

# *Giving Form to the Formless: from the Kantian sublime to the debate between Rosalind Krauss and Georges Didi-Huberman*

Serena Feloj\*

## ABSTRACT

In this text, I will ask whether an artistic representation of the sublime is possible from one of its essential characteristics: the absence of form. Beginning with the Kantian notion of formlessness and its theoretical implications, I would like to refer to Rosalind Krauss's (1996) reading and the debate engaged in with Georges Didi-Huberman (1995). In this journey around formlessness I will make mention of the entry "formlessness" that Bataille publishes in *Documents* (Bataille 1929). The thesis that I would like to argue, taking a position in the debate, is that even in the experience of the sublime, which is entirely subjective and originates in formlessness, there emerges the purely human need to resort to form and representation.

## KEYWORDS

Sublime, formlessness, art, representation, dialectic

The "Analytic of the Sublime" is perhaps the part of Kant's three *Critiques* that is most unresolved. Kant seems to revise many of the fundamental themes of transcendental philosophy, yet without giving an entirely convincing treatment of them. It is precisely these difficulties in interpreting this section of the text, however, that have ensured its success and longevity, so much so that even today it is still interesting to discuss the sublime, and the debate seems to be far from reaching a definitive conclusion. One of the questions that recurs most often in the history of interpretations of the Kantian sublime is whether it can be applied to art. Schiller himself in his three writings on the sublime (1801) attempts to depart from Kant in giving objectivity to the sublime, that is, in finding it in the work of art and, in particular, in tragedy.

Looking at the Kantian letter, the question "Is it possible to speak of sublime art?" is clearly answered: the sublime is solely a state of mind of the subject, occasioned only by natural phenomena, and in no way can it be attributed to an object, even if it were

\* University of Pavia, serena.feloj@unipv.it

an artistic object. At first glance, artistic sublimity thus seems to be excluded. It is also known that Kant's aesthetics, while containing a treatment of artistic creation, is not a philosophy of art, and little space is reserved for the definition of the work of art.

However, we can feel entitled to abandon the letter of Kant's text and more freely employ the notion of the sublime he outlined to interpret some artistic phenomena, including contemporary ones. There are, after all, relevant and promising attempts to apply the Kantian sublime to the arts, especially in the field of art criticism developing in the United States in the mid-twentieth century. The immediate reference and underscored by the important studies of Diarmuid Costello (2007) and Robert Clewis (2008), is to Clement Greenberg's modernism and, in the same tradition, to Thierry de Duve's powerful 1996 work, *Kant after Duchamp* (De Duve 1996). In this paper, however, I would like to focus on a specific aspect of the sublime and its possible application in art, namely its formless character. Beginning with the Kantian notion of formlessness and its theoretical implications, I would therefore like to refer to Rosalind Krauss's (1996) reading and the debate engaged in with Georges Didi-Huberman (1995). In this journey around formlessness it will of course also be necessary to make mention of the entry "formlessness" that Bataille publishes in *Documents* (1929). The thesis that I would like to argue, taking a position in the debate, is that even in the experience of the sublime, which is entirely subjective and originates in formlessness, there emerges the purely human need to resort to form and representation.

### 1. *Kant: the Sublime and the Formless*

In distinguishing the sublime from the beautiful, Kant writes in §23 of the third *Critique*: "The beautiful in nature concerns the form of the object, which consists in limitation; the sublime, by contrast, is to be found in a formless object insofar as limitlessness is represented in it, or at its instance, and yet it is also thought as a totality." (KU 5: 244) In the "Analytic of Beauty," Kant defines beauty as an exclusively formal feeling, in accordance with its disinterested nature described in the first moment. For the beautiful, therefore, the form of the object is an essential part (KU 5: 211). On the contrary, the formlessness that gives rise to the feeling of the sublime is first and foremost limitlessness, and the most appropriate example, brought by Kant himself, is the infinity of the number series that provides the occasion for experiencing the mathematical sublime.

The formless is thus that which escapes the limit of representation, which struggles to be brought back to unity and which, precisely because of this, is subject not to the understanding but to reason's demand for totality. Our rational ground thus generates the failure of comprehension by the imagination, but entails an awareness of our destination to freedom. The absence of form prevents intellectual knowledge, which for Kant is essentially representational, and yet a minimal demand remains, namely that of being able to comprehend, though not determine, the formless in its totality.

