

## Veber's concept of unreal gestalt

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### ABSTRACT

*Veber's aesthetics should not be seen as just another application of the Meinongian theory of objects. The central concept of Veber's aesthetics, that of unreal gestalt (irealni lik), has to be approached from both Kantian and Meinongian viewpoints if it is to be made understandable. In Veber's theory, an aesthetic feeling (which is included in every aesthetic experience) has two objects: (1) its own object (eg, beauty) and (2) its borrowed object (the bearer of beauty, eg, melody). The latter is always an unreal gestalt, which is formed through a process of gestalt-formation (oblikovanje). This process can be performed even on imaginary elements. Veber argues that the beauty of a melody does not depend on the factuality of its foundations (ie, of the individual tones) but it does depend on the melody's own factuality. But how can a melody be at the same time factual and unreal? A Kantian reading is suggested to steer Veber clear of an imminent contradiction.*

*Key words: aesthetic value, gestalt, unreal gestalt, beauty, melody*

### 1 Introduction to the Problems

Dušan Pirjevec (1972: 85) says that France Veber's aesthetics is "firmly anchored in the great stream of European aesthetic thought". I do not want to challenge his thesis. On the contrary I shall argue that a lot of light will be shed on Veber's aesthetics if he is regarded not only as the faithful pupil of Meinong that he is generally taken to be but also and foremost as a follower of Kant's aesthetics. These two lines of influence, Kantian and Meinongian, do not exclude one another but, on the contrary, support and reinforce each other. It is only in their light that the central concept Veber's aesthetics, that of unreal gestalt (*irealni lik*) has any hope of becoming fully understandable.

Veber's *Estetika* (1985, [1925]) is probably his most important philosophical book. The only book that can compete with it about this distinction is *Vprašanje stvarnosti* (1939). It is an interesting question whether these two books should be read in parallel, as Dean Komel (2004) has suggested. In any case, such a comparison is beyond the scope of this paper. My task is simply to try to clarify the central notion of *unreal gestalt* (*irealni lik*). The task is not easy, however, for several reasons. First, Veber's *Estetika* is written in a longwinded Meinongian style: it involves much repetition and such a wealth of material that the undeniably valuable items are easily lost among the excessively

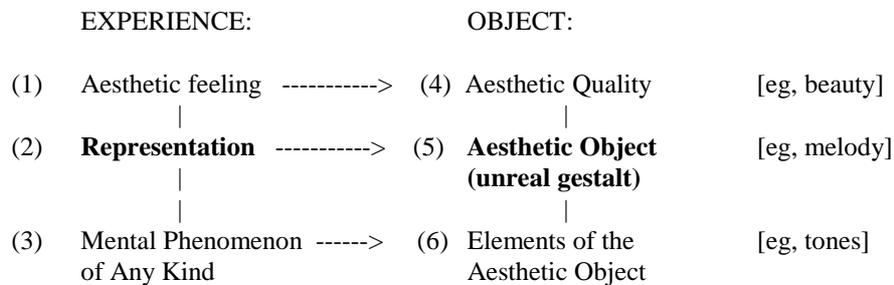
many items with little or no use-value. Consequently, it is very difficult to find, at least on a first reading, what is important in the book and what is not. Third, despite its length and seeming thoroughness, the book leaves some concepts hopelessly unclear. Unreal gestalt is unfortunately one of these.

My approach will be critical because I believe that Veber is like any other philosopher: his views must be open to criticism. And I believe that his views can survive such criticism. For instance, if we compare Veber's notion of "unreal gestalt" to the concept of "significant form" of his English contemporary Clive Bell (1997 [1913]), it is not at all obvious that Bell's concept, which has become a fixed star in the firmament of aesthetics, is so much clearer and more interesting than Veber's. It could even be argued that Veber's concept is potentially more useful.

Because unreal gestalt is not a fully polished concept, I will try to do some of the required polishing, but I must admit at the outset that I am not able to solve all the problems that will emerge as we go deeper into the concept and its background. I will concentrate on two sets of problems connected with the concept of unreal gestalt: (1) those related to the notion of gestalt (or form) and (2) those dealing with unreality. But first it will be necessary to examine the place of unreal gestalts in Veber's aesthetics.

