

Has the sublime changed and is it still relevant in contemporary art?

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What is the sublime?

The word 'sublime' has been misused over recent years. In 1757, Edmund Burke in his book, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, explains that the sublime provokes the deepest emotions that the psyche is capable of feeling, through awe and terror (1958, p. 23). The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) of Critical Theory (Buchanan, 2018) says the sublime is "a quality, a concept, object, or experience may be said to have if it is breath-taking, unique, incomparable, and beyond words." This definition has lost the sense of awe and terror that Burke says is critical for the sublime to exist. It does, however, describe an experience beyond our comprehension. Today the dictionary definition of sublime is "extremely good, beautiful, or enjoyable" (Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary, 2023). There is nothing negative or incomprehensible about this meaning of the sublime. It is just another word for beautiful, which Immanuel Kant defines as being enjoyed by all and limited (1987, p. 64). For Kant, beautiful is only ever a pleasurable experience whereas the sublime is both pleasurable and terrifying (1960, p.34). For millennials, the sublime is only a positive experience and almost mocks the original meaning. With the definition having drifted so much, does it still have a relevance today? Through exploration of the sublime in relation to nature and emotions, this essay will examine how the contemporary concept has changed, if at all, from the romantic concept. Two artists studying these themes are 18th century painter, Joseph Wright of Derby, and contemporary photographer, Florian Maier-Aichen. Wright uses painterly techniques common to romantic painting of the period. Maier-Aichen on the other hand uses photography to recontextualise the romantic sublime to reflect a more contemporary sense of the sublime.

Four key theorists and their beliefs

There are many subcategories of the sublime today, which suggests that the contemporary world is seeking to find new meaning from the sublime. Despite this there are four core approaches which derive from Longinus, Burke, Kant and Schiller. Longinus, a 1st century Greek philosopher, describes the sublime as 'fundamentally transformative', a life changing, psychological experience (Morley, 2010, p. 12). Longinus believed that the sublime artist was able to rise above everyday banality and create an ethereal encounter. Sublime art challenges us by exposing us to danger and the fear of the unknown, powerful emotional effects. The idea of the sublime, although used by poets such as John Dryden and Alexander Pope, mostly disappears until the 18th century (Mambrol, 2021). It resurfaces with Burke and Kant who

start to contemplate the aesthetics of the sublime. Burke describes the sublime as a mixture of fear, excitement, awe and terror. For Kant there are three fundamentals of the sublime: it is beyond comprehension or imagination, it is experienced as awe and terror, it is infinite or boundless. Kant is interested in how consciousness impacts the experience of the sublime and the consequences of this. Schiller, by examining Kant's *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, develops his own ideas of the sublime: the dynamic and the theoretical sublime. The theoretical sublime refers to our capacity to reflect on the infinite and eternity. The dynamic sublime refers to our power over nature and our ability to overcome it.

Burke defines sublime artwork as seeking to destroy us through its magnitude in nature. A lone man standing on the edge of a cliff, staring into the abyss, questioning his place in the world whilst facing

