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The Kantian Sublime: Why Care?
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The Kantian sublime exists as topic, ghost, or foil in many current critical texts about art. Immanuel Kant lays the foundation for a mode of thought that yields two centuries of critique. As Terry Eagleton notes, it is within Kant's vision that "Marx's immanent critique will find a foothold." (100) Despite the simplification of Kant in some contemporary writing, the actual text is nuanced and at times contradictory; Kant exists at the threshold of rationalism and romanticism. A close read of the text dispels the notion of a pure formalism; even within the Kantian realm, the concepts of beauty and the sublime originate with sensory experience but ultimately assert the triumph of the human capacity to reason. Revisiting Kant's text seems particularly relevant to our cultural moment as critics such as Edward Said and Eagleton reassess the material outcomes of countervailing anti-essentialist theories. Perhaps the most controversial and fantastical aspect of Kant's text-- the assertion of beauty and the sublime as universal experiences deserves the most thoughtful enquiry.

In his essay "Turned Upside Down and Torn Apart," Thomas McEvelley provides a cogent summary of the sublime's evolution from Longinus to Modernism. He notes that early ideas of the sublime were associated with terror. Longinus, the author of a first century AD Greek text "On the Sublime," who deals with the term in relation to the field of rhetoric, discusses the Homeric Battle of the Gods describing forces with ultimate power to threaten the destruction of individual beings and the harmony of the universe. The sublime is thus experienced externally, a force from the outside. (59) Edmund Burke's 1757 text "A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful" extends Longinus' "terror-sublime:" while beauty for Burke is comforting, the sublime makes one question one's own existence and threatens harmony and order. A confrontation with immensity, greatness or vastness causes such terror. While the beautiful is of human scale, and the viewer can perceive it in its totality, the sublime is something out of human scale; it is impossible both to perceive and understand. (62) This quality of unknowable-ness that provokes terror is found in states of being such as solitude and silence as well as objects such as mountaintops and stormy seas. (63) The concept reemerges during the eighteenth century as the sublime landscape and its sense of potential danger, the edge of an ocean or cliff. McEvelley notes that the sublime in this case represents a response to the rise of secularism, because it conflates the concept of God with another category of experience. Romanticism could thus replace the Enlightenment's discredited Christianity with the Sublime: "nature was to become a somewhat secularized version of the church" (60) in the work of writers such as Wordsworth and painters such as J.M.W. Turner.

Immanuel Kant's "Critique of Judgment" (1790) shifts the emphasis of the sublime from the object to the subject. For Kant, the sublime though instigated by objects in the world is not an external object itself, say a mountaintop. The sublime is a mental process, a particular subjective experience that presents the limits of human knowledge to the subject. By emphasizing the subject and the limits of human cognition, the Kantian sublime ultimately rests not in Nature itself, but in the human capacity to reason about Nature. In earlier views of the sublime, it is unreasonable, irrational, etc. By bringing reason into the sublime, some like McEvelley, argue that Kant pacifies the sublime into a rational Protestant vision, but Kant also re-defines and expands the possibilities of reason itself. I would argue that Kant's emphasis on the sublime's connection to reason does not inhibit the sublime but rather centers knowledge around the subject. Rather than pacifying the sublime, Kant deepens it, making it fundamental to human thought.

Kant's emphasis on the structures of the human mind and its ability to ascertain and know the world is central to his critical philosophy. He divides the mind into several faculties: the first of which is called the Imagination. The imagination, also called sensuous intuition, is the faculty of pure experience, the faculty of the senses. It is the faculty we use to take in things as they appear to us via sensory experience, what Kant calls Phenomena. The imagination is the faculty of perception, apprehension and presentation. If I see a dog for example, I apprehend its sense particulars with the faculty of the imagination. Then the second faculty, called Understanding, cognizes this phenomena into a concept. When I look at a dog with my imagination, I see a specific four footed animal, then my understanding kicks in allowing me to connect what I see to the concept of "dog" and think of the dog without limitation to this single determinate dog. The faculty of the understanding is the faculty of conception, comprehension and re-presentation. Thus the accord of the two faculties of the imagination and understanding allow me to both apprehend and comprehend the sense particulars around me.

