



rethinking the sublime
the sublime – a contemporary retrospective

Lecture 9 | Coexistent Perspectives (ADAA7000)

what is the sublime?

A word that is much used and abused....

A word whose common usage has been trivialised...

‘A sublime free kick!’ – match commentary, every weekend



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 exceeds the limits of the understanding and sensibility: the failure of the imagination to grasp things in their totality.

...and then, for Kant, **reason rebounds**: the mind discovers in itself a power greater than nature.

rethinking the sublime: today's route

Aim: to trace how the sublime moves from nature to art, technology, capital and the planet, and to ask who gets to stand at a safe distance.

	Block	Theory	Practice
01	Origins	Longinus · Burke · Kant	Friedrich
02	Who stands on the rock?	Wollstonecraft · Eagleton · Irigaray · Freeman · Battersby	Friedrich, revisited
03	Painting the storm	Kant's safe distance · Schiller	Martin · Wright of Derby · Turner · Akomfrah
04	Scale	the sublime and the picturesque	Ansel Adams · Carleton Watkins
05	Finitude	Lyotard · Newman · Shaw · Morley	Malevich · Newman · Viola
06	The machine	Nye · Jameson · Shinkle · Parikka · Gabrys · Crawford	Hine · Emma Charles · Anadol · Eliasson
07	Terror	Burke · Battersby · 'shock and awe'	Cole · Hirst · Gursky
08	No safe distance	Nancy · Peebles · Morton	Burtynsky · Donovan
09	Cosmological	the cosmic sublime	Turrell

Content note: today includes images of the 9/11 attacks, the 2003 bombing of Baghdad, nuclear explosions, child labour, the slave trade, and a video work showing a mother's death. If anything is difficult, step out: you don't need to explain.

01

ORIGINS

LONGINUS | BURKE | KANT

Theory: Longinus · Burke · Kant

Practice: Caspar David Friedrich

Why would anyone enjoy being terrified?

the Sublime

an evolving concept, shaped by its historical-cultural context

From the Latin *sublimis*: raised up, lofty.

‘Whenever experience slips out of conventional understanding, whenever the power of an object or event is such that **words fail and points of comparison disappear**, then we resort to the feeling of the sublime.’

Philip Shaw, *The Sublime* (2006), p. 2

The sublime as concept and cultural practice has played a central role in western understanding, engaging **aesthetic, spiritual and ethical values**: from the mid-17th-century translations of **Longinus**, to the **Burkean and Kantian sublimities** of the proto-Romantic and Romantic periods, via 19th-century concerns with science and theology, to recent theoretical writing. Tate, *The Art of the Sublime* research project



Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, c. 1817–18, Hamburger Kunsthalle

Long Live Longinus!

On the Sublime (Peri Hypsous)

A Greek treatise of the 1st century CE on **elevated style in speech and writing**. Its author is unknown ('Pseudo-Longinus').

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

Longinus, *On the Sublime* §35 (trans. W. H. Fyfe)

Landscape arrives later, when 18th-century travellers crossing the Alps borrowed Longinus's words: 'a delightful Horror, a terrible Joy' (John Dennis, 1688).



Edmund Burke

Edmund Burke (1729–97), *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757).

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**; that is, it is productive of the **strongest emotion** which the mind is capable of feeling' (Part I, §7).

But only at a distance: 'When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight... but **at certain distances**, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful.'

His word for it: *delight*, 'a sort of **delightful horror**'.



John Henry Foley, *Edmund Burke* (1868), Trinity College Dublin. Burke drafted a plan for the gradual abolition of slavery (1780), but his brother and kinsman speculated in Caribbean plantation land.

aesthetics can influence ethics

art/nature 'moves' People

humility

insight

inspiration

transcendence

In the 18th century, **aesthetics** (from the Greek *aisthēsis*, perception) meant the study of **sensory experience**. In the sublime that experience is **embodied**: it happens to the body before the mind can name it.

The Kantian Sublime

- **Immanuel Kant**, *Critique of Judgement* (1790), §§23–29, distinguishes two kinds of sublime:
- The **mathematical sublime**: the **immense and immeasurable** (mountains, the starry sky) which the imagination cannot take in as a whole.
- The **dynamical sublime**: the **overwhelming force of nature** (thunder, volcanoes, storms at sea), which could crush us, viewed from a place of safety.
- In both, the imagination fails, and then **reason rebounds**. We discover in ourselves an idea (infinity, freedom) greater than nature. The sublime is in the mind, not the mountain: the pleasure is our own superiority.

negative pleasures

*The **dynamical sublime** evokes both awe and fear. The mind is ‘alternately attracted and repelled’, so the feeling is not positive pleasure but admiration and respect: a ‘**negative pleasure**’ (Kant, §23).*

German *Lust* means pleasure, not lust: Kant’s *negative Lust* is ‘negative pleasure’.

The 'Magnetism' of the Sublime

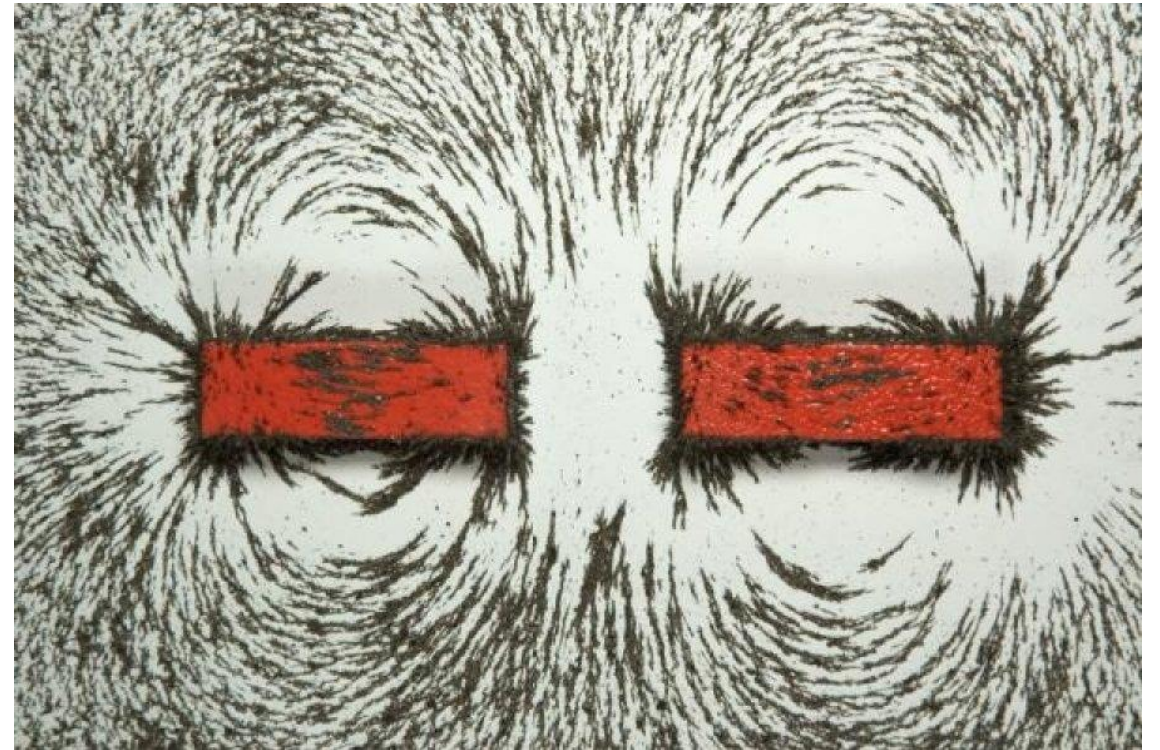
ATTRACTION AND REPULSION

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

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

The beautiful attracts

The sublime attracts and repulses







02

WHO STANDS ON THE ROCK?

GENDER | DIFFERENCE | THE CANON

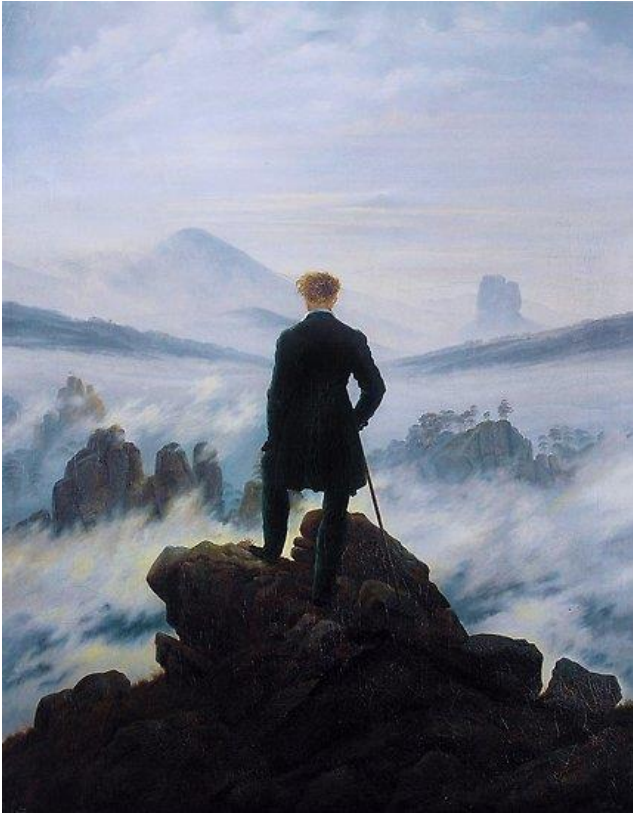
Theory: Wollstonecraft · Eagleton · Irigaray · Freeman · Battersby

Practice: Friedrich, revisited

Whose sublime is it?

‘Size matters’

Masculine Sublime



- Burke's binary: the **beautiful** is small, smooth, delicate (coded **feminine**); the **sublime** is vast, rugged, terrible (coded **masculine**).
- **Kant** goes further in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764): women have 'a beautiful understanding', men 'a deep understanding'.
- Size matters, as does scale: soaring peaks, vertiginous cliffs, roaring rivers, massive earthquakes, violent storms.
- **Mary Wollstonecraft** gave an early feminist response, turning Burke's own vocabulary against him.

