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Evoking the Sublime in Landscape Painting: Joseph Anton Koch's Schmadribachfall and Caspar David Friedrich's Watzmann

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ABSTRACT
Kant's rejection of the possibility of an artistic sublime requires critical revision. By reference to two landscape paintings – Joseph Anton Koch's *Schmadribachfall* and Caspar David Friedrich's *Watzmann* – it will be shown that paintings can indeed be capable of evoking an experience of the sublime. In this context, it is precisely the painting's manner of representation that can provoke the failure of apprehension and comprehension that is central to the mathematically sublime and that represents an indispensable element of the experience of the sublime. Although Immanuel Kant cites examples from architecture to illustrate this failure of apprehension and comprehension, a pure judgment of the sublime can only be made regarding "raw nature". Works of art, however, are always determined in their form and size by a human purpose. On the basis of contemporary sources, it will be shown that works of art can be considered as mere magnitudes. Another reason for Kant's rejection of the artistic sublime is his restrictive understanding of the work of art. The historical analysis of the paintings in question will show that beyond the level of this normative understanding of the work of art, paintings can be capable of eliciting an experience of the sublime.

KEYWORDS
Mathematically sublime, painting, aesthetic estimation of magnitude

In the second half of the 18th century, the sublime received a certain amount of interest. Since Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* and Immanuel Kant's *Analytic of the Sublime* in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, the sublime has been opposed to the beautiful and associated with large, powerful, and thus seemingly infinite objects of nature, such as mountains, the sea, or volcanic eruptions.[1] Although Immanuel Kant cites examples from architecture,

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a pure judgment of the sublime can only be made regarding "raw nature"[2]. Works of art, on the other hand, are always already determined in terms of their form and size by a human purpose. A vast amount of paintings have indicated that sublime subjects were highly popular in landscape painting. However, static paintings hardly seem to be able to depict the immense power and movement associated with the sublime. Also, the limited dimensions of pictures seem to make it impossible to represent the vast dimensions of natural phenomena.

First the questions of whether, and to what extent, Immanuel Kant's *Analytic of the Sublime* opens up the possibility of evoking the sublime in the medium of the image will be addressed.[3] The focus of this discussion will be on the phenomenology of the mathematically sublime. Thereafter, Kant's understanding of the work of art will be examined. On Kant's view, a work of art must always be a "beautiful" work of art, that is, its purpose is pleasing. Kant states that the work of art must always have a beautiful form that is purposive with respect to observation and judging. Regarding landscape painting, this claim entails that all the parts of the painting must fit together to form a harmonious unity that matches the perceptual capacities of the beholder. It will be shown that this normative understanding of the work of art is also a cause of Kant's rejection of the notion of an artistic sublime.

By reference to two landscape paintings – Joseph Anton Koch's *Schmadribachfall* and Caspar David Friedrich's *Watzmann* – it will be shown that paintings can indeed be capable of evoking an experience of the sublime in the sense of Kant. Since the topic to be investigated is whether such an experience can be evoked in the context of contemplating a picture, in methodological terms, a reception-aesthetic approach is used.[4] This approach is supplemented by references to sources drawn from art criticism that provide information regarding the reactions of historical beholders. In this way, normative presuppositions concerning how a 'beautiful work

Throughout this paper, Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (KU) is quoted using the standard abbreviations followed by the volume and page number of the Akademie Ausgabe (AA). The translation used is drawn from the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, which was edited by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood.

[2] KU § 26, AA 5:253.

[3] In accordance with the thematic focus of this issue, I will concentrate in this paper on paintings from around 1800, i. e. paintings that were created in close contemporary proximity to Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. It would be a different question to discuss this for modern, non-figurative art, such as that of Barnett Newman and others.

[4] In art history, reception aesthetics was outlined by Wolfgang Kemp, and this approach understands the work of art as the result of an interaction between the work and the beholder. See Kemp (2003[6]), pp. 247-265.

of art' should be constituted can be uncovered. Since these presuppositions determine the judgment of taste to a not insignificant degree, they must be exposed.

1. *The Mathematical Sublime as the Failure of the Aesthetic Estimation of Magnitudes*

Since the sublime is commonly associated with overwhelming greatness, Kant first considers the concept of greatness in § 25 "Nominal definition of the sublime." Kant states that what is called sublime is that which is "absolutely great".[5] Saying that something is absolutely great indicates that it is "great beyond all comparison". According to Kant, a magnitude (*quantum*) can be cognized "from the thing itself, without any comparison with another; if, that is, a multitude of homogeneous elements together constitute a unity". However, as soon as the question becomes how large the object is, this inquiry always presupposes a comparison with another magnitude. It is not only the multitude of the unit of measurement that matters but also the magnitude of that unit of measurement itself. However, since a magnitude, in order to serve as a measure, presupposes another magnitude, we can obtain merely a "comparative concept" and not an absolute concept of a magnitude. To indicate how great an object is, the mathematical estimation of magnitude based on numerical concepts is necessary.[6] This type of estimation is always based on numerical quantities and an underlying unit of measurement. However, in order to obtain an idea of how great the underlying unit of measurement is, one must "grasp it in one intuition." Kant calls this process, on which the mathematical estimation of magnitude is based, the "aesthetic estimation of magnitude". Taking up a quantum intuitively in the imagination involves two actions: apprehension (*apprehensio*) and comprehension (*comprehensio aesthetica*). Through apprehension, the imagination can progress to infinity, but comprehension becomes more and more difficult the further the apprehension progresses and ultimately reaches a limit. Kant calls this limit the "aesthetically greatest basic measure for the estimation of magnitude."[7] When apprehension and comprehension have reached the maximum, then, "the partial representations of the intuition of the senses that were apprehended first already begin to fade in the imagination as the latter proceeds

[5] KU § 25, AA 5:248. The next citations in this paragraph are also found here.
[6] KU § 26, AA 5:251.The next citations in this paragraph are also found here.
[7] KU § 26, AA 5:252 for this and the next citation.

on to the apprehension of further ones, then it loses on one side as much as it gains on the other […]." The "aesthetically greatest basic measure for the estimation of magnitude" would thus also be the greatest measure of which an intuitive representation is possible. Kant's concept of the "mathematical estimation of magnitude" can also basically be called a measuring process. Similarly, in the process of measurement, "a measure is first determined by delineating a part of a continuum that is then to serve as a comparative quantity."[8] As the history of measurement shows, the underlying unit of measurement was initially intuitive. Since one primarily has an idea of the size of one's body, it is unsurprising that historical units of measurement were initially body-related.[9] Here, for example, one can refer to units of length such as the foot and the cubit. Kant's statement that every estimation of magnitude is initially aesthetic can be understood as an anthropological constant with regard to the history of measurement.

