

"BEAUTIFUL" AND "SUBLIME" BY I. KANT WITHIN EVERYDAY EXPERIENCE OF THE CITY

Background. This paper explores the relevance of Kantian aesthetics, specifically his concept of the sublime, in the context of contemporary urban experience in Ukraine, particularly amidst the ongoing war. It examines how modern aesthetics engage with Kant's ideas, with some rejecting the applicability of his notions on beauty, the sublime, and aesthetic judgment, while others affirm their importance for understanding contemporary urban experiences.

Methods. The study employs a comparative and analytical methodology, examining Kantian aesthetics in relation to contemporary aesthetic theories, particularly in everyday and urban contexts. It integrates philosophical analysis, historical contextualization, and theoretical classification, engaging with key thinkers such as Kant, Hegel, Dewey, Berleant, Saito, Leddy, and Kvokačka to explore shifts in aesthetic discourse and the relevance of Kantian categories in modern aesthetic experiences.

Results. The discussion highlights the contradiction inherent in the experience of the modern city, where the Kantian sublime—a concept traditionally associated with reflection and disinterested pleasure—can still be relevant, but often in a transformed or "negative" form. This is especially notable in the context of urban environments that are undergoing rapid changes due to technological advancements and social upheaval. The emergence of the "negative sublime" concept is explored as a way to describe the urban experience of modern city dwellers who, due to the chaos and overwhelming nature of their environment, may be unable to feel the traditional sense of the sublime. The author situates this discussion within the specific context of contemporary Ukrainian cities, where the ongoing war and the imposition of martial law dramatically shape daily life. The concept of the sublime is argued to be especially relevant in the analysis of grassroots commemorative practices, such as spontaneous memorials that emerge in response to war. These memorials, while ephemeral and often improvised, offer a form of aesthetic experience that resonates with Kant's notion of the sublime—emphasizing reflective judgment and negative pleasure as people engage with public spaces marked by loss and trauma.

Conclusions. Ultimately, the paper advocates for the continued use of the Kantian sublime in understanding the emotional and aesthetic impacts of the modern urban environment, particularly in the context of war and collective memory in Ukraine.

Keywords: Kantian aesthetics, The sublime, Aesthetic judgment, Urban experience, Negative sublime, Urban space.

Background

Today, Kant's aesthetic ideas continue to play a significant role in the development of aesthetic thought. Kant's key work on aesthetics, *Critique of Judgment* (1790), addresses many theoretical questions, focusing primarily on the analysis of two aesthetic categories that have become classics: the beautiful and the sublime. At first glance, these concepts might seem to have lost their relevance in the context of the expanding field of aesthetic studies, particularly as it incorporates the realm of the everyday and, specifically, the everyday experience of urban life. However, this perspective proves superficial, as both the beautiful and the sublime, along with Kant's ideas regarding these concepts, can and should be reinterpreted. Consequently, contemporary scholars such as Arnold Berleant, Christopher Dowling, Adrián Kvokačka, Thomas W. Leddy, Sanna Lehtinen, María José Alcaraz León, Katya Mandoki, Yuriko Saito, Scott R. Stroud, Christophe Den Tandt, and others are turning to Kant's aesthetic legacy.

Moreover, the primary aim of this article is to review the main arguments of representatives of contemporary everyday aesthetics and urban aesthetics regarding the relevance or irrelevance of Kant's insights into the concept of aesthetic experience in the city today. Based on this analysis, I seek to explore how these concepts can be applied to the study of modern mass commemorative practices in Ukrainian cities, as well as how the sense of the sublime might be transformed and reinterpreted within the context of urban experience during a time of war.

Methods

It is worth noting that Kant's ideas about the beautiful and the sublime, as phenomena primarily found in nature—"The beautiful in nature is a question of the form of the object, and it consists in limitation, whereas the sublime is

to be found in an object even devoid of form, so far as it immediately involves, or else by its presence evokes, a representation of limitlessness, yet with a super-added thought of its totality" (Kant, 2007, p. 75)—lost their influence after Lectures on Aesthetics by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who deemed nature aesthetically neutral (Hegel, 1988, p. 143). Since then, aesthetic discourse has largely revolved around questions of art (creativity, perception, genre specificity, etc.), with major 20th-century philosophical-aesthetic approaches—phenomenology, psychoanalysis, neo-Marxism, post-structuralism, and pragmatism—focused on art.

