

IMMANUEL KANT'S *THIRD CRITIQUE*: APPLYING THE AESTHETIC LENS

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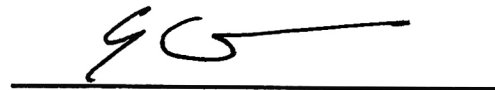
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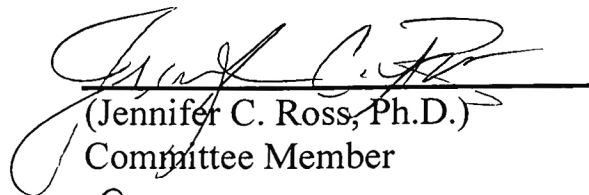
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IMMANUEL KANT'S *THIRD CRITIQUE*: APPLYING THE AESTHETIC LENS

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ABSTRACT

The following essays examine in greater detail and consider the potential of Immanuel Kant's theories of aesthetic judgement—with special interest in his theory of the sublime—to provide answers to several questions that become apparent upon further inspection of contemporary scholarship on the subject. Primary to this discussion is the question of the potential value held by the aesthetic experience for the contemporary question of representation, and the construction of meaning. While the longstanding debate regarding the validity of Kant's ideas is understandably relevant to the study of Kant's work, this project does not seek to offer support to or to dispute the quality of the arguments laid down by Kant. Instead, it intends to provide the context and understanding necessary to position Kant's ideas in the framework of contemporary studies in the Humanities in general, and, more specifically, to make a case for their utility in the analysis of the aesthetic experience in creative work.

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Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and the more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above and the moral law within. I have not to search for them and conjecture them as though they were veiled in darkness or were in the transcendent region beyond my horizon; I see them before me and connect them directly with the consciousness of my existence. The former begins from the place I occupy in the world of sense...The second begins from my invisible self, my personality, and exhibits me in a world which has true infinity, but which is traceable only by the understanding, and with which I discern that I am not in a merely contingent but in a universal and necessary connection, as I am also thereby with all those visible worlds. (Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Practical Reason*).

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PART I: *THE THIRD CRITIQUE*

INTRODUCTION

There is little doubt that since its publication in 1790, scholarly interest in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement* has been consistent but conflicted. Interest in the work has been notably interdisciplinary, with many seeking to analyze and apply the efforts of Kant's epistemological project outside the discipline of philosophy, testing these ideas against the studies of cultural analysis, history, and art theory to name only a few. This growing body of research into *The Third Critique's* theory of aesthetic judgement has focused on a series of difficulties that emerge when attempting to validate its assertions within Kant's greater philosophical system, as well as within the text of the *Third Critique* itself.

Beginning with his own contemporaries, scholars have raised questions regarding Kant's claims that *The Third Critique* establishes a link between the ideas advanced by his two previous philosophical endeavors, *The Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*. Equal attention has been given to Kant's treatment of aesthetic judgement itself, in particular his claim that the aesthetic experience must be located entirely in the mind of the perceiving subject, *and* that the resulting judgement can be thought of "as if" it should be experienced universally. This seemingly obvious contradiction, known by some scholars as the problem of "subjective universality,"¹ has

¹ Wilson, Ross. *Subjective Universality in Kant's Aesthetics*. 1st ed., Peter Lang AG, Internationaler Verlag Der Wissenschaften, 2007. 18.

given rise to significant dialogue about the role of aesthetic judgement in contemporary scholarship.

The following essays examine the context of this dialogue in greater detail and consider the potential of Kant's theories of aesthetic judgement—with special interest in his theory of the sublime—to provide answers to several questions that become apparent upon further inspection of contemporary scholarship on the subject. Primary to this discussion is the question of the potential value held by the aesthetic experience for the contemporary question of representation, and the construction of meaning. Additionally, how might a closer reading of the Kantian “subjective universal” help to locate the autonomy and value of the experiencing individual? Viewed through this lens, what might be learned from creative meditations on the aesthetic experience in the forms of art and literature?

Part I of this investigation will briefly examine the significance of reconciling Kant's aesthetic theories with his foundational arguments in *The Critique of Pure Reason* and *The Critique of Practical Reason*, which, together, seek to establish the superiority of the faculty of reason, and that faculty's practical application in the realms of understanding and morality, as well as its role in the sovereignty of the individual. In light of conflicting interpretations of his theories of aesthetic judgement, a deeper understanding must be established regarding Kant's insistence on the roles of reason and morality throughout his philosophical system. This discussion will then turn to understanding the “problem” of *The Third Critique*, subjective universality, and the historical framework through which this paradox has been viewed. Having established this foundational understanding, Part II will turn to applying the lens of these theories to the readings of two creative examples, each of

which takes up the question of the mediating role of the aesthetic experience in the relationship between the individual, representation, and the construction of meaning.

Before taking up these topics, several items should be addressed with the purpose of orienting the reader to the inherent limitations and the project's intent, and to offer reference to further reading where additional context might be found. As has already been established, the dialogue surrounding the validity of Kant's philosophical claims is robust and spans multiple centuries. A safe guess might be ventured that disputing or arguing in support of his theories, and subsequent interpretations of them, is the primary focus of majority of Kantian scholars. While this ongoing debate is understandably relevant to the study of Kant's work, this project does not seek to offer support to or to dispute the quality of the arguments laid down by Kant. Instead, it intends to provide the context and understanding necessary to position Kant's ideas in the framework of contemporary studies in the Humanities in general, and, more specifically, to make a case for their utility in the analysis of the aesthetic experience in creative work.

With these goals in mind, this project draws heavily on the work of Fiona Hughes and Ross Wilson, both of whom offer relatively recent and well-developed investigations into Kantian aesthetics, and on Jane Forsey's well-known 2007 article, "Is a Theory of the Sublime Possible?" Forsey provides a soundly reasoned overview of the problem of the sublime as it presents itself to the discipline of philosophy.² Perhaps more importantly to

² Forsey, Jane. "Is a Theory of the Sublime Possible." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65.4 (2007): 381-89. *JSTOR*. Web. April 20, 2012.

this undertaking, however, the momentum of her discussion leads her to consider what—if any—value is to be had when attempts to theorize the experience fail, and we are obliged to look for clues to understanding the nature of the sublime experience through creative representations of it instead. After briefly contemplating the sublime as represented by William Wordsworth and in the *Tao te Ching*, Forsey understandably questions the potential of such analyses to provide any ground for a philosophical understanding of the sublime:

While such descriptions or expressions may be evocative, they do nothing for a purported theory of the sublime. If this is what we are left with, it is so philosophically limited as to amount to nothing in the way of a theory of the sublime. What may be most unsatisfying about this third option—the sublime as feeling whether intentional or nonintentional—is that it rejects the history of talk about the sublime to date.³

Forsey's conclusion may be valid, especially where it concerns the problems of epistemology and metaphysics, but her discussion opens up the possibility of a broader reading of these issues. Where her approach potentially fails philosophy, it may instead provide evidence in the case for considering the role played by the aesthetic experience in the construction of meaning and representation.

This idea has been explored by a number of postmodern scholars in recent years, many of whom are particularly interested in how the aesthetic experience may facilitate the

³ Forsey, *Is a Theory of the Sublime Possible*, 388.

process of making sense of individual human agency in an increasingly global community. In introducing her book *An Aesthetic Education in an Era of Globalization*, Gayatri Spivak, for example, observes that “globalization can never happen to the sensory equipment of the experiencing being,”⁴ a point that seems to hint at the rift that has developed between Enlightenment ideas about the sovereignty of the individual, and the postmodern rejection of the faculty of reason this sovereignty is based upon on the grounds that it presupposes objectivity.

A deeper look at this idea will be taken up in the second half of Part I. where the problem of subjective universality in Kant’s *Third Critique* will be explored in relation to the historical interest surrounding it. Both Forsey’s and Spivak’s points, however, do underline the importance of understanding the role of perception in Kant’s philosophical system, especially considering the notorious and generally agreed upon difficulty of his theories of aesthetic judgment as they are laid out in the *Third Critique*.

Reason, Morality, and the Aesthetic Experience

At the heart of many of these difficulties, confused interpretations and misapprehensions may stem from the fact that Kant’s theories of aesthetic judgement are often tackled independently of his first two critiques. Removed from this foundation, understanding the ideas put forth by the *Third Critique* indeed becomes challenging. For example, in this vacuum Kant’s attempts to classify the experience of the beautiful as

⁴ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*. Harvard University Press, 2012. 2.

subjective, but also disinterested *and* experienced as though it should be universal, can appear extremely contradictory. Likewise, confusion can easily result from his assertion that feelings of the sublime result when we recognize the superiority of the faculty of reason over what our senses perceive as utterly overwhelming. Here, we recognize that Kant locates the aesthetic experience—those of the sublime *and* of the beautiful—in the mind rather than in the object perceived. To understand the mechanics of this clearly, it is first necessary to understand that underlying Kant’s entire philosophical system is an inquiry into the nature of perception and knowledge itself. Kant’s project as whole, including his theory of aesthetic judgement, is fundamentally epistemological.

Although the intent and scope of this project does not allow for a thorough overview of the contents of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, for the purposes of this discussion it is important to recognize that Kant establishes the basis of subjective universality foundationally in this first critique. In defining *a priori* knowledge as knowledge gained independently from empirical data, Kant establishes the plausibility of accessing knowledge that exists independently from subjective perception. However, access to *a priori* knowledge is gained through concepts supplied by the mind *via* subjective perception. The faculty of reason is then located when we recognize our ability to access *a priori* knowledge through the power of deduction by way of the concepts produced by perception inside the mind. For the interested reader, a helpful and detailed exploration of the mechanics of this idea can be found in the introduction of Philip McPherson Rudisill’s independent translation of Kant’s *Religion Within the Bounds of Reason*. To sufficiently grasp the ideas found in the *Third Critique*, however, it is perhaps most important to

understand that with the ideas above, Kant establishes as one of the pre-existing conditions for knowledge, and thus judgement, the faculty of reason.

Similarly, Kant continues this pursuit with his second critique, *The Critique of Practical Reason*, where he investigates the ability of the faculty of reason to act practically—that is to act toward a certain goal as the result of judgment. Simplified, his argument establishes two motivations to action, or “imperatives,” which Kant positions as central to his link between reason and morality. He terms the first category, those that are interested in satisfying a personally motivated goal, “hypothetical” imperatives. Motivation to act in this case might be thought of as “interested” in a certain outcome. Kant defines the second category of imperatives as “categorical,” distinguishing these as motivated universally. These categorical imperatives can be thought of as approximating universal law, or morality, and Kant asserts that, in the absence of obstacles, we are impelled by the faculty of reason to follow them without exception. It is from this idea that the Kantian categorical imperative, or “golden rule,” is derived. Furthermore, Kant explains that the effect of the universal or “moral” law impacts human sensibility in several ways:

The very notion of the law entails a disregard of personal happiness and a toppling of personal conceit, which is a negative force (personal humiliation), and it also includes an exaltation of the moral law which is a positive effect (condition of

personal dignity). This respect unfurls only in the soul upon the Idea of the moral law and not by any object, e.g. the emotion felt upon the playing of a great symphony.⁵

With a basic understanding of the intentions and conclusion laid down in his first two critiques, the ideas advanced by the *Third Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* begin to be clear. Kant's description of judgments of beauty as *disinterested*, that is without personal motivation, and *subjective*, contingent on the perceiving mind, follows the rules laid out by the Kantian universe. The same can be said for his seemingly paradoxical assertion that these experiences can be thought of *as if* they are shared universally because they appeal via the faculty of reason to our sense of moral law. As will be established in the second half of Part I. much debate exists about whether this line of argument constitutes a paradox, or if it, instead, represents a kind of proof, effectively acting as a throughway between the problem of subjective perception and access to a form of objectivity upon which meaning might be established.