The failure of apprehension and comprehension characterizes the phenomenological core of the experience of the sublime. The sublime can only be elicited when the object in question cannot be grasped in one intuition by the imagination, as was still the case with the aesthetically greatest basic measure for the estimation of magnitude. Kant illustrates this process of the failure of the aesthetic estimation of magnitude by reference to the example of the Egyptian pyramids. Kant is probably referring to the German translation of Claude Savary's *Lettres sur L'Égypte*, which was published in 1788.[10] Kant described this process by reference to Savary as follows:

> This makes it possible to explain a point that Savary notes in his report on Egypt: that in order to get the full emotional effect of the magnitude of the pyramids one must neither come too close to them nor be too far away. For in the latter case, the parts are apprehended (the stones piled on top of another) are represented only obscurely, and their representation has no effect on the aesthetic judgment of the subject. In the former case, however, the eye requires some time to complete its apprehension from the base level to the apex, but during this time the former always partly fades before the imagination has taken in the latter, and the comprehension is never complete.[11]

In order to experience the full emotional effect of the pyramids, one must not be too close to them; otherwise, the impulse to overlook the whole would be missing. However, one

[8] Schuppener (2002), p. 19 (my translation).
[9] Schuppener (2002), p. 32.
[10] The reference to this edition can be found in Böhme (1999), p. 94.
[11] KU § 26, AA 5:252.

must also not be too far away, because then grasping the pyramid as a whole would not be problematic. Kant adds that from this distance, the stones cannot be perceived sufficiently clearly to serve as a scale for the aesthetic estimation of magnitude. Viewed from a suitable distance, this approach is possible, but the parts that have already been grasped (the stones piled on top of one another) already begin to fade in the imagination before the comprehension has been accomplished. Kant neglects the fact that the experience of the sublime depends on one's point of view. Since the bodily dimension of the experience, which is expressed in one's physical relationship to the object, is of particular relevance, it is helpful to consult Savary's description to grasp and understand this dimension more precisely. After presenting an account of the ascent to the top of the pyramid, Savary provides the following description:

> When we reached the base of the pyramid, we circled it, contemplating it with a sort of terror. When considered up close, it seems to be made of blocks of rock, but from a hundred feet, the magnitude is lost in the immensity of the building, and they seem very small. The scale of them is still a problem.[12]

Savary also takes the blocks of rock as a scale, but for him, a problem that can be explained in terms of the diverging physical distances to the blocks of rock thus arises.

One may assume that Savary, when estimating the size of the blocks of rock aesthetically at a close distance, used his own body as a scale to obtain an impression of the size of the object. This process, repeated at a distance of a hundred feet, could not have the same effect since the blocks of rock appear to be small in relation to the subject's own immediate and reflexive perceived size. As soon as Savary once again becomes aware of the impression that the blocks had made on him when seeing them up close, a feeling of terror emerges. This feeling of terror can be attributed to the divergence of the scales when grasped at different distances. Kant completely ignores the aspect that is so important for the aesthetic estimation of magnitude, namely, the fact that the proportion of the observer's visual field that the perceived object occupies depends on the distance.[13] Another point that becomes clear in Savary's description is that he takes himself as a scale for the aesthetic estimation of the blocks of rock. In other words, Savary observes the size of the blocks in relation to himself. As a physical being, a human being has the ability to perceive one's own body size directly and

[12] Savary (1788), pp. 147-148 (my translation).
[13] This aspect is also highlighted by Budd (2003), p. 125.

reflexively. One's own body thus serves as a scale that enables humans to estimate sizes aesthetically.[14] At this point, one can explain Savary's description in terms of the failure of apprehension and comprehension that is significant for Kant; that is, Savary could overlook the pyramid as a whole from some distance, but he once again becomes aware of the impression of the enormous dimensions that the blocks of rock had made when seen from a close distance. In this case, the failure of imagination can be attributed to the fact that it is no longer possible to obtain an idea of the size of the entire building due to the divergence of scale that results from the variation in distance.

Another example to which Kant refers is St. Peter's in Rome. The inadequacy of the imagination with respect to the aesthetic estimation of magnitude, which is accompanied by a feeling of "bewilderment", also impacts the spectator on "first entering" St. Peter's Church.[15] Kant does not mention a source in this context and, moreover, fails to provide a more detailed explanation of the process. Contemporary travelogues provide detailed descriptions of the effect that the interior of the building had on visitors. Initially, St. Peter's did not impress the visitors with its greatness. For example, the architect and theorist of architecture Christian Traugott Weinlig writes in his *Briefe über Rom*, which was published in 1782, that "St. Peter's, very large indeed, does not, at first sight, have the great effect that one should expect of it."[16] Weinlig explains this effect in terms of the fact that the eye generally judges according to familiar proportions and proceeds from the parts to the whole. The interior of St. Peter's Church, however, is proportioned in such a way that all its parts have enormous dimensions, so that the beholder is initially un-

[14] On the significance of the immediate and reflexive knowledge of the size of one's own body with regard to size estimation, see Wyller (2010), pp. 42-44. Wyller notes that to develop an idea of how great an object is, one always needs a comparative quantity whose size is already known; otherwise, one can say only that A is bigger than B, that A is smaller than B, or that A and B are the same size. This operation of comparison could be continued as often as desired with further sizes, but we would only ever obtain a relational concept of size and could not genuinely determine how big the object is. Wyller asks, accordingly, how it could be possible to obtain an idea of how great something is. If we look at a single tree, for example, it initially seems as if there is no other magnitude that could serve as a scale in this context. However, the fact that remains unconsidered is that there is a further magnitude that we could use as a scale to estimate its magnitude: we could use ourselves as a scale. As Wyller notes, man can perceive his body and therefore also its magnitude directly and reflexively, making it possible to obtain a vivid idea of how great an object is. In the case of an object that can evoke the sublime, however, this approach is no longer possible without further efforts since the observer would then no longer succeed in estimating the object aesthetically and synthesizing it into one intuition.

