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Kant's Theory of the Sublime and the Visual Arts

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Sommario

Preface

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

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artworks of the eighteenth-century, with their depictions of mountains, glaciers, and waterfalls, now strike us as outdated or old-fashioned.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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Robert R. Clewis and Arno Schubbach

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Kant and the Possibility of the Sublime in the Visual Arts

Uygar Abaci*

Abstract
Whether Kant's critical aesthetics accommodates the possibility of art eliciting the sublime is a lively debate in the literature. Those who defend this possibility have generally based their account on Kant's theory of "aesthetic ideas" (Pillow 1994, Wicks 1995, Tomasi 2005, Vandenabeele 2015). I argue that this common strategy fails. I propose an alternative positive account. First, if art is to elicit the Kantian sublime through its form, the viewer is required to adopt a particular mental condition such that they perceive the artwork as sheer magnitude or power, abstracting from that it is a human artifact, what its purpose may be, and what it is supposed to represent. Second, if art is to elicit the Kantian sublime through its content, it can do so in a second-order manner, through the representation not of natural objects which would directly elicit the sublime, but the sublime experience itself (of another subject).

Keywords
Kant, artistic sublime, natural sublime, aesthetic ideas, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*

0. *Introduction*

Kant's theory of the sublime has enjoyed an immense amount of interest in the literature especially in the last three decades, roughly since the first book-length treatments of the topic by Crowther (1989) and Lyotard (1991). One question that has received increasing attention is whether Kant's theory can accommodate the possibility of artworks eliciting the experience of the sublime. This question is naturally motivated by the curious lack of an account of artistic sublimity in Kant's primary aesthetic treatise, the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* [hereafter *Critique*], where Kant presents his theory of the (natural) sublime as well as his theory of (beautiful) art. While some scholars have argued that Kant is indeed justified in not offering an account of artistic sublimity in the *Critique,* because his respective theories of the sublime and art

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significantly problematize the very possibility of a Kantian artistic sublime (Abaci 2008, Brady 2012, 2013), others have offered various ways in which a case for a Kantian artistic sublime can be made (Clewis 2010, Vandenabeele 2015, Guyer 2015, Küplen 2015, Hall 2020, Kvokačka 2021).

In this paper, I intend to engage with this ongoing discussion, and offer a nuanced position which both recognizes the challenge that specific textual and philosophical problems pose for a genuinely Kantian artistic sublime and delineates a conceptual room, albeit constrained, for the latter. I will first detail what I take to be the most pressing problems with the very idea of a Kantian artistic sublime, and map the various possible interpretive options in light of these problems. I will then discuss a positive account of Kantian artistic sublimity, which has gained the most traction in the literature over the last few decades, and argue that this account is implausible and even incoherent. I will then conclude by laying out two alternative positive propositions as to how and under what restrictive conditions artworks can elicit Kantian sublime.

1. *What the question of a Kantian artistic sublime is*

Before any discussion of the possibility of a Kantian artistic sublime, it is crucial to clarify the notion of the sublime that is relevant to our aesthetic-theoretical purposes here. The "Analytic of the Sublime" in the *Critique* is concerned with how certain natural objects and phenomena can elicit an aesthetic experience (and/or judgment) of the sublime. This is distinct from the question of what *things* are to be appropriately called sublime. The latter is what Kant seems to be more interested in in his precritical essay, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* [hereafter *Observations*], though with a view to offering more of an empirical inventory of what particulars are sublime (as opposed to beautiful, ugly, or comical) and less of a theoretical analysis of the predicate "sublime". The *Observations* offers a very long and diverse list of sublime things, including natural objects (2:208), artworks and artifacts (2:210, 211, 255), virtues like friendship and truthfulness but also vices and moral failings like wrath (2:212, 215), not to mention brown and black eyes, older age (2:213), the night (2:209), a long duration (2:210), understanding and boldness (2:211), male sex (2:228), and so on.[1]

[1] I provide author-date citations for all authors except Kant. Kant's works are cited according to the Akademie edition, except for the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which is cited according to the standard A/B pagination. I adopt the following abbreviations: *CPR=Cri-*

Offering such an inventory of sublime things does not at all fit with Kant's theoretical ambitions in the *Critique*, even though one can find remnants of the *Observations* in the *Critique*, where Kant still occasionally uses the term "sublime" in a loose manner as a predicate of things (e.g., General Remark, 5:272), including artworks (e.g., §49, 5:316). This leads some to the hasty conclusion that Kant's position in the *Critique* allows artistic sublimity. However, in light of the clarification above, Kant's calling an object sublime does not warrant that he holds that that object can elicit the experience of the sublime, the phenomenology of which he lays out in the Analytic. And it is the latter that I am concerned with when I raise the question of the possibility of a Kantian artistic sublime: can an artwork elicit the experience of the sublime as it is described in the Analytic?

Not only does the *Critique* not offer, at least explicitly and unambiguously, a theory of how art can elicit the experience of the sublime even, say, in its detailed discussion of art, but it also does, at times, quite explicitly, exclude the possibility of art evoking *pure* and *aesthetic* judgments of sublimity. In a somewhat perplexing move, right after citing the Egyptian Pyramids and St Peter's in Rome as examples of objects occasioning the feeling of sublimity in their viewers, Kant seems to radically qualify the theoretical significance of his own examples:

> [I]f the aesthetic judgment is to be pure (not mixed of with anything teleological as judgments of reason) and if an example of that is to be given which is fully appropriate for the critique of the aesthetic power of judgment, then the sublime must not be shown in products of art (e.g., buildings, columns, etc.) (*CJ*, §26, 5:252).

Of course, one could argue, along with, for instance, Wicks (1995), Clewis (2010), Guyer (2018), that impure (or "adherent") sublimity also constitutes a genuine case of sublimity, and that Kant's remark about the impurity of artistic sublimity is not really surprising given that he also holds that artistic beauty is impure (and yet genuine) beauty (*CJ*, §16, 5:229; §48, 5:311). However, Kant's remark here points not only to the unavoidable impurity of any possible artistic sublime, but also raises doubt as to the aesthetic relevance of any possible judgment of sublimity that would be evoked by artworks or human artifacts in general, implying that what elicits the sublime experience and/or judgment must be nature for that experience and/or judgment to be an aesthetically relevant one. I will revisit this point later on.

tique of Pure Reason, CPrR=Critique of Practical Reason, CJ=Critique of the Power of Judgement, G=Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, MPölitzL1=Metaphysik Pölitz, Anth=Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View.

At any rate, the difficulty with the notion of a Kantian artistic sublime is not just a matter of an architectonic gap or the lack of an explicit presentation in the *Critique*. In fact, Kant's aesthetic theory presents the notion with significant philosophical problems that seem to make it inherently unfeasible to pursue.

2. *The Problems with the very notion of a Kantian artistic sublime*

Here are some of the most pressing problems for the possibility of a Kantian artistic sublime.

2.1. *The phenomenology of the sublime*

The Analytic of the Sublime presents a very specific phenomenology of the experience of the sublime, wherein the magnitude or power of a (natural) object exceeds the imagination's perceptual limits of comprehension of the object in one unified representation, and this failure of the imagination, negatively, makes vivid the demand of reason for unity, the unconditioned, and infinity, and thus the existence of a human faculty that can actually entertain such ideas that cannot be instantiated or presented by anything in sensible nature. This results in a sort of revelation or self-realization of the subject's rational (cognitive and practical) freedom from nature. This whole experience is felt, by the subject, as a movement between displeasure and pleasure, intimidation and relief.

The question here is whether an artwork can set this kind of phenomenology in motion. Based on Kant's note that the sublime is found in the "formlessness" or "limitlessness" (*CJ*, §23, 5:244) of natural objects (as opposed to the beauty that is found in the form of an object), some, like Brady (2013, p. 123), suggest that art cannot elicit the sublime because artworks have ultimately definite forms and limits in space and time. However, I think that "formlessness" should not be understood literally, as all objects of nature are informed and limited too. Kant's point is rather that the object that stretches the imagination of the subject beyond its maximum capacity of comprehension occasions the feeling of a lack of a unified form and limit. So, the more appropriate worry with regard to the possibility of artworks stretching the imagination beyond its limits of comprehension must concern the magnitude or scale and power. Even if artworks could *represent* the kind of magnitude and power that we find in nature as requisite for the phenomenology of the sublime, they would lack those physical attributes themselves.

2.2. *Nature as the indispensable component of the sublime*

What is revealed by every instance of the sublime experience is human (transcendental or supersensible) freedom from the magnitude or power of (outer) sensible nature. Moreover, the same contrast is also reflected at the level of mental faculties, between reason and the imagination (as the sensible nature in us). It is worth underscoring here that the cognition or awareness of one's own freedom, whether it is theoretical/cognitive or moral/practical, is an important philosophical problem for Kant. Here Kant's account of the sublime offers an intimate way in which we "feel" our freedom, both cognitive and practical. That nature should elicit this feeling is particularly meaningful, as Kant understands freedom as freedom from natural-causal determination and limitation.[2] All of this makes nature not only the appropriate context for the occasioning of the experience of the sublime, but also the indispensable structural component of this very experience itself. Nature is built into the notion of the Kantian sublime.

Both Clewis (2010, p. 167) and Moore (2018, p. 371, n19) argue against the indispensability of nature for the sublime based on Kant's account of "subreption" and claim that what is truly sublime is not any object of nature that might elicit the experience of the sublime but human reason or an idea of reason (*CJ*, §26, 5: 257). Yet what they do not seem to recognize is that the sublimity of human reason is still defined in contradistinction with the limitedness of sensible nature inside and outside us. For what is sublime about human reason is its capacity for ideas of the supersensible and its cognitive and moral autonomy from sensible nature, as opposed to our sensible faculties that are in fact part of nature and thus are subject to its limitations.

There is a broader approach that tends to dismiss both the specific phenomenology of the sublime and the indispensable role of nature by emphasizing the end product of the sublime experience: the revelation of human freedom and/or the rational, transcendental, supersensible aspect of humanity.[3] Accordingly, any experience that involves or leads to such revelation or presentation would be called sublime, and such revelation is not tied to a specific phenomenology or a specific context of objects. This approach obviously opens up conceptual space for artistic sublimity, but it does so at the cost of trivializing the content of the Kantian sublime, in which

[2] *CPR*, A541/B569, A553/B582, A803/B83; *G* 4:446; *CPrR* 5:29, 5:97; *MPölitzL1* 28:257.

[3] Consider, for instance, Lyotard's broad definition of the sublime as the (sensible) "presentation of the unpresentable" (Lyotard 1982).

a specific phenomenology necessarily connects with sensible nature (outside and inside us). It is, however, precisely this phenomenology that makes the experience in question aesthetically relevant, at least, insofar as Kant's aesthetic theory goes. While other objects might lead to such revelations, or to feelings of awe or wonder, Kant would recognize sensible nature as the only sort of thing capable of producing the phenomenology of the sublime.

2.3. *The Purposiveness of Art*

Art is a purposive activity, aiming at pleasing the viewer, according to Kant. As noted earlier, this would make artistic sublime at best impure or "adherent" (*CJ*, §26, 5:252-3). While impure sublime can still be genuine, the problem here is how art, if its purpose is to please, can be "contrapurposive" and displeasing, which is a requisite for the elicitation of the Kantian sublime. Another related worry here is that art, as the embodiment and expression of the artist's intentions and freedom, could not serve the revelation of the viewer's own freedom, which is always a self-reflexive and first-person cognition for Kant. Zuckert (2019, p. 117), I think rightly, points out that the revelation in the sublime is not that of a fact (i.e., that we have a reason or that we are transcendentally free), but "a first-personal sense of what it is to 'inhabit' reason" and be a free agent.[4]

2.4. *Art as Beautiful Representation*

Kant asserts that "art displays its excellence precisely by describing beautifully things that in nature would be ugly or displeasing" (*CJ*, §48, 5:312). So, even if art represents sublime themes or content, i.e., objects that would naturally elicit the sublime without the mediation of art, it must have a beautiful form (*CJ*, §52, 5:326; *Anth*, 7:241). This introduces a clear distinction between the *representation* of the sublime and the *elicitation* of the sublime: the latter does not necessarily follow from the former.

The worry here is not that the artistic sublime would have to be a mixture of beauty and sublimity, something Kant calls "splendid" or "magnificent" in the *Observations* (2:209), but that our aesthetic response to artistic representation even of the sublime content would be to the form or manner of representation and thus

[4] One could also compare this kind of sui generis realization with that of the "fact of reason" (*CPrR*, 5:91-93), which is more of an immediate first-personal awareness of our free and normatively-bound agency than a cognition of an object or a fact.

yield judgments of taste (beauty), and not of sublimity. I admit that Kant's theory of aesthetic ideas complicates this, by suggesting that our response to (representational) art should also take its "content" into account. I will return to this point below, in the context of my discussion of a positive account of a Kantian artistic sublimity.

3. *Interpretive options*

In light of these difficulties and constraints regarding the possibility of a Kantian artistic sublime, a number of interpretive options come to the fore.

i. Art cannot elicit the sublime (of any kind), and it makes sense that Kant does not offer any serious consideration, let alone a full-blown theory, of artistic sublime.

ii. Art can elicit the same kind of sublime as nature, but perhaps not as "purely" (though as genuinely) as nature. In this case, Kant would be guilty of neglecting an important avenue of aesthetic experience in his major treatise on aesthetics. This narrative is both inherently implausible, given Kant's overall architectonic obsessions, and needs to be complemented by a list of solutions to the problems listed above.

iii. Art cannot elicit the kind of sublime laid out in the Analytic, but perhaps a sublime of a different kind. The question is whether our judgment on this different kind of sublime would be a genuinely aesthetic one, say, in the Kantian sense. What we have at hand is the fact that Kant does not offer a theory of a kind of sublime elicitable by art. This means that he either does not at all consider this kind of sublime or does not find it worth theorizing, as opposed to, for instance, artistic beauty. It is then quite possible that Kant does not think that the judgment on this hypothetical artistic sublime would be aesthetic and relevant to his project in the *Critique*. Brady (2013, p. 119), for instance, claims that only the original sense of the sublime, i.e., the kind elicited by nature, is aesthetically relevant.

iv. Since a set of constraints on the possibility of a Kantian artistic sublimity (i.e., both art's purposiveness and its having to represent content beautifully) is rooted in Kant's fairly restrictive conception of art (as representational and aiming to please the subject), one strategy to side-step these constraints would be to resort to a non-Kantian, e.g., post-modern, contemporary, or avant-garde, conception of art, which would allow the artist to displease, discomfort, and even disgust the viewer and thus could

in principle elicit the Kantian sublime. Lyotard (1982, 1984), for instance, argued along these lines when he claimed that some contemporary artworks can elicit the Kantian sublime by "presenting the unpresentable".[5] More recently, Küplen (2015) and Vandenabeele (2015) have also suggested that the Kantian sublime (or some modified version of it) could find a more suitable home in contemporary art.

