant's Aesthetic Theory: Mime, Pantomime, Commedia dell'Arte

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ABSTRACT

Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, a seminal work in the history of aesthetics, contains some puzzling passages about mime and gesture. This article examines these references as well as Kant's claims about commedia dell'arte, considering his remarks in the cultural and intellectual context of eighteenth-century Prussia. It proposes that looking at Kant's minor publications and texts such as his lectures on anthropology can help us better understand these passages as well as his broader account of the arts and aesthetic theory. Conversely, Kant's aesthetic theory can clarify his remarks on mime and commedia dell'arte. The analysis shows that Kant's thoughts on mime and commedia are expressed in terms of his evolving account of aesthetic pleasure: from the early focus on the principle of sensible comprehension to the mature account of the free play of the imagination and understanding. In short, Kant's aesthetic theory clarifies his remarks on mime, pantomime, and commedia, and those remarks in turn illustrate aspects of his aesthetic theory.

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It may be surprising to learn that Immanuel Kant had an interest in mime, pantomime, and commedia dell'arte. The terms themselves may not be altogether clear. Kant uses 'mime' (*Mimik*) and 'pantomime' (*Pantomime*) as near synonyms to refer to speechless gestures, facial expressions, and bodily movements, including those made by actors and performers viewed by an audience. Moreover, the related art form known as commedia dell'arte (or commedia for short) is generally understood as an umbrella term for the Italian-born, market-driven professional theatre of the Baroque era, characterized by touring companies (who eventually travelled far beyond Italy), stock characters, and professional actors working in and cultivating this craft or, as the name suggests, this *arte*. Centuries later, commedia dell'arte characters have influenced figures ranging from Pablo Picasso's harlequins to Marcel Marceau's silent mime, to film characters played by comedic (and sometimes satirical) actors Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton.

As will be shown below, Kant was exposed to commedia dell'arte even in his Prussian city of Königsberg. This art form shapes both what he has to say about theatre and about aesthetics in general in his major work, the *Critique of the Power of Judgement* (1790). While mime, pantomime, and commedia were not the main art forms underlying his aesthetic theory, they were art forms he was somewhat familiar with and observed – which is surprising, given Königsberg's distance from Italy.

From a biographical standpoint, Kant appears to have been engaged with attending theatre performances for the usual reasons – social interaction, amusement, diversion, and artistic appreciation. Kant recognized the power of humour to both unite and divide people, serving to create social community and act as a tool for critique and reform; that said, I do not wish to exaggerate the significance of staged theatre and comedy in eighteenth-century Königsberg.

Since Kant's remarks on mime and pantomime are expressed in terms of his aesthetic theory, they may be of interest to scholars in theatre studies, musicology, and related fields allied with aesthetic theory. Though contributing in these ways is not my primary aim, it would be welcome if Kant's conception of pantomime as a (speechless) 'play of shapes' capable of stimulating the imagination were explored further. In any case, the mere fact that the transcendental philosopher Immanuel Kant commented on these art forms (mime, pantomime, and commedia) is itself noteworthy and may draw the attention of scholars across disciplinary boundaries.

As it turns out, Kant does not always offer acute insights into these three art forms. His interpretation of commedia at times seems to be rather limited and overly anthropological, focusing on the bodily effects of comedy, indeed drawn from the experience of eating. While there is potential for his theory to be developed in a more intellectual direction, Kant tends to think of comedy and commedia dell'arte as aiding digestion and stimulating the movement of the diaphragm through laughter. Nonetheless, his reflections are of interest here because they offer a lens through which to interpret key aspects of his aesthetic theory such as disinterestedness, the free play of the faculties, aesthetic ideas, and the play of spatial forms.

Scholars of Kant might be interested in his thoughts on these art forms given that he refers to them, here and there, when articulating his aesthetic theory. Conversely, he expresses his thoughts about these art forms in terms *taken* from his aesthetic theory. In short, scholars interested in Kant's aesthetics might be able to learn more about his theory by examining these remarks.

It is not clear that Kant saw traditional (Italian-style) commedia performances based on comic bits (*lazzi*), that is, scenarios that gave directions for the actors for improvisation. What is likely, however, is that Kant saw – besides tragedies and dramas – comedies by people such as Italian playwright Carlo Goldoni (only 17 years older than Kant), as well as improvised pantomime comedy (*pantomimische Comoedie*), and Germanic variations of commedia dell'arte involving characters such as Hans Wurst (literally, Johnny Sausage), a figure based on commedia characters (Pantalone and Arlecchino) as well as the Austrian peasant 'farmer' type. If Kant attended staged comedies, he could have seen comedy such as plays by Goldoni, improvised pantomimes or harlequin acts, and comedies employing characters such as Hans Wurst.

As far as I can tell, the production details of the *improvised* performances Kant could have been attending are not well known. Owing to temporal and geographic distances, the staged plays in eighteenth-century Königsberg would have been quite different, indeed removed, from the commedia dell'arte of Baroque Italy. To learn more about these forms, just as Kant did with many other topics covered in his anthropology courses, he likely added to his personal experiences by reading reports, newspapers, journals, magazines, travelogues, and similar literary materials.

Moreover, precisely in those cases where commedia was *similar* to that of Baroque Italy, where it was improvised based on common comic scenarios, it is hard to know exactly what Kant would have seen: unlike Goldoni's scripted plays, these comic bits were not written down for recitation. Likewise, as comedy grew and extended beyond Italy, because the non-Italian peoples naturally could not understand the language of commedia dell'arte, commedia employed increasingly less speech. Kant in fact notes this (see below), claiming that pantomime becomes more universal insofar as it is based on silent human gestures, allowing more people to understand it more. To put it one way, commedia sometimes grew more and more like (speechless) mime and pantomime.

Kant typically thinks of mime and pantomime as a voiceless play of shapes. This is not to say that mime or pantomime cannot be accompanied by music; indeed, these three art forms blended with each other as well as with early forms of opera as it developed in seventeenth-century Italy.

This raises the question of where these art forms fit within his broader hierarchy of the arts. For Kant, poetry occupies the highest position, for it uses language to evoke imagery and thereby to present those rich, abundant representations of the imagination that elude conceptual determination, and which he calls aesthetic ideas. Kant at times characterizes commedia as aiding digestion and as merely agreeable rather than intellectually stimulating (though there is potential for it to be developed in the latter direction). In contrast, mime and pantomime, by virtue of being forms of gestural expression and gesticulation, are technically to be classified in Kant's scheme under the category of painting.

At first glance, it might seem that Kant would diminish the aesthetic value of mime and pantomime owing to their lack of linguistic content, thus relegating them – like table music – to the realm of the merely agreeable. But that would be misleading: if mime and pantomime are indeed to be seen as extensions or kinds of painting, then they are capable of expressing aesthetic ideas in their own right, much as painting does.

Although we have access to the theatre schedules listing the titles of performances in Königsberg during Kant's lifetime (see below), many details about the productions – such as the actors involved, set designs, and costumes – remain largely unknown.