Mary Wollstonecraft and the masculine sublime

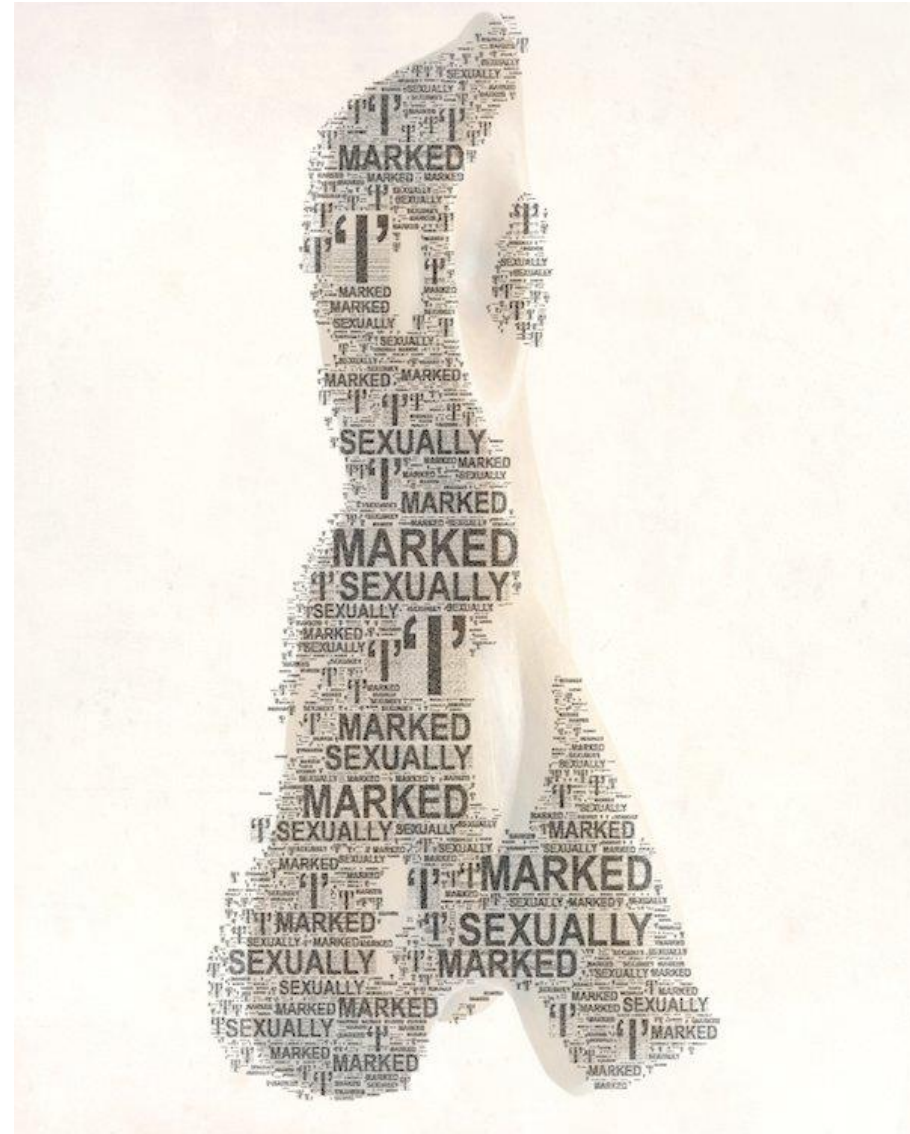


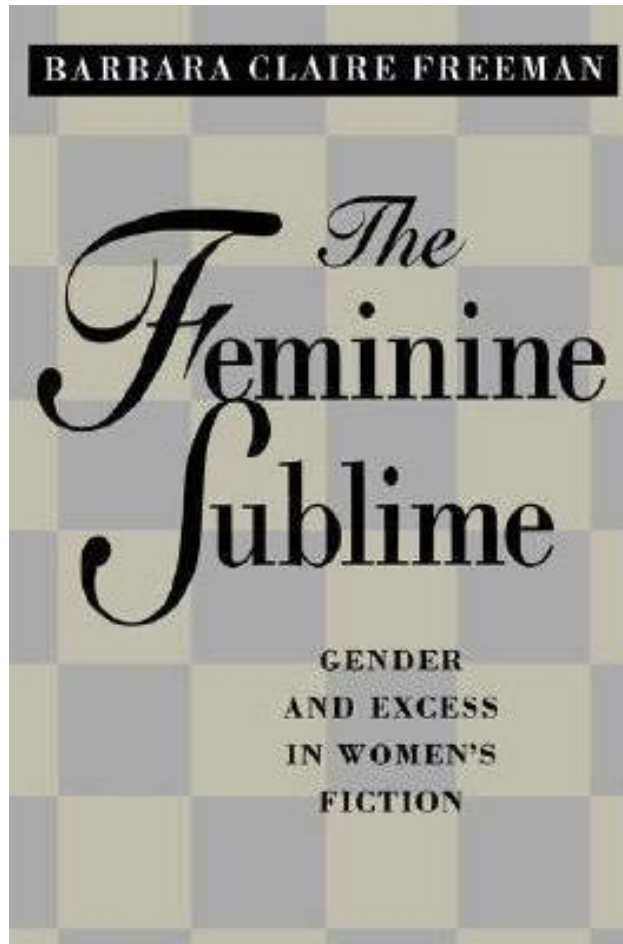
Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–97) [check portrait credit]

- *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), the first published reply to Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Wollstonecraft turns Burke's **sublime/beautiful** vocabulary against him: *he* becomes the emotional, theatrical, 'feminine' writer.
- *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792): if women are taught only to be beautiful, they are shut out of reason, and of the sublime.
- **Terry Eagleton**, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990): 'the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime, then, is that between woman and man'. **Patriarchal assumptions** about sexual difference sit at the source of Burke's distinction, which unifies his aesthetics and his politics.
- **Rhetorical insurgency.** Judith Butler: all language is iterative, but when marginalised groups repeat a culture's codes they can divert them toward greater equity. Wollstonecraft repeats Burke, with a difference.

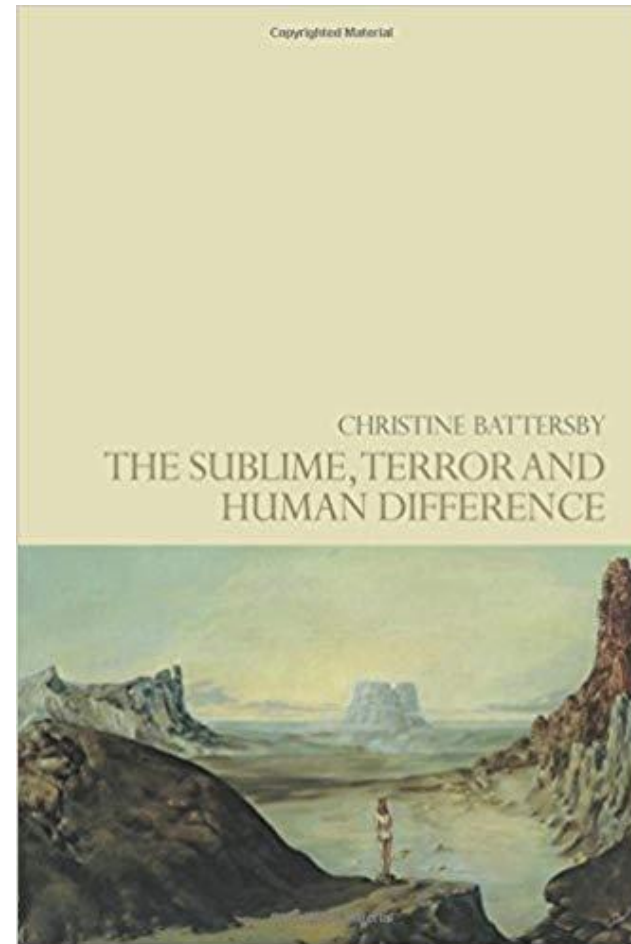
Grammar reflects,
for both men and women,
a valorization of masculinity and
an erasure of femininity.

Luce Irigaray





Freeman, B. C. (1995) *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction*. University of California Press.



Battersby, C. (2007) *The Sublime, Terror and Human Difference*. Routledge.

A Feminist response to the Romantic sublime

Countering the Canon

Barbara Freeman

Freeman: engagement rather than mastery.

- In Burke and Kant the sublime becomes a **discourse of domination**: a way of mastering excess (coded feminine) in highly gendered language.
- It peaks in a period that also sees the **expansion of empire and the Atlantic slave trade**, the industrial exploitation of the natural world, and bourgeois, patriarchal ideals of the family.
- Freeman's **feminine sublime** is not a search for a separate female voice. It is a different relation to excess: engagement and respect, rather than mastery.
- **Battersby** (2007) adds race and religion: 'Orientals' and other supposedly 'inferior' types were also shut out of the sublime.

03

PAINTING THE STORM

THE ROMANTIC IMAGE

Theory: Kant's safe distance · Schiller

Practice: John Martin · Wright of Derby · Turner · Akomfrah

Can you paint what exceeds representation?



Apocalypse as spectacle

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 of Derby stages Vesuvius as contrasts: calm sea and violent volcano, cool moonlight and hellish fire.

Tiny figures in the foreground give us **scale**, and our own insignificance.

Wright left Naples in 1774, **before the eruption of 1777**. He never saw it erupt like this, yet painted more than thirty views of it.

The sublime is **produced**: imagined, composed in the studio, sold to Grand Tour collectors.

After Tate, *The Art of the Sublime* (2013)



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

Turner: inside the storm

Snow Storm – Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth (exh. 1842) carried a subtitle: 'The Author was in this Storm on the Night the Ariel left Harwich'.

Critics called it 'soapsuds and whitewash'. Turner's reply, as later reported: 'I did not paint it to be understood, but I wished to show what such a scene was like.'

No horizon and no stable viewpoint: a vortex of snow, steam and light. The painting puts us **inside** the storm, not safely outside it.

