

Sublime Resources:

A brief history of the notion of the sublime

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The word 'sublime'

The word 'sublime' is used colloquially nowadays as a vague superlative. However, in particular in the realms of philosophy, literary studies, art history or cultural criticism, it has a range of more specific meanings. It might be used to refer to the transcendent, the numinous, the uplifting or the ecstatic. More particularly, it is also used to refer to the awe-inspiring, the grandiose or great. For some, the sublime is that which is terrifyingly vast or powerful. For others, the sublime is that which is unrepresentable, ungraspable or unimaginable. Above all, the sublime has come to refer to the 'rush' of intense aesthetic pleasure paradoxically stemming from the displeasure of fear, horror or pain.

These various - and perhaps in some senses contradictory - uses of the term stem from the complex and rich history of its development. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a period which spans the rise and fall of both Neoclassicism and Romanticism, the 'sublime' was one of the central concepts around which discourses on art and aesthetic experience were articulated. Hardly a writer on these matters during this period had nothing to say about the idea, and quite what the term might mean was hotly contested. (It is very much as a legacy of this complex history that the word now has such a wide set of meanings.) Although today the term, in its more properly philosophical senses, has little currency outside academic discourses, during this time it was a word which was widely used in everyday speech and writing. It was also a key term through which the radically new forms of taste for art and for the aesthetic appreciation of nature that were developing at the time found articulation: the term was used to elevate the taste for ruins, for the Alpine, for storms, deserts and oceans, the supernatural and the shocking. It was through the notion of the sublime that the taste developed for the rugged rather than the harmonious or smooth, the forceful rather than the restrained or measured, the wild rather than the orderly or symmetrical, the primitive rather than the sophisticated: in short, for the Romantic and the Gothic rather than the Neoclassical. These revolutions in taste continue to have an enormous effect on the art and culture of the present day. To understand the extent of the legacy of the notion of the sublime, we need only imagine a time when these effects of art (or the contemplation of nature) were not valued or enjoyed: when mountains, for example, were not impressive and awe inspiring, but merely monstrous (and inconvenient) carbuncles disfiguring the symmetry of the earth. John Donne thus writes of mountains: "Are these but Warts, and puck-holes in the face / of th' earth? Think so: but yet confesse, in this / The worlds proportion disfigured is." (from "An Anatomy of the World: The First Anniversary", ll.299-301, in Donne, 205. cited in Nicolson, 28).

Today, the term is most closely associated with the philosopher Immanuel Kant, and his *Critique of Judgement*, which deals at length with the notion of the sublime, and which remains, perhaps, the most philosophically subtle and systematic exposé of the idea. However, by the time Kant wrote this in 1790, the term already had a long and rich history.

Up until the late seventeenth century, the word 'sublime' generally was used simply to denote either literal or metaphorical height: especially the heavenly, noble or heroic. It also had a certain alchemical connotation. To 'sublime' a material, in alchemical terminology, was to transform it from its (base, earthly) solid state to its (more spiritual, heavenly) gaseous state without passing through an intermediate liquid state. It was possible to do this with a number of the substances in which the alchemists were most interested. Such a transformation had obvious metaphysical overtones for the alchemists. The alchemical connotations of the term had also crept into its everyday use of the term, for example in Donne's evocation of "love's subliming fire". This alchemical notion is also (incidentally) the source of the Psychoanalytical term "sublimation." The word 'sublime' was also used in Neoclassicist writings on poetry and rhetoric to refer to a 'grand' or 'ornate' style, in contrast to a more plain or coarse one.

The word, however, really started its transformation into the form we now know it with the 1674 translation into French by the celebrated Neoclassical critic and poet Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux (usually called just Boileau) of the essay *Peri Hupsous*. This essay was thought at the time to be by a third century A.D. Greek rhetorician named Longinus. (There is now some doubt as to the attribution of the work, and it generally considered to be from the first century A.D.). Boileau translated the title of the work as *Du Sublime* ('of the sublime') and due to Boileau's influential position in the world of letters, this translation of the title stuck, and the notion of the 'sublime' became intimately intertwined with Longinus's text, finding its way to the forefront of discussions about art and aesthetic experience.

'Longinus' on the sublime

The central concern of the *Peri Hupsous*, the experience of *hupsous* (sublimity) itself, is the ability of 'great' poetry or rhetoric not just to persuade its audience or address them in a rational manner (which would be merely good), but to sweep them away, in a fit of 'transport' (*ekstasis*), and to overcome and ravish them : "Great writing does not persuade; it takes the reader out of himself [...] [T]o be convinced is usually within our control whereas amazement is the result of an irresistible force beyond the control of any audience." (Longinus, 4). For Longinus, there are a number of sources for this poetical or rhetorical power. It comes from the elevated spirit of the writer, and from their ability to have grand conceptions, but also from their ability to craft the rhythm, language and tropes of their work to match this. Throughout, Longinus is concerned with the way that these figures and rhythms of speech might serve to mark the impassioned presence of the figure of the author, the power of the work depending on the way that these figures match such an impassioned source in the poet or rhetorician; but the effectiveness of the poetical figures is guaranteed in turn (circularly) by having a genuine content in the passion of the author (and the audience's awareness of this passion), which stops the piece of work sinking into the bathos of pretentiousness.

The *Peri Hupsous* is interesting for its discussion of the role of 'genius' in the creation of the sublime. Longinus asks his reader what is better: an author who correctly follows the rules of composition, making no 'errors' of judgement, yet producing only a workmanlike piece of writing, or an author who, in spite of a number of peculiarities, even errors, rises to flashes of brilliance which astound the reader (44-50). Longinus argues for the latter as superior, and in setting up genius as being – if not without risk – a maverick and unruly force, seems to be at points quite ambivalent about whether the faults of a genius are rare instances of failure which are merely coincidental to its successes, or if its transgressions of correct form are an integral part of its power: Longinus writes at one point that all figurative language tends to excess (44), at another that there should be no limit set on the number of metaphors in a passage (42), and at another (enigmatically) that the failures and successes of writing come from the same source (9)...

Reception of Longinus in the C17th and C18th.

Much of this seems at first to be at odds with the Neoclassicist theories of the writers, such as Boileau, who championed Longinus in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, writers who are usually understood to emphasise the correct application of the 'rules' of art, and who called for measure and reason: art was to be regular, rational, orderly, measured and harmonious. In contrast, Longinus emphasises intense passion, excess, and the way that the 'rules' – if still necessary to make art – are

insufficient to make it 'sublime,' this requiring an additional – perhaps irrational – element of inspiration or judgement which lies beyond and above the 'rules'. Some writers – for example Samuel Holt Monk, in his seminal study *The Sublime* (3-5) – have seen these Longinian ideas of sublimity as being so oppositional to the Neoclassical understanding of art that they herald the start of the break-up of its system, and usher in the rise of a Romantic sensibility, and certainly Longinus provides a fore-echo of such Romantic conceptions of genius or free creativity, its privileging of excess and transgression as artistic modes, and its emphasis on the intense passion and subjectivity of the artist. However, Longinus's ideas were quickly absorbed into Neoclassical artistic theory, and could be argued to have served as a supplement, a balance or a counter-tension to ideas about the correct technique for the production of art, invigorating Neoclassicist practice. In that Neoclassicism proposed that a knowledge of artistic rules had to be supplemented by a faculty of judgement as to how to apply them, it would seem unlikely that a taste for the Longinian sublime would have been experienced as contradictory to Neoclassical propriety.