We are left to conjecture about how they might have allowed for this art form to be used as satire and social critique, or exactly how the comedy might have expressed rich imaginative, aesthetic ideas. Nevertheless, with regard to satire, Kant's thought that commedia can punch up and poke fun at figures of authority is suggestive. Even if Kant could not have imagined the directions that the art forms would go – including the innovations of Marcel Marceau, Charlie Chaplin, and Buster Keaton, or the more faithful re-enactments of commedia dell'arte found all over the globe today – Kant's theory may offer some conceptual resources for understanding these recent artistic practices.¹

Having explained the relevant background and clarified the motivations underlying this inquiry, I now turn to the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*.

The third *Critique* contains two almost-invisible references to mime. Perhaps because the references are puzzling, Kant's invocation of *Mimik* (though not the passages themselves) has been largely overlooked in the secondary literature. In § 14, Kant writes of mime/mimicry as a play of shapes: 'All form of the objects of the senses (of the outer as well as, mediately, the inner) is either shape or play: in the latter case, either play of shapes (in space, mime [*Mimik*], and dance), or mere play of sensations (in time).² Yet Kant hardly explains what he means by *Mimik* as a play of shapes, nor its connection to or distinctness from, dance and ballet. A connection between gesture and mime is apparent in a passage several sections later, when Kant presents a division of the beautiful or fine (*schöne*) arts (§ 51). He is explaining how pictorial art can be seen as gesture: it is as if the artist uses shapes to express ideas. Kant introduces a comparison between painting and mime (*qua* unspoken arts):

But how pictorial art can be counted (by analogy) as gesture [*Geberdung*] in a language is justified by the fact that the spirit of the artist gives a corporeal expression through these shapes to what and how he has thought, and makes the thing itself speak as it were in mime [*mimisch*]: a very common play of our fantasy, which attributes to lifeless things, in accordance with their form, a spirit that speaks from them. (*CJ*, 5:324)

While mime or pantomime is not one of the principal fine arts named by Kant, he evidently thinks that he can *illustrate* his theory by referring to mime (hence this article's title). For, in § 51, he is offering examples of his division of the arts, and in § 14 (called 'Elucidation by means of examples'), Kant is clarifying his view of aesthetic judgements of taste.

But the precise meaning of these examples is not immediately clear. If pictorial art can be counted as 'gesture' (*Geberdung*) 'in a language', then the kind of gesture Kant has in mind seems to be precisely the same kind of gesture that is associated with mime

1 Since there is relatively little scholarship on Kant on mine, pantomime, or commedia, this article aims to shed light on topics that, even if relatively neglected in the literature, are found in Kant's writings, and in the case of mime, even in one of the *Critiques*. On Kant and acting, see Márcio Suzuki, 'Des Herrn Professors Kants Paradoxon des Commoedianten', *Kant-Studien* 109 (2018): 395–418, a title modelled on Denis Diderot's 'Paradox of the Actor'. Suzuki argues that theatre and the dramatic arts helped shape Kant's views of society and pragmatic anthropology.

2 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 5:225. Hereafter: *CJ*.

and pantomime. By taking a deeper look at the context and development of Kant's thought on pantomime and commedia, readers can understand such passages better and gain further insight into Kant's aesthetic theory.³ This allows for a more coherent understanding of what might otherwise seem to be curious or marginal examples within the context of Kant's account of fine art.

I would like to suggest that Kant's remarks on Harlequin/Arlecchino (*Harlekin*) and the jester (*Hofnarr*), often found in his anthropological lectures and notes, run parallel to the aforementioned Critical references to mime and gesture. The relations between mime, pantomime, and commedia dell'arte are not always clear, as noted. When seen from a historical perspective, sometimes the art forms blended into each other as they developed. Kant himself at one point mentions that it might be possible to stage a pantomime comedy valid for all peoples (see below). In any case, notwithstanding such historical and conceptual blending of these art forms, I will suggest that mime is more closely associated with an *intuitively given* play of shapes in line with Kant's mature aesthetic theory, whereas the jester and Harlequin (from commedia dell'arte) are more associated with the physiological and mechanistic account of humour deriving from Kant's anthropological materials (yet also to some extent found in the third *Critique*).

Elsewhere I have argued that Kant's thoughts on humour in general belong to his aesthetic theory.⁴ If that approach is fruitful, analysing Kant on comedy, mime, and commedia can help us understand aspects of his broader aesthetic theory.⁵ It is here proposed that looking at Kant's remarks can shed light on the above passages and to some extent his wider aesthetic theory. In turn, readers can make sense of Kant's remarks about mime/pantomime and commedia by seeing them in the context of that theory. For instance, Kant's thoughts on *Mimik* and commedia are couched in terms of the particular account of aesthetic pleasure he was employing at the time, whether a 'principle of sensible, intuitive comprehension' or the free and harmonious play of the imagination and understanding (see below).

Although Kant writes about the following three art forms, he is not always clear about their specific differences:

1. *Mime/mimicry (Mimik)*: a theatrical art of facial expressions and bodily movements.
2. *Pantomime (Pantomime)*: a related art using allegedly universal facial expressions or miens (*Miens*), gestures (*Gebärde/Geberdungen*), and gesticulation (*Gesticulation*). Pantomime can be thought of as a silent or wordless 'dance'. Even if Kant often associates pantomime with dance, pantomime is usually without music.

3 On comedy in Kant more generally, see Robert R. Clewis, *Kant's Humorous Writings: An Illustrated Guide* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021). The present analysis extends the analysis in *Kant's Humorous Writings* by examining Kant's thoughts on commedia dell'arte, pantomime, and mime in relation to his aesthetic theory.

4 See *ibid.*, and Conclusion to Robert R. Clewis, *The Origins of Kant's Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 240.

5 Not only is humour studies growing but Kant's humour theory in particular is increasingly studied in relation to his philosophical work and aesthetics. For very recent studies, see Marcus Willaschek, *Kant: Die Revolution des Denkens* (Munich: Beck, 2023), chap. 17; Clewis, *Origins of Kant's Aesthetics*, chap. 8; Lauren Olin, 'All in Good Taste', *Philosophy of Humor Yearbook* 4 (2023): 287–89; Mojca Küplen, 'Kant's Theory of Laughter', *Debates in Aesthetics* 16 (2021): 49–62; Clewis, *Kant's Humorous Writings*.

3. *Commedia dell'arte*: the aforementioned improvisational theatre making use of stock characters. It can be noted that Kant refers to *Harlekin* (Italian: *Arlecchino*) and not to the other characters and *Zanni* (servant characters).⁶

Mime (1) and pantomime (2) appear to be nearly the same in Kant's account. But the issue is further complicated by the fact that these art forms or styles were evolving and in flux during the modern period, and the genres were sometimes blended with opera, ballet, and dance.⁷ Thus, it is possible that, in Prussia in Kant's day, people thought of *commedia dell'arte* as a kind of pantomime or at least associated the two genres with each other. In addition, *commedia* and pantomime had by this time been adapted (in their various forms) across the continental European and British lands.⁸

In the next section, I will present an overview of the aesthetic theory of beautiful form in the third *Critique* (Section I). I will then turn to Kant's Critical classification of the arts (Section II) and the general context of *commedia* in modern Europe and Prussia (Section III). I will then look at Kant's own early and mature conceptions of *commedia* and mime (Section IV), before (Section V) concluding with thoughts on these as they relate to Kant's aesthetic theory.

I. THE AESTHETICS OF BEAUTIFUL FORM IN THE THIRD *CRITIQUE*

Since the fundamentals of the third *Critique*'s theory of beauty will likely be familiar to readers, only the main contours will be sketched here.