4. *A Positive Account: Locating the Artistic Sublime in Aesthetic Ideas*

(i) and (ii) are not satisfactory options. While (iii) and (iv) may be valuable approaches from the viewpoint of theories of aesthetics and art in general, they do not live up to the real challenge here, but evade it by modifying either the notion of the sublime or that of art in question. The real challenge for those who defend the possibility of a Kantian artistic sublime is to offer a positive account which is based on, or at least compatible with, Kant's text and can address the problems that have been pointed out above. One attempt at such an account that gained significant traction in the literature (Pillow 1994, Wicks 1995, Tomasi 2005, and Vandenabeele 2015 to some extent) finds room for artistic sublimity in Kant's theory of aesthetic ideas.

Aesthetic ideas are imaginative presentations of artistic genius: they occasion boundless content of thought, express what is not expressible through determinate concepts, and present the supersensible (i.e., rational ideas) through various compositions of sensible elements (imagery, colours, sounds etc.) (*CJ*, §48, 5:313) This presentation of the supersensible is the essence of the Kantian sublime. Accordingly, the argument goes, one and the same artwork that is the product of artistic genius elicits the experience of beauty and the experience of sublimity at once: our response to its form yields a judgment of taste, and our response to its representational content (i.e., its aesthetic ideas) yields a judgment of the sublime.[6] Pillow puts this succinctly: "Within one and the same artifact, the aesthetic idea possesses a sublime interior content recommended

[5] See Zukert (2021) and Kvokačka (2021) for a favorable, and Crowther (1993, ch. 8) for a critical, take on Lyotard's claim.

[6] Vandenabeele (2015) diverges from the Pillow-Wicks account by arguing that the judgment of the sublime does not just respond to the content of the artwork but also how that content is expressed through the form, though this divergence results from Vandenabeele's particular interpretation of the notion of an aesthetic idea as involving the manner as well as the content of artistic representation. See especially Vandenabeele 2015, pp. 37, 38.

to us by its outwardly beautiful form. For this reason, the work of fine art which exhibits ideas demands for its judgment two distinct modes of aesthetic reflection. Both beauty and sublime inhabit the work of art" (1994, p. 456).

5. *Problems with the Positive Account*

Despite taking on the challenge directly, this account has serious problems of its own.

i. First of all, this account leads to the extremely implausible consequence that all (beautiful) art is sublime.

1. Art is beautiful representation (*CJ*, §48, 5:311, 312).
2. Beautiful art is art of genius (*CJ*, §45, 5:307; §48, 5:311).
3. The product of genius employs aesthetic ideas (*CJ*, §49, 5:314), or beauty is the expression of aesthetic ideas (*CJ*, §50, 5:320).
4. All (beautiful) art employs aesthetic ideas. (1, 2, 3)
5. Art elicits sublime through aesthetic ideas (The Pillow-Wicks thesis).
6. All (beautiful) art elicits sublime.

Perhaps in order to avoid this conclusion, Wicks (1995, p. 192) qualifies his thesis as that only the "best" or "greatest" works of art can elicit beauty and sublime at once, though without explaining why the elicitation of beauty and sublimity at once would amount to better art or why better art has to be better at eliciting both beauty and sublimity. Vandenabeele (2015, p. 45), on the other hand, seems to recognize the inevitability of this conclusion but also admits that this is no longer a Kantian sublime: "unlike Kant, I no longer define the sublime as a feeling that is transcendentally distinct from the beautiful but as an aesthetic category that refers to an *excess* that is perhaps always, somehow, inarticulately present in the feeling of beauty."

ii. One motivation for this account is that a judgment of taste is about the form. Yet this is not entirely true in the case of art. Even though Kant says the beauty of art consists in its form, his theory of aesthetic ideas suggests that the judgment of taste on art is about form, content, and the relation between the two, i.e., "expression" (Guyer 1994).

iii. While the sublime (as laid out in the Analytic) involves the failure of the imagination (in living up to the demands of reason), the production and appreciation of the aesthetic ideas involves an impressive success of the imagination (in creatively presenting what

cannot be given in experience through empirical elements in the work). As Allison (2001, pp. 340-1) notes, if there is any failure in our aesthetic response to art, it belongs to the understanding, which cannot produce concepts that can capture the boundless contents of aesthetic ideas. As I claimed earlier, the failure of the imagination in the sublime is not a contingent element but is emblematic of our rational superiority over (inner and outer) sensible nature. We cannot simply generalize this failure and claim that any exhaustion of a cognitive faculty of ours leads to the same effect.

iv. Not every presentation of the unpresentable (rational ideas) should be called sublime or the concept of sublimity would lose its usefulness for aesthetic theory. What makes the Kantian sublime a useful aesthetic category is its specific phenomenology. Our response to aesthetic ideas involves a very different kind of cognitive process (i.e., the creative power of imagination overwhelming the understanding).

6. *Two Propositions on the Possibility of a Kantian Artistic Sublime*

In light of the above considerations, I propose that if art is to elicit the Kantian sublime, its form would be a better candidate than its content for such capability. This requires a particular mental condition on the part of the viewer: the viewer must perceive the artwork as sheer magnitude or power, by abstracting, at least temporarily, from the fact that it is a human artifact, from what its purpose may be, what it is supposed to represent or signify. Only then can the artifact elicit the experience of the sublime in the way nature itself can do.

There is textual basis for this proposition. For this kind of abstraction is precisely what Kant seems to have in mind when he describes the experience of the spectator gazing at the Egyptian Pyramids from a certain vantage point or when "first entering" St Peter's in Rome, as exemplifying the experience of the natural (and not artistic!) sublime (*CJ*, §26, 5:252). The spectator is captivated and bewildered by these objects qua mere objects of perception, independent of and prior to any possible further reflections on what kinds of things they are. This does not exclude any subsequent aesthetic response to their beauty, but the experience of the sublime elicited by artworks requires a temporary (and perhaps, involuntary) suspension of any judgment of taste.[7]

[7] Tomasi (2005, p. 552) and Guyer (2018, p. 322) both mention the possibility of such abstraction in passing.

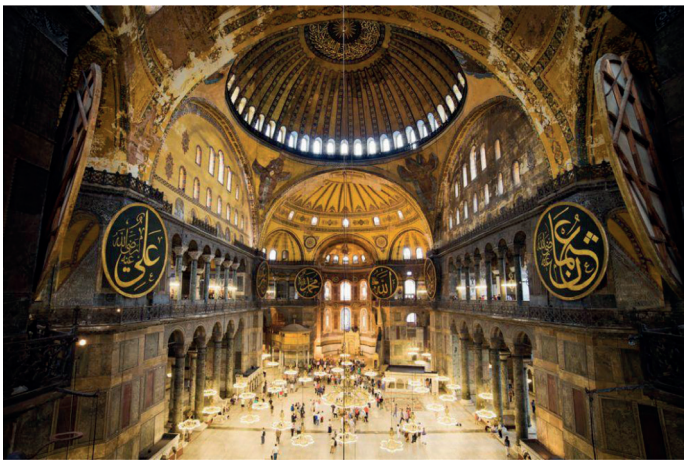
I believe that if my proposition regarding the possibility of the temporary abstraction or bracketing of taste in our response to an artwork is psychologically feasible, then it can successfully address the most pressing conceptual problems for a Kantian artistic sublime, i.e., art as necessarily beautiful representation and art as having the purpose of pleasing. However, there is an important caveat to consider here. One might rightfully ask whether we would really be responding to the artwork *as an artwork* in a state of abstraction from its objective status as an artwork. The worry is that if we could indeed achieve such abstraction and perceive the artwork as, say, a mere magnitude, then we would not be engaging with it qua an artwork anymore. This seems particularly problematic given that Kant emphatically states that "[i]n a product of art one must be aware that it is art, and not nature" (*CJ*, §45, 5:306).

Two points can be raised here against this worry. First, Kant's statement is explicitly and specifically about the beauty of art and the judgment of taste in response to it. For just below the above quote, he notes that "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" (*CJ*, §45, 5:306), and reiterates that "beautiful art must be regarded as nature, although of course one is aware of it as art" (*CJ*, §45, 5:307). This does not mean that the "awareness" condition would have to apply to all kinds of aesthetic engagement with artworks.

Second, while Kant seems to hold that an aesthetic response to an artwork is preceded by a logical/determining judgment that it is an artwork (and this could be facilitated, if not warranted, by the physical setting of presentation), he clearly does not think that this logical judgment (or cognitive awareness) should be the basis of the aesthetic response. On the contrary, the response is aesthetic precisely when it is not determined by the concept of art or that of what the artist aims to do, though Kant also suggests that the latter is important insofar as the "perfection" of art lies in the degree to which the artist accomplishes their intentions (*CJ*, §48, 5:311). More importantly, the mindset that I propose would make it possible for art to elicit the sublime does not entail a genuine or pretended lack of awareness of the fact that the object in question is an artwork, but a temporary abstraction from it as forced by a state of bewilderment and awe such that the subject perceives it as sheer magnitude or power.

Obviously, while grandeur is not a conceptual necessity for this proposition to apply, this kind of effect is much more likely to be caused by large-scale non-representational works in architec-

ture (e.g., *Hagia Sophia*, Istanbul), sculpture (e.g., Richard Serra's *Inside Out*), land or earth art (e.g., Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*). It would be particularly difficult to attain this effect in painting.



Hagia Sophia (537 AD)

Inside Out, 2013-14

Spiral Jetty, 1970

There is, however, one possibility that is worth considering with respect to representative visual arts like painting. As opposed to Pillow's claim that sublime (representational) art is not constrained by sublime themes, I hold that if art is to elicit the Kantian sublime through its content, it must depict sublime themes. This restriction on the content blocks the problematic conclusion that every (beautiful) artwork is sublime, which, as we saw earlier, the Wicks-Pillow thesis cannot avoid. However, as many have rightly noted (Abaci 2008, p. 247; Clewis 2010, p. 169; Kuplen 2015, pp. 129-130; Vandenabeele 2015, p. 41), sublime representational content is not a sufficient condition of eliciting the sublime experience.

Now, I propose that if art is to elicit the Kantian sublime through its content, it is more likely that it can do so in a second-order manner, through representing not sublime content (natural objects or phenomena such as mountains, vast landscapes, storms, which would directly elicit the sublime) but the sublime experience itself (of another subject). And this is what romantic painters of the sublime like Caspar David Friedrich and Johan Christian Dahl seem to have tried to achieve when they have portrayed human beings' encounters with the sublimity of nature. Especially notable examples would be *Wanderer above the Sea Fog* (1818), *Monk by the Sea* (1810), *Woman before the Rising Sun* (1818), *Moon Rising over the Sea* (1822), *Sunset* (1830-1835), *Two Men Contemplating the Moon* (1830-1835) by Friedrich, and *Two Men Before a Waterfall at Sunset* (1823) *and An Eruption of Vesuvius* (1824) by Dahl.

To be sure, these paintings can be said to represent first-order sublime themes. For, first, the viewer still sees the sublime natural landscape. Second, the viewer is directly shown the human-nature encounter. However, the setting is also configured to represent what might be called a second-order sublime: we, as viewers, are located behind a subject or multiple subjects, gazing at a scene that would elicit the sublime experience in us if we were in their place. So, we are invited to have a perceptual empathy or identification with the depicted subject(s), and to imaginatively reconstruct what they would be perceiving and how they would be responding to it.

Monk by the Sea (1808-1810)

Sunset (1830-1835)

Two Men Before Waterfall at Sunset (1823)

An Eruption of Vesuvius (1824)

There is one important advantage of this kind of second-order representation of the sublime over the first-order representation of the sublime in terms of the possibility of eliciting the Kantian sublime: the former gives more freedom to the viewer as the subject of aesthetic experience. As I noted in section 2 above, the real worry

regarding the purposiveness of art is not that it makes any possible artistic sublimity impure, but that art, as the expression of the artist's intentions and freedom, might not serve the revelation of the viewer's own freedom. The kind of imaginative reconstruction that is evoked by paintings that offer a second-order representation of the sublime is relatively free from the painter's instructions. With the use of the rear-view image of the subject(s) in the painting, we are transferred or plugged, as it were, into the scene and encouraged to imagine the real perceptual effect that the sublime scene would have upon us. In a way, the two-dimensional, spatially-limited artistic medium removes itself and leaves the viewer confronting the sublimity of nature.

7. *Conclusion*

In this paper, I argued that the possibility of a Kantian artistic sublime comes with inherent conceptual difficulties, most of which stem from Kant's original constructions of the concepts of the sublime and art in the *Critique*. I articulated these difficulties and mapped the interpretive options they leave open. I then demonstrated that the most vocal positive account in the literature, which takes on the challenge of finding room for a Kantian artistic sublime in Kant's text, is unviable, at least, without radical modifications of Kant's concepts of the sublime and of art, respectively. I concluded with two alternative propositions, one locating the Kantian sublime in the form, the other locating it in the representational content of art.

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Can Painting Evoke the Kantian Sublime?

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Abstract

Can painting evoke an experience of the sublime, understood in terms adopted by Kant in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*? I will present three considerations that imply that painting cannot evoke the Kantian sublime. I then indicate some problems with each consideration. In the process, I explain how some paintings might evoke an experience of the sublime, even when painting is understood in terms of an eighteenth-century European context and conception of painting. In order to illustrate the phenomenology of sublime responses to paintings, I conclude with two examples. I thereby aim to show the real possibility of the Kantian sublime in response to painting.

Keywords

Artistic sublime, natural sublime, Immanuel Kant, painting, beauty

Introduction

In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant does not develop an account of the artistic sublime. To be sure, at the start of his discussion (§23), he offers the following suggestive claim: "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 5:245).[1] The "first only" suggests that he would (or

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[1] References to Kant's writings are from the works by Immanuel Kant published in the Academy Edition (Akademie-Ausgabe=AA), *Kant's gesammelte Schriften* (1900–), edited by the Royal Prussian, subsequently German, then Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences, in 29 volumes, now published by Walter de Gruyter. Citations are given, in parenthesis, by volume: page number. Translations of Kant's writings are taken from The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant (Cambridge University Press, 1992–). The "Analytic of the Sublime" from the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* and excerpts from the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (both from the Cambridge Edition) are also found in Clewis 2019. The following abbreviations are used (Akademie-Ausgabe volume listed in parenthesis):

Anth = Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht (AA 07).
KpV = Kritik der praktischen Vernunft (AA 05).
KU = Kritik der Urteilskraft (AA 05).

could) consider the sublime "in art." But Kant does not provide such an account.

