

THE ARTISTIC ABSOLUTE. KANT ON THE COEXISTENCE OF BEAUTY AND SUBLIMITY IN ART

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It's as if the sea wants something of me. God is there, too, God calls. There's really nothing funny about it, he's everywhere. And everywhere he calls Bavink. You get crazy hearing your name being called so often. And then, Bavink must paint. Then, God should be put on a little piece of linen and paint. Then Bavink calls 'God'. And so they continue to call each other. For God it's a game, he's infinite and omnipresent. He calls and calls. But Bavink only has one stupid head and one stupid right hand and can only work on one piece at a time. And if he thinks he has God, he has linen and paint. Then God is everywhere, except where Bavink wants him to be. (Nescio, *Little Titans*)

Introduction

In his *Critique of Judgment* Kant makes a distinction between the beautiful and the sublime. They differ in the effects they have on the human mind and in the faculties that are addressed. Furthermore, there seems to be a difference between the sorts of natural objects that arouse a feeling of aesthetic pleasure, i.e. those objects we judge beautiful, and the sorts of objects that arouse a feeling of the sublime.

When we turn our attention from nature to the fine arts, however, a problem arises. Some commentators have argued that Kant pays too little attention to the role of the sublime in his discussion of fine arts and, conversely, to the role of fine arts in his discussion of the sublime. And indeed, much of his discussion of the sublime concerns the feeling of the sublime aroused by objects in nature, while his discussion of fine art is concerned with beauty in art rather than the sublime. Nevertheless, in several passages Kant alludes to the fact that a feeling of the sublime can be aroused by works of art, and that the sublime can be part of a work of fine art.

However, in §52 Kant makes clear that the sublime in art is possible only *in combination with* the beautiful: 'the exhibition of the sublime may, insofar as it belongs to fine art, be combined with beauty in a *tragedy in verse*, in a *didactic poem*, or in an *oratorio*' (CJ, 325: 195).¹ In

other words, while aesthetic pleasure and feelings of the sublime in nature are aroused by different objects, Kant allows the possibility of them being aroused by one and the same artistic object. The question is, however, whether this is consistent with the way he characterizes the feelings of the beautiful and the sublime in their respective *Analytics*. In this paper, I will deal with these questions. What is the relation between the sublime and fine arts? And, considering Kant's assumption that the sublime must be combined with beauty in art, how is such a combination possible

To deal with these questions, I will first discuss Kant's conception of judgments of beauty and judgments of the sublime, their similarities and their differences. On the basis of that discussion, we will see that a combination of beauty and sublimity in one object is problematic. Next, I will discuss the way in which the beautiful and the sublime appear in Kant's discussion of the fine arts. I will further discuss Kirk Pillow's attempt to demonstrate how a combination of them in a work of art would be possible, by identifying the sublime with Kant's conception of aesthetic ideas. After having shown several problems in Pillow's reading of Kant, I will turn to Lyotard's notion of the sublime in art. Although I believe Lyotard does convincingly argue that the sublime in art is possible, he too has to eventually drop the Kantian requirement of a combination of beauty and sublimity in art.

1. Beautiful form

In the *Analytic of the Beautiful*, Kant discusses what it means to make a pure aesthetic judgment of the beautiful. In the third moment of the *Analytic* he argues that when we judge an object (or its representation) aesthetically, we judge it only by its form. This follows from the two preceding moments. Firstly, if we would not judge solely by the form of an object, we would take into account aspects of the object that for Kant count as mere sensations, such as colour and tone. But sensations, as Kant writes in §3, are part of judgments of the agreeable, and hence connected with an interest. Secondly, from the connection of sensation with an interest it follows that a judgment which takes into account sensation cannot be universal, since, as Kant argues in §6, only a liking devoid of all interest can (and must) claim universal assent. Hence, if we, in judging an object, do not merely take into account form but also what is 'material' in sensation, the aesthetic judgment would be impure.

What does it mean to judge a form beautiful? According to Kant, the form arousing aesthetic pleasure is what he calls 'the mere form of purposiveness' (CJ, 221: 66), whereby 'purpose' is defined as 'the object of a concept insofar as we regard this concept as the object's cause (the real ground of its possibility)' (CJ, 220: 64-65). When we judge an object aesthetically, however, we do not take into account its purpose, since this would have to involve a concept of what the object is for; and as Kant argues in the fourth moment, the aesthetic judgment is without concept. Hence, the 'mere form of purposiveness' means that the parts and whole of the object are internally organized in such a manner that we need to assume purposiveness, even when we do not know what this purpose is or whether there is a purpose at all. Kant writes: 'Hence there can be purposiveness without a purpose, insofar as we do not posit the causes of this form in a will, and yet can grasp the explanation of its possibility only by deriving it from a will' (CJ, 220: 65).