[15] KU § 26, AA 5:252.

[16] Weinlig (1782), pp. 67-68 (my translation).

aware of the true dimensions of the interior.[17] A similar account is found in Andrew Lumisden's *Remarks on the Antiquities of Rome and its Environs*, which was published in 1797. Lumisden writes as follows:

> When I entered this magnificent cathedral nothing at first surprised me. I saw not immediately its greatness. Its length, breadth, and height are so nicely proportioned, that they exactly fill the eye: and the oftener that I examined it, its grandeur and my astonishment increased. The exact proportions, every where observed, easily impose on the eye.[18]

Upon first entering the cathedral, all its parts appear to the viewer to be so well-proportioned that the actual size of the interior initially has no effect on him. This effect only occurs when the visitor moves around the church interior and uses oneself as a scale for the aesthetic estimation of magnitude. Lumisden describes this process in the context of the two putti draped around the holy water font on the eastern piers of the nave. Lumisden writes the following: "Thus when we enter the gate, and look to the right and to the left hand, we observe the basons containing the holy water supported by statues that seem to be of the size of nature; but, when we approach them, they are gigantic."[19] The effect is comparable to Savary's experience. Seen from a certain distance, the putti appear to be merely life-size. This effect is mainly due to the fact that the church and its interior are proportioned in such a way that the viewer is not initially aware of the monumental size of each part. However, if the visitor approaches the putti, he becomes aware of their clearly superhuman size and feels inclined to estimate the enormous dimensions of the entire interior. Similar to the experience that Savary described, the imagination would also be overstrained in the attempt to obtain a vivid idea of the dimensions of the interior space. It is remarkable that Kant exclusively uses examples from architecture to illustrate the failure of apprehension and comprehension, as a pure aesthetic judgment can only be made about objects of raw nature and not about works of art since their form and size are always already determined by a human end.[20] In the case of an object of raw nature, e.g., a barren mountain massif, it would not be possible to identify individual parts, such as the stone blocks in the example of the pyramid, with the aim of using them as a scale for the aesthetic estimation of magnitude. Rather,

[17] Weinlig (1782), p. 68.
[18] Lumisden (1797), p. 285.
[19] *Ibid.*
[20] KU § 26, AA 5:252-253.

particularly in such a case, the contemplating subject would take itself as the scale for the aesthetic estimation of the mountain massif. Moreover, this process would then depend on the proportion of the visual field of the observer that the object occupies when viewed from a certain distance.

Against Kant's assumption that a pure judgment of the sublime is possible only in the case of objects of raw nature since a product of art is always already determined by a human purpose, a possible objection is that a product of art can also be regarded as a mere magnitude without reflecting on the purpose of the object.[21] This possibility is evident in various contemporary sources. Christian Traugott Weinlig, for example, writes that it required "often repeated contemplation of this temple [St. Peter's], executed with as much splendor as intellect and taste, to learn to regard it as the work of men."[22] In addition, a passage from a work published anonymously in 1788 under the title *Untersuchungen über den Charakter der Gebäude* describes that the impression of greatness dominates. In the chapter "Vom erhabenen Character" the anonymous author compares St. Peter's with the Pantheon in terms of its effect. He writes as follows: "The idea of extensive magnitude is the first and strongest idea in the case of St. Peter's; almost everything that we feel about it depends on it. With the Pantheon, the opposite is the case. Here, one is more imbued with the importance of the building."[23] In the case of the pyramids, the same author first emphasizes their purpose as burial sites, but he adds that this purpose no longer has any meaning for the contemporary spectator: "We cannot care about this; we consider these monuments even now to be sublime and admirable."[24]

Even Savary is less concerned with the purpose of the structures and instead focuses primarily on the aesthetic estimation of their magnitude.[25] Remarkable in Savary's description are the numerous comparisons of the pyramids with mountains or rocky peaks, even if Savary does not deny that the pyramids are works of man.[26] In

[21] On the possibility of considering works of art as mere magnitudes, see also Abaci (2008), p. 240, and Clewis (2010), p.169. Abaci, however, rejects this consideration because it would not correspond to Kant's idea of the way in which works of art are aesthetically appreciated and concludes that at best an impure judgment of the sublime is possible in this context. Kant's understanding of the work of art and its aesthetic appreciation will be discussed later.

[22] Weinlig (1782), p. 67 (my translation).

[23] Anonymous (1788), p. 113 (my translation).

[24] Anonymous (1788), p. 15 (my translation).

[25] Savary (1788), pp. 147-150.

[26] Savary (1788), pp. 144-145. The fact that the pyramids were not only compared with natural objects but even regarded as natural products illustrates the so-called "pyramid controversy". In 1789, Samuel Witte, a professor of natural law from Wittenberg, wrote

any case, these sources suggest that works of art can be viewed as mere magnitudes without reflecting on their purpose.

Paintings are always already limited in their physical dimensions, so it initially seems impossible that paintings, if they are regarded merely as magnitudes, would have the same effect as physically extended objects of nature or architecture. However, pictures might be able to push the comparative practices that the beholder uses for the aesthetic estimation of magnitude to their limits as a result of their specific design, i.e., by their compositional arrangement or by their choice of image detail. It will be argued that these practices of the aesthetic estimation of magnitude are also used in the reception of pictures; thus, landscape paintings in particular may be capable of evoking an experience of the sublime. Before examining this thesis on the basis of Joseph Anton Koch's *Schmadribachfall* and Caspar David Friedrich's *Watzmann*, Kant's normative understanding of a work of art as a beautiful work of art will be examined more closely and subjected to critical questioning.