A prominent pragmatist, John Dewey, in his work *Art as Experience* (1934), laid out theses foundational to contemporary aesthetic inquiries (from the late 20th century till today) (Dewey, 1980; Stroud, 2021). Central to these discussions is the concept of "experience," bridging the Anglo-American pragmatist tradition and the Continental phenomenological approach (Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty). This has influenced the development of urban aesthetics as aesthetics of engagement (according to Arnold Berleant's approach), challenging the classical dichotomy between subject and object in sensory cognition—a division articulated most rigorously by Kant. Instead of maintaining principled detachment through sensory perception, the subject is seen as immersed in the environment, deriving diverse aesthetic experiences from it, which becomes the central object of study.

Thus, Kantian aesthetic ideas remain unavoidable in this discourse—they must either be built upon or critically opposed. Researcher Adrián Kvokačka categorizes contemporary everyday aesthetic theorists into two groups: those who critique Kant and those who adapt his concepts

to modern analysis. Arnold Berleant, for instance, belongs to the critics, particularly of Kant's notion of the disinterested aesthetic subject, arguing that such a subject cannot be engaged with the environment, especially one providing everyday experiences. Kvokačka includes Yuriko Saito in this group; she questions the relevance of Kant's subject to the aesthetic evaluation of ordinary, habitual things (e.g., household chores, daily work) (Kvokačka, 2023, p. 28–29).

Moving forward, I will explore two main directions of reflection on Kantian aesthetics: the relationship between the concepts of the beautiful and the agreeable within everyday aesthetics, and the notion of the sublime in contemporary urban experience. Ultimately, this will enable me to address the relevance of Kantian categories in the aesthetic investigation of the modern Ukrainian city—a city under martial law, where vernacular, artistic, and official commemorative practices are actively forming.

Modern everyday aesthetics faces the challenge of self-definition. For example, Naukkarinen questions the distinction between routine experiences and extraordinary ones (e.g., festivals, disasters) and analyzes art experiences as extraordinary (Naukkarinen, 2013). Traditionally, aesthetics equated with the extraordinary, implying that the everyday, habitual, and routine cannot be approached aesthetically. However, Thomas Leddy, in his article on the "cute," demonstrates how aesthetics can expand its scope by introducing new concepts (Leddy, 2012). For instance, we might evaluate a lawn near a house as "charming," which constitutes an aesthetic judgment beyond classical categories like the beautiful.

Leddy argues, "Kant provides resources for understanding everyday aesthetics which go beyond classification of the everyday within the domain of the agreeable, with corralling a realm of the everyday within the beautiful and the disinterested, or with identifying everyday aesthetics with dependent beauty" (Leddy, 2021, p. 356). He identifies varying densities of aesthetic categories—from the thinnest (such as the feeling of the agreeable) to thicker functional aesthetics and the densest aesthetic ideal—which are reinterpreted within everyday aesthetics (Ibid., p. 354). According to Leddy, everyday experiences can encompass not only Kant's agreeable feelings but also notions of disinterestedness. For instance, we might find beauty in the face of a passerby or the view from our window.

Moreover, Leddy believes Kant's "beautiful" is more relevant to contemporary everyday aesthetics than often acknowledged (2012, p. 27). Kant himself, when providing examples of free beauty, often references everyday elements like clothing, ornaments, interiors, gardens (especially the English style, closer to the untamed, thus freer and more natural), furniture, and more (Kant, 2007, p. 73). Leddy sees these observations as a bridge to the aesthetic evaluation of everyday experience: "Everyday aesthetics should not be limited to the agreeable, for many everyday objects may also be beautiful and may owe the pleasures they give in part to a play between imagination and understanding" (Leddy, 2012, p. 32).

Kvokačka notes that Leddy and Dowling belong to the group of researchers who fully apply Kant's ideas in their original form to contemporary approaches. However, Kvokačka himself argues that Kantian aesthetics requires reinterpretation to adapt to the present, emphasizing disinterestedness as a key condition for Kantian aesthetic judgment (Kvokačka, 2023, p. 32–34).