This 'mere form of purposiveness' moreover, has a 'purposiveness of form', in the sense that it is purposive for us.² The aesthetic pleasure aroused by the beautiful form involves the harmony of the imagination and the understanding. But not merely harmony, since this harmony is presupposed in the experience of every object (as the subjective condition of

objective knowledge). Furthermore, for the judgment to be an aesthetic judgment it has to be without a concept, and therefore not determinative but reflective. It follows from this that the imagination in aesthetic judgment is not governed by the understanding (as in ordinary, determinative judgment), but that imagination and understanding are in *free play* (§9). Imagination is required to bring a manifold of sensible data under a concept – to search for patterns and unity – and as such stimulates our power of judgment. A beautiful object has ‘purposiveness of form’, then, if the contemplation of its form brings aesthetic pleasure and hence engages our cognitive faculties, sustaining them in that stage of free play: ‘We *linger* in our contemplation of the beautiful, because this contemplation reinforces and reproduces itself’ (CJ, 222: 68). This pleasure adds nothing to our knowledge nor sets us to action, but is merely our own ‘joy’ in judging – or as Kant calls it in §1: a ‘feeling of life’ (CJ, 204: 44).

2. The sublime

The judgment of the sublime, as Kant describes it in the *Analytic of the Sublime*, is an aesthetic judgment of an altogether different order from the judgment of the beautiful. Kant distinguishes between the mathematically and the dynamically sublime, involving the sublime as greatness and as might respectively. This distinction however, seems not to involve different ‘types’ of sublimity so much, but refers rather to different ways in which an object can be sublime, or even to sorts of objects or representations arousing the feeling of the sublime (cf. Lyotard 1991, 90). The mathematically sublime is what Kant calls the absolutely (*schlechthin*) large, the sublime ‘in comparison with which everything else is small’ (CJ, 250: 105). From this definition it follows that nothing in nature, that is, nothing given by the senses, can strictly be called sublime, since, as the saying goes, ‘there’s always a bigger fish’. This is not to say that large natural objects – what Kant calls the ‘simply’ large – cannot *arouse* a feeling of the sublime.

What is a feeling of the (mathematically) sublime? Kant distinguishes between apprehension and comprehension (§26), where the first means progressive ‘counting’ of elements, and the second the attempt to unite the elements into a totality (i.e. bringing them into *form*). Confronted with a great magnitude, our mind seeks to grasp it in its entirety, but cannot do so: the imagination can apprehend, but not comprehend. It cannot live up to the demand of reason for a unification in a single intuition. Kant writes: ‘[What happens is that] our imagination strives to progress toward infinity, while our reason demands absolute totality as a real idea, and so [the imagination,] our power of estimating the magnitude of things in the world of sense, is inadequate to that idea’ (CJ, 250: 106). However, this very inadequacy of our imagination makes us aware of the supersensibility of our reason, in comparison with which everything else is small. In other words: reason is, *sensu stricto*, the only sublime thing.

Something similar happens in the dynamically sublime, when we are confronted with nature as might. If we judge something sublime dynamically, we judge something to be fearful, without however being afraid. If the latter would be the case, the judgment would not be disinterested, and hence not an aesthetic judgment. So a sublime feeling is possible only from a safe place. Confronted with nature’s might, we realize our own impotence towards it. However, just as in the mathematically sublime the imagination’s inadequacy makes us aware of reason’s absolute largeness, here our feeling of impotence makes us realize the might of reason, in our ability to judge ourselves independent of nature: it ‘reveals in us a superiority over nature that is the basis of a self-preservation quite different in kind from the one that can be assailed and endangered by nature outside us’ (CJ, 261: 121).

Hence, in both cases, the sublime involves a displeasure immediately followed by a pleasure. The displeasure comes from the inadequacy of our imagination or from the impotence of our sensible being; the pleasure comes from the absolute largeness and supersensibility of our own reason, of which we become aware through the initial displeasure. Therefore, when we call an object sublime, we are using the term inappropriately, since, according to Kant, only our own mind is truly sublime.

3. Similarities and differences between the beautiful and the sublime

We can now understand the similarities and differences between the beautiful and the sublime, as summed up by Kant in §23. The first similarity is that we like both for their own sake, that is, both judgments of beauty and of the sublime are disinterested. Secondly, both are reflective judgments rather than determinative ones, by which he means that both are without a concept. Taken together, these similarities distinguish these judgments from both judgments of the agreeable (which are interested) and of the good (which depend on a concept). Thirdly, both judgments involve an interaction of the imagination with the power of concepts (which includes both the understanding and reason). Fourthly, both are singular (since they are without concept) but nevertheless claim universality.