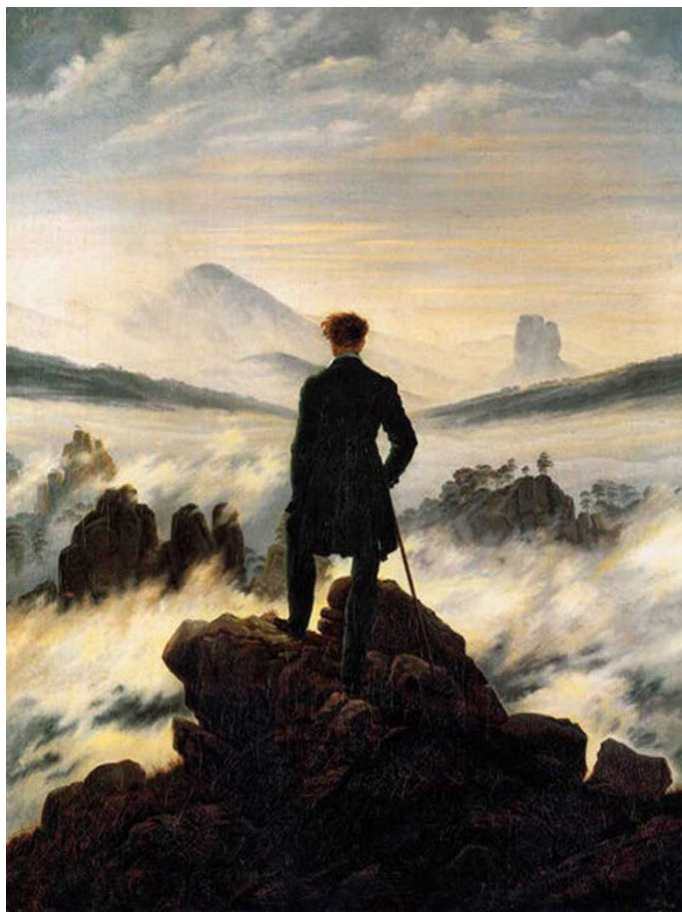


Figure 1 *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* by Casper Friedrich (1817)

danger head on. The sublime is a powerful aesthetic experience that is all encompassing. In Casper Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1817) (fig.1), we see a man poised on some rugged rocks. In the foreground, the rocks are dark, looming and very detailed compared to those in the background. This emphasizes the danger and humankind's defiance towards nature. The wanderer has conquered the mountain. Sunlight, diffused through the cloud formations, lights up the rocks. "The sublime must always be great; the beautiful can also be small. The sublime must be simple: the beautiful can be adorned and ornamented. A great height is just as sublime as a great depth" (Kant, 1960, p. 48). This, clear distinction between the beautiful and the sublime, helps us interpret Friedrich's painting. The image escapes from the page,

highlighting the immensity of nature. The sublime of nature evokes powerful emotions in relation to the temperamental landscapes.

Emotional Sublime

People are unconsciously drawn to a sheer drop, a sensation known as the 'call of the void.' This is a perception where the mind has a strong desire to jump off the cliff when stood on the precipice (Phelan, 2021). This emotional, conflicting altercation of the mind is a sublime moment. The sublime allows us an escape from the "sensuous world" to a place of transcendence (Schiller, 2001). It elevates us to a place of higher consciousness where our own thoughts disturb yet fascinate us. Some people feel a strong physical reaction when looking over a cliff's edge. The thought of stepping off the cliff terrifies most people. Individuals who have continuous suicidal ideation are much more likely to act on the 'call of the void' (Phelan, 2021). These ideas are a form of the negative sublime. This is founded on the idea that we are the only ones who can challenge and overcome despair (Whyte, 2011, p. 15). When confronted with despair in a painting, our unconscious will try and reveal a way out from the problem facing us. "The only transcendence revealed is that of man himself. The finite is negated only to liberate the subject. The negative sublime is the epiphany of freedom" (Harries, 1968, p. 45). When we confront the darkness within our soul, we can be free.

The encounter of the sublime is unique for everyone. No one reacts in the same way as our life experiences are all different. What causes awe and terror for one person may cause awe and pleasure for someone else. It can only be found in our own perceptions, when our inability to estimate the magnitude of things, makes us aware of a 'supersensible' faculty within us (Whyte, 2011, p. 5). It is a moment in time that will never recur as it arouses the senses of logic and the supersensible. The sublime, in that instant, takes us to another sphere of understanding. It exists at the periphery of our experiences, as it invokes the animal instincts within us and challenges our understanding of the universe. It can be abject. It arouses the senses, emotionally and bodily. We feel a sense of danger and are compelled and repulsed at the same time towards it (Kristeva, 1982, p. 8).

