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Sublime as Time Reversal: Reading the Kantian Sublime through Hölderlin and Deleuze

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In his 1793 treatise *Vom Erhabenen*, Friedrich Schiller observes that time, “regarded as a power, which acts silently, but inexorably,”¹ constitutes an object capable of eliciting the feeling of the sublime. The representation of time thus appears able to produce an affective state of fear or distress, insofar as it confronts one with the transience and finitude of existence. This is exemplified, for instance, by the hourglass depicted alongside a skull in Philippe de Champaigne’s *Vanitas*: the hourglass symbolizes an abstract feature of time – its irreversibility – and associates it directly with death. Yet, in such cases, one cannot strictly claim that the sublime concerns an experience of time itself, since these images remain fixed before us, incapable of enacting the temporal dynamic they symbolize.

The relation between the sublime and time may be understood in a more radical sense, within a philosophical tradition that has explored the concept of the sublime through the nexus between aesthetic experience and the transcendental structures of subjectivity. Examining some moments of Gilles Deleuze’s engagement with Kant’s philosophy as well as his reflections on tragedy and cinema, it may turn out that, alongside a sublime representation of time, Deleuze also opens a way of thinking a sublime time *of* representation in art, a point that becomes especially clear when considering the formal and technical aspects of artistic forms such as dramatic works or film, as they necessarily unfold through the temporal sequence of an action or movement.²

1. Sublime at/as the limit of time

Although the sublime is most often associated with the estimation of the absolute greatness of objects in space, what Kant’s *Analytic of the Sublime* radically calls into question about the ordinary mode of experience also concerns its temporal conditions. The feeling of the sublime is

¹ F. Schiller, *Vom Erhabenen*, in Schillers Werke. Nationalausgabe Bd. 20: *Philosophische Schriften*, B. von Wiese (Hrsg.), Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, Weimar 1962, 187.

² For a similar discussion, see D. Angelucci, “An Emotion That Seems to Be No Play”: *Deleuze on Kantian Sublime*, in M. Failla & N. S. Madrid (Eds.), *Kant on Emotions*, De Gruyter, Berlin 2021.

linked to a suspension or interruption of temporal flow, which Kant defines as “a regression which in turn cancels (*aufhebt*) the time-condition in the progression of the imagination and makes *simultaneity* intuitable.”³

The disproportion between imagination and reason in the sublime has a direct effect, for Kant, on the inner sense – that is, the consciousness of time. In the aesthetic comprehension involved in the mathematical sublime, the imagination must seize in a single intuition something it has previously apprehended over a certain amount of time; hence, every estimation of magnitude contains a tension between an act of progressive apprehension and one of instantaneous comprehension. The regression of the imagination arrests this movement of progression in a “contrapurposive”⁴ way, depriving itself of its tendency to advance in apprehension. If the regression “does violence to the inner sense, which must be all the more marked the greater the quantum is which the imagination comprehends in one intuition”⁵, then in the sublime, where reason demands it to exhibit the infinite in its totality, this violence reaches its extreme: the imagination would be required to comprehend instantaneously a magnitude that, ideally, could be apprehended progressively only over an infinite time. The regression of the imagination can thus be understood as its attempt to transcend the form of succession to comprehend it as a simultaneous whole, thereby producing an extremely violent interruption of its temporal progression.

This aspect appears to have been particularly emphasized by some of the earliest readers of the *Critique of Judgment*. Fichte, for example, compared the human being, in experiencing the sublime, to “a God,”⁶ insofar as he is freed from the sensible constraints imposed by time. Schiller, in a later essay on the sublime, defined it as a feeling that “frees the spirit” from the chains of sensibility “not gradually [...], but rather suddenly and through a shock.”⁷ The violence exerted upon the inner sense in the sublime is conceived by these authors as a suspension of temporal succession, which enables the subject to rise above their sensible nature. Yet this regression consists not simply in a transcendence of the condition of time, but rather in a particular mode of experiencing it. Rudolf Makkreel, along with other contemporary interpreters of Kant⁸, regards the regression not as a movement that carries the imagination “beyond its limits” in a metaphysical