2. *Kant on the Beautiful Arts*

The aesthetic experience of the beautiful is directly connected with a feeling of pleasure.[27] In contrast, the aesthetic judgment of the sublime is initially accompanied by a feeling of displeasure, which is transformed into a feeling of pleasure as soon as the subject becomes aware of his rational determination.[28] A judgment of beauty is not driven by an epistemic interest and therefore not grounded in any concept of the object.[29] In a judgment of beauty, the imagination interacts with the understanding and in a judgment of the sublime, imagination and reason interact.[30] While the sublime is associated with the formless or with an object that appears to be formless, the beautiful in nature is concerned with the form of the object, which consists in limitation.[31]

With regard to fine art, Kant also upholds the claim that the essence of all fine art lies in the fact that its form is "purposive for observation and judging".[32] Thus, it seems that a work of art

a treatise entitled *Ueber den Ursprung der Pyramiden in Egypten und der Ruinen von Persepolis*, in which he argued that the pyramids had been formed by volcanic activity. On the pyramid controversy, see also Hübner (2014), pp. 439-460.

[27] KU § 36, AA 5:288.
[28] KU § 27, AA 5:257.
[29] KU § 15, AA 5:227.
[30] KU § 26, AA 5:256.
[31] KU § 23, AA 5:244.
[32] KU § 52, AA 5:326.

must have certain spatial and/or temporal properties that are purposive for observation and judgment and therefore capable of instilling a feeling of pleasure. Although Kant avoids identifying specific qualities on the basis of which an object is judged as beautiful, he does implicitly underline such qualities by stating that the essence lies in the form that is purposive for observation and judgment. Now, from an art historical perspective, a question arises as to how such a work of art should be constituted. It cannot be a composition that is based on geometrically regular shapes, since otherwise the judgment would be a conceptually determined one.[33] According to Kant, this restriction also excludes compositions that are executed strictly in accordance with the rules of perspective or even those in which the "relation of the parts in a division to each other and to the whole" is first and foremost made conspicuous by "regular shapes, and those indeed of the simplest kind", since in those cases the judgment would also be determined by concepts.[34] Kant seems to be implicitly suggesting that a picture should not be dominated by an overly obvious regularity.

Since an aesthetic judgment regarding the beautiful is not based on concepts, a question further concerning whether such a judgment is possible at all in the case of a work of art that is always already determined by a purpose. According to Kant, we must be aware "that is art, and not nature; yet the purposiveness in its form must still seem to be as free from all constraint by arbitrary rules as if it were a mere product of nature."[35] Thus, Kant seems to suggest that we have to abstract from the fact that the work of art is the product of an intentional action to be capable of appreciating it aesthetically.

In conclusion, with regard to works of art, it can be stated that in order to be judged as beautiful, they must correspond to the conditions of human perception. This correspondence is achieved when the combination of the various elements forms a beautiful unity that is perceived as pleasing. A similar understanding of the work of art can also be found in writings by contemporary theorists and art critics.[36]

In terms of landscape painting, this view implies that paintings should be designed in such a way as to correspond to the beholder's perceptual capacities. Paintings that meet this re-

[33] According to Kant, geometrically regular shapes are "mere presentations of a determinate concept"; see KU § 22, AA 5:241.

[34] KU § 22, AA 5:241.

[35] KU § 45, AA 5:306.

[36] This point will be discussed in more detail in section 4.

quirement are structured into foreground, middleground, and background. The effect of pictorial depth is not achieved by a strict composition in accordance with the rules of perspective but rather by an arrangement of similar objects staggered into pictorial depth, which allows the beholder to estimate the distances and proportions within the pictorial space. Moreover, in such compositions, the beholder's gaze is often drawn into the depth by framing elements such as trees as situated in fore- and middleground. Such compositions harmonize with the conditions of human perception and inspire the free play of imagination and understanding.[37]

In summary, it can be seen that Kant's rejection of an artistic sublime is also based on his understanding of the work of art. The fact that works of art are certainly capable of evoking an experience of the sublime in the Kantian sense is demonstrated in the following by reference to two paintings by Joseph Anton Koch and Caspar David Friedrich.

3. *Joseph Anton Koch's* Schmadribachfall

The *Schmadribachfall* by Joseph Anton Koch, which was completed in 1811, presents an impressive alpine landscape in the Bernese Oberland (Fig. 1).[38] Below the Großhorn and Breithorn, the Schmadribach emerges from the glacier and rushes, framed by two thin rivulets, down the steep slope, ultimately flowing, largely concealed by a forested area, into the Lütschine, which extends prominently across the entire width of the lower edge of the picture. The meadow area surrounded by the mountain stream is populated by extremely small staffage figures, which when perceived from a certain distance can hardly be identified as a shepherd with a herd of goats and a hunter.

[37] For example, such a structure is often found in works by the landscape painter Johann Christian Reinhart; see Bertsch (2012), p. 63.

[38] Koch created several versions of the *Schmadribachfall*. In addition to the large-format oil painting in Leipzig, a smaller-format version can be found in the Casita del Infante in Madrid, and an 1822 completed version can be found in Munich. On the Madrid painting, see Sancho (2008), p. 18. On the Munich painting, see von Holst (1989), p. 85.

Fig. 1: Joseph Anton Koch, Der Schmadribachfall, 1811, Oil on Canvas, 123 x 93.5 cm, Leipzig, Museum der bildenden Künste.