Humankind is always in danger and to some degree we are aware of this, but it is only when we are shocked into an emotional response, that we become present in the moment. We prefer to be detached. When confronted with our own fears, we like to distance ourselves from them as otherwise it overwhelms us. We lose our identity, and it is this reaction of destabilisation that creates a sublime abjection within ourselves. When watching a horror film, we are scared but safe in the knowledge that this horror is not happening to ourselves. We are a step removed:

The passions which belong to self-preservation, turn on pain and danger; they are simply painful when their causes immediately affect us; they are delightful when we have an idea of pain and danger, without being actually in such circumstances (Burke, 1958, p. 51).

We watch the destruction of Ukraine and feel the pain and suffering but are watching the TV with a morbid curiosity. Shocked, outraged but safe. The horrifying encourages us to either be “spectators or cowards,” who refuse to look; those who are not afraid to look are acting out a part allowed by society through magnificent portrayals of suffering (Sontag, 1979, p. 38). It is the unseen psychological effects of a work of art that propel it into memory. Sublime images trigger a visceral response in the viewer. In the 18th century, religious paintings would cause this reaction.

18th century Sublime vs Contemporary Sublime



Figure 2 *The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah* by John Martin (1852)

One of the biggest differences between contemporary sublime and the 18th century ‘romantic’ sublime is the role of religion. The romantic sublime often features devastating biblical scenes, immense landscapes and destructive nature. John Martin’s *The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah* (1852) (fig.2) is a classic example of how religion influenced painting. It features a terrifying biblical scene of the

annihilation of two cities, Sodom and Gomorrah, that have been destroyed by God because of sinfulness and wickedness. The fiery reds and oranges used by Martin convey a sense of hell. These types of biblical sublime were a recurring theme in the 18th century (Ashton, 2009, p. 72). In the 21st century the relevance of God has diminished and the threat of heaven and hell therefore less significant. Today hell is more a mental experience as in Sartre's depiction of hell in *No Exit* (1955). It is not about being tortured through physical pain but rather psychologically by other people or fear of the unknown. We are but a "mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam" (Sagan, 1997, p. 6). A minute particle in an immense cosmos, struggling to comprehend our place in a world that has alienated us. What resonates with people regarding the sublime today involves nature, technology, science or the psyche rather than religion (Morley, 2010, p. 20). It is our own thoughts that scare us the most.

The sublime is something we deal with every day, but do not always realise it. It is a feeling lurking in the background. It is being frightened when walking alone in the dark, the uncertainty hiding in the shadows (McEvilly, 2001, p. 63). It is your heartbeat jumping at the sound of a branch snapping behind you. The uncomfortable sense you are going to be hurt and there is nothing more unsettling than being hunted, with no sense of a way out. Morley (2010, p. 13) says "Awe and wonder can quickly blur into terror, giving rise to a darker aspect of the sublime experience, when the exhilarating feeling of delight metamorphoses into a flirtation with dissolution and the 'daemonic'". Do we need artwork to discover the sublime, or is it all around us waiting to be discovered? Looking out the window and seeing storm clouds gathering is a sublime experience. There is the dread of the incoming weather and fear of unknown, combined with a sense of awe, watching the immense spectacle unfold. There is a powerlessness felt. The window provides the protection Burke says we need to appreciate the sublime. This experience can be seen in Joseph Wright's work.

Joseph Wright of Derby

Wright uses his imagination to create paintings, such as *Vesuvius in Eruption, with a View over the Islands in the Bay of Naples* (c.1776-80) (fig.3), to show man's insignificance against the sublime magnificence of nature. He is an artist who liked to contrast light and dark in his works, an effect often used in sublime art. It is typical of the romantic sublime of that era, showing us a catastrophic event. Wright travelled through Italy between 1773 and 1775, before Mount Vesuvius erupted in 1777 (Egerton, 1991, pp. 168-169). Vesuvius had been gushing lava and smoke for many years and this had a profound effect on Wright, who painted over thirty views of the volcano. The figures in the foreground of the



