

Kant's Aesthetics of the Sublime and Politics of Emancipatory Temporality

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ABSTRACT: The main purpose of this work is to present and argue ontological and political significance of the concept of the sublime analyzing Kant's aesthetics exposed in his Third Critique. In the first part of the paper we will lay stress upon the temporal structure of the Kantian sublime. In order to see how notion of the sublime reflects the radical reversal in the structure of time, we will lean on Deleuze's reflections on Kant and raise the following question: is not the experience of the sublime based upon reflection of the form of the subject, namely, the form of its inner sense — time? In the second part of this work more political issues will come forward through Slavoj Žižek's interpretation of Kant and Alain Badiou's work on revolutionary historical riots. The political actuality of the sublime is expressed in the following question: Can revision of the aesthetics of the sublime give an important contribution to the political theory of emancipation?

KEYWORDS: Sublime, Temporality, Imagination, Emancipation, Event.

I. "Time is out of joint" — Kant with Hamlet

In his lectures on Kant of March–April 1978, although in a lateral and more indirect way, Deleuze sets forth the relation between the sublime and temporality. The Shakespearean formula "Time is out of joint", used by Deleuze, offers a very fruitful line of interpretation of the Kantian philosophical reversal. In Deleuze's view this formula, taken from Hamlet's words pronounced after fatal encounter with his father's ghost, indicates in a most peculiar way the radical shift in the general conceptualization of time. The proximity between Shakespeare and Kant is not poetical or literary coincidence of two different authors; it is a matter of metaphorical intimation of the modern sense of time contained in those words of Hamlet which should be depersonalized, that is, deprived of its author in order to be understood as a formula. Deleuze interprets time as unhinged and "out of joint" in terms of subordinate and independent formal time. Kant's Copernican reversal consists exactly in the

passage from time, which is subordinated to the ontological movement of nature, to time as pure, linear and empty form “liberated” from cyclic curvatures and natural dynamics of the world. With Kant time is no longer the measure of such dynamics, but its formal condition, that is to say, movement became subordinated to time as its transcendental framework. Time which has been subordinated to the cosmo–ontological movement of nature is just an expression of ancient cosmology where periodical motions of the spheres were the hinge or the real joint of the world and time was only the measure of it, as Aristotle’s assertion from the *Physics* points out: “Time is the number of movement”¹. Instead of being the number of movement, subordinated to the axis of nature in its cyclic motions, with Kant time becomes criterion of movement, namely, its formal condition. It is “out of joint” since emancipated from the fixed point of reference. Temporal succession is not joined to the astronomical motions of the heavenly bodies, and hereby ceases to be just a measure of something external to itself. The Kantian autonomized, internalized and emancipated time, however, has not become the essentialist entity or some kind of alternative natural structure, but the subjective formal condition of possibility of all phenomena, which is at the same time the condition of impossibility of the subjectivity as substance. Time that becomes the subjective form of all sensible experience precludes the subject itself from being substantialized. Time out of joint, as Deleuze notes, is the enemy within subjectivity which in turn cannot be understood as substance or some kind of Cartesian *res cogitans*, but only as the formal apparatus of the conditions of synthesis determined by time.

The first step, therefore, is to take into consideration this shift from time subordinated to movement to movement subordinated to time. If we call to mind the fact that ancient cosmology always qualified as beautiful the harmonic order of the spheres and their natural cyclic passages, then we can conclude that time in such order was also the measure of beauty, subordinated to the beauty of cosmo–ontological *harmonia*. The passage from this ancient vision of time as an image of eternity to the Kantian conceptualization of formal, linear and pure time, actually provides the passage from the category of beauty to the category of sublimity. Formalized and empty time has lost its cyclical form becoming a pure straight line so that “the beginning and the end no longer rhyme” (Hölderlin)², that is, the beginning and the end does not fall anymore at the same point of circle; and only such kind of temporality can bear the character of something which is sublime. This character of the

1. Quoted in: Gilles Deleuze, *Second Lesson on Kant*, 21/03/1978, <http://www.webdeleuze.com/php/sommaire.html>

2. See also: G. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, p. 89.

sublime should be considered in real Kantian sense: something absolutely huge and incomprehensible which cannot be grasped in one unified representation. Just like Borges' labyrinth — to which Deleuze refers³ in order to emphasize that straight line of time is not its simplification in terms of predictability, but a vertiginous openness of real labyrinth — time in itself becomes non-symmetrical, non-numerical, where the before and the after are not coincidental, and "something is always elusive"⁴. Such temporality can be neither beautiful nor the measure of something beautiful. It opens the horizon of sublimity and its relation to the very form of subjectivity.