Dagobert Frey was the first to note that Koch's composition employs multiple points of sight, which creates the impression that the picture consists of different spatial zones.[39] While the foreground is composed based on a point of sight that is approximately at the level of the figure of the hunter, a higher point of sight must be assumed for the upper part of the picture containing the glacier and

[39] Frey (1950), p. 203.

rock massif, specifically a point that is approximately at the level of the plateau from which the waterfall plunges down into this depth. Frey locates a third, middle point of sight at the level of the forest. While the flat meadow area of the foreground creates the spatial depth that Frey describes as "central space", the mountain massif rising in the background is compositionally determined by three horizontally layered zones: the dark forested zone, the rock massif, and the glacier zone.[40] In terms of color, these zones are clearly separated. But the picture's disparate individual parts are connected by the mountain stream.[41] Christian von Holst emphasizes that due to these peculiarities, the painting cannot be grasped at first glance but rather must be taken in successively by the wandering eye of the beholder.[42] Von Holst considers the unique effect of Koch's painting, which resists the beholder's visual habits, to be the result of the fact that "despite the wide-angle effect, the near and the inaccessible are brought closer to the viewer as if with a telephoto lens".[43] According to von Holst, this effect results from the fact that the peak is positioned extremely close to the upper edge of the picture, which increases the narrowness of the pictorial space still further.[44] The function of the figure of the hunter, which is positioned parallel to the picture plane, has not yet been thoroughly analyzed.

The figure of the hunter provides a scale for aesthetic estimation in two ways. On the one hand, it serves the beholder as an indicator that can be used to estimate the distances within the pictorial space, while on the other hand, it also serves as a scale for the aesthetic estimation of the magnitude of the mountain massif. From an ideal distance, it is possible to overlook the mountain massif as a whole, but from this distance, it is not possible to identify the figure of the hunter clearly as a human figure. Such identification is only possible when the beholder steps closer to the picture, at which point the figure can serve as a reliable scale. The degree of detail in the execution of the figure defies the requirements of aerial perspective and supports this process of reception. From this distance, it is possible to identify the hunter as a scale for the aesthetic estimation of the magnitude, but it is precisely then that the imagination reaches its aesthetic maximum in the attempt to estimate the mountain massif aesthetically and thus fails to complete the comprehension. The horizontal layering of the mountain mas-

[40] *Ibid.*
[41] Von Holst (1989), p. 229.
[42] *Ibid.*
[43] *Ibid.* (my translation).
[44] Von Holst (1989), p. 231.

sif from the forested zone to the rocky massif to the glacier zone and the cloud-covered summit region ensures that the beholder's gaze continues to strive energetically upwards without granting the observer the ability to master this distance easily. This effect is enhanced by the lack of atmospheric diffusion of the aerial perspective, which encourages a close-up contemplation of the picture. The key function of the tiny staffage figures as a scale for the aesthetic estimation of magnitude is also emphasized by one of Koch's contemporaries, the painter Friedrich Müller, who also lived in Rome. Müller writes the following:

> Although Mr. Koch possesses a great skill in the figure, as not a few samples that he provided in this view amply demonstrate, one must think all the more that he set himself limits here and wanted only to place a few in the background, less for further animation than to serve the imagination of the viewer as a scale for the other objects, because otherwise the interest that rests in this representation on the parties in the distance could easily have been disturbed.[45]

It is remarkable that Müller particularly emphasizes the function of the figure as a scale for the aesthetic estimation of magnitude. The main function of the figurative staffage described by Carl Ludwig Fernow in his treatise *Über die Landschaftsmalerei*, namely, the animation of the landscape scene, is clearly marginalized in Müller's description.[46]

Based on Müller's account, it also becomes clear that Koch's painting was considered primarily in terms of size. Of course, this point does not refer to the physical dimensions of the canvas but rather to the way in which the picture is designed, which encourages the beholder to apply habitualized practices of aesthetic estimation of size even when contemplating the picture. Despite the limited dimensions of the painting, it is precisely the specific design of the picture that evokes an experience of the sublime.

It is quite likely that Joseph Anton Koch, who had lived in Rome since 1795, was familiar with Kantian aesthetics. The theorist Carl Ludwig Fernow, who also lived in Rome, held lectures on Kant's aesthetics during the winter semester of 1795/96.[47] In one section of his *Moderne Kunstchronik*, a polemic on the current state of art and art criticism, Koch certainly appears to be acquainted with Kant's work in that he distinguishes the beautiful and the sublime from the useful and complains that the art of his time was determined by the useful.[48]

[45] Müller (1812), p. 188 (my translation).
[46] Fernow (1806), p. 33.
[47] Von Holst (1989), p. 46.
[48] Koch (1834), pp. 54-55.

4. *Caspar David Friedrich's* Watzmann

Caspar David Friedrich's *Watzmann* confronts the beholder with a huge mountain massif that shows no traces of human civilization (Fig. 2). Friedrich's *Watzmann* can be understood as a reaction to a painting by Ludwig Richter that was shown at the Dresden Academy Exhibition in 1824 (Fig. 3). Richter's composition is obviously inspired by Koch's *Schmadribachfall*. Like Koch's painting, the picture features a large vertical format in which the rock pyramid is the dominant motif. In Richter's work, the forested zone is clearly staggered in depth, and the landscape is rendered civilized by paths, a cabin, and a chapel. Richter's first large-scale oil painting met with a positive response at the Dresden Academy Exhibition. The Dresden art collector and art connoisseur Johann Gottlob von Quandt acknowledged Richter's talent for depicting sublime scenes in nature. Von Quandt writes the following:

> The romantic, that which in nature reaches the incomprehensible and in representation the unbelievable without transcending the limits of the possible and the real, is entirely his subject, and he is able to put it before our eyes with such truth that we are completely struck by the feeling of the sublime, which is instilled in us by the sight of glaciers shining in the purest sunlight, impetuous streams and serious forests, which stand as a defense against landslides and avalanches.[49]

Although von Quandt emphasizes all the usual topoi associated with the sublime – glaciers, waterfalls, and the irrepressible power of natural phenomena – Richter does not depict a threatening and inaccessible nature but rather a mountain landscape that has been made accessible by man. Although the pyramidal composition emphasizes the monumentality of the motif, it is precisely the slightly staggered arrangement of the forest-covered zone that mitigates this impression. Johannes Grave notes that von Quandt may not have used the expression "feeling of the sublime" in this context by coincidence.[50] Von Quandt had commissioned a sublime Nordic landscape from Friedrich four years earlier, which was intended to serve as the pendant to a beautiful Italian landscape by Johann Martin von Rohden.[51] In 1830, von Quandt outlined his conception of the sublime in his *Briefe aus Italien über das Geheimnisvolle der Schönheit und die Kunst*.[52]

[49] Von Quandt (1824), p. 366 (my translation).
[50] Grave (2012), p. 196.
[51] See Grave (2012), p. 189.
[52] See von Quandt 1830, pp. 76-106.