Figure 3 Vesuvius in Eruption, with a View over the Islands in the Bay of Naples by Joseph Wright of Derby (c.1776-80)

painting are small in stature, showing the true scale of the impending doom. Closer inspection shows there are two men carrying bodies and a person in mourning. The unknowing of whether Mount Vesuvius is going to erupt, adds to the sense of trepidation. The chiaroscuro effects used by Wright to set the scene, changes the picture from picturesque to sublime. On the left-hand side of the painting, fiery lava pours down the volcano in a darkening, smoke filled sky. On the right-hand side is a lighter, night blue sky with a partially hidden moon illuminating the scene. This painting shows what Morley (2010, p. 12) describes as the “relationship between disorder and order, and the disruption of the stable coordinates of time and space”, that needs to exist for the sublime experience to happen, leaving us profoundly changed.

The spectacle is both alluring yet horrifying. Wright knew that at any moment Vesuvius could erupt, destroying him and anything else in its path. As Burke says:

No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear. For fear being an apprehension of pain or death, it operates in a manner that resembles actual pain. Whatever therefore is terrible... is sublime too, whether this cause of terror be endued with greatness of dimensions or not. (1958, p. 57)

Wright is trying to express his true awe and terror of his first-hand experience in the painting, yet no matter how sublime the painting is, the viewer is safe. We recognize the sentiments, but we were not there. We cannot experience the feelings that Wright felt simply by looking at this painting today. We can, however, appreciate the picture in the context of the romantic sublime. A modern comparison to Wright's painting would be Julian Bell's *Darvaza* (2010) (fig.4). Darvaza is a gas crater in Turkmenistan, which is also



Figure 4 *Darvaza* by Julian Bell (2010)

known as the 'Door to Hell'. It has been burning since 1971 when Soviet geologists were excavating for oil and natural gas. "The crater is about 226 feet (69 meters) across and about 98 feet (30 meters) deep" (King, 2023). The vastness of the hole is incomprehensible.

Bell uses his knowledge as an art historian to paint his sublime painting *Darvaza*. The painting is eight feet wide. There is a lone male figure in white, standing on the edge of the fiery hole. Bell (2013) says:

The figure functions as an indicator of scale and equally obviously as a testimonial. This is I, it tells the viewer, I the artist: I witnessed what I am showing you. I was a tourist who came close to this spectacle and now I wish to draw you close to it likewise.

He is inspired by Wright's *Vesuvius in Eruption*; Martin's *The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah* and the way light can be used to dazzle the viewer whilst engulfing him emotionally.

In Wright's melodramatic painting, *A Moonlight with a Lighthouse, Coast of Tuscany* (1789) (fig.5) a sense of unease mixed with wonderment can be felt. Like Wright's previous painting, the scene is moonlit. The painting has a limited colour palette and darkened hue, often associated with the romantic sublime. Though the seas are calm, the clouds are starting to form. The storm clouds are about to disrupt the tranquil seas. The rugged cliffs in the distance and the fateful-looking rocks that the lighthouse sits upon, are what make the picture sublime. Without the gathering clouds and the way in which the light is invoked, it would simply be picturesque. Kant (1974, p. 96) says, "The feeling of the sublime is ... a feeling of pain arising from the want of accord between the aesthetical estimation of magnitude formed by



Figure 5 A Moonlight with a Lighthouse, Coast of Tuscany by Joseph Wright of Derby (1789)

the imagination and the estimation of the same formed reason.” Through the anticipation of what is about to happen, the sublime is achieved, as it goes from admiration to fear. The perceived danger, lurking for the people on shore and in the boat evokes our emotions. The “spark of sublimity” in a painting is caused by our human responses “physically, emotionally and intellectually” (Beckley, 2001, p. 4). We can see how this interaction plays an important role in our experience of Wright’s painting and fits Kant’s theory.