A central notion to Kant's account is the pure aesthetic judgement of beauty. This judgement, Kant thinks (at least on one plausible interpretation), is made on the basis of a free and harmonious play of the faculties of imagination and understanding. In the judgement of beauty, a 'free play of our cognitive powers' (CJ, 5:238, 244, 256) gives rise to the aesthetic pleasure and associated pure aesthetic judgement of beauty.

6 While he refers to Harlequin, Kant does not appear to refer to other characters from *commedia dell'arte*: Brighella, Pagliaccio, Colombina, Vecchio, or Pantalone. This may simply be a matter of what survived in the literary record or, on the other hand, it may reflect the limits of Kant's understanding of *commedia*.

7 On opera and *commedia dell'arte*, see Emily Wilbourne, *Seventeenth-Century Opera and the Sound of the Commedia dell'Arte* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019). On music, gesture, and mimicry, see Mary Ann Smart, *Mimomania: Music and Gesture in Nineteenth-Century Opera* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004). For an overview of *commedia* in general, see Judith Chaffee and Olly Crick, eds., *Routledge Companion to Commedia dell'Arte* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015); Antonio Fava, *The Comic Mask in the Commedia dell'Arte* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007); and Nicolò Palazzetti, 'Il mito della Commedia dell'arte e la finzione del teatro', *SigMa*, no. 8 (2024): 447–67, <http://www.serena.unina.it/index.php/sigma/article/view/11497>.

8 Some studies of theatre in East Prussia and Königsberg explicitly mention *pantomime* in Königsberg. On the theatre scene in eighteenth-century Königsberg, see a 1928 doctoral dissertation: Ida Peper, *Das Theater in Königsberg Pr. von 1750 bis 1811 mit besond. Berücksichtigung der Königsberger Theaterkritik* (Königsberg: Kopal, 1928); hereafter: TK. See too August Hagen's extensive book on theatre in Königsberg and Danzig, *Geschichte des Theaters in Preußen, vornämlich der Bühnen in Königsberg und Danzig* (Königsberg: Dalkowski, 1854), which observes that by the late 1600s and early 1700s the German stage was ready for *commedia dell'arte* (p. 108). Hagen reveals that the performer Franz Schuch (active in Königsberg and other Prussian cities in the 1750s) combined pantomime and *commedia* (specifically, Harlequin). Hagen writes: *er führte auf als große Pantomime: 'Die Geburt des Arlequins nach Art des Herrn Nicolini mit verschiedenen geschwinden Verwandlungen'* ('He performed as a great pantomime, "The Birth of Harlequin in the Style of Mr. Nicolini with Various Rapid Transformations"). Clearly, there was a tradition of these overlapping art forms in Prussia during Kant's time.

The free play of the faculties is a response to what Kant calls the ‘form of the object’ for reflection in general (CJ, 5:190, 279, 291). There is some disagreement about how to interpret Kant’s aesthetic theory of ‘form’; thankfully, my aims here do not depend on settling these interpretive issues. What seems uncontroversial is that the aesthetic pleasure in beauty, and thus the pure aesthetic judgement of beauty, is a response to form of some kind.

For instance, in the passage quoted above from § 14, Kant characterizes mime as a play of shapes in space. Form is here read – in a rather strict sense – as a *spatial* shape, the counterpart to a play in time (associated with music).⁹

On another reading of Kant’s account (which might be associated with ‘moderate’ rather than ‘strong’ formalism), form is the product of a *synthesis of the imagination*, in response to a perceived object. The object looks as if it were the kind the imagination would freely create if it could produce its own forms. To put it another way, the object’s form is the kind that would be created when the imagination is considered to be free and ‘productive and self-active (as the authoress of voluntary forms of possible intuitions)’ (CJ, 5:240–41).¹⁰

Finally, according to a third aspect in Kant’s account (which might be called ‘weak’ formalism), form is *whatever* evokes the free play of the faculties of imagination and understanding, or, to put it more simply, whatever gets the process of the free play going. Indeed, the notion of a free (harmonious) play seems to be a (or even *the*) core element in Kant’s mature aesthetic theory. At the end of § 20, for instance, Kant writes that what he calls the ‘aesthetic common sense’ is an *effect* (*Wirkung*) of the free play: ‘the effect of the free play of our cognitive powers’ (CJ, 5:238).

The present aim is not to settle which of these (strong, moderate, or weak) formalisms is most compelling or which is closest to Kant’s considered view. Rather, I wish to identify the basic model that they all share: the play of the faculties, as a disinterested response to form, gives rise to the pleasure in beauty. This is important because Kant understands pantomime and mime to be a play of shapes and forms (see below).

Another core element of Kant’s aesthetic theory is his account of *aesthetic ideas*. At the beginning of § 51 (on the division of the fine arts), Kant says that all beauty, the beauty of art as much as the beauty of nature, can be seen as the expression of aesthetic ideas: ‘Beauty (whether it be beauty of nature or of art) can in general be called the expression of aesthetic ideas’ (CJ, 5:320). An aesthetic idea is a rich intuition or representation of the imagination that ‘occasions much thinking’ even if no concept or determinate thought can be adequate to it, and ‘which, consequently, no language fully attains or can make intelligible’ (CJ, 5:314). This is worth mentioning

9 This distinction likely has roots in the earlier phases of Kant’s aesthetics, even as early as the late 1760s. According to the *Anthropology Friedländer* (‘On the Senses’) from 1775/1776, Kant reportedly said: ‘Variousness in accordance with time is a play, hence music is a play of sensation. Variousness in accordance with space is shape, hence dancing is a play of shape. It may be called a play to the extent that it occurs gradually, thus in relation to time’; Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology Friedländer*, trans. G. Felicitas Munzel, in *Lectures on Anthropology*, ed. Allen W. Wood and Robert B. Louden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 25:496. For a similar passage from about 1781, see Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology Menschenkunde*, trans. Robert B. Louden, in *Lectures on Anthropology*, 25:999. A prominent critic associated with such strict formalism is Clement Greenberg. For more on these formalisms and their interpreters, see Clewis, *Origins of Kant’s Aesthetics*, chap. 2.

10 Moderate formalism can be associated with Henry Allison’s interpretation, and weak formalism (discussed next), with some interpretive remarks made by Paul Guyer, although at times Guyer seems close to moderate formalism, too. For more, see Clewis, *Origins of Kant’s Aesthetics*, chap. 2.

since, given Kant's premises, mime or pantomime, as a play of forms, could elicit aesthetic ideas (more below). Likewise, Kant explicitly states – creating some tension within his otherwise physical, mechanistic account – that a play with the material for laughter (or humorous content) can be considered a play with aesthetic ideas (CJ, 5:332). Such image-rich representations presumably include the content provided by commedia's scenarios (*lazzi*) and the jester's antics.

It may not be immediately clear how Kant's notions of form (and free play) are connected to aesthetic ideas.¹¹ But what is relevant for present purposes is that Kant classifies the various arts according to how they communicate these aesthetic ideas. If what the artists are communicating is an aesthetic idea, in wordless *Mimik* and pantomime, they do so through a play of shapes rather than through language. The pictorial artist, or painter, in parallel fashion brings about 'a very common play of our fantasy, which attributes to lifeless things, in accordance with their form, a spirit that speaks from them' (CJ, 5:324). Accordingly, in mime/pantomime, spirit could likewise speak through the presentation of intuitive, wordless content.

