

Why Not Exactly? Revisiting the Alleged Arguments against the Artistic Sublime in Kant's "Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment"

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ABSTRACT

The debate about whether, according to Kant, there can be an artistic sublime often fails to clarify the relationship of the "Analytic of the Sublime" to the "Analytic of the Beautiful" and to the short discourse on art of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (KU, § 43 to § 59). Therefore, three types of arguments are often conflated, which I would like to propose to distinguish as precisely as possible: 1. arguments that cast doubt on the possibility of aesthetic judgments with respect to works of art in general; 2. arguments that specifically put into question the experience of the beautiful in the arts; 3. arguments questioning the artistic sublime. Kant addresses the first two types of arguments in his ingenious argumentation of why we can experience works of art as beautiful at all. However, they are often readily understood as arguments against the possibility of an artistic sublime, which Kant, however, hardly discusses as such. By distinguishing these types of arguments, I want to pinpoint what exactly, according to Kant, stood in the way of the possibility of an artistic sublime – and to explore the possibility of artistic strategies to overcome these obstacles.

KEYWORDS

Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, art, artistic beautiful, artistic sublime

Introduction

The debate regarding whether there can be an artistic sublime according to Kant is often framed exclusively in terms of the "Analytic of the Sublime" and the brief discourse on art that Kant includes in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (KU, § 43 to § 59, AA 05: 303-354).¹ This approach may seem to be uncontro-

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I quote the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (KU) in the common standard editions: the translation in the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* edited by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood and the fifth volume of the so-called 'Akademieausgabe' (AA 05) edited by the Prussian Academy of the Sciences. For detailed bibliographical information including the other texts by Kant, see the references at the end of the article.

versial, but I will argue that the omission of the “Analytic of the Beautiful” gives rise to certain ambiguities. Namely, not only are the systematic premises of aesthetic experience and the pivotal concepts of Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment* elaborated in that context in terms of the beautiful and, like the “aesthetic reflecting judgment (*ästhetisches reflektierendes Urteil*)” (KU, §29, AA 05: 266), then transferred in occasionally vague ways into the “Analytic of the Sublime.”² Beyond that level, the debate concerning the artistic sublime can hardly be understood adequately without reference to the “Analytic of the Beautiful” because the possibility of the artistic sublime depends in a subsidiary way on the possibility of the beautiful in the fine arts: For Kant, the real problem is not the possibility of the artistic sublime but rather that of the beautiful in art.³ In his brief discourse on the fine arts, he thus argues in detail why artistic beauty is possible, but the sublime is hardly mentioned in this context, so that the sublime’s relationship to the arts and the possibility of an artistic sublime remains widely undetermined in many respects.⁴ Therefore, it is no wonder that the arguments contained in Kant’s discussion of the beautiful in art are all too easy to transfer to the possibility of the artistic sublime, an application which, however, seems to be quite problematic upon closer inspection.

Against this backdrop, we should therefore determine as precisely as possible which critical objections to the possibility of the artistic sublime are actually directed against the sublime instead of against the beautiful or against aesthetic reflecting judgments in the arts in general. In other words, I propose to distinguish three kinds of arguments. Firstly, we find arguments that cast doubt on

² Here and hereafter, I modify the translation, following Abaci (2008), by speaking of ‘reflecting’ rather than ‘reflective’ judgments to emphasize the process of aesthetic experience.

³ The question of whether, according to Kant, the sublime is only possible in nature or also in art has long been debated in Kant scholarship. On the one hand, many interpreters take a rather skeptical view – cf. Guyer 1996, p. 264; Abaci 2008, 2010, yet see his contribution to this Special Issue –, a view that is sometimes linked to an interest in focusing on the sublime in nature and considering it as an opportunity to renew our relationship with nature, cf. Brady 2013, pp. 64-66 and 117-147, and the criticism in Clewis 2016, pp. 107-111. On the other hand, there are interpreters who take a more optimistic or at least nuanced view – cf. Crowther 1989, pp. 152-163; Pillow 1994; Wicks 1995; Clewis 2010; Hall 2020 –, a view that is often linked to an interest in claiming Kant’s sublime for the avant-gardes of the 20th century, cf. Lyotard 1991, pp. 84-87, 97-101 and 135-139; 1994, pp. 50-56, 152f.; cf. for useful comments on Lyotard’s pioneering adaptation of Kant’s sublime Cunningham 2004 and Zuckert 2021.

⁴ Thus, in Kant’s “account of the sublime [...] the status of art is only indicated by omission” (Guyer 1996, p. 264). Cf. for the development of Kant’s thoughts about the sublime and relevant influences Clewis 2023, pp. 151-178.

the possibility of aesthetic reflecting judgments with respect to works of art in general. These arguments apply to the beautiful just as much to the sublime and are due to the general aim of Kant's third *Critique* and its systematic premises, which view "raw nature" (KU, § 26, AA 05: 253) as the paradigmatic case of aesthetic experience and highlight the latter's problematic relation to every artifact in the sense of a product of human art in general or artworks in particular. Secondly, some arguments refer specifically to the beautiful and its possibility in the arts. It is probably the main purpose of Kant's discourse on art to refute these arguments and to show how we can nevertheless experience beauty in the arts or why an artistic beauty is possible. Finally, some arguments are made against the artistic sublime. In fact, Kant hardly specifies this kind of argument explicitly because he only barely discusses the possibility of an artistic sublime. Accordingly, they should be distinguished as sharply as possible from arguments of the first and second kinds, as only these arguments can help us grasp the challenge that the artistic sublime might pose to philosophical argumentation and artistic representation and to investigate whether there might be room for certain strategies associated with the visual arts to meet that challenge.

Accordingly, I propose to take a step back and include the whole first part of Kant's third *Critique*, the "Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment," into the debate regarding the possibility of an artistic sublime. My contribution will proceed in four steps. In the first section, I will introduce Kant's concept of aesthetic reflecting judgments. This concept is key to the task of clarifying the specific structure of aesthetic experience and is pivotal to our ability to grasp why, according to Kant, the aesthetic experience has a problematic relationship to the arts in general. As I will show in the second section, however, the problematic nature of this relationship is not based solely on this general analysis of aesthetic experience but also (and even more so) on a further line of argumentation that pertains solely to the beautiful. On this basis, we can then address the debate regarding the possibility of the artistic sublime according to Kant. In the third section, I will therefore discuss first the extent to which the debate regarding the artistic beautiful can be applied to the question of the artistic sublime. In the fourth and concluding section, I will finally try to identify the challenges specific to the artistic sublime and explore the possible levels at which artistic strategies could address these challenges and the possible ways in which such strategies could accomplish that task.