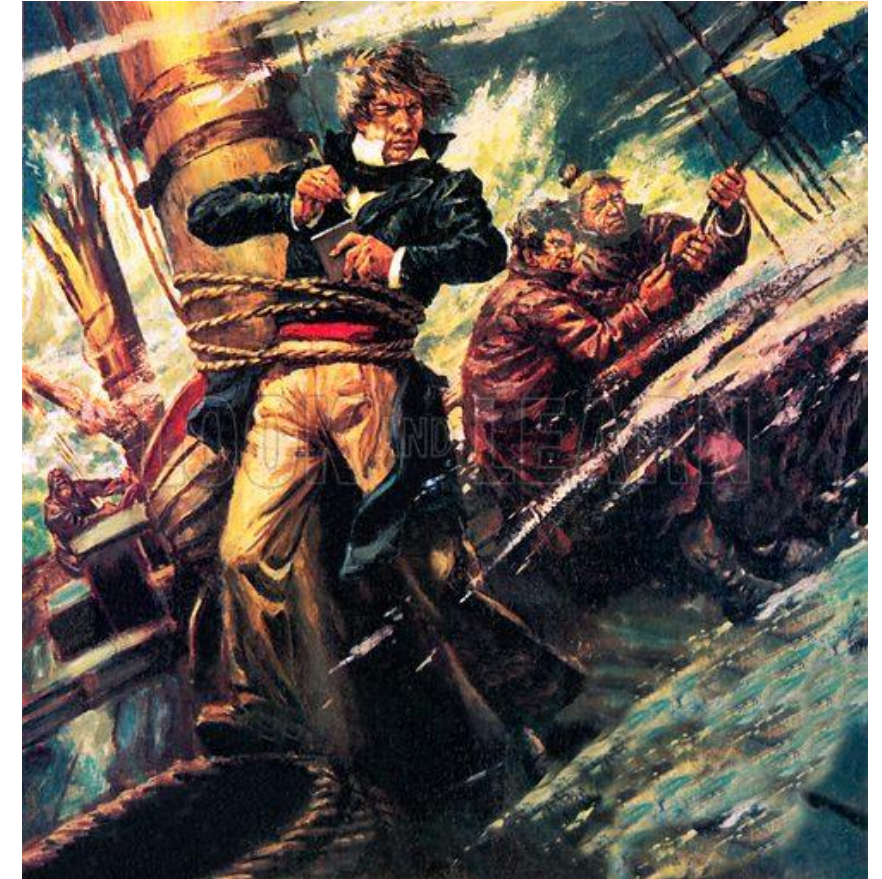
Burke and Kant theorised the sublime from a safe distance. Turner claims to have given the distance up.



J. M. W. Turner, *Snow Storm – Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth*, exh. 1842, Tate

Keeping a safe distance: Kant and Schiller

- For **Kant**, the dynamical sublime needs **safety**: storms and volcanoes become more attractive the more fearful they are, *provided we are safe* (§28). Burke agreed: terror delights only 'at certain distances'.
- **Friedrich Schiller**, 'On the Sublime' (1793; 1801), pushes back. The sublime object 'must, of course, be frightening, but it may not incite actual fear': we must feel our vulnerability, and a freedom within us that no force can touch.
- Schiller also renamed Kant's categories: the mathematical becomes the **theoretical** sublime, the dynamical the **practical**.



Turner lashed to the mast: a 20th-century illustration of the legend [add credit]. The story is Turner's own; historians doubt it.

Representation of the Sublime

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

The sublime should be experienced directly

“Once, Turner had himself lashed to the mast of a ship for several hours, during 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 that manner, I have discovered.”

David Markson, *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* (1988)



J. M. W. Turner, *The Bell Rock Lighthouse*, 1819, watercolour

...Turner was fascinated by science and applied the latest theories to his paintings



J. M. W. Turner, *Snow Storm – Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth*, exh. 1842, Tate



Turner knew the scientists Michael Faraday (top) and Mary Somerville (below).



the sublime at sea: Turner's *The Slave Ship* (1840)

J. M. W. Turner, *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying – Typhon Coming On* (exh. 1840).

Shown in the year of the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London. It recalls the **Zong** (1781), whose crew threw more than 130 enslaved Africans overboard to claim them as 'lost cargo' on the insurance.

A blazing sunset, a typhoon, a fleeing ship, and in the foreground shackled limbs sinking among fish and gulls.

Ruskin, who owned it: 'if I were reduced to rest Turner's immortality upon any single work, I should choose this.' But his famous description is all sea and light; the enslaved appear in a footnote.

Does the overwhelming beauty make us feel the horror, or let us look past it?



J. M. W. Turner, *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying – Typhon Coming On*, 1840, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



Sublime Seas: John Akomfrah and J. M. W. Turner, SFMOMA, 3 March – 16 September 2018
John Akomfrah, *Vertigo Sea* (2015), three-screen installation (left) and still (right).

04

SCALE

MACRO-PERSPECTIVES | MICRO-PERSPECTIVES

Theory: the sublime and the picturesque (Giblett)

Practice: Ansel Adams · Carleton Watkins · Peter Essick

What does the frame leave out?

Ansel Adams and the sublime

Rod Giblett, 'Wilderness to Wasteland: The Sublime, the Picturesque and the Uncanny in the Photography of the American West', *Continuum* 23:1 (2009)

For Giblett, American landscape photography has lived 'under the sign of the **sublime** and the **picturesque**'. Ansel Adams's towering mountains and canyons are the sublime in photography: vast, formless, awe-inspiring.

Carleton Watkins's mountains reflected in still lakes are closer to the **picturesque**: the 18th-century third term (Gilpin, Price) of roughness and variety, scenery composed like a picture.

But 'wilderness' had to be made. In 1851 the Mariposa Battalion entered Yosemite Valley to drive out the Ahwahneechee. The 'untouched' view has people missing from it.



Ansel Adams, *Clearing Winter Storm, Yosemite National Park*

Sublime



Ansel Adams, *Clearing Winter Storm*, Yosemite National Park, usually dated 1944

Picturesque



Carleton Watkins, *View from Camp Grove*, Yosemite, 1861



Peter Essick, *Thunderclouds, Garnet Lake*, for *National Geographic*

05

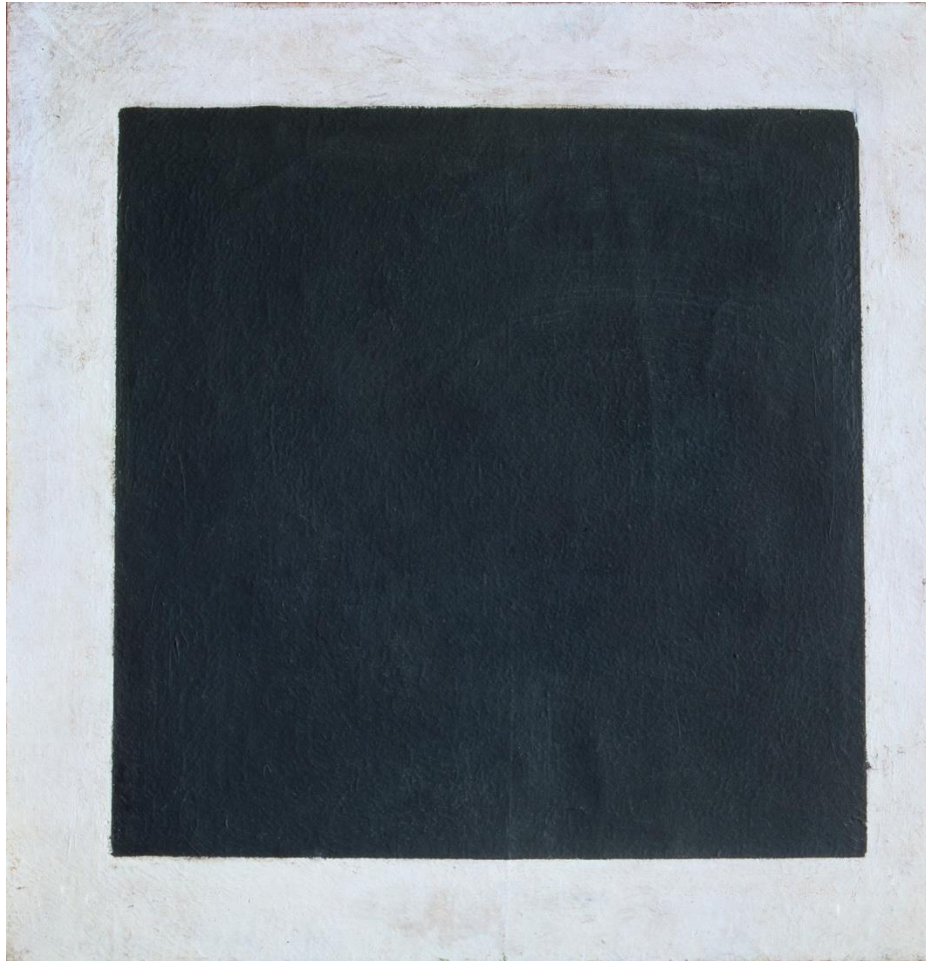
FINITUDE

THE LIMITS OF REASON | THE LIMITS OF COMPREHENSION

Theory: Lyotard · Newman · Shaw · Morley

Practice: Malevich · Newman · Viola

Can art present the unpresentable?



Kazimir Malevich, *Black Square*, first painted 1915; later versions 1923, 1929, c. 1932

The abstract 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...

Kazimir Malevich, Suprematist writings, 1915–19 [check sources]

presenting the unrepresentable: Lyotard

Jean-François Lyotard (1924–98), philosopher of *The Postmodern Condition* (1979).

‘Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?’ (1982): modern art devotes itself ‘**to present the fact that the unrepresentable exists**’.

The postmodern ‘puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself’ and ‘denies itself the solace of good forms’.

‘The Sublime and the Avant-Garde’ (1984) reads Newman’s ‘The Sublime is Now’: the inexpressible is not ‘over there’, but in this: **that something happens**.

Is it happening?

Kant

The imagination fails to grasp the whole → **reason rebounds**. The pleasure is our superiority to nature.



Lyotard

Presentation fails → **the work shows the failure**. No rebound, no consolation: only the event, here and now.

The Sublime is Now

Barnett Newman, 'The Sublime is Now', *The Tiger's Eye* (December 1948)

Newman sets an American sublime against European **beauty**: not a painting *of* a sublime subject, but a sublime **encounter**, here and now, between viewer and canvas.

Since then the word has been attached to so much (the techno-sublime, the eco-sublime, the Gothic sublime, the suburban sublime) that it risks meaning nothing.

Today's test for every example: **what work is the word doing?**

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?

'The impulse of modern art was this desire to destroy beauty.'



Barnett Newman, *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* ('Man, heroic and sublime'), 1950–51, MoMA

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**'.

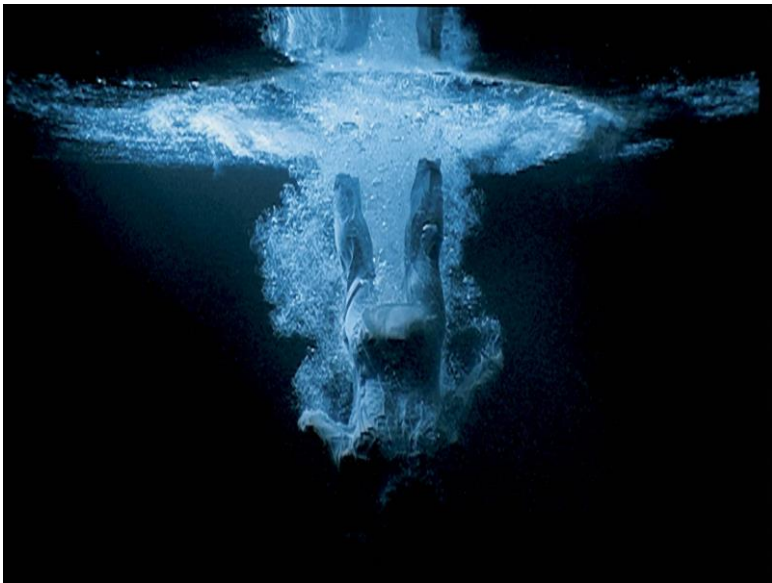
Simon Morley adds that we are looking at '**immanent transcendence** ... about a transformative experience that is understood as occurring within the here and now'.