Finally, given the present discussion of mime, pantomime, and commedia, Kant's notion of disinterestedness should be mentioned. As he explains in the first moment of the *Analytic of the Beautiful*, Kant thinks that making a pure aesthetic judgement of beauty requires being disinterested, that is, not having an interest in the existence of the object (whereby one could make use of the object, profit from it, and so on), but instead being engaged – no doubt with active attention – merely with a *representation* of it. And, as he explains in the second and fourth moments, when one makes a judgement of beauty, one speaks with a 'universal voice', or, as he puts it, taking a term from his moral philosophy, with *autonomy*. This means that, rather than being what he calls an 'aesthetic egoist', one is willing to engage with others, be informed by them, and explain reasons for one's own judgement.¹² The judge is thereby implicitly committed to thinking that everyone who is disinterested and has normally functioning cognitive faculties is in a position to agree, and should agree, with the pure aesthetic judgement (or at least should feel similar pleasure). This is to say that the judge makes a normative demand; in this sense, the pure aesthetic judgement can be said to have a *necessity* to it. The aesthetic judge attends to an object in a particular experience, and hence in this sense the judgement is certainly 'empirical'. At the same time, Kant holds that the judge demands the agreement *a priori*, and in this particular sense the judgement itself can be called *a priori*.¹³

After this overview of Kant's aesthetics of beautiful form, we can now briefly turn to the classification of fine art in the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*.

11 For a recent interpretation, see Ido Geiger, *Kant and the Claims of the Empirical World: A Transcendental Reading of the 'Critique of the Power of Judgment'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

12 For recent discussion of this point, see Jessica J. Williams, 'Autonomy and Community in Kant's Theory of Taste', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 82 (2024): 204–14; 'The Demands of Beauty: A Kantian Account of the Normative Force of Aesthetic Reasons', *Estetika* 61 (2024): 1–19.

13 Normativity was one of the first issues explored by the anglophone scholarship on Kant's aesthetics, including Paul Guyer, *Kant and the Claims of Taste* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Like most other studies of Kant's aesthetics, however, that study does not discuss mime, pantomime, or commedia. Kantian aesthetic normativity continues to be discussed today; see Serena Feloj, 'Aesthetic Normativity in Kant's Account: A Regulative Model', *Con-textos Kantianos* 12 (2020): 105–22; Ted Kinnaman, 'Kant on Aesthetic Normativity', in *Rethinking Kant*, vol. 7, ed. Edgar Valdez (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars), 41–50; Williams, 'Autonomy and Community'.

In classifying the fine arts in the third *Critique*, Kant draws an ‘analogy of art’ with the kind of expression we use to communicate. One of these is gesture (*Geberdung*):

Thus if we wish to divide the beautiful arts, we can, at least as an experiment, choose no easier principle than the analogy of art with the kind of expression that people use in speaking in order to communicate to each other, i.e., not merely their concepts, but also their sensations. – This consists in the word, the gesture [*Geberdung*], and the tone (articulation, gesticulation [*Gesticulation*], and modulation). Only the combination of these three kinds of expression constitutes the speaker’s complete communication. For thought, intuition, and sensation are thereby conveyed to the other simultaneously and united. (*CJ*, 5:320)

When read in the context of the arts of mime and pantomime, this somewhat puzzling passage makes more sense, for it is precisely through gestures and gesticulation, or the wordless movements of the body and face, that mime and pantomime communicate.

Though *Mimik* is mentioned in the *CJ*, it is not one of the main fine arts alongside poetry, painting, architecture, dance, and music. Yet mime (or pantomime) seems to be related closely to dance insofar as (or if) mime is without words or speech. Kant thinks of *dance* as speechless. He states in his course compendium, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798), ‘[m]usic, dance, and games form a speechless social gathering’.¹⁴ He likewise thinks of *pantomime* (qua means of communication) as wordless. In anthropology lecture notes from 1772, he is reported to have stated:

And from this it can also be seen why, as a means of communicating thoughts to one another, we chose words rather than pantomime and gestures [*Pantomimen und Geberden*], after all, noise spreads into all places and in general one perceives the impression far more intensely in hearing than one does in vision [*Gesicht*].¹⁵

There emerge at least four conceptual possibilities for a (performing) art form relevant to the present discussion. The art form can employ:

1. Words but no music, such as comedy on stage, including typical commedia using either sketches (*canovacci*) allowing for improvised (spoken) gags and routines (*lazzi*), or else scripted dialogues written by a playwright (for example, Goldoni, Molière);
2. Neither words nor music, such as silent pantomime;

14 Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), trans. Robert B. Louden, 7:277.

15 Immanuel Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin: Reimer/De Gruyter, 1900–), 25:276. Hereafter: AA. When the English edition is not referenced, translations from the AA are my own. Kant associates *Mimik* (sometimes translated as ‘mimicry’) with ‘caricature’ (Kant, *Anthropology*, 7:300). Speaking of an amiable man who nonetheless has an unattractive face, Kant writes: ‘Such a face is not a caricature [*Caricatur*]. For a caricature is an intentionally exaggerated sketch (a distortion) of the face in affect, devised for derision and belonging to mimicry/mime [*Mimik*].’ From this passage it seems that the scope of *Mimik* also includes a view of the face (*Gesicht*). Such an appearance of a ‘face’ could be brought about through sketches or caricatures (say a William Hogarth engraving), through facial expressions, or, as in commedia, even when wearing masks.

3. Music but no words, such as music with (or without) dance;
4. Both words and music, such as song and opera.

This conceptual layout reveals the similarities and differences among these performing art forms and is not meant to be comprehensive. Moreover, the art forms can overlap and are not mutually exclusive.

III. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT: COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE AND KANT'S PRUSSIA

Commedia dell'arte was typically improvisatory, and because it sometimes involved singing it blurred the lines with early opera.¹⁶ The market of commedia dell'arte at Carnival (*carnivale*) indeed provided a context for the early formation of opera in Venice. Around 1637, an itinerant operatic troupe from Rome travelled to Venice during its *carnivale* season (in which the city swelled to twice its size) and produced an opera for a paying public.¹⁷ The arrival of opera around 1637 not only took advantage of a 'pre-existing market' for commedia in Venice but its business structure was also modelled on that of commedia.¹⁸

Though originally belonging to Italian theatre (and perhaps with even more ancient origins), commedia dell'arte spread beyond the Italian cities and across Europe. Eventually, as historians of theatre attest, commedia troupes toured through the German states. As one scholar puts it, '[b]etween 1550 and 1600, Italian commedia troupes travelled widely, not only throughout the peninsula, but in France, the Netherlands, Germany, Spain and even England, where their activities can be traced in court records, private diaries, literature and pictorial works'.¹⁹ Another scholar likewise mentions commedia's spreading into the Germanic lands: 'France and the German states were among the first to receive Italian companies, such visits being fairly common from the early 1570s onwards. Spain, the Low Countries, Denmark and Poland were also attractions.'²⁰ An examination of the history of theatre performance in Königsberg reveals that works of Goldoni, whose *Servant of Two Masters* draws from commedia dell'arte, were staged in that city; performances of pantomime (*Pantomime*) and of harlequin (*Harlekenspiel*) were likewise produced (see TK, pp. 148–149, and below).²¹

16 Kirsten Gibson, 'Society: Music and Musicians in the Renaissance Social Order', in *A Cultural History of Western Music in the Renaissance*, ed. Jeanice Brooks and Richard Freedman (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), 50.