Kant then proceeds in summing up the differences between the beautiful and the sublime. The first of these is that, as we have seen, the beautiful concerns the form of the object, while the sublime concerns its unboundedness, and therefore could also be aroused by a formless object.³ Secondly, the beautiful and sublime speak to different faculties, since the beautiful involves a relation between the imagination and the understanding (their free play), while the sublime involves a relation between the imagination and reason (their initial conflict and subsequent 'attunement'). Thirdly, because of its sense of infinity and unboundedness, the sublime is connected with a presentation of quantity, while the beautiful is connected with a presentation of quality.⁴ Fourthly, while the beautiful pleases directly, and produces 'a feeling of life's being furthered' (CJ, 244: 98), the sublime involves 'a momentary inhibition of the vital forces' (CJ, 245: 98) and pleases indirectly. The sublime feeling is serious, as contrasted with the 'play' of the beautiful, and moreover, Kant states that it is an emotion. Pleasure, in the sublime, is always negative in involving a moment of being repelled. On the basis of the preceding we can see why this is so: the might or largeness of the object may repel us, and only attracts us *when* we become aware of our reason's superiority to it. In the sublime, the object is therefore not the actual source of the pleasure, as is the case with the beautiful.

The final distinction is, according to Kant, the most important, and concerns purposiveness. While the beautiful involves the aforementioned 'purposiveness of form', which makes it 'predetermined for our power of judgment' (CJ, 245: 98-99), the sublime, in its form, may appear contrapurposive. This difference pertains, however, only to the beautiful and sublime in nature, since the sublime in art 'is always confined to the conditions that [art] must meet to be in harmony with nature' (CJ, 245: 98).

Considering these differences, we can see why, at least in the case of natural objects, it is difficult to think of the same object as being both beautiful and sublime.⁵ This object would have to have both beautiful form and be unbounded (albeit not necessarily formless). It would bring about both a harmony and free play of the imagination and the understanding, and a conflict and subsequent attunement of imagination and reason. It would both stimulate judgment and frustrate it. And it would be the source of both a positive pleasure (in the object)

and a negative pleasure (for our own mind). Indeed, it seems almost impossible for a natural object to be both beautiful and sublime.

One possibility I would like to consider is that an object *can* be both beautiful and sublime, though not at the same moment. In his discussion of the mathematically sublime Kant mentions the example of the pyramids, and that, to fully enjoy them, one must neither be too close nor too far away. Apparently, the sublime has something to do with the distance of the subject to the object: only from a close(r) distance, the sheer magnitude of an object is revealed to the imagination, the comprehension of the parts fails, and this arouses the initial displeasure that makes reason aware of its superiority. We may think then, of mountains, trees, or animals (elephants, giraffes), which, from a distance we may like for their beautiful form, but from up close, through their largeness, arouse in us a feeling of the sublime. It would seem impossible, though, to call the same natural object beautiful and sublime *at the same moment*. Leaving this aside for the moment, we will now consider the beautiful and the sublime as combined in the fine arts.

4. The sublime and the beautiful in fine art

To consider the possibility of a combination of the beautiful and the sublime in art, we first have to get an idea of Kant's conception of fine art, which he provides by distinguishing fine art from other domains. Art is different from nature, because of its intentionality: it is a product of human freedom rather than of nature. Fine art is distinguished from science in that it is not theoretical, but is a practical ability, and is distinguished from craft because of the freedom of its form. Finally, it is distinguished from agreeable art, which serves the purpose of being pleasing for the sensations, while fine art serves no purpose but its own. The pleasure aroused by it, as Kant argues, is a pleasure in 'ways of cognizing' (CJ, 305: 172).

In §45 Kant writes: 'In [dealing with] a product of fine art we must become conscious that it is art rather than nature, and yet the purposiveness in its form must seem as free from all constraint of chosen rules as if it were a product of mere nature' (CJ, 306: 173). In other words, although we know that the producer of the work was thinking of a purpose, we must not be aware of the concept of this purpose, lest our aesthetic judgment be impure.

Kant continues discussing the conditions of a work being fine art. In order to be fine art, a work requires taste and genius. Taste concerns the work's beautiful form, and, as he writes: 'giving this form to a product of fine art requires merely taste' (CJ, 312: 180). However, having beautiful form is not a sufficient ground for being a work of fine art: it also needs what Kant calls 'spirit', which is 'the ability to express aesthetic ideas' (CJ, 313-314: 182). We will discuss aesthetic ideas later, but for now what is important is that being tasteful, i.e. having beautiful form, is not enough. There is room left for the sublime in art, which is exactly what Pillow will argue.

Before turning to Pillow's account, I want to point to a helpful distinction made by Allison, between the depiction of something sublime, the sublime depiction of something and the depiction evoking a feeling of the sublime (Allison 2001, 339). Let us consider these three possibilities. The first would be a depiction of massive mountains, volcanoes, wild oceans, and the like. However, we might ask whether a painting of something sublime is indeed a sublime painting. After all, a painting of something ugly, such as Ghirlandaio's portrait of an old man holding a child, is in fact, because of its form, beautiful. Moreover, in order for us to judge an object sublime (which, let us remind ourselves, is inappropriate in the first place)

means that, because of its magnitude or might, it arouses sublime feelings in us. This is not necessarily the case in the depiction of something sublime, and if so then we are not justified to call this depiction itself sublime, but merely beautiful.⁶

Conversely, when Kant does call artefacts sublime, they do not appear to be beautiful. Take for instance the following example: 'Perhaps the most sublime passage in the Jewish Law is the commandment: Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven or on earth, or under the earth, etc.' (CJ, 274: 135). Kant calls this passage sublime exactly because it expresses the inadequacy of the imagination vis-a-vis reason, and its necessary restriction by it.⁷ This demonstrates the difficulty of a combination of the sublime and the beautiful, since in the beautiful the imagination, in harmony with the understanding, is stimulated and keeps going. The sublime, on the other hand, demands that it be restricted. Kant's appraisal of the Jewish Law (which itself he would probably not call fine art) suggests that the sublime can only appear in the absence of beauty.