In light of the absence of a Kantian account (among other reasons), it has been argued that such an account would be very problematic. Given Kant's terms and presuppositions, scholars have sometimes found it difficult to see how art could evoke the experience of the sublime.[2]

Let us strengthen the claim to the bolder thesis that it is not possible for art to evoke an experience of the sublime: "Deny." If, for present purposes, we restrict the concept of "art" to painting, the thesis can be expressed as follows:

"Deny: Aesthetic engagements with painting cannot elicit an experience of the sublime".

I will argue that Kant is not committed to Deny and that his apparent dismissal (if any) of the sublimity in painting would not be justified, even on his own terms. To do that, I will present several considerations seemingly in favor of Deny and then criticize or problematize them. In the process, and by providing two concrete examples, I will indicate how the sublime can be elicited by painting.[3]

Given the theme of this special issue, I limit my discussion to the visual arts and painting and do not examine poetry or architecture. But since it offers some initial support to my position, it is worth observing that in poetry and architecture it seems at least prima facie evident that the sublime can be elicited (Guyer 2018; Budick 2010). Kant suggests the possibility of artistic sublimity as early as the first section of the *Observations* (1764). He adduces the poetry of Milton and Haller, and the pyramids of Giza and St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, as eliciting sublime responses, even if in the case of St. Peter's the response is somehow combined with beauty (GSE 2:208). "St. Peter's in Rome is magnificent. Since on its frame, which is grand and simple, beauty, e.g., gold, mosaics,

V-Anth/Collins = Anthropologie 1772/73 Collins (AA 25).
V-Anth/Mron = Anthropologie 1784/85 Mrongovius (AA 25).
V-Anth/Parow = Anthropologie 1772/73 Parow (AA 25).

[2] For instance, Abaci 2008 and 2010. Yet, consonant with the present paper, Guyer (2018) argues for the possibility of the sublime in art generally and in poetry in particular.

[3] Abaci (2010, p. 170) asks for a "convincing explanation of the absence of an actual account in Kant's text." Part of such an explanation would be that Kant wrote "The Analytic of the Sublime" relatively late and did so in haste. Moreover, as can be seen from the relative brevity of his treatment of art (§§43-53) and of adherent beauty (§16, §17), Kant's aim was primarily to analyze the conditions of possibility of a judgment of taste conceived as making a universally valid claim. Unlike contemporaries such as Henry Home (Lord Kames), Kant was uninterested in developing or applying his theory of aesthetic judgment to the arts, criticism, or theories of genre.

etc., are spread in such a way that it is still the sentiments of the sublime which has the most effect, the object is called magnificent" (GSE 2:210). So it is evident that at one point Kant thought that it was conceptually possible to experience with great "effect" the "sentiments of the sublime" in response to a work of architecture which has beauty "spread" out over its frame, leading to an experience of what was there called the magnificent sublime, one of three forms of sublimity identified in that treatise (alongside the terrifying and the noble).

In any case, if my position is mistaken and Kant is ultimately committed to Deny, it would amount to a rejection of his earlier views about artistic sublimity. Such a change of mind is not impossible, but if it did occur, it would be remarkable, and in principle we should be able to explain why it occurred. Indeed, as Guyer writes, commenting on Kant's invocation of the poetic depiction of the "kingdom of hell" (presumably by Milton) in his works of both 1764 and 1790 (KU 5:314), "Kant uses the very same example of a poetic trigger of the experience of the sublime, and so it seems natural to assume that later as well as earlier he assumes that this experience can be triggered by art as well as by nature" (2018, p. 308).

Though one must be careful not to reduce this topic to a biographical matter or to ad hominem arguments about Kant's knowledge of the arts and painting, it may be helpful to mention a few painters with whom he had at least some familiarity, most likely through engravings and drawings (or descriptions) since he did not travel beyond the greater vicinity of his city, Königsberg (Clewis 2023). The situation runs parallel to how his knowledge of places around the world cultures and traditions was constituted by his reading of travel reports, journals, and travelogues.

We know, for instance, that Kant admired the theorist and engraver, William Hogarth (GSE 2:214). More significantly, not only does Kant mention St. Peter's in Rome, he was aware of the work of Michelangelo, whom he mentions in a note (Reflexion 1510; AA 15:826) as well as in lectures.[4] According to an anthropology lecture, Kant admired Michelangelo's work, claiming that the "best recent painters" in Italy, "such as Raphael and Michelangelo, display a truly high taste in their painting" (V-Anth/Parow 25:399). Likewise, a lecture transcription from 1784/85 states: "Genius gives new rules. Thus Michelangelo was a genius, as he built St. Peter's

[4] E.g., see the editorial note (at AA 25:1311) on a travel report as a possible textual source of Kant's knowledge of Michelangelo. Kant's claims about the Egyptian pyramids, Kant himself states, are based on descriptions by Hasselquist (GSE 2:210) and Savary (KU 5:252).

Church in Rome according to a completely new invention, which later became a model for all times" (V-Anth/Mron 25:1311).

According to *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798), a compendium based on his set of notes for the anthropology course he had given since the 1772/73 winter semester, Kant views Leonardo da Vinci as a "vast" genius, that is, a genius in many fields (Anth 7:224). (Vastness and genius are two concepts that are associated with the sublime; this is not to say that Kant is here giving an argument for artistic sublimity, but the linking is nonetheless suggestive.) Likewise, according to a 1784/85 transcription of his anthropology lecture, Kant calls Leonardo a "universal mind" who was "great in all the arts" and familiar "with every science" (V-Anth/Mron 25:1309).

Finally, according to a 1772/73 student transcription, Kant favorably refers to the contemporary painter and theorist Anton Raphael Mengs, paraphrasing his comments on Raphael, Correggio, and Titian. Kant approvingly cites Mengs's view that painting can show an *ideal* reality and that some painters are better at portraying it than others. In citing Mengs, Kant reveals his admiration of Raphael:

> A painter is either a mere imitator, or an original, who paints the original. According to the judgment of Mengs – who is still alive – Raphael painted the idea, since he painted the heavenly forms beyond the human. Correggio was a painter of blessedness, since he awakened a gentle play of sensations in us which experience does not give. Titian comes in last place, since he painted nature. (V-Anth/Collins 25:99; my trans.; cf. V-Anth/Parow 25:325-326)

Revealingly, Titian is said to come in last place because he "painted nature." It is open to interpretation what such a claim might mean, and it is, after all, written by a transcriber recording Kant's invocation of yet another person, Mengs. Still, perhaps it means that Titian comes in last place because he does not "idealize," even if Titian employed his own particular style. If that is right, it would imply that Kant is far from endorsing a straightforward mimetic-imitative principle in painting (i.e., copying nature exactly as it appears). Kant here appears to already endorse some sort of idealization in painting – a notion that would later be developed into the third *Critique*'s notion of aesthetic ideas.

The Sublime: A Reminder

While this is not the place to investigate the various ways in which Kant uses the term "sublime" and the outlines of Kant's ac-

count will likely already be familiar to readers, a few words about his employment of the term will be helpful. According to one of the most basic senses in which he writes of the sublime, it is an aesthetic feeling or experience (e.g., KU 5:257) in which the imagination is expanded but ultimately fails in the face of reason, revealing or giving a feeling of the theoretical or practical powers of reason, to which he refers using the terms "mathematical" and "dynamical" sublime, respectively. In general, pure judgments of the sublime occur when the representation gives rise to an immediate intuition of vastness or power, leading to a sensory experience of the power of reason. This agitated (though overall pleasant) mental movement is based, Kant holds, on the imagination or sensibility's interaction with an idea of the infinite or unconditioned, including but not limited to the ideas of the immensity of nature itself and of one's freedom to act without determination by nature.

In a second, technical sense, the term "sublime" can be applied to, or refer to, the ideas of reason themselves: *they* are sublime. Ideas of reason are conceptual representations (of, e.g., virtue, freedom, the sage, or justice) that cannot be fully or adequately presented in experience or, in more Kantian terminology, cannot be given in or exhibited in intuition and sensibility. This sense is clear in Kant's nominal definition of the sublime. In fact, in "The nominal definition of the sublime" (§25), he himself emphasizes the point as follows: "We call sublime that which is absolutely great [*schlechthin groß*]." A few paragraphs later, he offers this summary: "The above explanation can also be expressed thus: That is sublime in comparison with which everything else is small" (KU 5:250). Kant places the following (somewhat confusing) summary at the end of this section: "Thus we can also add this to the foregoing formulation of the explanation of the sublime: That is sublime which even to be able to think of demonstrates a faculty of the mind that surpasses every measure of the senses"(KU 5:250). Such descriptions cannot refer to any actual object given in experience but can only refer to ideas of reason, which are unlimited (or unconditioned) and surpass the limits of ordinary experience.[5]

Related to this, the term can also refer to the cognitive capacity that produces the ideas, namely the *faculty of reason*: reason, not nature (or phenomenal appearances), is sublime. Abaci, for instance, invokes this sense: "What the sublime reveals is rather our own capacity to think limitlessness in contrast to the limitedness

[5] Moore (2018) astutely discusses the implications of Kant's claim that, strictly speaking, natural objects are not sublime and that only ideas of reason are truly sublime. In my view, Moore's interpretation implies the possibility of artistic sublimity.

of everything sensible" (2008, p. 238). "The revelation of this true absolute greatness in the mind, in turn, gives a feeling of pleasure. Therefore, what is truly sublime is not any sensible object of nature, but our own supersensible capacity" (Abaci 2008, p. 240).

In a closely related sense, the term can also refer to the practical-moral *vocation* or, as Kant sometimes puts it, our *mental disposition*. For instance, Kant writes: "Hence it is the *disposition of the mind* resulting from a certain representation occupying the reflective judgment, but not the object, which is to be called sublime" (KU 5:250; emphasis added).

Finally, throughout his various ethical and aesthetic writings, Kant sometimes uses the term "sublime" as an adjective, in order to indicate what is elevated or raised (*erhebt*) above nature, or at least presupposes elevation over nature. Using this adjectival sense, for instance, Kant calls apathy (*apatheia*), or the *lack* of feeling, sublime (KU 5:272). Though this point is often missed, his calling "apathy" sublime would be absurd if "sublime" is not interpreted as referring, adjectivally, to the raised, but is instead erroneously interpreted in its usual sense, namely, as an intense aesthetic experience that borders on astonishment. For *apatheia* is precisely the *lack* of such intense feeling or affect. But since this sense and the issues it raises do not concern us directly here, I will leave them aside.

Considerations in Favor of Deny

I now present several considerations that might seem to support Deny. As will be seen, I think each consideration is problematic.

1) *The experience of the sublime in painting must be combined with that of beauty, so it can at most be a mixed experience*

As we have already seen in the passage about St. Peter's, this first consideration in favor of Deny contains a grain of truth: Kant writes that the sublime, if presented in art, must be combined with beauty. As I will explain, however, this poses no problem for the possibility of the sublime elicited by art.

Near the beginning of §52 of the third *Critique*, Kant writes:

> Further, the presentation [*Darstellung*] of the sublime, so far as it belongs to beautiful/fine [*schönen*] art, can be united with beauty in a verse tragedy, a didactic poem, an oratorio; and in these combinations beautiful art is all the more artificial [*künstlicher*], although whether it is also more beautiful (since so many different kinds of satisfaction are crisscrossed with each other) can be doubted in some of these cases. (KU 5:325)

Here Kant's discussion of fine arts is concerned with the beautiful and with taste, so it is no surprise that he appeals to a concept of the beautiful. Crucially, however, in making such claims Kant does not deny that an experience of the sublime can be evoked by art (Guyer 2018, p. 319-320). I will return to this passage below.

Another passage on this topic can be found in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. In §67, reflecting his rather restrictive view that art must somehow be tied to the beautiful, Kant states:

> *Beauty* alone belongs to taste; it is true that the *sublime* belongs to aesthetic judgment, but not to taste. However, the *representation* [*Vorstellung*] of the sublime can and should nevertheless be beautiful in itself; otherwise it is coarse, barbaric, and contrary to good taste. (Anth 7:241; original emphasis)

Note that what would make the representation "coarse" and "barbaric" (e.g., repulsive vastness or overwhelming power) is exactly what would *enable* a real object (of nature) with those apparent features, and under the appropriate conditions, to initiate an experience of the sublime. The worry, for Kant, is not that a represented object or event exhibiting these characteristics would violate the conditions of sublimity, but of taste or beauty.

In the next section, §68, which again focuses on taste (entitled "On taste in regard to the sublime") Kant likewise writes (here using *Darstellung*, not *Vorstellung*, to make the similar claim):

> The *sublime* is the counterweight but not the opposite of the beautiful; because the effort and attempt to raise ourselves to a grasp (*apprehensio*) of the object awakens in us a feeling of our own greatness and power; but the representation in thought [*Gedankenvorstellung*] of the sublime by *description* [*Beschreibung*] or presentation [*Darstellung*] can and must always be beautiful. For otherwise the astonishment becomes a *deterrent*, which is very different from *admiration*, a judgment in which we do not grow weary of being astonished. (Anth 7:243)

Again, Kant is concerned that the viewers or spectators continue to pay disinterested, absorbed attention to the artwork and not be repelled by what is represented there, which may otherwise be repugnant to taste. This is likely due to his commitment to the view that artworks must be beautiful (or at least *classified* as fine/beautiful), a point I return to below. Section §68 concludes with a restatement of his view (again in terms of *Darstellung*):

> The sublime is therefore not an object for taste, but rather an object for the feeling of emotion [*Rührung*]; however, the artistic presentation [*Darstellung*] of the sublime in description and dressing [*Beschreibung und Bekleidung*] (in secondary works, *parerga*) can and should be beautiful, since otherwise it is wild, coarse, and repulsive, and, consequently, contrary to taste. (Anth 7:243)

In light of such passages, Kant seems committed to the view that, if there is to be sublimity in painting, it is restricted to those cases where the artwork or painting is also be beautiful (or at least classified as *schön*) and not contrary to taste. Yet while it is true that the sublime in painting must also be presented as beautiful, these passages do not entail that painting cannot incite sublime responses. As Guyer puts it, "Kant's outright statement that in art the sublime must always be accompanied with the beauty of the representation itself likewise provides no argument that a work of art cannot trigger a genuine experience of sublimity" (2018, p. 319).

But now a core problem must be addressed. What it means for "the sublime" to be "accompanied" with the "beauty of the representation itself" is far from clear. For even if Kant does not deny that a combination of beauty and sublimity is impossible (§52), we are still left with the worry (pressed by Abaci) about how an experience of the painting could be *both* beautiful and sublime. I think there are several ways one might address how beauty and sublimity might both be present.

