

# Rivista di estetica

58 | 2015 :  
architettura  
varia

---

## Sublimity, Negativity, and Architecture. An Essay on Negative Architecture through Kant to Adorno

STEPHEN M. BOURQUE

p. 166-174  
<https://doi.org/10.4000/estetica.443>

---

### **Abstract**

Architecture defines and consumes people. It exposes them to a multitude of varieties of different aesthetic engagements. Architecture becomes a lived experience. However, this lived experience is always caught in the inner workings of the social and more specifically within cultural ideology. In modern capitalism, culture pervades every aspect of our lives. It shows its presence everywhere from our own homes to the public streets. Culture is everywhere, and architecture is a tool used for both the benefit and detriment of the “culture industry”. Kant speaks of the sublime as a profound moment of reason realizing its ability to overcome its own limits. In this experience is it possible to be completely ravaged and descend into hades and melancholy? Is there a beauty in this descent? More specifically, can architecture become banal or pedestrian, uplifting or depressing? According to Theodor Adorno, our subjectivity is defined by the constant dialectical struggle between freedom and unfreedom (among other things). It is realizing our freedom in the face of our unfreedom that makes us truly able to attain some form of resistance. The sublime experience can be transformed into a spirit of revelation and beautifully allow us to in a way *resist* the one-dimensional tendencies of modern capitalism. Architecture, which is immersed in our societal being and contributes to many of our own subjective unfreedoms, comes to define our lives as inhabited space. When does architecture produce a sublime experience? Can architecture’s authentic “aura” stand out amongst the reproduced city and produce a sublime feeling that can be a form of resistance against the culture industry? Does Grand Central Terminal provide the key to an architecturally sublime experience? Using dialectical experience and examining the sublime *feeling* (in a critique of the Kantian sublime) as the key to breaking through the culture industry’s banal architectural hold on our subjectivity, this essay will examine the experience of the sublime as a key to unfolding resistance in the face of the banality of modern architecture in the city and opening our minds to the Great Refusal through the exploration of Grand Central Terminal.

## *Testo integrale*

1 Architecture defines and consumes people. It exposes them to a variety of different aesthetic engagements. Architecture becomes a lived experience. However, this lived experience is always caught in the inner workings of the social and more specifically, within cultural ideology. In modern capitalism, culture pervades every aspect of our lives. It shows its presence everywhere from our own homes to the public streets. Architecture is a tool used for both the benefit and detriment of the “culture industry”. Kant speaks of the sublime as a profound moment of reason realizing its ability to overcome its own limits. In this light, architecture can in fact inspire us to feel the sublime. However, in an age dominated by the culture industry and its specific mode of capitalistic production, architecture also can cause a subject to forget their surroundings and therefore architecture becomes banal. Banal architecture does not inspire a feeling of the sublime, requires us to think one-dimensionally and only reinforces the current modes of production of the global capitalist market. The dialectic between banal architecture and sublime architecture is a relationship that requires further examination. In order to realize our own unfreedoms in our subjectivity, sublime architecture plays a key role in our experience of architecture that enables us to maximize our own freedom (in the negative dialectical sense of freedom) and helps to explore the negativity of our subjectivity and inspires us to think *other*, more than one-dimensionally, and in turn allow us, as subjects, to act in accordance with the great refusal.

2 Immanuel Kant, one of the great philosophers of the modern era, wrote extensively about the sublime in his third systematic approach to philosophy titled, *The Critique of Judgment*. For Kant, the sublime is ultimately an experience or feeling resulting from an interaction with a given object (generally one which possesses a large magnitude or infatuates us with its immensity). In Kant the sublime experience is a judgment. This judgment is the failure of the imagination’s capacity to grasp the infinity of the object. Also incorporated within this failure is the understanding’s play with the imagination and their ultimate inability to grasp the immensity and calculability of the sublime object and feeling. This negative failure of imagination and understanding is converted into a positive experience in which reason, grasping inadequacy of the understanding and imagination in the conception of infinity, overcomes this inability by realizing its own potentiality and supremacy over the object:

For, since judgments about the sublime are made by the aesthetic reflective power of judgment, [the analytic] must allow us to present the liking for the sublime, just as that for the beautiful, as follows: in terms of *quantity*, as universally valid; in terms of *quality*, as devoid of interest; in terms of relation, [as a] subjective purposiveness; and in terms of modality, as a necessary subjective purposiveness (Kant 1987: 100).