Quoted in Rina Arya, 'Bill Viola and the Sublime', Tate, *The Art of the Sublime* (2013)

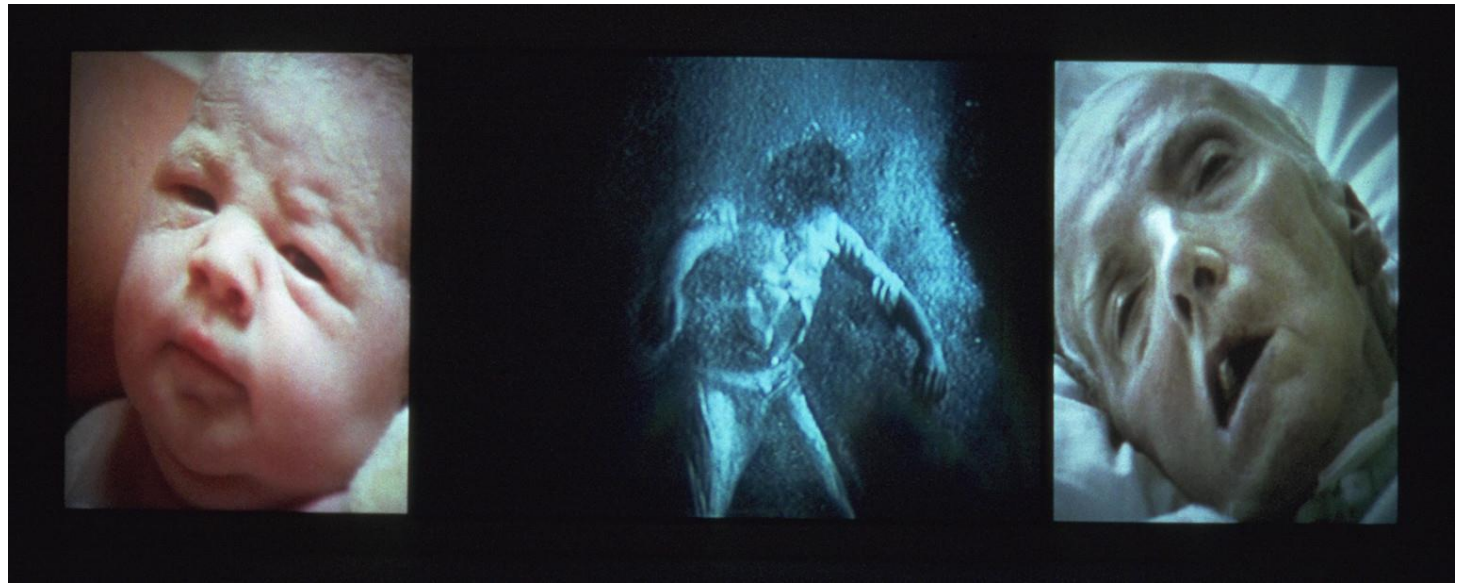


Bill Viola (1951–2024), *Five Angels for the Millennium*, 2001, Tate T11805 © Bill Viola Studio

Visual Theology - Bill Viola and the Sublime



Five Angels for the Millennium, 2001



Nantes Triptych, 1992, Tate

06

THE MACHINE

THE TECHNOLOGICAL SUBLIME

Theory: Nye · Jameson · Shinkle · Parikka · Gabrys · Crawford and Joler

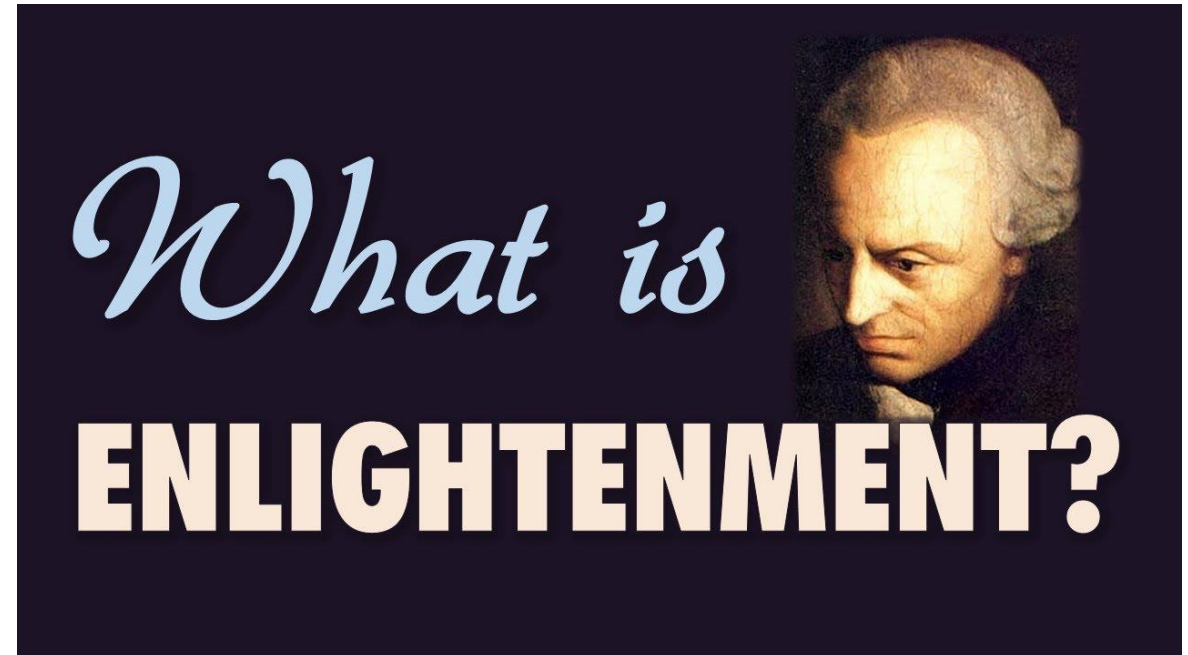
Practice: Hine · Howlett · Emma Charles · Anadol · Eliasson

What happens when the thing that exceeds us is something we made?

Legacies of the Enlightenment (recap)

The **Enlightenment**, or the **Age of Reason**, was a philosophical movement in Europe and later North America, from the late 17th to the late 18th century. Its participants thought they were illuminating human intellect and culture after the 'dark' Middle Ages.

- The Scientific Revolution – Isaac Newton
- The French Revolution – politics and ideology
- **The Industrial Revolution – James Watt's steam engine**
- Secularisation – later, Nietzsche's 'death of God' (1882)
- Darwin's theory of evolution (1859)

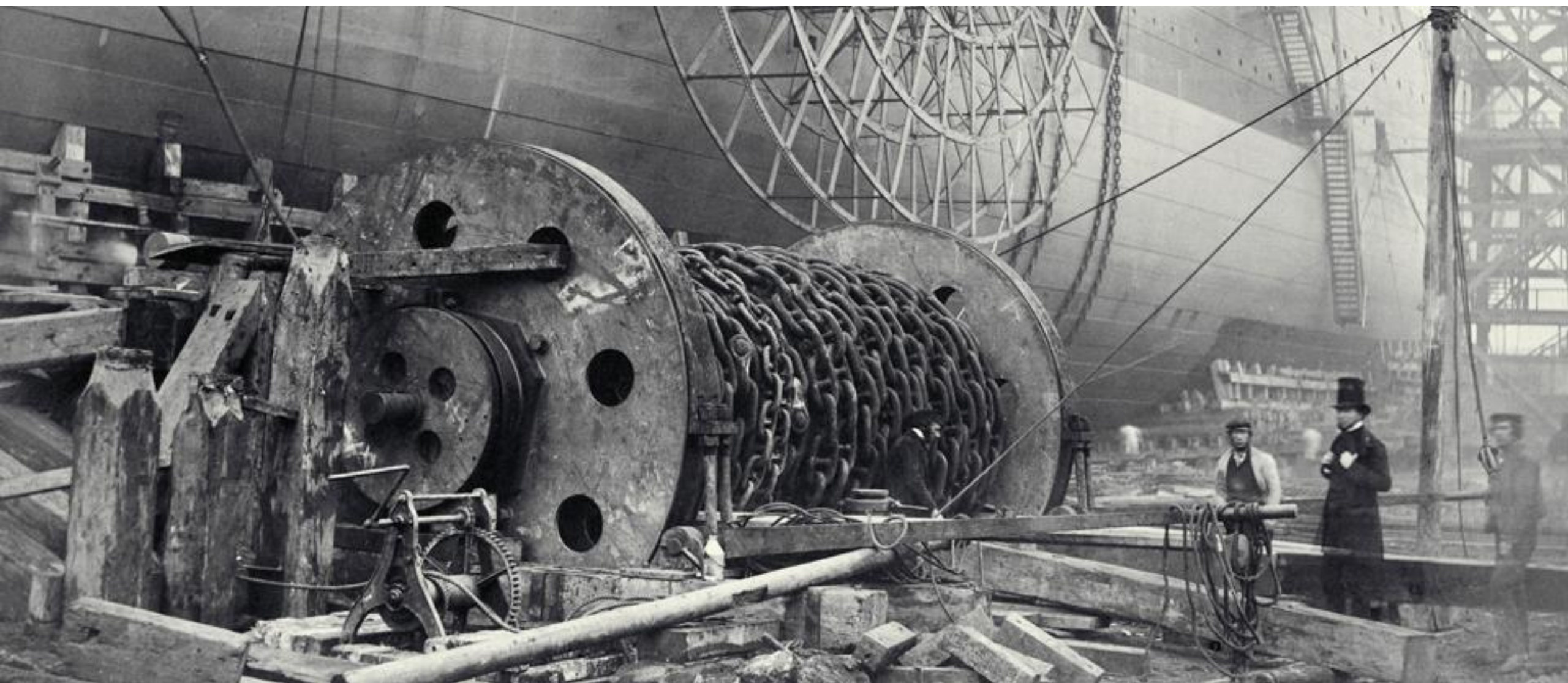


In 'What Is Enlightenment?' (1784), Kant summed up the motto of the age:

'Sapere aude! Have courage to use your own understanding!'