1. *Aesthetic Reflecting Judgments and the Aesthetic Experience of Works of Art*

The basic concepts of the “Analytic of the Beautiful” are well known, at least to Kant scholars, but they must nevertheless be introduced briefly in the following section to allow us to focus on the ways in which they put the notion of the aesthetic experience of works of art into question. In particular, Kant’s analysis of the aesthetic reflecting judgment raises fundamental doubts and therefore plays a pivotal role in the debate regarding the possibilities of the beautiful and the sublime in the arts. As we will see, however, this doubt pertains first and foremost to aesthetic experience in general and to the beautiful in art in particular, but it hardly pertains specifically to the sublime.

Aesthetic experience, as that notion is treated in the “Analytic of the Beautiful,” corresponds to aesthetic judgments, just as objective experience, according to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, finds its expression in objective judgments.⁵ Aesthetic judgments, however, take on a very different form and expand Kant’s previous conception of a logical judgment to make explicit the new structure of aesthetic experience. The first *Critique* essentially focused on the question of how “representations (*Vorstellungen*)” and “intuitions (*Anschauungen*)” can be related to an “object of experience (*Objekt der Erfahrung*)” (KrV, § 14, AA 03: 104) by isolating everything that characterizes only our subjective experience and uniting everything that we can objectively attribute to its object. It is the “pure concepts of understanding (*reine Verstandesbegriffe*)” that make this distinction possible, and it is the logical judgment that expresses this objective knowledge by subsuming the “appearance (*Erscheinung*)” that is given in intuition under concepts.⁶

Aesthetic experience is different, for the given representation or intuition is in this case not supposed to refer to an object but rather

⁵ In the following, I assume a close connection between aesthetic experience and aesthetic judgments, in contrast to Guyer (1997, pp. 97-101), who understands the interplay of imagination and understanding as part of a psychologically framed ‘aesthetic response’, from which he sets apart the aesthetic reflecting judgment referring to the intersubjective validity of the sensed pleasure. Based on this distinction, he upholds that “Kant’s explanation of aesthetic response is at odds with his characterization of the principle of reflective judgment, and the principle of taste has nothing to do with the latter” (Guyer 1997, p. 59). However, I rather follow Ginsborg’s (1990, pp. 1-41) fundamental criticism of this reading when I closely connect aesthetic experience and judgment in order to take into account the epistemological relevance of the experience of beauty especially in section 2 of my contribution.

⁶ This argumentation is central to Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* and its “Transcendental Deduction” and is as widely known as it is frequently discussed. I thus refer simply to my own summary in Schubbach 2022a, pp. 74-98.

to the subject and to the process of experience itself.⁷ Correspondingly, the aesthetic reflecting judgment does not find its determining ground in the object of experience but rather in the “state of mind (*Gemütszustand*)” (KU, § 9, AA 05: 217) that emerges in the process of experience.⁸ More precisely, it is the sensed ‘pleasure (*Lust*)’ or ‘satisfaction (*Wohlgefallen*)’ that is characteristic of aesthetic experience and underlies the aesthetic judgment.⁹ Thus, the aesthetic reflecting judgment says nothing about the object but pertains only to the subjective process of experience.¹⁰

To avoid misconceptions, this ‘state of mind’ that underlies aesthetic reflecting judgments must be characterized in further detail. It is not something like a ‘state’ that would result from the process of experience, as Kant might say of the ‘agreeable (*Angenehme*)’ that results from the immediate sensual consumption of an object. Rather, the ‘pleasure’ that is characteristic of aesthetic experience corresponds to an ongoing process of reflection. This process begins with a given perception or intuition and its apprehension by imagination, which prompts a “reflected perception (*reflektierte Wahrnehmung*)” (KU, Intr. VII, AA 05: 191).¹¹ Moreover, it involves further “powers of cognition (*Erkenntniskräfte*)” and thus stimulates their mutual “free play (*freie Spiel*)” (KU, § 9, AA 05: 217). This ongoing ‘free play’ and the continuous reflection thereon are constitutive of the ‘pleasure’ or ‘satisfaction’ that is characteristic of aesthetic experience, and they are simultaneously the determining ground of aesthetic reflecting judgments.¹²

In Kant research, numerous aspects of this structure of aesthetic experience and judgments are controversially discussed. For the following argumentation, however, it is only crucial that this structure is common to both the beautiful and the sublime, and that it

⁷ In the well-known books on the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, this central aspect of aesthetic experience is typically discussed in detail, cf. e.g. Guyer 1997, pp. 61-71, or Allison 2001, pp. 51-54.

⁸ For a precise distinction of this subject-related understanding of ‘Empfindung’ or ‘Gefühl’ in contrast to their meaning in the context of objective cognition, cf. KU, § 3, AA 05: 205f.

⁹ Cf. KU, § 1, AA 05: 203f. The relation between the reflecting and determining aspects of judgments, especially in empirical judgments, is in fact much more complicated, cf. Longuenesse 2000, pp. 33f., or Allison 2001, pp. 13-30.

¹⁰ From this basic characteristic of aesthetically reflecting judgments, Zuckert (2019, pp. 113-116) argues with regard to the sublime that Kant’s approach also targets mystical or transcendent takes on the experience of the sublime.

¹¹ In another passage, Kant characterizes the role of perception in the context of aesthetic experience as that of “merely reflected forms of intuition (*bloße reflektierte Formen der Anschauung*)” (KU, § 3, AA 05: 206).

