rethinking the sublime

an introduction to the contemporary or technological sublime

Coexistent Perspectives (ADCD7001)



The Sublime in the Age of the Anthropocene

Anthropocene – A Geological Epoch – The Age of the Humans

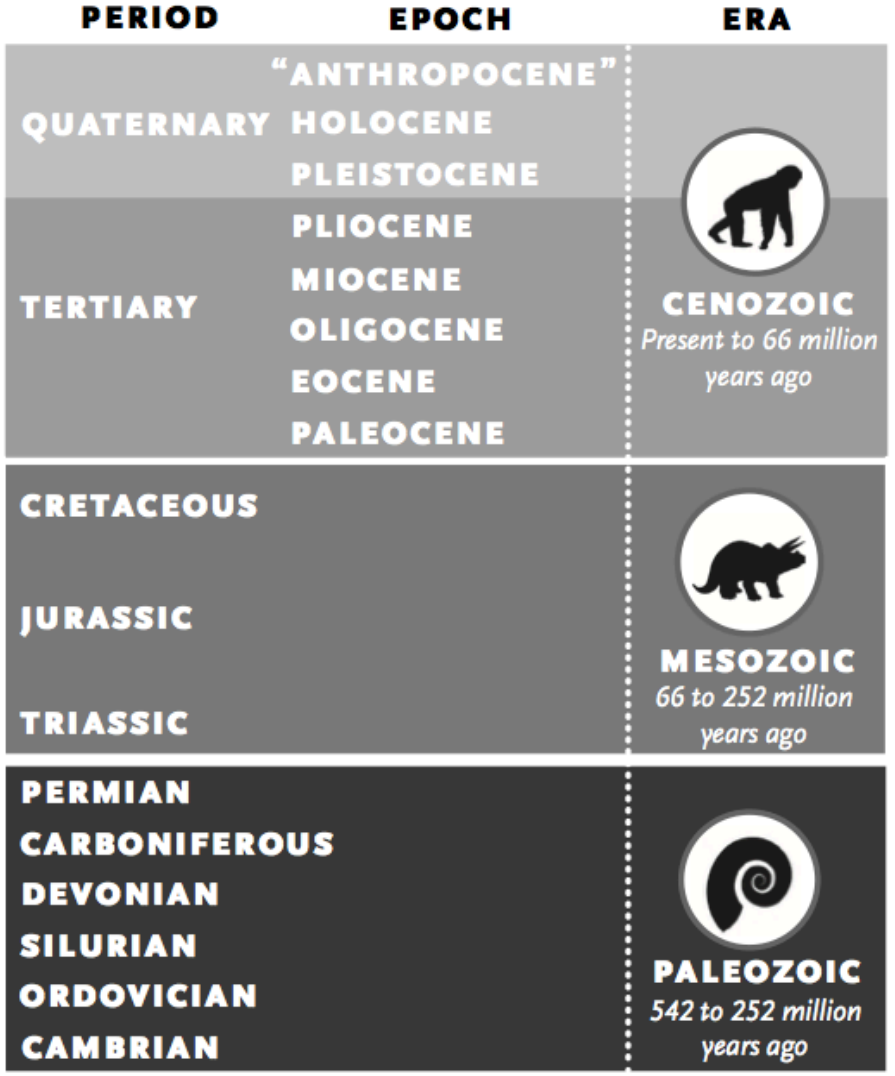
- **Human** (‘Man’) Versus **Nature**
- The Age of the **Enlightenment**

Humanity’s impact on the Earth is now so profound that a new geological epoch – the Anthropocene…

The current epoch, the **Holocene**, is the 12,000 years of stable climate since the last ice age during which all human civilization developed.

But the striking acceleration since the mid-20th century of **carbon dioxide emissions** and **sea level rise**, the **global mass extinction of species**, and the **transformation of land by deforestation** and development mark the end of that slice of geological time.

The Earth is so profoundly changed that the Holocene must give way to the Anthropocene.



what is the sublime?

A word that is much used and abused….

A word whose common usage has been trivialised…

FIFA 15 - Sublime free kick!



A Sublime Question…..the fundamental question of the sublime is about **what happens when the stability of human consciousness is threatened?**

A Sublime Answer …the **sublime** is experienced when a situation exceeded the **limits of the understanding** and **sensibility**. It can be seen as the failure of the **imagination** to grasp things in their totality.

the Sublime

an evolving within historical-cultural context

In aesthetics, the **sublime** (from the Latin sublīmis) is the quality of **greatness, whether physical, moral, intellectual, metaphysical, aesthetic, spiritual, or artistic**. The term especially refers to a greatness beyond all possibility of calculation, measurement, or imitation.

The sublime as concept and cultural practice has played a central role in western understanding, engaging **aesthetic, spiritual and ethical values** ranging from the mid seventeenth-century translations of **Longinus, to Burkean and Kantian sublimes** of the proto-Romantic and Romantic periods, via nineteenth-century concerns with science and theology to recent theoretical writing.

However, there is still much to be investigated in **the spaces between art, language and nature.**



Long Live Longinus!

On the Sublime

…the sublime landscape even touches upon the divine.

"Nature has implanted in our souls an unconquerable passion for all that is great and for all that is more divine than ourselves"

(Longinus). [1st Century AD Roman-era Greek]

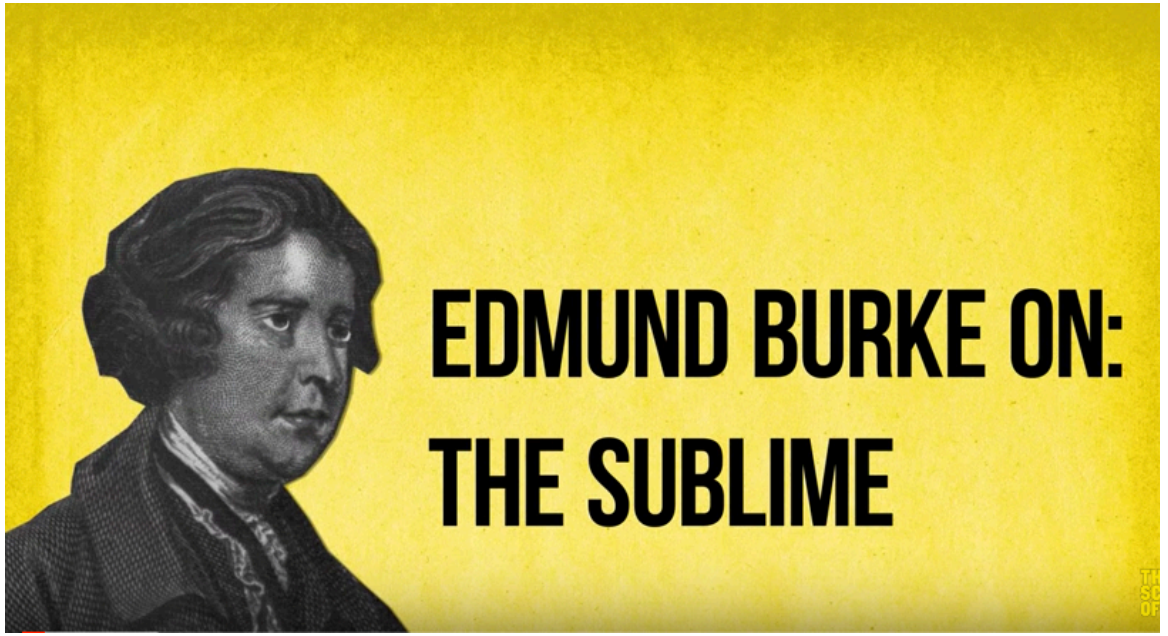


Edmund Burke

The theory of sublime art was put forward by **Edmund Burke** in ***A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*** published in 1757.

He defined the sublime as an artistic effect productive of the strongest emotion the mind is capable of feeling.

He wrote ‘whatever is in any sort terrible or is conversant about terrible objects or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime’.



aesthetics can influence **ethics**

art/nature ‘moves’ People

humility

insight

inspiration

transcendence

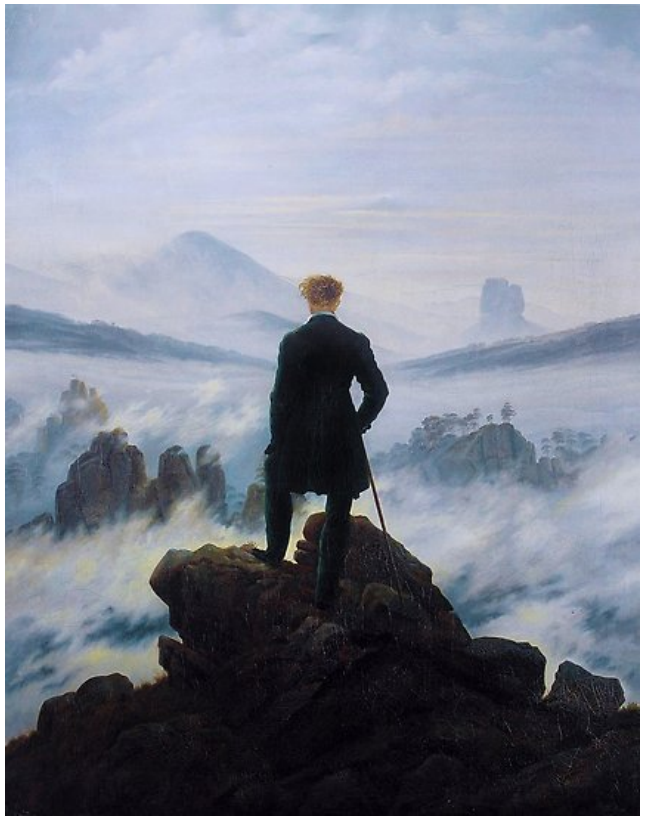
aesthetics in the 18th Century was thought of as **the subjective experience of the world**, but more crucially in the context of the sublime it was considered an embodied experience.





