

Into a Silent Universe: The Sublime and the Eerie in Byron and Ballard

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Extinction is no longer news: everywhere stories abound of a humanity on the brink of collapse. No longer relegated to the distant reaches of deep time or the arcane will of a deity, the end of humanity is now increasingly lived and felt as an ongoing process. The countdown to global tipping points are not measured in the millions or billions of years, but by the decade—and even as the timescale of catastrophe contracts to the span of a human life, the mass of processes, actors, and systems leading into this disaster become inconceivably more complex. In the words of the philosopher of horror Eugene Thacker:

“The world is increasingly unthinkable – a world of planetary disasters, emerging pandemics, tectonic shifts, strange weather, oil-drenched seascapes, and the furtive, always-looming threat of extinction. [...] To confront this idea is to confront an absolute limit to our ability to comprehend the world in which we live and of which we are a part” (2011, 1).

The future, we are told, is not human, but posthuman: which is to say that we will no longer be able to recognise ourselves as ourselves as we drift further into a global order of ecological disaster. As N Katherine Hayles declares: “If human essence is freedom from the wills of others, the posthuman is ‘post’ not because it is necessarily unfree but because there is no a priori way to identify a self-will that can be clearly distinguished from an other-will” (1999, 4). In other words, we realise that the human subject was never truly separate from the material processes relegated to the exterior of humanity, and as the world outside ourselves becomes unthinkable, so too do we become indistinct within the background noise.

Despite its seeming archaicism in the face of a posthuman future, I contend that the genre conventions of the Gothic, and its formula of “negative aesthetics,” are best suited to making sense of the catastrophe and decay which characterise that future (Botting 2014, 1). Just as the posthuman subject is structured around the human interior’s loss of autonomy from what lies outside, Gothic fiction follows what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has identified as a “particular spatial model” structured around the tensions of fragile interiors under siege from dangerous and desirable outsides (1986, 12). This model of the Gothic as a conflict between “what’s inside, what’s outside, and what separates them” thus lends itself well to depicting the anxious position of the posthuman subject—whose unstable, human interior is infiltrated and overpowered by the vast outsides of nature and machinery (ibid.). To elaborate upon this intersection of the Gothic and the posthuman I will look closely at a pair of aesthetic categories typical of the Gothic, namely the sublime and the eerie, to locate within the Gothic style a nascent sense of posthumanity.

At its simplest, the sublime may be defined as the experience of that which “overwhelms the self with the *idea* of an overwhelming power” (Williams 1995, 76). In our confrontation with that thing which utterly surpasses us, our mental faculties are pushed into a mad scramble to comprehend what is before us. In this state of confusion, the sublime is constituted as “a contradiction experienced between the demands of reason and the power of imagination [...] confronted with its limit by something which goes beyond it in all respects” (Deleuze 1984, 51). The goal of the sublime experience is then to surpass the limits of comprehension, as it forces us to reckon with that which lies outside ourselves and which floods the mind and senses with the “unrepresentable features of subjectivity and reality” (Peroikou 2017, 37).

How exactly this reckoning occurs, however, is not constant throughout the various historical manifestations of the sublime. For this reason, my discussion of the sublime will pass through three of its historical phases—the Romantic, the Gothic, and the Postmodern—assessing the state of the human subject and human reason within each. The persistence of the sublime over the past three hundred years, I argue, indicates a core of Gothic aesthetics within the heart of modernity, which in every incarnation also speaks to the imagination of extinction that haunts the modern world. The second aesthetic category of this paper, the eerie, is comparatively under-theorised but is nonetheless an essential component in the formulation of a properly posthuman aesthetics. Both the sublime and the eerie, I argue, are by their association with nonhuman and inhuman modes of cognition and perception explicit attempts to bring the power of what lies outside the human to the core of aesthetics. This transition from the Romantic sublime to the Gothic and from the Postmodern sublime to the eerie will be tracked through the analysis of two apocalyptic texts by Lord Byron and J G Ballard.

