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In Representing the Sublime, How Do Interstellar & Dune Differ?

The sublime is a philosophical concept that aims to explain that feeling of simultaneous attraction and rejection that the mind feels when experiencing something awe-inspiring and powerful “Whenever the power of an object or an event is such that words fail and points of comparison disappear, then we resort to the feeling of the sublime” (Shaw, 2006, p.2). This writing traverses the cinematic sublime, with special attention to the worlds of Dune & Interstellar.

In this writing we will see concepts explored such as Immanuel Kants dynamic sublime & natures relationship to the wonderful, along with ideas such as post-humanity and how the sublime fits in a world of distant technologies.

An investigation on whether sublimity is possible through the medium of film will take place, and the words of thinkers like Friederich Schiller will be of great importance as we weigh up his arguments against Kant and his theory of the “safe sublime”.

Regarding the case studies, it will be questioned how both Dune & interstellar represent the sublime via storytelling and visual language. It will be seen that Interstellar takes a more “traditional” approach to the sublime, choosing to display nature as the ultimate power, even in the vastness of space. Dune’s world, however, will evoke the sublime by transcending the current idea of humanity to a point of extreme unfamiliarity, where the only connection between us and them is the title of “human”. The horrors of technological advancement, and the prospect of intergalactic domestication of the human race, are notions that both films theorise upon and attempt to give perspective on.

This writing will explore the idea of the sublime within cinema and compare the representation of the sublime in two films, those being Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* (2015), & Denis Villeneuve's *Dune* (2021). The Sublime itself is the concept of an object that instils a sense of both awe & fear simultaneously, where the mind is both attracted & repulsed, the sublime *"takes possession of our attention, and all of our faculties, and absorbs them in astonishment"* (Ashfield & De Bolla, 1996, P.147). This essay will aim to prove that both *Interstellar* & *Dune* provide representations of the sublime, whilst also showing that the type of sublime they choose to represent differ. With *Interstellar* laying comfortably next to the ideologies of Kant and his "Mathematical & Dynamic" sublime concept, and *Dune* entering a lesser-known space within the sublime realm, that of the post-human sublime.

To most, the sublime is seen as an experience that the mind has, which leads to plenty of room for subjectivity within discussion of the sublime, Phillip Shaw believes that *"Certain objects become sublime as a result of association, or connection. A building, for example, though falling short of that 'largeness as constitutes the sublime', may yet raise ideas of riches, power, and grandeur... together these features form a code, which works like a language, to evoke a feeling of sublimity"* (Shaw, 2006, p.44). focussing on the word 'connection' many philosophers wrote on the sublime, saying that it was an effect caused by the object, and not a feeling that the mind subconsciously chose to experience. The same way feeling pain is an effect caused by having a bone broken, many thought that to experience the sublime was not up to the self, but up to the object to cause it. What Shaw says here however (and other writers have also exclaimed) is that the sublime *is* in fact a feeling that the mind chooses to experience, and these experiences can and will vary from person to person. To circle back to the case of subjectivity in this essay, some people may not find anything sublime about either film, since the sublime is all about the intermixing of love & fear, acceptance and rejection etc. One will not experience the sublime if they have no positive reaction to the object, as the positive and negative are eternally bound together when discussing the sublime. For the sake of this essay, it will have to be conceded that one can only experience the sublime within these films if they enjoy them, so moving forward any idea of either film successfully representing the sublime will be under the assumption that the subject of these sublime feelings must have positive feelings towards both films.

This essay will be written in accordance with the thinking that the sublime is a feeling produced by the mind and not an effect caused by an object, a seemingly never-ending mountain range can cause the mind to experience sublimity, but the mountain range itself is not a source of the sublime. The writings and arguments on the sublime made by Immanuel Kant & Edmund Burke will be of high importance when analysing our two films use of the sublime.

