

'The Work of Art is a Being of Sensation and Nothing Else' – Zones of Indetermination in Deleuze's Ontological Redefinition of Sensation

By tracing Deleuze's radical reshaping of the Kantian transcendental project, this paper seeks to address how the question of sensation works for Deleuze. What is at stake here is the question of a Deleuzian aesthetics and question of politics that goes before and beyond lived experience, undoing the triple organization of perceptions, affections and opinions in order to erect a monument composed of percepts, affects and blocs of sensation. This paper will begin with a consideration of how the aesthetic is working in the Transcendental Aesthetic of Kant's Critique of Pure Reason. The objective element of sensation, present in the first critique, will be read through the chapter 'The Image of Thought' in *Difference and Repetition*. Here, Deleuze mounts a critique of Kant for erecting a 'dogmatic image of thought', which rests on the postulates of recognition and common sense. Then turning to Kant's Critique of Judgment, this paper will consider Deleuze's reading of the Kantian (dynamic) sublime, where there is a pressure or tension between the faculties as they are pushed to their limit. An encounter with the sublime exceeds lived experience; through a violent encounter in which something is communicated from one faculty to another, a violence which, Kant writes, 'is the awakening of a feeling of a supersensible faculty within us.'¹ In a sublime encounter sensation exceeds the limits of the imagination as each faculty is forced to confront its limit. _ In the Kantian sublime Deleuze finds a transcendental, genetic principle of discord, which will overcome the postulates of common sense and recognition. Deleuze's reinvests his reading of the Kantian sublime in the concept of the sign. The sign is an intensity, it is a violent encounter that will constitute the condition of real experience beyond the postulates of recognition and common sense.

In the chapter 'Percept, Affect, Concept' of *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze and Guattari write that, 'The work of art is a *being* of sensation and nothing else.' This definition of the work of art as a *being* of sensation breaks with any kind of subject/ object philosophy and offers an ontological redefinition of sensation as being qua becoming. The work of art operates as a self-positing compound of percepts and affects. Percepts are no longer the perceptions of an object; affects are no longer the affections of a subject. It is the aim of art to wrest percepts from the perceptions of an object and affects from the affections of a subject in order to erect a monument composed of blocs of sensation. Deleuze writes that, 'what constitutes sensation is the becoming animal or plant, which wells up... or which suddenly emerges in the fusion, firing or casting of broken tones, like the zone of indiscernibility of beast and man.'² Sensory becoming, Deleuze continues, 'is the action by which something or someone is ceaselessly becoming-other...'³ The work of art is constituted as an exploration of these zones of indetermination in which the becoming affect of

¹ Coj para 25 p. 81 / 250

² WiP p. 179

³ WiP p. 177

affections and the becoming percept of perceptions exceed the confines of recognition and common sense in a process of continual becoming.

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In the chapter 'The Image of Thought' of *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze mounts a critique of Kant for erecting a 'dogmatic image of thought' that rests on the postulates of recognition and common sense. In the Critique of Pure Reason the faculties of imagination, understanding and reason enter into an accord under the legislation of the understanding. In the first Critique aesthetics designates a theory of sensibility in which the a priori forms of space and time operate as the conditions of possible experience. Sensibility designates the passive faculty through which we receive a manifold in intuition under the pure forms of space and time. In order to arrive at knowledge, the three active faculties of imagination, understanding and reason enter into a harmonious accord in order to produce the recognition of an object. The understanding legislates and judges, the imagination synthesizes and schematizes, and reason reasons and symbolizes. This harmony of the faculties, faculties which differ in nature yet, nevertheless enter into an accord, implies a common sense that grounds the harmony of the faculties and their agreement upon a supposed same object. In fact, Deleuze writes, Kant multiplies common senses. In Kant the relations between the faculties differ depending on the nature of that which is to be recognized. Thus across all three Critiques the faculties enter into diverse relations depending on whether it is an object of knowledge, moral value or aesthetic effect.