AESTHETIC APOTHEOSIS: The Romantic Sublime

In his seminal work on *The Romantic Sublime*, Thomas Weiskel proposes that “the essential claim of the sublime is that man can, in feeling and in speech, transcend the human, [although] what, if anything, lies beyond the human—God or the gods, the daemon or Nature—is matter for disagreement” (1976, 3). In short, the Romantic sublime functions as an aesthetic apotheosis, which draws the human mind upwards toward those things beyond itself. If in this language of transcendence we detect premonitions of current transhumanist claims about the supersession of humanity in a technological sublime, we should not mistake it for the basis of a truly posthuman aesthetics. The sublime in its Romantic form compels the human mind to rise above itself, but not necessarily to become something other than itself. In the Romantic sublime the observer experiences, in Kant’s terms, “a momentary inhibition” which redoubles the powers of the mind upon their return to order (2000, 128).

This dynamic may be found in the most typically sublime of Romantic poetry, such as “Mont Blanc” by Percy Bysshe Shelley, in which the poet proclaims the majesty of “The everlasting universe of things” which “flows through the mind” and “governs thought” (1-2; 140). In the experience of Mont Blanc’s sublimity, Shelley finds himself made subject to it, an epiphenomenon of an enormous and nonhuman power. In this moment, nature takes its place as sovereign of thought, but only for that moment. At the poem’s end, when the sublime feeling crashes down from its crescendo, the perspective returns from the natural to the human, and a final question is posed to the mountain itself:

—what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,
If to the human mind’s imaginings
Silence and solitude were vacancy? (142-4)

As much as the Romantic sublime decentres the human subject from its place of mastery, it depends upon it to ground the aesthetic experience. In Weiskel’s terms, the “sublime response saves our humanity from ‘humiliation,’” by incorporating a vast and threatening outside back into the bounds of the human subject in the form of a challenge to be overcome (1976, 95). The sublime in this sense contains a moment of contemplation of a world outside us and without us, which is then returned to a human perspective with the spoils. For all its language of transcending the human, the Romantic sublime ultimately reverts back to a sort of aesthetic tourism, which guides us in an awed state through the realms of the nonhuman and suprahuman only to return us safely to where we began: the human subject in all its mastery.

VOICE FROM THE CRYPT: The Gothic Sublime

If the Romantic sublime is essentially a limited sublime, which presents the enormity of nature as something to be imaginatively and intellectually conquered, what form might the sublime take in the failure of this conquest? Having admitted with Shelley that there exists a “secret strength of things / Which governs thought,” we venture nearer to a Gothic sublime which eschews the primacy of human reason altogether (139-40). As Vijay Mishra has argued, while “the Romantic sublime, finally, has the triumphant [human] subject,” the Gothic sublime is “the voice from the crypt that questions the power of reason [and] destabilizes the centrality of the ego” (1994, 38; 17). Although Weiskel is right to claim that “a humanist sublime is an oxymoron,” only in the Romantic form is this true for reasons of transcendence (1976, 3). As we shall see, there is in the Gothic sublime a crucial turn from the anthropocentrism of the Romantic sublime toward the dark powers of the nonhuman world.

Perhaps the cruellest instance of this Gothic sublime and its vision of an unthinkable world is found in Lord Byron's "Darkness." The poem recounts a vision of an Earth submerged into the inky void of space by the sudden flickering out of the sun. Byron describes his vision like so:

I had a dream, which was not all a dream.
The bright sun was extinguish'd, and the stars
Did wander darkling in the eternal space,
Rayless, and pathless, and the icy earth
Swung blind and blackening in the moonless air (1-5).

Here the sublime works not by transcendence but by privation, and throughout the poem "negative epithets" abound to subtract from the "rayless" universe and "pathless" planet all qualities except the endless dark (Dingley 1981, 22). Without direction, the Earth spins off among the stars, but without sight this vertigo remains strangely still. We may return here to Sedgwick's spatial formulation of the Gothic, and the parallelism she identifies in Gothic fiction between dreams and imprisonment, or the "almost inextricable association of depth with sleep and dreaming" (1986, 38). The Gothic nightmare, located by Sedgwick in De Quincey's opium dreams, Maturin's nested narratives, and the trope of live burial, is one of "privation and immobilization," the experience of "submergence under a massive space" and the forced enclosure within an ever-shrinking interior space (1986, 37). In Byron, too, the darkness which surrounds the dreamer is not so much an empty or inert space, but a force unto itself, which squeezes down and layers darkness upon darkness to smother all light.



Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *The Gothic Arch* (1761).

Byron's apocalypse confronts us with a universe in which disaster is not recompensed with transcendence, but only leads the human subject "into the abyss as it faces the full consequences of the failure to transcend" (Mishra 1994, 17). Reversing the Romantic formula, in which the sublime outside is made an aesthetic object of the human subject, all of humanity is here assumed back into the earth:

"—The world was void,
The populous and the powerful—was a lump,
Seasonless, herbless, manless, lifeless—
A lump of death—a chaos of hard clay" (69-72).

In terms which anticipate the desolate flatness of the Postmodern sublime, the Gothic sublime is progressively emptied of meaning, as all life slowly returns back to the mute matter from which it first emerged. In Mishra's words, the Gothic sublime "gestures toward a world and its symbolic forms that are exhausted: reality becomes a dream, realist representations a nightmare" (Mishra 1994, 157). Even the narrative structure itself is transgressed upon by this creeping void, as the dream "which was not all a dream" blurs the boundaries between the reality of the poet and the supposedly ontologically inferior world of the vision (Byron 2000, 1). In a sense, this confusion of fictional hierarchies is *the catastrophe* of Byron's poem, which in its "qualified acceptance of the version of the world represented in that dream" enacts the disappearance of the human subject which it describes (Mishra 1995, 17).

But still something remains and sets a final watch over Byron's silent universe. Lacking the independent human subject of the Romantic sublime—and without recourse to the divine presence of yet early instances of the sublime—the Gothic sublime retains only a reverence for the void; an awe at the numinous absence where God or Man once resided. Martin Bidney has remarked that "Byron's epiphanies exhibit a covert identification with the seer's gender-opposite, a deep empathy with the dark, sealike feminine" (2011, 98). For all its empty quietude, something elusive lurks within the darkness, which seduces the poet and draws him deeper into its midst. In the final lines of the poem, when all the earth lies dead, a face emerges from the darkness to reveal the being that had willed this annihilation:

The waves were dead; the tides were in their grave,
The moon, their mistress, had expir'd before;
The winds were wither'd in the stagnant air,
And the clouds perish'd; Darkness had no need
Of aid from them—She was the Universe (78-82).

This personification of darkness need not be mistaken for a latent anthropomorphism. Instead, by granting to a formless nature the cruel visage of a goddess, Byron raises further questions about this dark agency: Who or what is this thing? What does she want, if she wants? Perhaps more pressingly, by leaving this question of agency until the final lines of the poem, Byron does nothing to explain the preceding events. Beyond the sublime's ultimately pleasurable play with the imperceptible, the darkness of Byron's poem takes on the subtle and uncertain qualities of *the eerie*, which indicates the workings of some hidden agency while explaining nothing of its nature.

DROWNING IN SURFACES: The Postmodern Sublime

To elaborate upon the aesthetics of the eerie, we shall pass through another intermediate phase of the sublime and move from Byron's darkened apocalypse to another, no less cryptic, depiction of the world's end. In J G Ballard's *The Crystal World* a colonial doctor ventures into the forests of the Congo in search of a lost lover, only to discover a leak in time slowly transforming the jungle, and its inhabitants, into prismatic stone. Ballard describes the doctor's first sight of the crystal forest like so:

"The long arc of trees hanging over the water seemed to drip and glitter with myriads of prisms, [...] as if the whole scene were being reproduced by some over-active Technicolor process. [...] The sky was clear and motionless, the sunlight shining uninterruptedly upon this magnetic shore, and now and then a stir of wind crossed the water and the scene erupted into cascades of colour that rippled away into the air around them. Then the coruscation subsided, and the images of the individual trees reappeared, each sheathed in its armour of light, foliage glowing as if loaded with deliquescent jewels" (2014, 68).

A deathly quiet descends on the jungle, as the bustle of life is emptied of substance, locked in a frozen moment—a world trapped in amber! In this description there is still much of the sublime, but no longer in its Romantic or Gothic forms. This "Technicolor process," which reduces the jungle to images dancing across refractive surfaces, recalls Fredric Jameson's description of the Postmodern sublime, whereby the world "loses its depth and threatens to become a glossy skin, a stereoscopic illusion, a rush of filmic images without density" (1991, 34).