¹² As Kant notes, especially with regard to the beautiful, these different aspects of aesthetic experience are not successive phases but rather interdependent aspects of an integral process that mutually reinforce one another, cf. KU, § 12, AA 05: 222.

entails an intricate relation to concepts before any further specifications. Aesthetic experience is only possible through the suspension of the dominance of the concept, which gives imagination rules for apprehension and links it closely to the understanding with the aim of relating a given intuition to its object and thus making objective experience possible. In contrast, the reflecting process of aesthetic experience presupposes an activity of the imagination that is free from concepts and rules given by the understanding and can thus stimulate a ‘reflected perception’ and the ‘free play’ of various ‘powers of cognition.’ Again, formulated more succinctly and precisely, aesthetic experience and judgments cannot be under the dominion of concepts, which is true of the beautiful as well as of the sublime, which stand as the two specific forms of aesthetic experience.

For the possibility of an aesthetic experience in the arts, be it an artistic beautiful or an artistic sublime, this aspect constitutes a challenge, because Kant argues that works of art – as possible objects of aesthetic experience – are always accompanied by representations or ideas of concepts. In fact, Kant considers a work of art as an artifact that, unlike nature, is produced by human beings; thus, a conceptual idea of its purpose acts as a causal factor in its production and explains the structure of the artifact.¹³ That is why we cannot approach a work of art without forming a conceptual idea of its purpose and judging its perfection by reference to this purpose. According to Kant, however, such an understanding of aesthetic experience is typical of rationalist philosophy and Baumgarten’s *Aesthetica* and it completely fails to grasp the reflexive structure of aesthetic experience, which is at the heart of his own analysis.¹⁴ Therefore, a work of art is not an object of aesthetic experience for Kant, because it is accompanied by conceptual ideas and is also linked to a conception of aesthetic experience based on such conceptual ideas, whereas he claims that aesthetic experience and its reflexive structure has to be free of such ideas.

However, this conclusion is perhaps premature. It is certainly true that Kant deduces from the structure of aesthetic experience and his assumptions regarding the conceptual aspects of artifacts in general and works of art in particular that the latter are not well suited for aesthetic experience in its pure sense. Accordingly, in

¹³ Cf. KU, § 43 and § 48, AA 05: 303 and 311. However, it does not, as Kant seems to assume, follow from the idea of purpose, which may be causal with regard to the production and may organize the structure of the product, that the product is ultimately reducible to this idea; cf. the contribution to this Special Issue by Johannes Grave.

¹⁴ Cf. the relevant “Remark” in the “First Introduction” to the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* CPJ, pp. 28-31, AA 20: 226-229.

his “Analytic of the Beautiful” and “Analytic of the Sublime”, he prefers to refer to ‘raw nature’ instead.¹⁵ Admittedly, this preference is not a problem for Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment* because it is by no means an aesthetics in the sense of a philosophy of art.¹⁶ However, given the fact that the beautiful and the fine arts in particular have been substantially linked in theoretical reflections since antiquity as well as in more recent influential writings such as Baumgarten’s *Aesthetica*, it may nevertheless have seemed odd and startling that the fine arts are not the subject of an “Analytic of the Beautiful.” Thus, Kant included his discourse on fine arts from § 43 to § 59 to explain how works of art can be experienced as beautiful. In this context, Kant explicitly admits the possibility of complex experiences in which the consciousness of the artifact goes hand in hand with its aesthetic experience. Thus, he introduces the notion of “merely adherent beauty (*bloß anhängende Schönheit*)” (KU, § 16, AA 05: 229) and understands it to refer to aesthetic judgements that are not completely free of conceptual ideas.¹⁷ Consequently, an aesthetic experience of artifacts and artworks seems to be possible if the conceptual ideas that accompany their representation do not necessarily dominate the whole experience but are rather part of a more complex aesthetic experience.

A whole phenomenology of the aesthetic experience of works of art would be conceivable in this context. This phenomenology would describe various combinations of the awareness of the artifact and the conceptual ideas that accompany it with the reflecting process of experience and the interactions among various powers of cognition. Quite a few philosophers and theoreticians who followed soon after Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment* and who primarily pursued interests in the philosophy of art took this path. They even tried to reconcile the “Analytic of the Beautiful” with the assumption that we perceive works of art as beautiful also because – but not although – they were made.¹⁸ Kant persistently

¹⁵ With reference to the sublime, cf. KU, § 26, AA 05: 252f., and with reference to the beautiful, cf. KU, § 16 and § 17, fn./AA 05: 229f. and 236, fn. The privilege of nature over the arts in Kant’s concept of the beautiful and the sublime also has ethical significance, as Guyer 1996, pp. 229-274, shows, also with reference to pre-Kantian aesthetics.

¹⁶ It is much more difficult to say what the third *Critique* is in its entirety. But the answer certainly goes in the direction that it is a discourse on the possibility of ‘purposiveness (*Zweckmäßigkeit*)’ beyond the strict a priori and necessary framework of experience, knowledge and its laws that is explored in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Cf. for such a reading of the third *Critique* Zuckert 2007, esp. pp. 1-6.

¹⁷ It is this Kantian approach that Robert Clewis (2009, pp. 96-108) draws on in order to extend it to the artistic sublime and develop it into a model of “dependent sublimity” that is possible in our experience of works of art.

¹⁸ For a philosophical approach in close, critical reference to Kant cf. Heydenreich 1794, pp. 10-19, and for an art-theoretical approach under the recognizable but looser

rejects such an approach by taking the position that the madeness of the work of art may be casually conscious in the aesthetic experience, but it does not and must not play a role in the pleasure felt with regard to the beautiful: “art can only be called beautiful if we are aware that it is art and yet it looks to us like nature” (KU, § 45, AA 05: 306).¹⁹ He thus insists that even in impure aesthetic experiences of works of art, it is not the human art and its products as such that are the source of such pleasure but rather solely the reflecting process of experience that is stimulated by the intuition and its form.

The question thus arises as to why Kant insists so vigorously, even in his discussion of the fine arts, that the work of art *as such* is neither an occasion for an aesthetic experience nor the source of the pleasure felt in such an experience. Even if this position is motivated by the fact that Kant sees a systematic tension between the association of products of art with conceptual ideas and the reflective structure of aesthetic experience in general, there still seems to be no reason why Kant should not take a closer look at the impure forms of aesthetic experience and should not take into account the role of the madeness of works of art. The fact that Kant does not grasp this possibility, but insists that works of art must ‘look to us like nature’, suggests that there is another reason for this, one which pertains to the beautiful alone and is rooted not in the philosophy of art but rather in epistemology.