Kant describes this movement with regard to the relationship established between imagination and reason in the mathematical sublime. In the apprehension of natural numbers, imagination proceeds to infinity, since it is not limited by the form of the object, and reason requires that apprehension be comprehended in an idea of totality. Imagination cannot but fail in the face of such a demand, but the failure is reversed into an introspective movement in which the resistance of the formless object to comprehension generates the recognition of its rational component, and from there arouses the feeling of the sublime for the moral vocation of the subject.

Clearly, there is little room in this dynamic for the image and, more specifically, for the traditionally understood work of art. However, openings can be discerned in the Kantian text itself, since just as he defines formlessness as the occasion of the sublime, Kant opens up the possibility that it can become the presentation of an indeterminate concept of reason (§23). In the experience of the sublime, the object has a merely functional character: precisely because it lacks form, the perception of the object serves to solicit the movement of the faculties, but it does not have the purpose of obtaining a representation, as is the case in the judgment of knowledge but also in the judgment on the beautiful. This lack of form and the instrumental character of the object, however, seem to guarantee precisely the possibility that an artistic sublime will occur.

At § 25 Kant is explicit in recognizing the function of formlessness in generating an extension of the imagination. When we experience the feeling of the sublime, "we have no interest at all in the object, i.e., its existence is indifferent to us" (KU 5: 249). The very formless object, the absence of a limit in its form generates a feeling that is "universally communicable" and that causes an exceptional movement in the imagination, that is, it extends it beyond the limits of the visible. It is this movement of the imagination that makes the Kantian sublime interesting for contemporary art, particularly abstract and minimalist art (think of Barnett Newman's *Vir heroicus sublimis*; Newman 1948).

Again, in the “Deduction of the Judgments of Taste,” Kant provides elements to this effect when he writes that

the sublime in nature is only improperly so called, and should properly be ascribed only to the manner of thinking, or rather to its foundation in human nature. 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 (as it were *species finalis accepta, non data*). (KU 5: 280)

The formlessness thus gives occasion to make a sublime experience, that is, to extend one’s imagination; it is not a matter of defining an object but a relation between object and subject. It is therefore improper to ask whether the work of art can be sublime. Instead, it is necessary to ask whether art can look like nature by assuming the same absence of form that provokes the feeling of the natural sublime (cf. KU 5: 306). This is the challenge that the twentieth century takes up, starting with Bataille’s attempt to give a definition (a paradoxical operation) of formlessness.

## 2. Bataille: Defining the Formlessness

In 1929 Bataille published in the journal *Documents*, a short entry in the *Dictionnaire* placed in the appendix and dedicated it to the word “formlessness.” I would like to quote it in full:

FORMLESSNESS. – A dictionary would begin from the moment it no longer gave the meaning but the tasks of words. Thus formless is not only an adjective with such a sense but a term that serves to downgrade, demanding in general that everything has its own form. That which it designates has no rights of its own in any sense and is crushed everywhere like a spider or earthworm. It would indeed be necessary, for academic men to be content, for the universe to take shape. The whole philosophy has no other purpose; it is to give a redingote to what is, a mathematical redingote. Conversely, to say that the universe resembles nothing and is but formless is equivalent to saying that the universe is something like a spider or a spit. (Bataille 1929)

In formlessness, Bataille detects the possibility, if not the necessity, of escaping from giving form at any cost, of renouncing making sense of words, of giving cosmic order to what is chaotic. The formlessness, on the other hand, calls to return to the baseness of things, is a downgrading and in this movement accomplishes a deconstruction. Formlessness then is not a noun, not a thing, but a relation between subject and object. Form, in fact, is not denied or destroyed, but set in motion, it deconstructs itself to rediscover the real.

In this sense, Bataille's formlessness seems diametrically opposed to the Kantian sublime: it promotes a lowering to material things as opposed to an elevation (*erheben*) toward a moral destination. Yet, despite this essential difference, Bataille's formlessness can be juxtaposed with the Kantian sublime precisely because it points not to a thing, but to a relation between subject and object that by recognizing the impossibility of an image endowed with form promotes a redefinition, even a violent one, of our relation to the world. The hypothesis of a juxtaposition between the Kantian sublime and Bataille's formlessness is found formulated, among others, in a 2002 article by Cecilia Alemani.