Kvokačka proposes viewing disinterestedness as a mode of aesthetic experience beyond the feelings of the beautiful and sublime, as these experiences are relatively rare in daily life. This approach allows for interpreting Kantian aesthetic judgment as a form of experience and, moreover, as an experience of engagement with the environment (Ibid., p. 35–37). He also highlights Kant's explanation of experiencing the beautiful as the free play of imagination and understanding as crucial for comprehending the aesthetic perception of everyday life: "Kant welcomes the tendency of the imagination towards inventing fantasies based on the perception of objects, since the 'beautiful views of objects' sustain the free play of imagination" and "...we should make recourse to Kant's concepts of mechanical art and agreeable arts or handicraft, which provide a much more appropriate conceptual tool for reflecting on the objects of everyday life" (Kvokačka, 2023, p. 39–40).

Results

An intriguing turn these reflections take when shifted to the experience of life in a war-torn city. The constant attacks by Russian drones and missiles, on the one hand, become a daily objective experience for Ukrainians, but can they be considered truly mundane? Does such an experience have an aesthetic component, based on Berleant's concept of negative aesthetics, as it involves not only feelings of fear, irritation, and depression but also unity, resilience, resistance, and endurance when this experience becomes shared and something greater than individual suffering?

These experiences gain even deeper meaning when projected onto the scale of the environment. María José Alcaraz León, a representative of environmental aesthetics, draws on Kant's aesthetics when exploring the aesthetic experience of landscapes, particularly damaged ones. She raises the question of whether it is possible to derive aesthetic pleasure (as disinterested) from observing a ruined landscape through the Kantian concept that suggests aesthetic experience reveals an *a priori* principle of nature's purposiveness, essential for understanding and knowing nature (León, 2013, p. 171). Ultimately, relying on Kant, she concludes: "...it is possible to describe positive judgments of damaged environments as judgments of free beauty even when the thought of their damaged condition enters the aesthetic experience" (Ibid., p. 174). The view of Ukrainian lands, scarred by craters from Russian missile strikes, evokes heavy feelings that are not devoid of an aesthetic component. Undoubtedly, this feeling cannot be called disinterested and thus cannot be an aesthetic pleasure in Kantian terms, as it encompasses pain for the land, which carries connotations of national identity and ecological concern. Yet this pain attains an aesthetic mode when viewed as part of an environment where humans are just a fraction of a much larger process. When one considers the subject as an observer of an environment that requires care and responsibility, this perspective acquires a new dimension of disinterest, appreciating the environment for its intrinsic value and purposelessness.

Another key issue within the framework of Kant's reception by contemporary everyday aesthetics is the rethinking of the category of the sublime within the experience of the modern city. Researchers Sanna Lehtinen, Brit Strandhagen, and Matti Tainio note that this concept can be highly useful for understanding the modern city and its transformations (Lehtinen, Strandhagen, & Tainio, 2023, p. 103).

For contemporary aestheticians, the sublime has value within the postmodernist reception of thinkers like Jean-François Lyotard and Fredric Jameson. Notably, Christophe Den Tandt, exploring the presence of the sublime in modern metropolitan and megacity contexts, observes: "Just as sublime landscapes hint at a divine presence in nature, cityscapes spark off epiphanies about multitudinous humanity" (Den Tandt, 2018, p. 4). The researcher suggests that the experience of the modern city can be studied similarly to the postmodernist approach to discourse analysis (text, writing, etc.), going beyond classical and modern modes of representation.

Moreover, postmodernist interpretations of the sublime (e.g., through the analysis of avant-garde art that denies the viewer traditional representation, such as mimesis) allow Berleant to arrive at the concept of the "negative sublime," or the fundamental inability to experience negative pleasure through reflective judgment according to Kant. Leddy notes: "For Berleant, the actual or true sublime is lost in our postmodern age. He questions whether magnitude without spiritual elevation, as found in an enormous theme park, could attain the true sublime. He also suggests that the concept of the sublime is interesting today because it compellingly captures the dominant perception of our lived world, a world in which the power of nature has been made insignificant by barely controlled but unbounded human power. Such an environment, he says, is sublime because it is unpresentable" (Leddy, 2012, p. 239).