One other aspect of Longinus's text was influential and is worth mentioning here. The essay proceeds by giving a series of short quotations and discussions of passages which Longinus holds as exemplary of the sublime. In doing this, Longinus is not merely giving us a theory of sublimity, but building a 'canon' of what is sublime. (Homer is, as we would expect of the taste of a first-century Greek writer, foremost amongst the authors he holds up.) Furthermore, Longinus's own style is highly literary, and his lively presentation vies with the passages he presents. The essay is thus not just an essay on taste, but also a *tour de force* demonstration of Longinus's own taste; not just an essay on the power of sublime poetry to sweep its readers away in ecstatic transport, but also itself a demonstration of this very power. As Alexander Pope describes Longinus, his "*own* Example strengthens all his Laws, / And *Is himself* that great *Sublime* he draws" (*An Essay on Criticism*, [1711]).

This mode of criticism was to become highly popular in the eighteenth century. In that the essay proceeds in this manner it is worth looking at just what is the taste which Longinus is setting forth as sublime, since this itself was to prove as influential as the theoretical articulation of his precepts. Longinus's central interest is in the (Homeric) heroic and epic mode of writing, and in his examples imagery of violence and force predominates. He discusses a number of battle images, and such episodes from the *Illiad* as the madness of Ajax and the wrath of Achilles. Even where Longinus brings in an example of a love poem by Sappho (17), this passage is a description of the sensation of the body seeming to fragment under the violent throes of love and jealousy. Above all, images of the awesome power of natural or divine forces predominate both in the examples Longinus mentions, and also in the metaphors Longinus himself uses for the power of sublime poetry: it strikes us like a lightning bolt, sweeps us away like a flood, awes us like a storm and we are attracted to greatness in writing the same

way we admire stormy oceans rather than small streams, or the fiery powers of a volcano rather than the domesticated fire of a hearth (47).

The heroic and martial tone of Longinus's examples was influential in the development of the use of the term in Neoclassicist discourses (for example the kind of heroic 'history painting' promoted by the Royal Academies both of France and England) which dovetailed with rising forms of nationalism and militarism, and the constructions of masculinity around these notions.



Jacques Louis David, *Napoleon Crossing the Alps on Horseback*, 1801. Musée National des Châteaux de Malmaison et Bois-Preau, Rueil-Malmaison, France.

The images of powerful and violent nature he privileges, however, turned out no less influential in the development of the notion of the sublime during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as the term started to be used in order to articulate new experiences and understandings of nature, and new ways of appreciating it. The 'Grand Tour' of Europe, which provided the finishing touches of a young Gentleman's education, and during which he was expected to hone his taste with the encounter with the cultural treasures of the Renaissance and antiquity, took him across the Alps. As the eighteenth century neared, this passage across the mountains itself became, rather than simply a somewhat dangerous and

arduous inconvenience, one of the highlights of the tour. For example, John Dennis, of his 1688 crossing of the Alps, wrote that he had "walk'd upon the very brink in a literal sense of Destruction ... The sense of all this produced in me ... a delightful Horrour, a terrible Joy and at the same time that I was infinitely pleased , I trembled." (cited Schama, 449). Dennis was later to be one of the first writers to use the notion of the sublime to name this 'delightful Horrour' and 'terrible Joy.' A proto-Romantic experience of nature as wild, rugged, vast – and even somewhat dangerous – (rather than nature as orderly and tame, nature as expressed in a formal garden) started to become something to be appreciated.

The painter most associated during the eighteenth century itself with the development of this taste was [Salvator Rosa](#) (1615 - 1673). Although Rosa was a painter from a slightly earlier moment, and from Italy, there was something of a craze for his work in eighteenth-century Northern Europe, and his influence can be seen in artists from [Vernet](#) to [Turner](#).



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Salvator Rosa, *Landscape with Tobias and the Angel*. Probably 1660-73. London, National Gallery.

This kind of sensibility towards nature, and its association with the 'sublime', grew to such an extent over the first half of the eighteenth century, that these sorts of wild nature started to become themselves synonymous with the term. By 1747, Baillie could write that "the sublime in writing is no more than a description of the sublime in nature" (*An Essay on the Sublime*, cited in Ashfield and de Bolla, 88), reversing the precedence of the rhetorical sublime over the natural sublime.

The other thing that seems to have struck those who had set off on tour was the experience, on arriving in Italy, of the ruins of the ancient civilisations which were increasingly being unearthed by the emerging discipline of archaeology. There was a craze amongst these tourists, for example, for the prints of Giovanni Battista Piranesi of the ruins of Rome. Thus a taste for ruins – intimately linked with the feeling for the ravaging powers of nature and the smallness and fragility of the human, which were bound up with the appreciation of wild, rugged and Alpine landscape – also became an important part of the taste for the sublime. This iconography of the ruin is perhaps most famously expressed in Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem [*Ozymandias*](#), but is ubiquitous in eighteenth century art and literature.



Giovanni Battista Piranesi, "Veduta di Campo Vaccino," *Views of Rome*,
Plate 82, 18 x 27.75 inches, etching, 1772.

Development of the sublime as a distinct category.

What we see, then, as we reach the middle of the eighteenth century, is that a certain kind of imagery has started to become consolidated around the notion of the sublime. (To the kinds of imagery just discussed, we might add a few other repeated images which were repeatedly associated with the sublime: war, the supernatural, hell, and the thought of death. Thus Hildebrand Jacob in *The Works* (1837) can list the by-then familiar images of the sublime:

All the vast, and wonderful scenes, either of delight, or horror, which the universe affords have this effect upon the imagination, such as unbounded prospects, particularly that of the ocean, in its different situations of agitation or repose; the rising or setting sun; the solemnity of moon light; all the phaenomena in the heavens, and objects of astronomy. We are moved in the same manner by the view of dreadful precipices; great ruins; subterraneous caverns, and the operations of nature in those dark recesses... the sight of numerous armies, and assemblies of people ... the whispering of winds; the fall of waters in cataracts, or heavy showers; the roaring of the sea; the noise of tempests amongst lofty trees; thunder; the clash of arms, and voice of war. Few can read in Milton the ... description , which he has given, of the opening of the infernal gates, without some emotion... (cited Ashfield & de Bolla, 53).