In this text, von Quandt refers to Kant's aesthetics. Therefore, it is possible that Friedrich might have come into contact with Kant's theory of the sublime through von Quandt. Friedrich, who was also represented at the Dresden Academy exhibition by a high mountain landscape that was mentioned by von Quandt almost in passing, must have read the detailed acknowledgement of Richter as a painter of the sublime with great attentiveness.[53] Friedrich's *Watzmann* can thus be understood as a deliberate response to Richter's painting.[54]

Fig. 2: Caspar David Friedrich, Der Watzmann, 1824/25, Oil on Canvas, 170 x 135 cm, Berlin, Alte Nationalgalerie.

[53] Von Quandt (1824), p. 368. The high mountain landscape submitted by Friedrich was destroyed in 1945. The painting was documented by photographs. Depicted is the view from Mont Anvert to Mont Blanc; see Börsch-Supan & Jähnig (1973), pp. 391-392.

[54] See Grave (2012), p. 196.

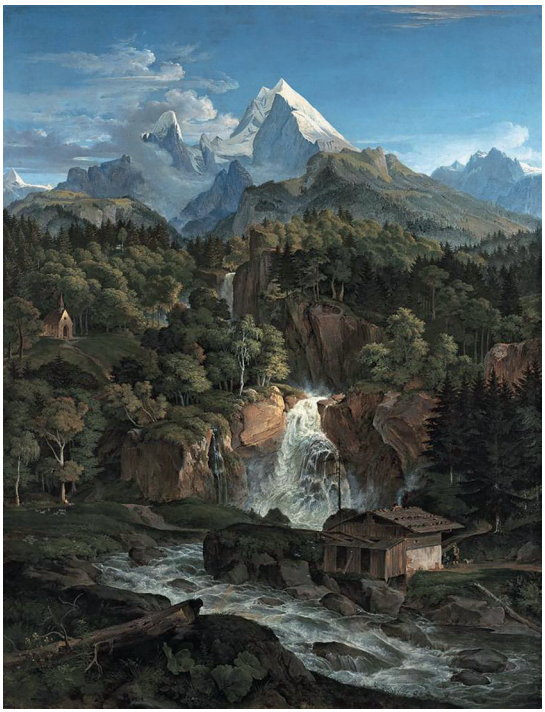

Fig. 3: Ludwig Richter, Der Watzmann, 1824, Oil on Canvas, 121 x 93.5 cm, Munich, Neue Pinakothek.

Unlike Richter's painting, Friedrich's depiction of the *Watzmann* is entirely limited to the high mountain zone. The beholder is confronted solely with pyramid-like towering masses of rock and glacier. In contrast to Richter's *Watzmann*, Friedrich's painting dispenses with everything that could have given the beholder the impression of a harmonious and accessible landscape. Even the narrow ridge that leads from the center of the lower frame, ascends slightly into the pictorial space, and drops threateningly to both sides, makes it harder for the beholder to enter the pictorial space. This impression is intensified by the two uprooted trees that hang down into the depths in the lower right corner. Moreover, as Helmut Börsch-Supan aptly notes, Friedrich refrains from giving the beholder a reliable scale that could be used to estimate the dimensions of the mountainous foreground.[55] Even if the uproot-

[55] Börsch-Supan (1960), p. 102.

ed firs and the bushes in the lower right corner could provide at least a clue for the aesthetic estimation, Friedrich avoids giving the beholder any idea of the proportions by depicting the bushes as only slightly smaller than the firs.[56] Moreover, the birch and fir trees growing in front of and on top of the prominent pyramidal rock formation do not provide a reliable scale for estimating size. Thus, it remains unclear whether these are young trees with low growth or mature specimens. Unlike Koch, Friedrich refrains from inserting a human figure into the composition as a reliable scale for the aesthetic estimation of magnitude.

The fact that Friedrich made this decision consciously is suggested by a drawing made on June 28, 1811, during a hike in the Harz Mountains, which Friedrich used as a model for the striking rock pyramid (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4: Caspar David Friedrich, Der Trudenstein im Harz, 28. June 1811, pencil on paper, 25.6 x 35.0 cm, Location unknown.

The drawing depicts the Trudenstein in the Harz mountains. Here, Friedrich has placed a human figure directly in front of the rock formation to clarify the proportions of the objects depicted in the drawing. At some distance from the human figure, a vertical line with two small transverse lines can be seen. These vertical lines

[56] See Börsch-Supan (1960), p. 103.

are found more frequently in Friedrich's drawings. They serve as a measure and illustrate the size of a human being.[57] Thus, it must be assumed that Friedrich, who carefully documented proportions and distances in the drawing, deliberately refrained from doing so in the painting. Although the slopes, which are densely covered with deciduous trees interspersed with a few patches of green meadow, initially suggest a considerable distance from the sparse vegetation that thrives on the rock formation, it is impossible to estimate this distance reliably. This irritating impression is due to the fact that the rocky cliff-like ridge in the foreground inclines strongly inward into the pictorial space, whereas the rock formation in front of the snow-covered peak leans towards the beholder. As a result, the pictorial space in the middleground appears to be strongly compressed. If one compares the summit region in the painting by Friedrich, who had never seen the Watzmann with his own eyes, with a watercolor nature study produced by his student August Heinrich during a trip to Berchtesgaden, it becomes clear that Friedrich adopted the shape of the snow-covered summit region very precisely but clearly tilted the rock formation in front of it, which in Heinrich's painting is positioned nearly parallel to the picture plane, i.e., towards the beholder (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5: August Heinrich, Vorgebirge des Watzmann, 1821, Aquarell, 32.5 x 41.3 cm, Oslo, Nasjonalmuseet.