2. *The Challenge of an Artistic Beautiful*

In addition to the fact that the association between products of art and conceptual ideas could compromise the reflective structure of aesthetic experience, another obstacle stands in the way of the artistic beautiful. Namely, there is some evidence to suggest that Kant tries to ensure that the experience of the beautiful specifically remains free of concepts precisely because it maintains a very special relationship to the concept. I will briefly discuss this relationship in the following in order to explain why Kant considers the artistic beautiful as such to be problematic (cf. Allison 2001, pp. 55ff.).

inspiration by Kant cf. Fernow 1806a, pp. 304-308.

¹⁹ It is well known that Kant sets the same basic idea from the side of reception in parallel to the idea of production in his theory of genius, according to which “nature in the subject (and by means of the disposition of its faculties) must give the rule to art” (KU, § 46, AA 05: 307).

The relationship between the beautiful and the concept is based on Kant's understanding of the 'free play' of the 'powers of cognition,' which is not primarily inspired by reference to the fine arts. In the experience of the beautiful, the imagination apprehends a given intuition and thus stimulates a 'reflected perception,' in which the understanding becomes involved. This interplay between imagination and understanding is free from any concept of the understanding that would determine the apprehension of imagination. However, it is not entirely without a relationship to concepts because this interplay is to be understood, according to Kant, as a match between the imagination and the understanding in this particular case: It demonstrates that this particular empirical intuition fits with the empirical concepts of the understanding in general without being subsumed under one determinate concept. In Kant's words, this intuition proves to be appropriate for the "concept (it is indeterminate which)" (KU, § 4, AA 05: 207).²⁰

This understanding of the interplay between the imagination and the understanding may seem to be enigmatic at first glance, but it becomes understandable if one broadens one's view beyond aesthetics and considers a central epistemological motivation of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.²¹ In both "Introductions" to this third *Critique*, Kant invokes the possibility in principle that the argumentation of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, according to which all intuitions must obey the a priori categories of understanding, does not exclude the possibility that the concrete *empirical* intuitions cannot be subsumed under *empirical* 'particular laws.' Consequently, we cannot rule out the possibility that, in the sense of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, we can form a priori synthetic judgments with regard to "nature in general (*Natur überhaupt*)" but that an empirical knowledge of "nature as determined by a manifold of particular laws (*durch eine Mannigfaltigkeit besonderer Gesetze bestimmten Natur*)" (KU, Intr. V, AA 05: 182) would nevertheless not be possible because empirical intuitions could not be ordered by empirical concepts.

Against this backdrop, the outlined understanding of the match between the imagination and the understanding in the experience of the beautiful becomes intelligible: The interplay between these two powers of cognition demonstrates, at least in this particular

²⁰ Within the reflecting aesthetic experience, the beautiful can be understood in this sense as the "presentation (*Darstellung*) of an indeterminate concept of the understanding" (KU, § 23, AA 05: 244).

²¹ The epistemological context of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* and its conception of aesthetic reflecting judgments is well-established, cf. e.g. Guyer 1997, pp. 35-57, or Ginsborg 1990, pp. 171-202.

case, that the empirical intuition stimulating it is suited to the empirical concepts that the understanding needs in its pursuit of empirical knowledge (without specifying such concepts or determining the object of the intuition).²² In other words, what we cannot theoretically prove in general, according to Kant, is aesthetically attested in the experience of the beautiful with regard to the concrete case, i.e., that empirical nature proves to be appropriate or purposeful with respect to our striving for empirical knowledge.²³ In this sense, nature is “beautiful, if at the same time it looked like art” (KU, § 45, AA 05: 306): it appears to be the product of “an understanding (even if not ours)” (KU, Intr. IV, AA 05: 180) and as such would also be intelligible to our understanding.

This epistemological context may seem far-fetched at first glance, but it does render an essential assumption of Kant’s “Analytic of the Beautiful” comprehensible: The experience of the beautiful must be free of empirical concepts if it is to be able to confirm what is not necessarily the case, namely, that empirical intuitions can be grasped by empirical concepts and thus accommodate our striving for empirical knowledge. Accordingly, not all objects of empirical intuition are equally suitable for an experience of the beautiful that supports our hope for empirical knowledge: All objects of which one must assume that they are in principle conceptually conceived are not suitable, a stipulation which, according to Kant’s assumptions, applies to all artifacts in general and to works of art in particular. Therefore, the beautiful can ultimately only be sought in nature, insofar as its existence and order as such can be thought independently of the empirical concepts and laws without which human action is impossible. Kant’s methodological preference for ‘raw nature’ in the “Analytic of the Beautiful” is most likely motivated by this epistemological contextualization of the beautiful.

In summary, the possibility of a genuinely artistic beautiful encounters two obstacles simultaneously. First, the reflective structure of aesthetic experience conflicts with the conceptual ideas that are associated with the products of art. This argument applies generally, and it at least does not foreclose on the possibility that the

²² Cf. Guyer 1997, pp. 74-82, and for an approach emphasizing the epistemological relevance of the experience of the beautiful Hughes 2007, pp. 248-276, or my own reading in Schubach 2022b, pp. 137-182.

²³ On the relation between the beautiful and the subjective conditions of empirical experience or the “purposiveness concerning form” of the beautiful, cf. the famous passages in KU, §9 and § 15, AA 05: 216-220 and 226-229, as well as KU, § 35, AA 05: 286f. This aspect of the beautiful also makes the formulation of the following Kantian ‘Reflection’ understandable: “The beautiful things indicate (*zeigen an*) that man fits into the world, and even his intuition of things coincides with the laws of his intuition” (AA 16: 127, my translation).

experience of the beautiful may be accompanied by awareness of the artifact, provided that the free play of imagination and understanding is not short-circuited by the conceptual ideas that are associated with the product of art. Second, however, we are dealing with a specific obstacle to the beautiful: Because it is supposed to also highlight the fact that empirical intuitions are purposeful for our pursuit of empirical knowledge, we cannot find the beautiful in artifacts but only in 'raw nature.' In the aesthetic context, however, this stipulation has the questionable consequence elaborated above: In an experience of the beautiful we may be aware that we are engaging with a work of art, but considered as the product of an art, it cannot serve as a source of the pleasure felt in the aesthetic experience. It can be beautiful only if 'it looks to us like nature.'