An initial, but ultimately unpersuasive, response is to say that some *aspects* of the painting are felt to be beautiful, while other aspects evoke the experience of the sublime. For instance, one could say that form evokes the experience of beauty, and the represented content or theme evokes the sublime. Some (limited) textual support for this view can be found at the beginning of §52, quoted at the beginning of this section (KU 5:325). Kant does not elaborate, so we must fill out his thoughts for him. In a verse tragedy, it seems that the beauty in the "painterly presentation" on stage is combined or united with the tragedy's content, that is, the plot: the turn of events, the heroes' responses, and so on, evoke feelings of the sublime. In a didactic poem, the beauty of the presentation in poetic form could be said to be combined with sublime content. And finally, in an oratorio, the beauty evoked by the "play of sensations" in the music (rhythm, harmony, melody) could be said to be united with sublime content expressed in the meaningful or inspiring words. Drawing from this, one might generalize that in such cases, the *form* is (or evokes the) beautiful, while the *content* (the represented) elicits the sublime. Perhaps along these lines, Kant writes, "Yet in all beautiful art, what is essential consists in the form, which is purposive for observation and judging" (KU 5:325-326).

This suggestion has two main problems, unfortunately. First, even if it has some textual support, it remains quite limited and implicit. Kant does not elaborate very much and, as mentioned, it

is we who have to flesh out the idea for him. Worse, the suggestion assumes that the perceivers are feeling both beauty and the sublime *at the same time*. Given how different their phenomenologies are, this seems conceptually impossible. One would need to explain how one could have both of these quite distinct experiences simultaneously.

So, it seems better to deny that in response to the work a perceiver simultaneously experiences both the experiences of the beauty and of the sublime. Again, a few options could be pursued at this point. One might view the matter *sequentially*: perceivers have first a feeling of beauty, and then the response of the sublime. They are both felt, just not at the same time. One problem with this move, however, is that it is insufficiently grounded in the text. Also problematic: such a shift between an experience of beauty and one of the sublime seems to be phenomenologically rare (though not impossible).

So if in response to a given work, one feels only the sublime, what are we readers to make of the claim that the work of art, even if it evokes the sublime, must be *presented* (*dargestellt*) in a beautiful way?

I see two remaining options here, the first more compelling than the second. According to the more plausible suggestion, while we are able to recognize or label a painting as beautiful, it does not have to *evoke* the experience of beauty. A work of *schöne Kunst* is not always felt to be, or judged, *schön*. Kant suggests this when he finishes the sentence, already quoted above: "and in these combinations *beautiful art* is all the more artificial, although whether it is also more beautiful (since so many different kinds of satisfaction are crisscrossed with each other) can be doubted in some of these cases" (KU 5:325; emphasis added). In other words, such art forms might be classified as belonging to the "beautiful arts" even if in fact they may not be (felt as) *more beautiful*: they might not elicit more or stronger feelings of beauty.

We can draw an analogy here. Just as some (e.g., early nineteenth-century German Romantic) paintings (say, paintings of the mountain *Watzmann*) that we can *recognize* as typically falling under the genre "sublime" do not necessarily or always evoke the sublime, so also do some paintings that we categorize or label as "beautiful" do not necessarily elicit the experience of beauty. We may recognize the painting as beautiful and as being in conformity with taste. The representation may be palatable, i.e., not repulsive or counterpurposive in appearance, but it need not evoke the feeling or experience of beauty in us every time we perceive it. On this view,

note, the phenomenology in response to the painting remains that of the sublime; it is neither the experience of beauty on its own nor beauty followed by the sublime.

A second, though less persuasive, response is to say that we *abstract* from the fact that we are looking at an artwork, and see it as if it were nature. To be sure, we may, upon reflection or if asked, recognize that it is an artwork. Yet in the act of considering, appreciating, and judging it, we would not take this fact into account. The idea here is that, if one abstracts in this way, it is no longer subject to Kant's condition that works of art must be beautiful, since perceivers are not seeing it *as* a work of art. Textual support for this suggestion might be found in Kant's claims that the (successful) work of fine art looks as if it were nature (KU 5:306-307) and that, in particular, the sublime in art is "always restricted to the conditions of agreement with nature" (KU 5:245), as well as his implication that the sublime in art should not look too "artificial" (KU 5:325). The depicted content might then be able to appear as repulsive, massive-looking, or threatening as *the real object in nature* that, according to the standard Kantian account, can inspire an experience of sublimity.

Perhaps we can have such an experience in response to trompe l'oeil (illusory) paintings. Such deceptive, mimetic paintings, in fact, were already being executed, with various degrees of accuracy, long before Kant's day, from still lifes in ancient Pompeii to Gerard Houckgeest's striking *Church Interior* (c. 1654), a remarkable example which brings to mind Kant's claims about St. Peter's.

For non-illusory and non-trompe l'oeil works, however, such abstraction seems psychologically implausible, even if still conceptually possible. Thus, this solution seems less fruitful than the previous one.

2) *A painting lacks the vastness or magnitude needed in order to evoke the sublime*

A second consideration seeming to support Deny begins with the premise that paintings are too small and limited to be able to evoke the experience of the sublime. With their shapes and sizes determined by artists, paintings – even extremely large ones like Rubens' *The Great Last Judgment* (1614-17) – do not come close to the immensity of nature needed to evoke a genuine experience of the sublime.

An initial problem with this consideration is that, as Abaci (2008, pp. 238, 246) and Guyer (2018, p. 321) have both pointed out, not even the natural wonders that elicit the simplest cases

of pure sublimity are infinite in power or extent. They are not unlimited or formless. They only give an appearance of being that way. An additional problem is that, according to one sense of the term "sublime," the natural object (or nature) is not itself sublime. Kant holds we commit a "subreption" when we give respect to the object (nature) rather than to "the idea of humanity in our subject" (KU 5:257).

Whether what is revealed in the sublime is taken to be an idea of reason, or reason as a capacity, or freedom, or the human moral vocation or disposition, it therefore seems misguided to look for determinate criterial properties or features of the object which give rise to the experience.[6] In other words, one cannot stipulate that objects must be a certain way in order to elicit the aesthetic experience. This point also synchronizes with the general tenor of Kant's aesthetics, which insists that aesthetic judgments are not cognitive or logical. Kant's account seems to allow for many ways to initiate an encounter with the idea or ideas at the core of the sublime experience.

Here a proponent of Deny might counter that the proposed view is too permissive. Could *anything* then elicit the experience? Are there no constraints on the objects at all? To be sure, the perceived qualities of the object, hence the qualities of the object itself (whatever they may be), still *matter*, but the point is that one cannot describe or stipulate beforehand the features of the object that will elicit the experience.[7] There is doubtless something about the object to which the perceiver – in a particular aesthetic engagement with the object – responds when she aesthetically reflects on it. To take the paradigmatic case, the vastness or power of the object (or of the scene or object represented) incites the imagination to expand. It fails to take in the perceived image all at once, so that one feels or "intuits" the power of reason or its ideas. Reason is felt to be greater than the imagination (in the mathematical sublime) or (in the dynamical sublime) sensibility. One feels part of a greater whole, a moral order, a teleology of

[6] For similar arguments using the mental character of the sublime as evidence of the possibility of artistic sublimity, see Kirwan 2004, p. 61, and Dunham 1933, pp. 88-89; also cited by Abaci 2008, p. 250 n7.

[7] I never held, nor wished to give the impression as claiming, that, as Abaci put it (commenting on my 2010 discussion piece), "the sublime is a completely introspective experience elicited and executed by the ideas of reason" (Abaci 2010, p. 171). I also never argued "for the unimportance of the object of perception in the sublime" (Abaci 2010, p. 173). I (still) deny neither the indispensable perceptual-imaginative aspect of the sublime experience (the expansion, yet ultimate failure, of imagination to comprehend a magnitude or power), nor the (pleasing) rational/mental aspects of the experience (cf. Abaci 2010, p. 173).

reason. It would seem that without *some* object, such an experience would not occur. In this sense, the object acts as a proximal cause of the experience of the sublime.

It should be evident that vastness is not a *sufficient* condition of the experience of the sublime, so I will not comment further on it.

Is vastness a necessary condition? Note that an object's perceived vastness is *relative* to a particular subject. What is vast at one distance becomes smaller from farther away. Kant makes this point by invoking Savary's description of perceiving the pyramids of Giza (KU 5:252). Kant implies that adopting the right or appropriate vantage point of the object (whether big or small) is an important, integral aspect of the sublime experience, but he does not imply that a particular, given vastness per se is *necessary*. Indeed, Kant himself indicates that small or medium-sized objects could, in principle, elicit the sublime.[8] "Here one readily sees that nothing can be given in nature, however great it may be judged to be by us, which could not, considered in another relation, be diminished down to the infinitely small; and conversely, there is nothing so small which could not, in comparison with even smaller standards, be amplified for our imagination up to the magnitude of a world" (KU 5:250). So the object's vastness is neither sufficient nor necessary for producing the experience of the sublime.

Before moving to the third and final apparent obstacle to Kantian artistic sublimity, I would like to comment on the potentially confusing term "nature." For if we are to say, for instance, that painting represents *nature*, or that a subject feels superior to nature, it should be pointed out that the meaning of this polysemantic term is not always clear. For one, Kant identifies both a sensible and a supersensible nature (e.g., KpV 5:43). As with many of Kant's terms, the word's meaning is determined by what it is contrasted with – e.g., noumena (the supersensible), reason, morality, and art. The term "nature" can refer to the sum of all "appearances" (sensible nature) as opposed to the thing in itself; to physical, material nature studied by physics or natural philosophy; and, of course, to the natural environment (sometimes called "external nature" in the literature), as in the trees, birds, insects, mountains, storms, or seashells – a sense employed throughout the third *Critique* and even in the second

[8] Abaci seems to agree: "But a relatively small object with great complexity of form can also provide a sufficiently long series of partial representations" to exhaust the imagination's capacity to comprehend them, and thereby elicit the feeling of the sublime (2008, p. 239).

one (on Leibniz's care for an insect, see KpV 5:160). This latter sense contrasts "nature" and "art."

The term "nature" can also refer to one (human) subset of generally "sensible" nature: our drives and inclinations. This sense is taken up by Abaci (2008, p. 246): "In the experience of Kant's sublime, it is rather the universally shared human (rational) superiority over and autonomy from (sensible) nature, and the moral significance of this contrast, that is made vivid to us."[9] It is worth dwelling a moment to reflect on this sense, for, even having read Abaci's response to my 2010 discussion piece, I still do not see why a work of art or artifice cannot reveal or make this contrast vivid, if or when "nature" is understood as referring to human drives and inclinations. At that point (nature as inner drives), the art/nature contrast is no longer concerned with *external* nature: and if we are no longer talking of external nature, the whole point of using the typical nature/art distinction is lost or given up, thereby opening up room for artistic sublimity. In other words, the Deny argument risks committing an equivocation concerning the polysemantic term "nature." Conceptual speaking, the sublime experience is understood in terms of a contrast between reason and *sensible* nature (human drives), then it is asserted that only objects of *external* nature (rather than art) are capable of starting the cognitive process that reveals the superiority of reason over, and independence from, nature.

Now, the leading question of this essay (Can painting evoke the Kantian sublime?) presupposes that there is a distinction between painting (as an artform) and nature. Parsing "nature" as "environment" (external nature), Kant would seem, in his discussion of the fine arts, to distinguish nature from art – thereby conforming to a common use of the word. Yet, if one carefully considers Kant's conception of genius, which is the faculty that produces fine art that is with spirit, the very nature/art distinction is blurred. After all, as many commentators have noted, for Kant, genius is a gift of *nature*. As Kant states in his definition at the beginning of §46, genius is the "inborn productive faculty of the artist" and "talent (natural gift)," that produces artworks that are inspired or endowed with spirit. Kant emphasizes: "Genius is the inborn predisposition of the mind (*ingenium*) through which nature gives the rule to art" (KU 5:307). This means that the products of genius are always in some way products of *nature* (in the subject). If so, as odd as it may seem to state this, it is

[9] Cf. Abaci 2008, p. 248 and 2010, p. 171 for similar uses of the term "sensible nature" in the context of defining the sublime.

(inner) nature that gives rise to artworks that can in turn occasion the feeling of the sublime. Once again, the point of insisting on (external) nature (as a stimulus of the experience of the sublime) in distinction from art seems highly questionable.[10]

3) *Even if painting can evoke the sublime, it can only give rise to an adherent judgment of the sublime*

The third consideration draws from Kant's distinction between pure and adherent aesthetic judgments. Roughly, pure judgments do not incorporate concepts of the object (such as a concept of its purposes or functions) into the judgment, whereas adherent (sometimes called "impure") judgments incorporate them and do not abstract from them. In adherent judgments, concepts of the broader purposes, functions, or aims of the object play a role in the judgment. In the case of an artwork, this includes but is not limited to its role and place in art history, movement, style, period, and artistic intentions (Clewis 2016; 2009; 2008).

The above claim has some bite. However, it requires one to accept a premise that is widely accepted in the scholarship, but which I consider disputable, namely, the claim that aesthetic judgments made in response to art must be adherent. But even if one thinks that aesthetic judgments made in response to art must be adherent, there could still be *genuine* judgments of the sublime – just as much as adherent judgments of beauty are still judgments of beauty in a genuine and authentic sense.

To make use of the free/adherent distinction in discussing the *sublime*, one can extrapolate from what Kant writes about beauty in §16, the only section he devotes explicitly to the topic (he ap-

[10] This blurring of nature and art chips away at a fundamental premise of Abaci's original argument, namely, the (alleged) rigid, stable contrast between reason and nature, presupposed by experiences of the sublime. Abaci: "Kant has nature in mind as one of the fundamental components of an underlying contrast" (Abaci 2008, p. 240). Interestingly, Abaci seems to recognize my point: with Kant's introduction of the notion of genius, he writes, "the distinction between natural and artistic objects that Kant made earlier is somewhat blurred" (Abaci 2008, p. 243). My point is not to claim that the phenomenology of appreciating a work of "genius" (in Kant's sense) is the same as, or even similar to, an experience of the sublime. Nor is my aim to explore or assess the line of argument explored by Wicks (1995), Pillow (2000), and Tomasi (2005) that holds that a work of art (e.g., painting) can occasion a feeling of the sublime (or akin to it) by expressing *aesthetic ideas*. I agree with Abaci on the different roles played by imagination (in the experience of the sublime and appreciation of a work of genius) and of the fundamental differences between aesthetic ideas and ideas of reason. Rather, I am noting that works of art, if inspired by genius, are at the same time works of nature, so that works of art *can* be seen in the broader contexts of Kant's theory of *nature* – thereby blunting the force of Abaci's argument. Recall, too, that the development of culture – including the arts (KU 5:432) – is the ultimate (though not final) end of *nature* (KU 5:431).

plies his ideas to the case of human beauty in the §17). He writes: "There are two kinds of beauty: free beauty (*pulchritudo vaga*) or merely adherent beauty (*pulchritudo adhaerens*). The first presupposes no concept of what the object ought to be; the second does presuppose such a concept and the perfection of the object in accordance with it" (KU 5:229). Kant adds that the adherent or dependent kind adheres to a concept and is thus "conditioned" beauty; it is ascribed to objects that stand under the concept of a particular end. The end can be either natural (as in the case of organisms) or imposed from without, say by an artist. Kant also calls it an "applied judgment of taste" (KU 5:231).

