

My initial interest with the Sublime began with its supposed rarity. I questioned if something so personal could truly be rare, especially if it is considered to be a matter of interpretation. Philosophers of aesthetic theory and more specifically, the Sublime, such as Kant or Edmund Burke, believed that the sublime could only exist in Nature because Nature was viewed as a supreme being with the ability to diminish humanity. To them, it was a matter of physical scale or conceptual complexity within Nature. However, with those standards, I determined that sublimity could exist in the arts. Thus, I entered an inquiry into the relationship between the Sublime and the arts by creating a large-scale 8'x8.5' painting. The piece is a mere representation of my conscious state throughout my process and a synthesis of ideas and people from my surrounding environment. I had made a subconscious effort to epitomize my experience at Oxbow, which is indeed a sublime experience. As for the viewers, I desired to create a piece, with intentions of provoking deeper thoughts, that one could stand in front of and ponder at for a while. Perhaps one might find sublimity in the scale or in thought.

The Sublime is simply a concept of interpretation that can prevail anywhere when one feels an overwhelming sense of diminishment or terror towards his or her ego and then a feeling of relief when brought back to reality; for me, the arts are purely Sublime.

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I will discuss and analyze the concept of the Sublime in order to ascertain whether it could manifest externally from Nature. The eventual product of this discussion may or may not resolve the posed question but it is important to note that the purpose of this paper is not to rectify the conflict, but to open more opportunity for further analyses. I will be focusing primarily on two reflective-judgment categories-the Sublime and the Beautiful-through the ideas of multiple philosophers.

Introduction: *On Aesthetics*

Aesthetic philosophy is the analysis of interpretation of beauty in taste; this field of philosophy is the basis of the Sublime and what is considered Sublime. The third Critique, the Critique of Judgment, in Kant's series of analytical writings, is divided into two parts: The Critique of Aesthetic Judgment and the Critique of Teleological Judgment. There lies four categories of reflective judgment within aesthetic judgment: the agreeable, the beautiful, the sublime and the good. I suppose we shall define *reflective judgment*, in the terms of Kant, as, "subsumption of a particular under a universal" (Internet Encyclopedia). Judgment is, arguably, the tie between understanding, which provides concepts (the universal) and reason, which provides inferences (the particular) by enabling personal subsumption to ensue. Aesthetics are, essentially, personal judgments and those judgments allow us to determine what is agreeable, beautiful, sublime or good.

Chapter 1: *The Sublime*

The origin of the sublime is commonly credited to Longinus of Greece, a literature and rhetoric teacher, in the first century A.D. in his treatise *On Sublime*. The treatise described a literary sublimity—perhaps the first introduction to the word Sublime—in that he illustrated what would constitute as great writing (e.g., vigor and nobility of the mind, must be made from and be able to elicit strong emotion, make right use of metaphors, employ notable diction and attend to the right arrangement of words) (Baker). This treatise remained untouched until its first interpretation in French in 1674 by Nicolas Boileau-Despreaux and would later influence Romantic and post Romantic philosophies (Kilburn). The idea of the sublime was reintroduced with Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, where he discussed both the sublime experience and the aesthetic of the beautiful under the influence of the Romantic era. This new concept behind what the sublime could be, outside of its intended literary connotation, differentiated beauty and the sublime and the sublime experience. Burke described the Sublime experience in different stages of terror, overwhelmingness and relief, insisting that a sublime experience would only be sublime if the principle sensation behind the experience was terror. He believed that the sublime existed almost exclusively in Nature, and fear would arise in the form of astonishment. The mind would be conquered by this glorious *thing* and would be so occupied, it couldn't entertain anything else, in this moment of astonishment and fear, the sublime is at its highest level of severity (The Norton). Later, Kant studied the Sublime in his 1790 *Critique of Judgment* and developed two forms of the Sublime: the mathematical and the dynamical. In both cases, the fundamental concept of the experience is discovering superiority over our own reason (Ginsborg).

The Mathematically Sublime:

The mathematically sublime is described as reason's superiority as opposed to the imagination. When we are confronted with the sublime, this object is so overwhelming in size that it is difficult for the imagination to comprehend it. Our imagination desires to advance to the infinite but our reason is aware of our mortality; the inability to estimate the scale of an object in the imagination triggers a feeling of a *supersensible*—beyond palpable—power in us (Ginsborg). There are two measurements of size: the aesthetic and the mathematical. The aesthetic is a measure based on intuition and the eye whereas the mathematical measurement is based on numerical calculations (the Mathematical). Suppose a 6' man was observing a 360' redwood tree in a forest, it would be obvious to him that he was much smaller than the tree and would, as a

result, feel diminished. The mathematically sublime is a very literal sublimity because of its pure calculative nature.