Edmund Burke (1729-1797) was of the belief that nature was the most sublime object, able of generating the strongest possible emotions in its beholders. Whilst Burke did ponder the link between the sublime and the mind of the beholder, it was Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) who set out to fully explore what happens to the mind when its borders of reason finds its limits. Kant declared that the sublime was not solely an effect caused by the sheer power of nature, but a feeling/experience of subjectivity that occurs within the mind. Burke, however, did not believe that the sublime was nothing but a side-effect of experiencing nature's destructive force. He argued that words held power *"to raise the idea of the sublime, such that the distinction between the sublime object and its description no longer applies; it is language, in other words, that brings about the transformation of the world, enabling us to hymn the vastness of the cathedral or the depths of*

the ravine" (Shaw, 2006, p.6). Whilst the idea of 'words' specifically holding power over the sublime may not be important when analysing the sublime representation in a film, it is key that we look at this quote, and this ideology in general, as a thought on language as a whole. Films speak to the audience through visual language, whether this be shot composition, set design etc. In an article on the sublime, Dwight Goodyear shows us 3 separate shots of the Pyramids of Giza to explain the idea of distance, in regard to experiencing the sublime (Goodyear, 2019)





The Article suggests that the final image would be the ideal view of the pyramids in order to experience sublimity, explaining that the time the eye would take to comprehend the lower tiers of the structure would be partly forgotten by the imagination by the time the eye has reached the apex of the pyramid, meaning that the full comprehension of the tower would never reach completion within the mind, leading to a lack of full understanding, leading to a sublime experience. This practice of theory displays the importance of how an object is shot on film in accordance with how likely this object is to exhibit sublime qualities.

Kant theorised the idea of how it is possible to experience the sublime from a safe distance. Friederich Schiller (1759-1805) disagreed with this sentiment, believing that feeling endangered was an integral piece to experiencing the sublime. This will prove to be incredibly important for discussion on sublime within film, as us, the audience, are unable to feel endangered when watching a film. Humans can feel every emotion whilst experiencing film, they can even feel endangered, to some extent. However, the unconscious mind is aware that a certain level of endangerment is not possible when watching a film, and therefore the human mind is unable to experience the sublime through film. This is where it is key to state that we are analysing the representation of the sublime experience through film *"All human experience takes place through representation, and that all representation is some kind of system which has the effect of creating meaning"* (Pajackowska, 2009, p.243). This essay is not attempting to state that the audience can experience the sublime via a film. The only semblance of sublime that the audience could experience, would be vicariously through a character in the film. By attempting to imagine themselves in a certain situation, the human viewer could reach some level of endangerment and wonder, but not enough to experience true sublimity. This writing will refer to the audience as experiencing the sublime when analysing our case studies, however, it is more akin to the audience acknowledging the possibility of sublime feelings, rather than genuinely feeling endangered by the scenes that will be discussed. Circling back to film language and the importance of staging an object correctly to convey the sublime, the audience is living vicariously through our film characters, meaning that they are less likely to feel any sort of sublime experience if the film stages our character far from the object that could possibly be the source of sublimity. If a character on screen is looking at a skyscraper, from a far enough distance that they can view it in its entirety, this means the character will not experience any level of sublime, therefore the audience certainly will not either.

The Kantian idea of the sublime, that of the Mathematical & Dynamic will be of great use during this writing. The Mathematical sublime preludes to the idea of unfathomably large numbers, and the concept of infinitude, whereas the dynamic sublime encompasses the superiority

that nature and its sheer power has over humanity. Due to the nature of the stories told in Dune and Interstellar, and the heavy inclusion of space and the universe, the mathematical sublime will be heavily talked about within this essay. The dynamic sublime may be discussed to a lesser degree, however it's importance is a level equal to the mathematical sublime. This is due to the technological & posthuman sublime we see in Dune. The civilisations we see in Dune have (for the most part) overcome nature's power as they conquer galaxies and build ships big enough to affect ecosystems, meaning the dynamic sublime will make way for other sublimities within Dune.