Alemani (2002) reminds us that the Kantian sublime qualifies not an object, but the relationship, the movement, that is established between the subject and the form of the object, which can also be infinite, without limits, and therefore qualify as formless. Thus, the sublime does not define a quality of the object but can only be found in our ideas; it lies in the judging subject. Similarly, the formlessness for Bataille does not concern "the substance of the object, but its accidental form" (2002, p.5); that is, the object is only an occasion that allows the subject to make a movement, in this case of lowering, renouncing the need to give a form, that is, a representation, to things.

In addition to this element that unites the sublime and the formlessness, looking at the effect on the subject reveals a further similarity. The sublime causes initial displeasure, the senses are humbled, the subject feels inadequate and infinitely small in the face of natural power, the imagination fails in its attempt to give form to the formlessness. On the other hand, from the initial displeasure (or counterpurposiveness) emerges a feeling of pleasure at one's moral destination, the subject can grasp the ideas of reason, and the imagination, while not concluding its activity in an image, assumes an even more relevant function in redefining the subject. Similarly, Bataille's formlessness responds to a dual movement, of attraction and repulsion, of pleasure and displeasure.

Like Kant, Bataille invites us to go beyond form, to grasp what lies beyond the definition of the object, to overcome the initial displeasure of formlessness. The outcome, however, is opposite to the Kantian one. In contrast to "surrealist idealism," the deconstruction of form is for Bataille a departure from ideals, beauty or morality, and a return to baseness, to matter in its substantiality. The formlessness is a liberation of matter in its baseness, which escapes all intellectualism and any categorizable concept.

Even in this radical difference, however, there is a point of contact between Kant and Bataille. The sublime is for Kant the place

where the free play and regularity of the understanding give way to the conflict between imagination and reason, a conflict that is not resolved but gives rise to a fundamental outcome for the subject, that is, a way is opened between the sensible and the supersensible. In this conflict, it is possible to discern, as has been done by post-Kantian aesthetics, an anticipation of the dialectical movement. At the opposite pole of sublime elevation, in the baseness of matter, Bataille lets us glimpse the same dialectical movement, a dialectical tension always in motion and never resolved. The downgrading of the formless wants to subvert the thesis that everything must have its form and tends toward dialectical materialism. As Alemani points out, for Bataille, the formless allows for the mediation of “rationality and the symbolic; against the pairing of *logos* and *nomos*, against the association of law and thought” (2002, p.16). The result is a downward dragging conflict that strongly stimulates the subject with a continuous movement that does not end. Just as the Kantian sublime elevates the subject above its sensible nature, the formlessness for Bataille liberates matter, in its baseness, from all ideality: to absolute rationality Bataille opposes the never-satisfied dialectical tension in constant motion, that same tension that is realized between imagination and reason.

The formless is thus that which eludes rational understanding, which eludes intellectual regularity and is bewildering to our vision. Faced with the impossibility of recognizing a form, the result is an “astonishing vision” that is outside the “academic view” of things (Alemani 2002, p. 14).

### 3. Krauss: *Representing the Formless*

However, our starting question still remains open: is it possible to represent the formlessness? Is it possible to speak of the sublime in art?

It emerges from Bataille’s position that the task of the formlessness is to reorient our vision by producing new forms, no longer ideal and abstract, but real and low, opposed to rational understanding and resistant to any form of unity. In Denis Hollier’s writing on Bataille, *La Prise de la Concorde* (1974), the anti-authoritarian character of the formlessness emerges, in its opposition to systematic and formalist theories. The rejection of the “mathematical redingote” takes on the movement of desublimation and downgrading, also leading to the rejection of metaphor and the symbolic, in favor of “base materialism” and horizontality as animal space (vs.

vertical position as typical of civilized man). Formlessness, however, as Hollier points out, denotes only a process, not a thing; it refers to otherness as opposed to form and does not substantialize into a matter, rather defining it as that which escapes form.

In this movement, in which as we have said it is possible to discern an analogy with the Kantian sublime, Hollier denies any dialectical character. According to Hollier, Bataille's formlessness contrasts the form of things with their negation, and the conflict that is generated finds no solution. Therefore, it would not be possible to bring formlessness back to the ternary logic of Hegel's dialectic, and the opposition between system, form, mathematization, on the one hand, and formlessness, declassification, and matter on the other remains an unresolvable conflict. Hollier on the other hand also justifies his position with a philosophical-historical observation: Bataille will attend Kojève's course on the *Phenomenology of Spirit* in the years following *Documents*.