Furthermore, the sublime has started to become seen not simply as a superlative form of beauty, but starts to become seen as a particular and specific variety of aesthetic pleasure, with characteristics somewhat different from those of a beautiful object. The possibility that one might have a taste for the one, without an appreciation for the other has become thinkable. Sublimity has moved from an adjectival form ('a sublime poem') and has taken on usage as a noun: 'the sublime'. It is perhaps Joseph Addison who, although using the term 'great' rather than 'sublime,' first attempted to articulate at length the distinction between sublimity and other 'pleasures of the imagination' such as beauty or novelty in his articles in *The Spectator* (see esp. Issues 412-21 [1712]). By 1764, Kant, in his early work, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* can set out the oppositions between the sublime and the beautiful in a way which would have been already familiar to his contemporaries:

Finer feeling, which we now wish to consider, is chiefly of two kinds: the feeling of the *sublime* and that of the *beautiful*. The stirring of each is pleasant, but in different ways. The sight of a mountain whose snow-covered peak rises above the clouds, the description of a raging storm, or Milton's portrayal of the infernal kingdom, arouse enjoyment but with horror; on the other hand, the sight of flower-strewn meadows, valleys with winding brooks and covered with grazing flocks, the description of Elysium, or Homer's portrayal of the girdle of Venus, also occasion a pleasant sensation but one that is joyous and smiling. In order that the former impression could occur to us in due strength, we must have a *feeling of the sublime*, and, in order to enjoy the latter well, a *feeling of the beautiful*. Tall oaks and lonely shadows in a sacred grove are sublime; flower beds, low hedges and trees trimmed in hedges are beautiful. Night is sublime, day is beautiful; the sea is sublime, the land is beautiful; man is sublime, woman is beautiful; ...The sublime *moves*, the beautiful *charms*. The mien of a man who is undergoing the full feeling of the sublime is earnest, sometimes rigid and astonished. On the other hand the lively sensation of the beautiful proclaims itself through shining cheerfulness in the eyes, through smiling features, and often through audible mirth... Deep loneliness is sublime, but in a way that stirs terror. Hence great far-reaching solitudes, like the colossal Komul Desert in Tartary, have always given us occasion for peopling them with fearsome spirits, goblins, and ghouls. (46-7).

Edmund Burke's Philosophical Inquiry

It is, however, Edmund Burke whose work first systematically sets out to examine at length not just the *differences* between the sublime and the beautiful, but to analyse their bases as *opposing* categories. In his 1757 book, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origins of Our Feelings of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Burke, an empiricist in the mould of Hume and Locke, set out not just to enumerate the kinds of object or artwork which are 'sublime' or 'beautiful', or to describe the feelings which they evoke, but to find a psychological and physiological basis for these feelings. To account for the difference between sublimity and beauty, Burke suggests two kinds of pleasurable sensation. He rejects the argument that the relief of pain or fear is pleasurable in the same way that a simply pleasurable sensation is. Rather, naming this negative pleasure of relief 'delight', he suggests that it is a return to the equilibrium of a neutral state, rather than pleasure which is a movement away from the neutral state towards a state of pleasure. Burke wishes to understand the basis of beauty as simple, positive pleasure, and he proposes that it is involved with our instincts towards sociability: the pleasure of the beautiful is a large part of what attracts and binds us to others.

When Burke examines the physiological expression of those under the spell of the sublime (the solemn, drop-jawed expression of awe), however, he finds it more akin to that evinced by an expression of sudden relief from terror. He thus proposes that at the basis of the feeling of sublimity is some 'modification' of terror or horror; it is fundamentally a 'negative' pleasure, or 'delight.' He writes: "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, 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" (Burke, 86). Burke takes a step further and proposes that at the basis of terror - and thus of the sublime - is our sense of our mortality. As Burke himself puts it: "what generally makes pain itself, if I may say so, more painful, is, that it is considered as an emissary of this king of terrors" (86). For Burke, this makes the sublime "the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling," since "the passions ... which are conversant about the preservation of the individual ... are the most powerful of all the passions" (86). The sublime, then, in terms at least of the intensity of its affects, is thus superior to the beautiful. For Burke, the empiricist, it seems largely shorn of the religious or numinous implications of the metaphors of height that have up to this point usually been associated with the term, and if there is a 'height' involved in the sublime for Burke, it often seems something more akin to a 'heightening' of sensation.

Burke then runs through the gamut of the familiar images and properties of the sublime (darkness, obscurity, vastness, height, mountains, deserts, the stormy ocean, supernatural fears, the infinity of space, the absolute power of God, the ungraspably vast or formless, war, conflagration, the ruin of civilisations, and so on) and goes to show how these might all in effect be situated within this schema of the sublime as having its basis in horror and terror.

Perhaps what sticks out as interesting about Burke, however, is what he adds to this canon of objects: we find a host of urban – or perhaps urbane – images discussed in terms of the sublime: theatres and public executions, street preaching, fireworks displays, architectural expressions of power, and so on.

Burke and the taste for the Gothic

These testify to the rapid urbanisation of the time, and link Burke in to a spectacularised and commercialising culture, which was perhaps already interested in attempting to manufacture these effects of the sublime in audiences for political and commercial gain. Burke's down-to-earth empiricist version of the sublime could be read as a manual for the production of these now-valued effects for a growing urban audience... In fact Burke's essay perhaps also functions in many ways like Longinus's own one: as well as a theory of the sublime, it serves as a kind of demonstration of a version of the taste for the sublime, an exemplary set of judgements which might be imitated by an audience. Its success as such is testified to by the fact that Burke's essay was hugely popular and rapidly went through a number of editions (even if its reviewers, and the writers who followed him mostly did not swallow whole his argument as to the grounds of sublimity lying in the negative pleasure of terror and pain, the experience of our mortality, and even if most accounts of the sublime continued to privilege notions of height, nobility and heavenliness as central to conceptions of sublimity). This success was perhaps in part due to its expression of the already-growing taste which we also find in the 'graveyard poetry' of the time (Young, Gray, etc.) and the stirrings of a taste for the 'Gothic.' If Burke did not as such 'invent' this taste, the example of the authority of his essay was, perhaps hugely instrumental in its legitimation and dissemination. Only a few years later (1764, the same year as Kant's *Observations*), Horace Walpole published his tale of supernatural horror, *The Castle of Otranto*, utilising many of the kinds of device described in Burke's account of the sublime. *The Castle of Otranto* was to be the founding text of the genre of the 'Gothic novel,' itself something of a populist and sensationalist genre, just the kind of formulaic commercial product that appealed to broadening reading public through its appeal to the base instincts for the shocking and the violent, rather than the heights of educated good taste (or at least such was feared in the criticism of the time).



Kant's 'Analytic of the Sublime.'

Burke's essay, however, was far from the last word on the sublime, and it is primarily with Kant's discussion of the notion in his 'Analytic of the Sublime,' in *The Critique of Judgment* (1790), the final book of his three *Critiques*, that the notion of the sublime is today associated. Kant's essay is complex and subtle and I can hope here to do little more than offer a brief outline, that will do it little justice.

To understand the significance of Kant's account of the sublime, we have also, however, to place it within the context of the architecture of the project of the three *Critiques*. Kant was writing to confute both on the one hand the empiricism of Locke and Hume (on which Burke's treatise was based), which claimed that all we know comes from the experience of our senses, and also, on the other hand, the Rationalism and Idealism of European philosophers in the Neoplatonic tradition who claimed that our only true knowledge comes through the recognition of (divine) Ideas, pure forms which pre-exist our sensory experience. The Idealists argued that we have a direct intuition of such forms, since we are spiritual, rather than merely corporeal, beings. In the critical writings, Kant argues that our experience can neither be entirely derived from sensory experience, but neither do we have a direct access to a divine truth. He suggests that there are certain categories which are innate to us and determine our sensory experience. Such things are our awareness of time and space themselves, or of cause and effect, which form the conditions of our perception of any object. Similarly, Kant argues that there are certain *a priori* Ideas which we carry into the phenomenal world, and without which we could not make sense of it: Ideas such as Infinity, Unity, Freedom, Justice, the Absolute, and so on. These, he suggests, cannot be derived from any empirical incidence that we might experience, and so stem from our 'supersensuous' powers of Reason; they are Ideas which we carry with us into the world, as Rational beings. As beings who have such ideas, we have a dimension which is 'transcendent' of the empirical or phenomenal world we move in. However, we do not have a direct intuition of the 'reality' of our world through these ideas; this - what Kant calls 'the thing in itself' - remains opaque to us, hidden behind the veil of appearances.