The world of Dune is one that has reached a state of post-humanity, as whilst the characters of this world still refer to themselves as the human race, they have vastly transcended to a different level of being than that of current day humanity. Dune's humanity and our modern-day humanity are incredibly detached from one another as concepts. Taking place 20,000 years in the future, the abilities that the 'humans' of Dune possess seem otherworldly, from the Bene Gesserit order and their "voice" of manipulation, to the human computers known as the "Mentat". Even the spaceship pilots of this universe must use 'spice' (a galactic drug that induces psychedelia) in order to enhance their navigation abilities. From a first thought, these powers seem as fantastical and unrealistic as the likes of Spider-man and The Hulk. However, when met with the idea that showing a human of 1000 years ago something like an iPhone would seem like witchcraft to them, the question begins to arise, could we end up like the humanity shown in Dune? We only must go back to 2007 to see the invention of the iPhone, so 20,000 years of human evolution could lead to all manner of currently unfathomable things. This is where we could see a psychological sublime take effect, as the thought of humanity one day becoming so detached from what is our current idea of humanity is astonishing from a technological progression perspective, yet from the viewpoint of life quality and the human experience, Existing in the world of Dune seems dangerous and terrifying.

The Technological sublime seeps through Dune's entire ethos, with all aspects of its world design being that of a civilisation/s that is/are clearly working on a higher scale from an engineering and scientific perspective than humanity currently is. We quickly see that this world has become one where *"The power of divine nature has been transferred to the power of human technology"* (De Mul, 2011). The Architecture (be that of Buildings or Vehicles) of Dune quickly enter the world of the weird & eerie due to our unfamiliarity with such design. These spaceships we see are impossibly large, which along with the movements of these ships, causes the human mind to struggle with comprehension. The largest of the vehicles we see in this film move as if they do not follow the laws of physics (the laws that current day humanity know at least), no plumes of smoke billow from their underbellies as they generate enough force to leave the ground. They instead silently float upwards into the sky, leaving no mark on the ground despite their scale. The combination of their odd design and somewhat magical methods of traversal creates an incredibly uneasy feeling in the viewer. Phillip Shaw's words *"The terror of the sublime is brought about through its relation with the real"* (Shaw, 2006, p.147) states that the sublime & reality, more specifically the mind's concept of reality, are inherently linked. We are aware that vehicles can't move how some do in Dune, however, remembering that this world is 20,000 ahead of us, the mind reasons that this may be a possibility in the future of humanity, via groundbreaking discoveries in physics and engineering. But due to modern technologies inability to recreate the ships we see on screen, these vehicles still seem otherworldly, the mind can't connect the dots on how they function whilst being so massive in size. The ships we see are just one instance of technology in Dune being incomprehensible in the current day human mind, therefore evoking a constant sense of technological sublimity.

One of the most striking images within the entire runtime of Dune is seen near the

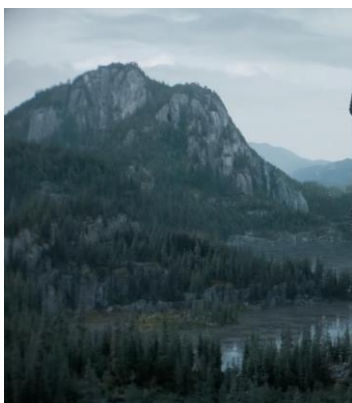
beginning, and sets the scale for the rest of the film, showing us the level & size of design/engineering that this world deals in.



This shot does a fantastic job of showcasing the scale of this universe, with 3 main elements making up this composition. The object of the shot; the ship



The crowd of 100's of humans standing below the ship



And the natural objects in the shot; the mountains and the forests

These 3 separate parts of the shot all come together to create scale in a very tangible and believable way, as we humans can imagine vividly, the size of objects such as trees, mountains/hills, and of course the human body itself. This shot, out of context, could still evoke a feeling of sublimity due to the sheer power and scale on show, however, it's when given the context of the story, that this images powerful effect begins to fully realise. This moment in the story is when the audience are first introduced to the name "Shaddam IV" who is said to be the "emperor of the known universe". This massive ship belongs to him, and it surely is no coincidence that the first time the audience see

a ship of this size, it is one that belongs to the ruler of this story's universe. *“Whilst narrative structure predates and out spans its specifically cinematic form, there is no doubt that the cinematic plotting of stories has particular power and significance”* (White & Pajackowska, 2009, p.242). Knowing that this ship belongs to the most powerful being in the Dune universe, uses the human relation between size & power to create a sublime effect.