For Kant, beauty originates in the senses (i.e. in the imagination) but ultimately leads to "indefinite concepts" of the understanding. Aesthetic judgment is an experience where the imagination presents an image to the

understanding, which stymies the impulse of the understanding to produce an abstract concept that will effectively contain or render intelligible the sense particulars. Instead of mastering the sensory data (as in the example of the dog) the understanding harmonizes with it in such a way that it produces an indefinite concept. For example: when we attend to clouds in the sky, our imagination apprehends certain sense particulars, but might be unable to totalize the sense particulars into a definite concept. We lose ourselves in a restful contemplation, in a free play between the faculty of the imagination and the faculty of the understanding. Neither faculty wins, but they exist in a kind of perfect harmony.

Beauty is pure aesthetic experience. It is called a pure judgment of taste. There are certain criteria the subject must adhere to in order to judge the beautiful, to make a pure aesthetic judgment. The first criterion is a disinterested subject. The pleasant is differentiated from the beautiful because it is bound up with interest or desire. That which is merely pleasant gratifies the senses and does not lead to indeterminate concepts. If I am hungry, my desire is to eat. My hunger is an interest. When I eat out of hunger, I may describe my meal as pleasant, but not as beautiful. Furthermore, my pleasure is a personal one; someone less hungry may not derive the same pleasure.

While the pleasant is a private judgment, the beautiful is a public one. If I enter the main dome of the Taj Mahal and deem the marbled walls beautiful, I cannot base my judgment on my interest in it, say using it for the utilitarian purpose of shelter. If my appreciation of the dome had to do with my use for it, it would be bound up in what Kant calls subjective interest. Furthermore, if I judged the object for its usefulness in general, thinking that the object might be useful to another person, the judging of the object is based on its objective purpose. In the latter case, I base my judgment on the definite concept of "utility." Pure judgments of taste cannot be based on definite concepts. Furthermore, if I judge this interior based on a historical lineage, saying that I could appreciate the tile work because of my academic understanding of Mughal architecture and its stylistic innovation for instance, I base my judgment on a definite concept. If I appreciate the Taj Mahal because of the poignant love story of its making, I base my judgment on the moral concept of abiding love. Kant notes that critics often attribute beauty to the most regular of geometric figures. Kant rejects the notion that a regular figure by itself is more beautiful than an irregular one on the basis of perfect form. If we judged beauty on such a doctrine, we would be basing it on a definite concept, a moral judgment of the good, rather than an aesthetic judgment of the beautiful. A circle, a square, or a cube is not inherently without beauty but if we judge their beauty according to this regularity, we are unable to make a pure judgment of taste.

If my judgment of the interior is not based on subjective interest or any definite concept, I assume that my satisfaction is one of universal satisfaction. This notion forms the second of the Kantian criteria for a pure judgment of taste, that of subjective universality. It is a notion that has caused much confusion and dissension in the last two hundred years. Because, in Kant's world, the structures of the mind are universal, I assume that everyone could appreciate this building as beautiful, that everybody could engage in a free play between this sensory intuition and these indefinite concepts. The universality of a pure judgment of taste is not a claim, but an assumption, and therefore ultimately resides in the subject's feeling. As opposed to the pleasant, which I see as private, I now have such an abiding conviction that my judgment of the beautiful is universal that I wrongly demand agreement from others: "he says 'the thing is beautiful', and he does not count on the agreement of others with his judgment of satisfaction, because he has found this agreement several times before, but he demands it of them. He blames them if they judge otherwise and denies them taste." (47) Despite my conviction of the object's beauty, Kant warns here that one must restrain from forcing it on others: "all judgments of taste are singular judgments" (49) and "there can be no rule according to which anyone is to be forced to recognize anything as beautiful. We cannot press [upon others] by the aid of any reasons or fundamental propositions our judgment that a coat, a house, or a flower is beautiful." (50) My assumption of its universal beauty resides in my disinterested engagement and not in the object itself so any definition of what is universally beautiful would be folly and counter to Kant's aims: "there can be no objective rule of taste which shall determine by means of concepts what is beautiful." (68)