This reading can be reformulated as an interpretation of the following well-known sentence by Kant: "Nature was beautiful, if at the same time it looked like art; and art can only be called beautiful if we are aware that it is art and yet it looks to us like nature" (KU, § 45, AA 05: 306). Kant links the two parts of this sentence with an 'and' and places them side by side on the same level. However, if the above reading is correct, then there is a specific argumentative dependency here: Something, and even works of art, can only appear beautiful if 'it looks to us like nature', because the beautiful in general is supposed to reveal that nature is purposeful for our striving for empirical knowledge, which means nothing other than that 'it looked like art', though it is not, and can therefore be understood empirically like any product of human artifice.

3. Is an Artistic Sublime Possible? Why Not!

The artistic beautiful is by no means the focus of the "Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment." Nevertheless, Kant attempts to demonstrate its possibility precisely because two obstacles stand in the way of the experience of the beautiful in the work of art: The reflexive structure of aesthetic experience in general and the epistemological contextualization of the beautiful in particular. In contrast, Kant refers in his examples of the sublime to nature as well as to art, but he does not address the artistic sublime as such. The debate regarding the possibility of an artistic sublime according to Kant must take this silence with respect to the artistic sublime into account.²⁴

²⁴ For good reasons, this silence was already the starting point of Uygur Abacı's (2008, p. 237) discussion of the possibility of the artistic sublime.

A question thus arises regarding the reason for this silence. Given the textual basis for this question, it may not be possible to answer without speculation, but we may be able to make some observations that at least render such silence less misleading. First of all, it seems mostly clear that Kant's silence should by no means be understood as tacitly asserting what Kant nowhere says, i.e., that there can be no artistic sublime.²⁵ Rather, it is possible that Kant does not consider the question to be urgent or that it does not cross his mind. Contrary to the contemporary view, the concept of the sublime has traditionally been far less closely associated with art than the concept of the beautiful. Especially in the English-speaking tradition, on which Kant arguably relies in this context, the sublime had been more closely related to nature, so that a theoretical reflection on art could very well do without the sublime (cf. Ibata 2020, pp. 29-36). While the question of an artistic beautiful was bound to arise after the "Analytic of the Beautiful," this was certainly much less the case for the sublime at the end of the 18th century.

For historical reasons, the question of the artistic sublime was thus quite dispensable. In addition, it was less urgent for systematic reasons, if my argumentation in the preceding two sections is correct. Namely, an artistic sublime may, like the artistic beautiful, face the obstacle that the conceptual ideas that are associated with the product of art can compromise the reflexive structure of aesthetic experience. However, it does not seem to face the second obstacle mentioned because the latter is specific to the beautiful and its epistemological contextualization: Only because the beautiful, through the free interplay of imagination and understanding, reveals, at least in individual instances, that the empirical intuition accommodates our striving for empirical knowledge, the preference for nature, insofar as it is independent of the empirical concepts of the understanding, imposes itself; therefore, all products of art must 'look to us like nature' to be experienced as beautiful. However, the sublime has little to do with this epistemological context, because in this case, the reflected perception does not involve the understanding but rather reason. More precisely, the perception already proves

²⁵ At the same time, the well-known passages in which Kant occasionally mentions the artistic sublime should not immediately tempt us to see in them general assertions of the possibility of the artistic sublime. For example, in one passage, Kant explains (in a manner that is as parenthetical as it is unexcited) that "the presentation (*Darstellung*) of the sublime, so far as it belongs to beautiful art, can be united with beauty" (KU, § 52, AA 05: 325). Here, Kant does not want to make the contradictory statement that one and the same intuition can be experienced as beautiful and sublime simultaneously. Rather, he refers to art forms that unite different senses or media, such as the oratorio, and can therefore apparently convey different dimensions of aesthetic experience via these different senses simultaneously.

to be unsuitable for its comprehension by imagination (cf. KU, § 26-29, AA 05: 251-265). It is the failure of the latter that summons reason, thus illustrating its superiority over sensuality. The intuition proves to be purposeful not for the understanding but rather for reason as a theoretical or practical faculty.

The situation of the artistic sublime is thus different from that of the artistic beautiful: While an artifact cannot reveal that empirical intuitions are purposeful for our understanding, though they need not be, because it is purposeful as such, there seems to be little to prevent that such an artifact could be purposeful for reason in the sense of the sublime, that is, not permitting the imagination to comprehend its intuited form and summoning reason into action. For the fact that understanding has adequate empirical terms for an artifact seems hardly to prevent that the imagination could fail to comprehend its form, and could summon reason into action. Consequently, an artifact may offer little space for an experience of the beautiful because its intuition must as such be suited to the empirical concepts to which it owes its production. But it certainly offers room for an experience of the sublime because its conceptual structure neither enforces nor excludes the possibility that this intuition will make the imagination fail and that it will prove to be purposeful for reason and its ideas, at least provided that the reflexive structure of aesthetic experience is not compromised.

Thus, the question of whether the sublime, at least from a systematic perspective, might not be even more readily experienced in products of art than the beautiful is worth considering. This possibility does not seem to be so farfetched because Kant himself chooses his examples of the sublime without concern for whether they are taken from art or nature. What seems to be mere carelessness, however, could also indicate that the difference between nature and art is not as decisive in the case of the sublime as it is in the case of the beautiful. Two examples contained in § 26 are particularly interesting in this respect. After introducing the pivotal limits of “comprehension (*Zusammenfassung*)” (KU, § 26, AA 05: 251f.) by the imagination, Kant illustrates these limits directly by reference to the Egyptian pyramids, which, when viewed from a suitable distance, arouse the desire to comprehend them in one intuition and yet simultaneously deny such a comprehension (cf. KU, § 26, AA 05: 251f.). As Kant further elaborates by reference to the example of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, this situation gives rise to “a feeling of the inadequacy of his imagination for presenting the ideas of a whole, in which the imagination reaches its maximum and, in the effort to extend it, sinks back into itself, but is

thereby transported into an emotionally moving satisfaction“ (KU, § 26, AA 05: 252).²⁶ The interesting point about both examples is that they refer to structures whose size was not only deliberately chosen but may also serve the purpose of impressing their visitors. In the case of the pyramids, moreover, we are dealing with a form that, as a geometric figure, can easily be related to the corresponding mathematical concept. It seems therefore evident that both intuitions are suitable for the understanding and its concepts. On Kant’s view, however, this suitability apparently does nothing to keep comprehension by the imagination from being overwhelmed, thereby invoking reason with its ideas and making an experience of the sublime possible.