‘Size matters’

Masculine Sublime



- Burkes – binary of Beauty (Feminine) and Sublime (Masculine).
- In the writings of both **Burke and Kant, the desire to masculinise** the sublime is further suggested.
- by how much size matters, as does scale, in the natural landscapes or phenomena deemed especially conducive to sublimity: soaring peaks, vertiginous cliffs, roaring rivers, massive earthquakes, violent storms.
- **Mary Wollstonecraft** – provides an early feminist response to the Burkean sublime.

Mary Wollstonecraft's

Dislocation of the Masculine Sublime: A Vindication



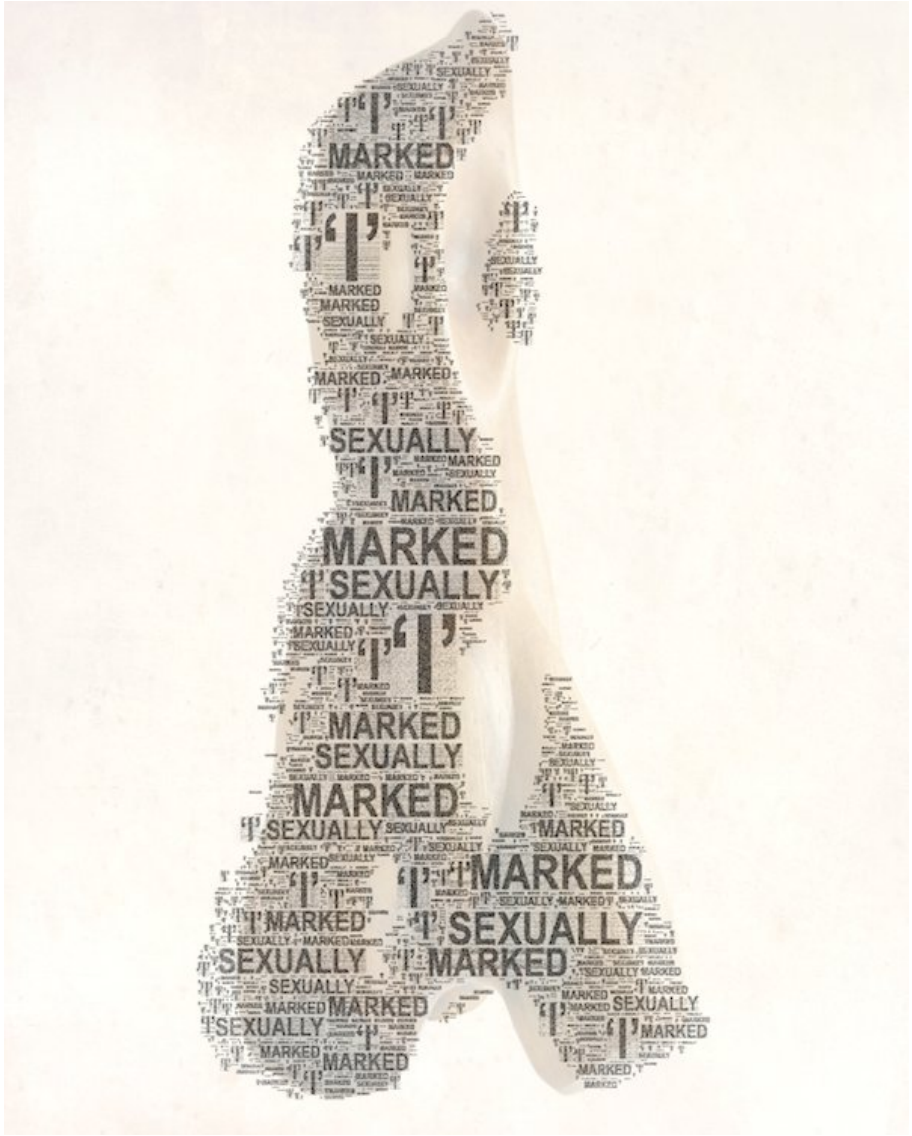
- Criticism of Burkes style…
- the Feminine Sublime, and the Marginalised *Rhetor* (an orator)
- Rhetorical insurgency – use of language and rhetoric

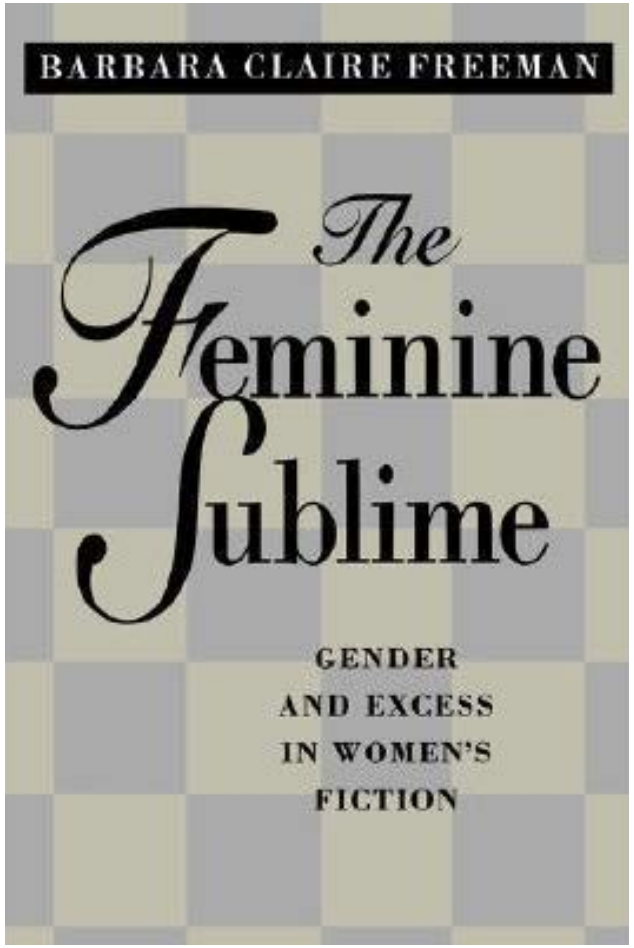
- **Terry Eagleton** observes in the Aesthetics of Ideology that **"the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime, then, is that between woman and man,"** but rather that **patriarchal assumptions** about the nature of sexual difference are at the source, and provide the thematic value, of Burke's distinction between the sublime and the beautiful.
- unifying structure for both his aesthetic and political ideas.

- **Judith Butler's** argument that while all **language is iterative**, the iteration of given cultural codes by marginalized groups can divert the chain of signification toward greater social equity.

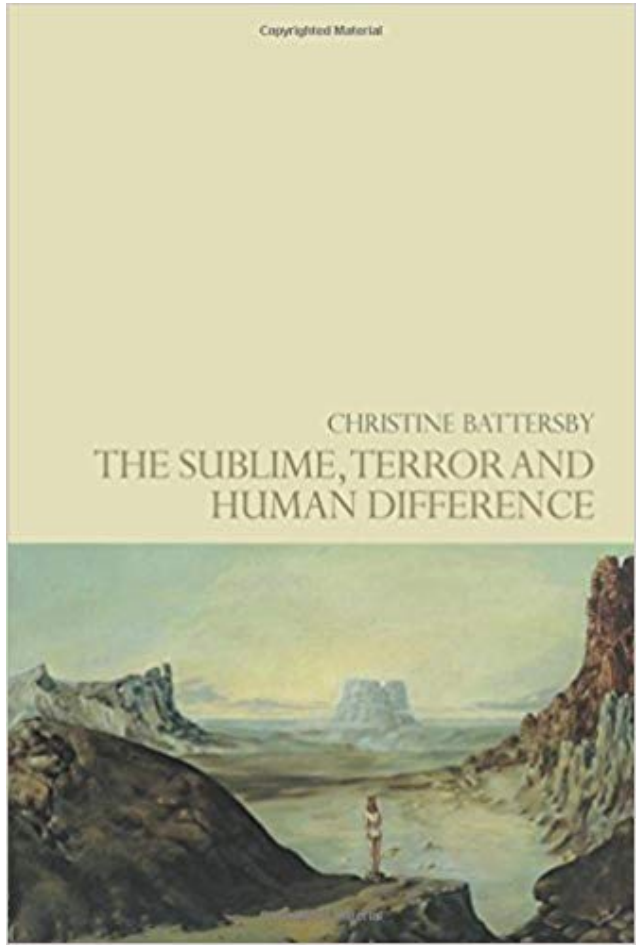
Grammar reflects,
for both men and women,
a valorization of masculinity and
an erasure of femininity.

Luce Irigaray





Freeman, B.C., 1995. *The feminine sublime: gender and excess in women's fiction*. Univ of California Press.



Battersby, C., 2013. *The sublime, terror and human difference*. Routledge.

A Feminist response to the Romantic sublime

Countering the Canon

Barbara Freeman

Freeman offers a typical feminist response; discourse and engagement rather than hegemony and brute force.

The dominant ideology of patriarchy and phallocentric nature of such the Romantic sublime haunts canonical theories of the sublime

Burkean and Kantian sublimes become “a discourse of domination,” that aims to control excess through highly gendered language.

a period which also sees the height of colonialism, the industrial exploitation of the natural world, and the development of the Victorian, bourgeois, patriarchal ideas of the family and consequent ideas about gender.

The Kantian Sublime

- **Kant** in **The Critique of Judgement (1790)** tries to theorise the sublime, and comes up with 2 categories:

- The **mathematical sublime** is that which is **immense and immeasurable,** and seems to approach **the idea of infinitude**. It might be the enormous scale of mountains or the immensity of a night sky full of stars.

- The **dynamic sublime** is concerned with the **forces of nature** and their superiority. It contains a sense of danger and is evoked by thunder, turbulent seas etc. provoking strong emotions such as fear.

negative pleasures

*The **dynamic sublime** evokes both awe and fear; it induces a '**negative lust**' in which **attraction and repulsion** melt into one ambiguous experience.*

In the **Enlightenment** times the sublime was classed as a '*negative pleasure*'.

