

*From the Sublime to the Monstrous. Two Interpretations of Kant*

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« L'objet est bordé de sublime »

Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur. Essai sur l'abjection*

The root of the noun *monster* (*monstrum*), derived from *monere*, to admonish, to warn, holds together the meaning of warning, to announce something that is out of the ordinary, against the natural order of things, with the meaning of showing, exposing – the root of *monstrum* is the same of the Italian verb *mostrare* (to show). Something announces itself, manifests itself as extraordinary, outside the normal course of events. On the other hand, the etymology of the noun *prodigy* (*prod-igium*) also expresses the sense of something that is 'placed before', exposed, shown. Which means that something particular, something that differs from the usual and natural order of things is exhibited, placed in front of a subject, causing astonishment and fear, disrupting one's ability to represent. Starting from these two aspects – the feeling of fear and the break in the subject's ordinary representational schema – the following pages aim to investigate the relationship between the monstrous and the concept of the sublime, linking them primarily as moments that challenge our cognitive possibilities.

*Sublime vs. monstrous?*

The modern history of the concept of the sublime begins with Nicolas Boileau's French translation of Pseudo-Longinus' *Peri Hypsous* in 1674. In his introduction, Boileau speaks of a dichotomy between the sublime of style and the sublime *tout court*, that which is extraordinary, surprising, marvelous, only alluded to in the ancient treatise. The concept of the sublime changes, becoming more similar to how we understand it today in philosophical terms, when the term is no longer ascribed to the dimension of ethos to indicate what is noble and elevated (an aspect testified to by its etymology, as *sublimen* is composed of *sub*, 'under' and *limen*, 'threshold', 'door', so originally "sloping up to the lintel" and by extension referring to what is elevated), but to the dimension of *pathos*. Also following the French reception of the English aesthetics of genius and sensibility, the effect of the sublime is no longer described as elevation of the mind, but as the act of shaking, upsetting the person contemplating (for an in-depth historical reconstruction of the concept see Saint Girons 2006). Already in its first modern appearance, the concept refers to the disorder of the faculties experienced by a subject, now more radical, when faced with the monstrous. In his well-known *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Burke moves beyond both the rhetorical aspects that are central in Pseudo-Longinus, and Boileau's classicist approach, clearly distinguishing the sublime from the beautiful and introducing the element of terror, the sense of 'delightful horror' as a specific characteristic of the sublime. What is new is the emphasis on the negative character of this experience.

A few years later, Kant addressed these same concepts in his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, later expanding them and subjecting them to his critical-transcendental analysis in the *Critique of Judgment*. In the latter the sublime (*das Erhabene*) is no longer characterized empirically as in Burke's *Enquiry* and in his own 1764 work: sublime is not something psychological or physiological, nor a style, but a critical moment *par excellence*, an experience of the transcendental subject in the encounter with something that upsets the ordinary exercise of the faculties. Or rather, to put it in Kantian terms, it is a feeling arising from the apprehension of an object that proves to be the occasion for a purposive relationship between the faculties of a subject. The simultaneous experience of pleasure and displeasure, of wonder and respect of the subject contemplating the greatness or power of nature, disproportionate to the sensible faculties, differs from beauty, it is an alternative experience, in that it is also negative. Put more explicitly, although perhaps simplifying a little, Kant theorizes the sublime when he realizes that the category of beautiful, as the free play of the faculties, is not sufficient to describe a certain experience of nature, which is neither theoretical, cognitive, nor aesthetic, as is the case with the judgment of taste that defines beauty. If from the point of view of the history of aesthetics this shift towards the sublime is not problematic, since the concept of the sublime is to be frequently found in the eighteenth century, the way it is

developed in the Third Critique points to a shift in Kant's reasoning (see D'Angelo 1997; D'Angelo 2019, pp. 136 ff).

Paragraph 23, the first paragraph of the *Analytic of the Sublime*, presents a brief summary of the differences between the beautiful and the sublime. Both experiences presuppose a reflective judgment, which is not determining. I will try to illustrate them briefly, only in order to clarify how the concept of the sublime is subsequently addressed and to better understand how it resonates with the theme of monstrosity. The category of beauty is connected to the ideas of limitation and form, the sublime to limitlessness and formlessness; what is beautiful causes an intensification of vital forces; the sublime, on the other hand, is an emotion of both attraction and repulsion, therefore not of joy but of astonishment and respect; beauty is characterized by the free play between imagination and understanding, the sublime is serious, it is a confrontation, a clash between imagination and reason. However, according to Kant, as we know, this impediment of the vital forces that characterizes the experience of the sublime in relation to beauty leads to a superior kind of pleasure: because of this ability to think such greatness and power, the sublime attests to the existence of a faculty of the mind which surpasses every standard of sense, i.e. reason.