Similarly, in his discussion of fine arts he writes in a footnote: 'Perhaps nothing more sublime has ever been said, or a thought ever been expressed more sublimely, than in that inscription above the temple of *Isis* (Mother Nature): "I am all that is, that was, and that will be, and no mortal has lifted my veil"' (CJ, 316n: 185). Why is this sublime? The fact that Kant thinks the thought is sublime probably has to do with the idea of the totality of nature being incomprehensible by the imagination. However, here he also states that the thought is *expressed* sublimely. Although it is not immediately clear why, we can conclude from this sentence that Kant thought that something can be presented sublimely. However, it is not at all clear whether he also believes that we are dealing here with a work of fine art. Both the examples of the Jewish Law and of the Temple of Isis make clear that the sublime appears despite its presentation in fine art rather than through it. As we will see later, Lyotard thematises precisely this negative aspect of the sublime.

We should finally consider the possibility of something evoking a feeling of the sublime. In the above we already alluded to the fact that Kant considers the pyramids (mathematically) sublime. In the same section he continues, however, that if we want to give an example of a pure aesthetic judgment (of the sublime) 'then we must point to the sublime not in products of art (e.g., buildings, columns, etc.), where both the form and the magnitude are determined by a human purpose, not in natural things *whose very concept carries with it a determinate purpose* [...], but rather in crude nature' (CJ, 253: 109). Since we know that the pyramids or St. Peter's Basilica have determinate purposes, our judgment is interested and therefore impure. But he then goes on to say that 'an object is *monstrous* if by its magnitude it nullifies the purpose that constitutes its concept' (CJ, 253: 109), suggesting that if an object is big enough it will erase the concept of a purpose in our presentation of the object. In entering St. Peter's Basilica, for instance, we are so overwhelmed by its magnitude, that we will not judge it by its purpose; indeed, we could say that we are momentarily distracted from the fact of it being a church.⁸ Indeed, recalling the issue of distance in the preceding section, we can imagine certain artistic objects being both beautiful and sublime. However, as we concluded there, the same object cannot be beautiful and sublime at the same time. Only from a distance can we get aesthetic pleasure from the church's beautiful form, but once inside we are overwhelmed by its sheer magnitude, and our imagination is no longer in free play, but repelled by the fact that it cannot comprehend the members of the whole as a single unity.

We can see now that it is very difficult to think of objects, both in nature and in fine art, that are both beautiful and sublime. And if such an object may exist, it is difficult to imagine how

we, as subjects, could have at the same time a feeling of aesthetic pleasure and a feeling of the sublime. In the next section we will turn to Pillow's attempt to solve this problem.

5. Pillow on the sublime and aesthetic ideas

Pillow's attempt to demonstrate the possibility of the combination of the beautiful and the sublime in works of fine art is directed at the third type discussed above: rather than a sublime subject-matter, he wants to talk about how the work of art can arouse an experience of the sublime. He does this by using Kant's distinction between form and content and writes: 'Now if judgments of beauty attend to the form of an object, one might suppose that a judgment of the sublime in the work would attend to the other side of the distinction, to its material content' (Pillow 1994, 444). As Kant argues, the judgment of taste refers merely to the object's form, whether it be a natural object or a work of fine art. However, according to Pillow's reading of Kant the judgment of the work of art cannot be reduced to the pure judgment of taste. As Kant makes clear in his discussion of the fine arts, for a work to be fine art it not only needs taste but also *spirit*, that is, the ability to exhibit aesthetic ideas. It is there that Pillow locates the sublime: 'I will argue [...] that the feeling of pleasure refers to the restful appreciation of the beautiful form which presents an aesthetic idea, but that the contemplation of its content may be more adequately characterized as an experience of *agitation* akin to the experience of the sublime' (Pillow 1994, 451). The judgment of the work of fine art exists, as Pillow argues, as two distinct stages, namely an aesthetic judgment of taste which refers to the work's beautiful form, and a second stage referring to its sublime content. Hence, form and content are judged at the same time, but by different criteria and through different faculties.

To understand and evaluate this interpretation, we need to turn our attention to Kant's conception of aesthetic ideas in the fine arts. In §49 he defines the aesthetic idea as 'a presentation of the imagination which prompts much thought, but to which no determinate thought whatsoever, i.e. no [determinate] *concept*, can be adequate, so that no language can express it completely and allow us to grasp it' (CJ, 314: 182). He proceeds by saying that the aesthetic idea is the counterpart of the rational idea: whereas in a rational idea no intuition is adequate to express a concept of reason (e.g., God, the soul, the totality of nature), here no concept of the understanding is adequate for the presentations of the imagination.

