

---

“The cosmic artisan: a homemade atomic bomb”. The Sublime  
Aesthetics of Deleuze and Guattari

TÁBANO

“El artesano cósmico: una bomba atómica casera”. La estética  
sublime de Deleuze y Guattari

---

Stephen Zepke \*  
Independent Researcher, Austria  
eszed@hotmail.com

Tábano  
no. 25, e6, 2025  
Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina Santa María de los Buenos  
Aires, Argentina  
ISSN-E: 2591-572X  
revista\_tabano@uca.edu.ar

Received: 16 June 2024  
Accepted: 12 July 2024

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46553/tab.25.2025.e6>

**Abstract:** For Deleuze and Guattari, art is a bomb, and the artist is a revolutionary, creating incendiary devices that explode beyond our expectations, our regulations, and our representative norms. But what is this art explosion? It is the raw force of sensation, a sensation that goes beyond the limits of our ability to represent it, something that is always new and undetermined by our physical, conscious or historical conditions. This overwhelming sensation emerges from Deleuze’s fascination with Kant’s sublime, which in a significantly altered form emerges in *Difference and Repetition* as the key to Deleuze’s own aesthetic, which is founded on the discord of the faculties. Deleuze’s revisionist reading of the sublime opens Kant’s system to new possibilities, ones even Kant himself was not aware of. The sublime continues to be the principle of Deleuze’s aesthetic in his later work, in particular in the *Cinema* books, and *Logic of Sensation, Francis Bacon*.

**Keywords:** Aesthetics, Sublime, Deleuze, Guattari, Art.

**Resumen:** Para Deleuze y Guattari, el arte es una bomba, y el artista es un revolucionario que crea dispositivos incendiarios que explotan más allá de nuestras expectativas, nuestras regulaciones y nuestras normas representativas. Pero, ¿qué es esta explosión del arte? Es la fuerza bruta de la sensación, una sensación que va más allá de los límites de nuestra capacidad para representarla, algo que siempre es nuevo e indeterminado por nuestras condiciones físicas, conscientes o históricas. Esta sensación abrumadora surge de la fascinación de Deleuze con lo sublime de Kant, que en una forma significativamente alterada aparece en *Diferencia y Repetición* como la clave de la estética propia de Deleuze, la cual se fundamenta en la

---

## Author notes

- \* Stephen Zepke is an Independent Researcher based in Vienna. His recent books include *Towards a New “New Brutalism”*, *Wandering Around Robin Hood Gardens* (2022 Universidad Nacional de Colombia), *Head in the Stars, Essays on Science Fiction* (2020 Multimedijaini institut), *La Sensación Más Allá de Los Límites, Ensayos sobre arte y política* (2019 Javeriana University Press), *Sublime Art; Towards an Aesthetics of the Future* (2017 Edinburgh University Press) and *Violence and Resistance, Art and Politics in Colombia* (2023, edited with Nicolas Alvarado Castilla, Palgrave/Macmillan).

discordia de las facultades. La lectura revisionista de Deleuze sobre lo sublime abre el sistema de Kant a nuevas posibilidades, algunas de las cuales ni siquiera el propio Kant conocía. Lo sublime sigue siendo el principio de la estética de Deleuze en su obra posterior, en particular en los libros sobre *Cine* y en *Lógica de la sensación*, Francis Bacon.

**Palabras clave:** Estética, Sublime, Deleuze, Guattari, Arte.

For Gilles Deleuze, working alone and with Felix Guattari, art is a bomb, and the artist is a revolutionary, creating incendiary devices that explode beyond our expectations, our regulations, and our representative norms.<sup>1</sup> In *Anti-Oedipus* they write: "the artist stores up his treasures so as to create an immediate explosion, and that is why, to his way of thinking, destructions can never take place as rapidly as they ought to" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983, p. 31) Further on they say it again: "the only literature is that which places an explosive device in its package" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983, p. 134). But what is this exploding package? It is the raw force of sensation, a sensation that goes beyond the limits of our ability to represent it, something "forever new" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 136) that is undetermined by our physical, conscious or historical conditions.

But perhaps these explosions come from the renowned militant Guattari, who transforms Deleuze's careful philosophy of difference into a psycho-social politics of desire, a desire that is always explosive (see Deleuze & Guattari, 1983, p. 118)? While this shift is certainly significant, and we will come back to it, we don't have to look far in Deleuze to find "sublime occasions" that "explode like something abrupt, brutal and revolutionary" (Deleuze, 1994, p. 190). While this is perhaps a symptom of the times (*Difference and Repetition* is first published in Paris, 1968), Deleuze is also fascinated by Kant's sublime because it provides the key to his own aesthetic, which emerges from the discord of the faculties. Kant's *Critique of Judgment* is, Deleuze and Guattari tell us approvingly, "an unrestrained work of old age", because in it "all the mind's faculties overcome their limits, the very limits that Kant had so carefully laid down in the work of his prime" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 2). As we shall see, this "overcoming" is achieved by the *sublime*, which opens Kant's system to new possibilities, ones even Kant himself was not aware of.

