

The theory of the Sublime

- And an introduction to the contemporary or technological sublime.

The sublime was experienced when a situation exceeded the limits of the understanding and sensibility. It can be seen as the failure of of the imagination to grasp things in their totality.

Aesthetics in the C18th 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.

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

It can be said that the sublime finds expression in an affective combination of elevated emotion and banality.

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.

Kant in *The Critique of Knowledge* (1790) tries to theorise the sublime, and comes up with 2 categories:
The 'mathematical sublime'
The 'dynamic sublime'.

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.

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'.

The C20th 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 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 C21st 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.

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.

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

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'.

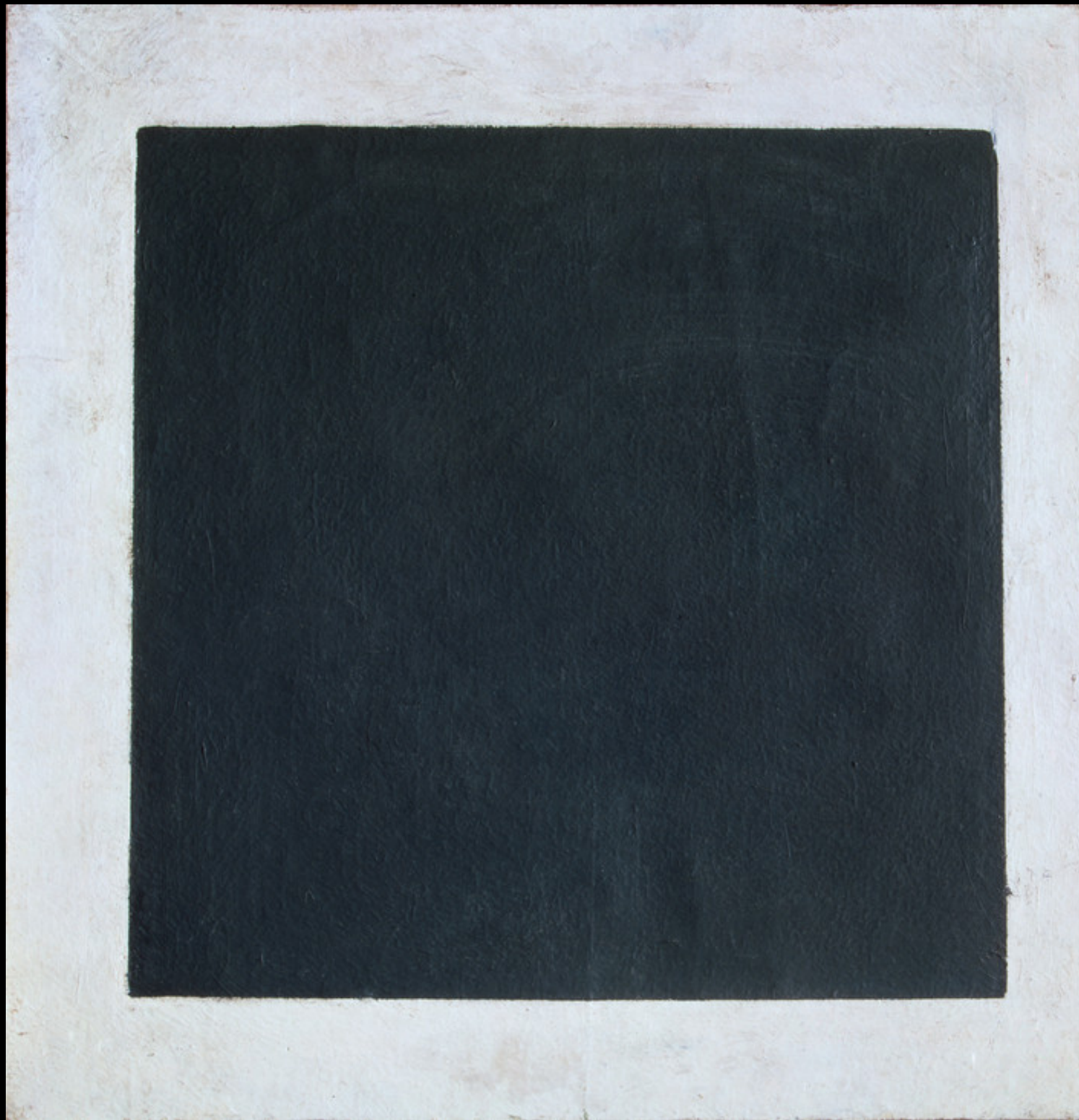
‘While technology is an expression of the grandeur of the human intellect, we experience it more and more as a force that controls and threatens us’. – Jos de Mul.

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.

The Intertwining of
Aesthetics and Ethics by
Jadranka Skorin-Kapov,
Jadr (2016)







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...