The ‘Magnetism’ of the Sublime

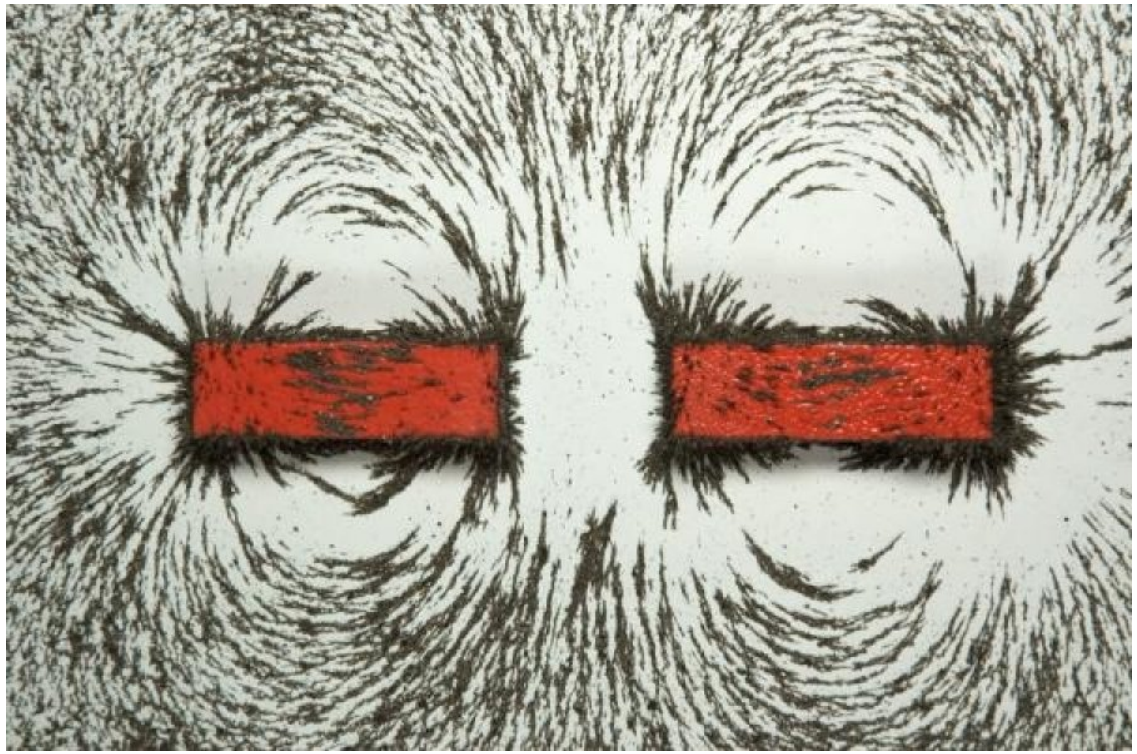
ATTRACTION AND REPULSION

Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant argued that the ***sublime*** involves both a sense of **attraction** and **repulsion**, in contrast to the ***beautiful***, which contained only **attraction**.

The simultaneous experience of **awe** and **terror**

The beautiful attracts

The sublime attracts and repulses





Shock and Awe

Martin's paintings with their dizzying detail and macro-perspectives, were the 'IMAX films' of their day…

John Martin *The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah* 1852 Oil on canvas 136.3 x 212.3 cm
Courtesy Laing Art Gallery, Tyne & Wear Archives and Museums

Joseph Wright emphasises the drama of the erupting Vesuvius through contrasts: between the tranquility of the sea and the violence of the volcano, the cool light reflected from the moon and clouds with the hellish spewing of fire and lava.

In comparison to the volatile power of the volcano, the tiny foreground figures stress man's insignificance before the sublime grandeur of nature.

Wright **did not witness** the eruption of Vesuvius in 1777, but it clearly spurred his **imagination**.

He returned repeatedly to the subject, and produced over thirty views of the volcano.



Vesuvius in Eruption, with a View over the Islands in the Bay of Naples
Joseph Wright of Derby, c.1776–80

The Romantic Sublime

Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry* (1757) connected the sublime with experiences of awe, terror and danger. Burke saw nature as the most sublime object, capable of generating the strongest sensations in its beholders. This Romantic conception of the sublime proved influential for several generations of artists.

Immanuel Kant, in his Critique of Judgement (1790), also set out to explore what happens at the borderline where reason finds its limits. He characterized three types of sublimity: the awful, the lofty and the splendid, and continued and deepened the shift of focus initiated by Burke, by asserting that the sublime was not so much a formal quality of some natural phenomenon as a subjective conception – **something that happens in the mind.**



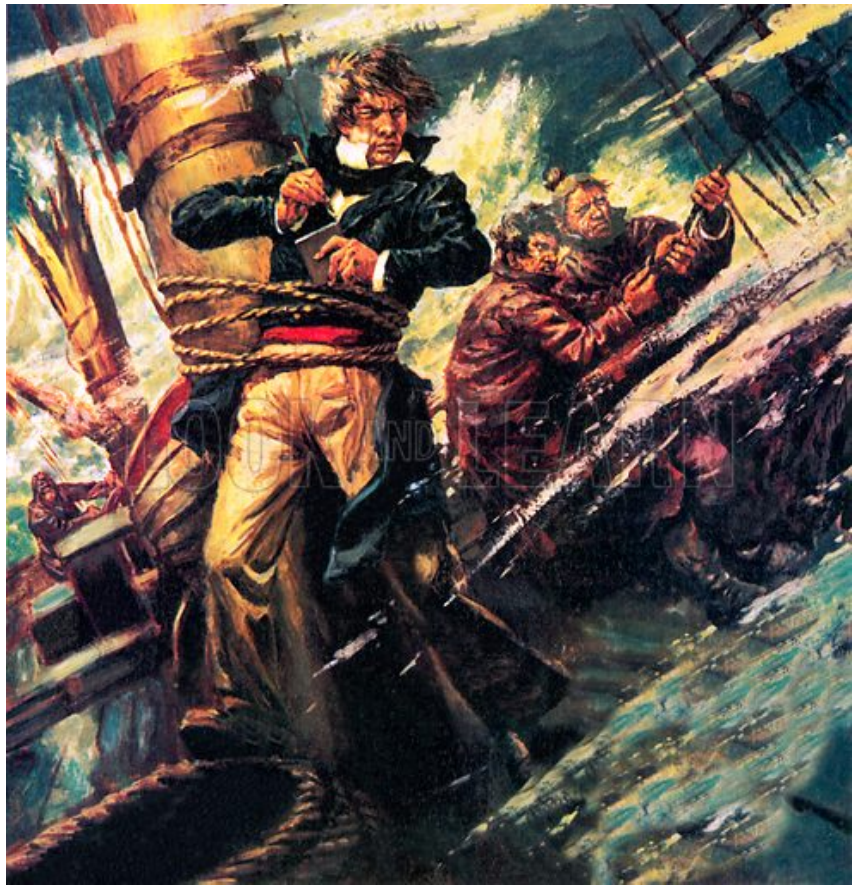
Joseph Mallord William Turner
Snow Storm - Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth exhibited 1842

Kantian Sublime – Keeping a Safe Distance

- Central to Kant's idea of the sublime is the concept of 'safe distance', which allows for subjective enjoyment of and the heightened emotions it affected.

- It is worth noting that philosopher **Friedrich Schiller** disagreed with the concept of safe distance stating (1793) that to experience the sublime one must actually feel endangered by nature and the elements.

- **Schiller** also changed **Kant's two categories** from the **mathematical and the dynamic** to the **'theoretical'** and the **'practical'.**



J.M.W. Turner encountering Sublime - The most famous story about J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851) has him tied to the mast of a steam-ship for four hours during a nocturnal snow storm.

Representation of the Sublime

Artists have been striving to re-present the sublime for centuries

The sublime should be experienced first hand

Once, Turner had lashed himself to the mast of a ship for several hours, furious a furious storm, so that he could later paint the storm. Obviously, it was not the storm itself that Turner intended to paint. What he intended to paint was a representation of the storm. One's language is frequently imprecise in the that manner, I have discovered.



JMW Tuner | The Bell Rock Lighthouse | 1819



Joseph Mallord William Turner
Snow Storm - Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth exhibited 1842

Turner was friends with the scientists Michael Faraday and Mary Somerville





Sublime Seas
John Akomfrah and J.M.W. Turner
March 3–September 16, 2018

SCALE

MACRO-PERSEPCTIVES | MICRO-PERSPECTIVES

Ansel Adams and the Sublime

Wilderness to Wasteland: The Sublime, the Picturesque and the Uncanny in the Photography of the American West

American landscape and wilderness photography has lived under the aegis of the aesthetic, and in particular, under the sign of the **sublime and the picturesque,** for some time. Ansel Adams' photographs of towering mountains and canyons are arguably major expressions, exemplars and evokers of the **sublime** in photography.

The **sublime** involves the formlessness of uplifting spectacles and produces feelings of awe and terror. By contrast, Carleton Watkins's photographs of mountains reflected in still lakes express the **picturesque** in photography. The **picturesque** presents well-formed depictions of serene scenery and produces feelings of pleasure.