Deleuze's reading of Kant begins from the "mysterious" harmony of the faculties in common sense (Deleuze, 1984, p. 22). This harmony requires the presupposition of an aesthetic common sense based on a representative model of thought, but, Deleuze says, this is an "unsatisfactory solution" (Deleuze, 2004, p. 60) because, "the Critique in general demands a principle of this accord, of the genesis of common sense" (Deleuze, 1984, pp. 22-23). For Kant, common sense allows the understanding to determine reason for speculative purposes (logical common sense), while reason legislates over the understanding in practical matters (moral common sense), enabling them to produce determinative judgments ("this x (singular) is of the type X (universal)"). But, Deleuze argues, a faculty could not be determined by another if they weren't first capable of a free and undetermined harmony: "How could any faculty, which is legislative for a particular purpose, induce the other faculties to perform complementary, indispensable tasks, if all the faculties together were not, to begin with, capable of a free spontaneous agreement, without legislation, without purpose, without predominance?" (Deleuze, 2004, p. 58). The *Critique of Judgment*, Deleuze continues, uncovers the ground presupposed by the other two Critiques, an "indeterminate and unconditional" (Deleuze, 2004, p. 69) agreement of the faculties. This happens in aesthetic judgment (i.e., experiences of the beautiful) where our feelings are undetermined by any empirical, speculative or practical interest. But, Deleuze wonders, where does the aesthetic common sense shared by the imagination and the understanding in such judgements come from? (see Deleuze, 2004, p. 60). We can neither affirm it logically (which would require the categories) nor postulate it (which would determine it practically), so it must be presumed. This, Deleuze complains, is highly unsatisfactory if aesthetic common sense is to act as the ground of all other relations between the faculties, and the judgments they produce. Kant must, Deleuze says, show how this free agreement of the faculties comes about, and so reveal the "transcendental Genesis" (Deleuze, 2004, p. 61) of the conditions of experience.

This, Deleuze claims, requires the Analytic of the Sublime. The sublime reveals the higher harmony of imagination and reason as the ground of aesthetic judgement, but only in a “paradoxical” (Deleuze, 2004, p. 61) way because it emerges from their “painful rending” (Deleuze, 2004, p. 62). This is a result of the imagination being overwhelmed by the sublime, unable to produce an experience we can understand because it cannot synthesis the infinity it is faced with. Reason, as “the faculty of the infinite” (Deleuze, 1978c, n.p.) therefore “forces the imagination to confront its limit” (Deleuze, 2004, p. 62), before unifying the chaotic infinity of sublime experience under an Idea.<sup>2</sup> This contradictory and violent agreement with reason in the sublime is the transcendental genesis of experience, Deleuze claims, as in it we “discover what the understanding had kept hidden, namely the suprasensible destination of imagination, which is also like a transcendental origin” (Deleuze, 2004, p. 62). In the sublime imagination connects to reason as the faculty able to “conceive a supersensible substratum for the infinity of this sensible world” (Deleuze, 2004, p. 62), and in doing so the imagination is raised to its transcendental function. This is important because imagination’s transcendental function now goes beyond the limits legislated by the other faculties, most significantly the impossibility of representing noumena. Although the imagination only transcends this limit in a negative fashion in the sublime, this nevertheless expresses its supersensible genesis, which it shares with reason and the understanding, guaranteeing the “suprasensible unity of all the faculties” (Deleuze, 2004, p. 63). This establishes a paradoxical “unity” where “the faculties which the sublime puts in play point to a genesis of their agreement within immediate discord” (Deleuze, 2004, p. 63).

Deleuze finds the source of this discord in four philosophical “reversals”. He attributes three to Kant; his new understanding of the form of time; the effect of time on the Subject; and the form of the moral Law; while one –the unregulated use of the faculties– Deleuze finds in Kant, but only by twisting Kant’s system. These reversals are all consequences of Kant’s famed critical method, which does not seek what lies outside experience, but instead seeks the immanent transcendental conditions of *this* experience. The critical method is the starting point and impetus to Kant’s reversals, the first of which concerns time. For Kant, time no longer measures movement as it did in ancient philosophy, but now gives the form within which movement is determined (see Deleuze, 1984, p. vii). This is the emergence, Deleuze says, of a “modern consciousness of time” (Deleuze, 1978, n.p.), where time “is the form of everything that changes and moves, but it is an immutable form that does not change –not an eternal form, but precisely the form of what is *not* eternal, the immutable form of change and movement” (Deleuze, 1997, p. 28). Time, in this sense, is the first of thought’s transcendental conditions because from this moment on to think contains an absolute distinction between what appears in intuition “prior to all thought” (Kant, 1929, p. 153), and the form of its determination as thought, which is time.

To be conscious of the form of time is what Kant calls “apperception” or the “I think”, because, as Deleuze puts it, “the form under which the ‘I am’ is determinable is obviously the form of time” (Deleuze, 1978a, n.p.). This will introduce the “paradox of inner sense” (Deleuze, 1978a, n.p.), because apperception “can only determine my existence under the form of the determinable, which is to say under the form of a passive being in space and in time” (Deleuze, 1978a, n.p.). As a result, while conceptual determination may very well provide the conditions of possible experience, it is space and time that, Deleuze claims, “will be the constitutive power of all possible experience” (Deleuze, 1978, n.p.).<sup>3</sup>

The dramatic consequence of this is that “I is another”, a formula Deleuze draws from Rimbaud to describe Kant’s second “reversal” and, he says, the “most difficult aspect” of “the Kantian revolution” (Deleuze, 1984, p. viii). Difficult, because in it the subject is irreducibly split, fracture, between the “I” of intuition’s “passive synthesis” (as Deleuze calls it) and the “I think” of transcendental apperception, “separated,” Deleuze says, “by the line of time which relates them to each other, but under the condition of a fundamental difference” (Deleuze, 1984, p. viii). The passive synthesis gives a sensation that forces me to

think, it is an "imperative" to think, Deleuze says, but "imperatives enter and leave only by that fracture in the I, which means that another always thinks in me, another who must also be thought" (Deleuze, 1994, p. 200). On this reading, time does not ground transcendental subjectivity nor the object constituted by the "common sense" of the faculties, as Kant wishes, but instead immerses us in the irreducible paradox of an inner sense where, as Deleuze puts it, "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. A giddiness, an oscillation constitutes time" (Deleuze, 1984, p. ix).