One of the most famous art works on the sublime is Joseph Wright Of Derby's (1734-1997) “Vesuvius in Eruption, with a View over the Islands in the Bay of Naples” (Wright, 1776). This painting depicts the destructive power of a volcano and comparing that to the insignificance of humanity via the small group of people in the foreground. When placing this painting, and the previously mentioned shot in Dune side-by-side, it would not be surprising if Director Denis Villeneuve & Cinematographer Greig Fraser were directly influenced by this painting. As previously mentioned, the shot from Dune contains 3 main elements; The source of the sublime (the ship), The depiction of human insignificance (the crowd), & the natural element for comparison (the mountains). Vesuvius in eruption also contains these 3 main elements to create an image that strikes the viewer and evokes that sublime feeling. Those 3 elements being the erupting volcano (sublime source), the small group of people (human depiction), & the blue, moonlit lake (natural element).



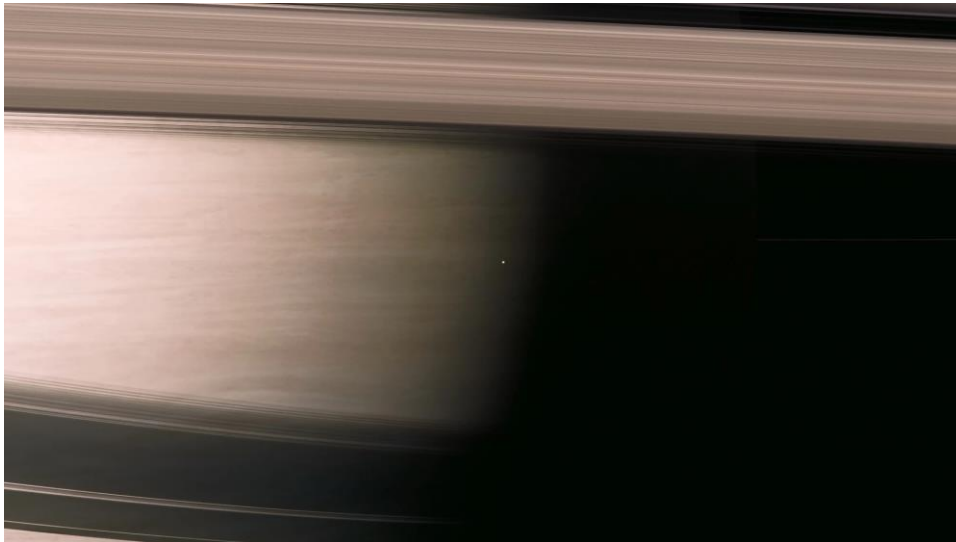
It is no coincidence that despite being created over 200 years apart, both these sublime evoking images are strikingly similar in their composition and element inclusion. This comparison tells us that the sublime, whilst an ever-evolving topic in the world of art & philosophy, still adheres to certain concepts and ideas, and humanity has, does, and will always chase the sublime feeling. *“The concept of the sublime then describes how these thoughts and feelings coexist in the ecstasy the great culture can create in its audiences”* (Pajackowska, 2009, p.248)

Interstellar & Dune's sublimines may have common themes, due to both stories taking place largely in the vacuum of space, However, whilst Dune exudes technological sublimity from every angle, Interstellar approaches this concept from a more natural perspective. Dune takes place in the far future, whereas Interstellar's story is set in 2067. This means that the technology shown in

interstellar is far less comprehension breaking than that of dune, as the greatest piece of technology we see in interstellar is most likely the robotic assistants TARS & CASE who are merely beings of Artificial Intelligence. Whilst we may not have machines of this calibre in 2023, humanity is not so far from achieving such technology that this level of advancement shown in the film enters the sublime.