Sublime



Ansel Adams, *Clearing Winter Storm, Yosemite Valley*, 1942

Picturesque



Carlton Watkins | View from Camp Grove, Yosemite

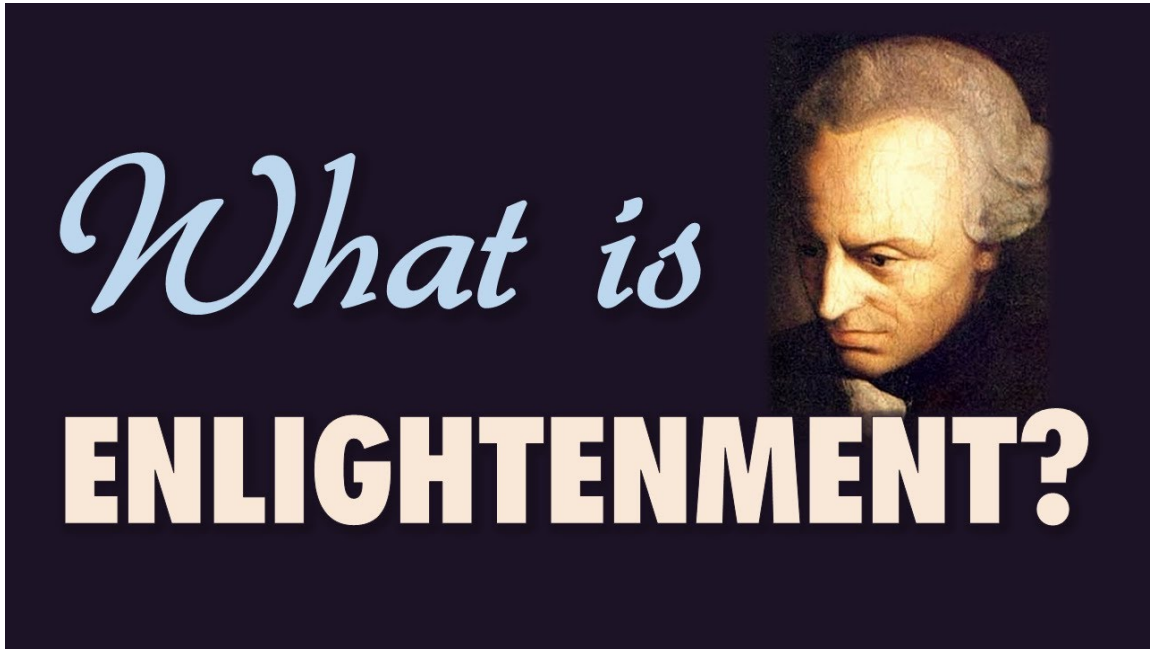


Thunderclouds | Lake Garnet | Ansel Adams

The Age of **Enlightenment**

The **Enlightenment**, also known as **the Age** of Reason, was a philosophical movement that took place primarily in Europe and, later, in North America, during the late 17th and early 18th century. Its participants thought they were illuminating human intellect and culture after the "dark" Middle **Ages**.

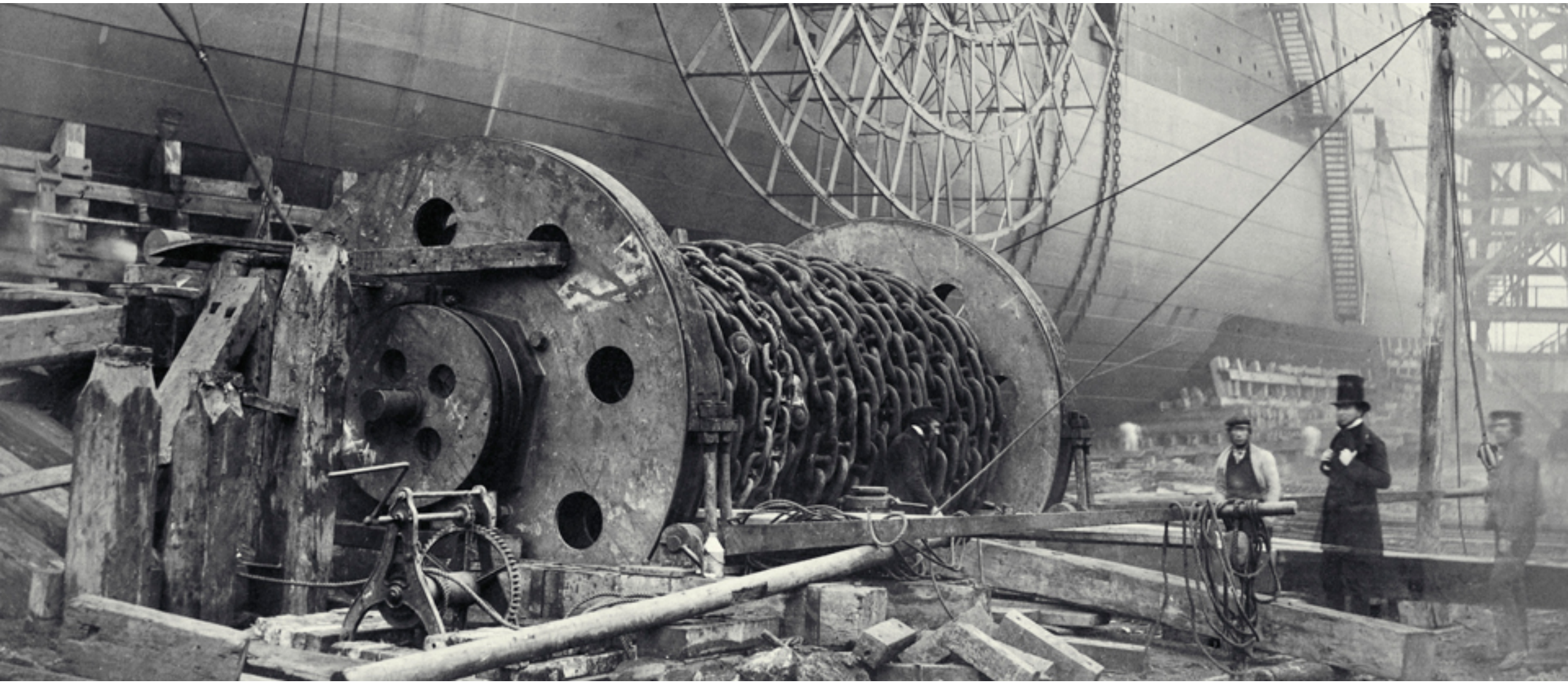
- The Scientific Revolution – Isaac Newton
- French Revolution – Politics and Ideology
- **The Industrial Revolution – James Watt…steam engine**
- The 'Death of God' (Nietzsche) – from religion to rationalism
- Theory of Evolution – Charles Darwin



In his essay 'What Is Enlightenment?' (1784), the German philosopher Immanuel Kant summed up the era's motto in the following terms:

'Dare to know! Have courage to use your own reason!'

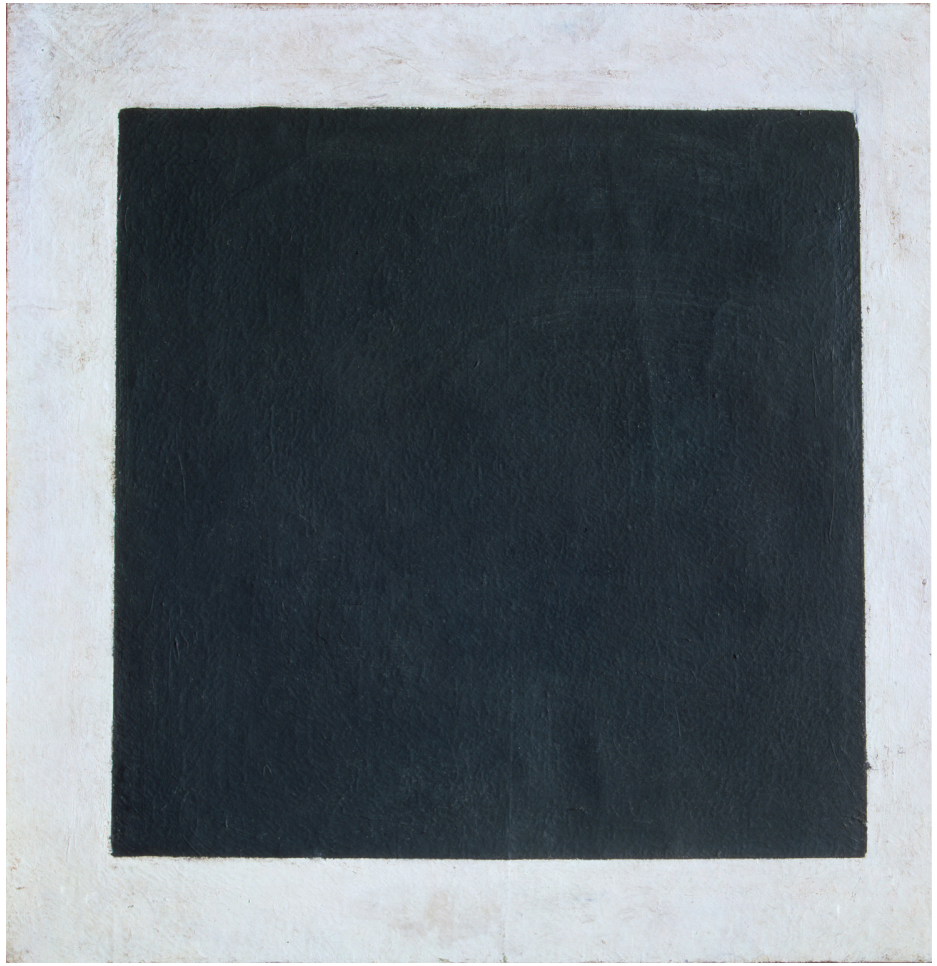






FINITUDE

THE LIMITS OF REASON | THE LIMITS OF COMPREHENSION



Kazimir Malevich | *Black Square* 1930 | Oil on canvas

The Contemporary Sublime

STARING INTO THE ABYSS

THE LIMITS OF PERCEPTION

I have destroyed the ring of the horizon and escaped from the circle of things ...

I have released all the birds from the eternal cage…

I have untied the knots of wisdom and set free the consciousness of colour! ...