The Dynamically Sublime:

The dynamically sublime is our measure of power, and, similar to Burke, the main principle behind the experience is fear. Simultaneously, we are cognizant of our safety, but because the experience is most commonly a spontaneous disruption of our comfort, we forget about how truly safe we are, and fear persists. The experience of the dynamically sublime separates humans (particle) from humanity (entirety) i.e., “the irresistibility of [nature's] power certainly makes us, considered as natural beings, recognize our physical powerlessness, but at the same time it reveals a capacity for judging ourselves as independent of nature and a superiority over nature...whereby the humanity in our person remains un-demeaned even though the human being must submit to that dominion”(Ginsborg). Nature can make us feel weak as individuals but also, in the moment of experiencing the sublime, make us feel sufficient by allowing us to realize our own ability to judge ourselves outside of nature. This sublime experience could appear in a situation like standing at the very edge of a rock in a sea of mountains. The dynamically sublime is, considerably, a more emotional experience, where the object aids us in reevaluating ourselves.

Fear ensues when security, whether physical or mental, is lost; thus, when confronted with the sublime, we feel diminished. The experience of astonishment is, essentially, a discontinuity of life and expectations. The insecurity derives from universal obscurity, or the unknown. Sublimity is so often met with hostility because of fear, and we fear what we do not know. The Sublime, in all historical forms (with the exception of Longinus), is a measure of power in Nature. This overwhelming power, through recoil of self-respect, causes us to internalize the experience. The eighteenth century Sublime exists almost exclusively in Nature-Kant even suggests that animals are unworthy of sublimity-but, in a more modern scope, there is a lack of definition that is inherent to the sublime. The interpretation is dependent on distance from the object over intimacy or preference of aesthetic features; with that being said, one could validate finding any medium of, say, the arts Sublime (Pres). But this contemporary idea of the sublime paves way for a colloquial use of a once very charged word. Perhaps when ‘sublime’ is used colloquially, it truly means beautiful. Can interconnectivity exist between the sublime and the beautiful?

Chapter 2: *The Beautiful*

The beautiful, as described by Burke, is simply a well-formed and aesthetic object i.e., round and soft. The causation of beauty is divided into four sectors: the formal cause, the material cause, the efficient cause and the final cause. The formal cause of beauty is love or passion; the material cause is the roundness, fragility, smoothness of an object such as a ball; the efficient cause is the soothing element like watching the sunset; the final cause is divine providence-an ecclesiastical presence (a Philosophical). Kant’s critique of Burke’s concept of the beautiful was that he had overlooked the mental experience when one viewed the beautiful. Kant believes there must be four distinguishing factors of aesthetic judgments. The first is disinterest, meaning we appreciate something for its beauty not for the pleasure it offers us. Universal and necessary judgments are often used to describe the second and third of the four. Essentially, Kant believes that when we make a judgment of beauty, we expect others to agree with us and, as a result, we debate and argue as if we think we can convince one another. Beauty then becomes a part of the object’s characteristics, when truly, it is a product of the human mind. The fourth is

the object's ability to appear purposive without purpose. The object can affect us, as though purposive, while not having purpose (Internet Encyclopedia). These four factors are collectively known as Kant's common sense. The common sense is the accumulation of all four moments of the Beautiful don't depend on the common faculties for normal cognition.. Instead, however, those faculties are more in balance than they are forming a determinate cognition.

Chapter 3: *Sublimity in Fine Arts*

The arts generate a lot of controversy over whether they have the ability to be Sublime. It is very commonly accepted, mostly in eighteenth century, for the arts to be considered beautiful- for we appreciate and place a certain invalid purposiveness on the arts. Burke affiliates his idea of the Sublime very singularly with Nature, as does Kant. But Kant does make it a point to note that art can be beautiful when it appears to resemble Nature. He chronicles how art can be produced to be beautiful: the artist cannot force artwork to be beautiful; he or she must be blessed with *genius*-in which nature governs art-and create art that is unrestricted by rules. Kant would say that music may not even count as beautiful, simply an agreeable art form, where as poetry is highly regarded as beautiful. In terms of art, judgment of beauty is merely a representation of aesthetic ideas but this concept of beauty limits the potential of the arts to be sublime. To further understand, take the instance of music: By the definition of beautiful and how to create beautiful artwork, music will never be considered beautiful. Kant disregards music's ability to mimic Nature, however it is easy to find that music easily mirrors the experience of Nature (e.g. the crescendo followed by abrupt caesura or grand pause in Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake, Opus. 20). In fact, it would be even more appropriate to consider music as sublime for its very well calculated measures and tones (Helixcenter). Perhaps music's ability to copy Nature is not beautiful but dynamically sublime. Here, we have distinguished music as both mathematically and dynamically sublime, very carefully taking into consideration the true definition of both.