Despite some unclear presentation, Kant seems to hold that the distinction does not mark out two kinds of *beauties*, but two kinds of *judging* or ways of attending to the object. As I read Kant, one could make a pure judgment so long as the apprehender, in making the judgment, abstracts from the concept of the end. As Kant writes, in one of two crucial passages relating to this: "A judgment of taste in regard to an object with a determinate internal end would thus be pure only if the person making the judgment either had no concept of this end *or abstracted from it in his judgment*" (KU 5:231; emphasis added).

If, in other words, there can be *pure*, free judgments of the beauty of art, it would be wrong to claim that for Kant, all judgments about the beauty of art are adherent. Indeed, Kant gives an example of "music without text" when *illustrating* what he means by a pure judgment of beauty: "One can also count as belonging to the same [free] kind what are called in music fantasias (without a theme), indeed all music without a text" (KU 5:229). This passage is strong textual support for the claim that Kant holds that art can give rise to free judgments (of beauty).[11]

The second crucial passage is widely quoted by proponents of the reading that for Kant all judgments of art are adherent, but it does not exactly say what they wish it to say. Kant writes that *if* the object in question is given *as* a work of art, then its being a work

[11] Abaci considers the promising possibility that vast works of architecture might be looked at or perceived as "mere magnitudes" rather than as objects with ends or purposes given by creators or artists (Abaci 2008, p. 240). "I mentioned earlier that Kant may have had in mind there the possibility that vast architectural objects can be perceived by the subject from an appropriate vantage point as mere magnitudes without regard to the fact that they are human artifacts whose forms and magnitudes are determined by certain human ends, so that they can occasion the feeling of the mathematical sublime" (Abaci 2008, p. 245). Yet he does not fully explore or embrace this possibility of free or pure judgments of the sublimity of works of art (calling it "untenable" in Abaci 2010, p. 172); in contrast, see Clewis 2009. Since this point concerns works of architecture, sculpture, and installations more than painting, we can leave it aside here.

of art (its purposes or "perfection" or what it is supposed to be) must be taken into account:

> *But if the object is given as a product of art, and is as such supposed to be declared to be beautiful, then*, since art always presupposes an end in the cause (and its causality), a concept must first be the ground of what the thing is supposed to be, and in the judging of the beauty of art the perfection of the thing will also have to be taken into account (KU 5:311; emphasis added).

The fact that an object, *given* as a product of art, is seen as, or presupposes, an end, can be read as a simple or trivial conceptual relation. This passage is far from saying that all judgments about art must be adherent and take into account the "perfection" of the work of art: one could view the work as if it were nature or a natural object (see also KU 5:306).[12] It is as if proponents of the widespread view wanted the sentence to begin with "since art" (omitting the italicized part). As noted, Kant illustrates what he means by "pure" or free judgment of beauty by way of the example of a musical fantasia. There, we do not see the fantasia *as* a work of art and in light of its presupposed ends and purposes, but delight in the play of sensations created by the rhythm, melody, and harmony. (To give a more contemporary example: massive works of land art, nestled in environmental settings, could be seen by viewers as objects of "nature" and thus need not be perceived as products of art.)

With this conceptual space opened up, these thoughts can be applied to the sublime. First consider adherent sublimity. At least implicitly, Kant indicates the possibility of *adherent* judgments of the sublime when he chooses, for purposes of presentation or exposition, *not* to discuss them.[13] In presenting his case, he will draw, Kant states, from examples of *pure* judgments of sublimity (Clewis 2009, p. 104). Nevertheless, this does not mean that he denies adherent judgments of the sublime or holds that they are impossible. In the "General Remark on the Exposition of Aesthetic Reflective Judgments," he comments on his presentation on the sublime as follows:

[12] There are several ways one might understand the concept of perfection here. For instance, it could refer to how well the work realizes the aims given to it by the artist or artists – the concept they had in mind when they produced the work. Or, perfection could be understood in a more general sense that is not limited to the views or intentions of the artist, but has to do with the uses or functions made of the object by anyone.

[13] Thus, even if Abaci were right that one of the "general features" of Kant's conception of art is "the intentionality of artistic production and the conscious appreciation of the product's objective purposiveness by its audience" (Abaci 2008, p. 241), there could still be room for partly teleological or *adherent* judgments of the sublime in response to art.

> Here one must attend above all to what was already pointed out above, that in the transcendental aesthetic of the power of judgment it is strictly pure aesthetic judgments that are at issue, *consequently the examples must not be drawn from those beautiful or sublime objects of nature that presuppose the concept of an end*; for in that case it would be either teleological or grounded in mere sensations of an object (gratification or pain), and thus in the first case would not be an aesthetic purposiveness and in the second case not a merely formal purposiveness. (KU 5:269-270; emphasis added)

Thus, Kant reasons, his examples will be of (e.g.) the starry sky as a broad, all-embracing vault (rather than worlds inhabited by rational beings, that is, as a place hospitable to life). But this is similar to how he first presented his theory of judgments of beauty by presenting the pure case, before then going on to introduce and describe the notion of adherent beauty (and, later, to present his thoughts on aesthetic ideas, beauty as a symbol of morality, and genius). As Guyer puts it, Kant "does not say that only the natural sublime is appropriate *tout court*, that only it is genuine, but rather that it is most appropriate *for the critique*, i.e., for the analysis of the experience" (2018, pp. 318-319; original emphasis; see also Clewis 2010, p. 168). In other words, since Kant aims to provide a transcendental analysis of a kind of *aesthetic* judgment that is taken to be normative, he starts with the pure form or mode of the aesthetic judgment in question. Thus, he claims, if one is to offer examples of pure, free judgments of the sublime, one should adduce instances of the ocean as it appears to us, not in terms of its functions in the ecosystem and water cycle, or in terms of its purposes for humans (separating land masses, facilitating sea-faring). This point underlies Kant's oft misunderstood, conditional claim (appearing a few pages earlier):

> rather I only note that *if* the aesthetic judgment is to be pure (not mixed up with anything teleological as judgments of reason) and *if* an example of that is to be given which is fully appropriate for the critique of the aesthetic power of judgment, *then* the sublime must not be shown in products of art (e.g., buildings, columns, etc.) where a human end determines the form as well as the magnitude (KU 5:252; emphasis added).

His concern is to give an example that is "fully appropriate" for the critique of the *aesthetic* power of judgment. Thus, he later claims that one must think of the experience of the sublime, if pure, in terms of "immediate intuition" (KU 5:270), or in terms of what strikes the perceiver immediately. In that case, one considers the ocean merely as the poets do, "in accordance with what its appearance shows" (KU 5:270). But that does not mean that one could not also have judgments that are partly teleological and

partly aesthetic. Examples of the mixed (adherent) kind are to *some* extent appropriate for the critique of the aesthetic power of judgment, but, given their partly teleological nature, they are not *fully* appropriate.

Although this raises issues that go beyond the scope of this paper, I doubt that, even on Kant's terms, a thing like an ocean or a ravine, in itself, would count as an "external nonpurposive object," a term used by Abaci (2008, p. 248) in defining the sublime. In §16, for instance, Kant considers horses as objects of *adherent* judgments of beauty, and thus as objects that are seen or judged as having purposes, making for a partly teleological and partly aesthetic judgment. Even such (external) objects as oceans (waterways) or horses can be seen, in some instances, or from some vantage points, as purposive or teleological. After all, Kant devotes the second part of the third *Critique* to an analysis of precisely such kinds of judgments. As Kant's claims in the "Analytic of the Sublime" show, an ocean is not, by itself or per se, either purposive or not – it depends on how we see it or what we do with it. We could see it as the poets do, or not. For similar reasons, an artwork may be a purposive object, but it need not always be *seen* or judged that way.

How, then, might these thoughts be applied to painting? Following the widespread (though dubitable) interpretation that art can give rise only to adherent judgments, a first thought might be that while adherent judgments of the sublime in painting may be possible, free (pure) judgments are not.[14] If so, any judgments of the sublime in painting must be adherent, on the grounds that one has a concept of the object (qua painting) in mind, and moreover, must try to understand what the painter was trying to achieve in the painting, the purposes, shape, color, and magnitude of which have been determined by the painter.

As can be seen from the foregoing, however, I adopt a non-standard view of the pure/adherent distinction in painting and art. I do not think that such judgments *must* be adherent – even if I agree that, as a matter of human psychology, in reality most of them would be adherent (whether or not this is the case would remain an empirical matter) (see Clewis 2008; 2009; 2016).

When we make an adherent judgment in response to a painting, we not only recognize it as a painting, we see in terms of concepts

[14] Abaci (2008, p. 247), for instance, holds that art could at most lead to impure, adherent judgments. "Kant thinks that the fact that the form of the object has been purposively determined by a human end has to be taken into account in our aesthetic appreciation of the work of art (§48, 5:311)." However, in other parts of his paper, Abaci, more suggestively, grants (based on §45, KU 5:306-307) that perceivers look at the works as if it were nature, without regard for the intentions imposed by the artist.

such as the artist's aims, or the painting's genre, movement or style, or place in art history, as well as concepts associated with the represented content (if any). Such incorporation of conceptual content goes far beyond just recognizing or labeling it as a painting. (Recall, on Kant's view, one can recognize something *as* a flower and still make a *pure* judgment of its beauty).

As noted, Kant at one point claims that we can *abstract* from the purposes of the object when judging. In the case of painting, such abstraction from teleological concepts would mean, for instance, that the perceiver can delight in the play of shapes or forms, or the painting's composition, without taking into account its genre or concepts associated with the represented content. Perhaps one can say that one sees it *as if* it were a natural object that is (in the act of judging) without determinate purposes.

So, in the case of the sublime response to painting typical of Kant's era, what might a *pure* judgment look like? It would mean that one feels an expanse of imagination before a painting that, e.g., represents the starry skies or the ocean as a seemingly limitless expanse, but that one does so without attending to concepts such as artistic intentions, the work's role in art history, its style, movement, or similar artistic and historical concepts. It would involve looking at the painting as if it were a (pleasing) intuition or image of nature, just as one can look at the sky as a mere vault, without thinking of the meanings or purposes of each light source. One would see it "as the poets do," not in terms of ends and purposes.[15] Rare as this psychological act might be, nothing in Kant's writings suggests that it is conceptually incoherent. It may be that, as Küplen (2015) argues, an experience of artistic sublimity is an uncommon occurrence. But this does not mean that it is impossible.

Of course, following the widespread (though questionable) interpretation, and perhaps in part because of the rarity of the psychological act of judging art in this non-conceptually determined way, one might not wish to accept the claim that aesthetic

[15] Note, these concepts are not identical to *the ideas of reason* that are revealed by the sublime experience or judged to be sublime. Abaci seems to have misunderstood my view of impure (adherent) judgments, thinking that I meant that the fact that ideas are involved necessarily renders all judgments of the sublime adherent. "Besides, if Clewis is right, then all cases of the sublime must be deemed impure because the involvement of ideas of reason is a definitive feature of the Kantian sublime" (Abaci 2010, p. 171). Incidentally, *that* view was once entertained by Guyer 2005:160-161; for previous discussion, see Clewis 2009, pp. 105-106. Abaci (2010) then goes on to explore precisely what I had had in mind: an adherent judgment based on the conception of the purposes of the object. It was for that reason that I drew the parallel with adherent beauty: "Recall that impure beauty for Kant is a kind of beauty in which the judging subject incorporates a notion of the end of the object into the judgment" (Clewis 2010, p. 168). In Clewis 2009, I had clarified that I was referring to the object's ends or teleological concepts.

judgments of painting can be pure and free. One might insist that they can only be adherent, and thus accept only the weaker thesis: while there may not be *pure*, free judgments of the sublime in response to art and painting, there can be adherent judgments. That would be understandable, though it would still be incorrect to deny the conceptual possibility of free judging of the sublimity of art.

In any case, there is good reason to think there can be adherent judgments of sublimity. And as noted, adherent judgments of the sublime are still genuine judgments of the sublime.

Two Examples

Before concluding, I now shift from the more scholarly register to the more personal. To give substance to what I have been arguing (and to partly "address" the problems Abaci raises),[16] I offer two imagined but concrete cases that I hope resonate with the reader. I wish thereby to show how painting might evoke experiences of the sublime. The following descriptions are based on my own experiences, and while I do not expect or demand anyone else to have had similar one – it is not normative in that sense – I think it is *possible* for them to do so, and I invite them to see if they have had, or could have, similar responses. (To clarify again, I share the following invented reflections as descriptions of experiences of the sublime, not as descriptions of works of art as exhibiting aesthetic ideas or works of "genius" in Kant's sense.)

My first example takes up and extends Kant's praise of St. Peter's and Michelangelo.