I have overcome the impossible…

The Sublime is Now

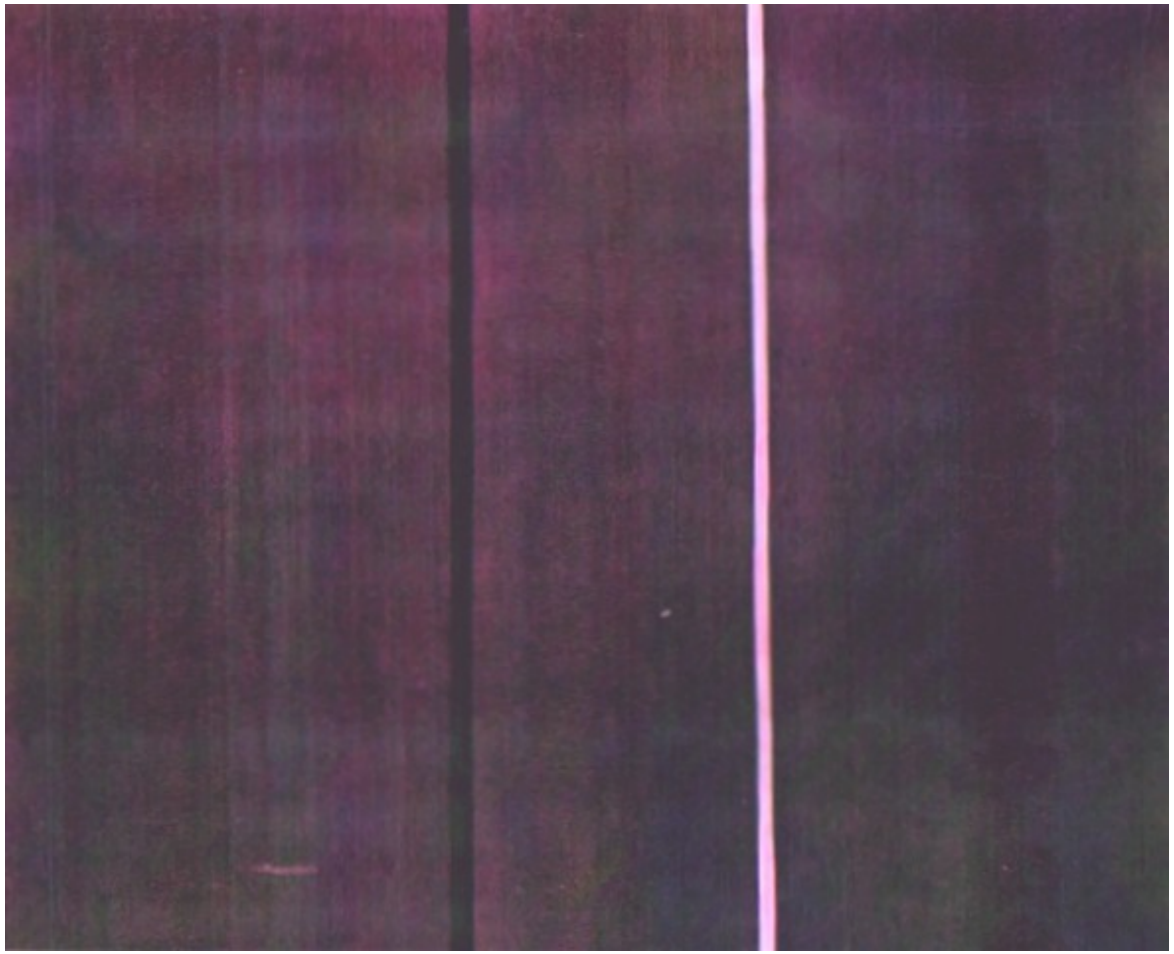
‘the impulse of modern art’ resides in the ‘desire to destroy beauty’.

Barnet Newman 1948 – ‘The Sublime is Now’

The sublime is a term that has been heavily employed in art writing over the past twenty years. Too heavily, it may be.

References to it have come from so many angles that it is in danger of losing any coherent meaning.

We have been offered everything from ***‘the techno-sublime’*** and ‘***the eco-sublime’*** to ***‘the Gothic sublime’*** and ***‘the suburban sublime’*** : anything from *volcanoes and vitrines to still life's and soft toys may be sniffed at for sublimity.*

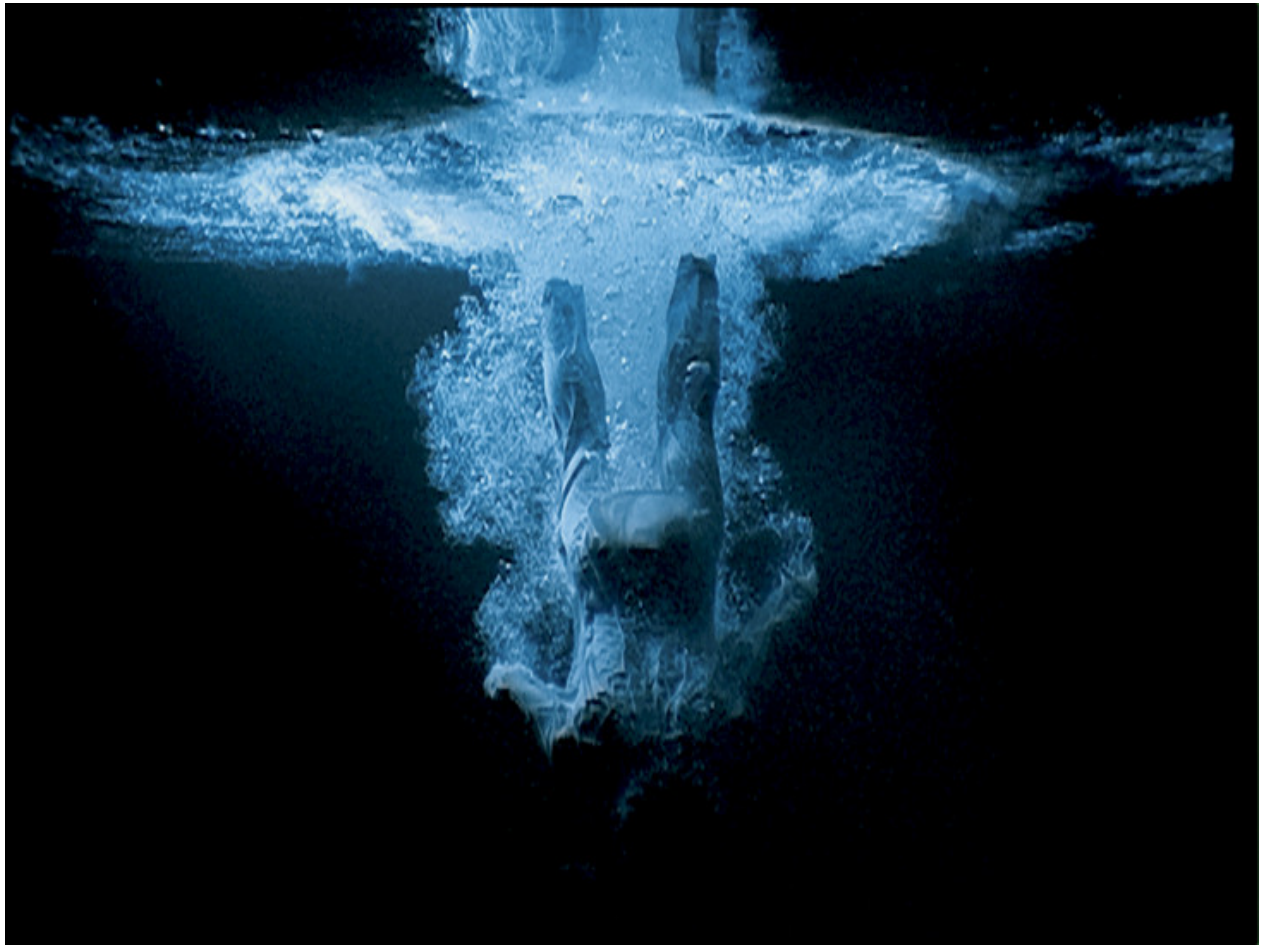


If geometrical abstraction is able to convey the **radical immanence** of the sublime, which is in the here-and-now, then how can the sublime be further developed in the visual arts?

Towards the Postmodern Sublime

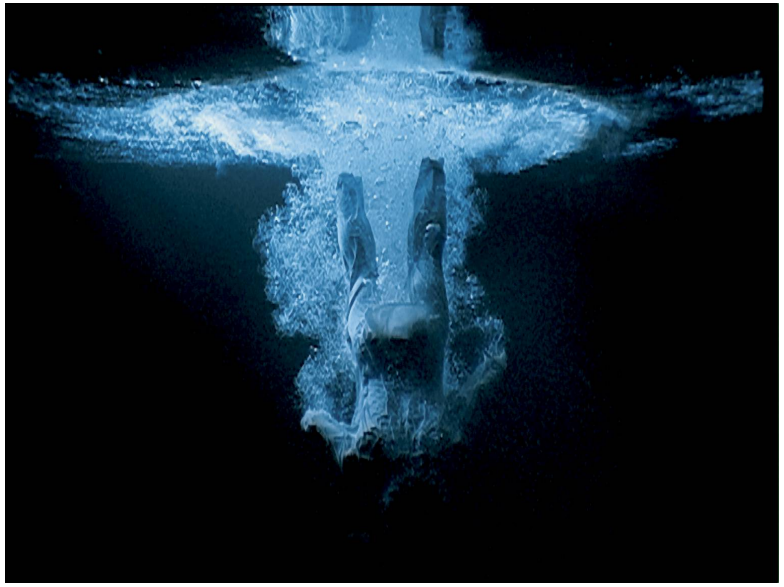
Shaw describes how, **'the postmodern sublime** is defined not by its intimations of **transcendence** but rather by its confirmation of **immanence'**.

Simon Morley adds that we are looking at '**immanent transcendence** ... about a transformative experience that is understood as occurring within the here and now'.