Finally we come to the last of the criteria for a pure judgment of taste: Purposiveness without a Purpose. The appreciation of the object should not originate in an objective purpose: or any kind of practical utility. In other words, a pure judgment of taste does not originate in the utilitarian purpose of nourishment (as in the case of the food) or shelter (as in the case of the Taj Mahal). Therefore, the object that one observes is said to be without a purpose. Purposiveness is an internal logic, a kind of intentionality of the object based on abstract principles. In the case of an object, the purposiveness resides in the design of it. This is why colors and sounds in themselves cannot be beautiful, but remain merely pleasant, as Gilles Deleuze describes in his paraphrasing of Kant: "Color and sound are too material, too entrenched in our senses to be reflected in our imagination in this way: they are the auxiliaries rather than the constituents of beauty. The essential thing is the design, the composition, which are precisely the

manifestations of formal reflections." (47) In other words, the color purple for example has no purposiveness on its own. Only when placed next to another color in a composition can it come to have a purposiveness and approach beauty. Here Kant notes that in everyday speech people often use the word beautiful to denote pleasant. "To one violet color is soft and lovely; to another, it is washed out and dead. As regards to the pleasant, therefore, the fundamental proposition is valid: everyone has his own taste (the taste of sense). The case is quite different with the beautiful." (47) Thus when we look at the interior marbled walls, the purposiveness has to do with their internal order, a shifting in scales, a repetition in motif, a consistency of color. Purposiveness can be found in objects of art or in objects of nature. Looking at a flower in nature for Kant, presents a kind of purposiveness, intentionality, or design in nature: "independent natural beauty discovers to us a technique of nature which represents it as a system in accordance with laws, the principle of which we do not find in the whole of our faculty of understanding. That principle is the principle of purposiveness...but also belonging to something analogous to art." (84) Purposiveness cannot be based on externalized definite concepts, such as the geometrical regularity of figures, but must be derived from our sensory experience of the object. Only in looking at the interior can we come to find its purposiveness and deem it beautiful. We cannot describe the purposiveness apart from the object itself.

We have seen how an object might be deemed universally beautiful, how this judgment cannot be based in interest or definite concepts. It is based rather in the purposiveness of an object and yields to indefinite concepts of the understanding. The three Criteria for judging the sublime are the same as the beautiful: disinterestedness, subjective universality, and purposiveness without a purpose. The sublime also originates in the senses, i.e. in the imagination, but rather than leading to indefinite concepts of the understanding, it leads to indefinite concepts of the last faculty of the mind called Reason. Remember the dog. We took in sense particulars that were then cognized into a concept of dog in our minds. However, the dog is also a thing-in-itself, outside of my knowledge of it. One might hope that the dog has a life of its own, an existence outside my human knowledge. The dog has an "essence," it has "dogness." Kant calls things in themselves noumena, which differ from phenomena, or things as they appear. The essence of the dog, the dog in itself, the dog's noumenon remains unknowable to me, because it exists outside of the boundaries of the mind, and the conditions of human cognition. Despite my various attempts to experience "dogness," I will always fail. Though I cannot know the dog's essence, I can ponder it, through the faculty of reason.

Whereas the faculty of understanding deals with providing concepts to images, the faculty of reason gives form to those ideas that have no image, and ideas that go beyond human experience. For example, Freedom in nature is a concept that has no image. It deals with ideas that go beyond the possibility of pure sensory experience. It is our faculty of reason that can reckon with such a concept that does not exist as sensory information. Thus the faculty of the imagination is said to schematize, the faculty of understanding to legislate or judge, and the faculty of reason to symbolize. The understanding legislates over phenomena, things as they appear in our sensory experience. Reason legislates over noumena; though we cannot ever know noumena, reason attempts to legislate and form ideas about that which lies outside of the sensible, what Kant calls the supersensible.