Kant termed this philosophical system 'transcendental Idealism,' and it is into this system which he sought to insert his notion of sublimity. Interestingly, the only essay that he cites as a source for his notion of the sublime in the third *Critique* is Burke's treatise (although Kant certainly also knew the work of Addison and Shaftesbury amongst others). Kant admits a debt to Burke, a debt which is also clear in his borrowing of Burke's opposition of the sublime and the beautiful, where beauty is a form of simple, positive pleasure, whilst the sublime, just as Burke argues, is a pleasure arising from displeasure: Kant describes it as "a pleasure that only arises indirectly, being brought about by the feeling of a momentary check to the vital forces followed at once by a discharge all the more powerful ... [S]ince the mind is not simply attracted by the object, but is also alternately repelled thereby, the delight in the sublime does not so much involve positive pleasure as admiration or respect, i. e., merits the name of a negative pleasure." (*Judgment*, SS.23)

However, Kant, the 'transcendental Idealist,' is setting out to refashion Burke's theory of the sublime in such a way that he can refute its empiricism. In order to do this, Kant proposes that the sublime involves the recognition of this 'supersensible' dimension in human Reason, the recognition that we have a power within us that transcends the limits of the world as given to us by our senses. This supersensible dimension of the mind, Reason itself, is what is properly speaking sublime. What should be seen as sublime are not the objects in nature which have been up to this point associated with sublimity - they are in fact merely formless, horrific, chaotic, and hardly deserving of such a noble epithet - but the powers of Reason to which the mind will turn when confronted with them. As Kant writes:

the sublime, in the strict sense of the word, cannot be contained in any sensuous form, but rather concerns ideas of reason, which, although no adequate presentation of them is possible, may be excited and called into the mind by that very inadequacy itself which does admit of sensuous presentation. Thus the broad ocean agitated by storms cannot be called sublime. Its aspect is horrible, and one must have stored one's mind in advance with a rich stock of ideas, if such an intuition is to raise it to the pitch of a feeling which is itself sublime – sublime because the mind has been incited to abandon sensibility and employ itself upon ideas involving higher finality. (SS.23)

How, then, do such objects, as presented to our senses occasion in us a sense of sublimity? Kant describes two ways that this may happen; he terms the first of these the 'mathematical sublime' and the second the 'dynamical sublime.'

The experience of the 'mathematical sublime' is occasioned by an almost ungraspably vast, formless object. Kant suggests that at a certain point, the powers of our senses and of our Imagination (the faculty of the mind that schematises and grasps the sensory world in images and 'forms') fail to be able to synthesise all of the immediate perceptions of such a huge and formless object into a full and unified image of a single figure; its sheer scale threatens to overwhelm the mind's powers of comprehension, our ability to grasp its magnitude with 'the mind's eye'. If this is an initially displeasing, humbling experience, however, this is also the point where reason steps in. For reason has in store another resource - the Idea of Infinity, drawn from within the realm of our supersensuous being. Thus although the object may seem at first to overwhelm our capacities, we find that it is only our sensory capacities that are thus threatened. Our Reason has at its disposal an Idea which is far larger than the object, and so we can figure it as merely approaching - inadequately - the appearance of the infinite. In such a movement, we are drawn away from our sensuous experience towards a recognition of the 'higher,' sublime, transcendental powers of Reason that we have within us. The 'dynamical sublime' rather than dealing with a large object, deals with an enormously powerful natural force - a storm for example. As with the mathematical sublime, we initially recognise in such a force the seeming inadequacy of the human: we are small and weak, and the storm might easily sweep us away and annihilate us.

However, Kant suggests that when we are faced with no immediate danger, when such a storm can be experienced as a mere representation rather than as a direct threat to life and limb (terror, Kant stresses is not in itself sublime; it is an abject, unreasonable, animalistic impulse), then we can recognise it as 'fearful' without being afraid, and at such a point we "discover within us a power of resistance of quite another kind, which gives us courage to be able to measure ourselves against the seeming omnipotence of nature." (SS.27) Kant goes on to explain the nature of such a 'power of resistance.' It is a power, "to regard as small those things of which we are wont to be solicitous (worldly goods, health, and life), and hence to regard its might (to which in these matters we are no doubt subject) as exercising over us and our personality no such rude dominion that we should bow down before it, once the question becomes one of our highest principles and of our asserting or forsaking them." (SS.27) Although objectively we are physically subject to the power of nature to destroy us, as free and reasoning beings, we can also act, in the name of our highest and most rational principles, against this narrow self-interest. What is sublime, then, in this experience is the recognition of the resources for heroism that we have within us. Again it is a triumph of the 'supersensuous' over the 'sensuous'

There are, of course, unmistakeable ethical overtones in Kant's version of the sublime, most clearly with the dynamical sublime, but also with the mathematical sublime. Although Kant's critical project carefully distinguishes between ethical and aesthetic judgements, we have in the sublime the start of something like a bridge between the two realms of experience. It provides us with a sense of that which is beyond our own self-interest, and provides access to (and pleasure in!) the kind of rational 'disinterestedness' which for Kant must form the basis of ethical rather than selfish action. In the sublime, we recognise in such a dimension of our nature our highest and truest freedom.

In Kant's theory of the sublime, we have something very different from Burke's. Burke seems to stress the immanence of the sublime: it is an irrational, emotional force, which "far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force" (Burke, Part II, ch. 1) It is based in terror and self-preservation, and seems to involve an intensification of affect, rather than any kind of transcendence. For Kant, the sublime, is transcendent, rational, and reminds us of our 'higher' moral functions. It is seen in terms which might seem in some ways to be closer to the Neoclassicist notions of the sublime - it involves the lofty and the elevated, and seems to inscribe questions of *value* as central to the notion, whereas in Burke, although questions of value, morality and religion are not excluded, they do seem to become secondary. However, such similarities in spirit between the notion of the sublime in Kant and the Neoclassicists are also deceptive. If Kant's 'transcendental Idealism' does manage to return to questions of value more convincingly than Burke's empiricism does, it situates questions of value in quite different - and decisively *modern* - terms. The value of the sublime is no longer at heart a matter of the ability to give us a glimpse of the divine; it now the transcendental nature of *human* reason which we glimpse in it.