3 In the quote above, Kant is explaining that the sublime is a feeling in which the individual uses the “aesthetic reflective power of judgment” (i.e. makes an aesthetic judgment that is closely related to our aesthetic judgments of the beautiful) and attempts to prescribe an amount of quantity to the object through the imagination (and the play between the understanding and imagination), however, the subject fails to do this and intends a purposiveness to the object, which is a purposiveness without purpose, and therefore realizes the failure of this play between reason’s faculties in prescribing a quantity to the object. The unboundedness and nobleness with which reason prevails over its own faculties is what captures the true experience of the sublime in the subject. Therefore, for Kant, the sublime experience is always a profound and uplifting experience that elevates the subject to realize the capacity of reason and to discover its greatness in relation to all things (i.e. the sublime experience for Kant is an experience reaching out towards the heavens; it is profoundly *noble* and in general honors reason itself).

4 A large point that Kant seems to miss in his experience of the sublime is the factor of the dialectics of history contributing to our experiences of objects in a given culture. Kant attempts to define the sublime in more or less a *pure* approach; Kant isolates the experience in a category of thinking defined as a concept. In contrast to this pure conception of reality, Theodor W. Adorno explains in his two great books, *Negative Dialectics* and *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, that any subject living in the world is always in relation to the current modes of production and his history which therefore means a subject is always caught up in the midst of the culture industry.

5 The culture industry is constantly a force that pervades our being in society. It is the modes of production and current economic framework expressed through our being in society, outside of the direct principles of exchange (for example: the culture industry is television, movies, the arts, etc.) and therefore is a given *culture* in society. All of the different aspects of our culture are always (in modern twenty-first century global capitalism) *economically* defined. Aesthetically this means that products of culture are intertwined with the conception of the consumer, producer, and the modes of economic exploitation and production. Therefore, substances in culture that are supposedly artistic are bound up in the exploitation of the relationship between consumers and defined more often than not by their exchange value rather than their aesthetic merit. The culture industry reinforces itself in only affirming and praising aesthetic products that confirm to the current reality (therefore making them only one-dimensional):

The promise of the work of art to create truth by impressing its unique contours on the socially transmitted forms is as necessary as it is hypocritical. By claiming to anticipate fulfillment through their aesthetic derivatives, it posits the real forms of the existing order as absolute. To this extent the claims of art are always also ideology (Horkheimer and Adorno 2004: 101).

6 It is therefore through the culture industry that the subject is bound to his everyday existence and experience of life. The culture industry is an ideology, which attempts to consume every individual living in the midst of its wake, «The general designation “culture” already contains, virtually, the process of identifying, cataloging, and classifying which imports culture into the realm of administration» (Horkheimer and Adorno 2004: 104). Thus, the culture industry attempts to define us by certain ideological concepts that pervade our subjectivity in the form of our many unfreedoms.

7 Our subjectivity in society is always determined in a dialectical relationship between our freedom and our unfreedom as explained in Adorno's theoretical thesis, *Negative Dialectics*. For Adorno, our subjectivity is constantly subjected to forces from the outside (that we have no control over). These forces (of which the culture industry is a prominent one) come to define our individualities in specific ways that affirm the grip of our current state of reality. In juxtaposition to these forces is the ability for an individual to think *other*. Adorno would like our individualities to attempt to defy being subsumed and overcome by ideology. Ideology can be any thing or thinking that attempts to define our beings under the concept of categories, while remaining unmediated by the position we find ourselves in as individuals: the position of being dialectically caught up in the tension of being a particular individual in the midst of universally defining systems of thinking. These systems (for example: the culture industry, morality, scientific definition, etc.) seek to define the individuals being in the world under concrete conceptual elements. All of these forces weigh down on the individual and constitute the universal aspects of his being. Therefore, it is Adorno's conception of subjectivity that acknowledges these tensions and consequently illuminates the individual to the different forces that he is dialectically caught between, thus, creating the need for a *reflexive* subjectivity which acknowledges the dialectic (between the universal and particular; unfreedom and freedom) and rather than synthesize the being of that individual positively (as in Hegel's conception of *Geist*

