

Nature, Fine Art, and *The Other One*: A Defense of the Artistic Sublime in Kant

The way Deadheads listen to music is different from most other people. I picked up the practice from my father, a Deadhead, who saw the original Grateful Dead in their later years. The practice can be related to “searching for the sound.” We actively listen for how the band members play off each other, the risks they take in going outside the known bounds of a song, the collective “group mind” that permeates foreground and background, and attempts to reach a transcendental state that takes a listener out of their body (Malvinni 2013, 14). Those who do not understand this interaction are not initiated into the scene; they are not “on the bus.” However, even a Deadhead who is well-versed in this practice can still feel overwhelmed by the sound of some of the Grateful Dead’s songs. The band's ability to turn a song inside out as it grows larger can halt any comprehension of what is unfolding. Some songs are works of art that make a listener feel uncomfortable and inadequate when they engage with them. However, with the result of feeling empowered, their cognition attempts to unite a song beyond imaginative description.

In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Immanuel Kant calls this process the “sublime,” i.e., the experience of confronting something absolutely great with the result being a negative pleasure (5:245). I will argue that Kant's *Critique* has a place for the artistic sublime. Specifically, one can correctly identify the displeasure and pleasure experienced when engaging with art as an experience of the artistic sublime. First, I will explain the judgments of taste and the sublime. After examining their similarities and differences, I will analyze arguments about the possibility of the artistic sublime and briefly discuss the role of music in Kant’s *Critique*. The discussion will continue by describing the process of experiencing the mathematical sublime and useful indicators in music theory for identifying the sublime in music. Using the Grateful Dead’s

04/07/1972 version of “The Other One,” I will show how some works of art present the mathematical sublime. There have been debates over what is sublime. The sublime is an experience; particular objects could evoke it. However, there may be a contextual difference that bars the sublime from being evoked by works of art, i.e., works of art elicit judgments of taste. The main difficulty is whether a work of art can elicit both judgments of taste and judgments of the sublime.

One Man Gathers What Another Man Spills

Kant describes judgments of taste as grounded in subjective and disinterested pleasure in response to a mental representation because what is beautiful about the object has nothing to do with whether it exists or not. This response of pleasure, unrelated to personal interest, leads to universality. Aesthetic judgments are singular analytical judgments treated as universal, where the concept of the beautiful predicates the singular subject. However, this subjective statement demands others to understand their pleasure as if it were an objective universal judgment, even though the claim is not based on concepts. Kant calls this the “universal voice,” meaning that someone does not have to agree with others’ subjective response but that they compare the response to the idea that it can be “considered valid for everyone” (5:216).

We can communicate the validity of our subjective sensations because of the pleasure we feel from judging due to the harmony of free play between the faculties, i.e., powers of the mind, imagination, and understanding. The imagination organizes what we perceive, and the understanding brings the representation under a concept. Both continuously work together, with the imagination apprehending the appearance of an object within the formal constraints provided by the understanding that does not apply concepts, never coming to completion and thus sustaining pleasure. This pleasure results from this activity of taste’s faculties and the object of

judgment as being purposive in form. Purposiveness can be found in both the object and the activity of free play, where a purpose is assumed but never determined, and the result is pleasure.

Mirror Shatters In Formless Reflections Of Matter

Another type of aesthetic judgment for Kant is the judgment of the sublime. The sublime deals with the experience of confronting the representation of objects that are absolutely great and mighty, which reveal a superior supersensible faculty within us. Kant describes two conceptions of the sublime: the mathematically sublime and the dynamically sublime. The experience of the mathematically sublime occurs when one tries to intuitively estimate the magnitude of something absolutely great or so large that the imagination fails to comprehend it. Examples in the *Critique* include the Pyramids in Egypt and Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome (5:252). This failure of the imagination to comprehend an object in its totality brings an unpleasant feeling. However, it also awakens the ability to think of an absolute totality with the faculty of reason.

If The Thunder Don't Get Ya, Then The Lightning Will

In the case of the dynamically sublime, it is the experience of someone's will becoming overwhelmed by the crushing power of nature that incites fear in them. Kant uses examples like lightning storms with thunderclaps and raging seas (5:261). A subject experiences the object as fearful, but the object itself is not an object of fear because the subject remains disinterested because they are in a safe position vis-à-vis the power of the object (e.g., viewing the raging sea from the safety of shore, 5:261). Displeasure or fear in the dynamically sublime stems from physical powerlessness, "but at the same time it reveals a capacity for judging ourselves as independent of it and a superiority over nature... whereby the humanity in our person remains undemeaned even though the human being must submit to that domination" (5:261). The

pleasure we feel is produced because not even the forces of nature can destroy our autonomy or ability to reason.