Kant and the Romantics

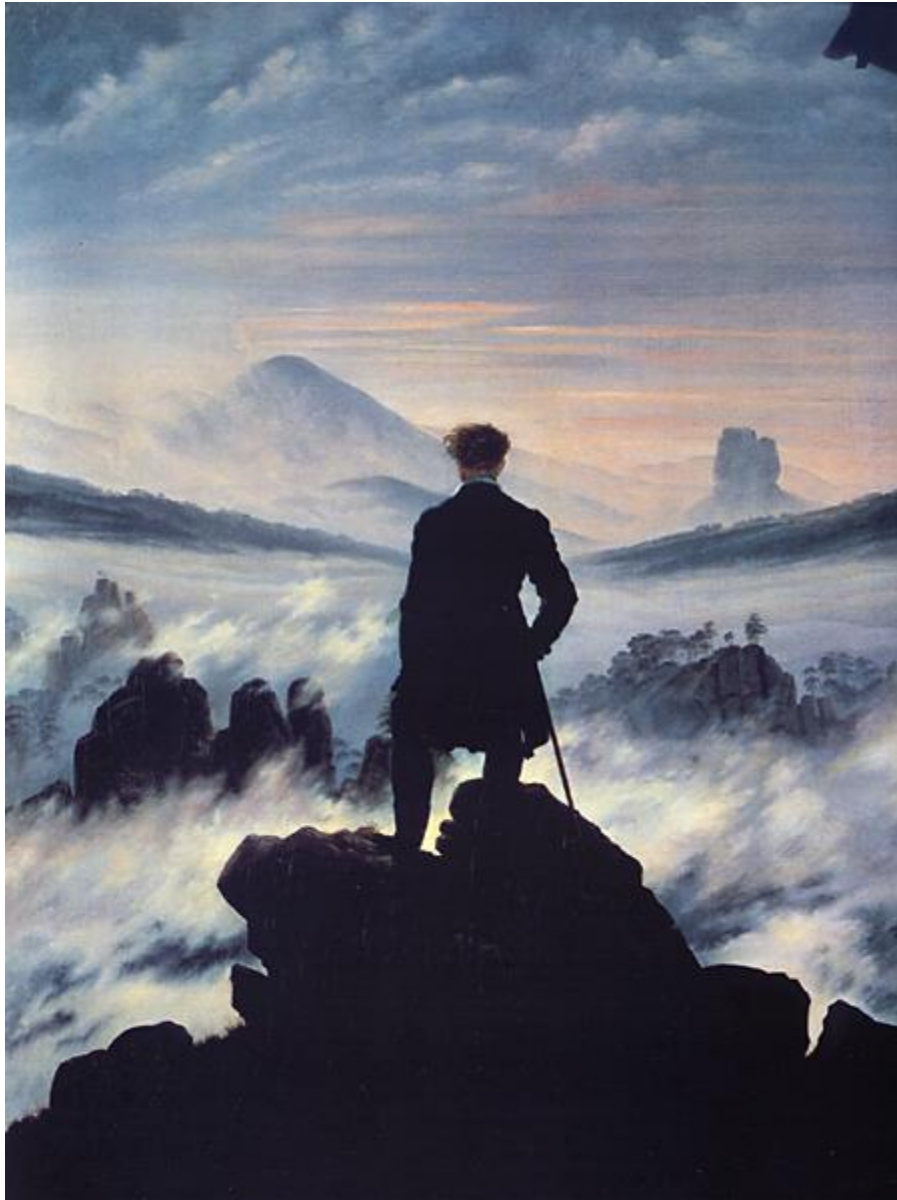
Many of the ideas raised in Kant's account of the sublime became central questions for the German Idealists and Romantics that followed him: one such central concern was the problem of how that which is beyond our sensory grasp - the infinite, the absolute - can be presented through sensory experience (even if this occurs only negatively and precisely through the intimation of a beyond which awareness of a *failure* of representation might provide). Longing, inadequacy and the relation between the fragment and the whole; the discovery in the sensuous of that which is more than sensuous; the importance of aesthetic experience to our religious and ethical life: all these become central in the work of Schelling, Schlegel, Fichte, and in the German tradition which extends through Hegel, Nietzsche and Schopenhauer to twentieth-century thinkers such as Adorno and Heidegger. However, these thinkers tend less and less to frame these questions in terms of 'the sublime.'

In German Romantic literature, we see the influence of the ideas and sensibilities of the sublime in the poems of Hölderlin (click [here](#) for an example) and of Schiller (who was an enthusiastic follower of Kant, and wrote two essays on the sublime) The character of Werther in Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), was perhaps one of the central works which disseminated the taste for sublime nature in European letters. Werther, the hero of the book, has a sensitivity to nature that borders on the pathological. His response to sublime nature as his mood darkens, a "longing to be lost in the vastness of infinity", gives us a fore-echo of his suicide. Werther takes to wandering on stormy nights:

It was a fearful spectacle: the raging torrents were crashing down from crags in the moonlight [...] [W]hen the moon appeared once more, peaceful above a sombre cloud, and the flood before me rolled and thundered and gleamed with awesome majesty, a shudder of horror shook me – and then longing seized me again! Ah, there I stood, arms outstretched, above the abyss, breathing: plunge! plunge! [...] How gladly I would have surrendered my human existence in order to be that stormy wind, scattering the clouds, snatching at the floods! (111-2, cited Kirwan, 21)

Werther's ecstatic suicidal longing to transcend his human form in an ecstatic merger with sublime nature perhaps provides a fore-echo of Schopenhauer's gloomy pessimistic vision of the sublime as involving a glimpse of the abdication of the will, and of Freud's account of the 'oceanic' urge. (see below)

The painter most associated with this strand of the history of the sublime in Romantic German culture is Kaspar David Friedrich.



Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*.
Oil on canvas, 194 x 74.8 cm, 1818 (Kunsthalle, Hamburg).

In England, the influence of the Kantian sublime was perhaps less significantly seen in philosophy than it was in Romantic literature and criticism. In the last decade of the eighteenth century and the first decades of the nineteenth we continue to see the influence of the taste for the 'Gothick', terrible and supernatural in English Romanticism, especially famously perhaps in the work of Byron or in Mary Shelley's novels. However, in the work of Wordsworth in particular, we find the development of a sensibility towards nature which seems, indirectly or directly (Wordsworth's collaborator Coleridge certainly read Kant and in his writings popularised many of the ideas he found in German philosophy for an English audience), to owe much to Kantian notions of transcendent sublimity.

This sensibility towards nature has been termed by Keats, the 'Wordsworthian or Egotistical Sublime' (Keats to Richard Woodhouse, 27 October 1818, *Selected Letters*, 147-8). In the experience of this, as with Kant, the mind, faced with vast, dreadful or powerful nature meets a check, but ultimately, in a moment of expansion and release, finds in itself a power greater than nature and undergoes a kind of affirmation. This occurs through a process whereby the mind recognises the powers of nature as a reflection of its own, as if nature is merely its own mirror image, a process through which the mind appropriates the attributes of nature to itself. We see an example of this in the passage of Wordsworth's *Prelude* where the poet remembers making a nocturnal ascent of Snowdon (Book 14). He recounts how his awareness of his physical battle with the mountain was suddenly interrupted by the emergence of the moon, which floods the scene with light. This revealed for him the ground on which he stood as "a fixed, abysmal gloomy breathing-place" (l.58), and opened up a vision of "waters, torrents, streams / Innumerable, roaring with one voice!" (l.59-60) which seemed to shake heaven and earth. This vision, however:

Reflected, it appeared to me the type
Of a majestic intellect, its acts
And its possessions, what it has and craves,
What in itself it is, and would become.
There I beheld the emblem of a mind
That feeds upon infinity, that broods
Over the dark abyss, intent to hear
Its voices issuing forth to silent light
In one continuous stream; a mind sustained
By recognitions of transcendent power,
In sense conducting to ideal form... [ll.66-76]

This Wordsworthian version of human transcendence over nature differs from the Kantian one in that for Wordsworth it is the human ego which seems to triumph over nature. In contrast, for Kant, the triumph is properly that of a Reason which is beyond the needs, capabilities and interests of the ego.