In other words, the question of whether the imagination fails in its comprehension of the given intuition, thus allowing a feeling of sublimity to be awakened through its interplay with reason, has little to do with the fact that the construction of these buildings was a human endeavor that presupposed purposes, and may therefore be accessible to the concepts of the understanding. Thus, the difficulty posed to the artistic beautiful by the fact that the work of art is accompanied by conceptual ideas does not seem to represent a similar problem for the artistic sublime, as is usually assumed to be the case.²⁷ I would thus intensify Robert Clewis’ (2010, p. 169) observation that the purposefulness of the artwork is as much a problem for the artistic beautiful as for the artistic sublime by proposing the thesis that this purposefulness is much more a problem for the artistic beautiful than for the artistic sublime. Because the conceptual ideas that accompany the work of art constitute an obstacle to the artistic beautiful but not to the artistic sublime, it seems to me that it is even possible that art need not even pretend to be nature to evoke experiences of the sublime. Why should “perceptual settings for the sublime” (Clewis 2010, p. 169) be unable to stretch and exceed our imagination, even if they are the result of a purposeful arrangement on the part of the artist

²⁶ The interpretation of these two examples admittedly raises more questions than I can address here; for a supplement, cf. Doran 2015, pp. 233-237.

²⁷ Cf. Abaci 2008, pp. 241f. and 246f., with reference to twentieth-century artists like Mark Rothko, Yves Klein, James Turrell, Barnett Newman, and Frank Stella. I would argue that, according to Kant, their purposeful choice of form and magnitudes should pose less of a problem for the experience of the sublime than for the experience of the beautiful. In this respect, I agree with Clewis’ reply to Abaci: “Abaci’s supposed problem with these examples is that the appropriate combination of visual elements is *purposive*. The form of artwork is so determined as to create the effect of formlessness on the human perceptual makeup (p. 247). But it is unclear how this is a problem” (Clewis 2010, p. 169). I would add that this problem is a problem for the beautiful and the starting point of Kant’s discourse on fine arts. However, it is much less of a problem or even no problem at all for the sublime.

and are not free from the order of concepts of the understanding? Accordingly, even if Kant rarely addresses the artistic sublime in his brief discourse on the fine arts, this fact would not indicate the doubtfulness of this possibility. Rather, in addition to the reference to the historically looser connection between the sublime and the arts already discussed, this situation would suggest that this issue is much less problematic for Kant than the artistic beautiful on systematic grounds.

4. *Finally, the Artistic Sublime*

According to the argumentation of the preceding sections, an artistic sublime would be notably less problematic in a systematic sense against the backdrop of Kant's "Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment" than it appears to be when counterarguments against the artistic beautiful are applied to the artistic sublime. However, this argumentation does not include a denial that, for Kant's "Analytic of the Sublime," the 'pure (*rein*)' aesthetic judgment remains authoritative, which, unmixed with concepts of understanding, finds its exemplary intuitions primarily in nature and, more precisely, in raw nature. However, such purity neither excludes the possibility of an artistic sublime nor is it appropriate for the actual experience of works of art (cf. Guyer 2005, pp. 318f.). The question of the artistic sublime must therefore be explicated as much as possible from a perspective on its impure forms and by reference to the different layers and the inherent complexity of works of art.²⁸ Kant himself repeatedly addresses various such layers but without detailing them with the level of clarity that could be desired. In a particularly interesting passage, however, he mentions the difference between the *form* of the intuition stimulating an aesthetic experience and the *content* of the same intuition with regard to what is represented in an artwork. Kant thus argues by reference to the beautiful that works of art can give rise to an aesthetic judgment in two ways: by their own present intuition (a point to which I will return) or by reference to that which they represent.²⁹ I want

²⁸ The question of impure sublimity also seems to me to suggest a possibly productive turn of the debate between Abaci (2010, pp. 171f.) and Clewis (2010, p. 168; 2009, pp. 96-108).

²⁹ Assuming that art is understood as the imitation of nature, Kant views the depicted beauty of nature as the proper reference point of the aesthetic judgment: "That the satisfaction in beautiful art in the pure judgment of taste is not combined with an immediate interest in the same way as that in beautiful nature is also easy to explain. For the former is either such an imitation of the latter that it is deceptive, and in that case it has the effect of natural beauty (which it is taken to be); or else it is an art that is obviously intention-

to follow Kant's suggestion and consider possible ways of evoking the sublime in an artwork that take as their starting point either (i) the content it represents or (ii) its perception with regard to the form of the present intuition.

(i) To approach the evocation of the sublime by a work of art via its content suggests itself as a possibility because for Kant, as for many of his contemporaries, art is valued due to its imitation of nature; moreover, the sublime is predominantly related to nature in this context. Thus, Kant foresees that a work of art could represent a content that evokes a feeling of the sublime even if the form of the same work and its aesthetic experience adhere to the norm that works of fine art must first and foremost be beautiful.³⁰ Theorists of art who draw heavily on Kant's third *Critique* shortly after its publication frequently take similar paths when they explain, for example, that a painting can evoke the sublime insofar as it brings to life memories of our experiences of the sublime in nature.³¹ Nevertheless, Abaci (2008, p. 247) is right in claiming that such an experience, which confuses the sublime nature depicted in the artwork with the perception of the work of art itself, can hardly be considered to represent an aesthetic reflecting judgment in general, much less in the sense of the "Analytic of the Sublime."