This first description of the sublime, which I have intentionally simplified, (for a more detailed discussion of the sublime in Kant see Feloj 2012), allows us to stress two important aspects in our discussion. First, the formlessness (*formlos*) of the sublime, not yet deformed or monstrous, but lacking form: "For the sublime, in the strict sense of the word, cannot be contained in any sensuous form, but rather concerns ideas of reason, which, although no adequate presentation of them is possible, may be aroused and called to mind by that very inadequacy itself which does admit of sensuous presentation" (Kant 2007: 76). A fundamental theoretical consequence can also be derived from this aspect, namely that the sublime object "lends itself to the presentation of a sublimity discoverable in the mind." (Kant 2007: 76). What is sublime, therefore, is not the stormy ocean, Kant writes, but the feeling that induces the mind to turn to what has a superior purpose: the sublime, in other words, is more subjective than beauty.

Secondly, the failure of imagination, which leads to discard sensibility and to the intervention not of the understanding but of reason, in the awareness of a "supremacy of our cognitive faculties on the rational side over the greatest faculty of sensibility" (Kant 2007: 88). Twentieth-century literature has concentrated on the failure of imagination, on the disorder of the faculties: "which [...] excites the feeling of the sublime, may appear, indeed, in point of form to contravene the ends of our power of judgement, to be ill-adapted to our faculty of presentation, and to do violence, as it were, to the imagination" (Kant 2007: 76). In other words, it is true that the limit of the imagination, experienced with the sublime, is the first step towards a superior kind of pleasure, awakened by this inadequacy (it is possible also to speak of a "productivity of the negative" in Kant, see Failla 2019), but the counter-purposiveness of the sublime that Kant seems to struggle with also unsettles the whole system: it is no longer an object for the intellect, and therefore

determines a type of experience that, although it does not fall completely outside of rationality, can nonetheless – leaving behind Kant’s terminology – be defined as a threshold experience.

Kant mentions the monstrous (*Ungeheuer*) in the section dedicated the mathematically sublime, where he speaks of a magnitude that is disproportionate to human faculties. Kant had already addressed this theme in the pre-critical period, in 1766, but with a different tone. In *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, for example, the deformed, the monstrous, is that which goes against the natural order, creating disharmony. Here the evident comparison, although only hinted at, is with the mystic’s imagination. In *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, the monstrous also returns as an attribute of the grotesque and the Gothic, insofar as they are asymmetrical and not harmonious. This disruption of the natural order of things had to and could be repaired, however, and illuminated by the light of reason, and could therefore be considered as something negative that nevertheless anticipates a positive moment. From 1781 onwards, however, Kant’s way of considering the monstrous changes. In the new topography that defines the limits of reason, the monster has no place; from this moment, Kant strives to expel the monstrous, to erase it: now the monstrous is no longer simply something that destroys harmony, but something beyond the limits of the human faculties (for a detailed analysis of the transformation of the monstrous from the pre-critical period to the critical period see Lemos 2014).

In the third *Critique*, as we know, the mathematical sublime does not concern a quantity that we can compare or measure with units of measurement – a measurement that can therefore proceed without encountering any limitations for the imagination – but a magnitude that Kant defines as absolute. In the aesthetic evaluation of a magnitude, that of simple intuition, the imaginative faculty encounters its own limits very early on, and these limits, this ‘maximum’ that is reached, is what provokes an emotion not connected to a real danger, but to the voice of reason. Conversely, the encounter with the monstrous does not produce the pleasure and respect derived from rational ideas. Kant writes that “An object is *monstrous* where by its size it defeats the end that forms its concept.” (Kant 2007: 83). Here, to experience the limits of the imagination, beyond which the comfort of accord with the ideas of reason is no longer possible, as in the case of the sublime, provokes neither identification nor pleasure, however negative. As Feloj has commented, in Kant the recognition of counter-purposiveness always prevents the possibility of representation: “either the lack of accord of faculties is annulled and the initial sense of displeasure is experienced as being part of a more general feeling of pleasure, as is the case with the ugly in beautiful art, which is also the case with the sublime, or what is counter-purposive is excluded altogether and gives rise to neither judgment nor representation, as is the case with disgust” (Feloj 2017: 106). The space of rationality depends on the recognition of the limit beyond which the monstrous is located.