The exhibition of aesthetic ideas may involve the presentation of concepts: for instance, the combination of concepts in a poem, or the depiction of certain known objects in a painting. However, the interplay of these concepts may give rise to an aesthetic idea, prompting so much thought and free association that reason keeps on going and soon exceeds the concepts in question: 'it makes reason think more, when prompted by a [certain] presentation, than what can be apprehended and made distinct in the presentation' (CJ, 315: 183). Shakespeare's *Othello* may involve the concept of jealousy, but this concept does not in any way grasp the thoughts prompted by the presentation in this play. The aesthetic ideas exhibited by Shakespeare cannot be translated in determinative concepts; they cannot in any way be pinned down by the understanding. Pillow tellingly characterizes the aesthetic idea as 'the spur to an open-ended exploration of meaning and significance' (Pillow 1994, 453). According to him, these aesthetic ideas do not merely play a role in the production of fine art by the genius, but also in the interpretation of fine art: the intuition of the work produces an excess of thought in the receiver, thereby exceeding the boundaries of his conceptual understanding and 'reproducing' in his mind the aesthetic idea.

As we noted in the above, Pillow sees a strong connection between the sublime and aesthetic

ideas. While first he writes that the encounter with aesthetic ideas is 'akin' to the experience of the sublime, he later goes so far as to identify the interpretation of them with a feeling for the sublime, and to say that the reflection upon aesthetic ideas 'requires a judgment of the sublime' (Pillow 1994, 451 and 454). How does he understand this relation? As we have seen, the judgment of the sublime involves the inadequacy of the imagination, as it is confronted with reason's demand for the absolute. According to Pillow, the same is happening when we grapple with aesthetic ideas. The 'unbounded' content of aesthetic ideas prompts a flood of associations and 'kindred presentations'. Pillow writes: 'Yet when the imagination seeks to *comprehend* this multiplicity as a whole, the unbounded wealth of the aesthetic idea soon overwhelms it' (Pillow 1994, 453). Hence, he argues, as in the case of the (mathematically) sublime, the imagination finds itself inadequate for exhibiting the idea of a whole, leading the interpreter of the work of art to 'an agitated exploration of what its sublime content means' (Pillow 1994, 458).

Pillow's reading of Kant, which attempts to make possible a combination of beautiful form and sublime content in our experience of one and the same work, is certainly suggestive. However, I think there are some difficulties that ultimately make it unsatisfactory. I will first discuss some textual difficulties, those points in which Pillow's reading simply seems to be at odds with what Kant writes.

Firstly, Pillow writes that he takes aesthetic ideas to 'symbolize the sublime content of rational ideas' (Pillow 1994, 452). If we look into the text of the *Critique of Judgment* however, we notice that this is only part of the story. In §49 Kant indeed writes that an aesthetic idea can 'try to approach an exhibition of rational concepts (intellectual ideas), and thus [these concepts] are given a semblance of objective reality' (CJ, 314: 182). However, Kant continues as follows: 'Another reason, indeed the main reason, for calling those presentations ideas is that they are inner intuitions to which no concept can be completely adequate' (CJ, 314: 182). And as Kant gives examples of these inner intuitions, or things 'exemplified in experience' – death, love, envy, all the vices and virtues – it is clear that he is not thinking of ideas of reason. ⁹ Therefore, it is not at all clear why, according to Pillow, the imagination would have to work on the level of reason and would have to answer to reason's demand for totality.

This brings us to the second textual difficulty. According to Pillow, imagination finds itself inadequate to the demand of comprehending a whole, thereby causing a feeling of agitation (being the combination of pleasure and displeasure in face of the sublime). But this is at odds with what Kant writes about the encounter with aesthetic ideas. Firstly, in the case of aesthetic ideas, it is the understanding which cannot keep up with the rapid associations of the imagination, rather than the imagination which cannot keep up with reason's demand for the absolute. Furthermore, Kant never suggests that the confrontation with aesthetic ideas is in any way the source of agitation. To look at this closely, I will quote *in extenso* what Kant has to say about this:

[W]hen the aim is aesthetic, then the imagination is free, so that, over and above that harmony with the concept, it may supply, in an unstudied way, a wealth of undeveloped material for the understanding which the latter disregarded in its concept. But the understanding employs this material not so much objectively, for cognition, as subjectively, namely, to quicken the cognitive powers, though indirectly this does serve cognition too. Hence genius actually consists in the happy relation [...] allowing us, first, to discover ideas for a given concept, and,

second, to hit upon a way of *expressing* these ideas that enables us to communicate to others, as accompanying a concept, the mental attunement that those ideas produce (CJ, 317: 185-186).