A second strategy for accommodating the sublime in art via the content of the work of art is based on Kant's doctrine of "aesthetic ideas (*ästhetische Ideen*)" (KU, § 49, AA 05: 314-318). In this case, the viewer does not confuse the work of art with the content it represents. Rather, it is the attempt to grasp this content that has the potential to evoke the feeling of the sublime. Namely, the aesthetic ideas describe a form of meaning that is characterized by the richness of the intuitions given with the artwork as well as their inexhaustibility by the concepts of the understanding. Thus, the aes-

ally directed toward our satisfaction (*eine absichtlich auf unser Wohlgefallen sichtbarlich gerichtete Kunst*), in which case the satisfaction in this product would, to be sure, occur immediately by means of taste" (KU, § 42, AA 05: 301).

³⁰ I read a passage that justifies the limitation of Kant's analysis of the sublime to that found in nature by arguing that the sublime in art must 'agree with nature' in this sense: "if, as is appropriate, we here consider first only the sublime in objects of nature (that in art is, after all, always restricted to the conditions of agreement with nature)" (KU, § 23, AA 05: 245). Although Abaci 2008, p. 238, rightly notes that the ambiguities of this passage are unlikely to be resolved, such a reading seems to be supported by a passage in the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* to which Doran 2015, pp. 276-280, draws attention. Moreover, he emphasizes the fact that the sublime in its beautiful presentation undergoes a non-mimetic transformation and aesthetic 'redemption.' The fact that Doran must parallel the sublime with the ugly and disgusting to support his argument seems, in my opinion, to be quite questionable.

³¹ Cf. Fernow 1795, p. 27, and 1806b, pp. 69-71. Semler 1800, pp. 187-191, also argues for a "mediated (*mittelbare*)" evocation of the sublime, but one that is supposed to arise from "reveries (*Reverien*)" triggered by landscape painting.

thetic ideas produce an inexhaustible *meaningfulness* with regard to a work of art, which is simultaneously concrete and abundant and may convey an idea of reason as the experience of the sublime.³²

However, it hardly seems convincing that this rather vague analogy could serve as a basis for justifying the possibility of an artistic sublime. That is, it seems to leap from the content of a work of art, as this notion is treated in the discussion of the aesthetic ideas, to the form of its experience, which may bear some resemblance to the experience of the sublime due to the conceptual ungraspability of the aesthetic ideas. Yet the structure of the aesthetic reflecting judgment of the sublime and that of the aesthetic ideas differ markedly: In one case, the comprehension of an intuition by imagination gives rise to a reflecting process and invokes reason based on its own capacities, whereas in the other case, the given intuition itself being a product of imagination invites associations but is not exhaustible by the understanding and its concepts. However, as Abaci (2008, pp. 245 and 248f.) once again convincingly argues, we should not compromise the structure of the experience of the sublime in order to make an artistic sublime seem possible, a possibility which, furthermore, no longer has any sharp boundaries.

These arguments for the possibility of an artistic sublime starting from the contents of works of art can adhere to Kant's historical assumption that we experience works of art primarily in the form of the beautiful. However, such arguments encounter difficulties with regard to explaining how the content can enter or even stimulate an aesthetically reflective form of experience without blurring the conceptual clarity of the sublime and depriving the possible artistic challenge of the sublime of sharpness and productivity.

We therefore turn to the question of whether we cannot experience works of art in an aesthetic reflecting judgment of the sublime and on the occasion of the 'reflected perception' of the present and intuited form.

(ii) The experience of an artistic sublime that also corresponds to the aesthetic reflecting judgment in terms of its form by no means excludes, if my argument above is sound, works of art that are not merely arbitrary intuitions but rather things that are made to be perceived or looked at. Kant himself occasionally seems to be implying that we are dealing here with an "art visibly directed on purpose towards our pleasure (*absichtlich auf unser Wohlgefallen*)

³² Both Pillow (1994, pp. 450-456) and Wicks (1995, pp. 191-193) argue that a formally beautiful "presentation of aesthetic ideas (*Darstellung ästhetischer Ideen*)" (KU, § 49, AA 05: 314) can, like the experience of the sublime, point us to some idea of the infinite, but does so by means of its content, because the meaning of an aesthetic idea cannot be exhausted by a concept or a finite set of concepts.

sichtbarlich gerichtete Kunst)” (KU, § 42, AA 05: 301).³³ Furthermore, philosophers and theorists of the arts who followed him or were influenced by him, such as Carl Heinrich Heydenreich or Carl Ludwig Fernow, have gladly taken up this perspective and developed it further.³⁴ Addressing the possibility of the artistic sublime is thus linked to a twist of one’s perspective on the work of art that is hardly implied in Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment* and, in any case, is not elaborated there: If a work of art is a thing that is produced to be looked at and is therefore intentionally and visually directed to our senses, then this purposeful design does not include solely the content of the work of art but also contains the form of its aesthetic experience and the pleasure that is linked to the play of imagination and understanding or reason.

Such a starting point requires reflecting on the specific capacities of different senses and possibilities of the various media associated with works of art more closely than Kant himself. In this way, we could address the question of how a work of art must be designed if it is to generate intuitions that would allow its observer to experience beauty or sublimity.³⁵ However, we cannot find a simple or unambiguous answer to this question with regard to the sublime any more than we can with respect to the beautiful. First and foremost, it must always be borne in mind that the act of intuition in isolation never constitutes an aesthetic experience. This claim is not only to be understood in the sense that the intuition is always part of a more comprehensive reflecting experience. It also includes the “freedom to make anything into an object of pleasure ourselves” (KU, § 5, AA 05: 210; cf. also KU, § 2, AA 05: 205). With respect to the sublime, Kant particularly discusses this ‘freedom’ in two respects: On the one hand, he emphasizes that the experience of the sublime requires a certain “receptivity to ideas” (KU, § 29,

³³ Admittedly, this formulation is as difficult to translate as it is to interpret. However, the omission of ‘visibly (*sichtbarlich*)’ seems so questionable that I have modified the translation at this point. The formulation can be read in the context of the whole sentence in footnote 29.