17 Remi Chiu, 'Popular Culture: Three Cases and Some Observations', in Brooks and Freedman, *Cultural History*, 187.

18 Ibid., 188.

19 Andrew Grewar, 'The Old Man's Spectacles: Commedia and Shakespeare', in Chaffee and Crick, *Routledge Companion*, 300.

20 Kenneth Richards, 'The Commedia dell'Arte Acting Companies', in Chaffee and Crick, *Routledge Companion*, 50.

21 On the reception of commedia dell'arte in central Europe, especially German-speaking countries, see the volume edited by Alberto Martino and Fausto de Michele, *La ricezione della Commedia dell'Arte nell'Europa Centrale 1568–1769: Storia, testi, iconografia* (Pisa: Serra, 2010). In his chapter, 'La Commedia dell'Arte nell'opera lirica dei paesi di lingua tedesca' (pp. 341–70), Alfred Noe analyses the presence of figures, derived from commedia, in the musical dramas in the Germanic countries between the mid-1600s and the end of the 1700s.

How did Kant's ideas about *commedia dell'arte*, pantomime, and mime develop? It is probable Kant read accounts of *commedia*, pantomime, or mime, drawing from literary and historical sources – as he was wont to do in matters of anthropology and geography. In addition, he may have seen productions at the theatre in Königsberg, or at the balls and soirées he attended when he was hosted, as he regularly was, by the local nobles such as the Keyserlingks.

It should be emphasized that Kant had been a theatregoer when he was a youngish man, attending plays with Johann Georg Hamann and Theodor Gottlieb von Hippel (himself a playwright) and similar acquaintances. It seems safe to assume that his thoughts on comedy were shaped by discussing plays and performances with these literary friends and colleagues. It is likely they watched, in addition to tragedies, comedies such as Goldoni's *Pamela, or the Rewarded Virtue* and *The Cavalier and the Lady* (TK, pp. 148–49), Molière's *The Miser* (TK, p. 143), and Hippel's *Man of the Clock*.²²

The character Hans Wurst (Johnny Sausage, also called Jack Pudding), a figure that (according to theatre historian Robert Prölss) seems to have been derived from *commedia*'s Pulcinella character,²³ was played by troupes in Königsberg in Kant's day, for instance from 1759 to 1763 (TK, pp. 12–13). Franz Schuch the elder there played Hans Wurst, Peper notes, adding that 'the further meaning of Schuch lies in the area of pantomime and ballet', for the actor 'combined ballet with German comedy' (TK, p. 13).²⁴

In 1753 and 1754 there were *Possenspiele* or plays that included 'Harlequin und Pantolon', central characters of *commedia dell'arte* (TK, p. 8). On 16 November 1767 there was a production of *Eine Pantomime von Kindern* (TK, p. 49). The fact that no author is listed for this piece suggests affinity with *commedia*'s improvisation. Notable plays staged in Königsberg in 1755 also included: *Der Wettstreit zwischen Harlekin und Pierret, Ballet* (no author listed); *Harlekenspiel* (no author); *Das Karneval von Venedig* (no author); and *Die lustige Bauernhochzeit, Pantomime mit Tänzen* (no author; TK, pp. 143–45). Clearly, there were performances of pantomime theatre and *commedia dell'arte* in Königsberg in Kant's day.

Perhaps due in part to his limited means and background, Kant never travelled beyond his region and thus never went to Venice or for that matter saw *commedia* performed in Italy. Kant's lack of travel did not stop him from making generalizations about Italy, presumably based on reading travel descriptions, journals, and similar sources (however questionable). Writing down his perceptions about people from Italy, he once jotted down: 'Public comedies, fine arts. Artificial.' (*Öffentliche Lustspiele. [...] Schöne Künste. Künstliche*; AA, 15:772), which suggests his association of Italy with *commedia*, or at least with *carnivale*.

In *Anthropology* (1798), Kant likewise mentions carnivals and masquerades. The 'Italian', he purports, is 'preeminent' in the 'taste for art' and prefers 'amusements' that are not private (as the French allegedly prefer) but public, such as carnivals and masquerades, or, in his words: 'pompous pageantries, processions, great spectacles,

22 See Manfred Kuehn, *Kant: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 166. For a list of plays shown in Kant's city for decades, starting in 1754, see TK, pp. 143–65.

23 Robert Prölss, *Geschichte des neueren Dramas*, vol. 1 (Leipzig: Schlicke, 1881), 638.

24 Further blurring the lines between characters and genres, Franz Schuch the elder also combined Hans Wurst (a character Johann Christoph Gottsched had tried to ban) with the *commedia dell'arte* character Harlequin; see Hagen, *Geschichte*, 155–57.

carnivals, masquerades, the splendor of public buildings, pictures drawn with the brush or in mosaic, Roman antiquities in the grand style, in order to see and be seen in high society'.²⁵

However breezy, dubious, or controversial such remarks about peoples and nationalities might be, it should be kept in mind that in his anthropology course Kant aimed to give his young students, boys who themselves typically had not travelled very far outside the province and likely knew very little about the larger world, insight into the customs and mores of nations around the globe, as part of education towards (what Kant took to be) world citizenship.

IV. KANT'S CONCEPTIONS OF COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE, *MIMIK*, AND PANTOMIME

Having outlined the historical context for Kant's understanding of *commedia dell'arte*, I now turn to his more specific interpretations of the three relevant art forms – starting with *commedia*.

It will be shown that Kant tends to interpret the laughter evoked by Arlecchino/Harlequin (taken as a synecdoche for *commedia* in general) in terms of its physical and psychological dimensions, and in terms of its social effects and contributions to human sociability. In contrast, pantomime and mime are generally understood as a play of shapes or forms. To put it another way: whereas Kant tends to see *commedia dell'arte* in anthropological terms, emphasizing sociability and related aspects of our social natures, including practices such as dining, his understanding of pantomime and mime (as a play of shapes) appears more closely associated with his aesthetic theory that makes use of his view of the forms of intuition (space and time).

Alas, I do not think it was necessary for Kant to be committed to such an understanding of these respective art forms. The characterization of *commedia*'s Harlequin as a kind of jester whose main contribution is to assist the digestive process, in particular, seems overly reductive and narrow. Kant's views on *commedia* do not, as far as I can tell, change and develop in a significant way over the course of his career. While his claims remain basically the same, they are expressed using a different aesthetic vocabulary, for the aesthetic terms themselves evolve.²⁶

In a section from Kant's course compendium *Anthropology* called 'On the Affects by which Nature Promotes Health Mechanically', Kant writes:

Laughter's jerky (nearly convulsive) exhaling of air [...] strengthens the feeling of vital force through the wholesome exercise of the diaphragm. It may be a hired jester (harlequin) who makes us laugh or a sly wit belonging to our circle of friends, a 'wag' who seems to have no mischief in mind and does not join in the laughter, but with seeming simplicity suddenly releases a tense anticipation (like a taut string). The resulting

25 Kant, *Anthropology*, 7:317. Compare Kant's somewhat uninformative remark on comedy in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764): 'Comedy represents intrigues, marvelous entanglements and clever people who know how to wriggle out of them, fools who let themselves be deceived, jests and ridiculous characters. Here love is not so grave, it is merry and intimate'; Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, trans. Paul Guyer, in *Anthropology, History, and Education*, ed. Günter Zöller and Robert B. Loudon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 2:212.