## 2 Veber's Analysis of Aesthetic Experience: A Précis

Veber's aesthetic theory has a solid psychological foundation. The following three-layer model expresses some of its central ideas:



Here the vertical sign "|" indicates the relation of "founding". Thus, for example, aesthetic feelings are founded on representations, and aesthetic qualities are founded on aesthetic objects. The horizontal arrow "---->" indicates directedness. For example, the representation involved in an aesthetic experience is directed to the aesthetic object (which necessarily is an unreal gestalt).

This figure does not appear anywhere in Veber's writings but it expresses some of his fundamental ideas clearly and economically. (For a fuller exposition see Sajama 1987.) Here are some of Veber's leading ideas:

(i) Aesthetic experience is complex, multi-layered. And there is always a *strict parallelism* between the experience and its object in the sense that the properties of the object are always reflected in the experience - one way or another - and vice versa.

(ii) All aesthetic experiences necessarily include a *representation* of the aesthetic object as their core. (This representation often is the result of a process of *Vorstellungsproduktion*. See § (v) below.)

(iii) An aesthetic feeling is based on a representation of the aesthetic object, but not directed to the representation but to its object. (To be exact, the aesthetic feeling has two objects: its proper (*lasten*) object is the aesthetic quality (eg, beauty), while its appropriated (*prisvojen*) object is the aesthetic object itself.)

(iv) The aesthetic object is always an unreal gestalt.

(v) The aesthetic object is composed of elements (tones, lines, shapes, colours etc.) that are put together by a process of gestalt-formation (*oblikovanje*). (Similarly, the representation at the core of the aesthetic experience is formed out of other kinds of mental phenomena through *Vorstellungsproduktion*.)

(vi) The aesthetic object may have properties that its elements do not have, because the whole is more than its parts.

This short summary cannot, of course, go into the byzantine detail of Veber's theory, but I hope it offers the bare minimum that will make it possible to grasp the place of unreal gestalt within Veber's aesthetics.

### 3 Why Are Gestalts Needed?

The concept of gestalt was needed in Meinong's school for the following reason. We can represent (*vorstellen*, *predstaviti/predstavljati*) simple objects, like a patch of green or a patch of blue, but we cannot *directly* represent their difference, because representations are simple and passive experiences that cannot perform a big task like comparison or differentiation. To represent complex or otherwise difficult objects, we need the mental activity of *Vorstellungsproduktion* or production of representations. Stephan Witasek explains clearly the official doctrine of the school in his textbook:

Sensations ... convey us a large amount of data about the objects around us. ... They do not, however, comprise everything ... that we grasp of the objects. [We experience] not only colours and tones ... smells, tastes and other such things but also all this combined and once more differentiated into *spatial gestalts* ..., *tonal and sonic gestalts* like melodies and linguistic formations; we see different kinds of *movement*, *rest* and *change*, we perceive *similarities* and *contraries* and different *numbers* of various objects. (Witasek 1908: 222-3)

The sensory organ is responsible for the arousal of a mere tonal experience; it takes place involuntarily and as if without any addition on our part. But when we should represent a melody, this cannot be achieved merely by heaping a set of tonal sensations, but only through a peculiar process caused by the tonal sensations. This process takes place most often without our noticing it at all, and its result is a ... new representation, that of a tone-gestalt or melody. (ibid.: 225)

[These new representations] are called *produced representations*, and the process, whose result they are, is called *production of representations*. (ibid.: 232)

Although Veber himself used the concept of *Vorstellungsproduktion* in his 1928 paper "Problem predstavne produkcije", in *Estetika* his chosen term was gestalt-formation or *oblikovanje*. Thus *oblikovanje* is the process in which the elements of a gestalt (eg, individual auditory sensations) are gathered and formed into a complex gestalt (eg, melody). And this very gestalt is the aesthetic object that is grasped through the corresponding representation. (To be sure, *Vorstellungsproduktion* takes place in the realm of experiences, whereas *oblikovanje* takes place in the realm of objects. But because of the strict parallelism between these two realms, it does not matter which vocabulary we use.) (For a clear exposition of Veber's 1928 paper, see Pihlar (forthcoming).)