The sublime exists within the supersensible. We cannot find the sublime in objects that we perceive with our senses: in bounded objects, but we can find it in those things that are supersensible: those things that are boundless: "The sublime is to be found in a formless object so far as in it or by occasion of its boundlessness is represented, and yet its totality is also present to thought." (82) Here Kant's ideas directly mirror those of Burke, who says that boundless objects, like nature present the sublime. However, Kant takes the idea a bit further here, by asserting that the boundless object is ultimately totalized in the mind, through the faculty of reason. In other words, the sublime is ultimately formless, we can make no image for it, and the notion of it rests in our minds. There is no "adequate presentation" (84) of the sublime, and this very inadequateness causes an agitation and an arousal of the mind. Kant describes the sublime as horrible; filling the mind with agitation, until it abandons sensibility altogether. Though the sublime originates in the senses, it ultimately abandons the sensible realm for the supersensible. Deleuze notes that for Kant, the presentation of the sublime presents to us the limits of our senses, but at the same time affirms the awesome powers of the mind, and of reason to render whole this limitation. Thus the initial feeling of the sublime is one of terror and inadequacy, when one realizes the limits of perception. This evokes pain or agitation, repulsion. Beauty engages the mind in a pleasurable restful free play caused by a harmony of the faculties. The sublime, on the other hand, by presenting the limits of the sensible world, provides a kind of painful movement in the mind caused by a conflict of the faculties of imagination and reason. This movement of pain however ultimately finds pleasure again, when the subject starts to revel in this very movement, when the subject through the faculty of reason, starts to ponder the nature of reason itself; Kant describes this movement as a subjective purposiveness. Though we cannot apprehend infinity, we can represent it in our minds as an idea, through the faculty of reason, and this ability creates a kind of

pleasure, an attraction. The sublime presents a simultaneous repulsion and attraction. Again to quote Deleuze, who describes the experience of the sublime: "It is as if the imagination were confronted with its own limit, forced to strain to its utmost, experiencing a violence which stretches to the extremity of its power... Imagination thus learns that it is Reason that pushes it to the limit of its power, forcing it to admit that all its power is nothing in comparison to an Idea." (Deleuze 49-50) And it is this idea, a product of reason that affirms our subjectivity, paradoxically by showing us its limits.

Kant names two kinds of sublime: the mathematically sublime or the concept of boundlessness in infinity and the dynamically sublime in nature, the confrontation with nature's raw power. Despite the fact that we cannot find the sublime in any object, much less any work of art, Kant does use certain monuments as examples in explaining his idea of the sublime. He mentions St. Peter's cathedral in Rome and the Pyramids as monuments that may inspire within us the feeling of inadequacy associated with the sublime. He notes that one must not go too far away or too close to the Pyramids: if one is too close, one sees the individual stones used to build them, and if one stands too far away, one is able to totalize the form, and it is no longer boundless. One has to stand just at the right distance to feel their immensity. When I was eight years old, my family visited Cairo. I remember being in a car, driving toward the pyramids of Giza, and when they came into sight, I turned to my mother saying: "I'm scared." My family laughed. If only I had read Kant, I could have told them that this was the terror associated with the sublime.

Thus, the major contribution of Kant has been the centering of the subject, affirming the human mind as that which is the most awesome. In Kant's view, the subject cannot know the essence or noumenon of any object. We cannot know free nature, for example "dogness;" we only know objects through human sensory experience called phenomena. But presenting noumena as a category opens it up to human desire. Deleuze writes: "In many ways understanding and reason are tormented by the ambition to make things in themselves [noumena] known to us" (24) and "The abyss between the sensible world [phenomena] and the supersensible world [noumena] exists only in order to be filled." (39) These two statements provide the crux in understanding Kant's agenda and his influence on subsequent philosophical thought. Though we cannot ever know the "essences" of things, these essences do exist for Kant. And it is our attempt to get closer to noumena, to things in themselves, to essences, that is the nature of the aesthetic itself. Aesthetic judgment (beauty, but even more so the sublime) is an attempt to arrive at noumena through reason, and therefore at the essence of human subjectivity.

