in order to show where Sartre's approach stands in relation to the digital image, an exploration is needed of aspects of its ontology, an exploration we will do in light of a study by Paul Crowther.

Crowther's Ontology of the Digital Image

Crowther sets out what he takes to be the ontology and the aesthetics of digital art (Crowther 2008). To proceed thus, it should be noted, is to reduce the image (whether digital or analogue) to a thing. However, the real value of Crowther's analysis is in the insights it brings to the differences between two technologies. Recognising that the image is inseparable from its incarnation, we will accept for the moment Crowther's treatment of the image as an object to be examined.

For Crowther, the key ontological qualities of the digital image \textit{simpliciter} are:

1) Perceptually, despite the almost absolute, two dimensional, flatness of its display screen ("no autographic surface markings"), the digital gives an "insistently" accurate illusion of three dimensional space—so accurate, in fact, as to hide any trace of its origin in the digital technology that gave rise to it—whereas, the non-digital idiom (e.g. painting) is less accurate, in this regard, even though it itself has a three dimensional aspect. Unlike other art forms, where the medium and the origin of the work can show through to some extent, digital images are simulacra with no discernible link to an original or prior model.

2) Following on from this, a digital image as a \textit{token} (as a representative of an original model) is indistinguishable from the \textit{type} of which it would be a token. In non-digital formats, a token (the reproduction of a painting) can never be equivalent to its type (the original painting). As Crowther summarises: "We have a case of absolute \textit{type-token identity}" (Crowther 2008, 164), so that the whole issue of an "original-copy" relation, inaugurated formally for the West by Plato, does not arise.

3) The algorithmic nature of digital technology enables "\textit{morphing}"—the combining of heterogeneous elements without leaving any trace of the fact of their having been combined.\textsuperscript{16} Unlike analogue formats, where any alterations to a work can inevitably be detected, the digital idiom, once again, is essentially capable of eliminating any trace of the history of changes that may have been effected, even if, as we know, the same format can also be programmed to provide evidence of changes.\textsuperscript{17} This point is reiterated by Crowther when discussing the dynamics of collective works in a digital idiom and the possible formation of an artistic community based on the obliteration of differences in contributions to an art work: 'All individual contributions to its evolution are absorbed seamlessly within the whole' (2008, 168.). The absence
of any origin characteristic of the digital idiom thus contributes to a new mode of collective art work. A unique original thus gives way, in effect, to a multiplicity of ‘originals’, each able to assume the intimacy of any locale whatever.

4) Finally, Crowther proposes that the digital enables interactivity in ways not possible in non-digital formats. ‘Navigation [where the user navigates a program] and user-transcendent autonomy [where the program itself changes] are unique to digital art, and this is because continuously evolving functions are possible only through digital technology’ (2008, 169. Crowther’s emphasis).

SARTRE AND THE DIGITAL IMAGE AS SIMULACRUM

It might seem that interactivity does not directly intersect with Sartre’s notion of the image. However, I argue that while the refinement of interactivity might be unique to the digital age, as Crowther and others have shown, it is not specific to this age. Oliver Grau (2003), for example, as we have already noted in the Introduction, shows that immersion—a precondition for interactivity—pre-dates by a long way the arrival of the digital era. The panorama with its illusion of space is a late-eighteenth-century instance (Grau 2003, 56–58), but any successful illusion (i.e. something experienced as the real thing), is essentially immersive. In this sense, Grau, while admitting that the capacity for immersion is not as great as in the digital age (Grau 2003, 3) is able, as we have seen, to point to immersive phenomena in the classical Roman world (see Grau 2003, 23–33).

The greater the interactivity, the greater the immersion of the user in virtual space and the greater the difficulty of maintaining a critical distance from the images. Indeed, Grau says that in such circumstances: ‘It is well nigh impossible to perceive it as an autonomous object’ (Grau 2003, 202). In other words, it becomes impossible for the object to be the object of reflective consciousness. Indeed, immersion puts reflective consciousness itself out of play, so that everything is given over to the experience of the image. Immersion is the truth of the image as image (its utter transparency), even if, ultimately, this insight is only communicable via reflective consciousness. Immersion, then, corresponds to Sartre’s version of the image as transparent and separate from reflective consciousness, even if the latter is needed to communicate its qualities to an audience (whether this be academic or popular).

I have proposed that the image as a simulacrum does not presuppose the image as a thing and that there is no conflict with Sartre’s approach because, even to be a false claimant—a process facilitated by the absence in the digital of autographic indices—there is transparency. If, for Sartre, the image is the presence of the thing in its absence, his approach might seem to some to be ill equipped to deal with simulacra. Even schematic representations
FURTHER IMPLICATIONS OF CROWTHER’S THEORY OF DIGITAL AESTHETICS

As we saw above in Chapter Six, Paul Crowther has set out what he takes to be the ontology—which Crowther admirably explains—and the aesthetics of digital art (Crowther 2008). A key point is that, ontologically, the digital image is discontinuous with analogue versions.