Another consequence of the Kantian reversal of the conception of time, which now ceases to be subordinated and gains independence and a formal character, touches on the problem of limit. According to Deleuze's interpretation, in the entire classical metaphysics limit was thought as external limitation, as obstacle and resistance. Spatial matter, for example, limits the thought and the spiritual realm from outside. In other words, thought refers to something outside thought which is irreducible to thought itself, because it is totally other to thought, the radical alterity which restricts it. Cartesian metaphysics is perhaps the most clear and distinct example of this position according to which the Otherness of thought is deemed to be something external: because thinking substance and extended substance are exterior and irreducible to each other, the main problem becomes finding the true point of their unity (God from Descartes' point of view). With the Kantian formalization of time, whereby time gets out of joint, limit is not considered an external limitation, but the internal flaw and fissure within the transcendental subject. The circular form of the ancient cosmological time can be viewed as a geometrical representation of the beautiful and harmonic definition/delimitation of the world, and every transgression of this metaphysical limitation, as the ancient Greek tragedies show, is destined to fail for destabilized order must be recuperated. The circular time corresponds to the circle of temporary destabilization and the consequent restoration of harmony. Nonetheless, in Kant — and Deleuze, following Hölderlin's studies, shows that this shift in the notion of time has been already carried out by Sophocles' tragedy, which expressed the modern sense of time — we have un-curved time which does not limit and encompass the harmonic world order. We could also say that time becomes the horizon which allows for the movement, the passage toward an asymptotic limit which always remain elusive and unattainable. The long wandering of Oedipus is the expression of such un-curved time: time as pure straight line. And in more philosophical terms we can assert

3. G. Deleuze, *Preface. On Four Poetic Formulas which Might Summarize the Kantian Philosophy* in: G. Deleuze, *Kant's Critical Philosophy*, London: The Athlone Presse, 1984, p. vii.

4. G. Deleuze, *Second Lesson on Kant*, 21/03/1978, <http://www.webdeleuze.com/php/sommaire.html>

that external limitation is substituted by an internal split and disharmonious heterogeneity of subjectivity itself. The other of thought (space–matter in classical philosophy) becomes the other within thought: time. Time traverses the subject, splits it in two and marks its dual structure, its heterogeneity (viz. sensibility and understanding, spontaneity and receptivity). Deleuze insists a lot on this fundamental change consisting in the interiorization of limit that ceases to be external material–corporeal or spatial obstacle and assumes temporal meaning. In that sense time plays the role of the “interior enemy” which operates within subjectivity and works against it “as if there was in thought something impossible to think”⁵. Such impossibility inherent to subjectivity is directly connected to the experience of the sublime, which is fundamentally the experience of limit and the impossibility of representations, the case of the failed synthesis. Therefore, the theory of the sublime is not a mere appendix, as Kant himself claims⁶, or some secondary and less important aesthetical problematization. Furthermore, the question of the sublime is not only the aesthetic question, but one of the keystones of the whole Kantian system which deals with its main problem — the possibility of synthesis. It means, in other words, that Kant’s aesthetics provides a further answer to his principal and inaugural question: how are a priori synthetic judgments possible?

2. Temporal conflictuality of the imagination in the experience of the sublime

In order to examine the temporal value of the sublime (and the sublime meaning of temporality as well) it is necessary to analyze Kant’s paragraphs from his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. We can interpret the tension between apprehension (*Auffassung*) and aesthetic comprehension (*Zusammenfassung*) in the mathematical sublime as a fundamentally temporal tension between the tendency to the infinite succession and the instantaneous grasping of totality. Reason (*Vernunft*) gives the imagination the task of representing the absolute totality of intuitions in one instant. In the successive apprehension of intuitions the imagination goes on to the infinity, but as the progressive movement from one sensuous part to the other one proceeds, the application of the rational Idea of totality becomes more and more difficult, until it reaches the point of its real impossibility. This happens when we find ourselves before some absolutely immense object of perception, like the calm ocean or the starry sky. Our apprehension is moving from one intuition to

5. G. Deleuze, *Second Lesson on Kant*, cit.

6. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, edited by Paul Guyer, translated by Paul Guyer and Eric Mathews, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000, §23, p.130.

another one, but at the moment when the imagination needs to comprehend and encompass the entire successive series of sensory intuitions in one single perceptive representation, it then faces its own limits and lack. There is no time to carry out and complete the operation of comprehension, because every new intuition in a temporal progress precludes the reproduction of what has been apprehended before it. Kant writes regarding the observation of a pyramid: “the eye requires some time to complete its apprehension. . . but during this time the former always partly fades before the imagination has taken in the latter”⁷. It seems that the lack of time is inscribed in the synthetic⁸ operation of the imagination as its transcendental condition. The imagination is temporally limited, traversed by the line of time, and its failure to satisfy the claims of Reason is actually the failure to schematize (temporalize) something that is beyond time, i.e. the Idea of Reason. In aesthetic estimation, where a quantity is intuitively and immediately grasped⁹ in order to be used as the unity of measure, the imagination — unlike its function in the constitution of the objects of experience — operates without categories of the understanding, that is to say in terms of the First Critique: without synthesis of recognition in concepts. The imagination is now directly under the influence of Reason and therefore also holistic and totalizing endeavor to grasp the unity in an instant, which finishes unsuccessfully. Such negative experience produces the sentiment of perturbation and irritating inadequacy between faculties (imagination and reason). Kant shows that the imagination is the victim of Reason that commits violence, forcing imagination to do something of which it is not capable, that is, to represent the irrepresentable, to encompass the infinite and to construct a whole. But this violence of Reason toward the imagination is actually just the other side of the violence inherent to the imagination itself.

7. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, cit., §26, p.136.

8. We will leave aside the question whether the aesthetic comprehension shall be taken as a synthetical operation *stricto sensu* or not. It is clear that the aesthetic comprehension of imagination cannot be the synthesis in the sense of the activity of the constitution of the objects of experience under discursive concepts, and actually such synthesis is what Kant calls *comprehensio logica*. But the pre-discursive, more fundamental operation of grasping the unity, called aesthetic comprehension, we will continue to define synthetical, as a synthesis without concepts, analogously to the Kant's term “schematism without a concept”. It should be noticed that Kant does not indeed use the term synthesis when discussing aesthetic comprehension. Cfr. Rudolf A. Makkreel, *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994.