³ “The measurement of a space (as apprehension) is at the same time the description of it, thus an objective movement in the imagination and a progression; by contrast, the comprehension of multiplicity in the unity not of thought but of intuition, hence the comprehension in one moment of that which is successively apprehended, is a regression, which in turn cancels the time-condition in the progression of the imagination and makes *simultaneity* intuitable. It is thus (since temporal succession is a condition of inner sense and of an intuition) a subjective movement of the imagination, by which it does violence to the inner sense, which must be all the more marked the greater the quantum is which the imagination comprehends in one intuition. Thus the effort to take up in a single intuition a measure for magnitudes, which requires an appreciable time for its apprehension, is a kind of apprehension which, subjectively considered, is contrapurposive, but which objectively, for the estimation of magnitude, is necessary, hence purposive; in this way, however, the very same violence that is inflicted on the subject by the imagination is judged as purposive *for the whole vocation* of the mind.” I. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*. P. Guyer (Ed.). P. Guyer & E. Matthews (Trans.), Cambridge University Press, New York 2000, 142.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ J. G. Fichte, *Practische Philosophie*. Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Bd. II, 3: *Nachgelassene Schriften 1793–1795*. R. Lauth & H. Jacob (Hrsg.), F. Frommann Verlag, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, 1971, 230.

⁷ F. Schiller *Über das Erhabene*. Schillers Werke. Nationalausgabe Bd. 21: *Philosophische Schriften*, B. von Wiese (Hrsg.), Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, Weimar 1962, 45.

⁸ According to Feloj, “the regression of imagination [...] does not annul time itself, but only suggests the possibility of denying the linear or mathematical form of time” and “should therefore be interpreted as an operation that limits time and not as one that transcends it”. S. Feloj, *Il sublime nel pensiero di Kant*, Morcelliana, Brescia 2012, 194.

or transcendent sense, but as the moment that affords it “the occasion to recognize them”⁹ and to reflect upon them in a transcendental way. This dynamic may be understood as a movement that, by freeing the imagination from temporal succession, simultaneously enables it to recognize the condition of time as its very limit.

Deleuze likewise conceives of the sublime as an experience that drives the subject to the extreme and compels the imagination to “take its own limit as its object” in what he described as a “transcendent exercise.”¹⁰ In his early writings devoted to Kant, *L’idée de genèse dans l’esthétique de Kant* and *La philosophie critique de Kant*, both published in 1963, one of the central questions guiding his reconstruction of Kantian aesthetics is how the accord between the powers of the mind, which grounds aesthetic pleasure, is produced – between imagination and understanding in the case of the beautiful, and between imagination and reason in the case of the sublime. While the aesthetic pleasure, both in the beautiful and in the sublime, depends on an inner, free, and purposive accord between the powers of the mind, which renders this pleasure rational and universally communicable, the difference between them, for Deleuze, lies precisely in *the way* this accord is produced: in the sublime, it is not a reflection on the form of a particular phenomenon in nature that produces the accord, but rather the fundamental discord and the internal disproportion between the subject’s powers.

What is judged sublime is not nature as such, but nature insofar as it mirrors an idea of reason. Before that which is judged absolutely great, the imagination seeks to meet the demand of reason to present the infinite as a totality in a whole intuition. In the failure of the attempt to give form to the sensible data, the imagination is forced to take as its object the limit of that form, thereby exhibiting the infinite negatively, in its disproportion relative to the finite. In the sublime, as Deleuze says with a striking formulation, imagination “accedes to its own Passion”¹¹: this failure of the representational process provokes a pain within the soul, which at once extends and elevates it, awakening the idea of its suprasensible vocation and revealing its purposiveness in accord with reason itself. For Deleuze, the sublime thus serves as a “model”¹² for conceiving the generation of this accord as a reflection on the conditions of experience that occurs within experience itself and that he considers a “transcendental genesis.”¹³

2. The tragic Caesura and the Time-image

While Deleuze does not focus on the temporal dimension of the Kantian sublime in the aforementioned texts, the second of his Lectures on Kant at Vincennes¹⁴, in which he examines Kant’s transcendental conception of time in relation to tragedy, offers a way to further explore it.

According to Deleuze, Kant radically overturns the traditional conception of time in the history of philosophy. As a transcendental and *a priori* form of experience, time for Kant is no longer the measure of movement in space; rather, everything is transcendently subjected to time as the immutable form of change and movement¹⁵. In antiquity, time could still be conceived as cycli-

⁹ “[The regression of the imagination], instead of extending the imagination beyond its limits, provides the occasion for the imagination to recognize them.” R. Makkreel, *Imagination and Temporality in Kant’s Theory of the Sublime*. In *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Spring, 1984), 303–315, 311.