Perhaps prepared by a walk through St. Peter's basilica, eliciting in me an initial feeling of awe or bewilderment before its stunning magnitude and grandeur, I enter the Sistine Chapel. As I approach the chapel, I feel the excitement building in me, just

[16] According to Abaci's response to my discussion of his article, addressing "the problems" he raises is one of three desiderata for anyone making a claim to a Kantian theory of artistic sublimity (Abaci 2010, p. 170). With my pointing out an equivocation concerning nature (external) and "sensible" nature, and my examples in the present section, I take myself to be doing that here. The first of the other two desiderata is "to present us with a convincing explanation of the absence of an actual account in Kant's text." I take the aforementioned third *Critique*'s late, hasty composition, as well as Kant's transcendental (rather than art-critical) aims in the work, largely to do this. The final desideratum is "to take on the burden of a positive account that is able to explain our aesthetic response to purportedly sublime artworks in terms of judgments of sublimity as Kant understands them." He thinks my 2010 piece attempted to do this (but also implies he had more or less already considered and preemptively responded to such arguments in his 2008 article). I add to it here.

thinking about what I am going to see. I have been there before, and the memory of visiting it (now long ago) builds up my expectation. I also think about all the history that unfolded in the chapel and its function as the site of the papal conclaves – the discussions held and documents signed, the alliances made (or not). The setting thus adds to the moment. I am aware of the contributions of the other artists such as Raphael, and even of Michelangelo's own *Last Judgment* on the altar wall, but I focus my attention on the ceiling. I imagine the hordes of people that have streamed through the chapel in the summer – though perhaps typically only for a matter of minutes. I am relieved they are gone and that I am allowed to visit it with just a few friends. Taking my time, I scan Michelangelo's work: I observe the biblical figures. I see the beautiful and symmetrical forms, but I also view them in light of what (little) I know of Christian theology. Naturally, I dwell on the image of Adam's finger almost reaching, yet falling short, just barely, of God's hand. Though the image has been reproduced widely on postcards, prints, and internet images, it is still striking and moving: it looks fresh and new to me. Far from making it clichéd, the scene's renown adds to the moment. As I contemplate the fresco's meaning in this place, as an image about the Christian story of creation, I feel small, one might say a "creature" – it is hard to get beyond the Christian symbolism. I wonder if the individuals in the bustling crowds felt awe, or if they were in too much of a hurry, or perhaps too thirsty. I think about my place, my personal goals and aims in life, and family and close ones. I cannot capture the entirety of the idea of this meaning and purpose. I look up again at Adam. I feel small before the representations of Adam and God. But I also feel uplifted. It is not just that I admire the mastery and technique of Michelangelo, his "genius" and the virtuous cultivation of his talent, though that is part of it. It is that I feel uplifted above ordinary affairs and events. The depicted scene stands in for nature: it all seems small in the face of a divine creator, or the idea of a profounder purpose that we aim for but fail to fully reach. The feeling of rising above ordinary affairs and concerns is ennobling: it is a feeling of freedom. It exposes a deeper meaning, perhaps a larger moral order. I feel goose bumps and my heart rate increase. Perhaps it is caused not by a late morning cappuccino but by a rush of endorphins brought about by my perception of the images and these reflections.

The second example must be briefer: a marine painting. A number of paintings from Kant's era could be chosen: Jan Por-

cellis's *Ships in a Storm on a Rocky Coast* (1614-18), Rembrandt's only seascape, the (stolen and still missing) *The Storm on the Sea of Galilee* (1633); Jan van Goyen's *The Thunderstorm* (1641); Arnoldus Anthonissen, *Seascape* (1660-1670); or one of Claude Joseph Vernet's numerous sea-wreckage paintings, such as *The Shipwreck* (1772). While Kant lacked firsthand acquaintance of these paintings, he could in principle have been aware of either prints or descriptions of them.

Let me take the Rembrandt, which, like Michelangelo's frescoes, also deals with Christian themes. As I look at it, I recall a curious and unfortunate fact: in an incredible heist in 1990, it was stolen from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston. So I can only look at reproductions of it, arguably making eliciting a sublime response even more difficult (and my task here even more challenging).

I look up the image online. I recognize this genre of painting, a marine painting dealing with biblical themes. Looking at the depicted scene, the content, I take my time with it and zoom in on the faces. It depicts the story of Jesus and his disciples on a boat in the middle of a raging storm. I study the grimaces of the sailors. One disciple is vomiting over the side. Another disciple, one with Rembrandt's face, is looking back at me. Intended or not, this self-reference – Rembrandt's placing himself next to Jesus – strikes me as both as somewhat humorous and challenging, a challenge to me the perceiver. Jesus is calm and poised with *apatheia*. The painting is well executed of course, and conducive to taste: the scene that would be repugnant if it were real life, is now tamed and (to use Kant's language) made beautiful (a work of "fine" art). Accepting the painting's invitation, as it were, I place myself in the position of the sailors on the boat. I am aware that the painting is a work of art, indeed an online image of a painting, but I place myself on that boat. In this sense, I regard the scene as if it were an image of nature (cf. §45, KU 5:306-307). I try to sense what the disciples felt: fear. Though I have never been afraid on a boat in this way, I imagine what it must be like. The sailors look like the people today who don't like to fly, who hold their hands together, or startle, when sustained, heavy turbulence bounces their bodies to-and-fro. If I were on that ship, I imagine, what fear I would feel too. Thankfully, I am here, looking at the online image of the painting – and it is a painting after all. I don't feel fear now, and the image does not threaten me. But reflecting and imagining in this way does bring to mind what it is like to feel such fear, and thus to disclose the merely relative value of

everyday affairs, perhaps even of existence itself. Noticing the relative worth of mundane matters – even of life, apart from the meaning I have given to it – is freeing.[17] And that feels good.[18]

Concluding Remark

If the above analysis turns out to be unsound and Kant is committed to Deny after all, it would seem to go against artistic practices. In that case, one might well want to let out a sigh: so much the worse for Kant! The rejection of Deny seems to be implicit in contemporary social practices in the visual arts. In fact, the rejection seems to have been in place since the Romantic painters, or even, as the Dutch marine paintings show, long before the Romantics.

Accordingly, I have addressed the argument using the terms of Kant's day and context. I have argued that even when adopting such a perspective, a case can be made for the possibility of the Kantian sublime in response to painting.[19]

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[17] Abaci provides a useful explanation of how paintings (of high mountains, oceans, and the like) might, through the perceiver's fantasy (or make-believe) and imaginative reconstructive activity, evoke the sublime, but for some reason Abaci does not find the example very satisfying: "So only if this quite unlikely phenomenology of a second-order subreption is the case, then there is a roundabout sense in which we may call our aesthetic response to such artistic representation of a 'sublime' natural object a judgment of sublimity" (Abaci 2008, p. 247). But in his contribution to the present journal issue, Abaci seems more open to such a possibility. For a similar example inspired by the sea, see also Schopenhauer's vivid description in §38 of *World as Will and Representation* (Clewis 2019).

[18] Consider too (associated with a *mimetic* view of painting) trompe l'oeil works, that is, illusionistic paintings that are intended to look so lifelike that one mistakes them for the real thing. If my argument is correct, such paintings, if carried out in the right manner, and perhaps bringing about the impression of the vast magnitudes found in architecture or in natural landscapes, could in principle elicit sublime experiences. Such awe-like responses might be evoked not just by the lifelike *content* (taken for the real thing, artifact, and/or nature), but also by the skillful powers and mastery of the artists who are able to create such stunning creations and pull off such feats of illusion. Compare Abaci's claim (2008, p. 247): "by means of a certain perceptual illusion such a painting [of a high mountain] may invoke in us a feeling of infinity." This tradition continues in paintings and installations today. Just to give one of many possible examples, street artists have painted deep-looking, dark holes in the sidewalk that are so realistic, passersby are afraid to walk over them, swooning before an apparent abyss.

[19] The paper originated in a workshop, organized by Arno Schubbach and Johannes Grave, at the University of Jena, July 17-18, 2022. I thank the organizers, participants (including Uygar Abaci), and audience for comments and discussion.

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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 judgements 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 Schubbach 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 Uygar Abaci'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, Barnet 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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Duality and Temporality: Evoking the Sublime through Pictures

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Abstract
Pictures pose a particular problem for the question of the representability of the sublime (in Kant's sense). Their dependence on a limited and immobile picture carrier seems to prevent any depiction of the sublime from the outset. The present contribution first asks what preconditions must be met in order to be able to speak of a successful evocation of the sublime. On this basis, it is explained why the choice of pictorial motifs that can be experienced as sublime in nature is not an adequate solution to this problem. Instead, the paper proposes that the mobilization of specific properties of pictures, i.e., their duality and their temporality, could render the evocation of sublime sensations conceivable. This approach is finally illustrated by reference to the examples of Caspar David Friedrich and J. M. W. Turner.

Keywords
Sublime; duality of pictures; temporality of picture perception

1. *Sublime Art? The Particular Case of Pictures*

With his contribution *Kant's Justified Dismissal of Artistic Sublimity*,[1] Uygar Abaci initiated a productive discussion of the artistic representability of the sublime in the Kantian sense.[2] Is it possible to integrate artistic representations into Kant's theory of the sublime, or does the sublime ultimately remain inaccessible to the arts? In addition to the question of how Kant himself thought about this issue, it is above all the underlying systematic problem that deserves attention. Are works of art capable – independently of Kant's own opinion – of succeeding as representations or evocations of the sublime that do justice to the core of Kant's theory? The discussion

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[1] See Abaci 2008; Clewis 2010; Abaci 2010; Doran 2015, pp. 275-285; Vandenabeele 2015; Crowther 2016, pp. 57-78; Guyer 2018; Hall 2020; and Kvokačka 2021.

[2] This contribution has been prepared within the framework of the Collaborative Research Center SFB 1288 "Practices of Comparing. Changing and Ordering the World", funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), subproject E02, "Comparative Viewing of Pictures: Practices of Incomparability and the Theory of the Sublime".

concerning this question has by no means been completed and continues to be stimulating. It obviously does not merely touch on a peripheral detail of Kant's theory but also contributes to putting into question and improving our understanding of central provisions of his concept of the sublime.

In more recent contributions to this discussion, reference has been made to various arts – partly by drawing on examples that Kant already provided in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. As far as I can see, the question of whether different arts might be suitable for the representation or evocation of the sublime to different degrees has not yet been asked systematically. Kant himself referred to architectural examples such as Egyptian pyramids and St Peter's Basilica in Rome (KU § 26, AA 5:252).[3] But the question also arises in relation to literature, music, and the visual arts.[4] The latter, especially painting, raise particular questions because of their specific nature. Since pictures (setting aside film, video, and the like) are motionless and silent and since their dimensions are also usually clearly limited, they seem to be particularly ill-suited to depicting or evoking the sublime.

It is noteworthy that even 18th-century theorists writing before Kant were skeptical of pictorial representations of the sublime, although they took it for granted that other arts could do so.[5] Edmund Burke explicitly appreciated the possibilities of poetic language in this regard but strongly opposed the idea of trying to express the sublime in paintings. Since pictures are limited and would present everything visible in excessive detail within the chosen section, he considered this form to be inappropriate for expressing sublime ideas (Burke/Boulton 1958, p. 174). In a short note published posthumously in 1788, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing outlined the refutation of an idea based on which Alexander Gerard had previously argued for the pictorial representability of the sublime. Gerard (1759, p. 24) had suggested choosing the scale relations within the representation in such a way that it would be possible to incorporate immensely large dimensions into the picture. However, such a procedure – according to Lessing's criticism – would not change the fact that the picture itself always remains manageable at a glance (Lessing/Barner 1990, pp. 266-267).

The stipulations that went hand-in-hand with Kant's theory made it even more difficult to think about pictorial representa-

[3] Citations of Kant's *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (KU) are to the fifth volume of the so-called 'Akademieausgabe' (AA 05) edited by the Prussian Academy of the Sciences.

[4] For the case of literature, see especially Guyer 2018.

[5] See Grave (in print). For the British discourse, see Ibata 2018.

tions of the sublime. These difficulties were highlighted particularly clearly when thinkers who had trained on Kant's *Critiques* thought about the consequences that his philosophy might have in the field of art theory and practice. In the first years of the 19th century, Christian August Semler and Carl Ludwig Fernow took up the definition of the sublime that Kant had given in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.[6] Both theorists had to concede, however, that in view of the finite extension of pictures and their immobility, at best an indirect, mediate, or symbolic representation of the sublime in painting was conceivable. Semler and Fernow deserve interest because their reflections suggest that a theory of painting that is also intended to include representations of the sublime presupposes an aesthetic of reception that grants the viewer an active role. Both thinkers outline – in the sense of Kant's shift of the sublime into the subject – approaches in which the desired effect can only be achieved with the participation of the viewer's imagination.

The theoretical positions on art adopted in the late 18th and early 19th centuries that have been briefly mentioned here leave no doubt that painting faced special challenges when confronted with the sublime. Even if one – like many of Kant's contemporaries – considered the sublime to be a potential object of the arts, it was by no means a foregone conclusion that paintings would be suitable for its representation. In the following, this problem will not be pursued historically but rather systematically. We will not ask whether Kant or individual contemporaries saw the possibility of a pictorial representation or evocation of the sublime. Rather, we will examine whether a solution to the outlined problem can be found in principle under the guidelines of Kant's theory. The question to be asked thus pertains to the type of understanding of pictures and their reception that such a solution would require. The fact that, in the following, we do not take up positions from the history of art theory is the result of a conscious decision. For it does not seem impossible, at least, that the question implicitly raised by Kant can be answered differently and more accurately based on our contemporary understanding of pictures. In so doing, however, we will concentrate solely on the mathematically sublime, since the attempt at a pictorial representation of the dynamically sublime seems to be even less promising in view of the motionlessness of pictures. The following considerations therefore focus on the question of whether limited and motionless pictures are capable of representing or evoking the mathematically sublime.

[6] See Semler 1800, vol. 1, pp. 187-192, pp. 310-312; Fernow/Georgi 2020, pp. 46-49; and Grave (in print).

2. *What Should Pictures that Represent or Evoke the (Mathematically) Sublime Achieve?*

Kant defines the mathematically sublime as something "which is great beyond all comparison" (KU § 25, AA 5:248) or as that "in comparison with which everything else is small" (KU § 25, AA 5:250). Accordingly, the sublime is characterized by the fact that no suitable scale can be used to estimate its size. Kant immediately states that this quality does not belong to any object or phenomenon in nature in the strict sense. However, "it is the disposition of the mind resulting from a certain representation occupying the reflective judgment, but not the object, which is to be called sublime" (KU § 25, AA 5:250). He therefore concludes that what should actually be characterized as sublime is that "which even to be able to think of demonstrates a faculty of the mind that surpasses every measure of the senses" (KU § 25, AA 5:250). Nevertheless, this "disposition of the mind" can be stimulated by the sensorial perception of objects and phenomena, which then prove to be the *occasion of* a sensation of the sublime without themselves being sublime.

Objects that overburden the "aesthetic estimation of magnitude" (KU § 26, AA 5:251) represent such an occasion. Such is the case not only for infinitely large objects but even for situations in which something *appears* infinitely large to the subject. Kant describes this case in remarkable detail, since the sublime's ability to be more than a purely hypothetical phenomenon depends on it. The estimation of magnitude is based on a combination of "apprehension (*apprehensio*) and comprehension (*comprehensio aesthetica*)" (KU § 26, AA 5:251), the interaction between which ensures that an object can be measured in its entirety. The aesthetic estimation of magnitude reaches its limits when, as the "apprehension" of an all-too-large object progresses, the "comprehension" thereof fails because the imagination is no longer able to grasp the newly added "partial representations" alongside the impressions already gained as a whole:

> For when apprehension has gone so far that the partial representations of the intuition of the senses that were apprehended first already begin to fade in the imagination as the latter proceeds on to the apprehension of further ones, then it loses on one side as much as it gains on the other […]. (KU § 26, AA 5:252)

While a mathematical estimation of magnitude poses no problem in such cases, the aesthetic estimation is overcharged. Moments of this kind are not necessarily based on an encounter with

a phenomenon that is actually infinite and exceeds every measure, even mathematical measures. Rather, other examples include "appearances the intuition of which brings with them the idea of its infinity" (KU § 26, AA 5:255), if the efforts of the imagination towards "comprehension" in the aesthetic estimation of size fail. Namely, the notion of a "magnitude of a natural object on which the imagination fruitlessly expends its entire capacity for comprehension" leads the subject "to a supersensible substratum" (KU § 26, AA 5:255). This effect is owed to reason, which is able to produce that wholeness that could not be secured in the aesthetic estimation of magnitude. With the sensation of the sublime, therefore, "the superiority of the rational vocation of our cognitive faculty over the greatest faculty of sensibility" (KU § 27, AA 5:257) becomes apparent.