9. It is important to bear in mind that this aesthetic estimation is the basis for the mathematical estimation, which is actually the estimation by means of concepts, through the conceptual synthesis. This Kant's insight can serve as an argument for the thesis that the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* is the basis of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The mathematical sublime does not refer only to the immeasurable and absolutely huge, but to an immeasurable absolute measure as well, and this latter acts as the fundament for each relative measure or measured relation between magnitudes. The *comprehensio aesthetica*, as an instantaneous grasping of intuitive measure, in other words, precedes and underlies the objective synthesis. It is some kind of pre-synthetical construction, the transcendental conditioning of what Kant calls the synopsis of the manifold, or the synthesis of apprehension of the first *Critique*.

This is exactly the moment of Kant's great "aesthetic contribution" to his theory of transcendental synthesis exposed in the first *Critique* where the imagination has a conciliatory and mediatory role consisting in the producing of schemata in order to realize the passage from the categories of the understanding to the intuitions of sensibility. Without this concretization and application of intellectual concepts to sensibility by means of schemata no experience and cognition could be possible. Now, in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* we have everything but this irenic and conciliatory imagination that operates without disruptions in the service of the understanding and its theoretical interest to constitute empirical objects. "Free play of the faculties" conceals the potential conflict which actually emerges in the sublime, where an accord is reached only through a discord. Moreover, confronting itself with Reason, the imagination turns reflexively on itself and discovers its violent kernel which is invisible from the point of view of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

In the first *Critique* Kant proposes the famous triple synthesis: synthesis of apprehension in intuition, synthesis of reproduction in imagination, synthesis of recognition in concepts. The second type, synthesis of reproduction, commits a violent act, for it stops the natural flow of time, that is, the succession of discrete intuitions in apprehension. In order to reproduce and retain the previous elements and partial representations and to synthesize them under one perception, the imagination needs to counteract the extensive time–continuum in apprehension. This act is comparable to the "regress of the imagination" from the third *Critique*: "... 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 ..."¹⁰. Briefly, in order to synthesize detached intuitions and grasp all of them as coexistent within a totality, the imagination needs to go against the natural, linear course of time (this is what Kant means by canceling the time–condition¹¹) and in that way it does violence to inner sense (this inner sense in Kant is nothing but time as the universal form of interiority and hence of every representation¹²). In the first *Critique* this violent deviation in the relation between subjective faculties was suppressed by the systematic determination of the understanding which guides the imagination. Only with the aesthetic

10. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, cit., §27, p.142.

11. Cfr. R. A. Makkreel, *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant*, cit.

12. "Form of interiority means not only that time is internal to us, but that our interiority constantly divides us from ourselves, splits us in two: a splitting in two which never runs its course, since time has no end", G. Deleuze, *Preface. On four poetic formulas which might summarize the Kantian philosophy*, cit., p. ix.

discourse of the third *Critique* does that which was covered up in the first *Critique* emerge on the surface: every sensuous unity is in some sense a result of the violence of the imagination which imposes the synthetic aggregation to a manifold and suppresses the irreversible extension of time in order to reproduce previous intuitions. The synthesis is not a “natural” operation, but rather an intervention. This could be envisaged only when the imagination liberates itself from the guidance of the understanding and experiences in turn the violence of the reason which requires absolute totality as the only acceptable measure of things. Since the synthesis of reproduction from the first *Critique* stays under the general logical (or mathematical) construction of experience, where the synthesis of recognition in concepts plays a key role, the “regress” of the imagination in reproduction is shown to be insignificant, because in some way the conceptual unity of a manifold has recuperated the linear time–order through schematism. The aesthetic imagination, which does not reproduce representations, but comprehends the whole in an instant and “makes simultaneity intuitable”, has a reflective and not determinant or constitutive role. It is the subjective inner state of the free and disordered relation between faculties that is at issue here. The violence done to inner sense, or what Kant calls subjective movement, actually opens up the perspective of the abyss of the subjectivity itself. We can use here the Deleuzian interpretation of time as interior limit and inner enemy and say that tension between the imagination and its temporal conditioning is a clear consequence of the radically changed temporal structure defined as “time out of joint”. The pure experience of this “disjointedness” corresponds to the experience of the sublime constituted through perception of chaos, disarray, devastation and cruelty in nature. In the sublime, besides the power of Reason, the imagination encounters also the power of Time. The disastrous outcome, that the imagination is not able to comprehend the absolutely great in an instant is proof that the imagination could not stop or control the flow of time. The inherent limit of the imagination takes also the meaning of the superiority of time which discloses itself as a true absolute greatness, that abyss in which imagination fears to lose itself. The annihilation or canceling of the time–condition — if we pay attention to the word which Kant uses (*aufhebt*) — is the negation of the successive mathematical order of time that ultimately affirms its most profound, abyssal structure which traverses the subject. Could we say, referring to Kant’s distinction between extensive and intensive magnitudes, that time is annihilated as the extensive and affirmed as the intensive magnitude?