Crowther examines the ontological status of the digital image and in doing so assumes that the ontological characteristics of the digital image are also equivalent to its aesthetic impact. The point to recall here is that, with a digital image, there are ‘no autographic surface markings’—that there is no discernible link to an original or prior model. This implies ‘a case of absolute type-token identity’ (Crowther 2008, 164). ‘Morphing’ (combining of heterogeneous elements) leaves no discernible trace.

Another component of Crowther’s argument about the aesthetics of digital art concerns interactivity:

It might be that if the right kinds of digital technology develop, visual idioms may emerge where the virtuoso interpreter takes on something of the same significance as the creator of the work. On these terms digital visual art might move in the direction of musical performance, with the work being increasingly presented as a vehicle for such interpretation rather than an individual visual artwork per se. There would be a gradual realignment in our paradigm of what visual art is. (2008, 168)

And, further,

it is easy to conceive of programs where it is not the elicited VR environment that is important, so much as the use to which the immersant puts it. (In this respect, for example, consider how a program attuned to nuances of movement might be realized by an immersant trained to professional ballet standards.) (168)

Regarding ballet choreography, there is a big difference in a professional ballet dancer using the digital idiom to develop and perfect ballet choreography, where the latter is the art object, and a ‘program attuned to nuances of movement’. It is the choreography which is aesthetically significant, not the program, even if the latter enhances it. Of course this is to say that the program is very much a means and not an end, whereas Crowther is attempting to speak in a way which implies that digital technology can be its own aesthetic end, as when, in examining what is specific to the digital, he valorises the digital’s capacity for sharpness of outline and intensity of three-dimensionality, together with the effacement of origins (the effacement of diachrony) in forming a pictorial whole, a process, we learnt,
made possible by the token-type identity structure of the digital idiom. As Crowther himself acknowledges, producing a digital pictorial whole is also characteristic of the police identikit. Each element characteristic (blue eyes, sharp nose) can be added precisely to produce the seamless digital identikit whole Crowther talks about in relation to artistic work.

Indeed, an interesting example in this regard, suggesting that the employment of the digital strategies Crowther describes may not be politically neutral, is the project by photographers at Australia's Charles Sturt University who *morphed* 1400 photographs of faces with the aim of producing the 'typical' male and female Sydney face (Sydney Morning Herald 2006, 1, and City of Sydney n.d.). For a number of reasons, not the least of these being political, it is important to oppose the logic and reality that founds the Sydney face, a logic inseparable from the technology through which it is animated. The result, then, is the most anodyne of images, showing a youthful, utterly plain—as though airbrushed—face despite the claim that all age, gender and ethnic groupings were included in the original sample. As the ontology of the digital image so well analysed by Crowther implies, there is no way of proving that the heterogeneity and differences in the faces that formed the raw material for the morphed outcome were actually included. The morphed face/image is absolutely synchronic, entirely embedded in the here and now, the diachronic dimension being totally occluded. Origins are irrelevant and might as well be non-existent. The technique is clear, but what of the aesthetic dimension? I suggest that nothing essentially aesthetic follows from the nature of the morphing process involved. Everything depends, as always, on evaluating the outcome, whatever means have been employed in its realisation. The question of what kind of aesthetic digital art can give rise to thus remains. But everything hinges on whether an aesthetic principle in general can still be formulated. And in order to try to illuminate what is at stake here we, at several points, will return to Kant and to the nature of beauty.

**KANT AND AESTHETICS AS AESTHESIS**

What is clearly notable, then, is that writing on aesthetics, including writing on beauty and the sublime in Kant, and the considerable research in this area (the work of Paul Crowther is an example) has not led to an elaboration of the nature of aesthetic experience in relation to digital art, even if Hansen has impressively elaborated on bodily experience in relation to the digital idiom. Most writing on aesthetics cannot be applied to digital art because of an approach to aesthetic experience which endeavours to objectify it through textual analysis, often an analysis of the Third Critique. Crowther attempts to point this out in two sets of remarks in notes to his 1996 article, 'The Significance of Kant's Pure Aesthetic Judgement' (Crowther 1996, 109–121). Unlike Paul Guyer and other similar commentators, Crowther
is 'not concerned to multiply the internal problematics of Kant's position' (1996, 121). It is not, then, a matter of engaging in a close textual analysis of the Third Critique in order to point out logical inconsistencies, but one of following to its limit the general tenor and aspiration of Kant's thought on beauty. Indeed, an 'attentiveness to the details of Kant's text is not matched by a corresponding phenomenological attentiveness to the concrete experience of beautiful configurations. If, however, we are interested in the validity of Kant's claim, this latter consideration should be of decisive importance' (1996, 121 n. 14).