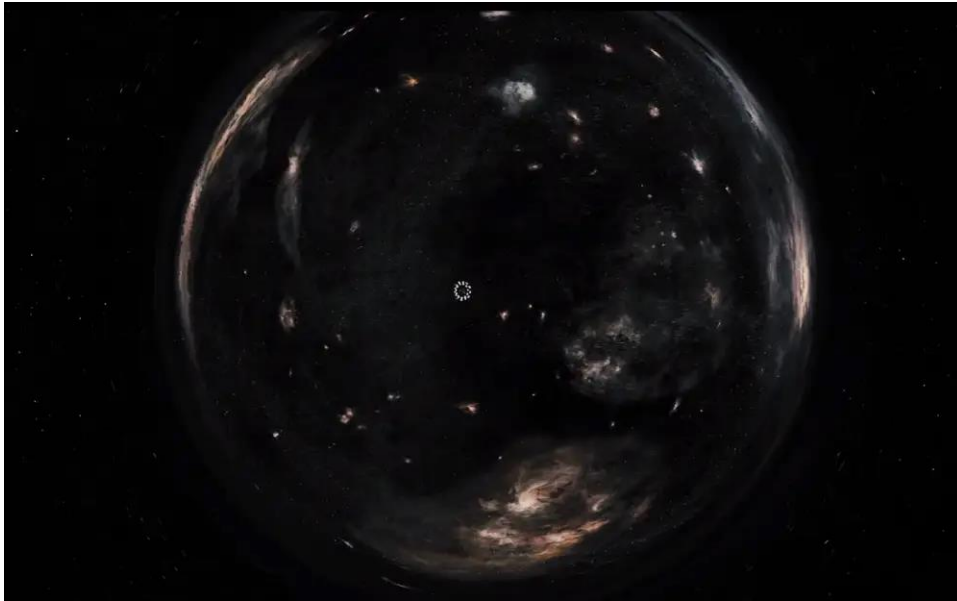
The closest thing Interstellar depicts to the technological sublime is the tesseract we see Cooper enter towards the end of the film. However, this piece of “technology” was created by 5 dimensional beings, so, the existence of the tesseract does certainly enter the sublime space, as we can’t even perceive the object fully, due to our 3-dimensional constraints. The tesseract may veer towards an astronomical sublime, rather than the technological, the Venn diagram of this however is quite close to being a singular circle.

Interstellar does a wonderful job of gradually exposing the audience to the scale of the universe, using its story progression to take a step up in awe-inspiring imagery every so often even as the core group of astronauts leave earth behind, watching the rock they call home spin in the foreground of a black surrounding, it is not until they reach Saturn where the sublime effect of interstellar’s imagery truly begins to take effect.



In this shot we immediately notice the gas giant looming in the background, with it’s iconic rings above. It is only via closer inspection that we realise Saturn is only being used in this shot as an object for scale comparison. In the centre of the shot is what could easily be mistaken for a dead pixel, it is however, the ship our characters are stationed on. The idea of being face to face with a planet that is 9x the size of earth is our first exchange with the dynamic sublime within space in Interstellar. *“An encounter with a ‘dynamically sublime’ object makes us quail in the face of an object so mighty that it causes our imagination to turn to our own mortality”* (Chua, 2009, p.52).

It is no coincidence however, that the two most sublime moments within Interstellar and its scale progression, both involve the idea of “holes” in space, which itself is a sentence one could lose themselves in with minimal effort. The first of these holes being the wormhole that the crew use to access a new galaxy that houses planets capable of holding life. As an audience, we are used to seeing space, galaxies, nebulae etc. As flat backgrounds, a painting for our spaceships to travel across. The wormhole, however, is an object that folds space-time, creating a shortcut through millions of lightyears. Visually, this meant depicting the commonly flat spread of space, as a ball, or more accurately, a tunnel.



In this shot, the mind is attempting to comprehend a “ball of space”. Wormholes are currently solely theoretical, so seeing one depicted so realistically is difficult to make sense of.

The largest evoker of the sublime in *Interstellar* however, is the black hole ‘Gargantua’ that is a catalyst for so much of the tension and conflict of the story. In likeness to the ship, we saw in *Dune* belonging to the “emperor of the known universe”, and how that evokes power, despite use never meeting the emperor, before we ever even see Gargantua for the first time, we are told of its immense power. As previously stated, a hole in space-time is a concept one struggles to comprehend, and with the wormhole, the mind can reason with itself and argue that wormholes are not proven real, so any level of anxiety or terror is unnecessary. The same cannot be said about black holes, as they are proven to exist. At the centre of every galaxy a black hole lies, a force so strong it creates these galaxies. Gargantua is the ultimate power within *Interstellar*'s story, a force of nature so destructive it is essentially the antagonist of the film, causing most of the problems throughout. With their existences clouded in mystery, black holes are arguably the most sublime object, especially in the context of Kant's Dynamical sublime concept, *“It is a horror that has already occurred, not one in its unfolding, and it is not one graspable by human reason”* (Leslie, 2009, P.37)