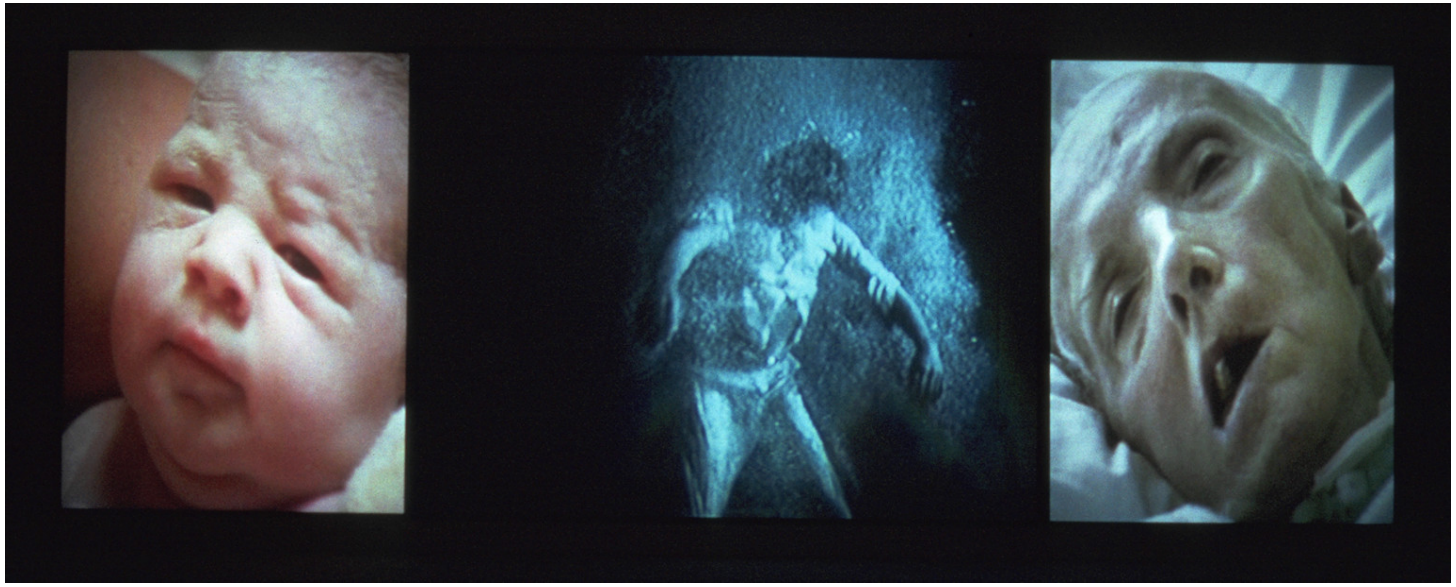


Bill Viola, *Five Angels for the Millennium* 2001, Tate T11805 © Bill Viola Studio

Visual Theology - Bill Viola and the Sublime



Five Angels for the Millennium 2001



Nantes Triptych, 1992

The Technological Sublime

The sublime is an aesthetic concept of ‘the exalted,’ of beauty that is grand and dangerous. Through 17th and 18th century European intellectual tradition, the sublime became intimately associated with nature.

Only in the 20th century, did the technological sublime replace the natural sublime. Have our sense of awe and terror been transferred to factories, war machines, and the unknowable, infinite possibilities suggested by computers and genetic engineering?

The 20th century marks a paradigm shift in humanities experience and connection to the world, away from the natural and toward a synthesised and enveloping relation with technology.

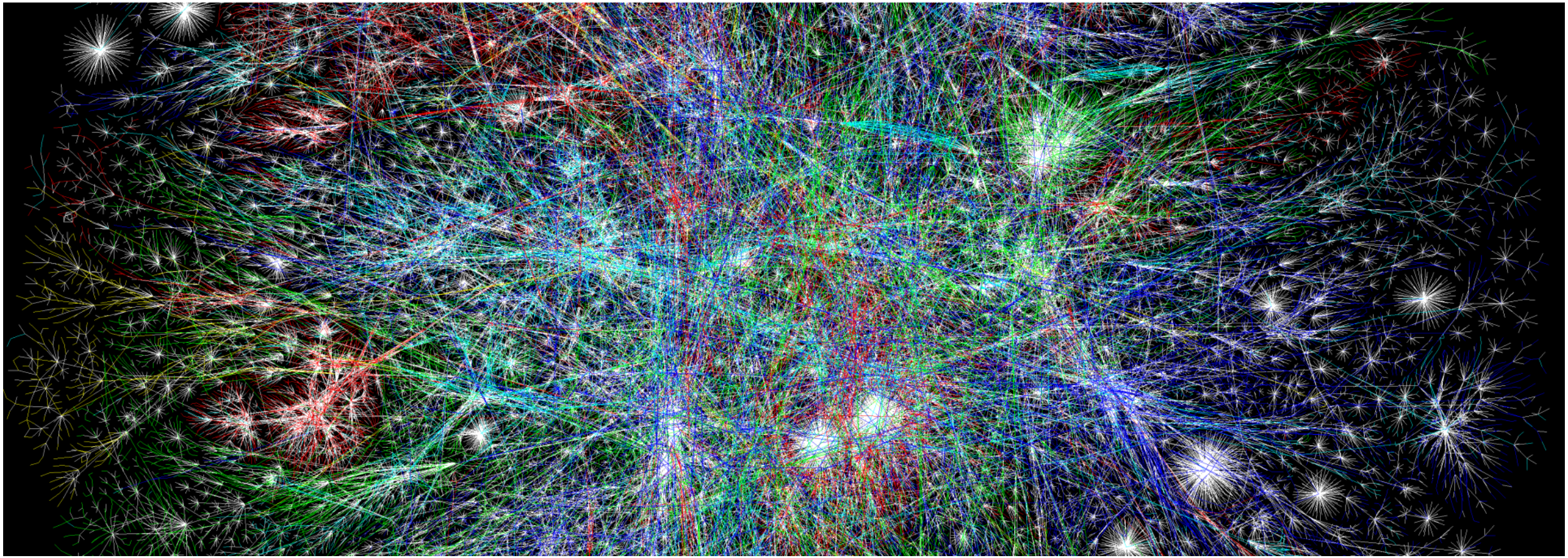
The Technological Sublime

- The sublime as expressed in nature such as the experience of Niagara Falls, gives way to a sense of the **sublime in relation to technology as in rockets, computers and genetic engineering**.

- Through the **industrial revolution** humanity with its inherent belief in progress found immense satisfaction in **overcoming nature** with bridges, factories and railroads etc.

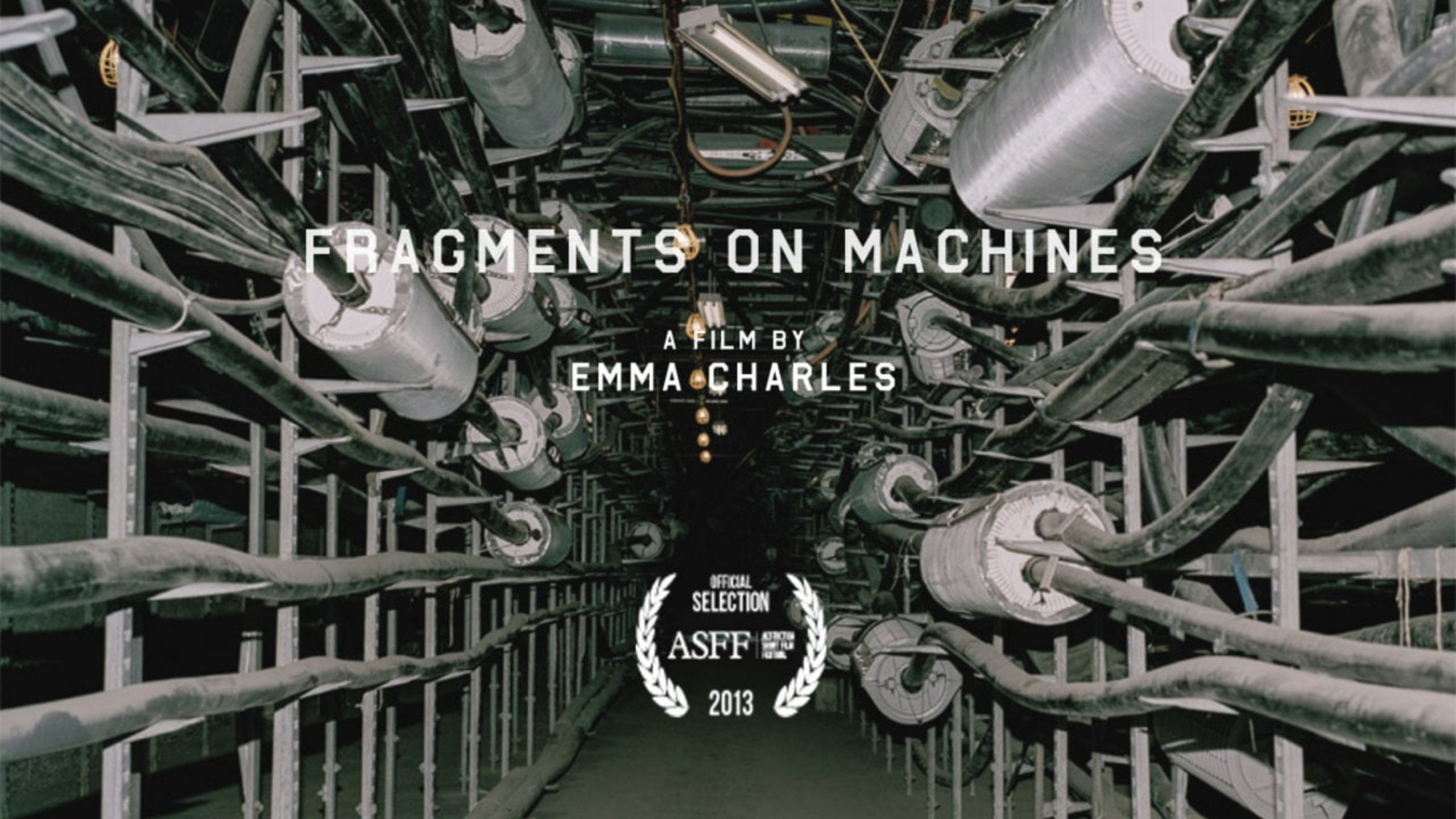
- However, a **contemporary or technological sublime** can be experienced in the early 21st Century as a feeling that humanity is exceeded by its own creation. Technology presents most of us with **a new 'unknowable', beyond our understanding**, consisting of infinite possibilities suggested by **computers, genetic engineering, quantum physics** etc.