#### 4 Are Aesthetic Objects and Artworks Identical or Not?

But now arises an interesting question about the ontological status of the "aesthetic gestalt". Let us suppose for the sake of argument that a work of art is a physical object (or at least that it has a physical aspect or is in principle capable of receiving some kind of physical expression). To minimize problems, let's take a statue, say Michelangelo's David, as our test case. Now we may ask, what in this case the aesthetic object is. It is, on Veber's view, the gestalt that is "embodied" in this statue. The gestalt is not the same thing as the statue as a physical object, but there obtains a close relation of embodiment between them. This interpretation seems to be completely in line with Pirjevec's view:

The artwork is for [Veber] the unreal gestalt whose "external main foundations have already been realized". (Pirjevec 1972: 94)

These "already realized external main foundations" are identical with the block of marble that we uninitiated call Michelangelo's David. Yet we are willing to admit that David is much more than a piece of stone. A follower of Aristotle would undoubtedly try to relieve our confusion by saying that it is the *form* not the *matter* that counts when David's identity is being established. But, she would add, the mere form is not yet the complete work of art although it is by far its most important part.

Yet, Pirjevec's statement could be interpreted in both ways: He could be interpreted as saying *either* that a work of art is the unreal gestalt itself *or* that a work of art is the unreal gestalt *plus* its material foundation. The latter interpretation seems to be the more reasonable one. Whether it was also Veber's view, is not entirely clear.

#### 5 What is the "Fundamental Immanence" of Gestalts

Veber sometimes expressed his views rather confusingly. For instance, the paragraph 4 of the book's *Introduction* is titled "*Načelna imanenca estetičnih objektov*" or "The fundamental immanence of aesthetic objects". If "immanent" is taken to mean what it meant to many phenomenologists, roughly "in the mind only", then we get the totally false idea that unreal gestalts are in the mind only. This interpretation is not far-fetched, since for example the Slovenian *Leksikon filozofija* defines "immanentno" as follows:

**immanent** that which is internal, that which remains in itself and does not overstep its own limits, does not go beyond itself, does not transcend. (Sruk 1995. Ušeničnik 2003 defines the notion in the same way.)

But if we read paragraph 4 carefully, we notice that by "immanence" Veber does not refer to the Brentanian notion of "mental inexistence" but the strange circumstance that *the beauty of a melody can be factual although the elements of the melody are non-factual* (Veber 1985: 64). Translated into plain English, this means that a melody may *in fact* be beautiful although its individual tones are only *imagined*. In other words, real beauty does not presuppose a real bearer (because an imaginary object can be beautiful, too). This is a special case of principle (vi) in section 2 above, according to which the whole may have "emergent" properties. It is also a good reminder of the fact that Veber's words do not necessarily have the same meaning as those of other philosophers. It is therefore entirely possible that Veber's key concept of "reality" is not the same as those of other philosophers. Let us now turn to this problem.

## 6 An Aristotelian Interpretation of the Unreality of Aesthetic Objects

If we take the word "real" in its plain everyday sense, then to call something "real" is to say that it exists and to call it "unreal" is to say that it does not exist. Any English Dictionary will confirm this hypothesis. Now to say that aesthetic objects are "unreal gestalts" is to say two things at once: (1) aesthetic objects are gestalts and (2) these gestalts do not exist. But it is not at all certain *where* (on which ontological level) or *how* (in which sense) these gestalts are not real for Veber. Unfortunately, it is extremely difficult to find a reasoned answer to these questions in *Estetika*. He takes it for granted that his reader understands what he means with "reality". He presupposes that his readers have read all his previous books and are well-versed in his version of the Meinongian theory of objects. I have not, and therefore I will have to resort to someone who has.