So far, we have largely discussed certain visuals that have the ability to create sublimation in the viewer, however, it must be stated that, like all other emotional states, sublimity is not only caused through visual stimuli. *Interstellar* is full of religious links and ideologies, and nothing more so than its soundtrack (composed by long time Nolan collaborator Hans Zimmer). With its lead instrument being a church organ, the music of *Interstellar* brings with it heavy themes of awe, fascination, and sublimity through religious aspects. One key point of the score is how stripped back it can be compared to other film music that may be regarded as “epic”. The music of this film has been spoken of highly, with such statements as *“If wonder could be translated into pure music, then that’s basically what Hans Zimmer’s score for Interstellar is.”* (Murdoch, 2021). The use of the word ‘wonder’ is very important as wonder is a feeling inherently linked to the sublime. The sublime is a feeling that leaves the self unable to comprehend, and therefore unable to communicate one's feelings. The mind is defeated, *“Yet through this very defeat, the mind gets a feeling for that which lies beyond thought and language”* (Shaw, 2006, p.2). The idea of being “left speechless” is one of sublime feeling, and *Interstellar*'s score instils this speechless feeling, with its soft, sometimes almost empty soundscape, the music of *Interstellar* itself feels speechless, only saying what it must, instead of bombarding the audience with sounds, telling them how to feel. In a religious context, the

sublime was originally seen as one experiencing a glimpse of gods true power, and completely giving themselves up to this feeling. The soundtrack evokes this same divine feeling, as the audience allows the film and the music to devour them whole, enveloping every sensibility with this awe that the music summons.

Interstellar is a story that travels beyond the idea of humanity, and Nolan believes that this very concept is in itself, religious. *"I wanted to use the church organ. I also made the case very strongly for some feeling of religiosity to it, even though the film isn't religious, but that the organ, the architecture, cathedrals and all the rest, they represent mankind's attempt to portray the mystical or metaphysical, what's beyond us, beyond the realm of the everyday"* (Nolan, 2015)

In exploring these films and their relationships with the sublime, we can see that from near to far distant futures, even at a time where one human can rule the "known universe", Nature is still arguably the most important feature of experiencing and representing the sublime. Interstellar contains 5th dimensional beings who dictate certain events of the film, but even the wormhole that they created is simply them distorting nature. Gargantua is even more proof of nature's importance to the sublime, being the source of terror felt for most of the film. Black holes are at the top of the chain in terms of destructive force, and yet it's the unanswered mysteries surrounding them that spark such wonder in the human mind. Even in a seemingly pure technological world of Dune, we still see nature being used for size comparison as it is nature itself that the humans of Dune have sought to conquer.

Films are an effective way to experience a "safe sublime" and live certain scenarios vicariously through the on-screen character, and filmmaking brings forward the minds want to experience the difficult *"We're all obsessed with spectacles and we all secretly hope to witness some outrageous moment...even if doing so is dangerous"* (Burns, 2022)

The sublime reaches all corners of art, with its representation in film being the most tangible idea of sublimity. The sublime within film leaves less to the imagination than other mediums would, due to the motion aspect that films bring to art, and this overall may be a detriment on the sublime experience. The sublime is a feeling that greatly benefits from a lack of information and understanding. It is a feeling that *"emerges in moments of blockage and frustration; it is an architecture that gestures towards the absence of something much greater"* (Shaw, 2006, p.7) and the sheer amount of information that a multiple minute film scene gives the audience compared to an impressionistic painting of a sublime experience (think Joseph Turners "Snow Storm - Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth" (Turner, 1842).

In representing the sublime, Interstellar transcends humanity via space and its size, power, mystery etc. Space is an abyss of secrets, with many of them likely never being unlocked by humanity, and this lack of information leads to space and its objects being one of the most unfathomable concepts. Dune transcends humanity via its own representation of humanity and showing the audience a species of wildly varying creatures and still tarring them all with the same brush, referring to them all as "humans". The prospect of humans reaching the level of advancement that the world of Dune does is incomprehensible, and therefore enters the world of sublimity.

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