Max Ernst, *L'oeil du silence* (1943-4).

For Jameson the Postmodern sublime speaks to the "eclipse of Nature" as the primary and determining outside of human experience upon which all prior forms of the sublime depended (1991, 34). In the

place of nature, the sublime object becomes the massive and unimaginably complex machinery of global capitalism “which turns back on and against us in unrecognizable forms and seems to constitute the massive dystopian horizon of our collective as well as our individual praxis” (35). Like Ballard’s Congo, the world of the Postmodern sublime is flattened out, inexplicably transforming tangible things and accountable injustices into images without discernible origin or reality. The Postmodern sublime is thus the aesthetic of the political thriller and cyberpunk tale, in which something colossal but intangible shapes us—our desires, the scope of our imaginations—all the while remaining impossible to represent outside of fragments and conspiracy theory.

Where this experience of the Postmodern sublime lapses into the eerie, however, is in the question of agency. What power is at work beneath the shallow surfaces of this new world? Like the Postmodern sublime, the eerie hinges on the occlusion of agency, and the speculation that follows the failure to discern a single guiding hand behind events. The aesthetics of the eerie, in the words of Mark Fisher, are:

“constituted by a *failure of absence* or by a *failure of presence*. The sensation of the eerie occurs either when there is something present where there should be nothing, [or] there is nothing present when there should be something” (2016, 61).

One of the more conducive environments to this eerie failure of apprehension is the empty landscape and the abandoned ruin. From out of the Congolese jungle an enormous patch of ice begins to spread, but without any conformity with the known laws of physics. Such an anomaly, like the Zone of the Strugatsky’s *Roadside Picnic* or the planet of Tarkovsky’s *Solaris*, constitutes a failure of absence in its inexplicable intrusion upon our world, and a failure of presence in its refusal to give away any determining agency behind it—if there is any agency at all.

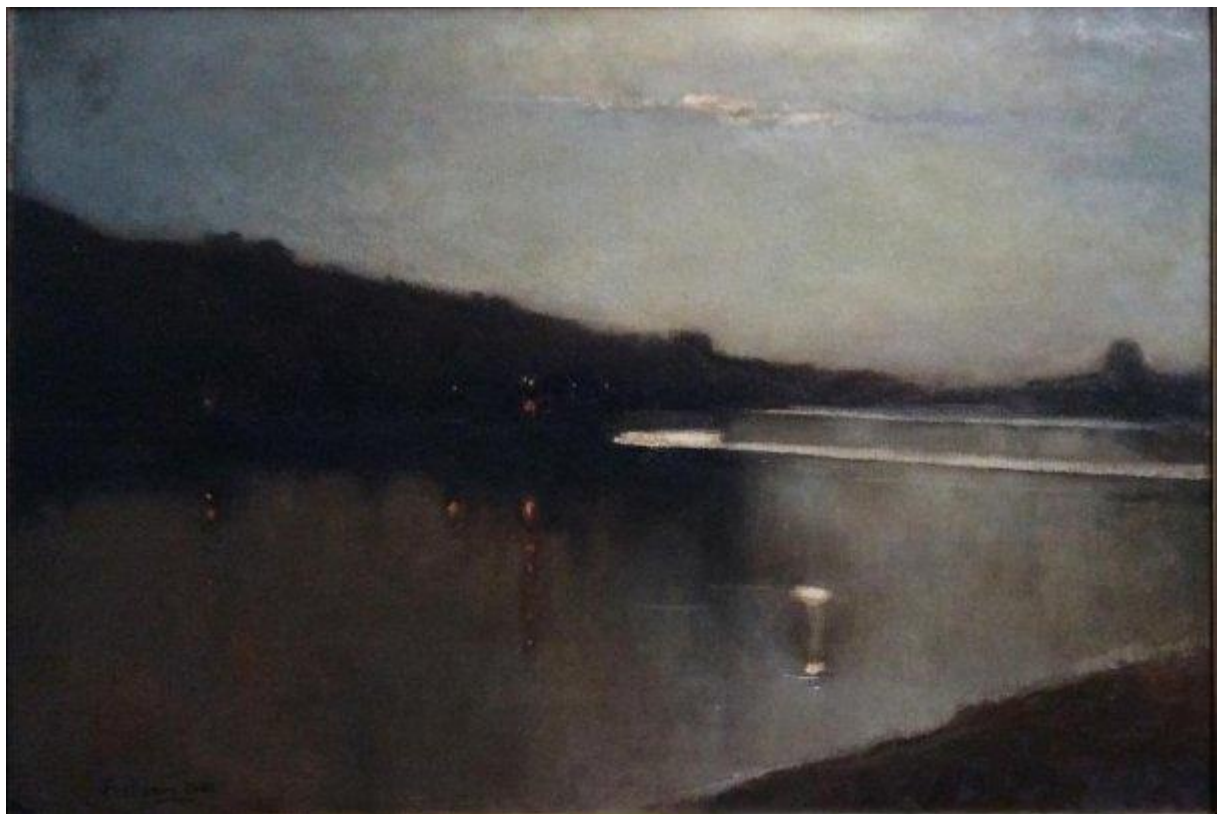
APOCALYPSE WITHOUT REVELATION: The Eerie