¹⁰ G. Deleuze, *The idea of genesis in Kant’s aesthetics*. Translated by Daniel W. Smith, in Angelaki. *Journal of the theoretical humanities*, Vol. 5, N. 3, December 2000, 57–70, 63.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid. See S. Palazzo, *Trascendentale e temporalità. Gilles Deleuze e l’eredità kantiana*. C. De Pascale, (Ed.) Edizioni ETS, Pisa 2013, 58–66.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ G. Deleuze, *Sur Kant*, Webdeleuze, 2020, <https://www.webdeleuze.com/textes/67>.

¹⁵ See G. Deleuze, On four poetic formulas which might summarize the Kantian philosophy. G. Deleuze, Kant’s Critical Philosophy. The Doctrine of the Faculties, H. Tomlinson & B. Habberjam (Ed.), The Athlone Press, London 1983, VIII.

cal, modelled on the recurring movements of nature; whereas for Plato time is the image of eternity, insofar as the mutable sensible world reflects a higher, immutable order, and for Aristotle the measure of movement, for Kant time no longer reflects anything: it becomes the empty form of a self-identical and immutable order or “a pure straight line.”¹⁶ The reversal of the relation between time and movement effected by Kant is a “rectification” of time, which reflects the transition from ancient to modern consciousness.

Jean Beaufret, in an essay on *Hölderlin et Sophocles*, traces the moment of awareness of time as a pure and empty form to what Hölderlin, in his *Notes on Sophocles* – written in 1804 as an introduction to his translations of *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone* – calls the “categorical reversal” of time¹⁷. In the second of his lectures on Kant, Deleuze refers to this passage from Hölderlin’s text:

At such moments man forgets himself and the god and turns around like a traitor, naturally in saintly manner. In the utmost form of suffering, namely, there exists nothing but the conditions of time and space. Inside it, man forgets himself because he exists entirely for the moment, the god because he is nothing but time; and either one is unfaithful, time, because it is reversed categorically at such a moment, no longer fitting beginning and end; man, because at this moment of categorical reversal he has to follow and thus can no longer resemble the beginning in what follows.¹⁸

The moment to which Hölderlin refers is the tragic *caesura*, exemplified in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* by the speech of Tiresias, who announces the presence of Laius’ murderer – Oedipus – in Thebes, thereby setting him on the path of his own condemnation. The *caesura* triggers the tragic mechanism through the intervention of the oracle, whose speech manifests a divine power. The force of the oracle’s word lies in the rupture it produces in the hero’s life, an “interruption” of his natural course that precipitates events in a tragic downfall. This event signifies both a betrayal of man and God and the liberation of time from any order subordinating it to natural or divine law. According to Beaufret and Deleuze, it is this formal element that makes Sophoclean tragedy modern in contrast to Aeschylus: whereas in Aeschylus the human *hybris* toward the gods followed a cycle of transgression and vengeance that restored a perennial legal order, in Sophocles the *caesura* entails God’s abandonment of the governance of the world, leaving man to the pure succession of a linear and empty time: “In Oedipus time has become a straight line which will be the line on which Oedipus wanders.”¹⁹

If the sublime entails a reflection on the limits of experience, this reflection, in turn, seems to be performatively enacted in tragedy, bringing the hero to the “edge of suffering, where nothing exists besides the conditions of time or space” – that is, their pure and empty forms. However, the intuition of simultaneity or the experience of a “pure present,” unlike for Fichte or for Schil-

¹⁶ G. Deleuze, *Sur Kant*.

¹⁷ “Kant nomme aussi ces « conditions » les formes pures ou vides du temps ou de l’espace. Le dieu qui n’est plus rien que temps, le temps étant lui-même réduit à ce qui en lui est pure ‘condition’, c’est-à-dire à sa forme pure et vide, n’est-il pas dès lors le retrait même ou le détournement du dieu tel qu’il laisse l’homme face à l’immensité vide du ciel sans fond?” J. Beaufret, *Hölderlin et Sophocles*. Edition revue et corrigée, Gerard Monfort Editeur, Brionne 1983, 27–28.

¹⁸ F. Hölderlin, *Essays and Letters on Theory*. T. Pfau (Ed.), SUNY Press, New York 1988, 108. “In solchem Momente vergißt der Mensch sich und den Gott, und kehret, freilich heiliger Weise, wie ein Verräther sich um. – In der äußersten Gränze des Leidens bestehet nemlich nichts mehr, als die Bedingungen der Zeit oder des Raums. In dieser vergißt sich der Mensch, weil er ganz im Momente ist; der Gott, weil er nichts als Zeit ist; und beides ist untreu, die Zeit, weil sie in solchem Momente sich kategorisch wendet, und Anfang und Ende sich in ihr schlechterdings nicht reimen läßt; der Mensch, weil er in diesem Momente der kategorischen Umkehr folgen muß, hiermit im Folgenden schlechterdings nicht dem Anfänglichen gleichen kann”. F. Hölderlin, *Anmerkungen zur Oedipus*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, Bd. V, *Übersetzungen*. F. Beissner (Hrsg.), Verlag W. Kohlhammer, Stuttgart 1952, 202.