It's with this second possibility in mind, that this project explores the questions posed earlier in this introduction. How might the subjective universal, particularly as it pertains to the aesthetic experience, help to locate the autonomy and value of the experiencing individual? What value does the study of this primarily philosophical concern

⁵ Kant, Immanuel. *Religion Within the Bounds of Sheer Reason*. Translated by Phillip McPherson Rudisill. Private Publication, 2013. xii

hold for the contemporary problems of representation and meaning? Finally, following Jane Forsey's investigation, what might be learned from applying these ideas to the analysis of creative work?

PART I: THE PROBLEM OF THE THIRD CRITIQUE

Roger Hancock summed up the problem of Immanuel Kant's *Third Critique* aptly in his 1958 article *A Note On Kant's Third Critique* when he stated clearly and concisely, "there is no commonly accepted interpretation of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. In particular, there is no common agreement as to whether Kant pursues a single unbroken line of argument in this work, and, if he does, what that line of argument is."⁶ Hancock's claim might be written off as a conclusion based solely on the theoretical analysis of his generation, but the difficulty of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* is widely known, and the contradictions and paradoxes found therein have been acknowledged by scholars throughout the centuries.

If it can be said to be difficult when taken as a whole, examining the *Critique* in terms of its components seems to yield an equally wide-ranging variety of interpretations, as well as a unique set of seemingly inherent paradoxes. Robert Zimmerman observes:

THE PARADOXES which Kant pronounces in the section of the *Critique of Judgment* entitled "The Analytic of the Beautiful" can easily mislead the uncautious [*sic*] reader. On a superficial reading they appear as cryptic and inconsistent. How can an aesthetic state of mind be both disinterested and emotive? How can a proposition concerning beauty be both contingent and necessary? These and other

⁶ Hancock, Roger. "A Note on Kant's Third Critique." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 8.32 (1958): 261-65. *JSTOR*. Web. February 29, 2012. 261.

questions come to mind as one works through the section and one feels helpless at the apparent lack of coherence.⁷

In another example, Orrin N. C. Wang points out in his discussion about the role of genius in Kant's theory of aesthetics that, "the structure of that argument is notoriously difficult to identify, especially with regard to resolving how different portions of Kant's book relate to one another in terms of importance and argumentative development."⁸

With all of this in mind, it might be difficult enough to account for the longevity of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, and for its foundational role in the social, philosophical, and artistic (even occasionally political) theory throughout the two centuries that followed its publication. In the wake of post-structuralism with its heavy critique of Enlightenment ideas, however, a resurgence of interest in Kant's theory of aesthetics has become apparent. Though this interest might appear paradoxical, scholars from a variety of disciplines have begun to examine the implications of Kant's theories through alternative readings, and to consider ideas of aesthetic judgment and the sublime against contemporary thought about human constructs of meaning.

⁷ Zimmerman, Robert L. "Kant: The Aesthetic Judgment." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 21.3 (1963): 333-44. *JSTOR*. Web. April 18, 2012. 333.

⁸ Wang, Orrin Nan Chung. "Kant's Strange Light: Romanticism, Periodicity, and the Catachresis of Genius." *Diacritics* 30.4 (2000): 15-37. *JSTOR*. Web. April 14, 2012. 21.

For example, in his 2000 article “Kant's Strange Light: Romanticism, Periodicity, and the Catachresis of Genius,” Wang explores the connection between postmodern approaches to historical study and the reflexivity that might be found inherent in the *Third Critique*:

A philosophical text, generated by the entanglement between Romanticism and the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, might contain sections exemplary in their recording of the interstice between trope and historical periodization...In resolving the contradictions between aesthetic judgment and creation, Kant transforms the solar light of human genius into the historical genius of the Enlightenment, which is very much the linguistic genius of Romanticism.⁹

Similarly, other scholars have taken up issues such as postmodern interdisciplinarity, aesthetic testimony, even humanistic roles of community, all in relation to Enlightenment thought, and in particular, Enlightenment thought about aesthetics. In his book, *Consequences of the Enlightenment*, Anthony J. Cascardi focuses on this reconsideration, and attempts to "reassess the relationship between certain issues in contemporary critical theory and the question of Enlightenment."¹⁰ Cascardi's argument even seeks to position Kant's aesthetics between contemporary theory and its criticism of Enlightenment principles.

⁹ Wang, Orrin Nan Chung. "Kant's Strange Light: Romanticism, Periodicity, and the Catachresis of Genius." *Diacritics* 30.4 (2000): 15-37. *JSTOR*. Web. April 14, 2012. 16.

¹⁰ Cascardi, Anthony J. *Consequences of Enlightenment*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge UP, 1999. Print. 1-5.

So how do we account for not one, but two apparent conflicts of historical and scholarly interest? How has a text which scholars from all disciplines allege consists of numerous ambiguities and paradoxes become so pivotal to the development of our understanding of human judgment and creativity? And why is contemporary theory so focused on that text following almost a century of criticism of Enlightenment thinking? The following argument discusses the contradictory concept of "subjective universality" in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* and reevaluates the historical environment in which the aesthetic paradox was produced. This paper also explores the possible connection between the seemingly paradoxical nature of the philosophy employed in Kant's *Third Critique*, and the interests of scholars working in the postmodern climate.

The Enlightenment and Kant's Subjective Universality

Although on occasion, the work of Immanuel Kant, and especially his *Third Critique*, is associated with Romantic thought by scholars, both Kant's ideas and his texts are generally held to be products of the Enlightenment of the 18th century. As with the specifics of all historical periods, accounts of its dating vary, especially across the lines drawn by the different disciplines. Louis Dupré, author of *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundation of Modern Culture*, places this era of "Enlightenment" in a period beginning roughly in the mid-17th century and ending sometime around the close of the 18th.¹¹ For the sake of clarity, this discussion will make use of Dupre' designation when referencing the period of Enlightenment.

¹¹ Dupre, Louis. *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture*.

London: Yale UP, 2005. Print. xi.

The use of the term "Enlightenment" often connotes the development of Western human inquiry toward the scientific approach, and the distancing from, if not outright rejection of, knowledge based heavily in theological, emotional, or irrational pursuits. In the broadest sense, the term Enlightenment represents the period during which humanity came to count reason highest amongst its values and assert the existence of a single, ultimately objective, truth. However, according to Dupré, "in the broadest sense" it is precisely how the Enlightenment has often been incorrectly classified. It has been described as everything from "shallow and pretentious intellectualism, unreasonable contempt for tradition and authority" by the Oxford English Dictionary, to "man's release from his self-incurred tutelage" by Immanuel Kant, himself—neither of which do much to communicate the nature of, nor the changes resulting from, the shift in human thought that took place over its course (1).

Solid definitions of Enlightenment principles and practices are difficult to establish, not only because individual movements of Enlightenment thought occurred in different—and often distant—locations throughout the European continent, but also because they occurred irregularly and spontaneously¹². For these reasons, and in an effort to define the era, many thinkers and their ideas are routinely omitted from definitive lists, precisely because their ideas oppose the broadest interpretations of "Enlightenment:"

The Enlightenment remained a project; it never became a full achievement. It continued to question the past and to anticipate the future, but various groups and individuals held different views concerning past and future. It has become

¹² Dupre, *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundation of Modern Culture*, 4.

increasingly common to exclude traditionalist thinkers such as Vico, Malebranche, Burke, and Herder from the Enlightenment...To be sure, in many ways they disagreed with their more radical contemporaries. But those contemporaries in turn found it necessary to respond to their challenges. This dynamic exchange, rather than the static rationalism with which it is often identified, characterizes the Enlightenment.¹³

In other words, despite generally held opinions of the Enlightenment as a period that has generated thought based solely on reason, Dupre points out that conflict existed not only at the very heart of Enlightenment thought, but as the central fuel of that period's debate.

The existence of that central conflict, which as a collective movement of human thought belongs at least partially to the era of Enlightenment, also plays a significant role in understanding the paradox central to Kant's *Third Critique*. Not only does the acknowledgment of this conflict position Kant's ideas at odds with those of many other Enlightenment thinkers but, like the aesthetic concerns of the *Critique of Judgment*, this "conflict" of Enlightenment thought is primarily an epistemological concern; that is to say it is the result of conflicting ideas about the ways in which human beings collect and understand information, how we go about creating, experiencing, and processing knowledge. The more commonly held view of the Enlightenment as a period of "rationalism" defines it as a movement subscribing to the epistemological view that knowledge can only be obtained through concepts understood as *a priori*, or concepts generated by information without the aid of sensory experience. However, paradoxically,

¹³ Dupre, *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundation of Modern Culture*, 21.

Enlightenment reason is also characterized by a reliance on the empirical methods of scientific study to interpret reality, approaches that, in turn, rely heavily on visual and auditory observations, measurement, and analysis.¹⁴ Besides being representative of the core disagreement in Enlightenment epistemology, this conflict between *a priori* knowledge and knowledge gained through sensory observation is also found to be paramount in Kant's treatment of judgment, specifically to his exploration of aesthetic judgment.

Understanding the importance this fundamental disagreement to Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, as well as that text's potential relevance to postmodern scholarship, is dependent upon understanding Kant's own positioning of the faculty of judgment within his epistemological system. With his first critique, the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant explores the nature of reality as fixed and objective, as existing outside the human realm of perception—and thus capable of producing a universal experience. However, with his second critique, the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant proposes that human beings do possess a form of judgment, or moral agency, that is not contingent upon the nature of that objective reality, and by which they may make choices freely. As Fiona Hughes points out, "it (appears) that [Kant] had established that we are both unfree (in the world of nature) and free (in the moral world). How could this be so without an existential rupture in our psyche?"¹⁵ The link in the Kantian universe between objective reality and moral agency

¹⁴ Dupre, *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundation of Modern Culture*, 24.

¹⁵ Hughes, Fiona. *Kant's Critique of Aesthetic Judgement: A Reader's Guide*. Continuum, 2010. 10-11.

can be found in Kant's *Third Critique*, in his positioning of aesthetic judgment as a kind of mediating faculty.

Central to Kant's treatise on the aesthetic experience (or judgment) is his assertion that experiences of the aesthetic, or beautiful, are entirely subjective. Unlike experiences as outlined by Kant's *First Critique*, experiences of the aesthetic are entirely unconcerned with the physical nature of the beautiful object, whether it be artistic or natural. In fact, so unconcerned—or “indifferent,” as often they're termed—are these types of experiences with the object they observe, that they are not even concerned that the physical object exists at all. Rather, aesthetic experience is wholly contingent upon the individual perceptions of the observer.¹⁶ The subjective nature of aesthetic judgment, alone, supports Kant's position on the existence of human moral agency, but his distinction of these experiences as indifferent provides for a more complex understanding of the role of aesthetic judgment, one capable of bridging the gap between objective reality and the free will of morality. In the accounts of his first two critiques, objective reality and moral agency are both governed by laws or goals of contingency or of purpose. However, as Kant notoriously argues in his *Third Critique*, human aesthetic experience, or the judgment of that which is found to be beautiful, is *not* governed by any particular purpose, precisely because it is indifferent to the objective nature of that which is observed. In short, it is the purposeless, indifferent nature inherent in aesthetic experience that qualifies aesthetic judgment as universal, a quality which reconciles it with the Kantian “pure reason.”¹⁷

¹⁶ Hughes, *Kant's Critique of Judgement: A Reader's Guide*, 36-37.

¹⁷ Hughes, *Kant's Critique of Judgement: A Reader's Guide*, 38-39.

This string of arguments that Kant develops in his approach to aesthetic judgment defines those judgments as both entirely subjective and dependent upon individual human perception, and yet also establishes them as universally experienced because their motives are not dictated by any cultural, social, or collective function. Kant also positions these judgments within his epistemological system in a role of absolute necessity, because of their ability to mediate between human moral agency and the concept of a universal reality.

As Hughes states:

In writing the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* Kant (brings) aesthetics onto the centre of the philosophical stage. He not only wrote an extensive philosophical treatise on aesthetics – this had been done before by Shaftesbury, Baumgarten and Winckelmann, for instance – but, most importantly, he argued for the inclusion of aesthetics within the range of topics that count as fundamental for human experience, alongside knowledge and morality.¹⁸

This sentiment is echoed by many who've undertaken the task of examining Kantian aesthetics, including Robert Zimmerman, who asserts that Kant's aesthetic theory rests, "primarily upon the notion that the aesthetic experience is not a second-rate phenomenon, but, rather a phenomenon of the utmost existential importance."¹⁹

¹⁸ Hughes, *Kant's Critique of Judgement: A Reader's Guide*, 6.