In order to have a more fair notion of the Romantic sensibility of this period, however, it is probably necessary to balance a Wordsworthian 'egotistical' sublime against Keats's critique of this. Keats's counter-vision of poetical character is given in an ecstatic form, as a mode of self-loss, an oceanic merging with the universe, rather than a sort of egotistical expansion. Hence Keats's description of 'poetical character':

it is not itself--it has no self--it is every thing and nothing--It has no character--it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, right or poor, mean or elevated--It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosop[h]er, delights the camelion Poet [...] [H]e has no Identity--he is continually in for--and filling some other Body--The Sun, the Moon, the Sea, and Men and Women who are creatures of impulse are poetical and have about them an unchangeable attribute--the poet has none; no identity [...]
(Keats to Woodhouse, 27 Oct 1818, *Selected Letters*, 148)

William Blake's debt to the discourse of the sublime would be yet another matter. Burke's borrowing from the traditions of the sublime are undeniable enough: in the grandeur and sweep of his visions, in the sombre or violent moods he so often takes up, his exalting and ecstatic tone, and in his clear debt to Milton (especially the Milton of the first books of *Paradise Lost*, where Satan and Hell are described). However, as is clear from the notes he made on his copy of Joshua Reynolds' addresses to the Royal Academy, he had little time for Burke, primarily because of the empiricism he seemed to Blake to embody: for Blake the visionary and mystic, Burke was a writer in the tradition of Hume, Locke and Bacon, writers who, he thought, "mock Inspiration and Vision" (cited Weiskel, 67). Blake disliked in particular Burke's association of the sublime with the obscure, thinking that "Grandeur of Ideas is founded on precision of Ideas." For Blake, there was none of the Kantian or Romantic sense of an 'unpresentable', or of the failure of representation which might necessitate a 'negative presentation'. The infinite and the divine are there to be directly intuited precisely by a form of visionary experience which will reveal it directly in its naked truth, a sort of 'revelatory sublime'.



William Blake, *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun*, 1805-1810. Watercolor, 15 3/4" x 12 3/4", National Gallery of Art, Washington DC.

The American Sublime



Frederick Church, *Twilight in the Wilderness*, 1860.

Oil on canvas, 101.6 x 162.6 cm, The Cleveland Museum of Art

During the nineteenth century the notion of the sublime (in particular variations of the Wordsworthian narrative of the triumph of the self over nature, which can be seen in retrospect to have provided something of a blueprint for notions of technological conquest and the American emphasis on individualism) was key in articulating the American experience of the scale of the 'new' continent, and in affirming, in the vast landscape paintings of the Hudson River School and the nature poetry of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Wallace Stevens, the national myth of the 'frontier,' the struggle of the human against the forces of the untamed wilderness. (We can also see similar trends in the art of other colonies, such as Australia and New Zealand.) David Nye has more recently argued in his book *American Technological Sublime* that this notion of the sublime has fed into an American enthusiasm for technological feats and triumphs over nature ranging from transcontinental railways to the Hoover Dam, and from skyscraping architecture to atomic testing and space missions, all of which at various points have become the focus for tourism to an extent that they have competed with more traditional sites of American sublimity: the Yellowstone National Park, Niagara Falls and the Grand Canyon.

The 'technological sublime' was not just an American mode, however, and the imagery and rhetoric of the sublime was also used to articulate the experience of the industrialised landscape in Europe. In British art of the late eighteenth century, Ironbridge Gorge, the site of the first mass production of iron, in particular became a privileged site of representation of sublime landscape, and a destination for tourism. The bridge itself, with its pioneering use of cast iron became an icon of technological mastery, and its frequent reproduction set the pattern for celebratory representations in popular prints and early illustrated newspapers of technological achievement. However, in Europe, the tone of artistic engagement with technology seems to have been more frequently sombre than in the United States. In the UK, the descriptions of Hell in the early books of *Paradise Lost* (which already appears as a mechanically animated landscape) frequently formed the blueprint for descriptions of the industrial landscape. Perhaps this was due to a growing awareness of the threat of the growing, and increasingly disenfranchised labouring class that inhabited these industrial landscapes, and perhaps it was also due to a greater awareness, being more in the shadow of their ruins and remains than those who lived in the New World, more of the long history of the rise and fall of civilisations, a theme which is often linked to that of technological progress. We find these figures linked, for example, in the work of painter John Martin, who illustrated Milton, and was famous for his vast apocalyptic canvases. Many of these pictures depicted fallen, ancient civilisations, or were based on archaeological surveys of ancient cities. Martin was also, however, a prominent figure in proposing engineering schemes, and his work fuses the ancient and the modern, the imperative to technological progress and the inevitable ruin of feats of engineering. Martin's work, with all its apocalyptic overtones, was much admired by Brunel and other contemporary engineers, and a taste for the Egyptian or Babylonian became rife in the engineering works of the day. Bizarrely, the newest industrial landscape must have given off the impression of being already the ruined remains of an ancient world, before they were even completed...



John Martin, *Pandaemonium*, 1841.

Oil on Canvas, 48 1/2 x 72 1/2 in., The Forbes Magazine Collection, New York.

The sublime and modernism

Throughout the nineteenth century the notion of the sublime slowly lost the central role it had once had in aesthetic speculation. However, it has undergone a number of sporadic revivals, prominently in the thought of the surrealists, and also in the critical discourse around the work of the New York 'abstract expressionist' and 'colour field' painters such as Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman. In an echo of the Hudson River School, these American artists sought to escape European conventions of art through a turn to the scale of the American landscape and a rejection of European representational traditions. The canvases were frequently massive and evidenced a 'heroic' conquering of the material difficulties of their production through the 'will' of the artist, often metonymically indicated in the paintings through bravura mark-making. Newman's essay, "The Sublime Is Now," sets out the programme for such an art; it is to reject the false sublime of myth as superstitious and outdated. A truly modern sublime will reject the 'representation' of an elsewhere or another time; rather, the modern painting will simply present *itself* to the viewer, in the here-and-now moment of the direct encounter between the physicality of the canvas and the spectator.



Barnett Newman, *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, 1950-1.

Oil on canvas, 7 ft. 11 3/8 in. x 17 ft. 9 1/4 in., MOMA New York.

'Postmodern' sublimes?

The end of the twentieth century has seen something of a revival of interest in the notion of the sublime in philosophy and cultural criticism, with a number of key thinkers interested in the notion. There has been a considerable interest in returning to look at the theories in particular of Burke and Kant, in part in order to explain our own art and culture, and in part also a desire to reassess the past, and to map ourselves into its trajectories.