McEvelley notes the representation of the sublime in Painting moved from works of Caspar David Friedrich and Turner to the Modernist project of abstract painting, as evidenced in the work often alluded to as the "abstract sublime." In this realm of painting, the ground of the vast landscape, becomes a kind of void that overtakes the figures altogether into a kind of monochrome bliss. As McEvelley describes, the surface of the picture itself becomes "the absolutely primal picture that depicts itself, as Aristotle had described the absolute beginning of consciousness as the thought that thinks itself." (72) Because the sublime is that which we can have no image for, it seemed a likely pursuit for abstract painters. In a 1961 article for Art News entitled "The Abstract Sublime" Robert Rosenblum compares the sublime feeling of looking at the paintings of Mark Rothko, Clifford Still, Barnett Newman and Jackson Pollock to the sublime feeling that Romantic landscape painters Friedrich and Turner sought in their work:

In the abstract language of Rothko, such literal detail- a bridge of empathy between the real spectator and the presentation of a transcendental landscape- is no longer necessary; we ourselves are the monk before the sea, standing silently and contemplatively before the huge and soundless pictures as if we were looking at a sunset or a moonlit night. Like the mystic trinity of sky, water and earth that, in the Friedrich and Turner, appears to emanate from one unseen source, the floating, horizontal tiers of veiled light in the Rothko seem to conceal a total, remote presence that we can only intuit and never fully grasp. The infinite, glowing voids carry us beyond reason to the sublime; we can only submit to them in an act of faith and let ourselves be absorbed into their radiant depths. (40)

Rosenblum states that the Rothko painting takes one "beyond reason to the sublime." He seems to be adhering to Burke's notion of the sublime as irrational: not the Kantian notion that privileges reason's ability to present the sublime in its totality, however indefinitely. But nevertheless, the statement does privilege the Kantian dictum, particularly the mention of intuition and its inability to fully grasp: relating thus to Kant's indefinite concepts of the understanding and reason. Besides Rosenblum, Clement Greenberg was another influential critic who promoted these painters precisely for their purity and the self-referentiality in his famous essay Modernist Painting. Thus Kant's emphasis on the "purity" of beauty and the sublime, his emphasis on disinterest and rejection of definite external

concepts has given fuel to those who champion the “self-referential,” artwork and an “art for arts sake” agenda. Kant gave fuel to the category of the aesthetic, which, as stated earlier, rejects external concepts in favor of an internal purposiveness. Kant wanted you to forget what you know when you looked at an object. Forget your interest in it, forget who did it, forget its relation to other works or any definite concepts at all. Take it utterly out of context; universalize it. Consider the object in and of itself, not for its utility, not for its place in history. Allow your imagination to take in sense particulars and your understanding or reason to engage in an unmediated free play: but never truly totalize, never arrive at a definite concept. For these reasons, Kant emerges as the formalist of all formalists, the greatest champion of the mythology of the privileged realm of the aesthetic as apart from ideology, convention, language, and history itself.