26 On the development of his aesthetic theory, see Clewis, *Origins of Kant's Aesthetics*.

laughter is always a shaking of the muscles involved in digestion, which promotes it far better than the physician's wisdom would do.²⁷

At least in this passage, Kant focuses on the mechanistic and physiological effects on the audience: the shaking of the muscles involved in digestion.

If it is a capacity for universal communication that stands out in the case of pantomime (see below), when it comes to harlequins and court jesters (*Hofnarren*) Kant tends to focus on the physical effects on the audience: 'By his antics [*Einfälle*] a harlequin who has a nimble wit produces a beneficial shaking of the diaphragm and intestines, by which the appetite for the ensuing social supper is whetted, and thrives as a result of the lively conversation.' And a few pages later the *Anthropology* states:

The position of a court jester [*Hofnarren*], whose function is to tease the king's distinguished servants and thus season the meal through laughter for the sake of the beneficial shaking of his diaphragm, is, depending on how one takes it, above or below all criticism [*Kritik*].²⁸

The assertion that the *Hofnarr* is beyond serious criticism can be understood as an illustration of Kant's aesthetic theory of disinterestedness. It is not possible to seriously criticize, or to reprove and reproach, this kind of fool because he is merely jesting in a play space (*Spielraum*) or area of latitude, where certain statements and actions (jokes and jests) are permitted. Were these statements or actions found in other contexts, they would be deemed inappropriate.

While some aspects of Kant's account emphasize the physical and social aspects of the response to humour, his wider account also highlights imaginative-intellectualist aspects. According to this latter, more 'aesthetic' view, in entertaining the humorous content the audience plays with an incongruity that stimulates the imagination and drives the understanding to find a resolution for the apparent 'nonsense'.

Even if Kant stresses the physiological and mechanistic aspects of the comedy of Arlecchino and the *Hofnarr*, their antics might be able to challenge social and political hierarchies in an intellectually stimulating way that leads to a free play of the cognitive faculties. Perhaps, for example, their comedy will bring to mind a new social structure or implicitly critique society, and in this way, comedy could become 'earnest in the presentation' (*CJ*, 5:335), and maybe even serious enough to make comedy production a fine/beautiful art, or in any case could bring about morally or politically beneficial effects.

In virtue of his role as a fool, the *Hofnarr* possesses the right to poke fun at the nobility or monarch with immunity, that is, without fear of retribution: the weaker is allowed to punch up at the stronger. Through the jester's ridicule of his targets, ordinary people, by a kind of participation, feel that they have one-upped those in power.²⁹

27 Kant, *Anthropology*, 7:262; see also 301, 323–24.

28 Ibid., 7:263, 265.

29 In *Arlecchino*, Fo claims that the harlequin stands for the reform-seeking common people, even if they are not always successful. See Dario Fo et al., *Hellequin, Harlekin, Arlekin, Arlecchino* (Turin: Einaudi, 2011), DVD. Likewise, in the Venetian *carnevale*, with its masks, the power structures were inverted. See also Dario Fo, *The Tricks of the Trade*, trans. Joe Farrell (New York: Routledge, 1991). On the carnival (in François Rabelais and Renaissance humanism), with its inversions of power that are based in laughter and mockery, see Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984).

Moreover, some of the *lazzi* (comic bits) themselves involve more wordplay than physical antics. Such language-based and conceptually richer *lazzi* would seem to lend themselves to a kind of humour that is intellectually enriching, one akin to the beauty found in another linguistic art form, indeed, the art form that occupies the highest position in Kant's hierarchy: poetry.

Let us now (proceeding chronologically) turn to Kant's thoughts on pantomime, which for the present purposes is conceived as being without words or speech, though in principle there is nothing to exclude words at some point being combined with pantomime. Since I aim to understand Kant's remarks on pantomime in terms of the corresponding aesthetic theory, it is necessary to examine Kant's evolving theory of aesthetic pleasure.

One key component of Kant's views of the grounding of aesthetic pleasure (and normativity) in the early period of his aesthetics (the 1760s and early 1770s) is the idea that what is beautiful will be, or necessarily is, easily graspable in intuition. In other studies, I have called this the principle of sensible comprehension, which Kant inherits from the German 'rationalist' aesthetic tradition. It can be formulated in the following way:

Principle of sensible comprehension: The beautiful facilitates sensible comprehension according to the laws of intuitive cognition or sensibility.³⁰

If something is found to be beautiful, on this view, it will facilitate sensible uptake or grasping. One feels aesthetic pleasure, the account holds, because of an object's apparent comprehensibility (*Begreiflichkeit*), evident for instance in its proportion and symmetry.³¹ This is Kant's view starting from the earliest period of Kant's aesthetics, that is, in the 1750s and 1760s, and going into the lectures of 1772/1773 (and beyond).

A passage from the anthropology lecture notes from this early period further clarifies what Kant means by 'play' in intuition, and it also touches on why such play would be pleasing: the 'facilitation of intuitive intuition' increases the feeling of life. 'This pleases because everything that increases our life elicits this effect in us, which one can certainly say about a *facilitation of intuitive intuition*, as human beings cannot represent a greatest manifold any other way' (AA, 25:378–79; emphasis added). The 'play' or activity is not yet (as in the *CJ*) a free harmonious play between the imagination and understanding but a play in intuition according to the principle of sensible comprehension.

During this period, Kant classifies the fine arts not in terms (as in the *CJ*) of the means of expression or communication but in terms of his theory of *play* (of shapes, sensations, and even thoughts) and the corresponding principle of sensible comprehension. In a revealing passage, Kant mentions 'pantomimes' to illustrate his aesthetic principle:

All human beings have conditions under which they can represent a great manifold, hence one also has a theme performed that for the above reasons [that is, concerning proportion] must please everyone. Musicians are called 'players'; we can call dancers 'players with shapes',

30 This formulation is taken from Clewis, *Origins of Kant's Aesthetics*, 33–44; it is also discussed by Jessica J. Williams, 'Robert Clewis on Kant and Aesthetic Normativity', *Kantian Review* 29 (2024): 629–35.