Florian Maeir-Aichen

Maeir-Aichen combines traditional and modern photography techniques to create works that use the sublime as his main topic. He blurs the boundaries between photography and painting, by changing the contours presented in the original, sharp-focused photo. His images merge the sublime's fundamental sense of awe with a more modern mindset towards sense of place and the way we try and control nature, rather than work with it (Aperture, 2007, pp. 46-53). He manoeuvres the seemingly everyday scenery into something that is unfamiliar to our senses. In *Untitled* (2005) (fig.6), Maier-Aichen shows us a vast, snowy landscape that has an eerie, unsettling feeling to it but is spellbinding at the same time. There is a sense of powerlessness as at any moment an avalanche could engulf you. There is simplicity in the way this



Figure 6 *Untitled* by Florian Maier-Aichen (2005)

photo has been composed and developed to create a romantic quality. The darker, limited, colour palette conveys a feeling of dread at first, but the single light gives a sense of hope. The blue hue and single light source are reminiscent of Wright's *A Moonlight with a Lighthouse, Coast of Tuscany*. The light emphasizes the sheer scale of this perpetual danger in the dark, whilst suggesting that the area is not as deserted as

one might think. On the one hand it hints at nearby civilisation, encroaching on nature, whilst representing warmth, shelter and safety on the other. The viewer becomes immersed in the landscape, alone and lost, faced with their own mortality.

When we contemplate our own impermanence, a form of sublimity is achieved. Every day we are one day closer to death, but we are in a paradox with death as it mesmerizes yet terrifies us. Baudrillard (1990, p. 67) says, “Deep down, no one really believes they have a right to live. But this death sentence generally stays tucked away, hidden beneath the difficulty of living. If that difficulty is removed from time to time, death is suddenly there, unintelligibly.” This is a sublime concept, automatically we are fighting with our own mortality whether we are aware of this or not. We avidly try and keep ourselves busy, so we do not have to confront our own fears of death. Maier-Aichen is showing us that humankind is no match for the power of nature. We have become complacent towards nature. When the mind has an encounter with the sublime, it unconsciously needs to balance out the uneasiness caused, by conquering it (Weiskel, 1976, p. 36). We have a need for self-preservation and unconsciously search for an exit. Once we understand a sublime moment it is no longer sublime. For the sublime to succeed it should never be completely unravelled. It should always create awe and terror.

At first glance, *Above June Lake* (fig.7) seems to be sublime in the sense it shows a vast landscape typical of the romantic sublime. It shows an aerial view of a Californian tourist destination, which has a 5-million-year-old geological heritage, but the colours have been altered. The mind is overwhelmed by the sheer dimensions represented, but it has an alien feel. Through the phenomenon known as pareidolia, where the brain tries to make sense of random stimuli in images, a face appears to be screaming through the landscape. Once you start looking, several faces can be spotted. The blood red, copper colour stands out amongst the aerial view. It feels like blood is literally being spilt across the scenery,



Figure 7 *Above June Lake* by Florian Maier-Aichen (2005)

destroying the natural way of things. If the area has so much history, then why is humankind imposing itself upon it? Maier-Aichen is showing us an environmental sublime. His transcendent landscapes convey

a sense of horror at what humankind is doing to the world. A contemporary of Maier-Aichen's, Kate Shaw, is also interested in the environmental sublime. In her painting *Sublime* (2019) (Fig.8), she shows a toxic-



Figure 7 *Sublime* by Kate Shaw (2019)

coloured, glittery landscape that is based on organic patterns found in nature. The colours are unnatural, implying contamination like in Maier-Aichen's *Above June Lake*. Both pictures create an unease in the audience about their part in the destruction of nature. McEvelley (2010, p. 170) says that today "the sublime will ingratiate itself to you by acting hypocritically like the beautiful, then double-cross you by turning out to be less than satisfying ... in a new version of the negative pleasure." Both artists have a charismatic quality about their work that upon further examination is not what it appears to be. There are hidden signs within the images. Sontag (1979, p. 43) says "the shock immersion in experiences that cannot be beautified, the encounter with what is taboo, perverse, evil", creates an emotional response. Shaw and Maier-Aichen want people to do a double-take when gazing upon their work. The distortion of the landscape is meant to provoke an unsettled feeling.