Kant provided profound depth to the concept of the sublime, building on Edmund Burke's earlier explanation in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757). Burke described the sublime as a sense of aesthetic pleasure based on fear, horror, and awe, contrasting it with the beautiful. Kant defines the sublime as negative pleasure and reflective judgment, grounded in the strict relationship between imagination and reason. For Kant, the sublime bridges aesthetics and ethics, linking moral judgment and sensory experience through shared practical reason as a common tool.

According to Kant, the subject can experience the sublime when perceiving an immense (mathematical sublime) or turbulent and dynamic (dynamic sublime) object that surpasses the subject's capacity for sensory comprehension. However, reflective judgment leads the subject to pleasure derived from their ability to think of the infinite. Lehtinen et al. propose that such a feeling can be projected onto the experience of a large city: "Tall buildings, infrastructural technologies, and other particularly urban phenomena may be seen as symbols of our ability to overcome our weaknesses, as traces of human greatness. Still, the feeling of powerlessness does not completely disappear" (Lehtinen, Strandhagen, and Tainio, 2023, p. 108). This projection is challenging for aestheticians, as it involves the city as a complex, hybrid, and constantly transforming system. Many aspects that amaze tourists may become mundane for city residents. Festive lights that once captivated in childhood may irritate and depress in adulthood. However, cities are always being enriched with new elements, technologies, and design solutions that can evoke a renewed sense of urban sublime. Researchers also point to the negative aspect of the sublime, rooted in fear and anxiety—for example, during temporary power outages caused by weather conditions (p. 110–111).

Given the situation that Ukrainian society has faced for nearly three years, I wish to continue the discussion on urban sublime in the context of living in a city during

wartime. Power outages quickly become a routine to which residents adapt, finding various alternatives for light and energy sources. A strong negative experience transforms into a shared experience of resilience and care when one sees, through the windows of a building without electricity, the lights of flashlights, rechargeable lamps, camping stoves, and festive holiday lights.

In contrast, the feeling of the sublime from a grand phenomenon that cannot be captured through sensory experience but is realized in the reflection of feelings can arise, for instance, from a spontaneous vernacular memorial to fallen soldiers in Russia's war against Ukraine. Such a memorial appeared on Kyiv's central square, Maidan Nezalezhnosti, in June 2022, a few months after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. Since then, the number of flags has significantly increased, and the growth of this "lake" of flags continues. These flags can be counted, but the image of a symbolic sea of individuals who sacrificed their lives for a common cause, including the continuation of life in Kyiv and other Ukrainian cities, evokes a sense of the sublime. The subject feels part of a vast whole that possesses the highest value, surpassing life itself.

This example is fascinating because the sublime is evoked not by a natural element or a work of art but by a vernacular, grassroots practice in the city. This practice occurs in a public square, an agora—a space symbolizing democracy and the fight for it. At the same time, this object contains elements of nature (it is no coincidence that the image of a sea or lake arises in the mind) and art (especially given the history of ready-made art and the artistic method of Ai Weiwei in transforming quantity into transcendent ideas).

Ultimately, these ideas highlight the importance of the concept of the sublime in contemporary commemorative practices, both grassroots and professional. For instance, in discussing such practices, researcher Oksana Dovgopolova mentions the striking installation of red poppies around the Tower of London in 2014 by artist Paul Cummins and designer Tom Piper, marking the centenary of the start of World War I (Butsykina, 2019).

In conclusion, it is hard not to agree with Lehtinen et al. that today the sublime in the city manifests as an evolving feeling, a reaction to the new challenges and opportunities of dynamic cities. This applies to urban artistic projects like Olafur Eliasson's *Waterfall* or Christo Javacheff's wrapping of the Berlin Reichstag or the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. In contrast, permanent massive objects in cities, like the Eiffel Tower in Paris or the Gulliver skyscraper in Kyiv, fail to evoke the sublime, as they create an effect of looming presence rather than grandeur, aligning more with Kantian monstrosity than sublimity.