Lewis Hine, child spinner in a US cotton mill, c. 1908



Robert Howlett, the *Great Eastern* under construction at Millwall: checking drum and launching chains, 1857



Lewis Hine, spinning room in a US cotton mill, c. 1909 [check]

The Technological Sublime

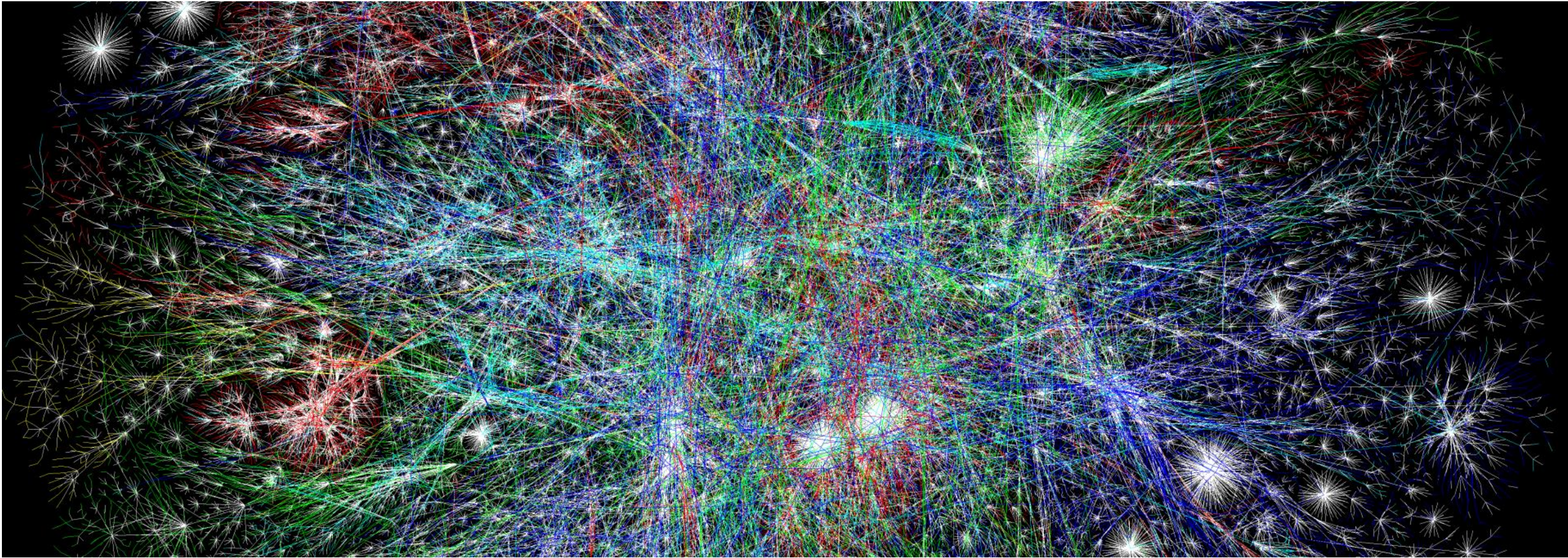
The sublime was first found in nature. From the 19th century, the same awe and terror attach to things humans make: railways, bridges, factories, dams, the atomic bomb, the moon rocket.

David Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (1994), traces it from the railroad and the Brooklyn Bridge to the Hoover Dam, the atomic test and the Apollo launches. Each time, awe at a machine becomes pride in those who built it.

Then the shift accelerates: awe and terror move to war machines, computers, genetic engineering, and now **AI**. Technology presents us with a new **unknowable**.

Are we exceeded by our own creations?

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.**’ – Eugénie Shinkle, ‘Video Games and the Technological Sublime’, *Tate Papers* 14 (2010)

For computers, the sublime lies in the near-infinite number of possible combinations, which, set against human scale, returns us to a sense of **limit and finitude.** (Image: The Opte Project, map of the internet)

FRAGMENTS ON MACHINES

A FILM BY
EMMA CHARLES



the AI Sublime: the cloud has a body

Kate Crawford and Vladan Joler

Anatomy of an AI System (2018)

A vast diagram of everything behind one Amazon Echo voice command: mining, shipping, factory and data labour, training data, e-waste. Expanded in Crawford's *Atlas of AI* (2021).

The sublime as a map too big to read.

Refik Anadol

Unsupervised (MoMA, 2022–23)

A machine-learning model trained on images of MoMA's collection, projected as an endlessly flowing wall of colour in the museum lobby.

Awe on demand, or a very expensive screensaver?

Data centres, chips and training runs work at **planetary scale**, but the experience is a chat window. Shinkle's *elevated emotion and banality* again.

Sianne Ngai's word for it: **stuplimity**, astonishment fused with boredom (*Ugly Feelings*, 2005).

Is AI the sublime of now?

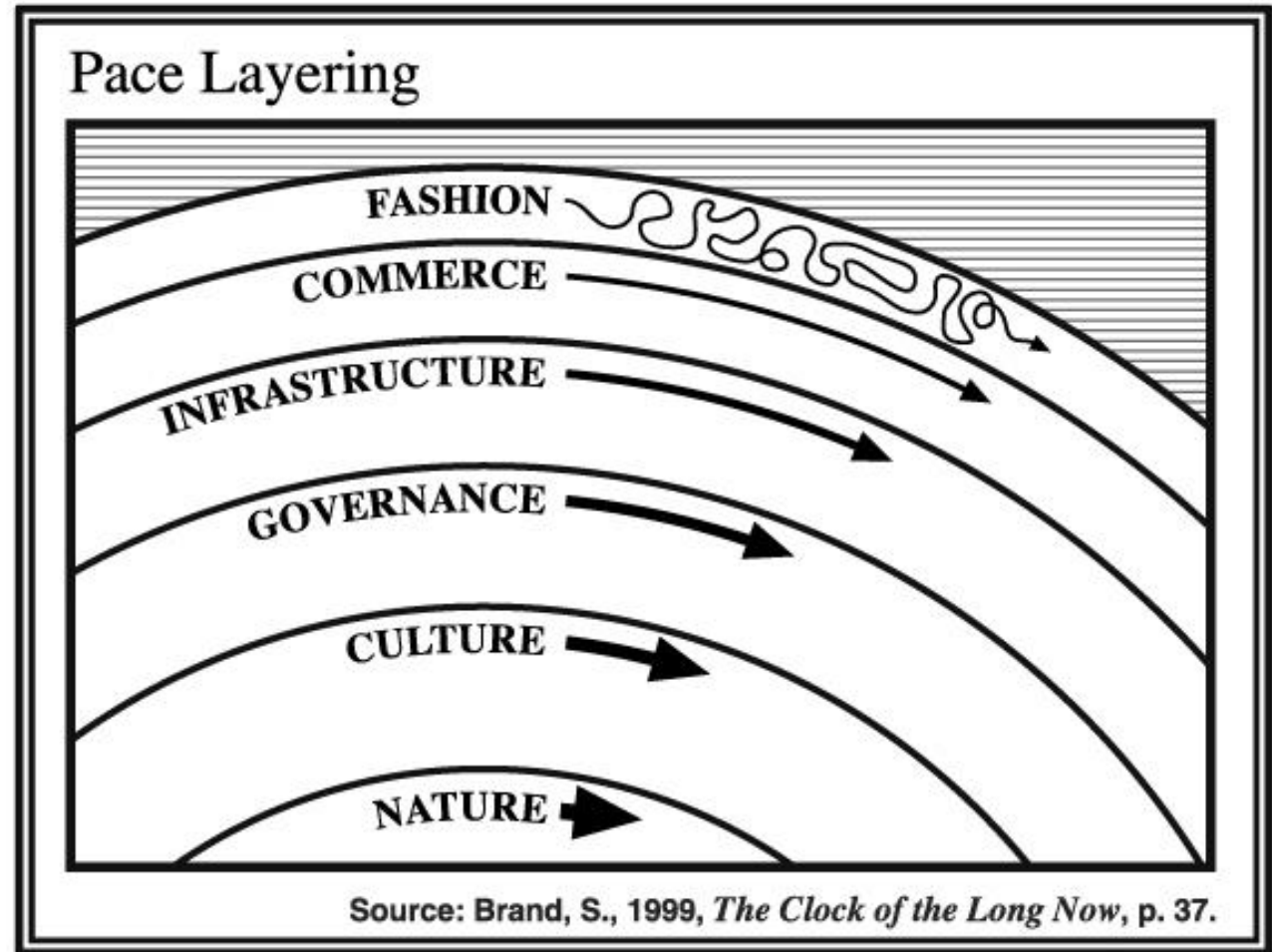
A Geology of Media and The Anthrobscene

Jussi Parikka (2014; 2015)

“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.”

The result is the opposite: **toxic waste, where media never die.**

Publisher's description, *The Anthrobscene* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014)



Deep Time | Deep Mining

Digital Rubbish

A Natural History of Electronics

Gabrys, J. (2011) *Digital Rubbish: A Natural History of Electronics*.
University of Michigan Press.

Technology also brings a new banality: ‘a combination of **anxiety** and **boredom**’ (Shinkle, 2010).

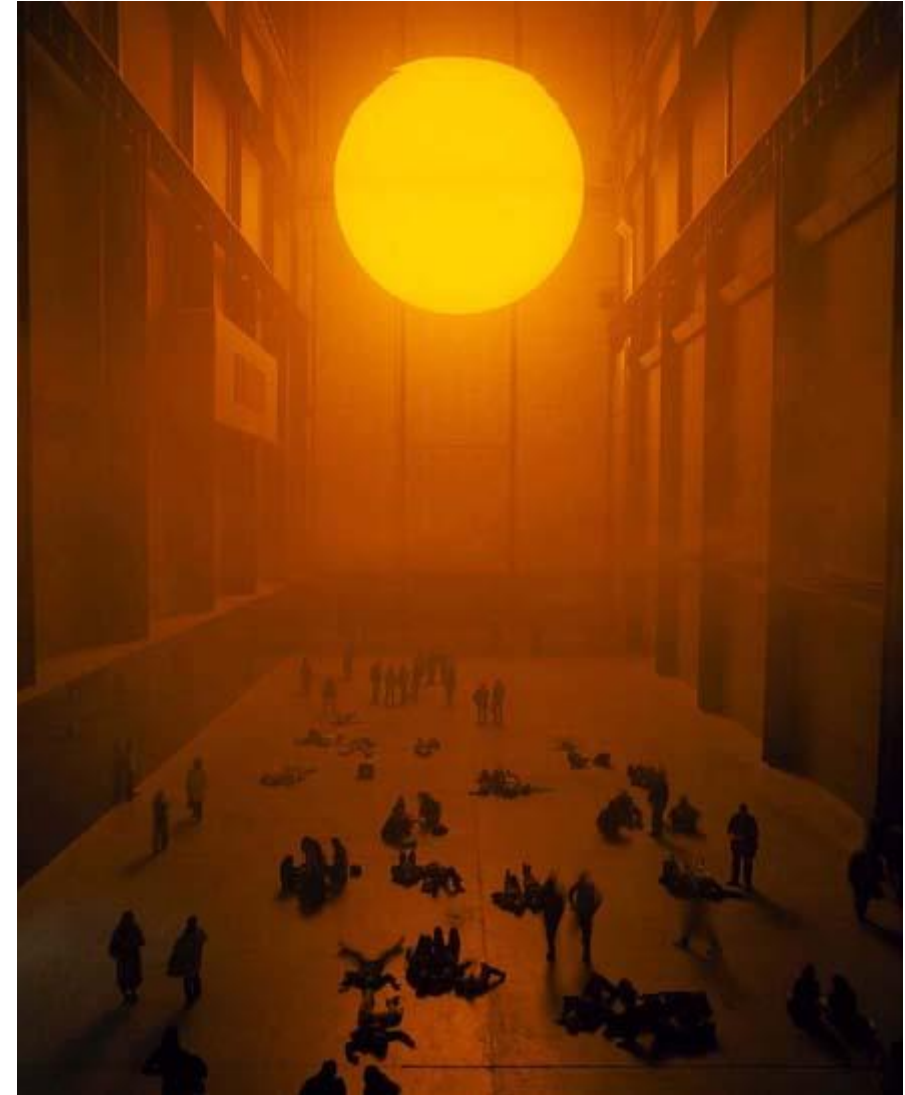
Sianne Ngai calls it **stuplimity**: astonishment fused with boredom (*Ugly Feelings*, 2005).