¹⁹ G. Deleuze, *Sur Kant*.

ler, does not lead her to the feeling of her own activity as freed from the bounds of time, but rather to the necessity of submitting to it as an absolute form.

In the Kantian categorical reversal (as refracted through Hölderlin's reading), where time becomes a pure and empty form, Deleuze seeks to conceive a plane of the transcendental disengaged from subjectivity²⁰. As an *a priori* form of sensibility, time is in fact also for Deleuze the form of the inner sense and self-affection of the I; even in its relation to itself – since this relation also takes place in time – the I must find itself subjected to the form of time and, consequently, internally split, passive, and unable to constitute itself as “a unique and active subject.”²¹ Since even “the *I think* can be determined only in time”²², the *caesura* produces a fracture in the subject, not a movement of elevation or withdrawal from the limit: “with Oedipus, one can no longer say that he has the atmosphere of someone who transgresses the limit, who eludes the limit.”²³ In the bending of the arc of time produced by the *caesura*, it is “the limit which eludes,” condemning Oedipus to a “long wandering” where “there will no longer be any atonement.”²⁴

Deleuze returns to Kant's conception of time in *The Time-Image*²⁵, with reference to cinematic montage and to the history of cinema. According to Deleuze, cinema becomes *modern* precisely when the image becomes free from the purpose of narrating the present of the action²⁶, no longer making time dependent on movement. In a certain sense, the *caesura* anticipates what Deleuze identifies in the transition from the *movement-image* to the *time-image* that takes place in modern cinema: a formal principle capable of interrupting narrative continuity, thereby making possible a direct presentation of time.

In classical montage, frames are linked in series to present movement within the plane-sequence, where each frame on the plane functions as a “matrix or cell of time,”²⁷ entirely dependent on the one that precedes it and oriented toward the one that follows. Montage thus represents time *indirectly*, through images that show objects moving on a plane-sequence oriented toward the spectator. From the spectator's perspective, everything moves, while, from the perspective of montage, each image expresses the totality of time as an actual present: “It is montage itself – says Deleuze – which constitutes the whole, and thus gives us the image of time”; but, in this way, “time is necessarily an indirect representation, because it flows from the montage which links one movement-image to another.”²⁸ According to Deleuze, from the 1950s onward, for example in Italian Neorealism and then in the French *Nouvelle Vague*, montage increasingly calls into question this dimension of actuality and temporal presence, destabilizing the normal and habitual perception of time – for instance, by abandoning linear narration, presenting disconnected movements and interruptions on the plane-sequence, or employing estranging camera motions. In modern cinema, where “perceptions and actions ceased to be linked together,” such a detachment produces a rupture in the habitual form of temporal perception, so that time is no longer perceived as a linear succession of movement: “thanks to this loosening of the sensory-motor linkage, it is time [...] which rises up to the surface of the screen.”²⁹

²⁰ See G. Rametta, *Il trascendentale di Deleuze*. In G. Rametta (Ed.), *Metamorfosi del trascendentale. Percorsi filosofici tra Kant e Deleuze*, Cleup, Padova 2008, 341–374.

²¹ See G. Deleuze, *On four poetic formulas which might summarize the Kantian philosophy*, VIII.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Gilles Deleuze, *Sur Kant*.

²⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Sur Kant*.

²⁵ G. Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1989.

²⁶ On the relation between narration and montage in the classical cinema, see *Ibid.*, 25–26.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 35–36.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, XI.

As in tragedy, so in cinema the passage to “modernity” – a category that should not be taken in a strictly historiographical sense, since Deleuze’s aim is neither to write a history of cinema nor of theater – rests on the Kantian reversal of the relation between time and movement: “It could be said that, in its own sphere, cinema has repeated the same experience, the same reversal, in more fast-moving circumstances.”³⁰ This analogy is not merely the application of a philosophical concept to film criticism; for Deleuze, the representation of time is a problem “as much a cinematographic as philosophical”³¹, which cinema addresses autonomously through the creation of images.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 36.