¹⁹ Zimmerman, Robert L. "Kant: The Aesthetic Judgment." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 21.3 (1963): 333-44. *JSTOR*. Web. April 18, 2012. 343.

Kant's arguments in the *Third Critique* form the foundation of what has become known as "subjective universality," and, as inspired and influential as they may be, to some they've also come to represent the Kantian paradox. In fact, the alleged paradox is what Robert Zimmerman, himself, refers to when he asks, "How can an aesthetic state of mind be both disinterested and emotive? How can a proposition concerning beauty be both contingent and necessary?"²⁰ Attempts to answer questions like those posed rhetorically by Zimmerman have stretched out over the two centuries following the Enlightenment and continue right up to the present. For many scholars, like Hughes, Zimmerman, Hancock, and Wang, subjective universality represents a paradox only in technical terms. There have been a seemingly endless number of attempts to translate, interpret, and draw implications from this brilliant, yet infinitely complex, piece of epistemological theory. Hughes, for example, finds in the Kantian paradox no paradox at all, but instead a form of philosophical tension, key to the function of the *Critique's* system:

(Tension) is not necessarily a paradox and aesthetic judgment is not a self-contradictory position; rather it is one that marks out a sociability that does not dissolve the autonomy of the subject. The voice of the individual speaks for the broader community of all judging subjects in finding something beautiful.²¹

Likewise, in answer to his own questions about the nature of Kant's apparently conflicting views, Zimmerman feels that

²⁰ Zimmerman, *Kant: The Aesthetic Judgement*, 333.

²¹ Hughes, *Kant's Aesthetic Epistemology*, 41.

Given the condition that aesthetic experience be "pure" experience, the subjectivity and universality, the contingency and necessity of aesthetic judgments, and the emotive but disinterested state of mind in the aesthetic subject are seen as logical deductions.²²

Roger Hancock agrees that the *Third Critique* doesn't put forth a paradox, per se, but a problem fundamentally concerned with concepts of formalism. His own interpretation of Kant's intention reads quite differently than those already mentioned:

I would like to suggest that the problem of the *Third Critique* amounts to the issue of formalism versus non-formalism...The ideal of the formalist would be possession of a set of rules which determine the correctness or incorrectness of any statement, or any possible action. In the absence of such rules, or to the extent that such rules do not exist, argues the formalist, statements and actions are uncontrolled and a-rational... Kant's thesis in the *Critique of Judgment* is that the dichotomy posed by the formalist is false...The *Critique of Judgment* rejects the formalist dichotomy at the beginning, and explores the implications of this denial for aesthetics, science, and ethics.²³

It should be noted that formalist interpretations of Kant's aesthetics are not uncommon, and, much like those more general conjectures presented here, formalists readings of *the Third Critique* are also widely varied. Although there is much support for the idea that the

²² Zimmerman, *Kant: The Aesthetic Judgement*, 333.

²³ Zimmerman, *Kant: The Aesthetic Judgement*, 265.

paradox of the *Third Critique* does not, in fact, represent a paradox at all, there are as many varying rationales supporting this conclusion as there are voices participating in the debate. Whether or not the opinions of scholars representing the variety of disciplines interested in Kant's aesthetic theories will ever be seen as in agreement about the nature of subjective universality, it can at least be concluded that, presently, no such agreement exists.

Romanticism and the Kantian Sublime

While opinions differ about the intent and ultimate value of Kant's epistemological system, there is plenty of evidence to support the claim that Kant's aesthetics have made an immeasurable contribution to the historical debate about aesthetics in general, as well as to the studies of epistemology and Enlightenment thought. This influence can certainly be seen in his own time. Equally, if not more commonly encountered, however, is the notion that Kant's critiques, especially his *Critique of Judgement*, can be sourced for understanding of Romantic era thinking.²⁴

The connection between the text in question with Romantic thought might appear on the surface to be established easily enough. Scholars from a variety of disciplines have drawn parallels between Kant's aesthetics and any number of Romantic-era products, including music and theater, philosophy and art, even civics, poetry, and literature.²⁵ The

²⁴ Cascardi, Anthony J. *Consequences of Enlightenment*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge UP, 1999. Print. 11.

²⁵ Muenzer, Clark S. "Goethe's Werder and Kant's Aesthetics of Failure." *Mln* 98.3 (1983): 492-99. *JSTOR*. Web. April 18, 2012. 492-494.

general tendency of Romantic theory, art, music, and literature to rely heavily on the subjective by way of the informing role of emotional experience, combined with the drive to establish individualism through a focus on perception, make a connection between Romanticism and the *Third Critique* seem quite likely. However, the specifics of this connection are not so clear as they first may seem. Kant's ideas belong to, as has already been established, the movement of Enlightenment thinkers that, despite inherent conflict regarding proper epistemological procedure, source the pursuit of rationalism as an ideal. Unlike the movement preceding it, which sought understanding of the human experience through the attempt to apply reason, Romanticism sought to experience that which is beyond order, reason, or rationality.²⁶ The search for the unknowable undertaken by Romanticism is arguably best aligned with a specific element of Kant's theories, that of the sublime.

Although the relationship between Kantian aesthetics and the Kantian sublime is notoriously complex, a distinction between the two discussions is clear. Though the rules of the Kantian universe, in particular the subjective universality applied to aesthetic experience, apply to Kant's discussion of the sublime experience, his line of argument clearly distinguishes between the aesthetic experience and the experience of the sublime. Unlike aesthetic experience, which produces a positive yet indifferent response in the

²⁶ Schueller, Herbert M. "Romanticism Reconsidered." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 20.4 (1962): 359-68. *JSTOR*. Web. January 3, 2012. 361.

observer, Kant defines the experience of the sublime as that which entirely overwhelms our ability for sensory perception:

We judge something sublime when it defeats our capacity for sensory comprehension. We cannot simply take it in, because it is too large or too powerful. What we take in through our senses does not hold together or, at least, threatens to fall apart. In the case of beauty, our sensory intake harmonizes with a general capacity for understanding sensory phenomena. But now, we are stymied. The absolutely large or overwhelmingly powerful phenomenon defies our capacity to take it in through our senses and, as a result, it cannot be held together or 'comprehended' so that we might be capable of synthesizing what we apprehend and recognize it under a concept.²⁷

Hughes' account of the sublime experience moves toward Kant's central point in the discussion of the sublime. As she words the phenomenon, the experience of the sublime cannot be made by our sensory perception into any sort of order; we cannot recognize it under any "concept."

Kant goes on to admit that upon first experiencing the sublime, the human reaction is one of displeasure resulting from the afore-mentioned experience of overwhelm. Our senses are defeated as we encounter that which, upon first observation appears to be unknowable, in fact *is* unknowable through any empirical approach. Observation—sensory information—is shown to have no application, and what results looks to be in line with the Romantic pursuit of the experience of the unknowable. In fact, here, in the concept of the

²⁷ Hughes, *Kant's Critique of Judgement: A Reader's Guide*, 14.

sublime, is found the most likely, most credible, connection between the philosophies of Immanuel Kant and the roots of Romanticism; but here also is the often-disregarded assertion made by Kant that puts his theory of the sublime at odds with the goal of the Romantics to discover a truth that defies rationality:

Hence the feeling of the sublime is a feeling of displeasure that arises from the imagination's inadequacy, in an aesthetic estimation of magnitude, for an estimation by reason, but is at the same time also a pleasure, aroused by the fact that this very judgment, namely, that even the greatest power of sensibility is inadequate, is [itself] in harmony with rational ideas, insofar as striving toward them is still a law for us.²⁸

This operation, set in motion by an encounter with the sublime, serves to re-establish the ultimate superiority of the human faculty of reason. As Hughes observes:

Our senses are defeated, but, at the same time, we discover an alternative power, the capacity as rational beings to think beyond the sphere of sensible experience. Although our senses and imagination are overwhelmed by the enormity of the phenomenon with which we are faced, in thought we can make sense of and even transcend it. In short, we discover ourselves as beings that are not only animal, but also rational.²⁹

²⁸ Kant, Immanuel, and James Creed Meredith. *The Critique of Judgement*. Clarendon Press, 1986, 114.

²⁹ Hughes, *Kant's Critique of Judgement: A Reader's Guide*, 14-15.

Regardless of the Romantic intent to experience the unknowable through nature, or through art, literature, or music, Kant positions the sublime experience as one that reinforces the superiority of the human faculty of reason over that of sensory experience.

In his book, *Aesthetics in Kant*, James Kirwan sums up with clarity the obvious conflict that results when trying to source Kant's *Third Critique* for the roots of Romanticism; "Though Kant is frequently included as a precursor of Romanticism, there is, as we have seen, little in his aesthetics that justifies this status."³⁰ To this assessment might be justly added the attempt to establish a Romantic link to Kant's theories of the sublime. So, as with Zimmerman's rhetorical questions about the paradoxical nature of subjective universality, and as with the centuries of scholarly inquiry into such a problematic text, what is to be made of the claim of Romantic scholars on the Kantian sublime, or even of its less complicated formal sourcing of Kant's aesthetics? The answer to such a question may lie just as well in late 20th and early 21st century study of *The Critique of Judgment* as it does in any study found on Romanticism itself.

Modernity, Postmodernity, and Kantian Aesthetics

"The Enlightenment enjoys no high regard in our time. Many consider its thinking abstract, its feelings artificial. To modern critics, the very term evokes form without substance, universality without particularity."³¹

³⁰ Kirwan, James. *The Aesthetics in Kant*. London/New York: Continuum, 2004.

Electronic Ed. 143.

³¹ Dupre, *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture*, xi-xii.

This statement, made by Louis Dupre in 2005, can be most easily understood when viewing Kant's aesthetics through a postmodern lens that looks through Modernism, and subsequently Romanticism, back into the age of Enlightenment, in search of the source of "modern" thought. It sums up the turn of epistemological thinking away from the rationalistic values espoused by the Enlightenment, a turn greatly influenced not only by 20th century Modernism and postmodernism, but by 20th century analytic theories such as structuralism and post-structuralism, with their attempts at historical deconstruction—all of which have either found reason to embrace or take issue with (but never to disregard) Kant's *Critique of Judgment*.³² Even such a multilayered framework represents a severely simplified approach to the roles being potentially assigned to *Kant's Third Critique* at the beginning of the 21st Century.

To reach a point of any real understanding of why contemporary scholars, such as those referenced at the beginning of this discussion, are turning their attention not only to the *Third Critique* itself, but to the role of the *Third Critique* in the development of ideas throughout the last two centuries, it must first be understood that the climate in which postmodernism exists is one that, like post-structuralism, views reality as indefinable, contingent upon individual perception which, it asserts, is created by cultural conditioning. In short, reality is a construct of social and cultural experience, and apart from those experiences there can be no reality.³³

³² Belsey, Catherine. *Post-structuralism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002. Print. 72.

³³ Belsey, *Post-structuralism*, 69-71.

This perspective alone is cause for rejection of Enlightenment rationalism on the basis that it asserts the existence of a knowable, rational truth. It should then, in turn, justify the rejection of Kant's epistemological system along with its assertion of the superiority of reason. It conflicts with Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* on the issue of moral agency because the very nature of moral agency suggests a faculty that is inherently individual. Such a faculty cannot exist in post-structuralism or the postmodernist system because individual identity is relative to socio-cultural experience, and thus cannot exist inherently (that is to say *without* socio-cultural positioning). Likewise, it conflicts with Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* not on the basis that objects or events do or don't actually exist, nor even that they exist in a certain way or another, but on the assertion that through any means of approach, be they pure reason or empirical, one can ever claim to gain access to an object or event's objective existence.