Gabrys's chapter '**Ephemeral Screens: Exchange at the Interface**' reads the computer screens of the Nasdaq Stock Market as material fossils of economic exchange.

The Contemporary Sublime

- **Fredric Jameson** (1984): technology is contemporary society's 'other'; our awe is really the 'hysterical sublime' of failing to map the global network of capital.
- **Eugénie Shinkle** (2010): the technological sublime involves 'the absence of a consistent and uniform boundary between the self and the machine'.
- **Jos de Mul** (2011): '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.'



Olafur Eliasson, *The Weather Project*, Tate Modern Turbine Hall, 2003–4

07

TERROR

FORBIDDEN PLEASURES | THE CAPITALIST SUBLIME

Theory: Burke · Battersby · 'shock and awe' (Ullman and Wade)

Practice: Cole · Hirst · Gursky

When does awe become complicity?

Content note: this block includes 9/11, war and nuclear explosions.

After 9/11: the destructive sublime

“The thing about 9/11 is that it’s kind of an artwork in its own right. It was wicked, but it was devised in this way for this kind of impact.”

Damien Hirst, BBC News Online, September 2002

The attacks were “the greatest work of art that is possible in the whole cosmos.”

Karlheinz Stockhausen, Hamburg, 16 September 2001

Hirst apologised; Stockhausen said he had been misreported, and his Hamburg concerts were cancelled. Both remarks expose the **dark ambiguity of the sublime**: awe at destruction, watched on a screen.





Top: Thomas Cole, *The Course of Empire: Destruction*, 1836, New-York Historical Society.



Below: the World Trade Center site after the attacks, September 2001 [add photographer].

SHOCK AND AWE

BEAUTIFUL BOMBS

‘Shock and awe’: Harlan Ullman and
James Wade, *Shock and Awe:*
Achieving Rapid Dominance (1996)

Main image: Baghdad, 21 March 2003 [add
photographer]

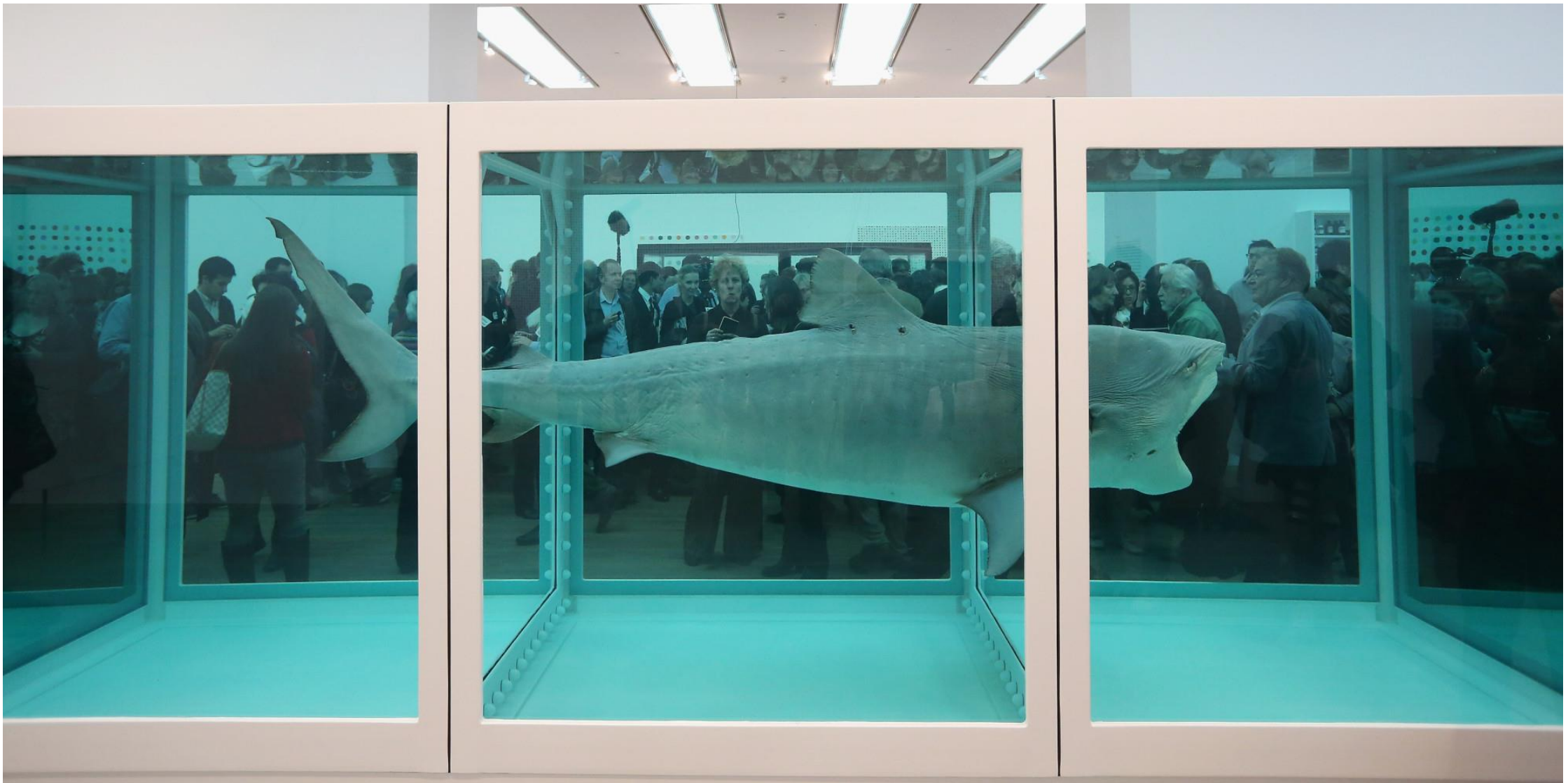


[check: which painting?]





Nuclear test cloud [check source and date: the image looks digitally treated; consider the Trinity test, 16 July 1945]



The Capitalist Sublime

Damien Hirst, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991): a tiger shark in formaldehyde, sold in 2005 for a reported \$8–12 million.
Nature as terror; nature as commodity.

GURSKY

Andreas Gursky (born 1955), of the Düsseldorf School, photographs enormous spaces (stock exchanges, supermarkets, apartment blocks, factories, mountains) from a height and distance no person could occupy.

His huge prints are **digitally composed**: perspective straightened, depth flattened, every detail equally sharp. You can't take the image in as a whole: Kant's mathematical sublime, made in post-production.

People appear as tiny, repeated units in a global system. In place of nature, the landmarks of a **global economy**.



Andreas Gursky, *Copan*, 2002: Oscar Niemeyer's Edifício Copan, São Paulo. One catalogue essay on it is called 'The two faces of the sublime'. Is it the inhumanity that makes it sublime?