Deleuze, a postmodernist thinker, who writes a pithy summation of Kant’s ideas in a text called “Kant’s Critical Theory” called it “a book on an enemy.” (xvi) How is Kant an enemy for Deleuze? The last several decades of structuralist and post-structuralist theories address directly the impossibility of Kant’s humanist model of subjectivity and the self-referentiality in art making that it yields. Semiotics, as applied to these same abstract expressionist works, presents the impossibility of forgetting what we know or desire in an ideal of disinterestedness, despite Rosenblum’s desire to present Rothko’s work as “beyond reason.” We are what we know. What we are as entities is inseparable from what we acquire through experience, language, convention, and culture. Reality, Nature, Soul, Desire and Need are not prior entities, they are themselves representations, pretenses, if you will, containers of ideology, culturally constructed through language itself. The soul exists only in my utterance of it, and in the shared convention of language that allows me to communicate the idea of the soul with you. The meaning of soul thus changes over time and in context. Interiority is no longer privileged as the prior, untainted, force that yields human creativity. Kant’s humanist model of the self, a model of subjectivity that asserts the existence of an essence, a noumenon, is a representation in itself, a sign if you will. But Kant’s model of subjectivity anticipated its demise; for though Kant’s humanist model presents a centered essentialist subjectivity, it affirmed our inability to ever know or define this essence. Thus, ironically it is Kant’s focus on the limits of subjectivity that paved the way for Western thought to rethink the very category of the subject as a single entity. Kant, it seems almost willfully, presents himself as a kind of punching bag to many philosophers that succeeded him. It is his insistence, his rational doctrines and dictums of self-referentiality, universality, and essence that form a kind of icon of modernism to be rejected. Most recently, however, critics such as Said convincingly and single handedly reject what he calls [postmodern] structuralist antihumanism in favor of the real potentiality and materiality of humanism: “despite the (in my opinion) shallow but influential ideas of a certain facile type of radical antifoundationalism, with its insistence that real events are at most linguistic effects....these are so contradicted by the historical impact of human agency and labor as to make a detailed refutation of them here unnecessary.” (10)

Marxist critics such as Terry Eagleton critique the category of the aesthetic as one that tries to deny ideology, (because that might be bound to definite concepts), but ultimately embodies it in the utmost. For Marx himself, the point of contention between his writings and Kant, exists in the idea of “use-value.” For Marx, the use-value of an object is the usefulness of the thing, grounded in the inherent and natural properties of the thing. Bread has use value because it satisfies hunger. It satisfies human needs, what Kant would call an interest. For Marx, the concept of utility does not denigrate the object, but rather elevates it, to quote Eagleton: “The utility of objects is the ground, not the antithesis of our appreciation of them.” (205) The genius of Capitalism lies in its ability to do, in a most perverse way, what Kant indeed proposed, to separate the object from one’s seeming interest in it, from its utility, from its usefulness. As Eagleton notes: “Classical aesthetics and commodity fetishism both purge the specificity of things, stripping their sensuous content to a pure ideality of form.” (205) Thus for Marx, we are beings with interest, and this interest is both necessary and undeniable. Disinterestedness remains a useful fiction for Capitalist ideologies. Commodity fetishism, i.e. the following of interests in its extreme case, is the ultimate outcome of the Kantian ideal of disinterestedness. One doesn’t need a new car every three years but the investment in pure style apart from utility propels one to keep buying. Marx’s warning of the danger of considering objects apart from their use-value has proved to be true to the utmost.

Kant’s vision has thus proved a wonderful fantasy so let us celebrate it even as we understand the pitfalls of idealism. Kant’s project also represents skepticism, and it is through his insistence on the skepticism inherent in critique that subsequent thinkers are able to critique him. There is currently an impulse to revise and revive ideas of humanism, universality and essence in a post-post-modern world. Recently, in “After Theory,” Eagleton reconciles his Marxist influences with ideals of universality by asking for a materialist notion of universality based on the shared reality of our mortal human bodies over the “familiar bogeyman of universality peddled by postmodernists...the

Western conspiracy which speciously projects our local values and beliefs onto the entire globe." (160). Despite humanism's misuse of politics and public policy in the form of ethnocentrism and empire, Said asks us to remember the humanist ideal "based on the human being's capacity to make knowledge, as opposed to absorbing it passively, reactively, dully." (11) Can we similarly see Kant's universality not as the masquerade of authoritarianism but as an assertion of what makes human beings common? Kant's ideas are nuanced; they carry the tools of their own dismantling. There is an awe of reason in this formalist world, a limit to subjectivity in this humanist vision and the paradox of a universality that is also subjective.

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