In *Difference and Repetition* Deleuze elaborates this splitting of the self in terms of three syntheses of time. The first is "the original synthesis which operates on the repetition of instants" (Deleuze, 1994, p. 71), an entirely passive synthesis performed by the imagination that constitutes and repeats sensible instants as (here Deleuze follows Hume) "habit", or, "what Kant calls the receptivity of intuition" (Deleuze, 1994, p. 86). This is the first synthesis of time, a "contractile contemplation", or habitual repetition of instants that constitutes the "lived, or living, present" (Deleuze, 1994, p. 70), and retains enough of these to form "a living rule for the future" (Deleuze, 1994, p. 71). This passive self emerges from these "events" of "contemplation", these mysterious contacts of the sensible and sensibility, of experience and what gives rise to it. Deleuze locates the difference between Kant and Hume precisely at this level of the imagination. Hume assumes an irreducible (and therefore empiricist) dualism between the objects of nature and their experience, while Kant assumes their (rationalist) agreement on the basis of a "pure transcendental synthesis of imagination as conditioning the very possibility of all experience" (Kant, 1921, p. 133). This transcendental synthesis places the objects of experience (*noumena*, or "things-in-themselves") outside the conditions of possible experience or knowledge. Things, in other words, presuppose Kant's "dogma" (as Deleuze calls it) of representation, but Kant's theory of the synthesis of time (ie., "apperception") on which it is based provides, according to Deleuze, the conditions of its collapse and the emergence of something "real" in its place.

The repetition of instants in a habit constitutes a present that passes (from past to future presents), but if this is the case, Deleuze argues, then there must be another time in which the present passes. This is the "more profound" (Deleuze, 1994 p. 80) passive synthesis of memory (Deleuze's second synthesis of time), which forms the past from the passive self's awareness of itself as a series of former presents (i.e. as habit). At this moment both the former present and the actual present are "represented" in the present (Deleuze, 1994, p. 80). Memory is therefore the transcendental a priori synthesis of the pure past that makes it possible for the present to become the past, for time to emerge as such, and so for apperception to be possible. Through memory the reproduction of the past and the projection of the future becomes possible according to the active syntheses of contiguity, causality, resemblance or opposition found in the understanding (Deleuze, 1994, p. 83). What is significant here is that Deleuze does not try to deny representation, but instead shows how it depends on the passive syntheses of the imagination (habit and memory), giving it an empirical rather than rationalist genesis. As a result, Deleuze will famously refer to his own philosophy as a "transcendental empiricism".

Deleuze now asks whether its possible to live the passive synthesis of memory, to live the "being in itself of the past" as we do the passive synthesis of habit constituting our organic bodies, without reducing it to an historical moment or a subjective experience, both of which would subordinate it to representation? Doing so means affirming the transcendental difference dividing the past "in-itself" and the present of lived experience, which does not mean "resolving" or "dissolving" this difference but allowing it to resonate. This is the method of transcendental empiricism, a sublime method because it means following the imagination beyond its determination by the schematism and towards the Ideas that dwell in the "in-itself" of time as the conditions of the transcendental genesis of experience.

For Deleuze, “the active syntheses of memory and understanding are superimposed upon and supported by the passive synthesis of the imagination” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 71), meaning that aesthetic experience precedes its conceptual representation. Consequently, Kant’s concept of “transcendental apperception” –the form of time allowing the determinable to be determined– is the formal condition that subsequently allows the subject to experience itself, and so is “that by virtue of which it can say *I*.” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 86). Between these moments, however, is the “empty form of time” – the third synthesis of time in Deleuze’s account– that both divides and connects (it is a disjunctive synthesis) the passive syntheses of imagination constituting the pure presence of experience (the undetermined event), and the active synthesis that represents them as the experience of a self-conscious subject (determination giving rise to an act). But this synthesis only works through the caesura it creates between its terms, a paradoxical relation within which the active subject is at once constituted and dispersed. As Deleuze puts it, the third synthesis “refers to the absence of ground into which we are precipitated by the ground itself” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 114), achieving “the formless as the product of the most extreme formality” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 115). This is why Deleuze describes Kant’s transcendental apperception as a pyrrhic victory, because at the moment it establishes time as the form uniting the faculties it simultaneously establishes their unbridgeable distance from the unknowable noumena. By “reversing” this relationship, however, Deleuze makes the disjunctive synthesis of the faculties in the “empty form of time” the genesis of thought (as it is in Kant), but thought is now aesthetic rather than conceptual (ie., passive rather than active), and creates reality rather than simply representing it. So while Deleuze retains Kant’s faculties they now find their transcendental genesis in an unregulated and violent disjunction, giving the imagination and the understanding

a secret coherence which excludes that of the self; they turn back against the self which has become their equal and smash it to pieces, as though the bearer of the new world were carried away and dispersed by the shock of the multiplicity to which it gives birth: what the self has become equal to is the unequal in itself. (Deleuze, 1994, p. 89-90)

In this sense the a priori condition for thought is precisely what cannot be thought, because Deleuze’s “twist” of transcendental apperception in third synthesis of time makes the unconscious pathology of the passive synthesis the a priori transcendental genesis of the rational subject. This, as Deleuze points out, is a “reversal” of Kant that emerges at a “precise moment within Kantianism, a furtive and explosive moment which is not even continued by Kant” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 58). This moment grounds the *cogito* on its own abyss, “an alienation in principle, insurmountable in principle” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 58) that, Deleuze says, provides “a cogito for a dissolved self” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 58). I think therefore I am not. This “schizophrenia in principle” is now the “highest power of thought”, a power that “opens Being directly onto difference” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 58). The “dissolved self” has a “real experience” of the inclusive disjunction of being and thought, one that turns against Kant’s transcendental subject and its conditions of possible experience, “smashes it to pieces” in fact, to emerge instead in the “already-overman whose scattered members gravitate around the sublime image”, an image that “makes the sun explode” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 89).