*Monstrous filiations and aberrant turns*

Given Kant's definition of the monstrous as something so great it nullifies its purpose, it would seem that the monstrous is conceived in opposition to the sublime as a critical feeling, which allows and implies the intervention of reason. And yet, it could also be said that in the experience of the Kantian sublime, there is always an initial monstrous moment, which, however, could not exist if there were no initial guarantee of its being overcome. Moreover, this monstrous that critical philosophy expels beyond the boundaries of thought thus becomes an absolute 'outside', and thus seems to gain a new power. As Lemos writes: "The Monster withdraws from this new topography of Reason. However, the elimination of this figure from the field of critical philosophy seems to confine it to a slightly more threatening place: it begins to inhabit an exterior that we cannot see, perhaps because we maintain a more fundamental relationship with it" (Lemos 2014). It is indicative that twentieth-century interpretations of Kant insist above all on the failure of the representative faculties in the Kantian experience of the sublime, on dissent, on disagreement. This aspect of Kant's thought, though immediately tamed by Kant himself, seems to be the most promising for philosophy starting in the twentieth century, so much so that today, if we consider the work of Donna Haraway and other authors (who certainly do not claim to be Kantian), it is reasonable to speak of a "monstrous turn" (Haraway 1992: 304). 'Monster' is intended as a figure representing hybridization, able to refute all claims concerning primeval purity. According to non-anthropocentric posthumanism, in fact, nature is a "cosmos of monsters", and the encounter with the monster, with the absolute other, is described in terms of interconnectedness and kinship (see Braidotti 2005). The investigation underway is primarily epistemological, as Timeto notes: "The monster as an aberration has always been first and foremost an aberration of the concept, a sign of the decline of representational epistemology and its instruments" (Timeto 2018: 128).

Among the many interpretations of the third *Critique*, two French authors of the twentieth century stand out who seem to radicalize the epistemological scope of Kant's sublime, viewing it not only as a cognitive possibility, but as the necessary starting point of a thought that is neither conventional nor abstract. Both authors speak of this feeling as being caused by a violent encounter with the Outside, as an experience of the limit. This experience is out of the ordinary and is violent, it borders on the experience of the monstrous. Deleuze's *Kant's Critical Philosophy* offers such an interpretation of Kant's philosophy. Throughout the 1960s, Deleuze defined the German philosopher as an author devoted only to the study of the ordinary use of the faculties – for this reason Kant is an "enemy" and his theoretical assumptions must be refuted. The text written in 1963 focuses on the relationship between the faculties in the three *Critiques*; here Deleuze makes a distinction between the first meaning of the term faculty in Kant's writings, understood as a type of relation between subject and object: from this point of view, it is possible to identify the faculty of knowing, referred to the object from the point of view of conformity; the faculty of desiring, referred to the object in a causal relation; and the feeling of pleasure

or displeasure, in which the representation has a certain effect on the subject, enhancing or damaging its vital force. Kant's objective is to determine the higher form of such faculties, that is, the situation in which the faculty is autonomous and gives the law to itself. There is, however, a second meaning of the term faculty, which designates not the various relationships of representation, but the sources of the representations. This is the role of the three faculties as sources of representations: imagination, understanding, and reason. The relationship between these two meanings of 'faculty', with their systematic variations, produces what Deleuze defines as "the real network which constitutes the transcendental method". For instance, understanding legislates in the faculty of knowledge, which does not, however, exclude the role – described as "original" by Deleuze – of imagination and reason.