This theoretical dialogue between object and perception can become very complex, but to put it shortly, the system created by post-structuralism (and subsequently inherited by postmodernism) requires along with the rejection of rationalism, the rejection of the existence of human agency, and of human subjectivity, by redefining concepts of subjectivity as contingent on socio-cultural means of creating meaning (like language, for example).³⁴ It is here, in the attempt to reconcile the individual as a being in possession of the power of choice *not* contingent on the conditioning of society with shifting views of how meaning is constructed, that that the Kantian paradox of subjective universality becomes of interest to postmodern inquiry.

³⁴ Belsey, *Post-structuralism*, 72.

Though it should be noted that not all scholars currently examining the *Third Critique* self-identify as postmodern in their approaches, evidence of such inquiry is varied and plentiful. Anthony Cascardi's previously mentioned 1999 book, *The Consequences of the Enlightenment*, is one such example. Cascardi seeks to respond to current theories by positioning aesthetics in a role similar to language, as a form of communication, and thus equally valid as a system of creating meaning: "In contrast to most contemporary theory, which is interested in subsuming artworks under a series of worldly discourses, my interest is in discovering the ways in which aesthetics is itself the forgotten discourse of the world" (3). Moreover, Cascardi attempts to do so without rejecting Enlightenment developments outright, but instead places Kant's *Third Critique* in a mediating position between contemporary theory and a potentially new understanding of how meaning might be constructed:

(This) volume represents an effort to challenge the view that the pursuit of constructive social and ethical goals requires an anti-Enlightenment stance. But it proposes to do so without summoning us to return to Enlightenment rationality... This volume appeals to Kant's *Critique of Judgment* in order to suggest that we cannot so clearly position ourselves on either side of the debate concerning the Enlightenment and its consequences. As I hope will become clear over the course of what follows, the question of our relationship to the Enlightenment is better understood in terms of the difficulty of locating any position that would be categorically inside or outside the Enlightenment, inside or outside objectivity,

inside or outside critical or systematic thought. Our current position is itself a consequence of the nonclosure of the Enlightenment.³⁵

Cascardi appeals to the unifying paradox found at the heart of the *Third Critique* to develop a potentially new perspective through which the contemporary crisis of representation might be understood. Cascardi is by no means alone in his proposal that the unifying nature of Kant's paradox might provide insight from which contemporary scholarship may benefit. Vivasvan Soni, Orrin N.C. Wang, Aaron Meskin, Karen Lang, and Jane Forsey to name only a few, have all taken up issues such as community, historical studies, aesthetic testimony, art and aesthetics, modern interpretations of the sublime, morality, and postmodern interdisciplinarity, all in relation to Kant's *Critique of Judgment*.

Conclusion

Though no single interpretation of Kant's *Third Critique*, his *Critique of Judgment*, is, or has ever been, agreed upon, the seemingly paradoxical, but unifying nature of the epistemological arguments found therein may represent a reason for the text's status as one of continual interest, after its publication at the end of the Enlightenment. This nature may also explain the surge of scholarly interest in Kant's *Third Critique* seen at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, as the ideas proposed by Kant in its development not only offer contemporary scholars a means by which to reassess Enlightenment thought, but may offer potentially beneficial insight to the evolution of postmodern human constructs of meaning.

³⁵ Cascardi, *Consequences of Enlightenment*, 5.

PART II. APPLYING THE AESTHETIC LENS

INTRODUCTION: A NOTE ON THE SUBLIME

Although it exists within Kant's greater philosophical system, and as an aspect within his system of aesthetic judgement as well, the question of the sublime experience is particularly complex and, as such, has captured the interest of those attempting to address the questions laid out by this project's introduction. It should be noted that while Kant is by no means the first to attempt a theory of the sublime, his incorporation of it as a necessary and functional part of his epistemological system is significant, and his location of the sublime experience in the mind of the perceiver makes his theory of the sublime particularly influential to scholarship in the 20th and 21st centuries.

Although speculation about and attempts to theorize the nature of the experience of the sublime far predate Enlightenment thinking, the development of Kant's own theory of the sublime can arguably be sourced to the work of James Addison, who is referenced by Kant directly, and to the work of Edmund Burke. Some debate exists about the extent to which each directly influenced Kant's theory of the sublime. However, the progression of Kant's ideas from his earlier work, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, to his theory as laid out by the *Critique of Judgement* suggest that Addison's work—at minimum—acted as source material for both Kant and Burke.³⁶ Furthermore, the Kantian sublime seems to build upon and argue against elements of both philosophers'

³⁶ Crowther, Paul. *The Kantian Sublime: From Morality to Art*. Oxford: Oxford

University Press, 2002. Print. 12.

theories. Addison, like Kant, clearly establishes the importance of dividing experiences of beauty from those of the sublime, but, unlike Kant, insists on the sublime as an extension of a range of pleasurable aesthetic experiences, finding in the sublime an “exhilarating feeling of self-transcendence.”³⁷

Edmund Burke, instead recognizes in his theory the role of terror and pain in the sublime experience, but essentially locates the spectator’s pleasure in self-preservation, a feeling that results from recognizing the potential for serious harm as a result of the *object* of the sublime.³⁸ On this point Kant most notably breaks stride with Burke, instead insisting that the experience of the sublime relies on the interior sensibility of the viewer rather than on the object being viewed. As noted, this shift from object as sublime to a sublime generated by the internal experience of the spectator plays a notable part in Kant’s larger philosophical system, in particular to his ability to establish philosophical connections between the subjective experience of the viewer and the theoretically universal law of reason that governs the viewer’s faculties.

Here, aside from its philosophical complexities, Jane Forsey’s discussion holds another clue as to why this relatively minor piece of Kant’s philosophy has garnered so much recent attention. Forsey is led to consider what might be made of an attempt to understand the sublime experientially, through a creative rather than a theoretical approach, precisely because the nature of the sublime experience seems to resist efforts at

³⁷ Crowther. *The Kantian Sublime*. 7.

³⁸ Crowther. *The Kantian Sublime*. 8.

theorization. Kant himself describes the sublime as a feeling experienced as the result of a kind of initial cognitive failure:

[O]ur imagination, even in its greatest effort to do what is demanded of it and comprehend a given object...proves its own limits and inadequacy, and yet at the same time proves its vocation to obey a law, namely, to make itself adequate to that idea. Hence the feeling of the sublime in nature is respect for our own vocation. But by a certain subreption (in which respect for the object is substituted for respect for the idea of humanity within ourselves, as subjects) this respect is accorded an object of nature that, as it were, makes intuitable for us the superiority of the rational vocation of our cognitive powers over the greatest power of sensibility.³⁹

When we encounter that which we call sublime, the magnitude of the experience overwhelms the capacity of our sensory perception and we, at first, perceive—with an unpleasant sensation—that we fail to comprehend the experience.⁴⁰ We find the feeling pleasurable only when we recognize the demonstrable primacy of reason in our natural desire to make sense of that which appears to be entirely incomprehensible. Kant's location of the true object of the sublime experience as the viewer's own faculty of reason brings into relief a kind of reflexivity, and a heightening of the subjective experience of the

³⁹ Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, 114.

⁴⁰ Hughes, Fiona. *Kant's Aesthetic Epistemology: Form and World*. 1st ed., Edinburgh University Press, 2007. 14.

individual, which lends itself to the kind of experiential analysis Forsey's article considers as a final resort.

This reflexivity and heightened subjectivity have guided the analyses of the creative works found in Part II. of this project. In addition to the dimension they add to the historical discussion found in the second half of Part I., both examples provide ample opportunity to explore the inquiries already laid out in this project's introduction, and both represent examples of the sublime experience as it can be found in art and literature. Although their differences are many—they are the products of two very different historical periods with vastly differing paradigms of thought—both do so against a meditative backdrop that turns its gaze upon ruins, a motif that overlaps with Kant's early description of the sublime as arising in the presence of "a certain dread, or melancholy; in some cases merely with quiet wonder; and in still others with a beauty completely pervading a sublime plan."⁴¹ While the first of these two examples addresses these questions in relation to individual artistic ambition and its inevitable failure, the second examines the aesthetic experience within the context of identity and community, as well as the personal and the historical. In doing so, both approach the same crucial questions: What is the value of the individual, subjective experience and its expression, and how does the subjective, and deeply personal, intersect with the social and potentially universal to contribute to our definition of the human experience?

⁴¹ Crowther. *The Kantian Sublime*. 10. Here, Crowther quotes Immanuel Kant's 1764 *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*.

PART II. FRIEDRICH'S RUINS: LOCATING THE SPECTATOR IN THE RUINS IN THE PAINTINGS OF CASPAR DAVID FRIEDRICH

Introduction

The paintings of Caspar David Friedrich are inextricably linked to the European Romantic movement, and, more specifically, to the German Romantic concepts of the beautiful, the sublime, and the role of nature as representative of both. Friedrich's work makes dramatic use of both picturesque and foreboding natural imagery, often relegating human presence to the position of silent spectator, overcome by an encounter with a divine nature. Although his influences might not be limited to the subject of landscape painting, and although his subjects vary from naturalistic landscapes to allegorical or symbolic narratives that often incorporate figures and ruined architecture, Friedrich is widely regarded as a painter working within the European traditions of landscape painting. This classification stems from his extensive use of the German landscape, of sweeping mountains, seascapes, and forests, as well his incorporation of individual elements of nature, such as lone oaks or fir trees, into nearly all of his canvases. However, it is a classification that has not gone unexamined.

Much study has been devoted to the visual clues found in Friedrich's work, and the historical record of his words and life, in an effort to interpret his highly symbolic compositions, and shed light on his deeply personal approach.⁴² Throughout the course of

⁴² Forster-Hahn, Françoise. "Recent Scholarship on Caspar David Friedrich." *The Art Bulletin* Mar. 58.1 (1976): 113-16. *JSTOR*. March 16, 2013.

his life, and since his death in 1840, critics, artists, art historians, and other scholars have examined the expansive and varied body of work created and left behind by Caspar David Friedrich, and some have found in his paintings of landscapes and seascapes a revolutionary approach to landscape painting which succeeds in apprehending the spirit of nature, while others have located a unique sense of narrative, "a new genre—the tragedy of landscape."⁴³ Still others, like the art critic Wilhelm Basilius von Ramdohr, Chancellor of the Saxon Court in 1809, for example, found in Friedrich's arrangement of religious themes and natural elements a corruption of the landscape tradition, which risked endangering good taste.⁴⁴

Interpretations of meaning have been as varied as opinions about Friedrich's work. Often identified and explored for significance are his use of allegory and symbol to communicate his ideas about spirituality and its relationship to organized religion, as well as his opinions about the political climate of his native country, Germany.⁴⁵ Friedrich has been known to include himself as a wanderer in his spiritual allegories, and as an observer in his political meditations, and has been cited as explicitly identifying the subjects of a number of his works as spiritual and political.⁴⁶ In addition to these widely accepted interpretations, 20th and 21st century scholarship has also focused on what J.L. Koerner

⁴³ Honour, Hugh. *Romanticism*. New York: Harper & Row, 1979. Print.

⁴⁴ Forster-Hahn, "Recent Scholarship on Caspar David Friedrich," 28.

⁴⁵ Beenkan, Hermann. "Caspar David Friedrich." *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* April 72.421 (1938): 170-75. *JSTOR*. Web. 25 Mar. 2013. 171-173.

⁴⁶ Beenkan, *Caspar David Friedrich*, 283.

refers to a sense of "heightened subjectivity" present in Friedrich's canvases, an element created by the artist's use of formal elements and inclusion of silent spectators to draw the viewer's attention to the exclusively subjective nature of his or her experience of the canvas itself.⁴⁷

This sense of heightened subjectivity can be found present, in one form or another, in nearly all of Friedrich's works. In some cases it is used to lead the viewer through the artist's narrative; in others, to enhance the viewer's experience of the sublime. In some cases, it appears to call into question the issue of spectatorship, or viewing, in general—of nature, and of art.