The exploding sun marks the downfall of the rational transcendental subject reified by Kant’s Copernican revolution, and the joyful emergence of Nietzsche’s overman in its place. Deleuze offers an explicitly Nietzschean version of critique, turning the synthetic unity of apperception discovered by Kant into the ontogenetic difference of will to power and its affirmation in the “concept” of the eternal return (Deleuze, 1994, p. 41). By following this *furtive* moment in Kant, Deleuze is able to show how an aleatory repetition of difference lies at the very heart of Kantian reason (Deleuze, 1983, p. 52). The “third synthesis of time” frees the future from any conceptual determination (in particular the logical structure of cause and effect, or chronological time), to announce “the repetition of the future as eternal return” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 90). In this way Nietzsche, Deleuze argues, took critique beyond the point where it was “exhausted in

compromise" (Deleuze, 1983, p. 89), the point where Kant himself was "the perfect incarnation of false critique" (Deleuze, 2004, p. 139), to found "a radical transformation of Kantianism, a re-invention of the critique which Kant betrayed at the same time as he conceived it, a resumption of the critical project on a new basis and with new concepts" (Deleuze, 1983, p. 52). Consequently, and with Nietzsche: "the conditions of a true critique and a true creation are the same: the destruction of an image of thought which presupposes itself and the genesis of the act of thinking in thought itself" (Deleuze, 1994, p. 139). This is a revolution *against* the Copernican revolution, one that "does not," Deleuze claims, "allow the sun to return since it presupposes its explosion; it concerns only the nebulae, for which alone it moves and from which it becomes indiscernible" (Deleuze, 1994, p. 91). A truly critical Kant has emerged, one no longer committed to the presupposition of thought's conditions in a transcendental subject, but to the nebulous and distributed "act of thinking in thought itself" (Deleuze, 1994, p. 139). What then, is thought? It would not be unreasonable to say that it is art. It is certainly creation in its most radical, ontological sense, an explosion of undetermined being into something new, like the paintings of Turner perhaps: "It cannot even be said that he is far ahead of his time: there is here something ageless, and that comes to us from an eternal future, or flees toward it. The canvas turns in on itself, it is pierced by a hole, a lake, a flame, a tornado, an explosion" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983, p. 132).

"Thought", Deleuze tells us, "is primarily trespass and violence", an event that forces us to think, an *encounter* with "the being *of* the sensible" (Deleuze, 1994, p. 139). The being *of* the sensible can, logically enough, only be sensed, but *as such* and prior to it becoming an object, or even a quality, in active synthesis, it is "in a certain sense the imperceptible" (Deleuze, 1994, p. 140). This is a recurring theme in Deleuze, from Bacon making invisible forces visible, to the ultimate point of "becoming imperceptible" in *A Thousand Plateaus*. In such cases, sensation qua being *of* the sensible emerges as a problem (Deleuze, 1994, p. 140), a sublime problem in fact, because it can't be represented by the active syntheses of consciousness (the understanding), or grasped by any of the empirical faculties (the imagination), and so pushes these faculties to their limit. At this point, Deleuze tells us: "Each faculty is unhinged" (1994, p. 141). There is no more common sense, no more subject and object united in a representation, there is only the sensation produced by passive synthesis demanding to be thought", or a "problematic Idea" as Deleuze calls it.

This strangely disorienting "Idea" dragged from the midst of Kant's system explodes, Deleuze claims, the vicious circle in which the condition (noumena) seems to rest on the conditioned (phenomena). This is a criticism Deleuze borrows from Salomon Maimon, who argued that Kant's *a priori* principles of representation were merely traced from the psychological structures of perception, and so failed to discover experience's real and genetic conditions. If understanding and sensibility are two entirely separate sources of cognition, Maimon asks, how is it that the latter only appears in terms of the former (2010, p. 38)? Such an appearance tells us nothing about where sensation comes from, about the *noumena*, which Kant keeps strictly inaccessible. Maimon's solution –one that Deleuze follows– is to draw on Leibniz to argue that space and time are not absolute and ideal forms of intuition, but rather two different "Ideas of understanding" that provide the differentiation necessary for finite beings to sense an object as such. As a result, we can have real experience of the infinite, intense, and self-differentiating whole, but the limited perspective of the sensing being leaves most of this noumenal realm in obscurity and darkness. Space and time give sensation an intensive magnitude determined by differentials that cannot be grasped by representation or by conceptual thought, but can be discerned through Leibniz's differential calculus. For Maimon –and for Deleuze– these "Ideas" are real, and as such pass through the barrier Kant places between phenomena and noumena, and can be followed back from objects to their real genetic differences. As Deleuze puts it: "Maimon's genius lies in showing how inadequate the point of view of conditioning is for a transcendental philosophy: both terms of the difference must equally be thought –in other words, determinability must itself be conceived as pointing

towards a principle of reciprocal determination” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 173). Maimon makes intense differentials conditioning, as Ideas of the understanding, and while Deleuze takes up this Idea of differential and conditioning sensations, he associates them with the “problematic” Ideas of thought found in the faculty of reason. This is because Ideas comprehend infinity, but without conditioning it according to our subjective conditions, making it a more comfortable home for the sublime disjunction of the faculties Deleuze Deleuze makes the transcendental condition of genesis.

Deleuze assumes that the passive intuition of sensation both precedes and conditions active synthesis, because, as he puts it, “transcendental empiricism is the only way to avoid tracing the transcendental from the outlines of the empirical” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 144). Only transcendental empiricism, in other words, is capable of carrying a faculty to its limit by (passively) synthesizing “free or untamed states of difference in itself” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 144). Generously, Deleuze claims that Kant’s third Critique anticipates these objections “at least in part”, inasmuch as it “uncovers the ultimate ground still lacking in the other two Critiques” (Deleuze, 2004, p. 61). The ground it discovers is the faculties’ “free agreement, indeterminate and unconditional”, meaning that “with the *Critique of Judgment*, we step into Genesis” (Deleuze, 2004, pp. 68-69). Where Deleuze’s account diverges from Kant’s, however, is that on his account each faculty emerges for itself, unrestrained and free to develop “strange combinations” (Deleuze, 1984, p. xii) within their “discordant accord, [as] the source of time” (Deleuze, 1984, p. xiii). This, Deleuze exclaims (not without some satisfaction), is quite “contrary to Kant” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 143), even if it has somehow emerged from his assumptions.