or Kant's examination of "pure" categories, such as the sublime), mediates these conditions for moments of spontaneous action of revolt against these systems.

8 Architecture is present throughout any scenario where a human individual is alive in society (i.e. in relation to other people). Although many people only find architecture to be relevant to practical use (architecture's use-value in the presence of human society), it also at the same time caught up in an aesthetic dimension of being in the world that the human subject cannot ignore while in midst of society. Architecture's aesthetic dimension comes to define how we experience and live in the world through its interaction with certain aspects of humanity (for example: space, time, gravity, light, dwelling, room, ritual, and memory [among others]) (Pallasmaa and McCarter 2012). «Architecture as experience does not have to do with what a building *looks like*, but rather with how it engages the landscape, climate and light of its place; how its spaces are ordered to appropriately house the activities that take place in them...» (*ibidem*: 5). Therefore, when approaching the concept of architecture in society it is not merely how the architecture *looks* to us, but rather, how it engages our bodies and us in our everydayness in relationship to our subjectivity.

9 Taking architecture to be an influence in our every day life, culture, and experience, it is seen that architecture is one of the main aspects of our relationship to our subjectivity in the light of what type of architecture the culture industry chooses to erect. These experiences of architecture enter into the dialectic of our subjectivities:

As we enter an architectural space, an immediate unconscious projection, identification and exchange takes place; we occupy the space and the space settles in us. We grasp the space through our senses and we measure it with our bodies and movements. We project our body scheme, personal memories and meanings into the space; the space extends the experience of our bodies beyond our skin, and the physical space and our mental spaces fuse with each other (Pallasmaa and McCarter 2012: 14).

10 Architecture enters into our very being in the way we experience it. This being, as a subjectivity caught in the rifts between the dialectics of its freedom and unfreedom and the particular and universal, thus encounters architecture in an embodied *cultural* sense. An individual must encounter architecture not only as a lived experience that places the place into ourselves, but also as an aesthetic experience that projects an aesthetic suggestion and should provoke an experience of reflexivity in the individual (in certain cases) in contrast to encountering architecture as banal (i.e. only encountering architecture's use or exchange value, the way it *looks*, and above all only using architecture to affirm the current culture and modes of production).

11 In accordance with the attempt to view architecture as an aesthetic experience, it is useful to look at the examination of aesthetic experiences in far capitalism in relationship to the mechanical reproduction of architecture and architectural styles as explicated and elaborated in the essay by Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. In this essay, Benjamin examines the "authenticity" of the work of art in an age where the reproduction of artistic creations is caught up in the means of production in a current culture. The reproducibility of the work of art and its *image*, for Benjamin, puts the work of art in question as to its authenticity:

Since the historical testimony rests on the authenticity, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction when substantive duration ceases to matter. And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object. One might subsume the eliminated element in the term 'aura' and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. [...] The technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence (Benjamin 2010: 14).

12 Therefore, the authenticity that a work of art displays when encountered by the individual is its *aura* and this is separate from the work of art's economic use value and defines the work of art's individual and unique existence. What is denied to us in the modern experience of architecture is an architectural project's unique individual aura. Architecture with a lack of aura often creates in the subjective individuals experience the experience of the banality of architecture as an artistic project. This banality only confirms the current mode of thinking. Unlike Benjamin's praise of film as a revolutionary break up of the aura, an architectural aesthetic experience thrives on the presence and immediacy of the authentic structure and experience of the building. As an aesthetic medium in contraposition to Benjamin's thesis, architecture should engage with the authenticity of a work, however, this does not mean that it should have a cult following as described in the essay, more that the architectural object should present it self as set apart from the normal banal city architecture in order to fully immerse the viewer in its splendiddness. Taking Benjamin's analysis into consideration, what hope does a city dweller have for truly aesthetic and authentic aesthetic experience if all the buildings bleed into one another and therefore look the same?