³⁴ Carl Ludwig Fernow (1795, p. 405), a theoretician of art who builds on Kant’s third *Critique*, defines the concept of ‘presentation (*Darstellung*)’ in precisely this sense: “Presentation in general is the form that we produce in a thing so that it can be looked at (*Darstellung überhaupt ist die Form, die wir an einem Dinge hervorbringen, damit es angeschaut werden könne*)”. In a similar way, Carl Heinrich Heydenreich (1794) follows in the footsteps of Kant by attempting to approach a “philosophy of the fine arts” in terms of the artwork as a product of human craft.

³⁵ With regard to the beautiful, Kant asks a similar question in the “General remark on the first section of the Analytic.” Since beauty depends on the ‘free play’ between imagination and understanding, Kant believes that a suitable intuition is one by which an “object can provide it [the imagination, A.S.] with a form that contains precisely such a composition of the manifold as the imagination would design in harmony with the lawfulness of the understanding in general if it were left free by itself” (KU, § 22, AA 05: 240f.).

AA 05: 265) and thus a certain personal experience, culture and practice;³⁶ on the other hand, he suggests several times that it is not the intuition that ‘triggers’ the experience of the sublime, as it were, but rather that reason seizes the opportunity offered by a suitable intuition to prove its superiority over sensuality.³⁷ When we ask how a work of art can allow for an experience of the sublime, we are thus not aiming at an intuition that ‘mechanically triggers’ such an experience but rather at an intuition that can constitute a particularly suitable “occasion (*Veranlassung*)” (KU, § 30, AA 05: 280) under appropriate cultural and practical circumstances.

Against this backdrop, we can thus ask which “object is suited (*tauglich sei*) for the presentation (*Darstellung*) of a sublimity that can be found in the mind (*Gemüte*)” (KU, § 23, AA 05: 245).³⁸ With regard to the “Analytic of the Sublime,” it would be reasonable to think first and foremost of ‘objects’ or phenomena whose sheer size makes the “aesthetic estimation of magnitude (*ästhetische Größenschätzung*)” (KU, § 26, AA 05: 251) fail, thus causing reason to be summoned and offering itself to reason as a means for demonstrating the latter’s superiority. However, such an approach all too easily gives rise to fundamental objections. Namely, Kant’s contemporaries already objected that every work of art must be a limited form and therefore cannot achieve the failure of the ‘aesthetic estimation of magnitude’ that seems to be necessary for the experience of the sublime.³⁹

However, to reduce the question of the possibility of an artistic sublime to the ‘aesthetic estimation of magnitude’ is insufficient. For it takes into account only arbitrary intuitions and their most general characterization in terms of their magnitude that Kant established in the “Axioms of Intuition” from the *Critique*

³⁶ Cf. KU, § 29 and § 32, AA 05: 264-266 and 282f. Thus, the judgment of taste can claim much less universality in the case of the sublime than in the case of the beautiful; cf. KU, § 39, AA 05: 292f. as well as, for a more detailed account, Doran 2015, pp. 261-266, and Vandenabeele 2019, pp. 170-175, the latter of whom reconstructs the different modality of judging the sublime as a kind of corrosion of its aesthetic nature.

³⁷ “The apprehension of an otherwise formless and nonpurposive object merely provides the occasion for becoming conscious of this, which in this way is used in a subjectively purposive way, but is not judged to be such for itself and on account of its form” (KU, § 30, AA 05: 280). Cf. also Doran 2015, pp. 216-218. Because the sublime is rooted in this ‘purposeful use,’ Kant subsequently concludes that a deduction of the sublime in nature, unlike in the case of the beautiful, would be as little possible as it is necessary. It is quite surprising indeed that Moore (2018), in his detailed discussion of this passage and Kant’s abandonment of deduction, does not even mention, let alone discuss, the latter’s reference to use. Guyer (2018) also neglects this point and thus speaks nearly on every page of an intuition ‘triggering’ the experience of the sublime.

³⁸ I have modified the translation here; Guyer and Matthews translate ‘tauglich sei’ as ‘serves’.

³⁹ Cf. Fernow 1806b, pp. 69f., and Brady 2013, pp. 123f.

of *Pure Reason* (KrV, 286-289, AA 03: 148-151) and probably tried to connect with motifs from the discourse on the sublime in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. But even if the failure of the imagination to comprehend the perceived form is primarily prompted by limitless objects in Kant, other factors also play a decisive role and other reasons are by no means excluded. Kant himself, with regard to the example of the pyramids, mentions that the distance and thus the situation of perception are important factors. When we deal with works of art, we must furthermore take into account their inherent complexity: An 'art visibly directed on purpose towards our pleasure' makes use of the specific conditions associated with different senses and media, which could be included even alongside Kant's far-reaching privileging of the formal aspects of art: In the picture, forms create manifold relations both among themselves and in relation to the frame, which must by no means always be easy to combine into one comprehensive form, as Kant constantly assumes. Rather, it is possible to use the specific capacities of pictorial presentation to produce tensions, oscillating moments, and incoherencies in their perception in order to deny any simple form.⁴⁰

Starting from art, its technical means and procedures and its manifold genres, an unbiased gaze seems to be necessary here, i.e., a gaze that can glimpse the sublime beyond the level of its presentation through sheer size. Such a gaze extending beyond a focus on magnitude seems to me to be important for making accessible the visual strategies by which artists around 1800 took up the challenge of the sublime and made it productive. However, such a stance seems to me not only not to be excluded from Kant's considerations for systematic reasons but even to be systematically indicated. Namely, aesthetic experience, unlike the situation suggested by Kant's focus on magnitude, does not pertain to the necessary laws of experience that are the subject of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. On the contrary, aesthetic experience in general and the experience of the sublime in particular involve individual intuitions and objects and take from them a pleasure that teaches us something about our relationship to nature or about ourselves, at least if the prerequisite of specific cultural conditions is fulfilled. A theory of the artistic sublime that follows in Kant's footsteps will therefore not be reducible to a theory of experience and the necessary dimension of the mere magnitude of appearances. Rather, such a theory must include a more comprehensive culture of the sublime including the relevant

⁴⁰ Cf. the contributions to this Special Issue by Johannes Grave and Sonja Scherbaum.

forms of experience and presentation, and it must relate them to the cultural-historical exploration and development of their conditions – for example, those found in the specific strategies evolving in the arts around 1800 and further on.

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