If in the first *Critique* we have gotten to know the imagination as a constructive mediatory faculty of the *Bildung*, producing the schemata (defined by Kant as *Zeitbestimmungen*) as function of the intellectual unification of synthesis of the manifold, in the third *Critique* we see that the form of time

undermines the imagination from within, so what happens is an inherent conflict between these two. In a certain sense, the experience of the sublime is the plausible consequence of the mode in which Kant grounds the synthesis in his first *Critique*. To put time as the general condition of synthesis, the form of interiority and all representations, and, on the other hand, posit it as a bridge which connects the heterogeneous aspects of the same subject (receptivity and spontaneity), means actually to build the whole construction of the transcendental synthesis on a very precarious terrain. What Kant's aesthetics, and the experience of the sublime particularly, shows us is the fragility of synthesis as such¹³. Deleuze insists a lot on this chaotic, precarious, "aesthetical" territory of the entire Kantian transcendental construction. In the text *What is Philosophy* Deleuze and Guattari describe Kant's third *Critique* as an unrestrained work of old age. Deleuze also writes: "It will be the Critique of Judgment, in his last book, as if to the extent that he aged, he became aware of the catastrophe"¹⁴. We could only add that the fragility of synthesis, brought to light in the catastrophic failure to synthesize the absolutely huge and the absolutely powerful, is a result of the inherent heterogeneity within the subjectivity and its incessant inner tension which tracks the line of time.

The experience of the sublime, indeed, is an important lesson on the antagonism in the very core of subjectivity itself. The antagonism between the imagination and reason reveals the antagonism within the imagination itself, that is, the conflict with its temporal conditioning. Or rather we can ask: are these two antagonisms (imagination versus reason and synthesis of imagination versus temporal succession) actually one and the same conflict? Is not disagreement with Reason and its compulsory pretension to the unconditioned totality just a projection of the radical ambiguity within the imagination itself?

The main point of Kant's theory of the sublime arrives at the moment in which the imagination and reason, in an interesting dialectic overturn, reach a mutual agreement on the basis of their discord. What is the basis of this harmony between two faculties that seemed totally irreconcilable? The imagination, brought to its ultimate limits, recognizes Reason as the superior faculty of the supersensible, in such manner that it recognizes the supersensible as its own destination (*übersinnlichen Bestimmung*). In other words, imagination through negative experience, tension and pain, discovers its transcendental origin and common root with Reason. The imagination is not capable of representing the supersensible Idea, however it represents this very incapability and its own insufficiency. Through such privative self-reflexive experience of proper insufficiency, the imagination enters in harmony with the faculty of

13. Deleuze, *Fourth Lesson on Kant*, 04/04/1978, cit.

14. Deleuze, *Third Lesson on Kant*, 28/03/1978, cit.

the supersensible, since it recognizes the supersensible as the origin of all our faculties; the origin which it cannot represent, but only indicate. However, Kant begins his discourse on the sublime with the assertion that apprehension tends towards infinity, as an infinite temporal succession of sensuous parts in intuition. In other words, it means that the supersensible Idea of infinity is already present at the pre-discursive level of the sensible apprehension, and as such it is constitutive for the synthesis of imagination. The confrontation with Reason serves to explicate this transcendental presence of the infinite in all our faculties and to discover their "point of concentration", that is, the supersensible unity of all our faculties¹⁵.

It is very important to stress that the sublime for Kant is not a quality of the object. And when we judge a phenomenon as sublime it is only improper use of the category of the sublime. Even the category of the beautiful is not objective, but reflective: what is beautiful cannot be determined objectively, derived from some concept of the object or made dependent upon the immediate relation with the object in terms of the pleasantness. Nonetheless, in the judgment of the beautiful we express ourselves *as if* the object judged is beautiful *in itself* and *as if* it is created *purposively* for us. For Kant, the beautiful lies in the reflection upon the form of the object and the feeling of pleasure is aroused with reference to the concrete form of an object, as if its purposiveness were based on some definite concept. In the case of the sublime it seems that the "as if term" fades away and we do not have that type of subjective purposiveness, immediate pleasure and harmony between objects in nature and our faculties, as we have it clearly in the experience of the beautiful. What we have in the sublime is more likely some kind of projection of our inner disposition, so the purposiveness must regard the form of the subject and not that of the object. Kant defines the sublime as "disposition of the mind"¹⁶, "a movement of the mind connected with the judging"¹⁷ or simply, the use that the faculty of judgment makes of some objects, and not the object itself. Instead of prescribing a definition to the sublime objects Kant, when he wants to be more precise, uses the expressions such as "the object serves for the presentation of a sublimity that can be found in the mind"¹⁸. In fact, what is sublime in the experience of the sublime is the very subject of the experience, who discovers the potency of the noumenal. Therefore, if in the beautiful the subject reflects the form of an object, could we conclude that in the sublime what is reflected is the form of the subject?

15. Cfr. Gilles Deleuze, *l'idée de genèse dans l'esthétique de Kant*, in: *Revue d'Esthétique*, n.2 (1963): 113-136.

16. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, cit., §25, p. 134.

17. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, cit., §24, p.131.

18. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, cit., §23, p.129.

