

The Sublime

This exhibition is about the beautifully dangerous/ sublime. When you stare out into a raging storm you think two things:

1. How beautiful and unique it is and how lucky you are to witness such events
2. How lucky you are to be safe at shore and not amidst the terrifying spectacle in front of you.

This is the theme of my exhibition, and it's this idea/philosophy I will be exploring in this essay. I believe it is important to discuss this philosophy as with all the horrific scenes we see and hear everyday on the news there is still some kind of beauty within them, and this beauty is something we need to stay sane, because if you can't see the beauty in death then what is there to live for. For this exhibition I have chosen four artists and five pieces of art:

Joseph Mallord William Turner – 'Snow storm' & 'The Slave Ship' (1842), (1840)

Robert Capa – 'D-day landings' (1944)

Siegfried Sassoon – 'Suicide in the trenches' (1914-1918)

Roger Fenton – 'Valley of the shadow of death' (1855)

Throughout this essay I will be referencing several different philosophies and their ideas on this theme as well as touching on other similar themes, for instance I will be looking at Edmund Burke and his seminal work on the sublime.

The definition of Sublime art as theorised by Edmund Burke is "whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger... Whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror." (Burke, 1757) But he also believed there was

inherent pleasure in this emotion, to me this means that we can look at certain things of terror or danger and also see beauty and elegance, however Immanuel Kant the German Philosopher writes about how the sublime can be split into two forms the “Mathematical - if our ability to intuit is overwhelmed by size”, and the “Dynamical - if our ability to will or resist is overwhelmed by force” (Kant, 1961). Kant then writes that the sublime is not the storm or the building at all, nor any object but is in fact the “ideas of reason: namely, the ideas of absolute totality or absolute freedom” (Kant, 1799). He remarks that the sublime feeling is a kind of rapid alteration between the fear of the overwhelming and the pleasure of seeing that overwhelming overwhelmed. Within Kant’s work we find an interesting connection between the ideas of the sublime and morality, as Kant argues that the sublime experience wouldn’t be possible without the moral training we receive teaching us to recognize the importance of our own faculty.

Another philosopher who theorised about the sublime was Rudolf Otto again a German Philosopher. However, unlike Kant or Burke, Otto’s work with the sublime not entirely clear, in his writing he speaks about the sublime as virtually identical in content and structure to the numinous although he denotes it and calls it “authentic schema of the holy” (Otto, 1963). The bases of Otto’s work *Das Heilige* is to not only analyse the religious phenomenon he calls the “Numinous” but to try and produce it in his readers, and in doing so he creates a body of work that with its structure and content make it almost a history into the sublime.

In all of Edmund Burke’s writing his most acknowledged source of the sublime is nature, which he found created such immense forces that they easily invoked such feelings of despair and pleasure, resulting in his idea of the Sublime. Nature is a perhaps one of the most common sources of the sublime and is discussed by every philosopher I have researched and talked about, it is capable of such acts of devastation and chaos such as earthquakes, tornadoes, volcanos, storms, etc but these catastrophic events viewed from afar and when they don’t affect us are seen as wondrous and beautiful. In modern times we see more man-made devastation than natural with constant wars and

conflict but still within all this misery and suffering we come across those rare few photographs or art works that instil these feelings of the sublime inside us, and I believe it is incredibly important to have in these feelings especially in this modern world.

For my exhibition I have chosen to use the Mission gallery, mainly due to the architecture, as I like having the curved wall separated from the rest of the gallery, I feel it makes that part of the exhibition more immersive and gives me more options with combining certain artworks. For every piece of art, I plan on blowing them up to around A2 or A1, as most of them will have their own wall it would look nicer and as one of the main themes of the sublime is looking at the ideas of “eternity and infinity” the bigger the better.

The first artwork I chose was a piece by Joseph Mallord William Turner, ‘Snow Storm’. This piece depicts a beautiful raging snowstorm that is both deadly and elegant, and to me is the perfect example of The Sublime. Lots of Turners work is about nature and nearly always nature in turmoil, but I felt this piece stood out and was more unique. Later while thinking of another artists and artwork to include I stumbled upon another one of his pieces, ‘The Slave Ship’ and immediately knew to include it in my exhibition. This painting denotes a slavers ship being abused by the powerful waves around it and shows what we assume are slaves thrown over board in the murky ocean, the background is a beautiful golden sun rise that is in complete contrast with the scene below.

Next, I chose a poem by Siegfried Sassoon, ‘Suicide in the trenches’. Sassoon is one of my favourite poets and one of the first I ever read, his poems from WW1 are both beautiful and harrowing, and ‘Suicide in the trenches’ is no exception. The poem is about a young soldier in the trenches of WW1 who through the harsh winter shoots him self in the head, Sassoon then talks about all the people lucky enough not to be there “where youth and laughter go to die” (Sassoon, WW1). Although only a short poem it is beautifully written and conveys a multitude of emotions, we are saddened to hear

of this young smiling boy driven so far to commit suicide, but we also feel some pleasure in knowing we won the war, and we derive pleasure in a way from how its written.

‘Valley of the shadow of death’ is a photograph by Roger Fenton who is known as one of the first war photographers. The photograph was taken during the Crimean war in 1855; the location was named *Valley of the shadow of death* by British troops as it was under constant shelling from the Russians, it denotes the once scenic valley covered in cannonballs. The sublime nature of this photographs is how the picturesque landscape is, and how it’s also the setting for death and pain.

Robert Cappas infamous photographs from D-day show us a different perspective of one of the most historic days in modern history. While none really show us clearly the combat and the harrowing events of that day we still get a chilled felling from them. Cappa shot around 106 photographs that day but only 11 survived an accident at the photo lab, this makes these photographs even more impressive. The one I have chosen depicts a soldier crawling through the shallows of the ocean with sea blockades and other soldiers scatted in the background, the whole image is slightly blurred but this I feel helps create more of an atmosphere around the picture as you can imagine Cappa quickly firing of shots while being shot at himself.

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