Perhaps even more significantly, Friedrich's use of heightened subjectivity, combined with attention drawn to spectatorship, is uniquely apparent in his depictions of ruined architecture, a subject less frequently examined by Friedrich scholars. Although the subject of landscape dominates Caspar David Friedrich's body of work, representations of ruins are also significant in the artist's world. As has been discussed, much study has been devoted to the interpretation of Friedrich's allegorical and symbolic paintings of landscapes and figures as political or spiritual in nature, and as representative of a unique form of heightened subjectivity. In light of the highly symbolic nature of Friedrich's work, the following will examine the presence of ruins in Friedrich's work in relation to his attention to spectatorship and will consider that in such depictions might be found Friedrich's

⁴⁷ Koerner, Joseph Leo., and Caspar David Friedrich. *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*. London: Reaktion, 1990. Print. 36.

representation of the futility of the human struggle to apprehend meaning and permanence through artistic achievement.

Friedrich's Subjectivity

The work of Caspar David Friedrich often presents the majesty, serenity, and terror of nature, making use of mountains, clouds, trees, seascapes, rocky cliffs, and even fields of shattered ice to evoke ideas and feelings of the sublime in the viewer's imagination. However, it is Friedrich's startlingly deliberate and often unnaturally symmetrical use of these elements of the natural world that has given rise to speculation among scholars that the artist intended to draw attention not only to sublime aspects of nature itself, but to the spectator's subjective experience of nature, and the artist's active role in ordering this experience through art. Friedrich's carefully balanced, centrally focused compositions have set his work apart from his contemporaries, and brought about numerous considerations of Friedrich himself, and his work, within the context of the Romantic movement. Linda Siegel, for example, in her article *Synaesthesia and the Paintings of Caspar David Friedrich*, considers Friedrich's unique perspective within the movement:

As painter, philosopher, and poet, he is an integral part of this artistic *Gesellschaft* and his works are the finest example of the doctrine of Synaesthesia in the German Romantic visual arts. Friedrich specialized in a new and very modern form of landscape painting not yet entirely understood... Friedrich's works represent a

totally new vision as compared to the paintings of his contemporaries, Grein, Hartmann, Schadow, Koch, etc.⁴⁸

Siegel's discussion of Friedrich's "new vision" and "modern form" positions his aims within the concept of Synaesthesia, a doctrine she describes as one in which the "expressive power of all art forms blend together with philosophy in creating the ultimate artistic experience" (196). It also illustrates what exactly she sees in Friedrich's work that sets it apart from his contemporaries; that through his paintings Friedrich succeeds in creating not just a picture, but an experience for the viewer.

The experience of Friedrich's work, as well as much of Friedrich's subject matter, is often thought of in terms of the sublime, a concept explored by Kant, among others. The Kantian sublime, which must be thought of differently than the beautiful or the aesthetically pleasing, can be thought of as that which overwhelms, or as that which is absolutely great (Abaci 237). More specifically, Kant defines the experience of the sublime as one that takes place in the mind when it is overwhelmed by the seemingly infinite. Friedrich's paintings often depict landscapes that, when closely inspected, seem to invite the viewer into the experience of the sublime. His technique creates a certain limitlessness of space within the picture, giving the illusion of infinite depth and vague spatial organization, often in relation to tiny human figures that appear dwarfed by the grand scale of their environments. His work is also concerned with the *idea* of the sublime, as can be seen, for example, in his images of large ships setting sail onto a boundless ocean, or of

⁴⁸ Siegel, Linda. "Synaesthesia and the Paintings of Caspar David Friedrich." *Art Journal* Spring 33.3 (1974): 196-204. *JSTOR*. March 16, 2013. 196.

ruins, depicted as the crumbling remains of humanity's ambition. These elements and concepts are, themselves, quite different from the "experience" described by Siegel, the ultimate experience created by the blending of all art with philosophy. Siegel's "experience" alleges that Friedrich succeeds in creating canvases that not only convey the idea of the sublime, but that produce the experience of the sublime for their viewers.

In his book *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape Painting*, Joseph Leo Koerner investigates the idea of subject within Friedrich's landscapes. He finds that, like Kant, Friedrich conceives of sublimity as being located in subjective experience, or in the mind, rather than in the object being viewed:

I would note that Friedrich locates sublimity not in the object itself, but in its subjective effect on the viewer...It was Immanuel Kant, of course, who first located sublimity purely within the beholding subject, rather than in objects themselves. In his *Critique of Judgment*, we read that unlike beauty, which concerns a liking or dislike for the form of the object, sublimity is contained not in anything of nature, but only in our mind, in so far as we can become conscious of our superiority to nature within us, and thereby also to nature outside us...When we speak of the sublime in nature we speak improperly; properly speaking, sublimity can be attributed merely to our way of thinking.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Koerner, Joseph Leo., and Caspar David Friedrich. *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*. London: Reaktion, 1990. Print. 212.

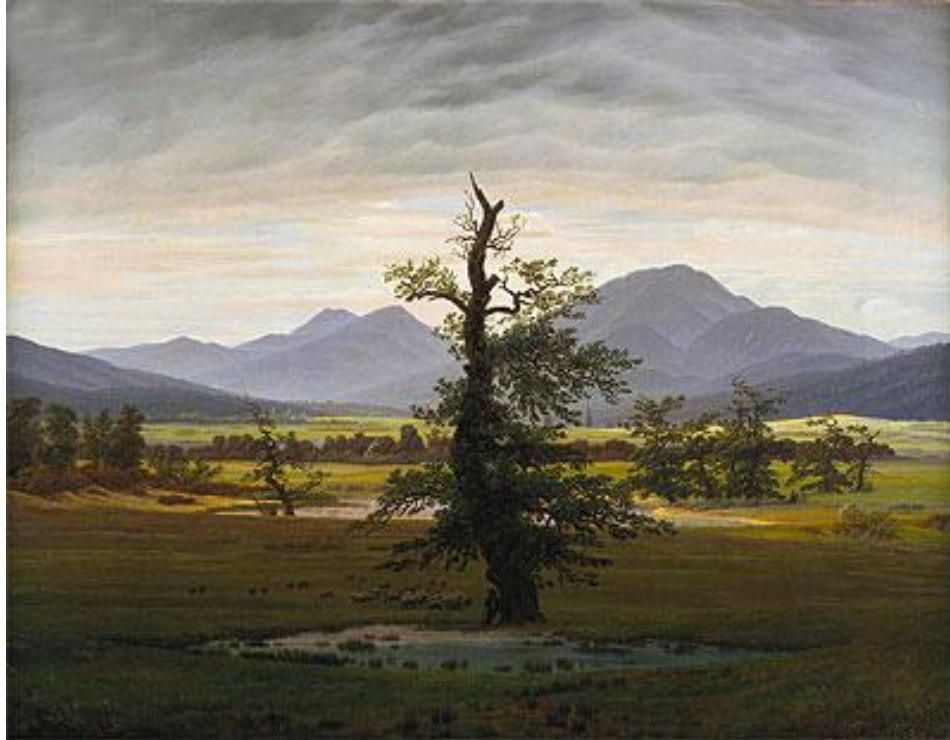


Figure.1. Friedrich, Caspar David. *Village Landscape in Morning Light (The Lone Tree)*. 1822. National Gallery, Berlin. caspardavidfriedrich.org. March 2013

Friedrich's paintings, and the methods through which they convey this subjectivity, must then be considered. This "heightened form of subjectivity," as it is described by Koerner, is often made evident by the aforementioned, deliberately unnatural sense of composition with which Friedrich arranges his views of nature.⁵⁰ His compositions are frequently central, and sometimes heavily so, placing tree, mountain, or path starkly in the center of carefully arranged but seemingly infinite space. The center-weighted object of his compositions is then usually symmetrically supported by the work's surrounding environment. Friedrich's *Village Landscape in Morning Light*, also sometimes referred to as *The Lone Tree* or *Solitary Tree*, is one such example (Fig. 1). In this work, Friedrich has placed central to the picture a solitary, dark tree whose highest branch stands towering

⁵⁰ Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*, 36

above the surrounding landscape. Because of perspective, the peaks of the mountains behind seem to rise to heights just below that of the tree's highest point, creating an implied symmetry that could only naturally be viewed from a very specific perspective, one controlled by the artist, or rather created by artist for the viewer. The ordering of the natural world through such intentional placement creates a sense of unnatural conflict.

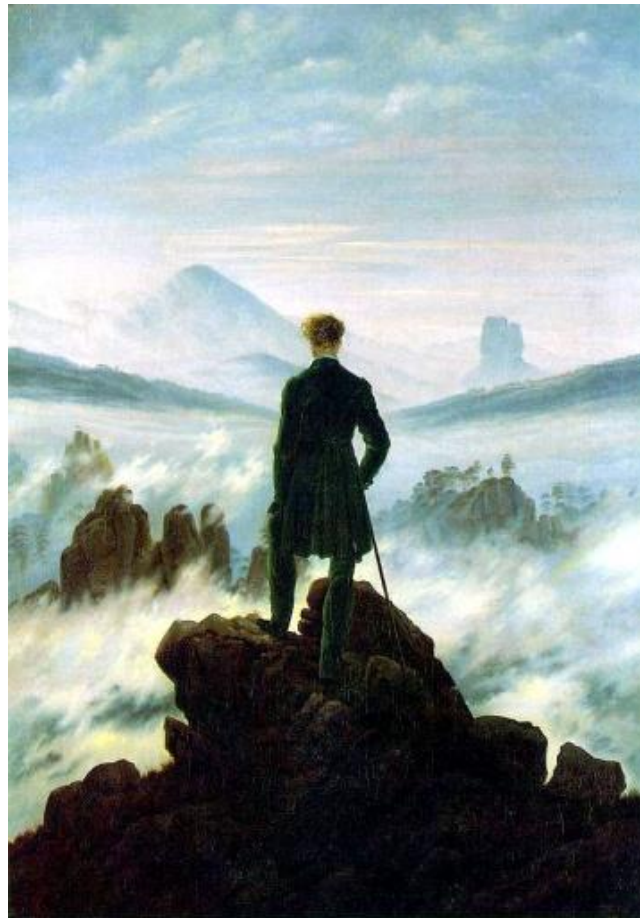


Figure.2. Friedrich, Caspar David. *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*. 1818. Kunsthalle, Hamburg. caspardavidfriedrich.org. March 2013

Another tool often employed by Friedrich to achieve a sense of heightened subjectivity is that of the *Rückenfigur*, a silent, unmoving individual, or group of

individuals, most often turned away from viewer.⁵¹ This *Rückenfigur*, often thought of as the halted or paused traveler, appears to take in the scene the artist has offered the viewer, and in the case of Frederick's work he or she acts to both contemplate the scene at hand and to obstruct or disrupt it. Arguably the most famous example of Friedrich's use of the *Rückenfigur* is his *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (Fig. 2). Although the individual depicted in *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* is thought to have been identified, the identity of the figure is secondary to his place as central, contemplative figure standing alone between the viewer and the sublime experience of nature. Like the lone tree, this dark figure is positioned in the center of a nearly symmetrical composition, his height rising above all but the highest mountain peak that he observes. Aside from the allegorical meanings that might be suggested by this hierarchical placement, Friedrich's most well-known *Rückenfigur* would, himself, appear to be the subject of the painting. Considering the figure's placement, however, and Friedrich's location of the experience of the sublime as entirely subjective, it may be more accurate to consider the figure's *experience* the subject of Friedrich's painting. Such an interpretation places the figure as an obstacle between the viewer and the potential experience of the landscape created in the scene, forcing a reconsideration of both the figure and the landscape.