13 In the Kantian sublime experience, an individual is supposedly able to realize the overcoming of reason and the gloriousness of all of its attributes. In this *pure* examination of reason (as mentioned above) our historical being is not thought of, from Kant's point of view, as being important or incorporated into the experience of the sublime. When we encounter an object, aesthetically or otherwise, it is always incorporated into the blending of the concept of that object, the objects history, as well as the dimension of the non-conceptual that forever separates us in a specter like division from that object. When addressing the aesthetic experience and feeling of the sublime, Kant seems to believe that the innate faculties (i.e. concepts) of reason in the make up of an individual constitute the very essence of that feeling and although each individual subjectively encounters the object that will facilitate this experience, the process itself is universally valid for any being possessing reason. However, the experience of the sublime moment captured correctly by Kant, seems to be rather in the interplay between the concept of understanding and of imagination and the inability to grasp fully the ideas it is presented with in correspondence to the sublime object (without the triumph of reason).

14 Therefore, the sublime experience that is supposed to assert reasons triumphant attributes, actually succumbs to the experience of realizing that the concept of reason itself is in fact faulty and that it is tied up in the non-conceptual given its existence. Thus, in the sublime experience, rather than a jubilation of reason (as in Kant), the individual is actually presented with the presentation of the non-conceptual and therefore with the very dialectical relationship of his subjectivity. In this realization a subject is made to become *reflexive* and consequently called to live and experience this aesthetic event as a process or inspiration of dialectical living; the individual is caught up in the spiral of dialectic history, subjectivity, and aesthetic experience through the encounter with the sublime object. However, just critiquing the outcome of the Kantian sublime does not discount his analysis of how this interplay between the imagination and understanding becomes a crucial aspect in the experience of the sublime. It is the interplay of the concepts of these faculties that allow for the expression of these concepts to realize that they are intertwined within the non-conceptual framework and therefore to come to the thought that given within every concept is always this lack; a ghost haunting the specter of the *pure* concept. In order to come to this non-conceptual dimension or *lack*, the subject must still *play* with these concepts and see their conceptual interactions as well as their non-conceptual ones in order to completely be subsumed in the feeling that ultimately illuminates the reflexive and dialectical being of the self. Taking these faculties in their dialectical interchange between the conceptual and non-conceptual (and their ultimate failure, without reason's triumphant glory) the end result becomes the realization of our truly bound subjectivity that the sublime aesthetic experience actually comes to capsule. Therefore, the concept of play is

a crucial dialectic exchange that redefines Kant's conception of the sublime and makes the sublime distinct in this moment of the play. The sublime experience is in its very existence the dialectic notion of play between the conceptual and the non-conceptual.