The dialectical aspect of the formless, however, is fundamental and problematic and returns to the center of discussion in Bataille's revival of the formless in the 1990s debate between Rosalind Krauss and Georges Didi-Huberman.

Rosalind Krauss, in the years leading up to her detachment from Clement Greenberg and *Artforum*, published two articles devoted to Surrealist art that reconsidered Bataille's formlessness. In 1983, she published an essay ("No more play") devoted to some of Alberto Giacometti's sculptures, and in 1985 she published an essay ("Corpus delicti") on Surrealist photography. In both articles Krauss' attempt is to connect the formlessness to artistic works, while acknowledging its nature as a mere process. Two aspects are present in Rosalind Krauss's reading, which would remain constant until the publication, with Yve-Alain Bois, of the catalog *Formless. A User's Guide*. First, Krauss emphasizes anti-formalism: that is, formlessness does not designate the mode of presentation of a work of art, but an operation aimed at downgrading it. The second aspect, partly in contrast to the first, is the idea that formlessness is an aggression against form, as *Gestalt* (Bois-Krauss 1997). To these two aspects I would add a third, less explicit one, namely the appearance, alongside formlessness as downgrading, of the term "desublimation." This is a term borrowed from psychoanalysis and, beyond its complexity, which I cannot turn to, it detects the appurtenance, even oppositional, with the sublime. If the sublime indicates an elevation to the idea, desublimation indicates a lowering to matter.

These aspects will be taken up in Georges Didi-Huberman's paper devoted to Bataille's *Formless* and published in 1995. With this

writing Krauss and Bois come into conflict and precisely publish, in 1997, the voluminous exhibition catalog devoted to *Formless*. The reason for the conflict lies in the importance Didi-Huberman attaches to the image, or rather to the work of art. For Didi-Huberman the formlessness is certainly a process of altering the object, but it is not a total destruction, rather the object survives in the form of a trace. For Didi-Huberman, the relationship between form and formlessness can be traced back to a dialectical relationship, since “an image cannot be pure negativity. It can disprove, of course, [...] but it must also, in some way maintain the trace of what it disproves, so that its negativity does precisely work. An image, for Bataille, [...] must therefore be dialectical” (Didi-Huberman 1995).

For Krauss and Bois, however, the formless is irreducible to form, is totally other, and is an exercise in deconstructing form. This theoretical position prompts Krauss and Bois to open the formless to contemporary art. Starting with Bataille’s definition of formlessness, they identify four categories (base materialism, horizontality, pulse, and entropy) under which they place a dictionary of entries. This operation will in turn lead Didi-Huberman to criticize Krauss and Bois for giving substance to formlessness, that is, for giving it forms in art criticism. According to Krauss and Bois, the entries would instead like to constitute a manual for the use of formlessness, precisely by recognizing its operative character. The belief is that contemporary art, even unknowingly, uses formlessness to deconstruct the forms of modernism, and the reference will be, especially for Krauss, to Pollock’s art. I wonder then if it is possible to perform the same operation for the analogous and opposite of the formlessness, namely the sublime. Is it possible to give a user’s manual for the sublime with contemporary art in mind? According to Krauss, it would seem so.

#### 4. *Didi-Huberman: Giving Form to the Formless*

What role, then, does form play with respect to the sublime and the formlessness? Is it possible to think of an artistic manifestation that does not reduce these categories to substantiation? For Krauss, the first step in making this comparison possible is to overcome the form/formlessness binary. Instead, formlessness is created by form itself, as an internal logic that produces heterology and acts against itself. It is therefore a matter of attacking and overcoming the modernist claim of formal unity and pure visuality. It is there-



fore a matter of evading form. This same mechanism seems to me to give a chance to the sublime in art as well.

Beginning with her analysis of Pollock's drip paintings, however, Krauss is against the sublimating force of Greenberg's modernism, which would have projected the painting to pure verticality, to elevation. Verticality, for Krauss, is functional to the realization of form, it leads to access to a kind of vision that is sublime, elevating, purifying. This ultimately leads to beauty. Verticality "opens up the possibility of a detached, formal pleasure, which Freud is pleased to call beauty." It is a path of sublimation. In contrast, for Krauss, Pollock's sign wants to bring back to horizontality, wants to lower and desubliminate the perceptual field, accomplishing the task of downgrading the formlessness (Bois-Krauss 1997, p. 28).