It's Bending My Mind

In *The Analytic of the Sublime*, Kant notes that the judgment of the sublime and taste share two attributes: they claim universal validity and are based on feelings of pleasure. However, they differ in several ways. Judgments of the sublime are (1) limitless/formless, (2) involve the faculties of imagination and reason, (3) a “tumultuous”¹ movement of the mind that results in negative pleasure, (4) claims universal validity of moral feeling rather than cognition, and (5) contrapurposive in form (5:244-245). While Kant provides examples of the sublime in nature, he explicitly states that the sublime “is not contained in nature, but only in our mind” (5:245).² This is because the sublime proper “only concerns ideas of reason, which though no presentation adequate to them is possible” are brought to mind because they cannot be presented, “which does allow of sensible presentation” (5:245).

His Job Was To Shed Light, But Not To Master

It is important to note that Kant's theory of the beautiful is much more developed than his theory of the sublime. As he notes at the beginning of the *Analytic of the Sublime*, “[the] theory of the sublime is a mere appendix to the aesthetic judging of the purposiveness of nature” (5:246).

Some scholars demonstrate that the lack of content in Kant's discussion of the sublime trivializes the sublime. Other scholars illustrate the role of the sublime in connecting judgments of taste and morality. This paper will look at debates regarding the possibility of the artistic sublime, specifically, which objects might provoke an experience of the sublime.

¹ General Remark, 5:273.

² 5:264, 5:256, 5:245

Inspiration, Move Me Brightly

The sublime is an experience in our minds. Particular objects would provoke the movement. This is because ideas of reason (i.e., moral and intellectual ideas) elicit the sublime. The question is whether our representation of objects of nature, works of art, or both stimulates the sublime. One line of thought by Uygur Abaci is that Kant has nature as one of the fundamental components for judgments of the sublime. While it would be hard to distinguish between the possibility of natural and artistic objects causing an experience of the sublime, thinking of the sublime as a response to artworks would take judgments of the sublime out of the “broader context to which they belong,” which is nature (Abaci 2008, 239).

In his article "A Case for Kantian Artistic Sublimity: A Response to Abaci," Robert Clewis has another line of thought, namely, that the broader context of nature is not essential when distinguishing objects that can properly elicit the sublime. If nature itself cannot be sublime, then neither is art. Instead, these objects can elicit moral ideas that lead to a sublime experience. Specifically, art itself can make us “aware of these [rational] ideas... Artworks can express moral ideas and move us to reflect imaginatively on these ideas” (Clewis 2010, 167). It also does not matter the size of the objects per se, but rather the point of view or distance of the perceiving subject and their ability to reflect on a rational idea that an object stimulates.

Once In A While You Get Shown The Light,

In the Strangest of Places If You Look At It Right

The distinction between representation and presentation is just as important as that of beauty and nature. Works of art can *represent* the sublime and objects associated with the sublime (Clewis 2010, 169). For example, a painting of a hurricane making landfall can be associated with the sublime. However, this painting does not necessarily have to incite a movement of the mind that

brings about the experience of the sublime. The artist of the hurricane painting may use specific colors and shadowing techniques to create a perceptual illusion that may make us think of infinity without “awakening the idea of infinite greatness in us” (Abaci 2008, 247).

Some works of art *present* the sublime without representing such traditional sublime objects (Clewis 2010, 169). In other words, these works of art can *elicit* the experience of the sublime. A painting that contains geometrical patterns of varying shades and hues by no means represents hurricanes or thunderstorms but nonetheless stimulates in us a rational idea that provokes a movement of the mind, giving birth to an experience of the sublime. Clewis further supports the parallel between “presentation” and “experience” by pointing to a passage in the General Remark of *The Analytic of the Sublime*, equating the “tumultuous movements of the mind” to “a sublime presentation” (5:273). Indeed, it would be strange for someone to be *presented* with the sublime by a work of art that does not represent traditional sublime objects without experiencing the sublime.