Following Kant's phrase that the sublime is "great beyond all comparison" (KU § 25, AA 5:248), the situation thus outlined can also be described as a particular form of a failure of comparison. The attempt to compare what appears to be incomprehensibly great breaks down less because an unsuitable scale is chosen than because, in comparing, it is not possible to preserve the wholeness of the *comparatum*. That which is to be compared disintegrates into "partial representations" in the very process of comparison because the power of imagination is no longer able to exercise its "comprehension". This situation can lead to the combination of "displeasure" and "pleasure" (KU § 27, AA 5:257) that characterizes the sublime – in Kant, as previously in Burke. The "feeling of the inadequacy of his imagination for presenting the ideas of a whole" (KU § 26, AA 5:252) provides the subject with a basis for experiencing the fact that reason is able to remedy precisely this deficiency. What the imagination is no longer able to grasp as a whole, reason can think as an entirety.

If pictures are to prompt sensations of the sublime, they must be able to make a perceptual offer that brings the sensibility and imagination of the subject to their limits.[7] The experience of this excessive demand should also be suitable to stimulate the subject to "abandon sensibility", to secure the wholeness that escapes the imagination through the use of reason, and "to occupy itself with

[7] I understand this premise more specifically than it has been understood by those authors – e.g., Pillow 1994; Wicks 1995; Tomasi 2005; Vandenabeele 2015; and Kvokačka 2021 – who attribute sublimity to some works of art because of their capacity to express or stimulate 'aesthetic ideas' that themselves, based on their inexhaustibility, seem to suggest an analogy to the infinity of the mathematically sublime. With its inexhaustibility, the 'aesthetic idea' does not bring sensibility and imagination, but rather the intellect, to its limits.

ideas that contain a higher purposiveness" (KU § 23, AA 5:246). Infinite size is not necessarily required in this context, as demonstrated by Kant's reflections on the aesthetic estimation of magnitude, which can also be overburdened by phenomena that are too large but nevertheless limited. However, the question of whether and, if so, how pictures could provoke the overtaxing of the imagination described by Kant remains unanswered.

Before we turn to this question, we should address a problem that emerges on a somewhat different level. This problem seems to imply a fundamental objection to the possibility of a pictorial evocation of the sublime. When Uygar Abaci justified his skepticism against any artistic representation of the sublime in Kant's sense, he referred, among other things, to Kant's hint that the sublime should not be exhibited "in products of art (e.g., buildings, columns, etc.), where a human end determines the form as well as the magnitude […]" (KU § 26, AA 5:252). Somewhat later, Kant varies this argument once again: "A pure judgment on the sublime, however, must have no end of the object as its determining ground if it is to be aesthetic and not mixed up with any judgment of the understanding or of reason" (KU § 26, AA 5:253). Abaci (2008, pp. 246-247) noted that a use of artistic means of representation for the purpose of evoking the sublime would conflict with the requirement stipulated by Kant: "If there is to be (a judgment of) artistic sublimity, it is necessarily impure, because artworks are irreducibly objectively purposive" (Abaci 2010, p. 172).

On closer inspection, this conclusion is perhaps less compelling than it might initially seem. The objection pertains to artworks insofar as they are perceived as works of art. Kant's analogous considerations of the judgment of beautiful objects (KU § 48, AA 5:311) suggest that it is possible to think of cases in which a purpose in the cause must not necessarily be presupposed in the judgment of an object, insofar as this object is not perceived as a work of art. Thus, the problem outlined by Abaci does not arise in the same way when a work of art is decidedly not perceived as a work of art but rather, for example, as an object of nature or as a picture without artistic ambition. But, more importantly, Abaci's argument does not take into account the fact that the artistic purpose may not be the cause of all the properties and qualities of a work of art and that its reception can be detached from such a purpose. When Kant writes that in the work of art, "human end determines the form as well as the magnitude", this claim does not already indicate the degree to which this determination shapes the work. The contingencies of

the production of works of art, the inevitable as well as productive indeterminacy of the works themselves, and the comparatively wide scope of reception make it seem to be quite possible that such works, in addition to the purpose addressed by Kant, also have other characteristics that are not significant with respect to the purpose itself and that can, as it were, take on a life of their own in reception. Even during the creation of a work, coincidences can play a productive role, such as when, during the work on a watercolor, the not fully controllable properties of the material or the inherent logic of the picture in interaction with the artist lead to the emergence of a solution that goes beyond the guiding artistic idea. Kant, as his reflections on the concept of genius (KU § 46-50, AA 5:307-320) suggest, may have been open to such considerations, which is why he does not emphasize a specific concrete purpose for the arts but rather a "purposiveness without an end" (KU § 15, AA 5:226). Kant's skepticism regarding an evocation of the sublime by means of works of art "where a human end determines the form as well as the magnitude" may therefore fall short because this idea ties works of art and their formal properties too closely to a specific artistic purpose. Even if one concedes that it would be contradictory to create works that aim at the purpose of evoking sensations of the sublime, it is not possible to exclude completely cases in which works that are capable of evoking sublime sensations occur more or less unintentionally and independently of the artist's aims.

3. *Sublimity by the Choice of the Represented Subject?*

These considerations, however, do not yet decide whether the specific medial conditions of pictures perhaps exclude their suitability for the sublime. The motionless stasis of pictures does not allow changes and sequences of events to be visualized directly.[8] That *dynamis,* which is indispensable for the dynamically sublime, is not part of their repertoire of expression. Instead of considering how the incomparably great forces of the dynamically sublime could nevertheless be expressed in pictures in an indirect, mediated way, we will therefore limit ourselves in the following to the question of whether pictures are at least suitable for the representation or

[8] At this point, it is not possible to elaborate on the fact that paintings, too, have time and again been conceived as dynamic and vivid. However, such an understanding of a dynamics of paintings implicitly presupposes the act of reception with its own temporality. For a detailed consideration of this issue, see Grave 2022.

evocation of the mathematically sublime. In so doing, we must first examine whether a skillful selection of the subject to be represented in the picture can contribute to solving this problem.

A solution that seems obvious at first glance, i.e., that of capturing something infinite in the picture, proves to be of little help on closer inspection. The central perspective that has been common and widely used since the Renaissance maintains that lines extending parallel to each other at an angle of 90° to the picture surface into the depth of the pictorial space intersect at the vanishing point. The vanishing point has therefore often been understood as an image of that place in infinity where this convergence of parallels occurs. Even on this understanding, however, the infinite can only be made vivid in this way by means of a geometric construction, not in the sense of an aesthetic estimation of magnitude. The vanishing point may be infinitely far away from the viewing subject, but it nevertheless does not offer an opportunity to overcharge the aesthetic estimation of magnitude in the manner described by Kant. For, due to the increasing perspectival shortening of distances in the depth of the pictorial space, the possibility of allowing the "apprehension" to progress continuously in the estimation of distances is soon exhausted. The size estimation must therefore cease – not because the "comprehension" no longer succeeds, but because the "apprehension" cannot be continued. Strictly speaking, we only *know* that the vanishing point is infinitely far away; we cannot *apprehend and comprehend* this infinite distance vividly. The central perspective and vanishing point, therefore, do not seem to be suitable for awakening sublime sensations.

Similar problems might be posed by the attempt to push the viewer's imagination to its limits by depicting an extremely large object very far away in the depth of the pictorial space. In this case, it would not be a matter of making the infinite appear. Rather, the viewer would be challenged by the fact that she or he is confronted with both extremely long distances and exceptionally large dimensions. This extensive distancing would also allow the central object to appear to be extraordinarily large despite the limited surface of the picture. Ernst Ferdinand Oehme's painting *Das Wetterhorn* (fig. 1) obviously plays with precisely this effect.[9] The immeasurable size of the mountain almost ruptures the format of the picture, as the mountain peak reaches the picture's border. Simultaneously, however, Oehme has placed the mountain – unlike in a watercolor (fig. 2)[10] – conspicuously far away in the pictorial space. In view of this distance, which can hardly be measured in its own right, the mountain

[9] On this painting, see Bischoff 1997, p. 190, no. 76.
[10] For information on this watercolor, see Bischoff 1997, p. 185, no. 48.

1. Ernst Ferdinand Oehme, The Wetterhorn, 1829, oil on canvas, 141.5 x 184.5 cm, Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Alte Nationalgalerie.

2. Ernst Ferdinand Oehme, The Wetterhorn with the Rosenlaui Glacier, probably 1825, pen and brush, 23.8 x 33.5 cm, Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett.

must once again appear much larger. Oehme's pictorial strategy – of which, by the way, we cannot say with certainty that it was intended to evoke the sublime – is very suitable for pushing the viewer's aesthetic estimation of magnitude to its limits. But it is difficult to judge whether it is capable of triggering an effect that corresponds to the uninterrupted progression of the "apprehension" described by Kant alongside the simultaneous overcharging of the "comprehension". For, in this case, it is not actually the wholeness of the extraordinarily large object that seems to be in question but rather the continuous functioning of the "apprehension" that is prevented.

The "comprehension" that is involved in the process of aesthetic size estimation seems to be more significantly undermined by pictures that show only a part of a subject with particularly large dimensions. If, for example, a mountain that appears to be very high and massive is shown comparatively far away from the viewer and, moreover, if only a section of it is visible, the aesthetic estimation of size is confronted with an aggravated problem. In such a case, it is not only difficult to gauge the dimensions of the mountain; rather, a perception of the wholeness of the extraordinarily large object is also denied. Caspar David Friedrich may have followed such an idea when working on his painting *The Watzmann* (fig. 3) – although there is some evidence to suggest that it was not his intention to paint representations of the sublime.[11] Despite its large format, his painting shows only a part of the mighty mountain, as, among other things, the vegetation, which remains sparse even at the lower edge of the picture, undoubtedly indicates. As in Oehme's picture, it is difficult for the viewer to determine the distance and the size of the mountain. In addition, however, the "comprehension" that occurs in the aesthetic estimation of magnitude is also prevented here since the mountain is not entirely visible. It is obvious that this situation poses nearly insurmountable problems for size estimation. However, even this form of representation probably does not fully meet the requirements that Kant stipulated for occasions of the sublime. The defect that the wholeness of the exceedingly large object remains elusive to the contemplating subject is not due to barriers of our sensibility but rather to the limits of the picture. In this case, sublimity could at best be evoked if the viewer tries to supplement what is missing in the picture through his imagination and if, during this process, the "comprehension" becomes overtaxed as the "apprehension" progresses.

[11] On the painting, see Börsch-Supan & Jähnig 1973, pp. 397-398; Verwiebe 2004; and Grave 2012, pp. 195-197. On Friedrich and the theory of the sublime, see Grave 2001 and Grave 2012, pp. 187-199.

3. Caspar David Friedrich, The Watzmann, c. 1824/25, oil on canvas, 135 x 170 cm, Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Alte Nationalgalerie (on loan from DeKaBank).

4. *The Duality of the Picture and the Temporality of Picture Reception*

Sensations of the mathematically sublime, as Kant understands them, presuppose temporal processes. They are divided into a sequence of initial "displeasure" and subsequent "pleasure". The displeasure, in turn, arises from the failed attempt to ensure the "comprehension" in the aesthetic estimation of magnitude alongside the successively advancing "apprehension" simultaneously. Displeasure thus implies in itself a process in which the overburdening of the imagination can come to light. Since pictures (if one excludes moving images such as films or videos) are motionless and do not exhibit any changes of their own accord, only one temporal process could serve as the situation that gives rise to the sensation of the sublime: the temporal performance of viewing the picture. From the perspective of Kant's theory of the sublime, this idea is only logical, because in the strict sense it does not place an external object at the center but rather the process of sensorial perception and thinking stimulated by that object. With regard to our interactions

with pictures, though, this thought is not quite so self-evident since we rarely consider the intrinsic value and significance of the temporality of picture perception. Without taking this temporality and processuality into account, however, it is not possible to produce a promising assessment of whether and to what extent pictures can evoke the sublime. The question is therefore whether pictures can influence the process by which they are perceived in a way that stimulates or favors sensations of the sublime.

As these considerations indicate, it is difficult to arrive at a representation that can serve as an occasion for sublime sensations solely by means of the well-calculated selection and perspectivization of pictorial motifs. However, pictures would be considerably underestimated if they were to be reduced solely to what is depicted in them. Unlike the contemplation of an impressively high mountain in nature, the depiction of such a natural spectacle always raises the possibility of turning one's attention to the painting as an object with its own physicality and materiality in addition to the view of what is depicted in the painting. Every contemplation of a picture offers the viewer not only the things within the depiction but simultaneously the picture itself as a thing.[12] In many cases, this circumstance seems to be trivial or irrelevant to us. Regarding works of art, these two offers of perception are sometimes understood as correlates of different forms of viewing: an interpretive reception concentrating on the depicted content or a contemplation that focuses on aesthetic qualities or stylistic aspects. But even such a distinction of modes of perception underestimates the significance of the fundamental duality of the picture, which is associated with far-reaching potential. If a picture is designed in such a way that it specifically encourages the viewer to pay attention to both aspects of the picture's duality, the temporal process of viewing the picture is shaped in a decisive way. Namely, only in the temporal performance of seeing can both aspects of the duality of the picture come to the fore. This potential is likely to contribute significantly to our tendency to ascribe to pictures a 'power' or 'agency' that is capable of limiting the sovereignty of the viewer.[13]

[12] At this point, it could be discussed how the fundamental duality of the picture can also be asserted for non-representational, abstract or monochrome painting. In picture theory, it is disputed whether non-representational paintings can be considered pictures; see, e.g., Asmuth 2011, pp. 94-95. For my argument, it should be sufficient that pictures enable references to extra-pictorial reality. Such references would already provide a minimal basis for making the duality of the picture experienceable. Presumably, the expectations and reception practices of the viewer are as important in this context as the properties of the painting.