This is the fourth reversal Deleuze “finds” in Kant, once more quoting Rimbaud; “A disorder of all the senses, or rather an unregulated exercise of the faculties” (Deleuze, 1984, p. xi). This “deregulation” of the faculties occurs in the sublime, which makes their disharmony the condition of thought. “Discord of the faculties,” Deleuze cries, “chain of force and fuse along which each confronts its limit, receiving from (or communicating to) the other only a violence which brings it face to face with its own element, as though with its disappearance or its perfection” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 141). The faculty’s “disappearance or its perfection” is a succinct description of the sublime paradox constituting the transcendental genesis of each faculty –the problematic Idea or “differentiating element” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 142) that the faculty attempts to articulate, but cannot. As Deleuze puts it, this Idea is “the violence of that which forces it [the faculty] to be exercised, of that which it is forced to grasp and which it alone is able to grasp, yet also that of the ungraspable (from the point of view of its empirical exercise)” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 143). This genetic difference constitutes a specific problem, the Idea responsible for each faculty’s transcendental genesis.

This Idea is a sensation without extension, without a body or a sign that represents it. It is an intensity, what Kant defined as a sensation grasped in its difference from absolute zero, and that Deleuze claims “creates at once both the quality in the sensible and the transcendent exercise within sensibility” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 144). This intense difference is imperceptible to our conscious sensibility, but is “perceived” in a passive synthesis of the infinite and chaotic outside, a sensation expressing the event of this encounter. As a result, and as Deleuze puts it: “the privilege of sensibility as origin appears in the fact that, in an encounter, what forces sensation and that which can only be sensed are one and the same thing, whereas in other cases the two instances are distinct” (Deleuze, 1994, pp. 144-145). While the active syntheses can only represent intensities in extension, Ideas “think” them as a “problem”. Reason in this sense is the faculty of posing problems, Ideas of totality that are conditioning, but escape all conditions of possible experience. In this way, for Kant and Deleuze, reason seeks to move from representational phenomena to the unconditioned principles that ground them. As Kant puts it; “the mind listens to the voice of reason within itself, which



demands totality for all given magnitudes" (1987, p. 111). For Kant, as for Deleuze, reason is a type of judgment – "Ideas" – about the "problematic" totality acting as the unconditioned condition of empirical concepts. But for Kant this process produces the transcendental illusion (or antinomy) that the unconditioned can be given, and rather than pursuing the possibility that reason could actually express or act as the unconditioned, decides instead to cast any unconditioned and genetic element of experience (ie., the noumena) out of the realm of representation altogether.

Deleuze however, reverses Kant's approach by seeking the genesis of representation in the "problems" that conceptual understanding represents and "resolves", or perhaps better *actualises*. In this sense, the application of a concept in a judgment is guided by a problem as the consistent intensive structure that will be incarnated in a thing. As such, the problematic Idea becomes the noumena, and grounds experience, but is neither undifferentiated nor unchanging (as in Kant). This rethought "noumena" qua intense genetic "event", is a passive synthesis of the open whole expressed in a unique individuation (most spectacularly perhaps, in the explosive art work). In this sense there remains a distinction between phenomena and noumena for Deleuze, but this distinction is rethought as active and passive synthesis, as actual and virtual, or as perception and its imperceptible problematic Idea. In Deleuze's hands then, Kant did not construct a "logic of the sensible" but rather an *aesthetic* (because passive synthesis is the *aistheteon*, the imperceptible being of the sensible (Deleuze, 1994, p. 140)), "in which the sensible is valid in itself and unfolds in a *pathos* beyond all logic, which will grasp time in its surging forth, in the very origin of its thread and its giddiness" (Deleuze, 1984, p. xiii). As the aesthetic "thought" of a totality that is outside subjective experience, but nevertheless acts as its genetic condition, an Idea is more a sense than a cognition, animating the body more than in consciousness. Unlike in Kant, for Deleuze the Ideas contain the undetermined, the determinable and determination, allowing them to go beyond conditioning and embrace genesis. Deleuze modestly admits that, "perhaps this does not appear sufficiently clearly in Kant" (Deleuze, 1994, p. 170).

Nevertheless, Kant does provide a glimpse of this re-thought Idea in the sublime. There, Deleuze argues, the Idea emerges from the wreckage of the schema, to be "thought" by an imagination finally unleashed from the understanding. "In effect," Deleuze writes,

the schematic imagination of the *Critique of Pure Reason* is still under the logical common sense; the reflective imagination of judgments of beauty is still under the aesthetic common sense. Yet with the sublime, according to Kant, the imagination is forced or constrained to confront its own limit, its *phantasteon*, its maximum which is equally the unimaginable, the unformed or the deformed in nature (CJ §26). Moreover, it transmits this constraint to thought itself, which in turn is forced to think the supra-sensible as foundation of both nature and the faculty of thought: thought and imagination here enter into an essential discordance, a reciprocal violence which conditions a new type of accord (CJ §27). (Deleuze, 1994, p. 321)

As a result, Deleuze continues,

the harmony between the faculties can appear only in the form of a *discordant harmony*, since each communicates to the other only the violence which confronts it with its own difference and its divergence from the others. Kant was the first to provide the example of such a discordant harmony, the relation between imagination and thought which occurs in the case of the sublime. (Deleuze, 1994, p. 146)

In the sublime, then, Kant discovers a faculty unregulated by common sense and ready to explore its transcendental exercise in the realm of Ideas.