If You Get Confused, Listen To The Music Play

Given what we know from previous literature, art can elicit the sublime. Specifically, there are works of music that a viewer engages with that can elicit the mathematically sublime. One point needs to be made about the role of music in the third *Critique*. Kant ranks music the lowest in his typology of fine arts. However, Kant mentions that music without words is an example of “free beauty,” i.e., a pure judgment of taste that does not presuppose a concept for the representation of an object. That is why I will use jams from the song “The Other One” by the Grateful Dead as an example of the artistic mathematical sublime. The Grateful Dead, founded in 1965, are best known for their long jams. Some argue that their most creative and experimental jams are from their earlier performances, notably 1965-1975. I will use their “The Other One” performance on

4/7/72 from Volume 1 of their *Europe '72 tour*.³ Before dissecting the performance, I will turn to what a subject experiences with the mathematical sublime.

The Way You Strike Me Now, It's Sparking My Imagination

The experience of the mathematical sublime is when one tries to intuitively estimate the magnitude of something absolutely great or so large that the imagination fails to comprehend it. There are two kinds of intuitive estimation: logical (by numerical notation) and aesthetical (by the eye). Intuitive estimation has two processes: apprehension, which presents partial representations of a given manifold of intuition to the imagination, and comprehension, which aims to present the succession of partial representations as a singular one to the faculty of reason (5:252). In an aesthetic estimation, the imagination can effortlessly apprehend each representation because apprehension extends to infinity, but because of the might of something so large, comprehension fails to present a single representation as the representations intuited previously start to fade in the imagination as it apprehends further ones (5:252). The inadequacy of the imagination to present an idea in its totality brings a negative feeling replaced with pleasure at the fact that our supersensible faculty of reason enables the contemplation of infinity by an infinite, sensible nature (5:257).

The Bus Came By and I Got On, That's Where It All Began

The mathematical sublime seems to invite its subject to contemplate (Hull 2019, 35). Since the imagination fails in the estimation of the mathematical sublime, indicators of what to look for in the artistic mathematical sublime are needed. Previous literature has discussed that specific works of art can present the experience of the sublime without referring to traditional objects of the sublime. Since this paper demonstrates that the mathematical sublime is evoked by “The

³ Specifically, I will be analyzing the first introductory jam of The Other One I. The notation in Deadbase, a Grateful Dead anthology, is marked as The Other One I > El Paso > The Other One II.

Other One,” we must know what to listen for when examining the song. In the presentation of a song without words, we should be aware of the “use of figures that defy attempts to hear individual tones, to replicate motives or themes... and certainly any attempt to transcribe” (Hull 2019, 35). A song can go about this sort of presentation by “[making] use of ambiguous harmony, contrapuntal chromaticism, abrupt modulations, virtuosic passagework, and complexity and multiplicity of [notes]” (Hull 2019, 35).

Ambiguous harmony is when a song's overall harmonic context cannot be traced back to a tonal center. In “The Other One,” it is difficult to differentiate if it is based in an E major or Dorian key. Contrapuntal chromaticism is when two or more melodies are played simultaneously with notes outside of a seven-note major and minor diatonic scales.⁴ Modulations are the process between tonal and rhythmic changes. Passagework relates to song sections that do not relate to the work's central theme.

There Was Cowboy Neal At The Wheel Of The Bus To Never Ever Land

The form of “The Other One” can be broken into five sections: “(1) opening jam, (2) first verse-chorus, (3) middle jam, (4) second verse-chorus, and (5) outro jam” (Malvinni 2013, 67). I recommend starting the recording towards the end of “Drums” > “The Other One” in order to get the full force of Phil Lesh's introductory bass riff.⁵ Starting at 00:05, drummer Bill Kreutzman and Ron “Pigpen” McKernan on the keys follow Phil Lesh's central theme of the song.⁶ At 00:09, Jerry Garcia on lead guitar assumes a different theme, which Lesh responds at 00:12, creating a juxtapositional yet cooperative force that overwhelms the listener. Both Garcia and

⁴ For example, a C scale uses the notes C, D, E, F, G, A, and B.

⁵ If you want to listen to the songs while you read this portion of the paper, a free resource to gain access to the recording is Archive.org. However, the quality of the recording is worse compared to streaming platforms like Spotify. This annotation of the song is from the version on Spotify.

