



rethinking the sublime

the sublime – a contemporary retrospective

Lecture 9 Essay Seminar | Coexistent Perspectives (ADAA7000)

Question 3. Space and Place: *How do contemporary creative practices engage with the politics and poetics of space, including questions of displacement, postcolonial geography, affective architectures, or the uncanny? What critical frameworks can be used to analyse these spatial imaginaries?*

Question 4. Time, Memory and the Archive: *In what ways do contemporary artists and designers reimagine time, memory, and archival practice, whether through repetition, rupture, slowness, or non-linear temporality? How do these temporal aesthetics intersect with cultural, technological, or historical concerns?*

Essay Examples 1. Olafur Eliasson — “The Weather Project” (2003): The Immersive and Participatory Sublime



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Essay Question

How does Olafur Eliasson’s large-scale installation practice transform the Romantic sublime into a participatory, spatial experience of collective awe and ecological awareness?

Essay Thesis

In works such as *The Weather Project*, Eliasson re-activates the Romantic sublime within an urban interior, replacing nature’s transcendence with an immanent experience of light, scale, and atmosphere. By situating viewers inside the phenomenon rather than before it, he converts the Kantian “safe distance” into a social, bodily encounter — an aesthetic of shared finitude and environmental interdependence.

Core Theories:

Edmund Burke (terror and awe), Immanuel Kant (mathematical sublime), Jean-François Lyotard (the unrepresentable), Doreen Massey (relational space), Henri Lefebvre (space as lived and produced)

Outline Structure

1. **Introduction** – Define the sublime; trace from Burke/Kant to Lyotard’s postmodern sublime.
2. **Theoretical Context** – Burke’s terror, Kant’s mathematical vastness, Lyotard’s “unrepresentable,” Lefebvre’s lived space.
3. **Analysis** – *The Weather Project* (2003), *Your Blind Passenger* (2010); phenomenology, scale, participation.
4. **Conclusion** – Eliasson as re-spatialising the sublime: from vertical transcendence to horizontal coexistence.

Essay Example 2. James Turrell — “Roden Crater” (1974–ongoing): The Cosmological Sublime and the Architecture of Perception



Essay Example 2. James Turrell — “Roden Crater” (1974–ongoing): The Cosmological Sublime and the Architecture of Perception

Essay Question

In what ways does James Turrell’s *Roden Crater* project materialise the sublime through light, architecture, and cosmological orientation?

Essay Thesis

Turrell’s manipulation of celestial light and geologic scale realises what Kant termed the “mathematical sublime”: an encounter with infinity mediated by perception itself. Transforming a volcanic crater into a sensory observatory, Turrell’s practice fuses the phenomenological body with cosmic immensity, producing what Barnett Newman called the “here-and-now” sublime — transcendence made immanent through architectural space.

Core Theories:

Kant (mathematical/dynamic sublime), Barnett Newman (“The Sublime is Now”), Merleau-Ponty (phenomenology of perception), Gaston Bachelard (poetics of space)

Outline Structure

- 1. Introduction** – Outline the sublime as the limit of comprehension; introduce Turrell’s light architecture.
- 2. Theoretical Context** – Kant’s sublime, Merleau-Ponty’s embodiment, Bachelard’s poetic interiority.
- 3. Analysis** – *Roden Crater*, *Skyspaces* series; sensory calibration, temporality, and perception.
- 4. Conclusion** – Turrell’s cosmic phenomenology as spatial embodiment of the modern sublime.

Essay Example 3. Edward Burtytsky — “Oil” / “Anthropocene”: The Technological and Ecological Sublime



Essay Example 3. Edward Burtynsky — “Oil” / “Anthropocene”: The Technological and Ecological Sublime

Essay Question

How does Edward Burtynsky’s large-scale photographic practice visualise the technological sublime within the Anthropocene landscape?

Essay Thesis

Burtynsky’s aerial images of extraction sites and industrial sprawl reframe the Romantic landscape as a post-natural terrain of human excess. His monumental compositions evoke both awe and dread — a “technological sublime” (Jameson) in which the viewer confronts their own implication in planetary transformation. The resulting spatial imaginary is one of *dark ecology* (Morton): beauty and catastrophe entwined.

Core Theories:

- Fredric Jameson (technological sublime), Jussi Parikka (*Geology of Media*),
- Timothy Morton (dark ecology, hyperobjects), Eugene Thacker (*world-without-us*), Jean-Luc Nancy (the limit of the self)

Outline Structure

1. **Introduction** – Define the technological/Anthropocene sublime.
2. **Theoretical Context** – Jameson’s technological sublime; Morton’s hyperobjects; Parikka’s deep-time materiality.
3. **Analysis** – *Oil Spill* #2 (2010), *Tailings* #34 (1996), *Anthropocene* (2018); scale, aerial perspective, ethical spectatorship.
4. **Conclusion** – Burtynsky’s work as spatial ethics: the sublime as confrontation with our industrial unconscious.

Artist	Type of Sublime	Spatial Focus	Key Theorists	Keywords
Olafur Eliasson	Participatory / Eco-Sublime	Immersive installation, phenomenological space	Burke, Kant, Lyotard, Lefebvre	Light, Atmosphere, Collectivity
James Turrell	Cosmological / Phenomenological Sublime	Architectural and celestial space	Kant, Newman, Merleau-Ponty	Perception, Infinity, Light
Edward Burtynsky	Technological / Anthropocene Sublime	Industrial and planetary space	Jameson, Morton, Parikka	Scale, Extraction, Catastrophe