Friedrich's *Rückenfiguren* have come to identify a large portion of his work and have been the subject of much study regarding their function within his landscapes, and their influence on contemporary concepts of spectatorship. In one such example, Kenneth Scott Calhoun's article, *F.W. Murnau, C.D. Friedrich, and the Conceit of the Absent Spectator*, considers the relationship between Friedrich's silent observers and the 20th

⁵¹ Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*, 35.

century cinematic concept of the absent spectator, a concept summed up succinctly by Christian Metz: "The film is not exhibitionist, it knows I am watching it, but it doesn't watch me watching it. Nevertheless, it knows I am watching it. But it does not want to know."⁵² Drawing on this observation, Calhoon compares several of the figures in Friedrich's works with scenes from the 1922 film *Nosferatu*, directed by F.W. Murnau. In comparison with the approach of Murnau, Calhoon recalls another scholar's particularly apt description of Friedrich's *Rückenfiguren*:

[They appear] "frozen in contemplation, their stillness a mark of immense interiority." We underscore the word "frozen" and perceive in this "immense interiority" an emotional void—one that seeks out its echo in land- and seascapes that guarantee isolation.⁵³

If Friedrich's *Rückenfiguren* signal an "immense interiority," their function as such, and their placement, also draws attention to the necessity of the viewer him- or herself. Like a mirror projecting backwards, the *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* echoes back the idea that without the artist's ordering of his world, and the viewer's gaze peering inward on this world, the experience ceases to exist. This process of gaze reflecting gaze, in turn, makes obvious the vast difference between the experience of landscape painted—or imagined—and the experience of nature itself.

⁵² Calhoon, Kenneth S. "FW Murnau, CD Friedrich, and the Conceit of the Absent Spectator." *MLN German Issue* 120.3 (2005): 633-53. *JSTOR*. March 16, 2013. 365.

⁵³ Calhoon, FW Murnau, CD Friedrich, and the Conceit, 648.

The Spectator in the Ruins

Through his paintings and drawings, throughout his career, Caspar David Friedrich approached a number of subjects including landscapes, figures within nature, allegorical narrative, architecture, and the ruins of architecture. Many of the elements that might contribute to a sense of heightened subjectivity in the experience of Friedrich's paintings can be found throughout the artist's body of work; central, symmetrical compositions, for example, or an implied sense of hierarchy created the careful placement of the canvas's elements. His *Rückenfiguren* can also commonly be found, although, it should be noted, they are not necessarily always present. However, a careful look through Friedrich's work does yield at least one curiosity regarding his silent spectators. They appear to be absent—or at least completely re-contextualized—in relation to the majority of his images of ruins.

Ruins do not account for the majority of his subject choices, yet Friedrich's paintings of ruins might be considered as well-known as his landscapes, and his *Rückenfiguren*. The artist is famously known for frequenting ruins, particularly the remains of Eldena Abbey, and for incorporating his experiences of the place into his paintings.⁵⁴ His connection to this particular ruin is made obvious by a work he created early in his career, a work now lost except for its description. Helmut Börsch-Supan describes the drawing in his article, *Caspar David Friedrich's Landscapes with Self-Portraits*:

⁵⁴ Börsch-Supan, Helmut. "Caspar David Friedrich's Landscapes with Self-Portraits." *The Burlington Magazine* Sep. 114.834 (1972): 620-30. Print. 623.

Friedrich's first use of a landscape composition to refer to his own destiny occurred in a large sepia drawing of 1803 or 1804 entitled *My Burial* and known only from written accounts. It contains no self-portrait; only the words: '*Hier ruht n Gott C. D. Friedrich*' are inscribed on a cross on a grave. Mourners, one of whom is a priest, stand round the open grave. Five butterflies, souls of relatives of the painter who had died before 1804, fly heavenwards. In the background appear the ruins of a Gothic church, probably the monastery church of Eldena near Greifswald that figures so often in Friedrich's work. A rainbow in the sky symbolizes peace.⁵⁵

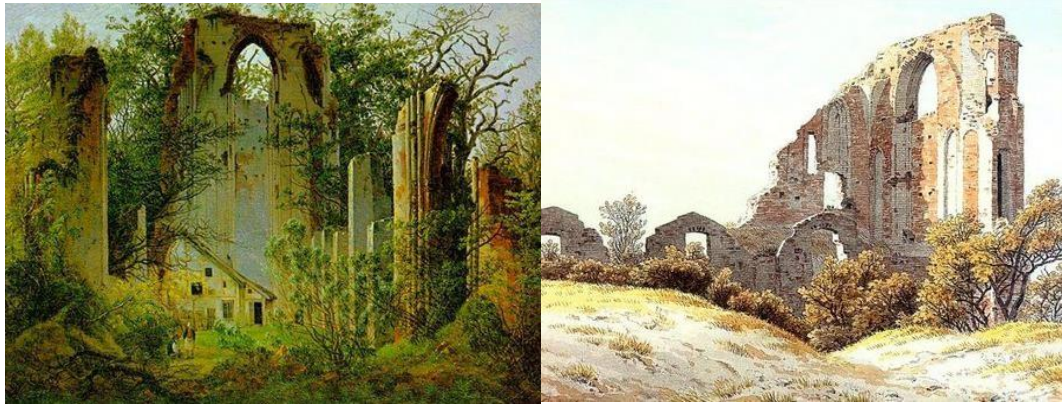


Figure.3. (left) Friedrich, Caspar David. *Eldena Ruins*. 1825. National Gallery, Berlin. caspardavidfriedrich.org. March 2013

Figure 4. (right) Friedrich, Caspar David. *The Ruins of Eldena*. 1825. caspardavidfriedrich.org. March 2013

Friedrich painted Eldena Abbey again in 1825, in two very distinct works (Figs. 3 and 4). In one rendition, *The Ruins of Eldena* (Fig. 4), Friedrich shows the decaying abbey in an essentially straight-forward way, breaking away from his common central composition in favor of what seems to be a more objective view. In his second version, *Eldena Ruins* (Fig. 3), the familiar arch of the ruin rises at the picture's center, nearly

⁵⁵ Börsch-Supan, *Caspar David Friedrich's Landscapes*, 623.

reaching the top edge of the composition. The ruins, overgrown by the wilderness that appears to surround them, seem to tower over what looks to be a second, more modern and more modest structure. Although closer inspection reveals two small figures in front of this second structure, these tiny crouching figures seem to represent an entirely different kind of presence than Friedrich's classic *Rückenfiguren*. If any comparisons can be drawn it is only that they are still. They do not obstruct our view of the scene, or even intrude significantly upon it, nor does what we are given of their posture necessarily suggest contemplation, although their presence could be said to add a certain quality to our experience of the ruin. Yet, the central composition of Eldena's towering arch does seem to confront the viewer in a way similar to that of the *The Solitary Tree*. To apply Koerner's description, *Eldena Ruins* does still seem to contain a sense of "heightened subjectivity," an effect that is influenced greatly by Friedrich's compositional choices, but which is also quite often accompanied by the familiar silent spectator within the picture.



Figure.5. Friedrich, Caspar David. *The Abbey in the Oakwood*. 1809-10. National Gallery, Berlin. wikipedia.org. March 2019



Figure. 6. Friedrich, Caspar David. *Monk by the Sea*. 1809. wikipedia.org. March 2019

What might be otherwise assumed to be the product of normal progression over the course of an artist's work takes on a different significance when other examples are considered. Another of Friedrich's well-known paintings of ruins, *The Abbey in the Oakwood* (Fig. 5)—especially when considered alongside its pendant piece, *Monk by the Sea* (Fig.6)—adds perspective to the question of the missing silent spectator. *The Abbey in the Oakwood* depicts a procession of monks "[filing] past an open grave stationed at the centre of the picture's lower frame edge...This grave is meant as the artist's."⁵⁶ As Börsch-Supan further explains, an understanding of *Abbey* is contingent upon the knowledge of Friedrich's first vision of his own burial, now lost:

⁵⁶ Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*, 81.

Knowledge of the lost sepia drawing *My burial* is essential to a correct understanding of the *Abbey in the Oakwood of 1809*. The painting depicts monks bearing a coffin past an open grave in the foreground, through the portal of a ruined church—once again the west front of the monastery church of Eldena—to a cross flanked by two torches.⁵⁷

Again, as with *Eldena Ruins*, *Abbey* is populated by the tiny, bent figures of the monks as they move toward the center of picture, and as with *Eldena Ruins*, they are not spectators, but participants in a scene which Friedrich offers to the viewer. The composition of this scene is familiar, with its central arch, however the nebulous haze that blurs ground with sky, obscuring the horizon, makes the space in which this scene exists seem even more unnatural than many of Friedrich's other works. Furthermore, the lack of an actual *Rückenfigur* might not read as significantly if *Abbey in the Oakwood* were not paired with another of Friedrich's masterpieces, *Monk by the Sea*.

Thought to be representative of Friedrich himself, *Monk by the Sea* depicts a solitary monk peering out into the abyss of ocean and sky.⁵⁸ We see him from behind, and though his placement diverges from center, and he is dwarfed by his environment, his situation—alone as the observer of a stormy seascape—places him in the role of a spectator interceding between the viewer and the landscape. When considered as a pair these two images can be read in dialogue with each other, but if the silent spectator can be located in

⁵⁷ Börsch-Supan, *Caspar David Friedrich's Landscapes*, 623.

⁵⁸ Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*, 81.

Monk, where might the spectator's view be found in *Abbey*, and what might the implications be of this shifting gaze?

Consideration of Friedrich's ruins by scholars is limited, confined mostly to the extension of understandings already reached about the artist's use of allegory to convey his views of human spirituality. A certain devotion to the divine through nature, and a mistrust of the established institution of the Roman Catholic church, can be found in his juxtaposition of crumbling abbeys with natural growth. In his book, *Romanticism*, Hugh Honour discusses one possible interpretation of Friedrich's ruins:

Paintings of Gothic churches often bring the organic simile to mind, but with inferences of a diversity of characteristic of Romantic symbolism. Caspar David Friedrich seems to have contrasted the (to him) dead Catholic faith of ruined monasteries with the living nature of religion...represented by the trees growing round them, with branches echoing Gothic arches.⁵⁹

If Friedrich's ruins are to be viewed simply as manifestations of the artist's struggle with faith in the established sense, what is to be made of the curious absence of his familiar *Rückenfiguren*, and of Friedrich's association of his own death with ruins in his depictions of Eldena Abbey?

If an answer may be found, it might be located in another observation made by Hugh Honour as he considers Caspar David Friedrich's ongoing personal inquiry into the role of art itself:

⁵⁹ Honour, Hugh. *Romanticism*. New York: Harper & Row, 1979. Print. 158.

Friedrich was concerned to express in paint thoughts and emotions which could not be put into words. He was essentially a painter and his gradual retreat into himself and his own world of visual forms was perhaps the inevitable result of his inability to communicate in any other way. What he himself...said of another artist's works applies perfectly to his own: 'Just as the pious man prays without speaking a word and the Almighty hearkens unto him, so the artist with true feelings *paints* and the sensitive man understands and recognizes it.'⁶⁰

Honour continues, observing that in Friedrich's work can be seen the traces of an artist "grappling with the problem of art and reality," and to point to Friedrich's own assertion that "Art is mediator between nature and mankind."⁶¹

Friedrich is known to history—and to his contemporaries—as a dedicated, often severe, and solitary artist. It is known that he chose to associate himself directly with monkhood in his canvases, and speculated that the clothing in which he depicted himself in his 1810 self portrait, and a number of other portraits, was intended to bring to mind the garbs of a religious devotee.⁶² Compared to other artists of his time, his studio practices were also austere and unorthodox. In contrast to the "usual riot that traditionally pervades an artist's atelier: the stacks of paintings, drawings and prints in various states of finish: the skulls, plaster casts..." Friedrich meticulously divided his work space into two rooms: one

⁶⁰ Honour, Hugh. *Romanticism*. New York: Harper & Row, 1979. Print. 76.

⁶¹ Honour, Hugh. *Romanticism*. New York: Harper & Row, 1979. Print. 82.