Deleuze argues that Ideas are virtual and “supra-historical” “structures” that are actualised through a “*static genesis*”, an “event” that “may be understood as the correlate of passive synthesis” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 183). The event therefore actualises an Idea according to conditions provided by the domain in which it appears, but it is not determined by this domain, whose limits are changed by the event. As Deleuze puts it, the virtual Idea and its actualisation are “echoing without resembling each other” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 189), the Idea being actualized in the critical/creative moment, the moment when thought discovers its real conditions of intense difference (the differential Idea) and actualizes it in a becoming that goes beyond the limits of its faculty. These are moments of creative transformation and revolution, moments when an event gives rise to an act. This, Deleuze exclaims, is “a sublime occasion [...] which makes the solution explode like something abrupt, brutal and revolutionary. Having an Idea is this as well” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 190). This then, is the ontological, aesthetic and political importance of thought qua art. This is not Conceptual art, which Deleuze and Guattari condemn (Deleuze, 1994, p. 198-199), but an art of Ideas, one that produces what Kant calls an “intellectual feeling” [*Geistesgefühl*] (1987, p. 32) of the “mental attunement” of the imagination and reason in the sublime. This “intellectual-feeling” would emerge, then from Nietzsche’s version of critique. As Deleuze describes it: “the point of critique is not justification, but a different way of feeling: another sensibility” (1983, p. 94). This new sensation exceeds our ability to represent it, causing us pain, but at this moment we also think-experience the genetic power of imperceptible Ideas, which causes us pleasure. The sublime is an experience of this “dissensus” (Deleuze, 1984, p. 51), an intense experience of the “reciprocal violence” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 321) constituting its intellectual-feeling, and the way we are able to find “harmony in pain” (Deleuze, 2004, p. 62).

All of these formulations point towards the role of negative presentation in the sublime, because Ideas are essentially unrepresentable. But sublime “intellectual-feelings” don’t have a lack of presence because of this, but an excess, they are “too much” for the active synthesis of representation, which cannot grasp them within the framework of conscious, logical thought. The sublime therefore offers a “sign” that expresses the passive synthesis (ie., the disjunction between intuition and infinity), and its genetic force that must –but cannot be– sensed. As Deleuze puts it in his book on Francis Bacon, there is “in this excessive presence, the identity of an already-there and an always-delayed” (Deleuze, 2003, p. 51), meaning that “resemblance then emerges as the brutal product of nonresembling means” (Deleuze, 2003, p. 115). Of course we see the violence of this “resemblance” clearly in Bacon’s work where the “analogical language” of painting, as Deleuze calls it (2003, p. 113), makes the invisible and infinite forces of the genetic event (ie., the Idea) visible in the monstrous bodies of the paintings’ protagonists. Nevertheless, as the actualisation of what causes the actual to differ from itself (ie., its transcendental genesis in the problematic Idea), the sublime intellectual-feeling is the entirely positive presence of a virtual but genetic infinity. As Deleuze puts it in relation to poetry: “Nonsense is not the absence of signification but, on the contrary, the excess of sense” (2004, p. 187). This genetic excess poses a “problem” that drags infinity into matter, where it is not “itself”, only appearing as something else (ie., it is a negative presentation). Appearing as something else the problem “itself” is eternally “not yet”, the future or third form of time as the “eternally new”. As Deleuze puts it: “thought shelters in itself what resists thought” (1978b, n.p.).

This process of material creation also animates art, or perhaps better it *is* art, whose works, Deleuze say, “are developed around or on the basis of a fracture that they never succeed in filling” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 195). Painting makes invisible forces visible, just as music makes non-sonorous forces audible, cinema “is directed to what does not let itself be thought in thought” (Deleuze, 1989, p. 168), while poetry articulates “the secret word that has no sense” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 291). Each art develops a unique problem (as its transcendental and genetic condition) into sensations produced according to its own means. This is, Deleuze is happy to

admit, a “*modern* ontology” of the arts (Deleuze, 1994, p. 196), one that seeks its own a priori conditions through a process of immanent “critique”. While on the surface it may seem that this process ends with the discovery of the a priori conditions that determine an art (colour and line for the visual arts, language for poetry, movement and time for cinema, etc.), these conditions in fact supply the material of experimentation specific to each art, which undergoes radical shifts and mutations as it actualises its structuring and genetic “problem”. As Deleuze and Guattari put it:

It is here that art accedes to its authentic modernity, which simply consists in liberating what was present in art from its beginnings, but was hidden underneath aims and objects, even if aesthetic, and underneath recodings and axiomatics: the pure process that fulfils itself, and that never ceases to reach fulfilment as it proceeds –art as “experimentation” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983, pp. 370-371).

Deleuze and Guattari ascribe to an avant-garde understanding of art, but with the important proviso that its “model” is desubjectified, de-historicised and even “universalised” insofar as it is transcendental in an ontological sense. Nevertheless, the way in which art is able to overcome its limits, continually folding its “outside” into its “inside” in series of creative events, that makes the “aesthetic paradigm”, as Guattari calls it, “the paradigm for every possible form of liberation” (1995, p. 91). This power that Deleuze and Guattari attribute to art means, and again it is a Modernist trope, that “there is no other aesthetic problem than that of the insertion of art into everyday life” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 293). Modernism in this sense is a process of critique that discovers its conditions only by going beyond its previous limits, only, in other words, by actualising its own problems, its own Ideas, which forever escape along the leading edge of a creative and open infinity. Unlike our usual understanding of Modernism then, Deleuze does not see this process as purifying art in its sacred autonomy, quite the opposite, for what is “modern” in every art is precisely its ability to extend the possibilities of life.