The eeriness of Ballard’s novel hinges on this paucity of information concerning the causes of the crystal growth. Watching the contaminated zone spread daily, the characters attribute to it all manner of explanations from the scientific to the theological. A physicist posits that it is a growing rift in the laws of the universe, “as if a sequence of displaced but identical images of the same object were being produced by refraction through a prism, but with the element of time replacing the role of light” (Ballard 2014, 66). Later the possibility of anti-time is introduced, against which our own time is slowly depleted. “As more and more time ‘leaks’ away, the process of super-saturation continues, the original atoms and molecules producing spatial replicas of themselves, substance without mass, in an attempt to increase their foothold upon existence” (85). As in Byron’s “Darkness” this spectre of extinction attains cosmic proportions, with crystalline zones scattered across the earth, and even spotted spreading across the sun.

Without that single sublime moment in which the terror of unknowing is paid back in full, the emptiness of the eerie lets the mind spiral away from itself, toward explanations both sacred and profane. In his introduction to the novel, Robert Macfarlane suggests that the crystals may be read as “a manifestation of capital: a fiscal rather than a physical precipitation, whereby all things are rendered fungible” (2014, 6). Suggestively, Mark Fisher has argued that capital is itself a kind of eerie agency which, “conjured out of nothing, [...] nevertheless exerts more influence than any allegedly substantial entity” (2016, 11). As the crystal forest spreads, in the diamond mines of the Congo, through the beachfront properties of Miami, and—prophetically—the Pripyat marshes, it precipitates value, turning dead time into objects. Such a reading recalls Jameson’s formulation of the Postmodern

sublime as the incomplete attempt to grasp capital's increasingly diffuse and invasive structures, but remains well within the domain of the eerie in the fact that Ballard's crystal zones accumulate possible agents without ever arriving at a sensible end to the speculation.

In the crystal jungle, a priest watches over the remains of his parish, to preach the manifestation of eternity on earth and the final transubstantiation of all flesh into everlasting light. He declares: "Here everything is transfigured and illuminated, joined together in the last marriage of space and time" (Ballard 2014, 162). Although communicated in the register of religious zeal, the priest's sermons speak to an utterly alien and inhuman salvation. This "Apostle of the Prismatic Sun" proclaims that in the forest "the transfiguration of all living and inanimate forms occurs before our eyes, the gift of immortality a direct consequence of the surrender by each of us of our own physical and temporal identities" (169). In this surrender of the self to an impossibly vast outside, the eerie is revealed as a species of sublime experience, but one in which the centrality of the human, in either its triumphant, empty, or fragmented forms, has been eschewed altogether.



Lorenzo Delleani, *Imminente luna* (1882).