The sublime is a self-reflection of the subject which, in the encounter with the certain natural phenomena such as calm immense oceans, starry sky or storms and volcanic eruptions, reaches the awareness of its own supersensible nature in the form of the Ideas of Reason. If we take into consideration that the form of the subject, namely, the form of its interiority is time, for time is the universal condition of all phenomena and the constitutive framework for every representation that necessarily belongs to our inner state¹⁹, then self-reflection of the form of the subject necessarily includes its temporal dimension. Time underlies the way in which representations are collocated in our mind, that is to say, time as pure intuition, or subjective a priori form of our inner sense regards the pure relationality between representations in terms of succession, simultaneity, or permanence²⁰. Because of this universal and relational character time is pure irrepresentable interiority which cannot be perceived immediately, but nonetheless acts as the ground of all possible experience. Analogously to the exhibition of the irrepresentable Ideas of the reason, what comes forward in the experience of the sublime is an exhibition of the temporal core of subjectivity.

3. The revolutionary event of emancipation and the sublime

We saw that the experience of the sublime depends directly upon the new character of time opened by the Kantian subject (or better to say: opened in the Kantian subject). Slavoj Žižek in his interpretation of Kant's imagination argues that the experience of the sublime marks the moment of a radical rupture and interruption in the linear temporal order²¹. Such order is constituted by the schematism as a function of the application of the discursive categories to sensible experience. The subject's synthesis counteracts the natural flow of sensations and "produces" the time as order of numerical succession²². Turning back to the issue of the violence of the imagination and its "regress", it means that even before the synthesis of reproduction in the imagination we have one more originary intervention in time, which together with the synthesis of apprehension, "constructs" the continuity of time as the numerical series of discrete moments, the sum of separate items, what is in accordance

19. "All presentations, whether or not they have outer things as their objects [...] belong to our inner state; and this inner state is subject to the formal condition of inner intuition, and hence to the condition of time". Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996, B51.

20. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, cit., B50 and B67.

21. Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish subject*, London–New York: Verso, 1999.

22. Cfr. "Therefore number is nothing other than the unity in the synthesis of the manifold of a homogeneous intuition as such, a unity that arises because I myself produce time in apprehending the intuition", Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, cit., A 143.

with Kant's analysis of extensive magnitudes²³. What is "attacked" by this first synthesis in apprehension is the indivisible natural continuity of time which becomes distinguished in itself, so we are able to represent a manifold²⁴. All these interventions in and against time (firstly, against its presupposed natural indivisible flow, and then against its discrete irreversible continuity) remain nevertheless within the main structure of the theoretical determinant judgment, offered by the first *Critique*, which has the linear temporal order as a basis. This temporal order is also that which allows imagination to schematize the categories and contribute to the constitution of the object of experience, as Kant's doctrine of schematism demonstrates. According to Žižek, such schematized time is a homogenized time in which nothing really new can emerge, because it provides a framework for the repetitive experience ruled by necessary laws. This experience designates the scientific methodic truth for which the *Critique of Pure Reason* offers transcendental grounding, while Kant's third *Critique* opens the space for extra-methodic truth²⁵. This space is what Kant in the Introduction for his third *Critique* defines as territory without domain²⁶. The territory without domain suspends mechanism of the schematism and "control" over the particular by means of universal laws thereby the subject of that territory reflects, in an aesthetic experience, the uniqueness of the event as exhibition of the freedom through subversion in the schematic order of time. The experience of the sublime is the experience of something non-ordinary and extra-ordinary, *felt* like an event *ex nihilo*. At the level of objective experience and cognition nothing can be created *ex nihilo* since the principle of causality, as a category of understanding, requires a previous state of conditions which necessarily produce an effect, following the schemata of temporal succession. However, since the sublime is a matter of subjective experience and "movement of the mind", the fact that we feel some phenomenon as event — unexpected, unpredicted, compelling or transfixing — produces a rupture in the homogeneous order of schematized time. Such an event has a meaning of the liberation and emancipation from previous conditions, because something new "cannot be accounted for by reference to the pre-existing network of circumstances"²⁷. This liberation from blind causality concerns our transcendental freedom, and our moral supersensible

23. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, cit., B203–B207.

24. "Every intuition contains a manifold. Yet this manifold would not be presented as such if the mind did not in the sequence of impressions following one another distinguish time." (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, cit., A99) and: "Apprehension of the manifold of appearances is always successive . . . the manifold of appearances is always produced in the mind successively." (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, cit., B235/A190)

25. Gaetano Chiurazzi, *Al di là del dominio. Il problema della Critica del Giudizio come problema ermeneutico*, in: *50 Jahre Wahrheit und Methode*, ed. R. Dottori, LIT, 2012, pp.213–226.

26. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, cit., p.64.

27. S. Žižek, *The Ticklish subject*, cit., p.43.

destination, as Kantian sublime shows. The morality as the Law of Reason, which particularly intervenes in the dynamic sublime, is nothing but the emergence of our intrinsic freedom which breaks with natural causality and the linear order of time. “We are dealing here with another temporality, the temporality of freedom, of a radical rupture in the chain of (natural and/or social) causality”²⁸. In this break we have to search for political significance and emancipatory character of the sublime. Is not a revolution, the sublime experience of disruption *felt* like something historically new? Are the popular uprisings, civil riots, and social revolts the sublime openings of the historical new, of the unexpected, something “absolutely huge” and “absolutely powerful” with unpredictable consequences? Following Žižek we can ask: when does the experience of the sublime occur in politics? His answer is: when people “risk freedom” against their immediate interests, profits and calculations in terms of costs and benefits, and when the impossible, due to the new temporal order, becomes possible.