Psychoanalysis and the sublime

Writers in a psychoanalytic tradition, such as Neil Hertz and Thomas Weiskel have sought to understand the psychological mechanisms underlying the sublime. In Weiskel's *The Romantic Sublime*, he notes that what seems to be staged in the sublime, both in Kant and in Wordsworth is something very like an Oedipal scenario. Just as the inauguration of the Oedipal complex requires the infant to resolve his ambivalent feelings of fear and love for the father figure by a process of identification with his superior power, in the sublime we are also faced with the image of a powerful force, which might threaten to destroy us, but resolve this fear by identifying ourselves with the force and appropriating to ourselves its characteristics. Weiskel goes a step further: underlying this Oedipal structure must also lie, he claims, a troubled and ambivalent relation to the maternal. The sublime object shares many of the characteristics that the infant attributes to the maternal body (formlessness, scale, lack of limits of boundaries) and like the maternal body, it seems to offer a simultaneously desired and dreaded annihilation of the self, merged back into the cosmos or the maternal body. According to Freudian theory, the infant, alienated and helpless, desires during the developmental stage of 'primary narcissism' to be merged back into the maternal, but since this is a desire dangerous to its own developing sense of self, it represses this desire and projects it onto the maternal itself, and thus experiences this as a giant, threatening, formless other that desires and threatens to devour it. In the case of the experience of the sublime a similar threat of annihilation of self is either literal in the case of the dynamical sublime, or more figurative in the case of the mathematical sublime, where, as we are faced with the infinite, the stable scale and order of the self is placed in jeopardy as we, in Burke's phrase, "shrink into the minuteness of our own nature, and are, in a manner, annihilated" (Part II, Ch.6). Such a sublime is similar to Freud's 'Oceanic' experience.(see Weiskel 83-106)

Feminism and the sublime

Feminist writers, especially Barbara Freeman, have taken on these kinds of psychoanalytical interpretation to articulate a critique of the phallogentric nature of such a Romantic sublime, and to note the connection between such an Oedipal logic and the aggression towards both nature and Others which characterised the period to which the height of the discourse on the sublime corresponds - a period

which also sees the height of colonialism, the industrial exploitation of the natural world, and the development of the Victorian, bourgeois, patriarchal ideas of the family and consequent ideas about gender. Such accounts tend to note the highly gendered language in which the sublime was defined by such writers as Burke and Kant, and the gendering of the examples that they used (see Kant above: "man is sublime, woman is beautiful"!). From this, an argument is built up as to how the sublime was implicated in the construction of gendered identities in this period. Freeman goes on to suggest that there are inevitable instabilities in a discourse such as the sublime, which focuses on excess and on boundary experiences. (What is the 'properly' gendered status of the eighteenth-century male viewer who experiences 'ravishment' in front of wild nature, as it commits, in Dennis's phrase, a 'pleasing rapine on the soul'? Although some writers, such as Kant, seem very careful to make sure they describe the sublime in terms of triumph of an active, masculine, reasoning self over nature, there are also innumerable writers for whom the pleasures of the sublime, in terms of ideas about gender that were current at the time, are far more ambiguously 'feminising'.) As a consequence of these instabilities, there is room for entry into or appropriation of the discourse from other angles than that of the white, colonising, patriarchal male. There was thus simultaneously a distinctly 'female' experience of the sublime, consequent on women's different path through Oedipalisation and their different relation to the maternal, which forges a less 'phallic,' dominating, aggressive and vertical relationship with others, and a more horizontal, open, expansive, permeable one. Freeman links such a notion of the 'feminine sublime' to notions of 'feminine *écriture*', as espoused by Hélène Cixous. (such a mode of 'feminine' writing is not posited as something only available to women, but a mode of writing which gives both men and women a different kind of access to language, one much less concerned with the possession of language as a kind of phallic power). Freeman's writing thus constitutes a rethinking of just what kind of an 'ekstasis' or 'transport' the sublime may have been (or may still be) in a way which reflects 'postmodern' theories of the subject as fragmentary and in flux. The ecstasy of the sublime, and experience of the boundary, is that of such an unstable subject, whose borders are no longer clear, and who is always negotiating the way in which one is always already 'beside oneself...'



Ana Mendieta, *Isla*, 1981/1994.

Black and white photograph , 101.6 x 76.2 cm, Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection

Fredric Jameson - globalisation and the sublime

The notion of the sublime has also been influentially used by Fredric Jameson to describe 'postmodern' forms of ecstatic subjectivity in the first (and eponymous) essay in his book, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. In this essay, Jameson is attempting to describe the effects of the globalisation of capitalism and its technological superstructure on cultural forms and subjectivities in the late twentieth century. One of the central effects of this on our experience, he suggests, is that more than ever before we have lost any ability to plot ourselves within a totality of human relations, under a socio-economic system where our human relationships are mediated by capital and our everyday activities indirectly impinge upon, and are impinged upon by, people on the other side of the planet about whom we know almost nothing; we find ourselves a fragment of an unimaginably vast whole, over which we can have no totalising vision or empirical understanding. For a parallel to this experience he turns to the Kantian mathematical sublime; but where for Kant (who was a provincial German of the eighteenth century) the ungraspable whole of which one might find oneself a part is the order of the natural Universe, it is now, for us, that of society: of the 'second nature' of the artificial networks that we have constructed to organise our lives. The experience of this second nature, argues Jameson, has largely replaced our experience of nature as a point of orientation. For such a subject of a society whose outlines can no longer be grasped, fragmentation of experience is the inevitable outcome; and such an experience is typified in postmodern cultural forms of collage, channel-zapping, and a general dislocation of signs from their referent. In fact, Jameson argues that such an experience of cultural fragmentation is similar to the symptoms of schizophrenia as discussed by Lacan. For Lacan, Schizophrenia, when thought of as a linguistic disorder, seems to constitute a breakdown in the syntagmatic chains of language. Such a breakdown in turn causes a severance of signified from signifier, and the subject is thrown into a world of pure, unconnected, excessively present signifiers. In such a world, the schizophrenic's access to 'affect' (at least with any content) wanes, and leaves them in a realm of pure moments of ecstatic (if terrifying) 'intensity'. Such is the state, for Jameson, of the postmodern subject, at once terrorised and thrilled by the seemingly random signs which the incomprehensible global system throws up, and left in a constant state of hysterical, schizophrenic, postmodern 'sublimity'. One result of this, suggests Jameson, is the prevalence of conspiracy theories in our culture, often articulated around imaginary secret technological and bureaucratic networks, and expressive of a paranoid fantasy-wish for an image of order. If this sounds a bleak picture, he does hold out a more positive cultural manifestation of the postmodern sublime in this essay, in works of art such as the multi-screen video installations of Nam June Paik, which send out a bewildering barrage of seemingly senseless images. Jameson argues that these installations seem to offer the viewer not the possibility of returning to a more simple, whole state, but instead hold out the impossible imperative to achieve that new mutation in what can perhaps no longer be called consciousness [...]

The postmodernist viewer is called upon to do the impossible, namely, to see all the screens at once, in their radical and random difference [...] and to rise somehow to a level at which vivid perception of radical difference is in and of itself a new mode of grasping what used to be called relationship: something for which the word *collage* is still only a very feeble name. (31)

Such a mutation in consciousness might resemble the ecstatic (sublime?) vision that Neo has at the end of *The Matrix* in which the impossible complexity of the flows of data which make up the unimaginable totality of the 'matrix', are grasped all at once, in a moment which takes Neo out of the normal orders of time or space. (Such a transcendent vision is usually the culminating point of the books of William Gibson.)