⁶ Typically, it follows the notes E > B > D

Lesh play around each other's themes, poking at hints to the overarching theme of the song, which they both land back on with the rest of the band simultaneously at 00:59. At this point, the drums take a break from syncopation, and we feel some relief of a downbeat and awareness of the "essence" of the song. The band starts to fade away from the overarching theme at 01:20 through 02:18 to enter a whimsical space that Garcia takes the band to, an unrelated theme. It is more ornamental and delicate compared to the ferocity of the song.

The listener, feeling uncomfortable in the passagework of space and unfamiliarity, gains familiarity again with Garcia's subtle hint of the main riff at 02:30 for one second, only to be thrown into a new theme. As the band starts to crescendo at 02:40, Kreutzman initiates another rhythmic modulation into a trash-time rhythm at 02:49, creating another synergetic space for Lesh and Garcia to interplay between two different keys. Rhythm guitarist Bob Weir provides a stable framework for the new modulation that complements the differing melodies of the lead guitar and the bass. At 03:41, the band starts to pick up as if they are about to plunge back into the central forceful theme of the song until 04:07 when they pull back. The moments from then until 04:12 are a breath of fresh air. Something light that the imagination can grasp. Then Lesh teases the central theme again at 04:13, only to die a few seconds later.

What was once a structured, formless song that made any attempt to decipher individual notes has turned into an interpretive space that feels so far removed from *the* song that the listener becomes unsure if they are even experiencing *a* song anymore. This passagework from 04:20 until 07:14 highlights the band's ability to explore the outermost realms of a song. While the listener feels lost, subtle hints from the different band members serve as a reminder that this is part of the song's unfolding journey. At 07:15, Garcia brings back the main riff. The drums and keys follow. Only Lesh is holding out, and Weir reinforces it. The band finally breaks back into

an interplay of different themes at 07:57. It is at 08:24 that the band drops into the first verse, initiated by Phil conforming to the main bass riff.

Aside from a technical formulation of the artistic mathematical sublime, one can experience Kant's basic notion of it. The first 45 seconds of the song hit the listener with a force that seems to swallow them up whole. As each instrument varies measure by measure while revolving around a central theme, the imagination cannot successfully grasp the unfolding song becoming absolutely great. However, a person's faculty of reason makes them aware of their ability to even think about "The Other One."

That's It For the Other One

Drawing out the qualitative description of "The Other One" is essential for two reasons. First, it helps readers who do not listen to music like Deadhead's break down the song into sections identifiable with indicators of the mathematically sublime, such as challenges to distinguish individual tones, replication of themes, and difficulties in transcription. A lot is happening in the recording, especially for someone who does not listen to psychedelic rock or jazz fusion. For example, modern pop-music bass lines do not have licks or riffs like guitarists may have. The bass lines are very repetitive and foundational.

On the other hand, Lesh plays the bass like a guitarist plays a guitar. His style of playing consists of long non-repetitive phrases, contains staccato riffs, and refrains from playing the root note of a chord on the downbeat to build tension with the listener, then comes crashing on the downbeat.⁷ The limitedness of the imagination discerns the sublime as an "abyss in which it fears to lose itself" because of its perceptual incapacity, while the sublime simultaneously reveals the limitless capacity in us (5:259).

⁷ A good example of this is at 00:59 of the recording, as discussed earlier.

Second, the long description fails to adequately explain why the listener feels overwhelmed, shocked, and in awe when listening to “The Other One.” It is descriptive prose that breaks down parts of the whole. The imagination can easily apprehend the short representations of the song; taken in succession, the imagination fails to comprehend a single idea of what “The Other One” is in totality. I only discussed the first nine minutes of this version of the song, which is twenty minutes long. At this specific performance, they play another song after but go *back* into “The Other One” for another ten minutes. The song is absolutely great in duration as well as substance. How we engage with music like the Grateful Dead can allow us to discuss why particular works of art are meaningful to us. Works of art that elicit the sublime provide us with the “emotionally moving satisfaction” that occurs when our rational being is capable of reasoning beyond infinity (5:252). The worth of our rational being, the essence of who we are, is affirmed by art that demonstrates the power within us.

In this paper, I have discussed the varying interpretations of Kant’s theory of the sublime. Existing literature has provided a way that is phenomenologically consistent with Kant’s overall project of experiencing the artistic mathematical sublime. The Grateful Dead’s “The Other One” demonstrates how music without words can create the right conditions for one to experience the sublime when engaging with a work of music.

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