- 15 What is important for the architectural experience is indeed this ability to realize that we are bound to our chains in the dialectical schemata of experience: a true sublime architectural experience would highlight the lack between the conceptual and non-conceptual in order to show the individual the own face of his subjectivity and therefore to realize in himself a feeling for the potential of spontaneity against the universal structures that confront him in his everyday living. It is the task of architecture to incorporate an experience in which the banality of everydayness is contradicted with a unique anti-systemic form of daily human experience. The sublime feeling is the negation of our every day banality that in a moment of resistance offers the individual in the wake of his subjectivity, the possibility of spontaneity and a moment where the subject is subsumed in the feeling that gives rise to the reflection that things could be other than the current modes of production and reality (a key point of culture in the sublime experience, that Kant seems to have left out or missed). Great sublime architecture therefore can produce a feeling that is a *reflexive* dialectical process in an individual and therefore negate the banality of the typical architecture produced and reproduced by the culture industry.
- 16 For the city dweller, grotesque and massive buildings become part of their everyday experience as living in the city. A person is made to feel small, wandering block to block in the seemingly never ending rows of large buildings made of glass, concrete, and brick. The buildings blend together and force a cultural persona of traits characterized by largeness, inadequacy, familiarity, and alienation. While walking uptown in New York City, on Park Avenue, these familiar buildings, one after the other, consume the city-dweller and the familiarity of these buildings become banal. A person experience the city streets continually notices that after a long period of time these buildings tend to look the same and create a sense of lost individuality that is ultimately a suggestion these buildings make about the current culture industry in the United States. However, approaching the upper-middle section of Park Avenue on Forty-second Street the city-dweller is confronted by a standout architectural phenomenon. This point of architectural dwelling is the building and complex of Grand Central Station.
- 17 Grand Central Station itself stands out uniquely amongst the other buildings in the city. It is smaller than the rest of the buildings in the surrounding area and offers a unique experience of classical architecture mixed with early twentieth century thematic elements. The building itself is indiscernibly modern and ancient. Its intricate Romanesque architectural elements bring a taste of history and vividly illuminate New York City in contrast to the bleak, massive capitalistic architecture that tends to invade the person in his contact with the culture capital of America. Walking inside Grand Central, one is lost amongst the beautiful marble floors and the immensely detailed lit ceiling in the main area. Grand Central terminal offers a sublime moment of negativity amongst the hustle and bustle of daily working life. It is this very negativity that allows us to realize our reflexive situation through the architecture of Grand Central. Grand Central Station embodies our very contingent historicity and presents us with a situation where we can abstractly remove ourselves from our very own alienation through self-critical reflection about the building and about our daily working lives. It provides a key example for architecture that can erupt our sense of everydayness and stand out amongst a banal city culture.
- 18 What is needed for the sublime experience is an important negative function that the artistic work gives to our own consciousness. This negative feeling helps the individual to realize the failure of concepts and our own interaction with our environment and us, as bound to a dialectical relationship to our own subjectivity present in the relationship between the universal and the particular aspects; the subject and society. Through sublime experiences that induce this negative feeling

(a type of *play* with concepts), a thinking that remains *other* to society and therefore participate in the Great Refusal, we are subjectively given a small strand of hope for humanity and our future. It is this hope that negative architecture hopes to accomplish and that is given to us through a feeling that attempts to deliver us from the banality of everydayness. The dialectically sublime experience remains a feeling, a feeling in which hope, change, and reflection become possible. The sublime is the nobility of possibility.

---

## **Bibliografia**

ADORNO, TH.W.

– 1973, *Negative Dialectics*, London, Routledge

DOI: 10.4324/9780203479605

BENJAMIN, W.

– 2010, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, New York, Prism Key Press

HORKHEIMER, M. and ADORNO, TH.W.

– 2004, *Dialectic Of Enlightenment, Philosophical Fragments*, Stanford (CA), Stanford University Press

KANT, I.

– 1987, *The Critique of Judgment*, Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company

PALLASMAA, J. and McCARTER, R.

– 2012, *Understanding Architecture*, New York, Phaidon Press

---

## **Per citare questo articolo**

*Notizia bibliografica*

Stephen M. Bourque, « Sublimity, Negativity, and Architecture. An Essay on Negative Architecture through Kant to Adorno », *Rivista di estetica*, 58 | 2015, 166-174.

*Notizia bibliografica digitale*

Stephen M. Bourque, « Sublimity, Negativity, and Architecture. An Essay on Negative Architecture through Kant to Adorno », *Rivista di estetica* [Online], 58 | 2015, online dal 01 avril 2015, consultato il 21 novembre 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/estetica/443> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/estetica.443>

---

## **Autore**

**Stephen M. Bourque**

---

## **Diritti d'autore**



Rivista di Estetica è distribuita con Licenza Creative Commons Attribuzione - Non commerciale - Non opere derivate 4.0 Internazionale.