[57] See Grummt (2011), p. 631.

Furthermore, it is hardly a coincidence that Friedrich placed two smaller rock formations that exhibit a striking resemblance to the left summit of the Watzmann alongside the prominent rock formation of the Trudenstein on the righthand side, whereas the rock formation, which leans slightly to the left, serves as a formal analogy to the snow-covered mountain peak on the right.[58]

As has already become clear, Kant's theory of the sublime completely ignores the facts that the failure of the aesthetic estimation of magnitude depends on the perspective of the beholder and that the aesthetic estimation of magnitude of an object is always connected with an estimation of its distance. Friedrich's painting confronts the beholder with an indeterminate spatial situation that prevents him or her from obtaining a coherent idea of the distances and proportions in the painting. Thus, it could be claimed that the imagination can proceed to infinity in this context as well in the repeated attempt to grasp the visual possibilities of the aesthetic estimation of size that are provided by the picture without ever finding those possibilities to be suitable for the aesthetic estimation of magnitude. Due to this infinite process of apprehension, the imagination does not succeed in comprehension.

As was shown in section 1 by the historical contextualization of the examples used by Kant, the pyramids and St. Peter's, the corporeal-bodily component in the process of aesthetic estimation of magnitude is of essential importance in order to evoke an experience of the sublime. By refraining from inserting a human figure into the composition as a reliable scale for the aesthetic estimation of size, the beholder is forced to rely all the more on his own reflexively and immediately perceived physical size. This reliance is indicated on the one hand by the large format of the picture (170 x 135 cm) and on the other hand by the choice of the image section, which is limited to the high mountain zone. The effort to apprehend the whole mountain massif vividly in the imagination blurs the boundary between the real space of the beholder and the pictorial space. The effect of this design becomes particularly clear in comparison with Richter's *Watzmann*, which has much smaller dimensions and offers the beholder a view of the entire mountain massif as seen from the valley. When contemplating Richter's painting, the imagination can easily succeed in apprehending and comprehending the perceived parts. The pictorial composition of Friedrich's *Watzmann* causes this process to fail by exceeding the capacity of the imagination. The exceptionally large format and the

[58] See Rzucidlo (1998), p. 140.

fragmentary character of the picture were also noted by Friedrich's contemporaries. Johann Gottlob von Quandt, who had previously acknowledged Ludwig Richter's *Watzmann* in a positive review, however, was more critical with regard to Friedrich's painting. On the one hand, Friedrich, due to the fact that he had never seen the Watzmann with his own eyes, had not been able to solve the issue of pictorial representation in a satisfactory manner.[59] Moreover, according to von Quant, "such a spatially large natural object can appear large in a picture by composition, but it can never suffice in terms of absolute size".[60] The latent criticism that von Quandt highlights here is to be understood as suggesting that Friedrich tried to create the impression of greatness based merely on the large format of the picture.[61] Von Quandt's premise that a large natural object in a picture can only appear large through composition coincides with the requirements for picture design highlighted by contemporary theories of art. Christian August Semler, in his *Untersuchungen über die höchste Vollkommenheit in den Werken der Landschaftsmalerey*, demands that the artist should place human figures or buildings beside such large natural objects to facilitate the estimation of size and enhance the effect of the feeling of grandeur.[62]

After the publicist and art critic Carl Töpfer had seen Friedrich's painting at an exhibition at the Hamburg Kunstverein in 1826, he also expressed his critique and described the irritating effect that Friedrich's painting had exerted on him in an unusually detailed manner. Töpfer writes as follows:

> The artist has omitted to provide a view into the valley; he leads us to the highest peak of a glacier and shows us nothing of the warmer nature but the highest mountain point, where the scanty vegetation does not dare to raise its head freely against light and air but creeps fearfully and timidly on the ground. It is undeniable that a feeling of loneliness seizes us when looking at the picture, a gloomy emptiness without comfort, a standing up without being raised. Whoever wants to make us vividly aware of the dizzy heights of the viewpoint does not have to cover the valleys blurred in fog under our feet with the frame; we have to perceive the tops of the church towers to be uplifted by the distant imagined ringing of the bells, to find in the terribly cold wasteland of an alpine peak with our imagination the signpost that leads us back to the plant and human world; if, as is the case with this picture, it cuts off any possibility of return with the merciless frame, it leads us up many thousands of feet in order to surround us, when we are at the top, with a barrier that allows us to see nothing but the impassable last peak of ice and snow […].[63]

[59] Von Quandt (1825), p. 81.
[60] *Ibid.* (my translation).
[61] Von Quandt is also interpreted in this way by Ohara (1983), p. 132.
[62] Semler (1800), pp. 176-177.
[63] Töpfer (1826), col. 443 (my translation).

With the expression "standing up without being raised" Töpfer describes the feeling of displeasure elicited by the contemplation of the painting. On Töpfer's account, the beholder is denied the rational elevation that occurs in the experience of the sublime. While the sublime expresses itself on an emotional level in the succession of feelings of displeasure and pleasure, Töpfer's contemplation of Friedrich's painting featured only a feeling of displeasure without, however, leading to a feeling of pleasure that arises as soon as the subject becomes aware of his rational determination. Töpfer also emphasizes the pictorial strategy that could be used to evoke an experience of the sublime in contemplation of the painting, namely, the choice of the picture's detail, which is limited to the high mountain zone and cuts off the view into the valley "with the merciless frame". The fact that Friedrich did not want to bar the beholder from an experience of the sublime, as Töpfer's critique suggests, but rather tried to evoke such an experience, is suggested by a passage in his *Äußerungen bei Betrachtungen einer Sammlung von Gemählden von größtentheils noch lebenden und unlängst verstorbenen Künstlern*. In that text, Friedrich writes as follows: "Large is this picture, and nevertheless one wishes it were still larger because the sublimity in the perception of the object is felt to be large and demands a still larger extension in space. Therefore, it is always a compliment for a picture if you wish it to be bigger."[64] For Friedrich, then, the choice of the picture's detail, which encourages an "ever greater expansion in space," seems to be a pictorial device used to elicit an experience of the sublime. Based on this statement by Friedrich, it becomes particularly clear that Carl Töpfer also wished the painting to be larger, complaining that the "merciless frame" cuts off any possibility of returning to the safe valley. Friedrich does not describe the painting to which this passage refers in detail, nor does he mention the artist by name. However, considering the two critiques made by Töpfer and von Quandt, which both pertain to the size of the painting, it is quite likely that this passage refers to these critiques. It seems that Friedrich intends to make it clear that the arguments of his critics do not apply. Based on these two negative critiques, the question of why the picture did not evoke an experience of the sublime in Töpfer and von Quandt now emerges. In this context, it seems fruitful to focus on the limits of the painting, because it is the "merciless frame" that seems to prevent the beholder from experiencing the sublime, at