The identity of the self - the 'I think' of the universal thinking subject – grounds this harmony of the faculties as they work to produce recognition of the object in general. In the first edition of the Critique of Pure Reason, Kant elaborates on a three-fold synthesis that defines the respective roles of the faculties and which 'necessarily occurs in all cognition.'⁴ This threefold action begins with the synthesis of apprehension in intuition. Here all cognition is ordered and connected under the formal condition of inner sense, or time. The transcendental unity of apperception unites the manifold of intuition in a single consciousness. Kant writes that, it is the 'I think' that 'constitutes the transcendental basis for the possibility of all cognitions as such.'⁵ This act of apprehension is intimately linked to the synthesis of reproduction in the imagination which retains these previous intuitions for if, Kant writes, 'I were always to lose the preceding representations... from my thoughts and not reproduce them when I proceed to the following ones, then no whole representations... could ever arise.'⁶

The threefold synthesis that underlies all cognition in Kant culminates in the synthesis of recognition in the concept. All synthesis', Kant writes, 'through which even perception itself becomes possible, stands under the categories.'⁷ For what constitutes knowledge is not simply the act by which the manifold is synthesized, knowledge is constituted in the act by which the

⁴ CPR A98

⁵ CPR A102

⁶ CPR A102

⁷ CPR B162

represented manifold is related to an object. And for this manifold to be related to an object we must therefore have the concept of an object form in general. This object form in general, or object = x, is a postulate of recognition that underlies all cognition in Kant and serves as the first step towards a more general postulate of representation. In a formula coming from the first Critique, the recognition of an object, the object = x is the objective correlate of the 'I think.' Difference becomes an object of representation always in relation to an identity, opposition, analogy, or resemblance. 'The world of representation,' Deleuze writes, 'is characterized by an inability to conceive of difference in itself, and repetition for itself.'⁸ In the first Critique, sensation is subordinated to the categories of the understanding – all possible perception stands under categories and the form of recognition of the object in general. Common sense and recognition underlie all experience and in the first Critique sensation is bound within this construction.

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In the Critique of Judgment we find the subjective element of sensation expressed in the feeling of pleasure or pain. Here aesthetics designates a theory of art as a reflection on real experience. An aesthetic judgment is a feeling that arises from the manifestation of free play between the faculties, freed from the legislation of both the understanding and reason. Of the two possible modalities of aesthetic feeling Deleuze will invest in the Kantian notion of the (dynamic) sublime and identify within it the genetic conditions of real experience, which go beyond the postulates of recognition and common sense.

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The feeling of the sublime is experienced when faced with immensity or power – with the formless or deformed. In an encounter with the sublime, 'it is as if the imagination is confronted with its own limit, forced to strain to its utmost, experiencing a violence which stretches it to the extremity of its power.'⁹ When faced with a magnitude or immensity, reason demands that the imagination comprehends an infinitely large or powerful intuition – to 'unite the infinity of the sensible world into a whole.'¹⁰ Although the imagination can apprehend the parts in succession without difficulty, in an aesthetic estimation of an immensity or magnitude, imagination reaches its maximum when forced to comprehend it in a single intuition. It is with this simultaneous comprehension that imagination reaches its finite limit and 'in its fruitless efforts to extend this limit, recoils upon itself.'¹¹ Absolute immensity and power are Ideas of Reason, Ideas that can be thought but cannot be known or imagined. In an act of violence, Reason demands that the infinite be comprehended in a totality. In this moment of violence the Imagination is freed from the Understanding for it is no longer able to reflect upon the form of an object. In a paradoxical movement the imagination admits that its power is nothing in comparison to the rational Idea and finds itself freed from the understanding. The imagination enters into an accord with Reason, but a discordant accord. 'Reason and imagination,' Deleuze writes, 'accord with each other only

⁸ D+R

⁹ KCP 50

¹⁰ Genesis 63 – Infinity of sensible world – totality – Idea of reason

¹¹ KCP 50

within a tension, a contradiction, a painful laceration. There is an accord, but a discordant accord, a harmony in pain.¹²