Inside Super K: A Manmade Lake Deep Inside a Mountain

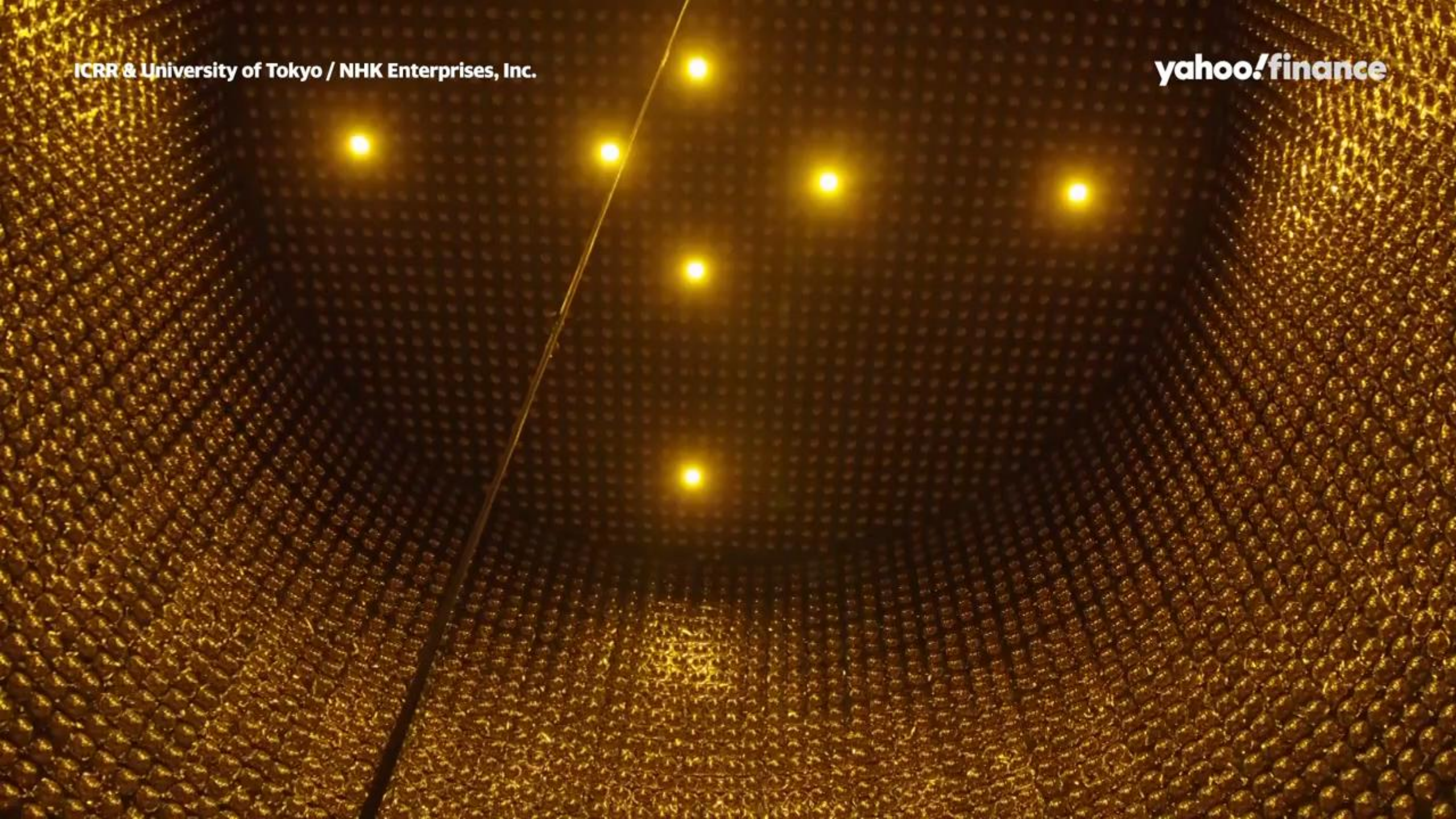


The micro subordinated to the macro; reality composed for the sake of the image.

Andreas Gursky, *Kamiokande*, 2007

ICRR & University of Tokyo / NHK Enterprises, Inc.

yahoo!finance







Andreas Gursky, Chicago Board of Trade II, 1999 [check]

08

NO SAFE DISTANCE

THE ECOLOGICAL SUBLIME

Theory: Nancy · Schiller · Peeples · Morton

Practice: Burtynsky · Baichwal and de Pencier · Donovan

Where do we stand when we are the storm?

The sublime in the Anthropocene (recap)

Anthropocene: ‘the age of humans’, a proposed geological epoch

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

The idea: humanity’s impact on the Earth is now so profound that it marks a new geological epoch.

The **Holocene**, the c. 11,700 years of relatively stable climate since the last ice age, saw all of human civilisation develop. Since the mid-20th century: soaring **carbon dioxide emissions**, **sea-level rise**, **mass extinction**, **deforestation**.

In **March 2024** geologists formally rejected the Anthropocene as an epoch. It survives as an *event*, and as an aesthetic problem: **how do you feel something this big, when you are part of it?**

PERIOD	EPOCH	ERA
QUATERNARY	“ANTHROPOCENE”	 CENOZOIC <i>Present to 66 million years ago</i>
	HOLOCENE PLEISTOCENE	
TERTIARY	PLIOCENE	 MESOZOIC <i>66 to 252 million years ago</i>
	MIOCENE	
	OLIGOCENE	
	EOCENE	
	PALEOCENE	
CRETACEOUS		 PALEOZOIC <i>542 to 252 million years ago</i>
JURASSIC		
TRIASSIC		
PERMIAN		
CARBONIFEROUS		
DEVONIAN		
SILURIAN		
ORDOVICIAN		
CAMBRIAN		

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-François Courtine and others, *Of the Sublime: Presence in Question*, trans. 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



Edward Burtynsky, from the *Oil* series: oil fields, Belridge, California, and a Los Angeles freeway interchange, both 2003



Jennifer Baichwal, Nicholas de Pencier and Edward Burtynsky, *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch* (2018).

no safe distance

1

Burke and Kant

Terror delights 'at certain distances', provided we are safe. The storm is out there; we watch from the rock.

2

Schiller

The object must be frightening, and we must feel what it would mean to be exposed. The safe distance starts to wobble.

3

The Anthropocene

We are the dynamical force.
The storm is something we made. There is no outside to stand in, and no rock above the fog.

So what happens to Kant's **rebound**? If the overwhelming power is ours, feeling superior to it is no comfort. It is the problem. Jennifer Peeples, 'Toxic Sublime: Imagery of Contaminated Landscapes', *Environmental Communication* 5:4 (2011): images of polluted places can be beautiful and appalling at once. They can wake us up, or let us admire the wreckage from a comfortable distance.

Burtynsky: witness or spectacle?

Dark Ecology

For a Logic of Future
Coexistence

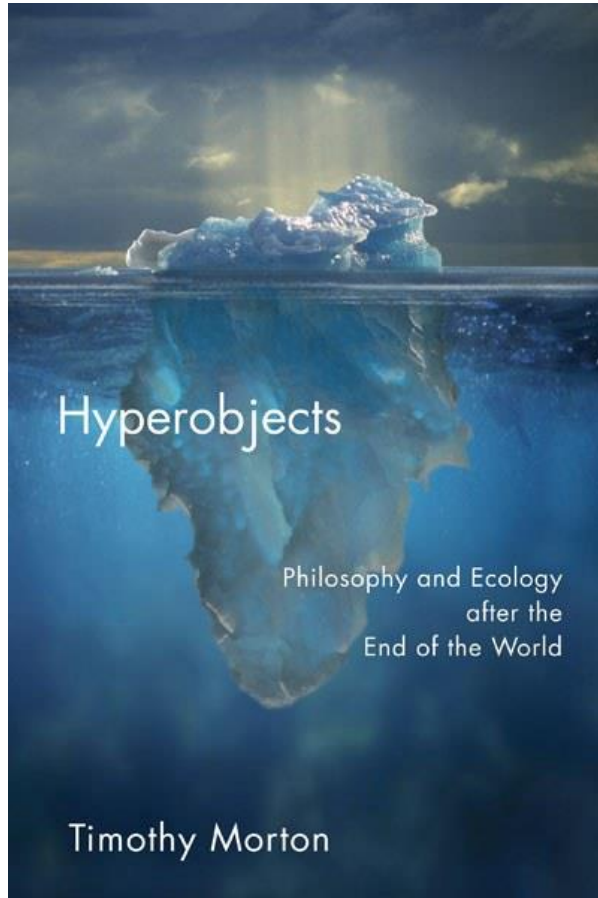
Timothy Morton (2016)



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

hyperobjects

timothy morton (2013)



Things so massively distributed in time and space that we can't see them whole: global warming, plastics, radiation.



Tara Donovan, *Untitled (Styrofoam Cups)*

09

COSMOLOGICAL

JAMES TURRELL | THE ASTRONOMICAL SUBLIME

Theory: the cosmic sublime

Practice: James Turrell

Can the sublime be quiet?

James Turrell, *Roden Crater*, Arizona, 1977–ongoing



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

– James Turrell



James Turrell [check: work and location]

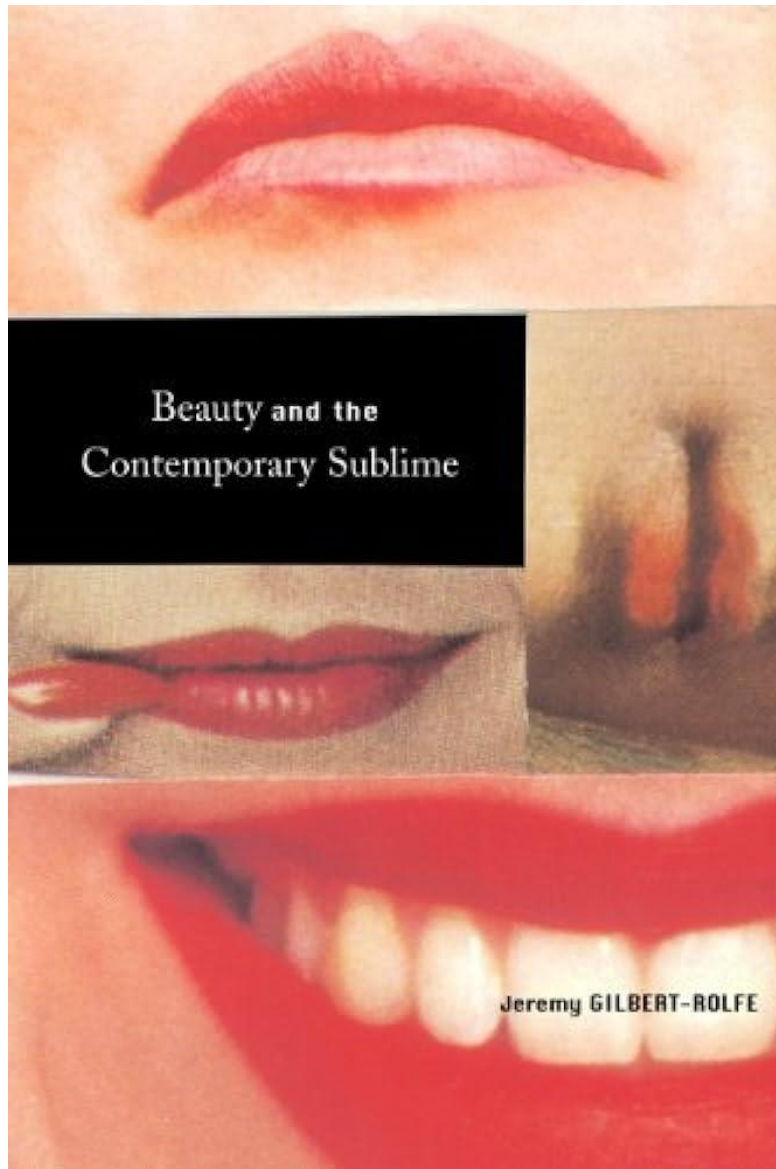
Sublime: The Tremors of the World

Centre Pompidou-Metz, 11 February – 5 September 2016

The Tremors of the World offered a dialogue between ancient and contemporary works. It explored our ambivalent and persisting attraction to “**Nature too far**” (Victor Hugo) and to catastrophe.



More than a hundred artists, architects and filmmakers, from **Leonardo da Vinci** to **Rosa Barba**, including William Turner, Susan Hiller, Dove Allouche, Werner Herzog, Lars von Trier, Robert Smithson, Agnes Denes and Ana Mendieta.