[64] Friedrich (1999), p. 47 (my translation).

least according to Töpfer. Since at least the last third of the 18th century, the frame of a work of art attained a new significance. As soon as the aesthetic autonomy of art was proclaimed, the limitedness of the beautiful object, i.e., the work of art, became a central determinant of aesthetic judgment. In his *Vorbegriffe zu einer Theorie der Ornamente*, which was published in 1793, Karl Philipp Moritz describes the function of the frame in a chapter entitled *Der Rahmen* as follows: "Why does the frame beautify a picture, because it isolates it and removes it from the context of the surrounding things. […] The picture represents something self-contained; the frame, in turn, delimits that which is self-contained."[65] For Moritz, the picture frame serves as a border and is considered to be a line that simultaneously includes and excludes. The frame can play this role only if the painting is designed in such a way that all its parts harmonize into a unity that is appropriate to the perceptual abilities of the beholder. In formal terms, the concepts of the work of art developed by Kant and Moritz are similar. For Moritz, too, the essence of the work of art lies in its form, which consists in limitation.

In that Friedrichs dissolves the boundary between the pictorial space and the space of the beholder through his choice of the image detail, the frame loses its isolating function. If Töpfer's understanding of the work of art is based on such a concept, it is unsurprising that he was unable to experience the sublime in his contemplation of Friedrich's painting. If art critics base their judgment on writings in art theory and the concept of the beautiful work of art, it is obvious that they will judge a painting like Friedrich's *Watzmann*, which contradicts this convention, as negative. However, Friedrich's painting rejects the concept of the beautiful work of art. The indeterminate spatial situation, which makes it impossible to obtain a coherent idea of the distances and proportions contained in the painting, as well as the choice of the image section, which is limited to the high mountain zone, indicate that the painting can elicit an experience of the sublime.

5. *Conclusion*

First of all, the historical contextualization of the examples chosen by Kant to illustrate the failure of the aesthetic estimation of magnitude, the pyramids and St. Peter's, made it possible to

[65] Moritz (1793), p. 6 (my translation).

show that the experience of the sublime is always also a corporeal-bodily experience that depends on the point of view of the beholder respectively on divergent points of view and thus consequently presupposes spatial movement. For the aesthetic estimation of magnitude, the viewer draws on his own magnitude, of which he has an immediate and reflexive knowledge, even when contemplating works of art. As was demonstrated by Joseph Anton Koch's *Schmadribachfall*, the failure of aesthetic estimation of magnitude in the observation of the painting is provoked by divergent points of view. The specific design of the painting provides the impulse for such an approach to reception. In the case of Caspar David Friedrich's *Watzmann*, the choice of image section and the unclear spatial relations within the painting prevent the viewer from reliably locating his point of view. This in turn pushes the practices of comparison for the purpose of aesthetic estimation of magnitude to their limits.

Besides proving that pictures can certainly be capable of evoking an experience of the sublime in a Kantian sense through their specific design, two aspects were analyzed in more detail that are responsible for Kant's rejection of an artistic sublime. The first is Kant's statement that a pure judgment of the sublime can only be made regarding "raw nature". The sources suggest that works of art can be regarded as mere magnitudes without reflecting on their purpose. This is not only the case with the pyramids and St. Peter's, but also with the paintings by Friedrich and Koch. The second aspect that can explain Kant's rejection of an artistic sublime is his understanding of the artwork. On Kant's view, a work of art must always be a "beautiful" work of art. Regarding landscape painting this means that all parts of the painting must fit together in such a way that a harmonious unity is formed that matches the perceptual capacities of the beholder. Paintings that can evoke an experience of the sublime, however, resist such a requirement by overstraining the beholder's perceptual abilities. Based on contemporary art criticism, particularly regarding Friedrich's *Watzmann*, it became clear that the normative understanding of a "beautiful" work of art is not only found in Kant's rejection of an artistic sublime, but also in the judgment of art critics. An investigation into the question of whether an artistic sublime is possible must ask what understanding of art is presupposed. This turned out to be an appropriate way to uncover the implicit assumptions that led to a negative answer to this question.

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Fig. 1: Joseph Anton Koch, Der Schmadribachfall, 1811, Oil on Canvas, 123 x 93.5 cm, Leipzig, Museum der bildenden Künste (von Holst 1989, Fig. 163, p. 330).

Fig. 2: Caspar David Friedrich, Der Watzmann, 1824/25, Oil on Canvas, 170 x 135 cm, Berlin, Alte Nationalgalerie (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie / Andres Kilger CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

Fig. 3: Ludwig Richter, Der Watzmann, 1824, Oil on Canvas, 121 x 93.5 cm, Munich, Neue Pinakothek (Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Neue Pinakothek München CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

Fig. 4: Caspar David Friedrich, Der Trudenstein im Harz, 28. June 1811, pencil on paper, 25.6 x 35.0 cm, Location unknown (Grummt 2011, Fig. 653, p. 631).

Fig. 5: August Heinrich, Vorgebirge des Watzmann, 1821, Aquarell, 32.5 x 41.3 cm, Oslo, Nasjonalmuseet (Nasjonalmuseet Oslo/ Veiby, Jeanette CC BY 4.0).