Bojan Žalec says that, in the context of Veber's aesthetics, "unreal" means "non-spatial and non-temporal" (2003: 125). This only confirms my suspicion that Veber uses words in a rather unpredictable way. For "non-spatial and non-temporal" are the very terms that some philosophers use to define the term "abstract" (see eg Oliver 1995:2). For them, an abstract entity is an entity of which it makes no sense to say that it is in some place or at some time. This means that an abstract entity is non-spatial and non-temporal.

And in fact this interpretation would seem a very credible one. It makes sense of Veber's concept of unreal gestalt. If the interpretation is correct, then unreal gestalts would be Aristotelian forms, just as I suggested above. For Aristotelian forms are not *themselves* in space and time, although their individual instances do exist in time and space. Similarly, if the real aesthetic object is an unreal gestalt, it does not itself exist in time or space - only its instances or "material foundations" do. The fact that *we* would like to call David, the concrete statue, the "veritable" work of art, does not make the opposite usage incomprehensible. It is totally understandable, if somebody wants to call the abstract form, and not its concrete material realisation, the artwork proper. And it is probable that Veber was such a person.

## 7 A Kantian Interpretation of the Unreality of Aesthetic Objects

There is, I believe, another possible reason why Veber wanted to insist on the unreality of aesthetic gestalts. I admit that this interpretation is purely hypothetical, but I

believe that it sheds some light on this rather murky topic, and is to that extent justified. The interpretation runs as follows. The reason why Veber chose the concept of unreal gestalt was that he wanted to emphasize the autonomy of aesthetic value. For a defender of aesthetic value, the question whether an object is beautiful is independent of the question whether the object in fact exists. This is the idea which Veber, somewhat misleadingly, called "the fundamental immanence of aesthetic objects". This idea is also closely related to (if not a mere application of) Meinong's famous principle of "the independence of *Sosein* from *Sein*", according to which the question which properties a thing has, has nothing to do with the question whether the thing exists or not. Thus, the golden mountain has the property of being made of gold although it does not exist.

Although the idea of the autonomy of aesthetic value may have its deepest roots in Meinong's principle of independence, it is also connected with Kant's ethics and aesthetics. In his ethics, Kant stressed the meaning of the *right motive* (as opposed to good consequences or any other external feature of an action): We should do our duty out of respect for the moral law (or out of sense of duty). Without this attitude, any action lacks moral worth. In his aesthetics, Kant tried to achieve something similar. He tried to show that the aesthetic attitude is "pure" in the same sense as the ethical attitude is: it is disconnected from all egoistic and self-interested desires. In a critical passage of his *Critique of Judgment* he wrote as follows:

Both the agreeable and the good involve a reference to the faculty of desire ... [They both involve delight, but s]uch delight is determined not merely by the representation of the object, but also by the represented bond of connection between the subject and the real existence of the object. It is not merely the object, but its real existence, that pleases. On the other hand [the aesthetic judgment] is simply *contemplative*, i.e. it is a judgment which is indifferent as to the existence of an object ... (Kant 1952: § 5)

In other words, all other forms of value involve a reference to desire; aesthetic value alone does not. Thus if we desire X, we necessarily have a positive attitude to X's existence. And, if we find X pleasant, we want X to exist. But if we aesthetically enjoy X, we do not necessarily want X to exist. Indeed, we are quite indifferent as to the existence of the aesthetic object. This is the kernel of Kant's doctrine of the aesthetic attitude. (It may, of course, be questioned whether it is plausible. I, for one, find it quite implausible. Just as I prefer 20 000 real tolar to 20 000 imaginary ones due to their greater purchasing power, so I prefer the real David to the imaginary one that existed in Michelangelo's mind only. The reason is simple: the really existing David can offer so many more aesthetic experiences than its private imaginary counterpart. And since I am no misanthrope, I prefer a possible world containing a real David to an otherwise similar possible world that does not contain it - no matter whether I myself will ever see it or not.)