[13] The considerations regarding the duality of the picture, the corresponding specific temporality of picture perception, and questions of the *agency of* pictures are dealt with in

Against this backdrop, the question emerges of whether pictures can influence their reception in such a manner that they lead the viewer's imagination to its limits in the way described by Kant. Is it possible by a specific design of the picture to cause the viewer to emphasize the duality of the picture in the temporal process of reception by repeatedly alternating between looking at what is represented and paying attention to the picture as a thing in its own right? At the very least, it is conceivable for a painting to make use of two strategies at once to challenge the viewer. As we have seen in the examples discussed above, the painting can present the viewer with a pictorial motif of extraordinarily large or wide dimensions, so that the viewer is stimulated in a particular way towards an aesthetic estimation of size. Simultaneously, however, such a painting can also make its own fabricated and artificial nature so conspicuous that the gaze is frequently drawn away from the pictorial motif and towards the picture as a thing. In such a case, a permanent and incessant conflict between fundamentally different objects of perception would emerge, namely, between the spatial depth of what is depicted and the surface of the image carrier, between the scarcely measurable dimensions of the pictorial subject and the limited size of the picture itself, between the illusion of a view of something that is not itself physically present and the sheer material presence of the painting. In this way, the aesthetic estimation of magnitude would face particularly far-reaching problems. On the one hand, it would struggle – as might be the case with the paintings by Oehme and Friedrich – to achieve a successful interplay between "apprehension" and "comprehension" in confronting the central motif of the painting. On the other hand, however, a permanently successful "comprehension" would also be prevented by the fact that the phenomenon, whose wholeness is to be ensured by the imagination, is subject to constant shifts and thus eludes definition. The sensorial perception of the observer would not be able to grasp an entirety since the object of perception would constantly change due to the alternation of these aspects of seeing. In this case, a focus on the duality of the picture would oppose any attempt to unify what has been seen within one coherent imagination.

Whereas the starting point of Kant's mathematical sublime is an incommensurability that is rooted in dimensions which exceed the possibilities of an aesthetic estimation of magnitude, the case just outlined would be based on an incommensurability of a different kind. Due to the change between an emphasis on what is repre-

detail in Grave 2022. In this book (pp. 86-101), I also consider the objections that seem to arise from Richard Wollheim's concept of *twofoldness*.

sented on the one hand and a focus on the means of representation and the image carrier on the other, two incommensurable objects of perception would compete with each other. It would make little sense to estimate the size of each of these objects of perception separately and then compare them with each other. If, however, there were multiple or even constant changes between these two perceptual offers, the viewer's sensibility and imagination could be overcharged, which would be comparable to the effect described by Kant.

What I have thus far formulated only tentatively and hypothetically can be illustrated by reference to particular examples. In the following, I examine two paintings by Friedrich and Joseph Mallord William Turner in further detail, albeit without claiming that these artists were actually striving to evoke the sublime. On the contrary, in the first case, i.e., the painting *The Monk by the Sea* (fig. 4), there is some evidence to suggest that Friedrich was skeptical regarding a theory of the sublime in Kant's sense.[14] This unusual marine painting, which already fascinated and provoked his contemporaries, is characterized by the fact that only one small pictorial motif provides a sense of scale: the figure with its back turned towards us, who stands on the beach and seems to look out over the vastness of the sea. This enormous expanse of water, like the depth of the sea, cannot be measured by the viewer. When working on the painting, Friedrich deliberately erased three ships that had been sketched in the preliminary drawing, so that not even a boat or ship enables us to estimate the distances involved. The distance to the horizon must remain entirely immeasurable, since no clues are provided that would allow us to estimate, in the sense of a comprehensible perspective construction, the dimensions of what stands before the monk's eyes and our own. Moreover, the lack of framing elements within the landscape has the consequence that no border of the scenery can be discerned towards the sides of the painting. Only the edges of the picture's surface and the frame cut off the view.

As a result of the painting's radically reduced composition, the contemplation of the picture is not exhausted solely in an immersive focus on a pictorial illusion; rather, the painting also attracts attention due to its own materiality, flatness and limitedness. Clemens Brentano, who was able to see the painting when it was first presented at the exhibition of the Berlin Art Academy in 1810, vividly describes how the desire to enter the depicted

[14] On the painting, see Börsch-Supan & Jähnig 1973, pp. 302-304; Grave 2011, pp. 63-90; and Grave 2012, pp. 145-169 (with further references).

4. Caspar David Friedrich, The Monk by the Sea, 1808/10, oil on canvas, 110 x 171.5 cm, Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Alte Nationalgalerie.

landscape in order to experience a sense of longing is thwarted and the painting itself emerges in its concreteness: "[…] that which I should have found within the picture I found instead between the picture and myself, namely a claim that my heart made on the picture, and a rejection that the picture did to me […]."[15] Indeed, Friedrich's painting causes the two-dimensional image carrier to become particularly conspicuous, especially since its boundaries alone define the field of the visible. By dispensing with all the usual principles of landscape composition, the artist reduced the seascape to three pictorial elements, the beach, the sea, and a large section of sky, which can also emerge at any time as two-dimensional stripes. The line of the horizon, which runs straight and without any curvature in an uninterrupted manner, reveals itself as a parallel to the upper and lower edges of the picture and thus incorporates characteristics of the picture carrier into the representation. It has been noted repeatedly, with good reason, that the eye is also drawn to the painting as a two-dimensional and limited artefact. Simultaneously, however, the suggestive perception of space is not permanently suppressed. The juxtaposition of the colored surfaces with which the beach, sea and sky

[15] Brentano & Arnim 2021, p. 37. For the German original, see Schultz 2004, p. 41.

are depicted creates a spatial impression, and the subtly nuanced color gradients additionally reinforce this impression of depth, without the resulting spatial effect approaching the measurability of a perspectively constructed space.

In this way, Friedrich has created a painting that already presents an immeasurable spatial expanse on the level of what is represented within the picture. Beyond that point, however, his landscape painting seems to be particularly well suited to entrap the viewer in a process of reception that switches several times between two fundamentally different offers of perception: between a view of the seascape on the one hand and a view of the painted image carrier on the other. When and how these changes take place is not solely up to the viewer. This characteristic explains why Heinrich von Kleist, when editing and supplementing the text by Brentano, was able to note that precisely this painting – that is, a picture that, as Brentano had noted, allows its artificiality to become conspicuous – acquires an unusual power over the viewer: "[…] and since in its uniformity and boundlessness it has no foreground but the frame, the viewer feels as though his eyelids had been cut off."[16] With these words, Kleist highlights the fact that the picture poses fundamental challenges to the sensorial perception of the viewer.

Turner's painting *Shade and Darkness. The Evening of the Deluge* (fig. 5) may stimulate similar reflections.[17] Even the unusual bipartite title indicates that here, too, the viewer's gaze is drawn both to the scene depicted in the painting and to the means by which that scene is represented: *The Evening of the Deluge* refers to the biblical scene of the onset of the Flood, which emerges for the viewer only slowly and dimly from the whirl of color in the painting, while the words *Shade and Darkness* address fundamental questions of light, shadow, dimness and thus visibility or invisibility. The companion piece that Turner created for the painting adds an explicit reference to this aspect: *Light and Colour (Goethe's Theory). The Morning after the Deluge – Moses Writing the Book of Genesis*. Turner was thus referring to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Theory of Colour* (1810), which had only recently been made accessible in an English translation by Charles Eastlake in 1840.

[16] Kleist 2021, p. 41. For the German original, see Schultz 2004, p. 44.

[17] On the painting, see Butlin & Joll 1977, p. 229, no. 404; and Wilton 1979, p. 287, no. P404.

5. Joseph Mallord William Turner, Shade and Darkness. The Evening of the Deluge, 1843, oil on canvas, 78.7 x 78.1 cm, London, Tate Gallery.

Turner's painting of the eve of the Flood reveals, on prolonged viewing, that a lengthy procession of animals leads from the foreground across a diagonal in the right half of the picture to the ark, which can be seen in the middle of the picture in faint blue-grey colors on the horizon. Like an echo, a flock of birds in the sky corresponds to this procession, which seems, alongside the cloud formations and the animals, to form a vortex in the lower half of the picture. In front on the left, reclining, probably sleeping people are visible, who, according to an inscription in verse that Turner added to the picture, are ignoring the impending Flood.

Turner's depiction obviously attempts to encompass extremely large and wide dimensions and, in this respect, might be reminiscent

of 16th century world landscapes. The work combines the depiction of barely measurable expanses with a formal design and painterly execution that obscures the individual pictorial motifs with clouds of color which span all the objects in the painting, thus making spatial orientation difficult. The viewer's eye takes an unusually long time to distinguish different objects in what at first glance appears to be a nearly formless chaos of colors. Glaringly bright areas and heavily darkened parts further restrict the sensorial perception of the picture. Familiar forms of pictorial spatial representation that would allow us to estimate sizes and distances with some degree of reliability are thus avoided. Turner may have been aiming to accomplish two goals with this composition. On the one hand, he produces an equivalent to the process of evening twilight, which increasingly reduces the visibility of the things that surround us. On the other hand, this approach conveys the global, cosmic dimensions of the events depicted, which were not limited to one place.

Turner's formal design and material execution of the painting, however, also has the consequence that – as in the case of Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea* – attention is repeatedly drawn to the artificiality and materiality of the painting. In many parts, it is difficult to distinguish between the contour lines of the depicted animals, people, or objects on the one hand and brush marks or spots of paint on the other. Precisely because the scene depicted in the painting is so difficult to recognize, the viewer is brought close to the picture plane, where she or he encounters the painting's own materiality all the more vigorously. In this case, too, the design of the picture encourages the spectator to switch several times between different objects of perception: the depicted image and the picture itself. This switching is all the more noticeable because the painting's original octagonal format and its integration into a pair of pictures additionally directed the viewer's gaze to qualities that are inherent in the painting as a physical thing rather than in the subjects that are depicted in it. Turner's landscape thus also confronts the viewer with fundamental challenges. He too attempts to encompass immeasurably large dimensions in his representation without running the risk of reducing those dimensions to measurable distances through the use of linear perspective. Simultaneously, he also pushes the viewer to perceive the image carrier and the means of representation in their materiality. As in the case of Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea*, the representation of the immeasurable is combined with the fact that the viewer's gaze is constantly stimulated to switch between what is represented and the picture in its materiality.

In both cases, the aesthetic estimation of magnitude is pushed to its limits in a way that poses fundamental problems, especially for the "comprehension" in Kant's sense. In this respect, both paintings can be understood as explorations that investigate the possibilities of evoking the sublime by means of a picture. While in Friedrich's case, such an understanding of his painting *The Monk by the Sea* would probably be at odds with the artist's intentions, Turner reveals greater affinities with the theory of the sublime, although for him, the conception of Edmund Burke was clearly closer at hand.[18] It is noteworthy that both artists related their paintings to great, elusive ideas. In a brief commentary on his painting, Friedrich directly addressed the solitary figure depicted in the painting, whom he evidently viewed as a representative for an overly far-reaching, presumptuous claim to rational understanding: "With overweening conceit, you think to become a light for posterity, to unravel the darkness of the future, to finally know and understand clearly what holy intuition ("Ahndung") only is, what can only be seen and recognized in faith" (Friedrich/Zschoche 2005, p. 64). He was thus concerned with fundamental questions of faith and with the fact that human understanding must inevitably fail in such matters. *Ex negativo*, an idea of God appears here, which accounts for the limited possibilities of the human individual. Turner, on the other hand, hinted at references to the global event of the Flood and thus to God but also to basic questions of light, darkness, visibility, and invisibility already in the cumbersome title of his picture. In both cases, therefore, the artists seem to have already assumed that the sensorial overload caused by the picture could stimulate a reflection pointing to a destiny of man that is not exhausted in sensibility and imagination. The great and simultaneously vague thoughts to which both painters referred seem to strike a chord with Kant's understanding of the 'ideas of reason' or 'pure concepts of reason' "that are never given in any possible experience whatsoever, hence […] concepts whose objective reality (that they are not mere fantasies) and […] assertions whose truth or falsity cannot be confirmed or exposed by any experience" (Pro. § 40, AA 4:327). The thoughts that both paintings are supposed to inspire refer, for their part, to something unconditional, the unrepresentability of which can precisely reveal "the superiority of the rational vocation of our cognitive faculty over the greatest faculty of sensibility" (KU § 27, AA 5:257).

[18] On Turner and the sublime, see, for example, Finley 1979; Wilton 1980; and Ibata 2018, chapter 9.

Friedrich and Turner gave the landscapes depicted in their paintings an impression of immensity. Simultaneously, they played on the duality of the picture so decisively that the viewer can be stimulated to engage in a temporal process of reception that, through the multiple changes that occur in the object of perception, undermines any attempt to perform an aesthetic estimation of magnitude based on successful "apprehension" and "comprehension". Both artists seem to have used this pictorial strategy to convey the experience that something eludes pictorial representability. If we can assume that these artists had such an intention and considered their attempts to be successful, these examples would provide a possible explanation for how pictures – precisely by emphasizing their specific, seemingly limiting characteristics – are able to evoke sensations of the sublime.

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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.

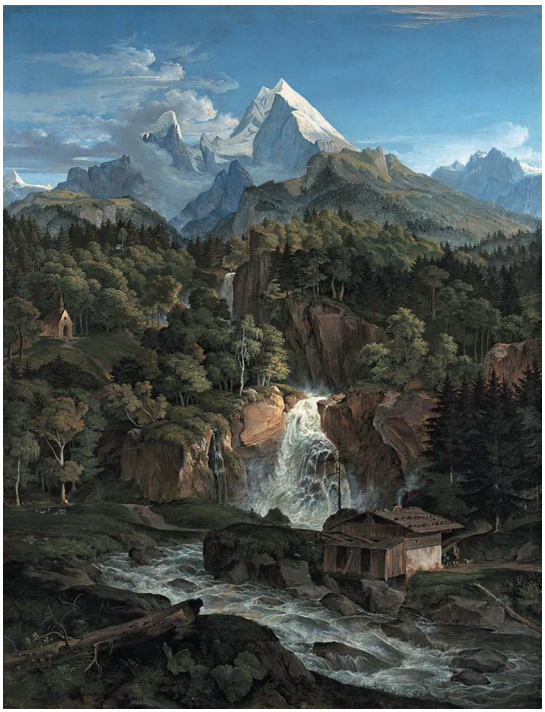

Fig. 3: Ludwig Richter, Der Watzmann, 1824, Oil on Canvas, 121 x 93.5 cm, Munich, Neue Pinakothek.

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).

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

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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

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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 Kojeve'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 desublimate 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 reinterpretation 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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