The Internet – The Networked Society



The contemporary technological sublime finds expression in an affective combination of elevated emotion and banality – a combination in which the subject also **encounters the limits of the self.**

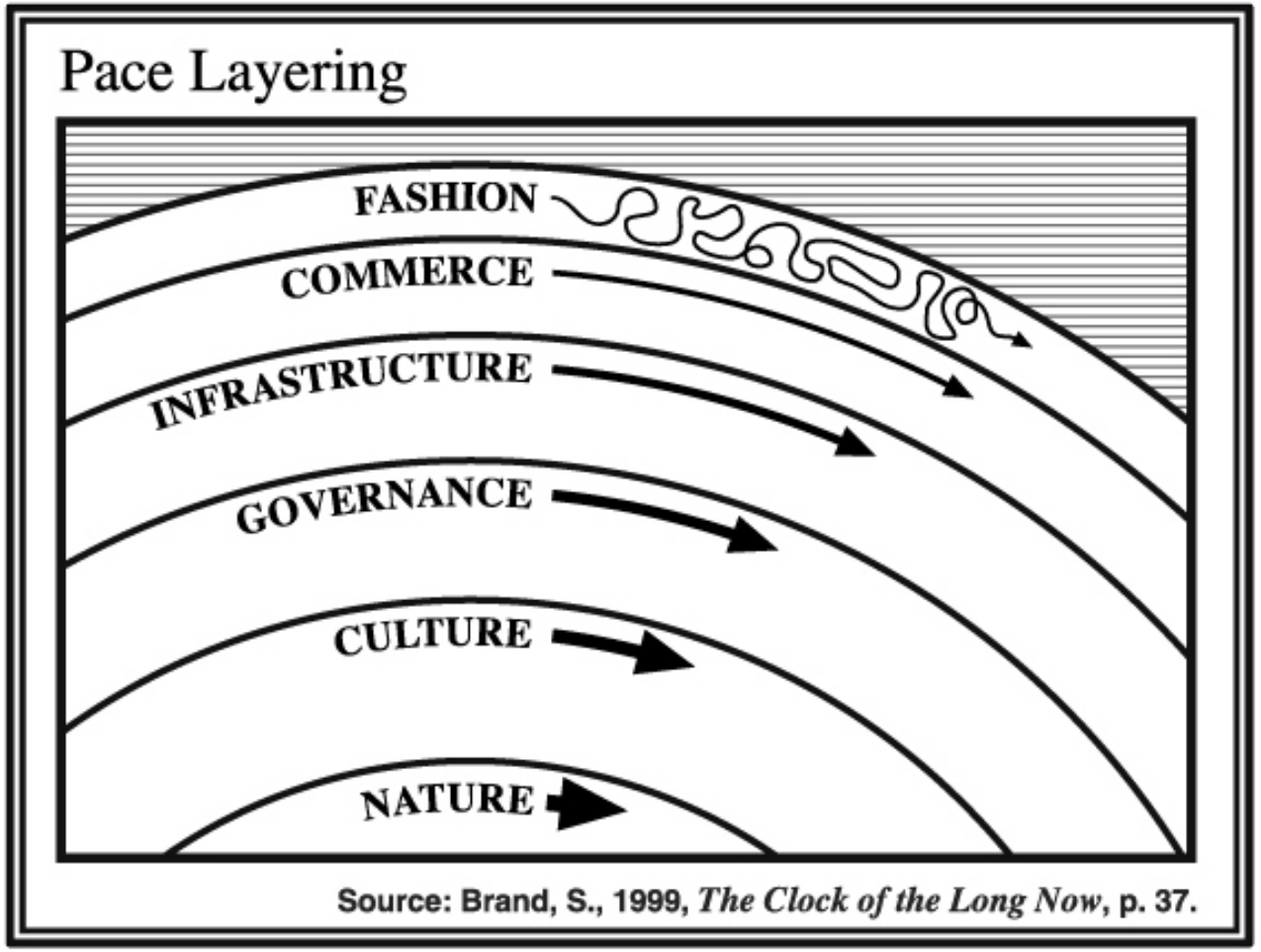
In relation to computers the sublime resides in the infinite number of combinations, which against human scale relegates us to a sense of limit and finitude.


FRAGMENTS ON MACHINES
A FILM BY
EMMA CHARLES
OFFICIAL
SELECTION
ASFF
2013

A Geology of Media and The Anthrobscene

Jussi Parikka

“**Smartphones, laptops, tablets, and e-readers** all at one time held the promise of a more environmentally healthy world not dependent on paper and deforestation.



Digital Rubbish

A Natural History of Electronics

Gabrys, Jennifer. *Digital rubbish: A natural history of electronics*. University of Michigan Press, 2011.

At the same time technology presents us with **a new form of banality**, which can be categorised as a combination of **anxiety and boredom.**



"Ephemeral Screens: Exchange at the Interface" which examines the computer screens used at the Nasdaq Stock Market as material fossils of economic exchange, the performativity of networks, and related cultural imaginaries.

The Contemporary Sublime

- By the 1980s critic **Fredric Jameson** stated that technology represented contemporary society's 'other'.

- **Eugenie Shinkle (2013)** says the technological sublime can be understood as 'the absence of a consistent and uniform boundary between the self and the machine'.

- 'While technology is an expression of the grandeur of the human intellect, we experience it more and more as a force that controls and threatens us'. – **Jos de Mul.**

TERROR

FORBIDDEN PLEASURES

AFTER 9/11: PHOTOGRAPHY, THE DESTRUCTIVE SUBLIME, AND THE POSTMODERN ARCHIVE

"9/11 wicked but a work of art, says"
Damien Hirst

The events of 9/11, he'd enthused, were "the greatest work of art imaginable for the whole cosmos." **Karlheinz Stockhausen**

Both artists later apologised for there remarks, although both of them were articulating the dark ambiguity of the sublime







Top: Thomas Cole, *The Course of Empire: Destruction*, 1836.

Below: A photograph of the aftermath of the attacks, September 2001.

SHOCK AND AWE

BEAUTIFUL BOMBS

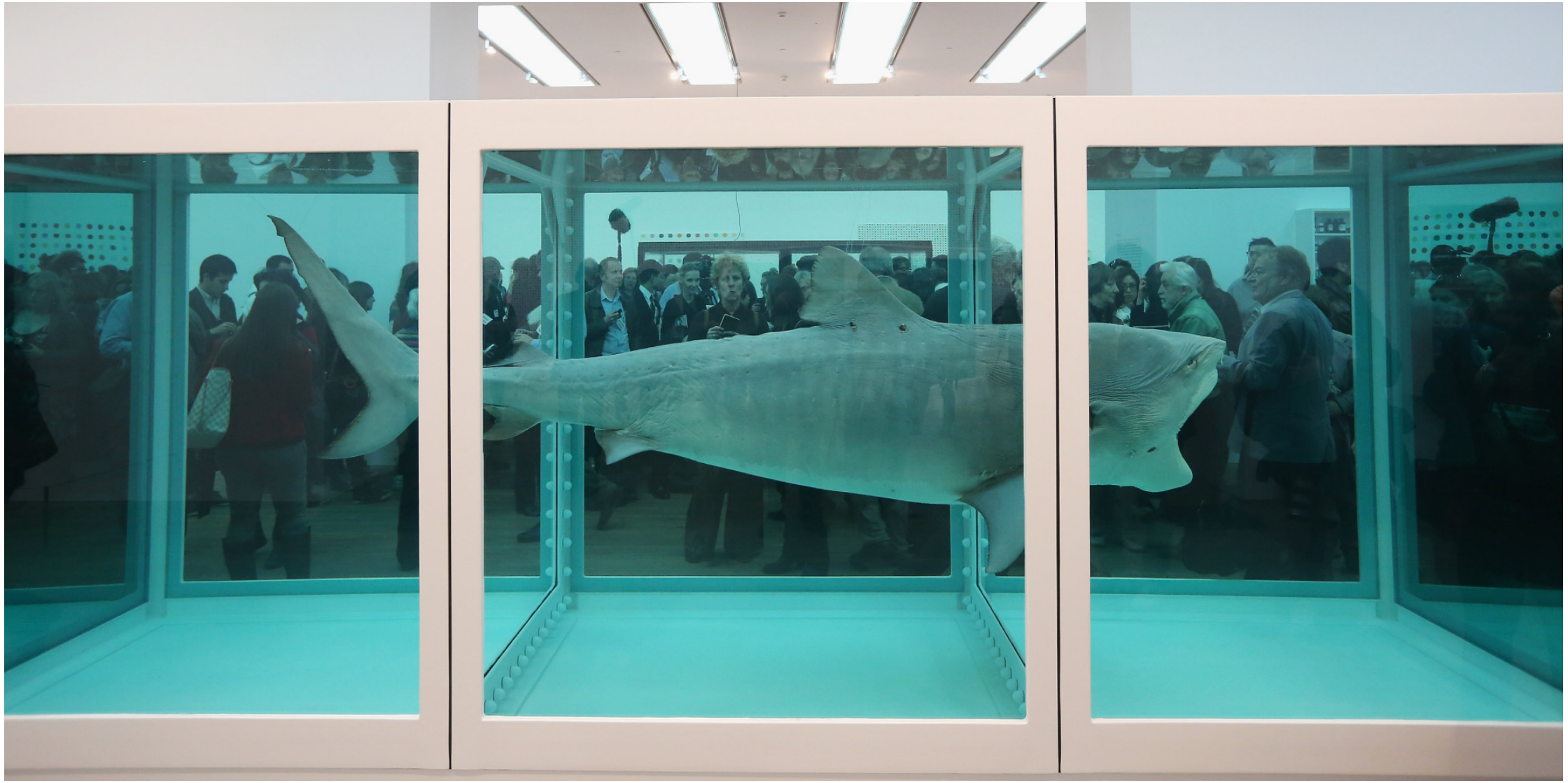
The terrible and the sublime

Edmund Burke









The Capitalist Sublime

The nature we meet in Hirst's art work is transformed…
a terrible sublimity of this new conception of nature.