In introducing Guattari into the argument at this point, we return to the question of how his work with Deleuze changed Deleuze’s system, because both the sublime and Kant largely drop out of his writings after they meet. In Deleuze’s superior empiricism the function of the sublime is to unleash the faculty of imagination from its role in determinate judgement, allowing it to sense the transcendental Idea as its problem, and allowing the undetermined faculties to arise in permanent confrontation with their limits. In this way, the difference between the supersensible noumena and sensible phenomena remain, but their transcendental difference is genetic, it eternally returns as the repetition of difference. *Anti-Oedipus* (first published in 1972), however, drops any mention of the faculties in favour of transcendental machinic operations, their flows and breaks, shifting transcendental genesis away from the Kantian realm of Ideas and their “thought” towards material production and its “consumption of pure intensities” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983, p. 20). What does this mean? In *Difference and Repetition* the Idea is “Real without being actual, ideal without being abstract” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 208), meaning that its undetermined virtual aspect conditions its material actualization, but is not present in it (ie., its negatively presented). As Deleuze remarks: “Difference is explicated, but in systems in which it tends to be cancelled” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 228). The genetic disjunction unleashing the faculties means the intensity of the Idea can only ever be actualised as what it is not, extension. After meeting Guattari, Deleuze moves away from this “structuralist” conception of genesis.<sup>4</sup>

In his seminar of 1978 Deleuze returns to Kant’s sublime, although now with a slightly different emphasis. He focusses on how Kant explains the way a chaotic experience of infinity overwhelms the imagination by exceeding the body as its phenomenological measure, giving rise to a new and inhuman type of aesthetic synthesis, one in a state of continual variation. Once more, Deleuze’s reading offers a twist on Kant: “We have seen that aesthetic was –even though Kant does not say it, but it is what he is thinking of– was the grasping of rhythm as basis of measure and the unit of measure”. The result is appropriately dramatic;

My whole structure of perception is in the process of exploding. Why? My whole structure of perception is in the process of exploding because we have seen that this whole perceptive synthesis found its foundation in aesthetic comprehension, which is to say the evaluation of rhythm. Here it's as if this aesthetic comprehension, as evaluation of a rhythm that would serve as a foundation of measure, thus the synthesis of perception, is compromised, drowned in a chaos. The sublime. (Deleuze, 1978a, n.p.)

The sublime remains central, but problematic Ideas have become genetic rhythms felt by bodies immersed in chaotic infinity, rhythms as aesthetic syntheses or sensations, rhythms as chaosmosis. Art, Deleuze and Guattari argue, is a “composed chaos –neither foreseen nor foretold” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 204), a refrain that detaches part of the existing world (they call it a “readymade” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 316)) from its conditions (ie., its meaning and function), allowing it “to open onto a future” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 311) through the process of experimentation its chaotic forces unleash. The artwork in this sense is an “interface” or “umbilical point” (Guattari, 1995, p. 80) folding matter and its chaotic virtual forces into something new. A good example comes in Deleuze’s book on Bacon, where a “chaos-germ” (2003, p. 102) is introduced by the painter’s diagram, exploding the “figurative givens” (2003, p. 100) that act as the “optical organization” (2003, p. 101) of what we see. This allows the painter to “collapse” their “visual coordinates” and so “embrace the chaos” (Deleuze, 2003, p. 102), turning it into a “germ of rhythm” (Deleuze, 2003, p. 102), an aesthetic synthesis expressed in their particular “analogical language” (Deleuze, 2003, p. 113). Deleuze calls this “the new order” of a “pictorial experience” (2003, p. 102) that escapes the limits of the human organism to create the new flesh of the Body without Organs, a new art even, where “time itself is being painted” (Deleuze, 2003, p. 48).

In Deleuze’s cinema books transcendental genesis is understood in terms of time, with the movement-image and the time-image giving indirect and direct images of it. The movement-image is produced by the sensory-motor-schema, which establishes an “interval” between us and the chaotic infinity of duration it represents. Vertov takes this image as far as it can go, Deleuze tells us, “beyond the human limits of the sensory-motor schema towards a non-human world where movement equals matter [...]. It is here the movement image attains the sublime” (1989, p. 40). A new “rhythm” emerges, “a dialectic of matter in itself” (Deleuze, 198, p. 39) moving between the camera (the eye in matter) and Nature, going beyond the organism but not the “interval” of the schema that makes its image indirect. The movement-image always confronts this limit, as in Deleuze’s reading of the classic expressionist story-line where a formless power is released that overwhelms organic life, but adhering to Kant’s model this force in turn produces a transcendental subjectivity, a triumphant “supra-organic space which dominates the whole inorganic life of things” (Deleuze, 1986, p. 52), the “divine part in us”, the “*non-psychological life of the spirit*” where we are alone with “God as light” (Deleuze, 1986, p. 54). As a result, in Expressionism, Deleuze argues, “the movement-image remains primary, and gives rise only indirectly to a representation of time” (Deleuze, 1989, p. 40).

The time-image, however, no longer actualises the virtual chaos of duration indirectly, but brings “a principle of indiscernibility” (Deleuze, 1989, p. 7) to these terms. “For the time-image to be born”, Deleuze tells us, “the actual image must enter into relation with its *own* virtual image as such [...] An image which is double-sided, mutual, both actual and virtual, must be constituted” (Deleuze, 1989, p. 273). The time-image is actual and virtual “at the same time”, its components being, Deleuze tells us, “totally reversible” (1989, p. 69) and in “continual exchange” (1989, p. 70) to the point they “exchange their roles and become indiscernible” (1989, p. 127). This “coalescence of an actual image and *its* virtual image” (Deleuze, 1989, p. 127) provides a direct image of the disjunctive synthesis constituting time. This is a sublime image that moves beyond negative presentation to give us “visions” of “the thing in itself” as Deleuze explicitly calls it (1989, p. 20). Modern cinema is therefore modern in a familiar sense, as Deleuze explains, “no longer