In an encounter with the sublime, reason confronts the imagination with its sensible limit but conversely 'the imagination awakens reason as the faculty capable of thinking a supersensible substrate for the infinity of this sensible world.¹³' In attempting to comprehend the Ideas of reason, imagination reaches its limit and presents to itself, albeit negatively, the fact that the unrepresentable exists, and it exists in sensible nature. From the empirical point of view, this limit is inaccessible and unimaginable. But from the transcendental point of view, the imagination takes its own limit as its object; it is that which can only be imagined – that which is accessible *only* to the imagination.¹⁴ In an experience of the sublime each faculty is involuntarily pushed to its limit, giving rise, Kant writes, 'to a feeling of the supersensible faculty within us.'¹⁵ Elevated to its transcendent exercise each faculty grasps that which concerns it exclusively. The three-fold synthesis of apprehension, reproduction and recognition breaks down as the genetic conditions of experience emerge as the difference between the faculties. An experience of the sublime gives rise to a second kind of sensation that exceeds the limits of human experience. As Stephen Zepke puts it, 'in the sublime aesthetic comprehension exceeds the body as phenomenological measure, and so gives rise to a new type of aesthetic synthesis, an inhuman synthesis in a state of continual variation.'¹⁶ Zepke argues that 'it is precisely the ontological and political necessity of overcoming the human conditions of possible experience that places the sublime at the forefront of any 'Deleuzian' contemporary art.'¹⁷

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Citing Plato, Deleuze distinguishes between two kinds of things, those which do not disturb thought, and those which force us to think. The former are objects of recognition and have nothing to do with thinking. But the latter, those which force us to think, are objects, not of recognition, 'but of a fundamental *encounter*.'¹⁸ Deleuze locates this encounter, this sensation that forces us to think, in the Kantian sublime and will reinvest it in the context of the sign. The sign is an encounter that forces us to think outside the confines of recognition and common sense, it is a sensation that can only be felt and which renders the mind perplexed. The sign is an intensity - it cannot be grasped through cognition in the form of common sense and recognition, but can only be sensed from the point of view of a transcendental sensibility apprehends it immediately. Empirically the sign is unsensible, but transcendently the sign is that which can only be felt or sensed – it is that which is accessible only to the faculty of sensibility. Daniel Smith writes that, 'by taking the encountered sign as the primary element of sensation, Deleuze is pointing, *objectively, to a science of the sensible freed from the model of recognition and subjectively, to a use*

¹² Genesis p. 63

¹³ Genesis 63

¹⁴ Zepke p. 77

¹⁵ CoJ para 25

¹⁶ Zepke p. 78

¹⁷ Zepke p. 81

¹⁸ D+R p. 176

*of the faculties freed from the ideal of common sense.*¹⁹ Signs are sensations which are unsensible from the point of view of recognition and common sense, they can only be felt or sensed, and render the mind perplexed. And it is the world of art, Deleuze writes, that 'is the ultimate world of signs.'²⁰

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If the aim of art is to produce sensations then the principles of composition in the work of art will, at the same time, be the genetic principles of sensation; it will be the work of art which reveal the conditions of sensibility. Thus, works of art, as beings of sensation, are going to be an exploration of the transcendental realm of sensibility – the work of art as a pure being of thought. 'Sensation', Deleuze writes, 'has one face turned towards the subject... and one face turned toward the object. Or rather, it has no faces at all, being both things indissolubly...'²¹ The work of art wrests perceptions from the perceptions of an object and affects from the affections of a subject, erecting in its place the nonhuman landscapes of nature and the nonhuman becomings of man. As a self-positing compound of percepts and affects, a *being* of sensation whose validity lies in itself, the work of art is going to be an exploration of these zones of indetermination that go before and beyond lived experience.

In *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze writes that, 'The composite sensation, [art] made up of percepts and affects, deterritorializes the system of opinion that brought together dominant perceptions and affections with a natural, historical and social milieu.'²² For Deleuze it is always a question of 'freeing life wherever it is imprisoned', of shattering lived perceptions through sensations which exceed the lived. Once we begin to determine the conditions of real experience, Deleuze writes, the two senses of the aesthetic become one, to the point where the being of the sensible reveals itself in the work of art, while at the same time the work of art appears as experimentation.'²³ Art will become a creative enterprise and experimentation in thought, in a pure thought, which exceeds the confines of recognition and common sense. The work of art is going to be an exploration of these zones of indetermination, a support for the experimentation of thought that goes before and beyond lived experience. This is what's at stake in a politics of art, to go before and beyond lived experience and to undo the triple organization of perceptions, affections, and opinions, in order to substitute a monument composed of percepts, affects and blocs of sensation.

¹⁹ Daniel Smith p. 92

²⁰ Proust and Signs p. 9

²¹ Logic of sensation p. 34

²² What is Philosophy p. 197

²³ D+R p. 82