GURSKY

The German photographer Andreas Gursky takes pictures of enormous spaces stock exchanges, skyscrapers, mountain peaks-in which crowds of people look tiny and relentless, making their presence felt in the world, like a minute, leisurely colony of ants.

Also like ants, these people appear to spend little time examining their own encroachment-architectural, technological, and personal-on the natural world.

In their determined, oblivious way, the people in his photographs make clear that there is no longer any nature uncharted by man. In place of nature we find the invasive landmarks of a global economy.

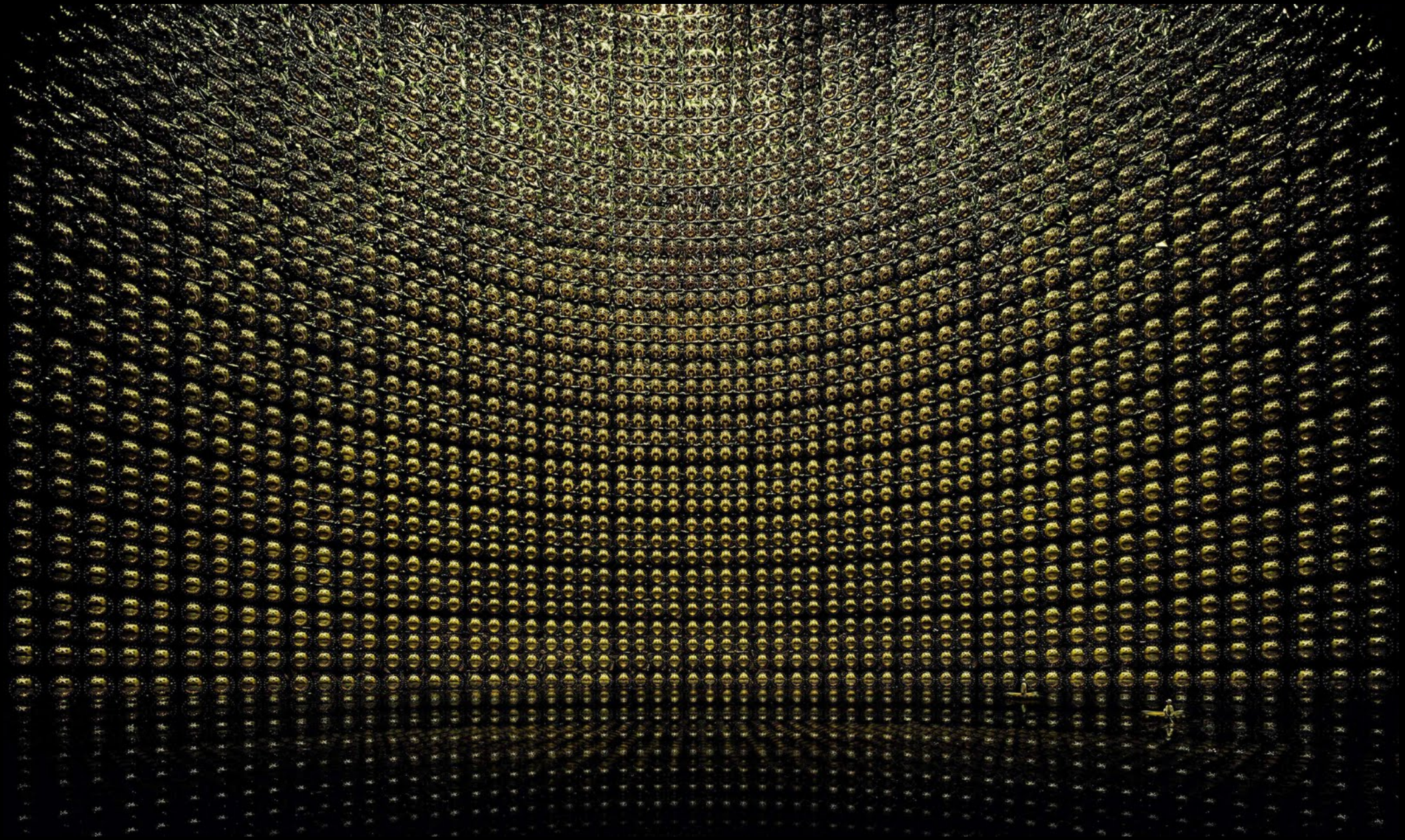
Taken as a whole, Gursky's work constitutes a map of the postmodern civilized world.



It's the inhumanity isn't it that suggests the sublime. We interpret the people as tiny and akin to making their presence felt in the world, like a minute, leisurely colony of ants. Is this not a landmark of a global economy and does not this work constitute a map of the postmodern civilized world?



https://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/whats-on/exhibitions/hayward-gallery-art/andreas-gursky



Subjugating the micro for the macro. Contriving the reality for the purpose of the image. Gursky



© Andreas Gursky/DACS, 2017?



The French philosopher **Jean-Luc Nancy** describes the sublime as being, ‘a feeling, and yet more than **a feeling in the banal sense**, it is **the emotion of the subject at the limit’.**

Jean-Luc Nancy, ‘The Sublime Offering’, in Jean-Francois Courtine (ed.), *Of the Sublime: Presence in Question*, trans. by Jeffrey S. Librett, Albany 1993, pp.44–48, 44.

It produces a **subjective situation** where one can perhaps encounter the limits of the self in a moment.

this **encounter** is with some thing or situation that **exceeds the ordinary**, that which also potentially **exceeds our understanding**.



Edward Burtynsky
Oil Spill #2, Discoverer Enterprise, Gulf of Mexico, May 11, 2010
Digital, colour print on paper



Edward Burtynsky
Oxford Tire Pile #8, Westley, California, USA 1999
Dye coupler print
68.6 x 86.4 cm
Courtesy Flowers Gallery, London © Edward Burtynsky






A FILM BY JENNIFER BAICHWAL, NICHOLAS DE PENCIER
AND EDWARD BURTYNSKY
ANTHROPOCENE
THE HUMAN EPOCH
NARRATED BY ALICIA VIKANDER
mongrel



Dark Ecology

For a Logic of Coexistence

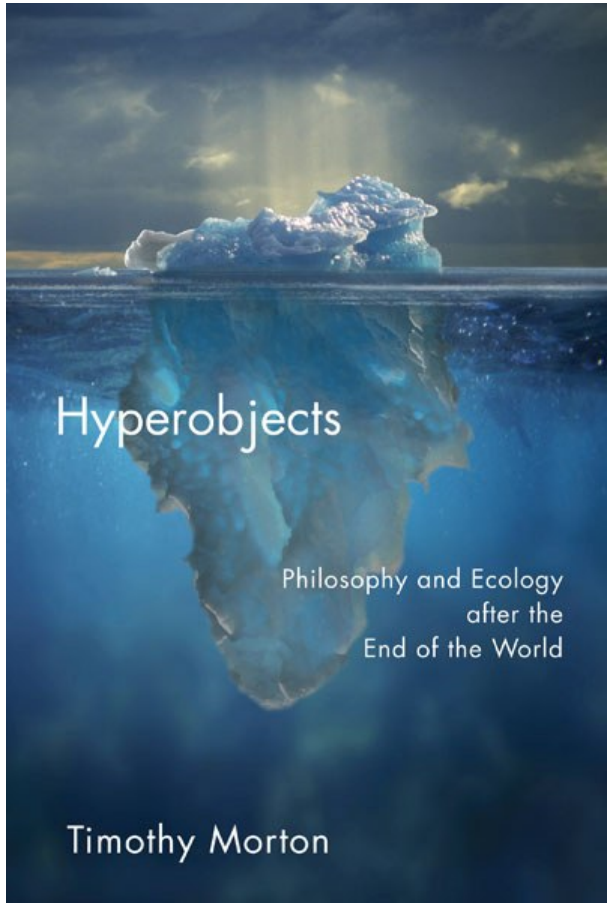
Timothy Morton



dark ecology does not mean heavy or bleak; it is strangely light

hyperobjects

timothy morton





Tara Donovan

JAMES TURRELL

COSMOLOGICAL | ASTRONOMICAL SUBLIME

James Turrell | Roden Crater



"My desire is to set up a situation to which I take you and let you see.
It becomes your experience."



Roden Crater | James Turrell

Sublime. The tremors of the world

From 11 February to 5 September 2016

The tremors of the world offers a dialogue between ancient and contemporary works. It explores the ambivalent and persisting attraction for the "**Nature too far**" and catastrophes.



Gathering over a hundred artists, architects, and filmmakers worldwide, from **Leonardo da Vinci to Rosa Barba, including, among others, William Turner, Susan Hiller, Dove Allouche, Werner Herzog, Lars von Trier, Robert Smithson, Agnes Denes, or Ana Mendieta, *Sublime.***

post-human sublime

Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe (1999) speaks of a **post-human sublime** that locates technology as a form of **non-organic being** that bears no relation to nature or the natural, and as a ‘trace’ of the human now out of its control.

Technology is both a post-human other and a part of everyday life

the **alliance of the sublime and the banal** is a consequence and a reflection of the ambivalent position of technology in contemporary culture.