Discussion and conclusions

Given the above, it can be seen that contemporary aesthetics do not overlook Kant's figure and the ideas from his *Third Critique*. Some reject the relevance of his interpretation of the beautiful and the sublime, the key characteristics of the subject of aesthetic judgment, and the conditions for the possibility of aesthetic evaluation, such as disinterest and the purposiveness without purpose. Others, on the contrary, consider it necessary to rely on Kantian ideas regarding these concepts as fundamental for the possibility of exploring the experience of everyday life and the urban experience of modern people. In the latter case, the Kantian concept of the sublime is relevant for projecting onto the contemporary experience of living in a large city, given its dynamic transformation and the involvement of new technologies. However, the

contradictory nature of the modern city experience leads to the emergence of concepts like the "negative sublime," which reflects the fundamental inability of a large city inhabitant to experience the sublime.

These considerations allowed me to introduce a discussion on the relevance of the Kantian sublime in the context of living in a modern Ukrainian city, given the martial law and the full-scale war of Russia against Ukraine. The main conclusion was the appropriateness of using the concept of the sublime in the analysis of the aesthetic experience of mass grassroots commemorative practices that are currently spreading in Ukrainian cities. Commemorative memorials of a spontaneous nature bring the possibility of experiencing the sublime into the urban space, in the classical Kantian interpretation – as the result of reflective judgment based on negative satisfaction.

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"ПРЕКРАСНЕ" І "ПІДНЕСЕНЕ" І. КАНТА: СУЧАСНЕ ПЕРЕОСМІСЛЕННЯ В МЕЖАХ ПОВСЯКДЕННОГО ДОСВІДУ МІСТА

В сту . Статтю присвячено дослідження актуальності кантіанської естетики, зокрема концепції піднесеного, у контексті сучасного міського життя в Україні передусім в умовах нинішньої війни з Росією. Автор з'ясовує, як сучасна естетика взаємодіє з ідеями Канта, причому одні науковці відкидають їхню доцільність для аналізу сучасних міських реалій, а інші підтверджують їхню важливість для розуміння досвіду сучасного міста.

М е т о д и . Дослідження використовує порівняльний та аналітичний методи, розглядаючи кантівську естетику у співвідношенні із сучасними естетичними теоріями, зокрема в контексті повсякденності та урбаністичності. Воно поєднує філософський аналіз, історичну контекстualізацію та теоретичну класифікацію, звертаючись до ключових мислителів, таких як Кант, Гегель, Дьюї, Берліант, Сайто, Ледді та Квокакса, щоб дослідити зміни в естетичному дискурсі та актуальність кантіанських категорій у сучасному естетичному досвіді.

Р е з у л ь т а т и . Обговорення зосереджено на суперечностях у досвіді сучасного міста, де кантіанське піднесене – традиційно розуміється як рефлексивне судження, засноване на незацікавленому задоволенні, – може бути актуальним, але вже в трансформованій або "негативній" формі. Це особливо помітно в умовах урбаністичних середовищ, які зазнають швидких змін, зумовлених технологічним прогресом і соціальними потрясіннями. Вступає в дію концепція "негативного піднесеного", щоб описати досвід сучасних міських жителів, які через хаос і перевантаження середовища не можуть пережити традиційне піднесене.

Автор розглядає це питання в контексті сучасних українських міст, де воєнний стан і війна кардинально змінюють повсякденне життя. Концепція піднесеного особливо важлива для аналізу низових комеморативних практик, таких як спонтанні меморіали, що виникають у відповідь на війну. Ці меморіали, хоча й тимчасові та часто імпровізовані, створюють можливість естетичного досвіду, який резонує з кантіанським розумінням піднесеного, акцентуючи на рефлексивному судженні та негативному задоволенні, коли люди взаємодіють з публічними просторами, позначеними втратами та травмами.

В и с н о в к и . Автор доходить висновку про доцільність використання кантіанського піднесеного для розуміння емоційних єстетичних вимірів сучасного міського середовища, особливо в умовах війни та колективної пам'яті в Україні.

К л ю ч о в і с л о в а : кантіанська естетика, піднесене, естетичне судження, міський досвід, негативне піднесене, міський простір.

Автор заявляє про відсутність конфлікту інтересів. Спонсори не брали участі в розробленні дослідження; у зборі, аналізі чи інтерпретації даних; у написанні рукопису; у рішенні про публікацію результатів.

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