31 Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology* Collins, trans. Allen W. Wood, in *Lectures on Anthropology*, 25:181.

just as with pantomimes [*Pantomimen*]. In a garden I find beauty through comprehensibility; if there is no order in it, then I can make no image of it; I see too much at once. (AA, 25:182)

The principle of sensible comprehension applies to the experience of several art forms (namely, to their ‘proportion and symmetry’), ranging from pantomime to the visual arts, music, dance, and gardening. It is not limited solely to the appreciation of natural beauty.³²

In a key handwritten note from about 1769, Kant conceives of pantomime as an intuitive form of a series of human shapes:

For sensibility to have a determinate form in our representation, it is necessary that it have an order and not just be grasped together. This order is a connection of coordination, and not subordination of the sort that reason institutes. The basis of all coordination, hence the form of sensibility, is space and time. The representation of an object in accordance with the relations of space is shape, and the imitation of this is the image. The form of appearance *without representation of an object* consists merely in the order of sensations in accordance with temporal relation, and the *appearance is called a sequence (or series or play)*. All objects can be sensibly or intuitively cognized only under a shape. Other appearances do not represent objects at all, but only alterations. Pantomime is an intuitive form of a series of human shapes, while dance is one of a succession of movements in accordance with time; both together are mimetic dance. [*Eine anschauende Form von einer Reihenfolge von Gestalten von Menschen ist die Pantomime, von einer folge der Bewegungen nach Abtheilung der Zeit der Tanz; beydes zusammen der mimische tanz.*] Dance is to the eye what music is to the ear, only in the case of the latter there are finer divisions of time in more exact proportion.³³

Pantomime is conceived of as a play of the movement of bodily shapes. Kant seems to think of the shapes in pantomime as ‘appearances’, understood not as (as in the *Critique of Pure Reason*) the correlate to the thing in itself (*Ding an sich*) but rather as constituting a special kind of sequence or series: an alteration in time that does not represent an object in the manner characteristic of ordinary cognition. In addition, the pantomime, as a play of shapes, is perceived *without interest* in the existence of the object and instead viewed with attention to its representation. Indeed, that may be why Kant refers to an ‘image’ or an ‘imitation’ of a representation of an object.

To understand Kant’s notion of pantomime more completely, it would be useful to see what he means by a facial expression or mien, for which he uses cognate words (*Mien, Mine*). The word ‘miens’ (French: *mines*) is also used by contemporary English writers on pantomime.

It is thus worth pausing here to mention John Weaver, not because of his possible influence on Kant but to depict a parallel linguistic and conceptual context from

32 See also a handwritten note from the mid- to late 1770s: ‘The play of sensations: [is] music. Sensations through thoughts: poesy. The play of thoughts and sensations connected with a purposive business: Rhetoric. The play of shapes: dance.’ Immanuel Kant, *Notes and Fragments*, trans. Curtis Bowman, Paul Guyer, and Frederick Rauscher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 15:411.

33 Ibid., 15:304.

roughly the same period.³⁴ When dance theorist Weaver writes about mime and pantomime, he also uses words such as ‘gesture’ and ‘mien’,³⁵ and he conceives of pantomime as lacking words or speech.³⁶

To return to Kant, miens are facial expressions – external signs that reflect inner mental processes or events. They are described as ‘universally valid and natural signs’ of the mind’s agitations.³⁷ The notion that miens are both natural and universally intelligible was likely a widely shared view at the time, not original to Kant. According to the lecture transcription, ‘Miens [*Mienen*] are universally valid and natural signs of mental agitations. There is nothing as universal as miens, for words are not as universal. Hence a pantomime comedy [*pantomimische Comoedie*] which could be valid for all peoples could be staged’ (AA, 25:667).

Kant likewise thinks it is possible to have a universal communication of thoughts through facial expressions or miens, gestures (*Gebärde*), and other signs made through corporeal movements.

All of our affects express themselves in miens, and vice versa; if one often imitates the miens of someone who is in the throes of affect, then one likewise falls into affect. Miens are certainly a far stronger [kind of] speech than words, and pantomime can certainly be seen as a [kind of] speech that is understood throughout the entire world. (AA, 25:443)

Suggesting a possible connection to comic wit, Kant even sees the imitation of miens (specifically, by actors) as an indication of *Witz* (wit). ‘Some people can imitate all of the miens, and one takes this as a sign of wit’ (AA, 25:444).

Proceeding chronologically, the next relevant anthropology lecture comes from around 1781/1782. Here, pantomime is regarded as a kind of communication (‘speaking’) through affects and miens rather than words:

Through pantomime, people speak by making themselves understandable merely through miens. But when the tone of language has to create the action, then one must let the *acteurs* speak in an unknown language of affects; here one might not know the true content of the discussion, but would still know whether he begs the other, threatens him, etc. (AA, 25:999)

Kant also understands viewing dancing in a similar way, which suggests that there is a strong affinity between pantomime and dance/ballet:

34 The influential English dance theorist John Weaver (1673–1760) uses the terms ‘miens’, ‘mime’, and ‘pantomime’. See John Weaver, *Essay towards an History of Dancing* (London: Tonson, 1712). Weaver, according to one historian, has long been acknowledged by theatre historians as the founder of English pantomime; Nancy Taylor, ‘John Weaver and the Origins of English Pantomime: A Neoclassical Theory and Practice for Uniting Dance and Theatre’, *Theatre Survey* 42 (2001): 191–214. For a study and collection of Weaver’s works, see Richard Ralph, *The Life and Works of John Weaver: An Account of His Life, Writings and Theatrical Productions* (London: Dance Books, 1985).

35 Weaver, *Essay*, 121.

36 Weaver admires the ancient Roman reintroduction of pantomime. After some time, he writes, ‘arose a new set of men called mimes, and pantomimes, to restore that imitation without words, which was lost among them’, and they ‘invented a new sort of diversion’ (ibid., 118–19). For Prölss’s treatment of this Roman history using the corresponding German concepts, namely, *Pantomimen*, *Mimen*, *Geberdensprache*, und *Mienenspiel*, see Prölss, *Geschichte*, 14.

37 Kant, *Anthropology* Friedländer, 25:667.

The shapes in dance consist in miens and gesticulations [*Mienen und Gestikulationen*], in positions of the body, and in motion [*Gänge*]; if everything there unfolds according to certain rules following a beat, it brings about a play of the imagination [*Spiel der Einbildungskraft*]. (AA, 25:999)

This is not yet – as in the third *Critique* – a play *between* the imagination and the understanding, but it is nevertheless a play of the imagination.

Johann Jacob Engel, at one point director of the Royal National Theatre in Berlin (1787–1794), published an influential work in the mid-1780s, *Ideen zu einer Mimik* (*Ideas for Mimicry*), a comprehensive account of bodily expressions written mainly to guide and assist actors.³⁸ It is likely a source of the third *Critique*'s references to *Mimik*. Moreover, in the 1770s Kant had published a work in a volume that Engel had edited, *Der Philosoph für die Welt* (*The Philosopher for the World*).³⁹

According to the student lecture transcription on anthropology from 1784/1785, Kant reportedly mentioned Engel, whose two-volume *Ideen zu einer Mimik* had been published in 1785–1786 but whose contents had been known three years earlier:⁴⁰ 'Facial features are predispositions to miens, and these are facial features that are put into play. Miens are gestures through which one expresses his present thoughts. Engel's *Mimicry*⁴¹ discusses this. Facial features are arranged according to the temperaments.'⁴² Likewise, according to the student notes from a later anthropology course (1788/1789), given shortly before the publication of the third *Critique* in 1790, Kant regarded miens and pantomimes as forms of wordless or nonverbal communication: 'Hearing is the easiest way to communicate thoughts to one another. One could not do it using sight; [except] perhaps through miens [*Minen*], pantomime [*Pantomimen*], and the like' (AA, 25:1453). Pantomime, as a widely intelligible, even universal, means of communication, can be contrasted with rhetoric, which is potentially deceptive and manipulative.⁴³ As a configuration of wordless movements in space, mime/mimicry could be seen as a purer art form in that it is freer of deception.