But, Didi-Huberman asks, is it really possible to think of anything other than form? Are the sublime, the formlessness, really totally opposed to beauty and form? Or is a dialectical opposition possible that finds a composition in something else, while maintaining the conflict between form and formless? Didi-Huberman's re-interpretation of the formlessness, although it may be seen as more distant from Bataille's letter, nevertheless opens up the possibility of linking the sublime and the formless even more clearly. In his 1995 text devoted precisely to Bataille, Didi-Huberman enhances the theme of "formless resemblance": through the formless what emerges is the need to deconstruct the very principle of resemblance and with that the idealistic tone of images.

In the sublime, our attention shifts from the object, which causes us displeasure, to something else, that is, in Kantian terms, to our moral destination. This is not, however, for Didi-Huberman, a mere opposition. Rather, it is a triadic dialectic. The dialectic indicates the setting in motion of form, the coming and going and the slippage from matter to form, from top to bottom, and vice versa. The conflict is not resolved, it is left open, but it creates a meaning: the sublime turns to a feeling that allows us to grasp humanity's destination.

The dialectic that Didi-Huberman talks about sheds light on the sublime and the formlessness. It is not a conciliatory dialectic, giving rise to a third element. But it constitutes a dynamic that makes manifest something that had been removed, made invisible. And the symptom, of course, is also manifested through pain.

Didi-Huberman writes: one aims for "the symbol," which redefines the human being. Didi-Huberman even thinks of Botticelli's Venus, an example of pure beauty. But what happens if we "open" this image, if we see beyond beauty? Didi-Huberman's concern is

first of all to overcome the closure of the visible as the primary effect of image idealism. The visible is enclosed in the beauty of form and thus limited; the formlessness and the sublime have the task of opening the visible to an elsewhere. Whether it is by a movement of downgrading (formlessness) or elevation (sublime), it is in both cases an operation of opening up the visible that involves a new look at the human.

In a lecture on sublimation, Didi-Huberman more explicitly acknowledges this function of the sublime. Does sublimation elevate to excess or bring us back to the zero degree of things? And what are we to understand as far as what concerns the element in which this operation is embedded? (Didi-Huberman 2012)

The fact that the words sublimation and symptom were chosen by Freud to emphasize, in some way, the dialectical hinge of the ambivalence of every civilization, recalls a certain tradition of thought (between Kant and Goethe, between Heine and Nietzsche) to which Freud owes many of his formulations and, also, his arguments. Freud claimed to keep the word *Sublimierung* away from the physical and metaphysical traditions of Sublimation. But how can we forget that the philosophy of the sublime, in the 18th century (from Edmund Burke to Kant) defines the sublime as an aesthetic emotion that drew its very source in pain? Is the sublime not, as Burke writes, “that pleasure which cannot exist without a relation, and even more so, without a relation to pain?” (Freud 1929, p. 79).

This debate obviously recalls Georges Bataille’s description of formlessness. The same year that Freud published *Civilization and its Discontents*, Bataille ironically flogged the fetishist idealization to which some works of art are subjected, recalling the operation of the formlessness.

However, the formlessness and the sublime seem to be two extreme movements that come to touch each other. Following Didi-Huberman, one can therefore answer that of the sublime and the formlessness we can have an image, provided that we deconstruct the image enclosed in the visible and open it to the invisible, which leads finally to the essence of humanity. Is this operation a mere opposition to beauty? It seems not, if understood in the light of the symptomatic dialectic. Rather, it seems to be an *Aufhebung* that enables a new and deeper conception of image and art.

In conclusion, we can say that, in the light of contemporary debate, it is possible to adhere to the Kantian notion of the sublime, starting from its formless character, while at the same time envisaging its artistic representation. The sublime thus constitutes an extreme case in which, despite its subjective character and the

absence of form, emerges the purely human need to resort to form and representation. This dynamic, which in Kant's theory of the sublime moves from the base sensible to the upper supersensible, could be interpreted as the same dialectical movement that the formlessness indicates in the 20th century. In the end, in both cases, the absence of form allows an openness of the visible to the invisible.

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