⁶² Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*, 88.

for storing his necessary supplies, and another, totally bare space in which he painted.⁶³ This regimented division of his space, depicted by Georg Friedrich Kersting (Fig. 7), is explained by Friedrich's contemporary, the painter, Wilhelm von Kügelgen; "Even the necessary paint box with its bottles and paint rags was banished to the next room, for Friedrich felt that all extraneous objects disturbed his inner pictorial world."⁶⁴

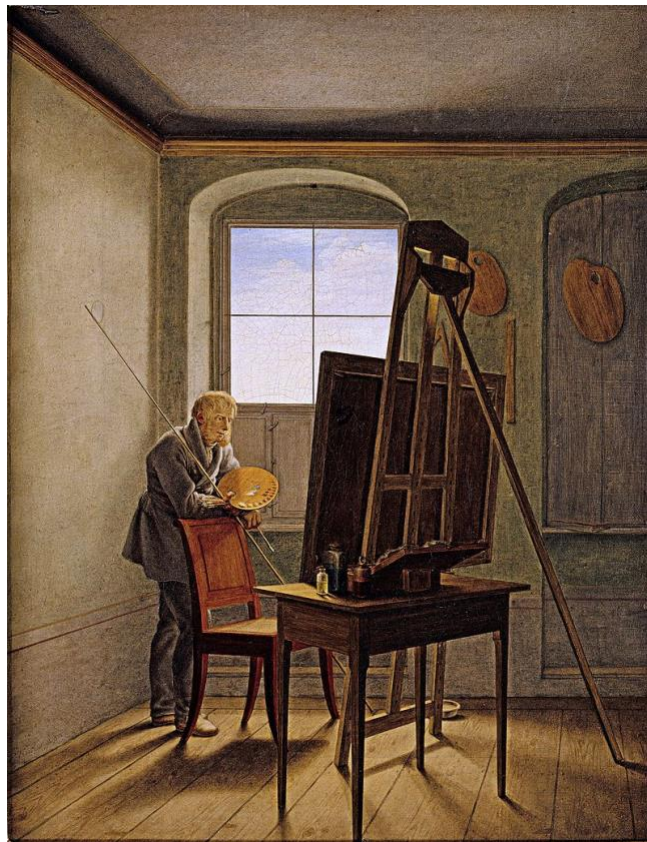


Figure 7. Kersting, Georg Friedrich. *Caspar David Friedrich in his Studio*. c. 1812. National Gallery, Berlin.

⁶³ Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*, 220.

⁶⁴ Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*, 222.

It is not difficult to imagine Friedrich, with his sense of deep interiority and deliberate adherence to a certain austerity, as a picture of the artist as pious devotee, perhaps in this case, of God's living church—nature—standing alone gazing out on the sublime.

Such a picture is particularly compelling in relation to the scenes Friedrich presents with *Abbey in the Oakwood* and *Monk by the Sea*. If, as Börsch-Supan posits, the funeral procession taking place in *Abbey* can be read as Friedrich's own, and if, as Hugh Honour speculates, Friedrich often chooses to contrast the decaying ruins of Eldena Abbey with the true, living religion of nature, it is possible, even with consideration to the season of the scenes, to read the ruins depicted within *Abbey* and *Monk* as representations of humanity's failed attempt to construct an understanding of the divine, and as the painter's ultimately doomed attempt to apprehend the spirit of nature through the limits of earthly artistic ambition. Through this reading, the spectator's disappearance might speak of the failings of humanity to truly understand anything that can only observe through the senses. Always the view is obstructed by the limitations of perception, smallness, and mortality, in comparison with all that is possible just beyond reach.

It is tempting to pause and accept as final the conclusions offered by this reading, but the previously discussed methods employed throughout Friedrich's work invite the viewer to consider the matter further. While his work makes a case for the futility of human ambition toward comprehension of the divine or nature through the senses, another possibility might be located in the relationship between the contemplative lens of Friedrich's silent spectators—his *Rückenfiguren*—and the implied consciousness of his paintings' viewer. Indeed, even when his figures are absent from his composition, the already established reliance on heightened subjectivity in Friedrich's compositions

continues to invite his audience to consider his scenes as meditations on the act of *viewing* rather than as depictions of pastoral or sublime landscape. Considered in this way, the disappearance of Friedrich's silent spectator in the case of *Abbey in the Oakwood* may indeed refer the viewer to the futility of creative ambition as a means of true comprehension of nature or the divine. However, it may do so while simultaneously asking the viewer to contemplate the inherent value of individual inquiry into these concepts, and to consider the implications of such representations. Through such a reading, *Abbey in the Oakwood* acknowledges the painter's awareness of human limitations, while asking the viewer, posthumously, to consider the value of the creative endeavor even in the face of certain failure.

The unique vision and sense of intensity Caspar David Friedrich brought to his canvases calls for inquiry into the elements, figures, and objects he chose to represent. The evidence presented by the body of work Friedrich left behind suggests that in his depictions of ruins might be found some of the most personal of his meditations on the medium he chose to devote himself to throughout his life. Furthermore, the absence or reconsideration of one of his most commonly included elements, the silent spectator, before the ruins often found in his paintings demands further investigation into Friedrich's understanding and employment of the element of spectatorship. Much could be learned from a deepened understanding of both Caspar David Friedrich's artistic use of gaze, and his relationship to the ruins he so dearly loved.

PART II. MORALITY, THE AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE, AND THE SUBLIME IN THE ENGLISH PATIENT

Introduction

In the broadest sense Michael Ondaatje's novel, *The English Patient*, is a story about the intersection of personal and cultural significances. The work investigates, on a private, national, and global level, the process by which meaning is created, and through which identities are defined, taking into consideration the impact of both the historical and the mythological. Ondaatje presents the reader with a collection of characters who find themselves unified by a shared state of near-ruin, and simultaneously isolated by individual attempts to come to terms with shattered perceptions of the significance of life. Interwoven throughout the unfolding narratives of these characters are endeavors by each to grapple with the concepts of identity, meaning, morality, and beauty to redefine the boundaries of self in relation to an often ambiguous other.

While the work has been described by some as morally gray, or even, in some cases, totally immoral, the constantly fluctuating and unstable concepts of identity and humanity presented by Ondaatje seem to demand more careful consideration of the concept of morality, and, ultimately, to suggest that the significance of the human experience cannot be found in moral judgment alone.⁶⁵ The novel addresses a different kind of significance, one that can instead be located in the experience of the aesthetic, the pursuit of which either concerns or consumes all of the novel's characters to some degree. It is in the aesthetic

⁶⁵ Jollimore, Troy A., and Sharon Barrios. "Beauty, Evil, and The English Patient."

Philosophy and Literature, vol. 28, no. 1, 2004. 23-24.

experience, a space free of the need—or, perhaps, even the possibility—of moral judgment, that Ondaatje sites a possible bridge between the contradictions created by personal and national identity, and locates one potential source of the significance of the human experience.

Morality and the Aesthetic Experience

The question of morality, or the essential "rightness" or "wrongness," that might be found at the center of any human action or thought, can be found running alongside the novel's meandering and abstract search for meaning. As the English patient, Count Laszlo de Almásy, recounts his experiences and subtly defends his choices, those surrounding him attempt to draw conclusions about the justifications for his actions. Likewise, the attempt to locate a guiding foundation for individual choice accompanies each of the other characters' accounts of his or her past. However, the central nature of the moral question within *The English Patient* does not define it as a necessarily moral work.

As Troy Jollimore and Sharon Barrios observe in their article, "Beauty, Evil, and *The English Patient*," the often ambiguous conclusions drawn by the work's author have given rise to a fair amount of criticism: "*The English Patient* is not universally acknowledged to be a suitable example of a morally insightful and instructive work. Indeed, both the novel and the 1996 film version of the novel have been the target of severe moral criticism."⁶⁶ Most common among these criticisms are that both iterations seek to create a heroic figure from an individual who, through his sense of impassioned devotion, chooses to aid an inherently evil cause—in this case that of Nazi Germany—as a means of

⁶⁶ Jollimore and Barrios, *Beauty, Evil, and The English Patient*, 25.

attaining a purely personal goal. Furthermore, these criticisms allege that the novel "seems to endorse Almásy's action, by depicting him as an attractive and admirable character."⁶⁷

Other such criticisms center around Michael Ondaatje's portrayal of the relatively obscure, real-life Almásy, a pilot, desert explorer, and alleged Nazi sympathizer, who—critics assert—has become unjustly associated with the questionable actions of his fictional counterpart. Also addressed by this criticism is the allegation that throughout his body of work Ondaatje ducks his responsibility as an immigrant to speak on behalf of his cultural and ethnic inheritance. Matthew Bolton elaborates on this concern in his article "Michael Ondaatje's Well-Told Lie;"

Discussions of Ondaatje's corpus have often revolved around his national and cultural position as a Canadian immigrant and Sri Lankan expatriate and his Dutch and Tamil ethnic background. Many readers argue simultaneously that Ondaatje ignores his duty to speak for his homeland...⁶⁸

The suggestion that either Ondaatje's literary decisions, or those of his characters, might represent positions that could be considered inherently immoral poses a series of important questions about the grounds for defining immorality, and the potential for and responsibility of a literary work to possess or convey such a definition. In much the same way, such criticism also demands the examination of the relationship between the concept of beauty—of attractiveness and admirability—and inherent goodness or rightness. The

⁶⁷ Jollimore and Barrios, *Beauty, Evil, and The English Patient*, 27.

⁶⁸ Bolton, Matthew. "Michael Ondaatje's 'Well-Told Lie.'" *Prose Studies*, vol. 30, no. 3, 2008. 221.

apparent contradiction in the assumption that a work cannot represent something as simultaneously beautiful and also immoral is taken up by Jollimore and Barrios, on behalf of *The English Patient*. Their analysis suggests of the novel that it is

[The] story of an individual who is both beautiful and evil. By inviting us to read it in this way, the work urges us to examine and potentially revise not only our interpretive practices but our views about morality as well. In extending this invitation, *The English Patient* critiques its critics, by critiquing the simplistic and indeed naïve assumptions regarding the connection between beauty and evil on which their interpretive practices rest.⁶⁹

Almásy's thoughts and choices are thus the result of a complex web of factors that cannot easily or clearly be labeled as inherently valuable on the grounds of their morality. Likewise, the fictional Almásy's decisions, as well as the literary choices of Ondaatje, exist as representations of this complexity, neither acting as declarations about morality, nor advocating for the fundamental rightness of that which is experienced as beautiful.

This complexity is easily located within the pages of *The English Patient*. Throughout the narrative, experiences of the beautiful are found, almost without exception, to be inextricably interwoven with choices that, in a general sense, might be thought of as immoral. As Almásy's fractured memories surface throughout the novel and he recounts his affair with the recently married Katherine Clifton, his recollections of both Katherine's beauty and of the beauty he experiences in the African desert are relived alongside the unfolding of unquestionably traumatic experiences. Even after this affair has led to the death of Katherine's husband in the attempted murder-suicide of the three, Almásy asserts,

⁶⁹ Jollimore and Barrios, *Beauty, Evil, and The English Patient*, 39.

[It] was her beauty he did not want to lose, the grace of her, these limbs. He knew he already had her nature tight in his fist. She was a woman who translated her face when she put on makeup. Entering a party, climbing into a bed, she had painted on blood lipstick, a smear of vermilion over each eye. He looked up to the one cave painting and stole the colours from it... There were traditions he had discovered in Herodotus in which old warriors celebrated their loved ones by locating and holding them in whatever world made them eternal—a colorful fluid, a song, a rock drawing.⁷⁰

Likewise, in a moment of foreshadowing, Katherine reads from Almásy's Herodotus the story of a king whose murder is ultimately the result of his own obsession with his wife's beauty.⁷¹ The sapper, Kip, recounts with significance his experiences dismantling bombs for the military of a country he is eventually forced to reject, experiences that for him take on an undeniably balanced and aesthetic quality. Caravaggio remembers observing the beauty of a scene, and of the woman within it, as he attempts to steal back the evidence of his spying:

He opens the window and steps out onto the verandah. A dark, beautiful night. Then he climbs off it and swings onto the verandah below. Only now can he enter the room with Anna and her general. Nothing more than a perfume in their midst. Printless foot. Shadowless. The story he told someone's child years ago about the

⁷⁰ Ondaatje, Michael. *The English Patient*. Vintage International, 1993. 248.