It is in this framework that the faculty of feeling in the third *Critique* stands out in Deleuze's work, since its higher form presents two "paradoxical characteristics". First, unlike knowing and desiring, the feeling of pleasure and displeasure does not define any interest of reason, neither speculative nor practical, but is completely disinterested. Secondly, it does not legislate over objects, being indifferent to their existence, it only legislates over itself, i.e. the faculty of feeling is not autonomous but "heautonomous". As regards the faculties understood in their second, higher sense, i.e. as the source of representations, according to Deleuze the third *Critique* presents a further particularity: here imagination, in its free agreement with the indeterminate concept of the understanding, does not schematize in the proper sense, but reflects the form of the object, becoming productive and spontaneous. Aesthetic common sense is thus "a pure subjective harmony where imagination and understanding are exercised spontaneously, each on its own account. Consequently common sense does not complete the two others; *it provides them with a basis that makes them possible*" (Deleuze 1984: 49-50), since it shows that the faculties are first and foremost capable of such harmony. This statement, however, poses another problem, which concerns whether the free accord of faculties that grounds common sense should be presupposed, or produced, generated. This problem is the subject of another article by Deleuze written the same year, *The Idea of Genesis in Kant's Aesthetics*. To solve this problem Deleuze considers the second kind of aesthetic judgment, the sublime. Already in this text the relevance (and the problematic nature) of the concept of the sublime emerges: the particular relationship between imagination and reason produced by the sublime, in its immensity or power, shows how the accord of faculties is a point of arrival, generated in the disagreement and contradiction between the demands of reason and those of the imagination typical of the experience of the sublime. If in the sublime reason places the imagination before its own limit, the imagination, by reawakening reason, overcomes its subordination to a determining faculty (the intellect, whether it legislates over it or harmonizes with it) and thus increases its power.

Deleuze returned to Kant more times in the course of the years, each time with greater admiration (on the Kant-Deleuze relationship see Palazzo 2013), to the point of claiming

that in his late work Kant becomes “sensitive to catastrophe”. The catastrophe in which aesthetic understanding is compromised is the experience of the sublime, highlighted in the lectures on Kant delivered by Deleuze in Vincennes in 1978 (Deleuze 2004) and connected to a notion of time described as “out of joint”. The point of arrival of the Deleuzian interpretation is that at any moment phenomena can occur in space and time that disrupt aesthetic understanding, that is, the basis of any imaginative synthesis, destroying its rhythm, that is, the agreement between things to be measured and the very units of measurement. The “adventure of the sublime” exhibits the fragility of the ground on which the activity of the imagination rests, which is blocked and left speechless before the immensity of the ocean, the infinite skies, the avalanches, the storms. This threat, however, is the beginning of something more powerful and necessary.

If the failure produced by the appearance of formlessness in the sensible world is a moment of arrest for Kant, who then proceeds to develop a new kind of accord, this failure is the only possible starting point for Deleuze, who conceives of thought as the outcome of a violent impact with the Outside. This description of the activity of thinking is, moreover, present throughout Deleuze’s work, from his 1962 text on Proust to *What is Philosophy?* written with Félix Guattari and published in 1991: the polemical target is classical rationalist philosophy, which believes it can arrive at truth by means of decision and methodical practice. Deleuze contrasts this idea with that of the involuntary quality of a necessary thought, whose success depends precisely on its relationship with exteriority. In Deleuze’s reading of Kant, the sublime is a decisive turning point, one in which dissonance is emancipated from agreement, and it is only in this dissonance that thought can originate for Deleuze. By reassembling the connections between the sublime and the monstrous, this interruption in the accord that characterizes the sublime – albeit with the violence and with the fear and disharmony it provokes, indeed precisely because of these – is the beginning of philosophy. In a famous passage Deleuze describes philosophical practice, in its relationship with the history of thought, as a “monstrous filiation”. Retracing the history of philosophy means taking a thinker and transforming his concepts, manipulating them, subjecting them to a “machination” (see Vignola 2018), developing a version of the history of philosophy which is a counter-history populated by “monstrous offspring”, in line with a conception of thought as a series of aberrant movements (see Lapoujade 2020), as an irrational logic, a flight towards its borders.

### *Disasters of the aesthesis*

In his *Lessons on the Analytics of the Sublime* and in other texts also Jean-François Lyotard speaks of the Kantian sublime (Lyotard 1995; Lyotard 2001), perhaps even more radically than Deleuze (for an analysis of the *Lessons* in the broader context of Lyotard’s production, see Branca 2021). Lyotard stresses the disruptive moment, the clash between faculties. With a bizarre faithful infidelity, Lyotard identifies the “negative presentation” of

the sublime, a feeling lacking an object, not in nature, but in art, in the avant-garde in particular (see Lyotard 2001: 123-143; Bonometti 2011). Also, the position that the sublime occupies in Lyotard's conception is almost opposite to the one it occupies in Kant: Lyotard places the sublime at the centre of his reading of Kant, while claiming that the marginal position it occupies in the *Analytic of the Sublime* in the third *Critique* is indicative of Kant's unconscious attempt to conceal it – the issues it raises risk “violating” his entire system. In particular, the sublime implies the sacrifice of a lesser interest in view of a greater interest, given that reason, “the faculty of pure Ideas, seems to have every interest in the disorganization of the datum and in the failure of the intellect and imagination” (Lyotard 1995: 77). In other words, the use that the subject makes of nature in the experience of the sublime is, after all, a use that proves to be interested, it has a purpose that is independent of nature. According to Lyotard, this characteristic also casts doubts on the disinterested character of the beautiful in the definition derived from the first moment of the judgment of taste, the moment that lays the foundations of the entire edifice of the *Critique*.