empirical, nor metaphysical; it is 'transcendental' in the sense that Kant gives this word: time is out of joint and presents itself in the pure state" (Deleuze, 1989, p. 271). Modern cinema then, is a transcendental empiricism, and the time-image produces –similar to Bacon– "liberated sense organs" that hallucinate the real (Deleuze, 1989, p. 4). The time-image, as Deleuze puts it, "makes us grasp, it is supposed to make us grasp, something intolerable and unbearable. [...] something too powerful, or too unjust, but sometimes also too beautiful, and which henceforth outstrips our sensory motor capacities" (Deleuze, 1989, p. 18). Rossellini's *Stromboli* for example, which climaxes in "a beauty which is too great for us, like too strong a pain" (Deleuze, 1989, p. 18). At the moment of the eruption ending the film, "there are", Deleuze writes, "no longer sensory-motor images with their extensions, but much more complex circular links between pure optical and sound images on the one hand, and on the other hand images from time and thought" (Deleuze, 1989, p. 47). This would be a materialist sublime emerging beyond negative presentation in the direct time-images, a new sublime shared with Bacon, and with all of Deleuze and Guattari's other explosions.

It is tempting to see this transition of the sublime from limit to infinite in the Cinema books as expressing a wider shift in Deleuze's oeuvre. It is as if the Kant that emerges in *Difference and Repetition*, where the sublime escapes its human conditions, but insists on thinking genesis through the realm of the Ideas, is materialised in Deleuze's later explorations of painting and cinema. After meeting Guattari, and with his help, Deleuze attempts to take Kant beyond Kant by materialising the sublime difference in aesthetic syntheses, in rhythms. This marks the emergence of a transcendental materialism in Deleuze's work with Guattari, leaving behind the "Idea" in favour of "refrains" and "diagrams" as the expressive mechanisms of chaos itself. But what remains constant is the ontological and political necessity of overcoming the human conditions of possible experience –exploding them– making the sublime crucial for any Deleuzian conception of art.

## References

- Deleuze, G. (1978). Deleuze Kant: synthesis and time, 14 March 1978. Trans. M. McMahon. Available at <https://www.webdeleuze.com>.
- Deleuze, G. (1978a). Deleuze Second lesson on Kant, 21 March, 1978. Trans. M. McMahon, available at <https://www.webdeleuze.com>.
- Deleuze, G. (1978b). Deleuze Third lesson on Kant, 28 March, 1978. Trans. M. McMahon, available at <https://www.webdeleuze.com>.
- Deleuze, G. (1978c). Deleuze Fourth lesson on Kant, 4 April, 1978. Trans. M. McMahon, available at <https://www.webdeleuze.com>.
- Deleuze, G. (1983). *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. Trans. H. Tomlinson. Columbia University Press.
- Deleuze, G. (1984). *Kant's Critical Philosophy, The Doctrine of the Faculties*. Trans. H. Tomlinson and B. Habberjam. University of Minnesota Press.
- Deleuze, G. (1986). *Cinema 1, The Movement-Image*. Trans. H. Tomlinson and B. Habberjam. University of Minnesota Press.
- Deleuze, G. (1988). *Foucault*. Trans. S. Hand. Continuum Press.
- Deleuze, G. (1989). *Cinema 2, The Time-Image*. Trans. H. Tomlinson and R. Galeta. University of Minnesota Press.
- Deleuze, G. (1994). *Difference and Repetition*. Trans. P. Patton. Columbia University Press.
- Deleuze, G. (1997). *Essays Critical and Clinical*. Trans. D. W. Smith and M. A. Greco. University of Minnesota Press.
- Deleuze, G. (2003). *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*. Trans. D. Smith. Continuum.
- Deleuze, G. (2004). *Desert Islands and Other Texts 1953-1974*. Trans. M. Taormina. Ed. D. Lapoujade. Semiotext(e).
- Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (1983). *Anti-Oedipus, Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. R. Hurley, M. Seers and H. R. Lane. University of Minneapolis Press.
- Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (1987). *A Thousand Plateaus, Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. B. Massumi. University of Minnesota Press.
- Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (1994). *What Is Philosophy?* Trans. H. Tomlinson and G. Burchell. Columbia University Press.
- Guattari, F. (1995). *Chaosmosis, an ethico-aesthetic paradigm*. Trans. P. Bains and J. Pefanis. Power Publications.
- Kant, I. (1929). *Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. N. Kemp Smith. Macmillan.
- Kant, I. (1987). *Critique of Judgment*. Trans. W. S. Pluhar. Hackett Publishing Company.
- Maïmon, S. (2010). *Essay on Transcendental Philosophy*. Trans. N. Midgley, H. Somers-Hall, A. Welchman and M. Reglitz. Continuum.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> As in the quote that titles this chapter, see Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 345

- 2 As Kant puts it, it is "it is in its chaos that nature most arouses our ideas of the sublime" (Kant, 1987, p. 99).
- 3 Deleuze makes the point clearly when discussing Foucault's "neo-Kantianism"; "the form of determination (I think) does not rest on an undetermined element (I am) but rather on the form of a pure determinable element (space-time)" (Deleuze, 1988, p. 61).
- 4 See, "How Do We Recognize Structuralism?" (Deleuze, 2004) for more on this.

## AmeliCA

### Available in:

<https://portal.amelica.org/amelijournal/828/8285163001/8285163001.pdf>

How to cite

Complete issue

More information about this article

Journal's webpage in [portal.amelica.org](http://portal.amelica.org)

AmeliCA

Open Science for Common Good

Stephen Zepke

**“The cosmic artisan: a homemade atomic bomb”. The Sublime Aesthetics of Deleuze and Guattari**  
**“El artesano cósmico: una bomba atómica casera”. La estética sublime de Deleuze y Guattari**

*Tabano*

no. 25, e6, 2025

Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina Santa María de los Buenos Aires, Argentina

[revista\\_tabano@uca.edu.ar](mailto:revista_tabano@uca.edu.ar)

**ISSN-E:** 2591-572X

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.46553/tab.25.2025.e6>



**CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 LEGAL CODE**

**Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International.**