Maybe, to write/philosophise about beauty and taste at all necessarily requires an engagement with a formalism that precisely obscures the nature of aesthetic experience. However, Hansen's work, based in part on his own experience of immersion, on embodiment in virtual environments, shows that this does not have to be the case, just as, to take another example, Julia Kristeva's notion of the semiotic (based in drive energy) does not entail severing all links with the symbolic, where philosophical discourse is located. In fact, experience based in drive energy—or in feeling, we could say in light of Kant—can enrich symbolic capacities. Rueger and Evren, however, see experiences 'below' cognition as opening up the possibility for anything to be beautiful:

Interpretations that locate the aesthetic reflection 'below' the level of cognition usually encounter the problem that all objects can be beautiful. On the view suggested here aesthetic reflection does not take place without accompanying cognition of the object. There is no reason why every object should have a form such that this form agrees with a form that the imagination could have generated freely. (Rueger and Evren 2005, 245 n 23. Authors' emphasis)

But, then, in the crucial section 15 of Kant's Third Critique, we recall, contra the above authors: 'I have already stated that an aesthetic judgement is quite unique, and affords absolutely no (not even a confused) knowledge of the Object. It is only through a logical judgement that we get knowledge' (Kant 1973, §15, 71). It is a matter, then, of coming to grips with Kant's non-cognitive stance in aesthetics, not one of finding a concept, willy-nilly, as so many commentators of Kant are wont to do. Moreover, "below" the level of cognition can also include what Julia Kristeva has called the abject, a notion which has fuelled a significant proportion of the art of the 1990s (cf. the work of Cindy Sherman), so it is certainly not the case that an aesthetics "below" the level of cognition finds all objects beautiful.

Although Crowther engages seriously with Kant's notions of beauty and the sublime and is motivated to show how these enable serious engagement with the aesthetics of the art or natural object, he does not, in the case of digital art, invoke Kant. Not only this is significant, but also the fact that Crowther, like so many commentators, does not note, much less develop,
the fact that beauty for Kant is not ideal perfection, but is, in consequence, an essentially material entity and its own model. This means that what gives rise to an aesthetic experience is synthetic (always unique), so that the material incarnation of beauty is the only way to appreciate beauty, whereas Crowther treats aesthetic experience analytically: the concept, or ideal model, becomes the way to appreciate the aesthetic object. It remains, then, to elaborate on Kant’s approach to beauty in order to illuminate the aesthetic principles of digital visual art.

Kant and Aesthetics as Feeling

At least two problems arise for the reader of Kant’s critique of aesthetic experience concerning beauty. The first is that such an experience is based on feeling, not on cognition, which raises the question as to how there can be any reflective philosophy at all concerning beauty. The second is that as a feeling, aesthetic experience would seem to be essentially subjective, while ‘disinterested delight’ introduces a certain indifference towards the object, which, to cite Heidegger, is essentially to misunderstand Kant on both counts. However, the question still remains as to whether—or how—there is any necessary involvement of an object, even though Kant, of course, refers to the object of aesthetic experience. In short, does the question ‘what is a beautiful object?’ really have any significance? Might not aesthetic experience be entirely internal to the subject so that, in a sense, an actual object becomes superfluous? Or is it rather that, as Heidegger says, beauty is no longer to be understood as reducible to a purely subjective state, that it ‘explodes the very subjectivity of the subject’ that it also cannot be confined within an object? (Heidegger 1984, vol. I, 123). Whether or not Heidegger’s statement is a valid interpretation of Kant, it loosens the subject-object straight jacket which has dogged Kant’s thought on beauty. Let us, then, use Kant’s notion of beauty as an inspiration and note that the kind of issues Kant raises regarding the subject-object relation are now being addressed within the context of theories of subject formation and ‘somaesthetics’ (cf. Shusterman 1999, 299–313).

For Kant, then, a judgement of taste in relation to the beautiful is essentially ‘disinterested’. Yet it is not at all, as we also know, an objective judgement. Rather, aesthetic judgement is essentially subjective and universal: ‘although it has merely subjective validity, still it extends its claims to all Subjects, as unreservedly as if it were an objective judgement, resting on grounds of cognition and capable of being proved to demonstration’ (Kant 1973, §33, 141). Entailed here is the crucial point that judgements of taste are not at all subject to proofs (logical or otherwise). A key mechanism of analytical criticism is thereby nullified. As the preceding passages of Kant’s critique show, proof as to who has, or does not have, good taste is quite irrelevant. This reinforces the idea that beauty can only be experienced; it cannot be the subject of a demonstration. Beauty is thus a pure attraction;