

# Preface

For several decades now, the concept of the sublime has enjoyed renewed interest. Though the sublime was often linked to art in these discussions, it was tied primarily to the European art of the twentieth-century (e.g., Lyotard 1984, 77-81; Lyotard 1994). The visual arts of the eighteenth century were hardly addressed. This neglect seems rather odd, since this is the very period from which the current theories of the sublime largely derive (for an historical anthology, see Clewis 2019).

How could this happen? It may be because these artworks of the eighteenth-century, with their depictions of mountains, glaciers, and waterfalls, now strike us as outdated or old-fashioned. In addition, theoreticians of the eighteenth century tended to relate the sublime to experiences of nature rather than art.

The case of Immanuel Kant is both representative and challenging. To what extent does Kant consider an artistic sublime possible? Scholars have sometimes tended towards a negative answer (Abaci 2008; 2010). This interpretation supports writers who focus on our conception of nature and flesh out an “environmental sublime” (Brady 2013, 183ff.). In other cases, it extends our understanding of the relation of the arts to nature (Danto 2005; Brady 2013, 144-146; concerning land art, see Hall 2020).

The emphasis on nature is not only understandable in light of current scholarship on the human relationship to nature, but also connects to one of Kant’s central aims in the third *Critique*. The *Critique of the Power of Judgment* does not merely contain a philosophy of art. It is a book about the concept of purpose, which usually refers to the (apparent) purposes of nature, even if the concept also occasionally extends to art. In the work, Kant aims to develop our understanding of nature beyond the mechanistic perspective found in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Yet Kant does not place art and nature in a facile opposition. Indeed, he plays with the idea that we can look at art as if it were nature (Kant 2000, 185) and at nature as if it were art (10, 276).

A further challenge is that Kant's approach to the sublime sometimes seems undecided between a theory of *experience* and a theory of its *objects*. Following Kant's focus on the process of experience, for example, the formlessness linked to the sublime appears not as a property of the object, but as characteristic for the experience which is occasioned by this object and which exceeds our powers of cognition (Clewis 2016, 108). Thus, this focus on the process and complexity of subjective experience might allow for an artistic sublime. Still, Kant's discussion hardly takes into consideration the intrinsic complexities of our experience of pictorial representations (after all, the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* focuses more on nature than on art).

The debate about the possibility of the artistic sublime typically follows Kant in this limitation and, as some of the following articles propose, could benefit from making use of the understanding of pictorial representation that has been refined in recent decades (from Mitchell 1994 and Boehm 1995 to Grave 2022). To include image theory and reception aesthetics is not to question art for a possible *imitation* of a supposed natural sublime, but to turn it for the *inherent* complexity of pictorial representation and the experience of a sublime made possible by it (Clewis 2016, 110f.). By focusing on the visual arts, it may be possible to grasp aspects of Kant's discussion of the artistic sublime that have been neglected so far.

Such an exploration of Kant's theory of the sublime promises to be productive because, in addition, it allows us to connect the debate about artistic sublimity to the European visual arts circa 1800. These arts accepted the challenge of a painterly, sublime representation, thereby advancing the artistic means of pictorial representation (Grave 2012, 189-199; Ibata 2018). Furthermore, Kant at one point gives *culture* an important role in his theory of the sublime. According to Kant, the experience of the sublime presupposes a "receptivity [*Empfänglichkeit*] to ideas" that can be only provided by "culture" (Kant 2000, 148) – although, perhaps in tension with this, he also claims that the normativity of the sublime is based on a shared human capacity for moral feeling and is grounded on practical freedom. In any case, we submit, a theory of the sublime should take into account the culture in general and the visual arts in particular that might enable us to experience the sublime.

This special issue is based on a workshop in Jena, Germany, on the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> of July 2022, with the same title organized by the research project: "Comparative Viewing of Pictures: Practices of

Incomparability and the Theory of the Sublime” (Friedrich Schiller University Jena), a sub-project of the Collaborative Research Centre “Practices of Comparison” at Bielefeld University.

The six contributions take Kant as a starting point (though not necessarily as an endpoint). They discuss the possibilities of the artistic sublime from a combination of philosophical, art-historical, and art-critical perspectives.

Uygar Abaci proposes that if art is to evoke the Kantian sublime, its *form* would be a better candidate than its content for such capability. But he also suggests that if art is to elicit the Kantian sublime through its content, it is more likely that it can do so in a second-order manner, that is, by representing the sublime experience of another person.

Robert Clewis aims to show the real possibility of experiencing the Kantian sublime in response to a painting. He presents, and then argues against, three main objections to the possibility that paintings might evoke an experience of the sublime. He concludes by describing two hypothetical encounters with paintings.

Arno Schubbach argues for the importance of taking into account (in addition to the standard texts here) the “Analytic of the Beautiful.” He distinguishes three kinds of arguments relevant to the question of the Kantian artistic sublime. He also considers whether there might be room for strategies of the visual arts to overcome some of the alleged obstacles to experiences of the artistic sublime.

Johannes Grave asks what preconditions must be met in order to be able to speak of a successful evocation of the sublime, noting the problem raised by pictures in particular: their dependence on a picture carrier that is limited and immobile. Referring to the works of Caspar David Friedrich and William Turner, he proposes that the *duality* and *temporality* of pictures could make the evocation of sublime experiences conceivable.

Rejecting some of the basic assumptions in the debate, Sonja Scherbaum argues that paintings can evoke an experience of the sublime. From an art-historical perspective, she discusses two landscape paintings: Joseph Anton Koch’s *Schmadribachfall* and Caspar David Friedrichs, *Watzmann*.

Serena Feloj turns to the *formless* character of the sublime. The experience of the sublime may well be subjective, and it may originate in formlessness. Even so, she holds, there is a human need to make use of and appeal to form and representation. Starting from a Kantian notion of formlessness, Feloj discusses the contributions of Rosalind Krauss, Georges Didi-Huberman, and Georges Bataille.

Accordingly, the present issue takes up the recent discussions of the fragile status of the artistic sublime in Kant's and post-Kantian philosophy. It scrutinizes the most important reasons for denying artistic sublimity in order to consider whether such reasons might be set aside once one adopts a more compelling conception of aesthetic experience and of pictorial representation.

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