The relation between Kant’s sublime and political revolutions is not only conceptual but historical as well. Kant’s Third *Critique* is the work which has been written in the political atmosphere of the French Revolution, published in the 1790. Is not the ambiguous character of the sublime (attractive and repulsive at the same time) an aesthetic translation of Kant’s impressions and political attitude toward French Revolution²⁹? The harmony in disagreement should represent superiority of the subject of Revolution, who finally finds rational satisfaction and subjective purposiveness in violence and terror. What is also interesting to notice is that another important name in the aesthetics of the sublime, Edmund Burke, is also the author of the famous conservative critique of the French Revolution³⁰. Can differences between Kant’s and Burke’s sublime be an indication of their political differences with regard to the revolutionary events? To answer this question it is necessary to examine political implications of the notion of the sublime.

Alain Badiou in his recent book *The Rebirth of History*, distinguishing immediate, latent and historical uprisings, sets out a theoretical framework for the current and future reawakenings of History, under the form of mass upheavals and riots against existent political and social order, whereby previously excluded people, the inexistent, mount the stage of history, become visible and — due to the subjective energy of the moment — open a whole series of unexpected and, until that time, unimaginable emancipatory consequences. Badiou therefore develops the concept of Event which makes

28. S. Žižek, *The Ticklish subject*, cit., p.43

29. Cfr. S. Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993.

30. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Oxford University Press, 2009., and E. Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Penguin Classics, 1986.

possible “the restitution of inexistent”³¹ and sets free a truth in the form of a new, previously unknown political possibility. In this study Badiou makes a few allusions to Kant; when he elaborates the question of intensification of subjectivity, as the constitutive factor of a historical uprising, he identifies such intensification with the concept of enthusiasm recognized already by Kant, and moreover, recognized by him exactly as the sublime feeling³². Badiou does not aim to establish any interpretative connection with Kant's aesthetics of the sublime, but we are convinced that such relation is a fruitful way for further analysis and philosophical reflection, since Badiou's considerations on the reawakening of History coincide to a great extent with Kant's discourse on the sublime. Analogously to the sublime which confirms the power of the Idea of Reason and discloses our supersensible destination, a historical uprising for Badiou is only that event where the power of an Idea will take root and confirm itself. Here is not the place to elaborate on the difference between Kant's and Badiou's concept of Idea, and its debt to the platonic tradition, but it is obvious that what connects the sublime with the rebirth of history is the exhibition of the Idea, of the infinite, of the irrepresentable, through the moment of rupture and through the unforeseen emergence of something New. Badiou disavows riots that have only negative, violent and anarchic character deprived of any enduring truth. The accord with an Idea is needed in order to have a truly historical Event which opens the new emancipatory possibilities important for the collective destiny of mankind. The universal aspect emerges from the struggle and conflict, from violent rupture in the causal order that introduces a new temporality. However, like in the painful experience of the sublime, negativity is a way in which Idea exhibits itself. For Kant this negativity, that is, awareness of the irrepresentability and impossibility of Idea, is the only possible way in which it can manifest itself (as *Darstellung* and not as *Vorstellung*). In order to carry out this negative exhibition of the infinite, the schematized order of time must be abandoned and suspended. Here arises another interesting point of contact between Badiou's notion of historical event and Kant's sublime which puts forward the actuality of the aesthetical experience in the framework of political theory and also confirms our line of interpretation that passes through the problem of temporality in the structure of the sublime. Badiou claims that “the invention of time”³³ is necessary for establishing a continuity of revolutionary Event when its initial force peters out. Very similar to Žižek's analysis of the Kantian sublime, Badiou puts the entire philosophical analysis of the rebirth of History in terms of a new and old-mainstream temporality.

31. Alain Badiou, *The Rebirth of History*, London–New York: Verso, 2012, p. 56.

32. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, cit., pp. 154–157.

33. A. Badiou, *The Rebirth of History*, cit., p.70.

Organization or discipline of the Event which wants to preserve and in some sense institutionalize the new possibilities brought up by massive uprising is actually “the transformation of eventual power into temporality”³⁴. This new temporality is, according to Badiou, regarded as *outside time*, in the sense that it cannot be inscribed into the order of time prescribed by the previous world. The Event–historical riot made an irremediable break in time, against its causal linearity and predictability, subverting the relation between possibility and impossibility (what seemed impossible within one temporal order now after the rupture is possible), and after that “the invention of time” stabilizes the new coordinates in terms of new continuity. Is not this break in time exactly what happens in the experience of the sublime? Moreover, is not Badiou’s “invention of time”, by means of which *outside-time* happened in the historical Event needs to create its new temporality, that is, a new temporal order of continuity through the organization and elaboration of the gained political results, similar to the gesture which Kant’s ascribes to the genius? The genius in some way unifies the sublime and the beautiful, in other words, he/she unifies the event of his/her infinite inspiration and creation of new matter with the process of form–giving and harmonization, in order to make communicable his/her creation³⁵. If we want to remain on the same line, discovery of the aesthetic Idea by genius would be analogous to the exhibition of the political Idea in a massive popular uprising, while genius’ composing of his/her artwork would be analogous to the political organization of the historical revolutionary movement which translates itself into some political body and institutional coordinates. Without the second moment — the moment of forming, organization and conceptualization — the artwork would be just an incomprehensible, incommunicable personal vision, as the storm and volcanic eruption of a political event would be just a nihilistic and violent episode of history. The emancipatory character of the sublime, hence, lies in its temporal rupture which opens a new horizon of great and universal impact, but this openness will remain counterproductive, or even destructive, if accord between historical imagination and political intellect is lacking — the accord which gives a form and consistency in order to make a revolutionary political event a model for others to follow.