There is clearly a difference in the relation between the faculties in the case of aesthetic ideas and the sublime. In the case of aesthetic ideas, the imagination is so productive that the understanding cannot keep up in bringing the multitude of intuitions under concepts. The understanding, therefore, fails, but this failure is, as Kant argues in the above, a *productive* failure, for it gets 'quickened' too. The faculties, in other words, are aligned and in harmony, therefore the reflection upon aesthetic ideas is purposive for the power of judgment.

This is altogether different in the case of the sublime, as Kant writes in §27: 'For just as, when we judge the beautiful, imagination and *understanding* give rise to a subjective purposiveness of the mental powers by their *accordance*, so do imagination and *reason* here give rise to such a purposiveness by their *conflict*' (CJ, 258: 115-116). Confronted with the sublime, the imagination is not free, but is stopped short by reason, which 'takes over'. The encounter with the sublime is initially contrapurposive for the power of judgment and purposive only once reason becomes aware of its supersensible powers. This is very different from the alignment of faculties in the case of aesthetic ideas. So when Kant talks about a 'happy relation' of the cognitive powers, and their reciprocal quickening, he is clearly speaking in terms of the beautiful. There is in any case, no mentioning of the agitation, negative pleasure, or alternation of attraction and repulsion that come with the sublime.

Two minor difficulties I want to just mention. Firstly, as Pillow acknowledges, the role of beauty in the aesthetic judgment threatens to diminish in his reading, which certainly is at odds with the text of the third Critique. He attempts to solve this problem by arguing that the sublime content stands in need of beautiful form, since the latter 'suspends the workaday activity of determinative judgment', and makes reflective judgment possible in the first place (Pillow 1994, 457). However, Pillow does not explain why an aesthetic judgment of the *ugly* could not do the same. Also, in the case of the ugly, after all, there is a suspension of determinative judgment, even if this does not entail the harmony of the faculties.¹⁰ Secondly, by reducing the sublime to the confines of the 'matter' of the work of art, Pillow cannot account for Kant's mentioning of a 'sublimely expressed' thought.

A final difficulty refers not so much to Pillow's reading of Kant's text, but simply to the question of whether his account is psychologically plausible. In his conclusion he writes: 'We now see that aesthetic judgment of the work of art involves a restful contemplation of its beautiful form combined with an agitated exploration of what its sublime content means' (Pillow 1994, 458). We can ask, however, what this combination of restfulness and agitation would look like. Is it possible to experience the aesthetic pleasure aroused by the beautiful form and the agitation that goes with the sublime – the combination of initial displeasure and subsequent pleasure, the alternation of attraction and repulsion – *in the same work at the same time*? I will not deny that an aesthetic experience can be highly complex, and all the more so in dealing with interesting works of art, but this description of Pillow's seems to be psychologically implausible, to say the least. This point, however, is not so much perhaps a problem of Pillow's reading, but rather of Kant's conceptions of the beautiful and the sublime themselves, which seems to make a combination of the two all but impossible. Perhaps, if we are to allow for the possibility of the sublime in the fine arts, we have to drop the condition of the beautiful. This is, in my view, what Lyotard does, to whose reading we now turn.

6. Lyotard and the negative presentation of the sublime

In his essay 'After the Sublime, the State of Aesthetics' Lyotard writes: 'For the last century, the arts have not had the beautiful as their main concern, but something which has to do with the sublime' (Lyotard 1991, 135). According to Lyotard, artists have, for a number of reasons (the independence from church and state, the invention of photography, etc.) forsaken the project of representation and documentation, and have turned their attention to the question: what is painting? He writes: 'These painters discover that they have to present that there is something that is not presentable [and] to make visible the fact that the visual field hides and requires invisibilities' (Lyotard 1991, 125). Sublime art, for Lyotard, means art which involves the absolute. However, as Lyotard argues with Kant, the absolute is unrepresentable, since presentation always implies relativizing and contextualizing. In this context, as we have seen, Kant approvingly mentions the Jewish ban on graven images. Nevertheless, according to Lyotard, one can present that there *is* an absolute; one can 'evoke' it by means of what Kant called 'negative presentation'.

To understand what Lyotard means we turn to Kant's mention of 'negative presentation' (or in Pluhar's translation: 'negative exhibition') in the General Comment on the Exposition of Aesthetic Reflective Judgments and Lyotard's close reading of it in his *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*.¹¹ In the General Comment Kant describes in fuller detail how the conflict and attunement of the imagination and reason works in a judgment of the sublime. Confronted with reason, 'the imagination finds nothing beyond the sensible that could support it, [but] this very removal of its barriers also makes it feel unbounded, so that its separation [from the sensible] is an exhibition of the infinite' (CJ, 274: 135). And as if to quickly reassure the shocked reader of his phrase 'exhibition of the infinite', Kant proceeds: 'and though an exhibition of the infinite can as such never be more than merely negative, it still expands the soul' (CJ, 274: 135).