In light of the improvised aspect of some pantomime performances, this point may be extended even further. When the pantomime is improvised (drawing, for instance, on the stock characters of *commedia dell'arte*) rather than constrained by the directions

38 On Engel's *Ideen*, see Hagen, *Geschichte*, 419–24. A recent book on the rhetorical traditions of gesture study is Adam Kendon, *Gesture: Visible Action as Utterance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); on Engel's life and the *Ideen*, see *ibid.*, 86–87.

39 See the editor's introduction to Kant's essay 'Of the Different Races of Human Beings', in Kant, *Anthropology, History, Education*, 82. On Engel's mimicry and aesthetics, see Alessandro Nannini, 'The Veil of the Body: Emotions and Expressive Mimesis in Johann Jakob Engel's Aesthetic Thought', *Itinera* 15 (2018): 106–12.

40 Hagen states that Engel's ideas had been outlined in the *Königsbergischen Theaterjournal* three years earlier; see Hagen, *Geschichte*, 419.

41 That is, Johann Jakob Engel, *Ideen zu einer Mimik*, 2 vols (Berlin, 1785/1786). A review of the first part appeared in February 1785 in *Göttingische Zeitungen von gelehrten Sachen* (Göttingen, 1753–1801). Years earlier, Engel had also published *Über Handlung, Gespräch und Erzählung* (1774; Stuttgart: Metzler, 1964).

42 Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology Mrongovius*, trans. Robert R. Clewis, in *Lectures on Anthropology*, 25:1380.

43 On deceitfulness in rhetoric, see João Lemos, 'Kant on the Deceitful Art of Rhetoric', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 65 (2024): 187–203.

of a playwright or choreographer, it may be considered, in a certain sense, even more 'natural' or aligned with nature.⁴⁴

Engel's *Ideen zu einer Mimik* presented a similar view, too, and it may have been widely shared during this time. The wordless arts of gesture and *Mimik* could expose, Engel thought, the soul's inner workings. Gesture and gesticulation, since they lie close to nature, are in this respect similar to naïveté (*Naivität*), one of the three arts of laughter named by Kant in the 'Remark' in the *CJ* (§ 54).

To summarize, the cases of Arlecchino and pantomime/mime, while similar in some respects, are different in others. At least on Kant's view, the jokes and antics of the character Arlecchino (though not necessarily commedia in general) are linked to sociability, dining, and 'taste' understood in the original sense connected to appetite. This is fitting for Arlecchino, given that this *Zanni* is typically dominated by his appetites and passions. In contrast, mime and pantomime are mentioned among dance and other fine arts, and conceived as a play of shapes according to the form of intuition. So, whereas passages on Harlequin are associated more with agreeableness, the passages on pantomime are more linked to imaginative play with shapes and forms. In pantomime, the aesthetic pleasure arises from observing a play of shapes in time rather than amusing antics and incongruities.

One might wonder if these art forms can be connected to aesthetic ideas, a core element of Kant's mature aesthetic theory. Presumably, both commedia and mime would be able to elicit aesthetic ideas, though in different ways. Commedia might be able to do so insofar as it provides scenes with imaginative content engaged with aesthetically, such as when Arlecchino 'punches up' and the commedia provides social critique, or when commedia contains intellectually rich scenarios or *lazzi* that employ stimulating, clever word play. Pantomime would be able to do so by virtue of its wordless, beautiful physical movements in space.

If and when Arlecchino's comedy amounts to mainly *physical* movements (as in later clowning partly inspired by the Arlecchino, from Pierrot to characters played by Chaplin and Keaton), then it seems to be getting closer to mime and pantomime. In that case, a play of shapes, an image or appearance, would strike the viewer as aesthetically stimulating.

It seems clear that, on a Kantian account, there can be a play of shapes in pantomime that leads to the expression of aesthetic ideas. After all, as described towards the beginning of this article, Kant explains painting's ability to express 'spirited' ideas precisely by applying the concepts of gesture and gesticulation (*CJ*, 5:324).

Still, even if silent pantomime is able to evoke aesthetic ideas through vivid imaginative or sensible representations, it cannot employ words. In this respect, it would differ from a poem, play, libretto, and even a narrative joke that tells a story or has a set-up followed by a punchline, thereby using a kind of formal structure (a point that highlights analogies between language-using jokes and poetry).

⁴⁴ Within commedia dell'arte, the shift from improvisation by stock characters to the enactment of the scripted words was one of the achievements of Carlo Goldoni, author of the commedia-inspired work *One Man, Two Guv'nors* or *Servant of Two Masters*.

I would like to summarize key aspects of the relationship between Kant's aesthetic theory and pantomime, mime, and commedia. I argued that Kant's thoughts on pantomime and mime are expressed in terms of his evolving account of aesthetic pleasure, whether placed in terms of a principle of sensible comprehension or instead a free play of imagination and understanding. According to his early aesthetics, Kant's account of pantomime is fleshed out in terms of the principle of sensible comprehension. The play of shapes is an intuitive configuration or form that is taken in with aesthetic pleasure at what is easily grasped in intuition or sensibility. Then, on his Critical or mature view, Kant employs his account of the free, harmonious play of imagination and understanding. According to the third *Critique*, Kant thinks of *Mimik* as a play of shapes, that is, bodily forms and facial expressions constitute spatial shapes, synthesized by the imagination but not brought under a concept or rule of thought. The aesthetic pleasure comes from the free play of the two faculties in response to these shapes in play.

One wishes that Kant had more directly explained how the play of shapes could lead to or express aesthetic ideas, but, to conjecture, perhaps the moving bodily forms, gestures, and facial expressions function as what he calls *aesthetic attributes*: sensible features of an object or event that jointly enable the expression of an aesthetic idea. The aesthetic attributes would be constituted by neither colour nor word but physical gesture – which is still a kind of communication.

Pantomime and mime take gestures that might otherwise go unnoticed, and bring them to the fore in a way that directs the audience's attention. For instance, the idea of grief or love might become vivid to the viewer because their attention is drawn to the way the body moves when grieving or in love. The ability to express aesthetic ideas through movement in this way would then make up most of the difference between mere imitation (verisimilitude) and artistic practice. Indeed, one might wonder how pantomime and mime can be original (a key component of fine art, for Kant) if these art forms essentially involve an actor's mimicking other people. Yet a plausible response seems available. One could say that these art forms not only copy but also likely *exaggerate* bodily movements and gestures in a novel way: they combine movements and gestures in a manner that uses those movements and gestures to bring about something original.⁴⁵

As for disinterestedness, Kant's thoughts on Arlecchino show that he thinks there is a play space (*Spielraum*) in which joking and jest can occur with neither harm nor foul. This view is consistent with the third *Critique*'s claim that there is a place – such as at a dinner party – where light-hearted, witty things can be said and then are to be forgotten (CJ, 5:305). Like the court jester, Arlecchino is given special permission to poke fun at the powers that be, and maybe even, laterally, at friends – so long as they can punch back. Thus, a special setting permits joking that may be inappropriate outside of that context.

In these ways, then, the interactions between Kant's theories of aesthetic pleasure, free play, universality, and disinterestedness, on the one hand, and his thoughts on mime, pantomime, and commedia dell'arte, on the other, become visible.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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