Lyotard and the sublime

It is, however, Jean-François Lyotard with whose name the sublime in recent years has been most strongly linked. In one of his best-known essays, "An Answer to the Question: What Is Postmodernism?" he suggests, like Jameson, that the sublime has become one of the key modes of aesthetic engagement in the postmodern era. However, he distinguishes here between two different kinds of aesthetics of the sublime which are at work in the contemporary world. First, in an echo of Barnett Newman's argument against surrealism, there is a variety of a merely 'nostalgic' sublime. For Lyotard, this nostalgic sublime is linked to the nostalgia of late twentieth century culture which has tended to move away from avant-gardist experimentation, back towards the past: we might see such nostalgic sublimity in the kind of spectacular 'postmodern' architecture championed by Charles Jencks, which jettisoned modernist programmes of formal design to embrace a vision of architecture as a montage of signs, plundered from the past, an architecture that tended to draw in particular from a Classicist tradition. Such a sublime, suggests Lyotard, is inevitably conservative and is in collusion with the logic of the market... It is also to be seen in the 'neoexpressionist' and 'transavantgarde' painting that seemed to dominate the art markets of the 1980s, with painters such as Georg Baselitz, Francesco Clemente or Julian Schnabel fabricating their work from a tissue of quotations from art history. Against this, Lyotard pits a more positive form of the sublime which is embodied in avant-gardist art, a sublime which enters into the realm of the 'presentation of the unrepresentable' through a programme of constant experimentation.

Lyotard expands on these brief comments in an essay entitled "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde." In this, Lyotard starts by improvising on the theme of some of the ideas in Newman's essay, "The Sublime is Now," namely the difference between on the one hand a work of art which seeks to be a *representation* of something outside the work, and on the other, the *presentation* which the work makes of itself. Lyotard attempts to synthesise this with the ideas of Longinus, Burke and Kant.

His arguments are rather complex, and as with Kant, I can hardly hope to bear them justice in a few paragraphs, however some attempt is necessary to lend this short history of the notion of the sublime any semblance of completeness.

Although in other places (notably his book *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, which makes a detailed and original reading of Kant's writings on the topic) Lyotard has focused primarily on Kant to discuss sublimity, here he pays quite some attention to Burke as well. He embraces the Burkean *immanence* of the sublime, and like Burke proposes it, instead of as a form of transcendence, as a form of intensification. He reinterprets Newman's version of the 'now' of the sublime as constituting a Heideggerian 'event,' or '*Ereignis*'. Such an event is not the same as a big media 'event'; it is something very small, and Lyotard spends some time explaining its temporality. The 'event' is not that which has already happened, or which we can already name as a particular kind of event, something we recognise, and can make a cognitive judgement as to what it is. Rather, the event is something more like a question which hangs over us. But neither is the event even a thing which we might already have formed a 'gestalt' of in our mind, which we have perceived or 'apprehended', and which we now only need to work out *what* it is: the question that hangs over us is not "what is this event, this thing that appears before me?" More than this, the event is the question: "*Is it happening? Will it happen?*" In the event, something unformed is - perhaps - emerging, and presenting itself to us. But at this stage, we do not know what it is or will be; we are not even sure that it is happening at all. Thus the sublime event, in Lyotard's explanation of it, is both a moment of *anxiety*, and also a moment of *quickenning*. As something unknown, still emerging, it shares the properties that Burke sets out for the sublime object - obscurity, darkness, formlessness, and so on. Lyotard reframes each of these as a lack or absence - of form, of light, of clarity - and Lyotard finds, as Burke did, that the sublime is thus centrally a meeting with pain and terror, a terror furthermore which, just as Burke also diagnosed, stems from basic existential fears: what if *it* doesn't happen? What if *nothing* happens? If nothing happens (to me) *ever again*?

For Lyotard, who in his work is generally interested in questions of communication, discourse and language, this question of the event is to be seen in relation to questions of the kinds of 'language game' that we know - the kinds of discourses with which we are familiar and of which we might be masters. If we are continuing safely *within* one of these language games (whether this be the language game of making art, of scientific practice, of philosophical discussion, or whatever) and obeying the 'rules' that are set, we are not involved in this kind of temporality of the Lyotardian sublime event. At each stage, we would know what move to make after any other move has been made. This new move would not present us with the difficulty, the lack, the terror of the event, since it will arrive in a form already comprehensible to us.

Against these 'safe' scenarios, Lyotard sets avant-garde art. It is this which faces us with the 'hit' of the sublime, challenges us with the unfamiliar, and presents us with a phenomenon which appears to us, as something unassimilable within our stable discursive orders, under the sign of the question mark: 'is it happening?' It is in this sense, suggests Lyotard, that we should understand the history of avant-garde art, which has, at each stage of its development, done away with what people can recognise as art - with good likenesses and naturalistic representation at first, then with pictorial space and with representation *per se*, until we have work such as Newman's which presents us only with the anxious moment of our encounter with the painting, a large, flat surface of colour; it presents us with the question: will this encounter happen, without the rules of art with which we were familiar?

For Lyotard, this temporality of avant-garde art plays an essential ethical role. What we are faced with when we are faced with the event, is an irruption into the order of language of the unspeakable, of that which exceeds the capabilities of the systems of language and discourse as we know them. This 'beyond' of any system of discourse is what Lyotard calls the '*differend*.' This can be imagined as the unformed chaos which swirls around language, which is produced as its other, a productive realm of potentiality from which the new can spring; it can also be figured as the space within which the difference between two irreconcilable orders of discourse is produced. This space for Lyotard is of vital importance in thinking the *ethics* of communication, and in thinking through the implications for the pragmatics of speech of the 'untranslatability' of one 'language' (and I use these terms also in their broadest metaphorical sense) into another. How are we to carry out a conversation with those who are different from us, and who have different ways of discussing things? How might these differences be discussed? What happens when one group forces another group to take up a mode of speaking which is alien to them, and within which the things which are articulable in their own mode of speaking are no longer so? How might such gulfs between different people or groups of people be bridged? These are the kinds of question which Lyotard poses in his book *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, and the sublime is important to Lyotard because it involves such a meeting with the different, with the borders of what can be said, with what is unrepresentable to us. To ignore this dimension is to impose the already-familiar order of the Same of our discourse on our Others.

The issue takes on particular urgency for Lyotard in "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde," in that the order of the Same which threatens in the essay is that of the omnivorous machine of global capitalism and its culture industries. For Lyotard, these threaten to swallow up even avant-gardist experimentation, as it is turned into 'novelty,' which can be sold on under the omnipresent logic of the market. It is this that Lyotard fears most in the return to nostalgic pastiche of the 'postmodern' art of the 1980s 'transavantgarde', and this is why he seeks in his essay to juxtapose the 'now' of the sublime event to the merely 'new' of capitalism, with its little *frisson*.

Lyotard's formulation of the notion of the sublime is far removed from those of the early-eighteenth-century Neoclassicists, and the notion has moved from serving to protect us from the 'modern' and justify the continuation of the ancient, as authors such as Alexander Pope hoped to do in the their satires by highlighting the bathetic ways in which modern poetry or art failed to live up to the lofty heights of the 'sublimity' of the ancients, falling forever from pathos into bathos and from the sublime to the ridiculous. Lyotard is now championing modernist experimentation as the locus of the sublime, not eternal classical standards (indeed, by his reckoning any such stable system of representation would be incapable of presenting us with the unrepresentable, of which the sublime event consists). In a peculiar way, however, Lyotard, left-wing modernist as he is, is closer to these cultural conservatives and reactionaries than might at first seem likely. For both Lyotard and the Neoclassicists, the sublime is a concept used to sort 'true' from 'bogus' art; and also for both, it is the commercial sphere which is the force which makes art degenerate into formulaic, false and bathetic states of non-sublimity...

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