This gesture of the imagination towards the infinite is connected to an affect that Kant

calls 'enthusiasm', 'a straining of our forces by ideas that impart to the mind a momentum whose effects are mightier and more permanent than are those of an impulse produced by presentations of sense' (CJ, 272: 132). Kant compares enthusiasm with madness (*Wahnsinn*),

but contrasts it with fanaticism, which is comparable to mania (*Wahnwitz*). In the latter case, the imagination strives to actually see something beyond the sensible, while enthusiasm acknowledges the negative character of the infinite in imagination; its madness therefore is 'a passing accident that presumably strikes even the soundest understanding on occasion' (CJ, 275: 136).

But what, asks Lyotard, is this negative presentation? He writes: 'It is neither the absence of presentation nor the presentation of nothingness. It is negative in the eyes of the sensible but at the same time is still a "mode of presentation" (*eine Darstellungsart*)' (Lyotard 1994, 151). This mode of presentation is, however, set apart from what it is supposed to present, namely the absolute, because of the latter's unrepresentability. The imagination, in following reason's demands, gestures towards the absolute, but:

because this gesture cannot succeed, there will remain in the order of presentation only a trace, the trace of a retreat, the sign of a 'presence' that will never be a presentation. 'Negative presentation' is the sign of the presence of the absolute, and it is or can only make a sign of being absent from the forms of the presentable (Lyotard 1994, 152).

In other words, that what cannot be presented, the absolute, can nevertheless become a presence in its absence, *because of the very failure of presentation*. Moreover, according to Lyotard this negative presentation is the only way we can become aware of the absolute.

Lyotard sometimes refers to the inexpressible absolute with the Lacanian term 'the Thing'. The Thing is what arouses the feeling of the sublime: it is that 'before which thinking retreats and toward which it races' (Lyotard 1994, 68). It might be of nature, but its nature is not conforming to, or somehow 'fitted' to our judgment, as is the case in the judgment of taste. It is that before which all language falls short, and which, again, can only be made presence in its absence, by a presentation of its absence. Lyotard writes: 'One cannot get rid of the Thing. Always forgotten, it is unforgettable' (Lyotard 1991, 143).¹²

Lyotard believes that the inexpressibility of the Thing is what is at stake in modernist painting, which has as its concern the sublime rather than the beautiful. The exemplary artist of the aesthetic of the sublime is, according to Lyotard, Barnett Newman, whose paintings no longer bear meaning, but merely *are*. In his essay 'Newman: The Instant' Lyotard writes: 'The message is the presentation, but it presents nothing; it is, that is, presence' (Lyotard 1991, 81). But only by presenting nothing can the painting fully turn the attention to what matters, namely the mode of presentation, the act of presenting, the act, that is, of painting. The loss of meaning first allows us to experience the true wonder, namely that presentation is possible. And only through this experience can we realize that which is not presentable – the absolute. The only thing Newman's pictures express therefore, or what they bear witness to, is that there are things that cannot be expressed.

Lyotard's account of the sublime is not reducible to a mere interpretation of Kant, and his reading of the third Critique is clearly strategic on several issues.¹³ Lyotard's suggestion, for instance, that the inexpressible Thing can be made a 'presence of an absence' only through sublime art, runs counter to Kant. According to Kant, after all, we are not solely dependent on art or aesthetics for our experience of the absolute: we experience it when we are acting according to the moral law. For Lyotard, the sublimity of the Thing seems to point rather to the

inadequacy of reason in the face of the imagination than to the inadequacy of the imagination in the face of reason (cf. Rancière 2009, 93).

Nevertheless, I think that Lyotard's reading provides the possibility to think of the beautiful and the sublime as both together in the work of art. His interpretation of Barnett Newman seems to imply that the beautiful and the sublime are mutually exclusive; that there is *either* an aesthetic of the beautiful *or* an aesthetic of the sublime. This may be the case, but this does not mean that they cannot both be present in a work of art. Rather, the work of art is the arena where the beautiful and the sublime contest each other. The shift in the stakes of art and literature, from the beautiful to the sublime, did not take place overnight. Lyotard writes: 'Historically, it is a slow, uncertain movement, always threatened by repression, through which the faculty of presentation seeks to remove itself from the *techn?* of beautiful forms' (Lyotard 1994, 153). The question asked by any artistic form contesting classicism, whether it was the baroque, Romanticism or the historical avant-garde was: 'is it possible, and how would it be possible, to testify to the absolute by means of artistic and literary presentations, which are always dependent on forms?' (Lyotard 1994, 153)

These questions imply that for Lyotard, as for Kant, the beautiful and the sublime can be present in one and the same work. However, they are in no 'happy relation'; rather they are in the way of each other. The beauty of the form is threatened by the unboundedness of the sublime, while the sublime 'is always confined to the conditions that [art] must meet to be in harmony with nature' (CJ, 245: 98). For Lyotard then, the work of art – necessarily confined to form – can arouse a sublime feeling, but this is despite the form of the work rather than because of it.