With regard to the issues addressed here, this interpretation of the sublime essentially aims to show that the sublime is an alternative paradigm to the harmonic one of beauty, a paradigm that Lyotard defines as “a denatured aesthetic, or rather an aesthetic of denaturation, [which] breaks the good order of natural aesthetics” (Lyotard 1995: 88). If the latter concerns the form, measure and harmony of beauty, the sublime, with its absence of form, points in the direction of force, excess, even the abysmal, as Kant himself wrote at one point. In Lyotard's reading, as D'Angelo also notes, “the sublime is about violence, which verges on the colossal and monstrous” (D'Angelo 2019: 155), rather than being its opposite. The fact that the sublime verges on the colossal and the monstrous depends on the fact that both, the sublime and the monstrous, appear to be counter-purposive, a fact that Kant strives to overcome in the course of the *Analytics of the Sublime* and that Lyotard, on the contrary, underlines (also Kearney 2012, who reads Lyotard together with Julia Kristeva and Slavoj Žižek, and speaks of a “teratology of the sublime”). Lyotard writes that when experiencing nature as absolute greatness, as absolute power, the imagination collapses, it is powerless, “it is raped”, and the only feeling possible is one of inadequacy, a sense of disproportion. However, as we know, this horror, the quality of being unrepresentable, allows to take a glimpse “of the Idea, of the absolute of power, of freedom”, a higher purpose which is reached at the price of what Lyotard calls “disloyalty”, “a serration”, or even “an abuse” (Lyotard 1995: 108-109).

From here, let us return to the two issues presented at the beginning, the main issues here at stake: the terror provoked by the sublime vision and the experience of the collapse of the subject's representative capacities. In his *Lessons on the Analytics of the Sublime* Lyotard writes: “Sublime violence is like lightning. It short-circuits thinking with itself.” (Lyotard 1994: 54). The experience of the interruption of ordinary perception, which Deleuze views as the necessary prerequisite of thought, is described in Lyotard's text *Anima minima*, the



last essay in the homonymous collection, as animation, as the emergence of the subject itself. The subject depends on this experience, it is “existed”, animated, only in the disaster of the imaginative faculty. This is how Lyotard presents the emotion of the sublime: “The beauty of a form is an enigma to the intellect. But that one can be moved by the 'presence' in the sensible of a 'thing' that the sensible cannot present in forms, is a mystery unacceptable to logic. And yet all descriptions of sublime feeling converge on this aberration. The regularities of nature fail, perception fails to maintain its ground, and, beginning with Longinus, it is admitted that this disaster of the aisthesis can occasion the most intense aesthetic occasion” (Lyotard 1995: 121, my transl.). Here, however, Lyotard goes a step further and in the disaster of the aisthesis he not only recognizes the opportunity to catch a glimpse of freedom, of the idea, of absoluteness, indeed this disaster is the only possibility for the soul to be affected and awakened by this sensible outside, and therefore to come into existence (not so much as a soul but as a soul-body, insofar as it is dependent on sensibility). The subject is, in other words, precarious, unstable, but also a miraculous event, which depends on a “sensible beyond”, the same way a sensation depends on the soul, in a sort of reciprocal coexistence. This relationship, however, is a violent and traumatic encounter: “What we call life proceeds from a violence exerted from outside on a lethargy” (Lyotard 1995: 123, my transl.). If for Deleuze true thinking, creative and unconventional thinking, can only emerge from the encounter with the sensible *out there*, Lyotard shares Deleuze’s perspective, the idea that matter is the cause of every incorporeal event: the possibility of subjectification depends on the encounter with the real, which however only occurs in the violent form of trauma, in the confrontation with the absolute other. Here the sublime, which is complicit with the monstrous moment it always entails, which we could identify with every real encounter with what is other from us, is productive, generative in a full sense. It is a feeling that nevertheless poses an epistemological question about the limits of thought, because only on the threshold of these limits does the emergence of the subject and its animation take place.

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