Kant's identification of the aesthetic attitude with the disinterested attitude has been exceedingly influential. Therefore it would not be surprising to see traces of it in Veber's doctrine of the autonomy of aesthetic value, as I have called it. There is a difference, though. Kant speaks of the disinterested *attitude* while Veber speaks of the unreality of the *object*. Yet they seem to be speaking of the same phenomenon, because typically an attitude is taken to an object. Thus if there is something special in the aesthetic experience, this peculiarity ("disinterestedness") may be ascribed either to its object (as Veber did) or to the attitude itself (as Kant did) without there being any necessary disagreement on the basic issue.

## 8 One More Difficulty and a Kantian Way Out

The idea of disinterested attitude gets an interesting expression in Veber's terminology. He uses the following three conceptual distinctions in describing aesthetic experience:

- (1) genuine/nongenuine (*pristen/nepristen*),
- (2) factual/nonfactual (*faktičen/nefaktičen*),
- (3) correct/incorrect (*pravilen/nepravilen*).

These can be briefly characterised as follows:

A *genuine* experience is one that involves conviction. (Cf 1985: 56)

A *factual* object is one that in fact exists. (Cf 1985: 64)

A *correct* experience is one that (i) involves conviction

& (ii) the conviction is justified (since its object is factual). (Cf 1985: 58)

Notice how economical Veber is. He defines correctness in terms of genuineness and factuality. A correct cognitive experience is such that (i) the subject, with conviction, ascribes existence to the object of the experience; and (ii) the object in fact exists. A parallel analysis for the success of an aesthetic experience would run as follows:

A correct aesthetic experience is such that (i) the subject, with conviction, ascribes beauty to the object; and (ii) the object in fact is beautiful.

In the following quote, Veber says that the aesthetic quality (ie, beauty) of a melody does not depend on the factuality of its foundations (ie, of individual musical sounds) but it does depend on its own factuality, since a non-factual gestalt cannot be the bearer of aesthetic value. Here is the passage:

Pictures, melodies and several other types of harmony are [beautiful or ugly] independently of the factuality of their ... foundation (individual colours, tones, facts etc) but not independently of their *own* factuality. (Veber 1985: 122)

Here Veber quite undeniably says that the beauty of such unreal gestalts as pictures and melodies does not depend on the factuality of their foundations but certainly on their own factuality. This means, however, that only factual aesthetic objects can have aesthetic value. But now a difficulty arises: if only *factual* aesthetic objects can have aesthetic value, and if all aesthetic objects are *unreal* gestalts, then there must be gestalts that are at the same time factual (since they are bearers of beauty) and unreal (because all aesthetic objects are unreal gestalts). But how can anything be factual and unreal at the same time?

One possible way out of this problem is to go back to Kant and say that to characterise something as "unreal" is not to describe the object itself but the attitude through which it has been grasped. Thus, all talk of "unreal [objects]" can be translated into talk about "disinterested [attitudes]", without any loss of meaning. Thus if the word "unreal" only signals that the act of suspending judgment with respect to the existence of an object has taken place, then the expression "unreal gestalt" only tells us that its user has performed the act of *epokhé* or, to mimic Husserl, the aesthetic reduction.

## 9 Summing Up: Do Unreal Gestalts Exist, After All?

Aesthetic experiences have as their most important ingredient a representation that is directed to the aesthetic object which is always an unreal gestalt. Yet, this gestalt must itself be factual if it is the bearer of the aesthetic value. Despite its factuality, the gestalt may be built out of non-factual elements: for example, one can form (*oblikovati*) a factual melody out of imaginary tones. Thus, there is no contradiction in saying both that the beauty of an aesthetic object is factual but the aesthetic object itself is unreal. Thus, the thesis that the beauty of the melody is factual only means that the melody in fact is beautiful. And the thesis that the object is unreal only means that the subject looks at it without self-centered motives. So the imminent contradiction is avoided but only at the price of making Veber's central claims sound rather shallow. Those who find the price too high are invited to find a solution that both preserves the profundity of Veber's aesthetic theory and saves him from contradiction. I am totally incapable of such a feat.

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