Other fine art very well may too, be sublime: a painting that is conceptually challenging or overwhelming in size, poetry that is almost too honest etc. Limits that were originally restricted what could be considered sublime, should be relocated in colloquial use, as it devalues the term by spreading it so thinly that it is synonymous with a word such as *magnificent*. The essence of the word is to describe an object that is so powerful, it seems to diminish us and create a boundary between our reality and Reality. If the sublime is directed by interpretation than one may rightfully find the arts as such.

Chapter 4: *Personal Interpretation of Art as Sublime*

To me, the Sublime is defined per individual, meaning there is no single definition for what is sublime. I find myself most interested with this romantic idea because I am an artist: I strive to create something that is bigger than myself. It would be invalid to say every piece of art I create is deliberately philosophical or thought provoking, however, I find that those pieces that are made to represent sublimity, are mostly representative of such concepts in the process of creation. Mastering something much larger than myself and trying to present such a large and glorious idea in only a painting, has caused me to feel this sense of overwhelming power from something out of my control. But then I remember, the artwork *is* in my control. This *thing* that, to me, is Sublime is not a Natural object, it is a product of myself and of other people.

The objective of many of my paintings is to fill the space. Now, this may seem easy, considering most of my work is abstract, it may seem the solution is to simply put a splotch of

red paint here or a squiggle of blue there. But I paint every stroke with a specific intention to achieve a certain aesthetic of my personal taste. During my process of painting, at a point of conflict-whether it be I cannot figure out my next step or I am bored with myself-I find my object to be most Sublime. That is, when I no longer feel as though I have complete control my artwork is sublime. Paradoxically, I do have control in that it is my painting and I can make any executive decision to continue to work on it or destroy it. As a result, I question my own definition of Sublime.

At first, it had been a consequence of feeling out of control and feeling overwhelmed by this *thing* that was so much more than I'd ever amount to. Now, understanding that I do have control, describing the Sublime as a product of my feelings in a particular moment is both ironic and invalid. The irony stems from its true definition, defined by the Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, "a feeling brought about by objects that are infinitely large or vast (such as the heavens or the ocean) or overwhelmingly powerful (such as a raging torrent, huge mountains, or precipices)". All parenthetical information that is used to describe something Sublime within that definition, is natural, yet I found that when I first tried to define sublimity for myself, it was a product of *my* feelings that came about when *I* was painting. Ergo, I feel uncertain describing something I was making or somebody else was making Sublime because Nature is, itself, the purest of the Sublime. Nature is incomparable to man, it is the most genuine being because it works in a respectable system, untarnished by poor ethics.

Something that is sublime in nature is separate from man. Here, I wonder if nature is sublime while man-made products are beautiful-where is the distinction? To answer my own question, I will say that to some extent that is true, however, something that is constructed by human beings has the ability to be sublime: something that is sublime makes someone feel, in the most humbling way, diminished. Very literally, diminished can be defined as being made out to be smaller or lesser; so, when an object is able to make someone or something rethink their true value in the Universe, that object can be considered Sublime. In this way, it makes it more clear as to why an artifact of Nature was most commonly seen as Sublime: Nature is vast and powerful. This then makes it so that manmade objects can be Sublime it is just a matter of what feelings they are evoking. With the correct intentions, I can create artwork that is Sublime by my own definition. Art is one of the most thought provoking skills in the Universe; in fact, the Arts in an ubiquitous understanding, are Sublime. I maintain the belief that my art is most sublime in its process of being created, when I have not yet defeated and conquered the work. That is probably because I do get a sense of feeling overwhelmed by this greater thing. I have accepted that others will see my work and not remark it as sublime or perhaps, may even feel underwhelmed. But I think sublimity is a personal experience, an experience between it and the artist. Again, that is why there truly is no single definition.

Chapter 5: *Conclusion*

I suppose if the backbone of the Sublime is interpretation, we can only conclude that the ability of sublimity to exist outside of Nature is solely reliant on the individual. What Longinus, Burke and Kant provided for us was a basis of what the Sublime and the Beautiful *could*, and most likely does, consist of-their philosophies are a platform for the individual to interpret their own idea of what is and what is not sublime. To me, I find that all forms of art can go beyond the label of being beautiful and extend outwards towards being described as sublime. The sublime is more so about the personal experience than it is the actual object. I think Kant was exactly correct when he noted that the sublime experience is initiated with fear: We *should* feel terror

when we realize our true status in the Universe. Anything that can humble one and have them re-evaluate his or her status can be considered fear-arts included. However, we must question what validates an individual's idea of what is aesthetic; is there is a universally accepted sublime object; do our ideas of sublimity change and develop as we do?

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