Concluding remarks

Many commentators have argued that Kant's *Analytic of the Sublime* is 'parergonal'; that it falls outside the main structure of the *Critique of Judgment* (Lyotard 1994, 51 and Allison 2001, 9). While both the *Analytic of the Beautiful* and the whole second part on Teleological Judgment are about the way in which nature conforms to our power of Judgment, the *Analytic of the Sublime* is about instances in which nature proves itself contrapurposive to the power of judgment. The ambiguousness of the *Analytic of the Sublime*, and its tension with other parts of the third Critique, has led many scholars, even those who studied Kant's aesthetics, to ignore the sublime. Conversely, inspired by contemporary art and painting, some critics have embraced Kant's theory of the sublime, thereby neglecting the fact that the *Analytic of the Sublime* deals almost solely with the sublime in nature.

In this paper, I have discussed the difficulty of a coexistence of beauty and sublimity in fine art. I have first showed that Kant's characterization of the beautiful and the sublime makes it impossible to have an aesthetic pleasure and a feeling of the sublime aroused by the same work, and at the same time. Next, I discussed Pillow's attempt to characterize aesthetic ideas as the 'sublime content' of the work of art, coexisting with its beautiful form, but concluded that his reading has both textual and psychological difficulties. Finally, I discussed Lyotard's reading of the Kantian sublime, which is idiosyncratic and at some points deviates from Kant, but nevertheless provides an interesting take on the possibility of a coexistence of beauty and sublimity in a work of art. Nevertheless, even in Lyotard's reading it remains impossible for a work to be both beautiful and sublime, or to arouse aesthetic pleasure and feelings of the sublime, at the same time. The work of art, in Lyotard's reading of Kant, becomes a battleground for the Thing demanding presence and the artistic form preventing it from

achievement. So, when we are aware of the beauty of the work, we must be blind to the sublime, while when the work arouses a feeling of the sublime, it must be without regard to its beauty.

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1. CJ refers to Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. The first numbers refer to the page numbers of the Akademie edition, the second to the page numbers of Werner Pluhar's 1987 translation.

2. For the distinction between form of purposiveness and purposiveness of form, which is not made clearly by Kant himself, see Allison 2001, 131-138.

3. Pillow, following Makkreel, emphasizes that the sublime may be found in formless objects, since it implies that it may also be found in formed objects. Consequently, at least this characterization of the sublime does not exclude its possibility in fine art (cf. Pillow 1994, 443).

4. As Allison notes, this seems only to refer to the mathematically sublime (cf. Allison 2001, 308).

5. As we have seen, in the strict sense no object at all could be sublime, since only our mind is sublime. However, if I write about sublime objects here, I mean those objects that arouse a feeling of the sublime.

6. This is also what Kant seems to say in his *Anthropologie*: 'when the sublime is described or presented, its representation in thought can and must always be beautiful' (quoted in Allison 2001, 339).

7. He continues: 'For once the senses no longer see anything before them, while yet the unmistakable and indelible idea of morality remains, one would sooner need to temper the momentum of an unbounded imagination so as to keep it from rising to the level of enthusiasm, than to seek to support these ideas with images and childish devices for fear that they would otherwise be powerless' (CJ, 274: 135).

8. This point is made by Paul Crowther (Crowther 1989, 143). I do not agree, however, that the artistic sublime might also involve 'a sense of the scope of human artifice', since Kant makes it clear that in judging

aesthetically, we should have no concept. In the General Comment on the Exposition of Aesthetic Reflective Judgment he says that when we judge the ocean aesthetically we should not think of the multitude of creatures living in it, nor should we, when judging the starry sky, think of planets or solar systems.

9. In a later article Pillow realizes this and distinguishes between Kant's account of the symbol (as an intuition referring to an idea of reason, to something supersensible) and the aesthetic idea as metaphor (relating empirical particulars) (cf. Pillow 2001).

10. Perhaps one could even argue that a combination of the sublime and the ugly in the fine arts is more plausible than a combination of the sublime and the beautiful, since both the ugly and the sublime are contrapurposeful for the 'reciprocal quickening' of the cognitive powers. Kant seems to hint at the affinity of the sublime and the ugly when he writes in Anthropologie: 'the exhibition of the sublime can and should be beautiful in itself; otherwise it is coarse, barbaric, and in bad taste' (Anthropologie, quoted in Pillow 1994, 444).

11. In Lyotard the translation of *Darstellung* as 'presentation' is associated with presence (as contrasted with absence). Therefore I will use his 'presentation' and Pluhar's 'exhibition' side by side, even though risking confusion with the reader.

12. In the Lessons Lyotard uses almost the same words for the absolute: 'The absolute is never there, never given in a presentation, but it is always 'present' as a call to think beyond the 'there'. Ungraspable, but unforgettable. Never restored, never abandoned' (Lyotard 1994, 150).

13. See for an elaborate discussion of Lyotard's (mis)reading of Kant the very insightful essay by Jacques Rancière, 'Lyotard and the Aesthetics of the Sublime: a Counter-reading of Kant' in Rancière 2009, 88-106.

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