Conclusion

Both Wright and Maier-Aichen use nature for conveying their idea of the sublime. Wright uses painting whereas Maier-Aichen uses photography. Maier-Aichen applies digital techniques to peel back layers of the photo to give the romantic painterly feel to his work as in *Untitled* (2005). When looking at

Wright's *A Moonlight with a Lighthouse* and Maier-Aichen's *Untitled* (2005), the influence of the romantic sublime is clear. Both appear vast in nature and use objects as a source of scale. The colour palettes are dark and gloomy, with a single light source illuminating a section of landscape, revealing a hidden danger. One of the sublime aspects of the pictures comes from the anticipation of what will happen. Both these pictures are 'traditional' romantic sublime. Both show destruction of the landscape but in different ways. Wright uses a natural disaster to show devastation of the landscape in *Vesuvius in Eruption, with a View over the Islands in the Bay of Naples*. Maier-Aichen, on the other hand, in *Above June Lake*, shows the harm that humankind is doing to the landscape. This opens the sublime back up to a contemporary audience who are aware of climate change.

Climate change has brought a new meaning for the romantic sublime. It has the same significance to people in the 21st century as religion did in the 18th. Artists like Maier-Aichen and Shaw, show through their immense, artificially coloured, landscape pictures, the issues created by urbanization, such as toxic waste. Developers build on flood plains then walk away as the houses built in these areas drown. Destroying nature that exists to protect us, such as flood plains, is unacceptable. Maier-Aichen challenges us to see the annihilation of nature as a contemporary, environmental sublime. This connection with nature allows us to understand the sublime from its beginnings to where the contemporary experience of sublime has evolved. Weiskel (1976, p. 157), on the other hand, suggests that our age cannot accept the romantic sublime and its correlative idealism, as in order to satisfy us the sublime must be "reduced and parodied as the grotesque...hedged with irony to assure us we are not imaginative adolescents." He suggests the sublime is more about quick reactive work than looking for anything meaningful. He believes that modern thinking has ruined the sublime, as we are looking for symbols and signs within the sublime artwork, which are not necessarily there. Maier-Aichen shows us that the romantic sublime can appeal to a new generation by changing its focus to destruction of the landscape by humankind.

Today we want to have a more intellectual sublime, but this can over complicate the sublime. In the 1950's Rothko and Barnett Newman proposed an abstract sublime. The experience of the abstract sublime is achieved through emotional effects, caused by staring at Rothko and Newman's massive canvases of simple colours. This drastic change in expressing the sublime, allowed their contemporaries to rethink the sublime. A new way to appeal to modern audiences, who were no longer feeling Burke's "awe and terror" when looking at work such as Wright or Martin's. This is where artists like Maier-Aichen and Shaw can reinvigorate the romantic sublime by creating a new focus for awe and terror.

Photographic manipulation has given artists a new way to reinvestigate the romantic sublime. There are many images of pain and suffering seen in photography today, showing the devastation of natural and man-made disasters that cause a sublime reaction. In the 21st century it is getting harder to shock as we have become desensitised by rolling news coverage. This does not mean that the sublime has no value in society today. Maier-Aichen has shown, it can be used to highlight important issues such as humankind's impact on nature.

The sublime will continue to be relevant in contemporary art as the sublime experience exists for everyone, whether we realise it or not. However, this encounter is subjective as we all have different backgrounds and our understanding of the world around us is unique. What is transcendent for one person could produce no reaction for another, but we are all able to have a sublime encounter. The sublime is an effective way to explore new subjects such as climate change that cause reactions of awe and terror for us today.

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