⁷¹ Ondaatje, Michael. *The English Patient*. Vintage International, 1993. 234.

person who searched for his shadow—as he is now looking for this image of himself on a piece of film.⁷²

So prevalent are they, that it might be said that the recounted aesthetic experiences in these examples are *dependent* on the moral risks being taken. This interpretation is certainly in agreement with the arguments of Jollimore and Bairos:

The people who instantiate the sort of aesthetic virtues we have focused on...might be expected to be considerably more prone to commit evil than people who are more conventional, more timid, less obsessive, or less passionate. This hypothesis, if true, would presumably help explain the distrust many people feel toward artists, and toward art. It would also help account for the feeling that artistic accomplishment is often if not always the result of taking a risk—a serious, moral risk, that is, not just an aesthetic one.⁷³

While it might address some complicated issues that concern the audience/artist (or author) relationship, such an interpretation does notably deviate from the epistemological conclusions of Immanuel Kant, whose 18th century treatise on aesthetic judgment might still arguably be considered an authority on the subject. Although Kant's *Critique of Judgement* plays a notable role in his epistemological system, one that places the aesthetic experience within the framework of establishing the faculties of both reason and moral judgement, for Kant, in order to qualify as a true judgement of beauty, the aesthetic

⁷² Ondaatje, Michael. *The English Patient*. Vintage International, 1993. 32.

⁷³ Jollimore and Barrios, *Beauty, Evil, and The English Patient*, 39.

experience itself must be *without* purpose, either moral or practical.⁷⁴ By definition it is purposeless—or disinterested—and the introduction of a particular aim, justification, or cultural bias removes the experience from the realm of the purely aesthetic and renders the resulting experience a product of personal taste.⁷⁵ In contrast to moral concerns, which have the practical intent of creating rules about the "rightness" or "wrongness" of a given act, the aesthetic exists purely for the purpose of experiencing the beautiful *as if* the experience were, itself, universal.

Besides providing an alternative interpretive lens to view what might otherwise be seen as a contradiction between immorality and the beautiful—or attractiveness and evil—the relatively traditional philosophy of the aesthetic experience as purposeless may offer additional insight into the novel's exploration of these ideas as they relate to personal and national identity. As is discussed in Part I. of this project, the Kantian paradox, or the "subjective universal," establishes Kant's insistence on the entirely subjective *and* universal nature of experiences of the beautiful and the sublime. By his account, aesthetic experiences are fully dependent on individual perception, and theoretically universal precisely *because* they are not motivated by cultural or social aims. As Fiona Hughes has observed, a certain tension is created by this paradox, but it is one that offers a unique

⁷⁴ Hughes, Fiona. *Kant's Aesthetic Epistemology: Form and World*. 1st ed., Edinburgh University Press, 2007. 38.

⁷⁵ Hughes, *Kant's Aesthetic Epistemology*, 41.

method for understanding the relationship of self to other, or, as she states, that “marks out a sociability that does not dissolve the autonomy of the subject.”⁷⁶

Such a reading of the *The English Patient* is intriguing, and is, in fact, already present in some recent scholarly approaches to Ondaatje’s work. For example, in his 2014 article, “Reclaiming the Past: Michael Ondaatje and the Body of History,” Christopher McVey examines the connection between body, history, and nation in *The English Patient*. In a notable comparison between the novel’s main character, Almásy, who through his trauma and injuries has become “denationalized and deracialized,” and Michael Ondaatje’s classification of himself as “a mongrel of place. Of race. Of culture. Of many genres,” McVey observes that

Both observations mobilize bodily metaphors of monstrosity to describe an unstable relationship between the sovereign self and the larger communities of citizenship in which that self is enmeshed.⁷⁷

Indeed, to become denationalized and deracialized is the self-confessed desire of Almásy, and, one might argue, it is this desire that Almásy uses to justify many of his decisions. Interestingly, this desire to obtain this anonymity is interwoven with his love of the desert’s beauty:

⁷⁶ Hughes, *Kant’s Aesthetic Epistemology*, 41.

⁷⁷ McVey, Christopher. “Reclaiming the Past: Michael Ondaatje and the Body of History.” *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 37, no. 2, Winter 2014, *JSTOR*. February 2018. 141

All of us, even those with European homes and children in the distance, wished to remove the clothing of our countries. It was a place of faith. We disappeared into landscape. Fire and sand. We left the harbours of oasis. The places water came to and touched...*Ain, Bir, Wadi, Foggara, Khottara, Shaduf*. I didn't want my name against such beautiful names. Erase the family name! Erase nations!⁷⁸

Considered in the context of the previously discussed moral criticisms, such a desire does imply an abandonment of the responsibility of group identity. When read alongside the value of the aesthetic experience, with its potential to mediate between the sovereignty of self and the inevitability of entanglement with others, a case emerges for the potentially mediating role of the aesthetic experience between the individual and the process of erasing borders. Here, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's assertion that "globalization can never happen to the sensory equipment of the experiencing being" once again becomes relevant.⁷⁹ Where cultures and identities must merge, or are forced to merge through rapid advancement, the human sensory experience cannot be dissolved into the concept of national or global identity.

If Ondaatje has made an effective example of Almásy, he has perhaps reserved his closing use of Hana to drive home this essential point. In the final chapter of *The English Patient*, in a letter to her stepmother at home in Canada, Hana writes,

⁷⁸ Ondaatje, Michael. *The English Patient*. Vintage International, 1993.139.

⁷⁹ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*. Harvard University Press, 2012. 2.

Maman is a French word, Clara, a circular word, suggesting cuddles, a personal word that can be even shouted in public. Something as comforting and eternal as a barge. Though you, in spirit, I know are still a canoe. Can swerve one around and enter a creek in seconds. Still independent. Still private. Not a barge responsible for all around you...I know the month and the day. One day after we heard the bombs were dropped in Japan, so it feels like the end of the world. From now on I believe the personal will forever be at war with the public.⁸⁰

Hana's words put voice to a pressing question about the value of individual sovereignty in the face of borders disappearing as the result of an action that has decidedly global consequences—which, indeed, redefines in an instant the meaning of individual and national identity. She concludes, “If we can justify this, we can justify anything.” Within the complex web of self and other woven by Ondaatje, *The English Patient* explores the potential role of aesthetic experience to provide answers to this question.

The Sublime: “In near-ruins”

Although there is much to be gained generally from an aesthetic reading of Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*, especially as such a reading relates to self and other, the work is equally open to another, more specific reading in light of a particular piece of the Kantian aesthetic theory, that of the *sublime*. In contrast to the experience of beauty—or the purely aesthetic experience—which produces in the viewer feelings of harmony, Kant defines an encounter with the sublime as being wholly overwhelming to the senses. When faced with what appears to be absolutely great, infinite, or boundless a sense of displeasure

⁸⁰ Ondaatje, Michael. *The English Patient*. Vintage International, 1993. 292.

is experienced as a result of initial cognitive failure. This disharmony only turns to pleasure when we recognize within ourselves a cognitive capacity to assimilate such an experience through reason, and, in turn, locate our own internal experience as the object of the sublime.

A connection is easily found between the imagery brought to mind by Kant's sublime experience and that used by Ondaatje within *The English Patient*. Almásy's desert, which made anonymity seem so desirable to him, is vast, ever-shifting, and boundless. The pleasure he takes results from its ability to disrupt the orderliness of civilization, or, more specifically, to resist the tendency of civilization to fix a place or individual with a specific identity or name:

The desert could not be claimed or owned—it was a piece of cloth carried by winds, never held down by stones, and given a hundred shifting names long before Canterbury existed, long before battles and treaties quilted Europe and the East.⁸¹

This tension between anonymity and assimilation, and the pleasure taken from it, may be much more akin to the felt experience of the sublime than to the purely harmonious experience of the beautiful. This disharmonious pleasure invites the reader to consider more closely the nature of beauty as it is experienced in the novel, and the relationship between those experiences and the concept of trauma. This question has been taken up by a number of scholars in relation to *The English Patient*. As he explores the body in the novel—in particular the body partially or totally ruined—Christopher McVey recognizes the description of trauma by Cathy Caruth:

⁸¹ Ondaatje, Michael. *The English Patient*. Vintage International, 1993. 138.

[Her] description [is] of traumatic experiences as those which cannot be assimilated, and so are continuously relived as a ‘double telling...between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival.’⁸²

Through this description, the reader is reminded of Almásy’s attempts to piece together and relate his story to the shell-shocked Hana and the maimed Caravaggio in the midst of the Italian Villa San Girolamo, which itself acts as a container, in “near-ruins,” for the story’s narrative. In fact, it could be said that all of the novel’s characters exist in this near-ruinous state, sometimes both emotionally and physically, as their stories unfold in World War II Italy. In the aftermath, near the close of the war, the artifacts of western civilization surround them, but in various states of destruction, some hidden away, recontextualized, and experienced as though dislocated from their histories. The sapper Kip’s viewing of the Sistine Chapel is brought to mind, in the “mostly dark hall” by the light of a military flare held aloft by one of his fellow soldiers:

They were under the huge vault. The sergeant lit a flare, and the sapper lay on the floor and looked up through the rifle’s telescope, looked at the ochre faces as if he were searching for a brother in the crowd. The cross hairs shook along the biblical figures, the light dousing the coloured vestments and flesh darkened by hundreds of years of oil and candle smoke. And now this yellow gas smoke, which they knew was outrageous in this sanctuary, so the soldiers would be thrown out, would be remembered for abusing the permission they received to see the Great Hall, which

⁸² McVey, *Reclaiming the Past*, 148

they had come to, wading up beachheads and the one thousand skirmishes of small wars and the bombing of Monte Cassino and then walking in hushed politeness through the Raphael Stanze till they were here...⁸³

In this and similar scenes a kind of dramatic tableau emerges, and the reader is confronted with the image of western civilization in a state of near-ruin, and with it humanity's ambition to comprehend and represent the human experience.

The scope of the personal and public implications of these scenes might well be thought of as unassimilable as Caruth has termed it, or beyond comprehension, producing the kind of cognitive failure described in Kant's sublime experience. It is perhaps even more important to note, however, that Ondaatje presents his reader with this and other similar scenes by dramatizing them, and filtering them through his characters' experiences aestheticized. Where they resist understanding in the historical context, their significance is brought back into a kind of harmony by the way they are experienced as beautiful by the novel's characters. Interestingly, Ondaatje does not seem to advocate for the primacy of this individual experience, however. Significance is drawn not in spite of but precisely *because of* the complications that emerge from the entanglement between the personal and the historical, the moral and the aesthetic. As such, Michael Ondaatje's novel might be read as a kind of testimony for what Fiona Hughes described in the Kantian paradox as "a sociability that does not dissolve the autonomy of the subject."⁸⁴

⁸³ Ondaatje, Michael. *The English Patient*. Vintage International, 1993. 77.

⁸⁴ Hughes, *Kant's Aesthetic Epistemology*, 41.

Conclusion

Read through a lens that seeks to understand its story morally or historically, *The English Patient*, and its author, might easily draw criticism. However, when equal significance is given to the aesthetic experience in the novel a new kind of understanding is possible. In this reading, Ondaatje has not created a space in which his characters' actions are meant to be put on trial, but through which each is given the opportunity to provide testimony regarding the value of his or her subjective experience of a narrative that will inevitably become history—both personal and public. It is in this space that Almásy ultimately declares

I do not believe I entered a cursed land, or that I was ensnared in a situation that was evil. Every place and person was a gift to me. Finding the rock paintings in the Cave of Swimmers. Singing "burdens" with Madox during expeditions. Katherine's appearance among us in the desert. The way I would walk towards her over the red polished concrete floor...⁸⁵

In this space, the reader is permitted to see without judgement and thus consider the implications of Almásy's testimony as an illustration of the inseparable relationship between beauty and morality, the self and other, history and the personal narrative, in coming to terms with the parts of the human experience that resist comprehension. *The English Patient*, its characters and story, and its author, all appear to similarly resist

⁸⁵ Ondaatje, Michael. *The English Patient*. Vintage International, 1993. 257.

theorization. Instead they ask the reader to consider what role the aesthetic experience might play in mediating the relationship between the individual, representation, and the construction of meaning where all other attempts at theorization fail.

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