4. Conclusion — toward a renewed aesthetics of the sublime

One can object here that this interpretation of Kant’s sublime is not valid since Kant’s aesthetics is predominantly based upon reflection of the natural

34. A. Badiou, *The Rebirth of History*, cit., p.70.

35. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, cit., §48 and §50.

phenomena (the sky, seas, oceans, stormy clouds, mountain precipices, etc) and therefore we are not allowed to make a similar passage from nature to history, applying the reflective judgment to political and social events. Another critique could be that the sublime refers to a single person, to the modern individual subject in all its “robinsonade” and solitude before nature and outside society (Kant himself says that there is something sublime in separation from all society³⁶), so that the sentiment of the sublime is in some way a-political, and regards only the ambiguous relation between individual and the world of nature. We will respond to these possible objections through three different elucidations.

Firstly, the way in which Kant conceives aesthetic reflection implies the overcoming of the naturalness and immediate dependence on natural causality. According to the main postulates of German Idealism, reflection is always self-reflection, so even when we reflect the form of an object of nature, judging it, for instance, as beautiful, what is at stake is the free relation between our faculties and *our relation* with the nature. In the experience of the sublime particularly, the naturalness is overcome by the victory of the supersensible moral vocation of the noumenal subject, which confirms the superiority and independence from nature. Nature is regarded “as paling into insignificance beside the Ideas of Reason”³⁷. The argument that the sublime is restricted to natural phenomena is therefore narrow, because nature in Kantian aesthetics of the sublime serves as a mirror of our own sublimity — the enlarging mirror in which our reflection becomes magnified.

Secondly, even the relation between man and nature has been changed since Kant's epoch. Due to a complete *Entzauberung* of the world, the technological and scientific development of mankind that put nature under human control, and made visible and accessible even the most distant and most unusual places on the Earth, nature certainly has lost its overwhelming, almost divine impact on man that challenged him to a heroic duel with nature. More humanized, that is, more subjected to man's power, nature has become less hostile. The gaze of the wanderer above the sea of fog from the famous Caspar Friedrich's painting today, at the beginning of the 21st century, will be definitely different. If sublimity before nature is eclipsed, it does not mean that sublimity as such has lost its meaning. Is then the sublime dislocated from nature to history, and to politics also³⁸? The aesthetics of the sublime in the 18th century can be viewed as a reaction to the prevailing mechanistic approach to nature at that time³⁹, so the only way to escape this determin-

36. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, cit., § 29, p.157.

37. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, cit., § 26, p.140.

38. Remo Bodei, *Paesaggi sublimi. Gli uomini davanti alla natura selvaggia*, Milano: Bompiani, 2008.

39. Pierre Hadot, *Le voile d'Isis, Essai sur l'histoire de l'idée de nature*, Paris: Gallimard, 2004.

istic vision, which follows the model of the perfect clock mechanism, was to offer another approach to nature, that of the reflective judgment. This analogy actually condenses the intentions of this work in which we propose a re-examination of the aesthetics of the sublime as a potential contribution to the political theory of emancipation. Nowadays the deterministic model is transposed from nature to a social reality that has succumbed to the logic of capital and managerial *techne*, so it becomes necessary to oppose another, alternative model of sociality (what is needed today is perhaps some kind of the Heisenbergian indeterminacy principle in the social realm). In that process the aesthetics of the sublime can have an emancipatory role in the similar way it did in Kant's epoch⁴⁰.

Thirdly, it is almost impossible to disregard the echo of the epoch of Revolutions in Kant's work. One note from the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, published during the second year of the French Revolution, seems to refer explicitly to this great event of "fundamental transformation of great people into the state"⁴¹ Moreover, is not revolution in an other Kant's text, namely, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, defined in terms of the unity between nature and freedom, which is exactly the program of his third *Critique*? In this late work of Kant, written in the 1798 when the French revolution had already showed its atrocities and dramatic outcomes, he notes that even if "the revolution of a gifted people which we have seen unfolding in our day" brings misery and atrocities, nonetheless it finds "in the hearts of all spectators (who are not engaged in this game themselves) wishful participation that borders closely on enthusiasm, the very expression of which is fraught with danger"⁴². The similarity between this description and the analysis of the sublime is obvious. The sympathy of the spectator for the revolution has cause in our moral disposition like the sublime, which recompenses, through the negative pleasure, the anguished breakdown of the imagination by elevating (*erheben*) us to the most profound realization of our rational nature articulated in the moral Law and the Idea of humanity. Revolution is moral because it is "the acknowledged duty of the human soul, concerning mankind as a whole"⁴³, and as such it signifies the realization of morality in history through the will of the people who strain to give themselves autonomously the constitution as morally good in itself. Kant's views on the French Revolution are not

40. It could be interesting to call our attention to one Hölderlin's letter, addressed to his brother Karl, in which he writes that Kant's philosophy is the only possible because it plays an important (we can say: emancipatory) role by saving the Germans from their timorous obtuseness. F. Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, 3 voll., ed. M. Knaupp, München-Wien; Hanser Verlag, vol. 2, 1992-1993, pp. 725-727.

41. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, cit., p. 246.

42. Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, New York: Abaris Books, 1979, p. 153.

43. Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, cit., p.157.

moralizing, because he saw the 1789 as an application of Pure Practical Reason, as the Event of the morality of the Right. And conversely, since he sees the Revolution as an ethical moment to be realized in history, Kant's ethics is not to be regarded as a "military" rigid moralism. In some way, the experience of the sublime demonstrates the true ontological character of Kant's ethics.

Those very enthusiastic tones⁴⁴ from Kant's text written in the 1798, in which he, interestingly, did not condemn the Jacobin's terror, but rather talks about enthusiasm and moral sympathy in spite of atrocity, serve some authors with the argument in favor of Kant's revolutionary intentions often hidden by an art of ambiguous and contradictory writing, necessary in the times of censorship⁴⁵. French philosopher André Tosel articulates Kant's political antinomy, which is nothing but a symptom of the real historical antinomy in the period of crisis, in these terms⁴⁶: the Event of the Right, through revolution as a historical symbol of the Idea of freedom and justice, does not use the instruments of the right, that is to say, does not respect the actual legal order and *status quo* of the institutionalized right. The Event of the Right is always an illegal violent reaction to the violence of the authority which is grounded in the valid legislation and the current systems of rules. Therefore, the revolutionary Event of the Right necessarily counteracts the fact of the right. This antinomy could be resolved if we take the meaning of the concept of "right" differently when we speak about the Event and when we speak about the fact or legality⁴⁷. However, the sense of this dramatic antinomy is that the state of the Right (or the Idea of Reason) cannot be enacted through the legal instruments of the right. The zero-point, the initial pre-legal situation of a new political and social organization, which should be more in harmony with the Idea of Reason, is not a juridical fact agreeable with the actual state of things, but a disorder, disarray, rupture with all its temporal implications that we have already elucidated with the example of the sublime. The origin of legality is "illegal", chaotic and violent — sublime. The new, "evental" violence in name of Reason collides with the old, "*ancien régime*" violence which acquired the form of the natural course of things, despotism of *status quo* in name of Nature, objectivism and self-proclaimed realism. Does this conflict between two violent transgressions, constitutive

44. Could not we take all those Kant's quoted words from *The Conflict of the Faculties* as an example of the reflective aesthetic judgment?

45. Domenico Losurdo, *Autocensura e compromesso nel pensiero politico di Kant*, Napoli: Bibliopolis, 1983.

46. André Tosel, *Kant révolutionnaire*, Paris: PUF, 1988.

47. The Event of the Right refers to the right as an effect of the Idea of Reason concerning our moral supersensible vocation and the striving for freedom (because of that the term is written with capital letter). The fact of the right has meaning of legality and juridical system of the rules in force. Therefore, we use these two different meanings of the same term "right".

for the realization of the Idea of Right, remind us of the violence and collision inherent in the sublime where imagination which violates inner sense is in turn violated by the pretensions of Reason to represent the Idea? Only the victory of Reason can establish the peaceful harmony between the faculties, in the same way as only the victory of a revolutionary cause can legitimate new political and social state.

Furthermore, this relation between two orders, between the Event and the fact, between the sublime irruption of freedom and the conventional continuity of *statu quo*, introduces thus a new perspective for the interpretation of the sublime with regard to *sensus communis*, another crucial concept of Kant's aesthetics. If the sublime finds its profound (political) meaning in the "domination of the rebellion", as an emancipatory authentic act oriented against the regime of facticity, then *sensus communis*, as horizon of intersubjective communicability authorized by current social rules, is always threatened by the potential rupture of the sublime. On the other hand, the sublime is constitutive for common sense, as its "illegal" origin and the instance which can always question the common *logos* of communicability. But the sublime event, as we have already noted, in order to produce far-reaching consequences with an universal and "objective" impact, has to find its proper *sensus communis*, its own language. All this generates some kind of hermeneutical circle between the sublime and common sense. The sublime is "the founding act" of common sense, and at the same time the sublime threatens current common sense, but nonetheless the sublime requires it as its horizon of communicability.

Philosophical hermeneutics has usually neglected the question of the sublime moving its attention instead toward the questions of common sense, taste and beauty. Hans Georg Gadamer in his rehabilitation of the humanistic tradition re-interprets exactly these concepts in order to offer an alternative model of the knowledge for the humanities⁴⁸. In doing so he develops a certain historical-philological genesis of the concept of common sense, referring principally to Giambattista Vico. Gadamer's analysis shows that *sensus communis* has its origin in the Latin rhetoric tradition with moral and political connotations close to the Aristotle's *phronesis*. For Gadamer common sense is the sense which constitutes the community and social life. What is interesting is that the sublime also comes from the rhetoric and literary tradition⁴⁹ and from its very beginning had a significant political and social value. But this category remains nonetheless of no particular interest to Gadamer; even

48. Cfr. Hans Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, Tübingen: J.C.B.Mohr, 1960.

49. The example is the famous treatise on the sublime from the ancient times, *Peri hýpsous*, ascribed to an unknown author named Pseudo-Longinus, published in 1554. by an Italian Renaissance humanist, Francesco Robortello.

when he critically examines Kant's aesthetics, the reference to the notion of the sublime is marginal .

On the other hand, interpretations of Kant's aesthetics that intend to ground political philosophy upon the category of *sensus communis* have already been suggested during the 20th century by different authors⁵⁰. We tried here to put forward the notion of the sublime as a truly political category, and the keystone of Kant's project of transcendental synthesis. The aesthetic theory of the sublime, hence, brings to light its "sublime actuality".

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50. Cfr. Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992.