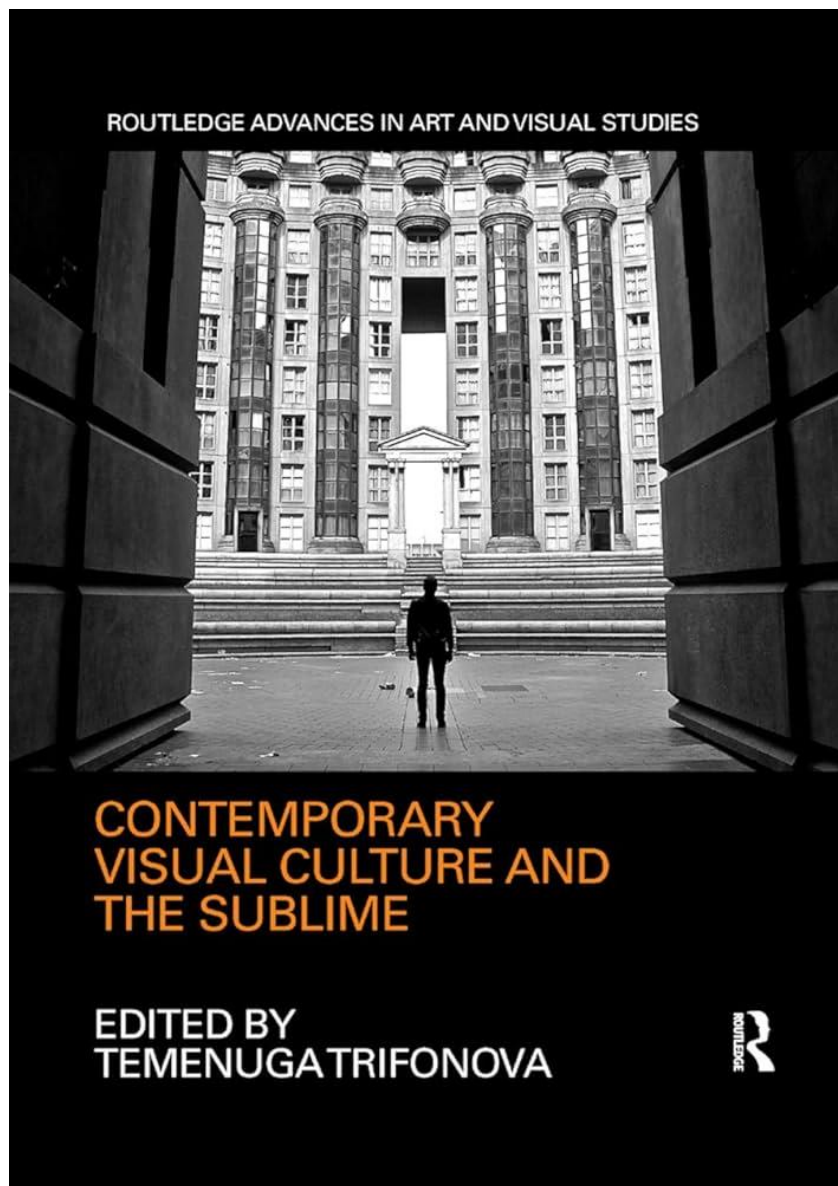


post-human **sublime**

Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime* (1999), speaks of a **post-human sublime**: technology as a form of **non-organic being** that bears no relation to nature, and as 'a trace of the human now out of the latter's 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.
Back to Lecture 5.



In the course of its long and tumultuous history the sublime has alternated between spatial and temporal definitions, from its conceptualisation in terms of the grandeur and infinity of Nature (spatial), to its postmodern redefinition as an “event” (temporal), from its conceptualisation in terms of our failure to “cognitively map” the decentered global network of capital or the rhizomatic structure of the postmetropolis (spatial), to its neurophenomenological redefinition in terms of the new temporality of presence produced by network/real time (temporal).

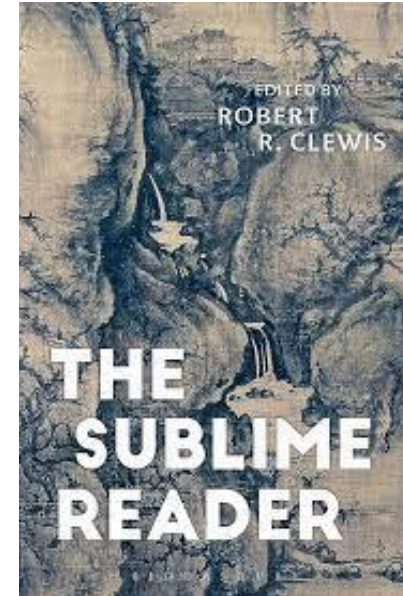
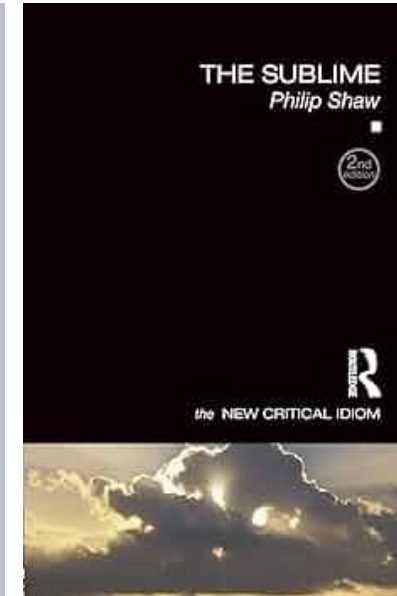
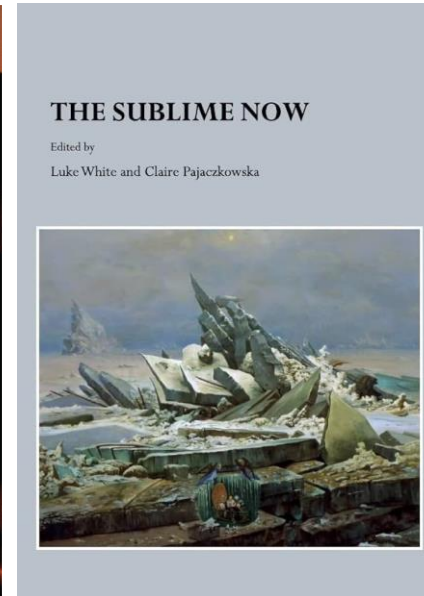
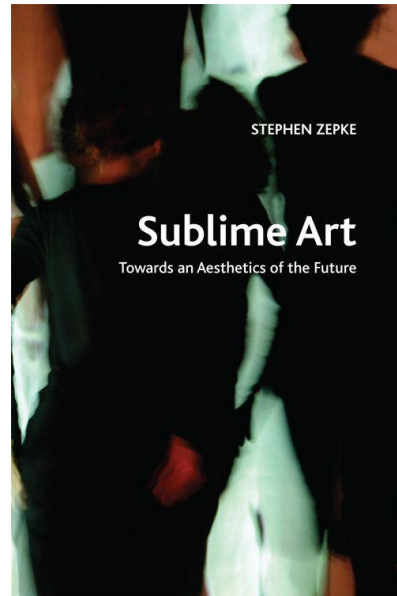
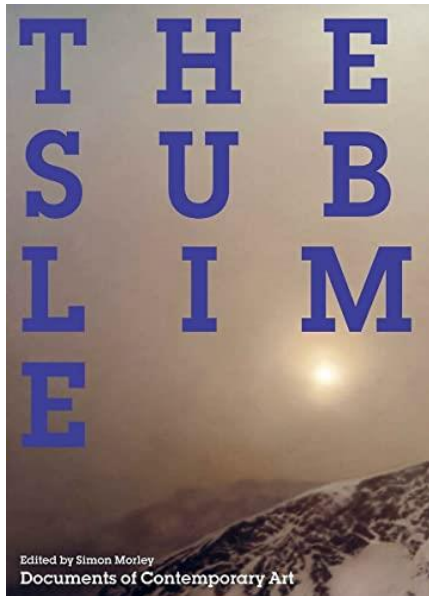
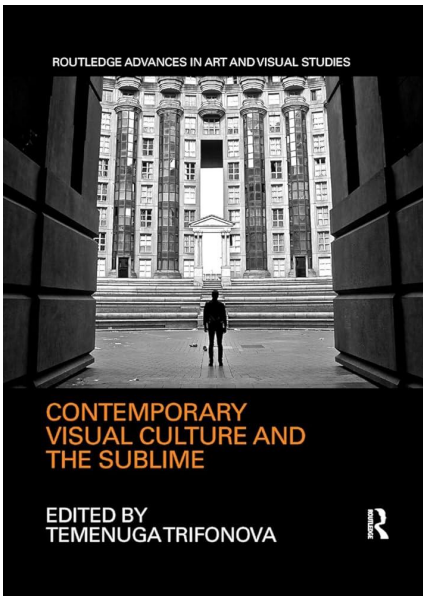
Publisher’s description: Temenuga Trifonova (ed.), *Contemporary Visual Culture and the Sublime* (Routledge, 2018)

rethinking the sublime: summary

- **Longinus**: the sublime is a quality of language that transports us.
- **Burke**: terror, enjoyed at a safe distance. **Kant**: the imagination fails, reason rebounds.
- **Who stands on the rock?** The canon is gendered and racialised (Wollstonecraft, Freeman, Battersby).
- The sublime keeps moving to whatever exceeds us: nature, the storm, the void, the machine, the market, the planet.
- **Lyotard**: the postmodern sublime presents the unrepresentable, here and now. Immanence, not transcendence.
- In the **Anthropocene** we are the force. There is no safe distance, and Kant's rebound is the problem, not the comfort.
- **Morton's** alternative: a Longinian sublime of intimacy and coexistence.

*From Friedrich's wanderer on his rock to Turrell's sky, the question has always been **where we stand**.*

where to start reading



Start here

Philip Shaw, *The Sublime* (2nd edn, Routledge, 2017)

Tate, *The Art of the Sublime* (2013), free online
Simon Morley (ed.), *The Sublime* (Whitechapel, 2010)

Primary texts

Burke, *Enquiry* (1757), Part I §7 and Part II

Kant, *Critique of Judgement* (1790), §§23–29

Liotard, 'The Sublime and the Avant-Garde' (1984)

Going further

Freeman (1995); Battersby (2007)

Nye (1994); Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (2005)

Trifonova (ed.) (2018); Morton, *Hyperobjects* (2013)

SEMINAR

is there still a safe distance?

Choose one work from today. **Where does it put the viewer, and is there still a safe distance?**

How to approach it

Say which sublime it is: Burke's, Kant's mathematical or dynamical, Lyotard's, technological, capitalist, toxic.

Point to specific decisions: scale, viewpoint, framing, duration, sound.

Where is the camera or viewer standing, and who isn't in the frame?

If you get stuck

Turner's *Snow Storm*: inside or outside the storm?

The Slave Ship: spectacle or witness?

Gursky's *Chicago Board of Trade II*: whose view is this?

Burtynsky's *Oil Spill*: does beauty help or hurt?

Anadol's *Unsupervised*: sublime or screensaver?