The eerie object constantly eludes our perception, let alone our cognition, because it is something utterly outside the human and is detected only in its strange effects upon the world. If we drown in the sublime, we suffocate in the eerie. Where previous forms of the sublime retain a place for the human subject, the eerie as a kind of Posthuman sublime is capable of communicating an aesthetics of a world without us. Further still, when placed in the middle of a mute nature which "lacks even the capacity for indifference," we ourselves become harbingers of the eerie (Fisher 2016, 119). If the world outside is governed by nothing but a dead rumbling "of cause and effect [lacking] any designing or purposive intelligence," then what are we? Are we the agents of our own actions, and for how long? In this way the eerie places us outside ourselves, in a moment of speculation that both devastates and re-composes that which we thought we were.

TOWARD A POSTHUMAN SUBLIME

The history of the sublime is a history of imagining extinction. In the Romantic sublime we find a momentary experience of destruction in an encounter with something that exceeds our cognitive and perceptive abilities. But from this moment of disorder re-emerges the triumphant human subject newly empowered by its voyage into the unknown. For all its use of natural imagery, the Romantic sublime ultimately privileges the human figure, who is an observer of nature's fury, but not a victim to it. In contrast stands the Gothic sublime, in which the human subject is decentred or erased from the scene as the landscape re-asserts its cruel power. If the human subject remains, it is sunk into the depths of an abyss, made alien to itself as an enfolding of this vast outside. All stable interiority is submerged in this darkling mass: the mind is shaped by exterior forces, the body is reduced to dust, and we awake to find our nightmares true.

In his theorisation of the Gothic sublime, Vijay Mishra sees in it a prefiguration of the Postmodern sublime as a sublimity without recourse to humanity, although while the Gothic sublime is constructed around unknowable depths, the Postmodern sublime is far more concerned with the perfidy of surfaces. If the Romantic and Gothic sublimes mark encounters with an immense natural outside in either a conquering or submissive form, then the Postmodern sublime is the experience of obstruction when we fail to grasp the totality of capital's global system. The shining surfaces of the Postmodern sublime, like the fractal shapes of Ballard's novel, both obscure the machinery which brings them into being and reduces all else into images which flutter across the screen.

In continuation from the Gothic and Postmodern sublimes, the eerie as defined by Mark Fisher may be identified as a species of *Posthuman sublime*. By adopting the inhuman perspective of the Gothic sublime, the eerie decentres our experience from the human interior and redirects it toward the hidden, agential depths of the nonhuman world. Additionally, by taking the aesthetic reduction of the Postmodern sublime one step further, the eerie transforms the human subject into an image trapped in glass, composed by something other than itself.

Moving from the Romantic sublime through its Gothic and Postmodern successors, and arriving finally at an eerie Posthuman sublime, we move closer an aesthetics which can "see the [human] inside from the perspective of the [inhuman] outside" (Fisher 2016, 10). The successive forms of the sublime function increasingly by what Heather Davis calls the "defamiliarization and derangement of sense perception" typical of the posthuman condition (2018, 63). Within the realm of posthuman aesthetics, Davis writes, we experience "the complete transformation of the sensations and qualities of the world. In other words, the world that we are born into is receding in front of our eyes, causing a re-arrangement of the sensory apparatus of our organism" (63-4). Within this re-arrangement of the senses, and by extension of ourselves, we discover nothing other than the mixed horrors and joys of the Gothic aesthetic.

The main tasks of posthuman theory, namely the "folding of the exterior back into the interior," the placing of the inhuman ontologically before the human, and the conception of an aesthetics after human finitude are for all their perceived novelty also the age-old pursuits of Gothic fiction (Brits 2016, 17-8). In this light, the archaisms and horrors of the Gothic are more than cheap scares or senseless

nightmares: the Gothic imagination is also an escape from the parochialism of the merely human—the assumed right of Man over his universe—and a way to think a world which will not wait for us, which does not care for what we think or need. If the world is becoming increasingly unthinkable, and the barriers between ourselves and this world increasingly blurred, we must confront “the question of human extinction—the fact that humans will become extinct, the fact that we cause other extinctions, and also that we are extinguishing what renders us human” (Colebrook 2014, 11). From its beginnings the Gothic form has repeatedly returned to tales of humanity’s dissolution and decay into an unthinkable universe. As we enter an era of globally unfolding catastrophe it is the horror of the Gothic which once again describes the limits of our existence, and its terror which may guide us to other ways of being.

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