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The Sublime

An Introduction

IAIN BOYD WHYTE

The test of a construct that has true value is its ability to retain its core yet take on diverse and different guises over the centuries, each of them expanding both the potency of the construct and our understanding of it. So it has been with the sublime. Dismissed in the heroic years of high modernism as a passé and febrile embrace of Kantian philosophy by the romantic imagination, the sublime enjoyed an enormous revival of interest during the postmodern 1980s and 1990s. With the certainties of the modernist project held up to critical reexamination, the sublime offered a vehicle with which to question the dominant view of human agency on which the modern economic and political order had been established. Dismissing as reductive and one-dimensional the modernist conception of the human condition as rational, progressive, and benign, the postmodern critique found in the sublime a device for exploring more profound and complex layers of meaning: the heroic, the mysterious, and the numinous.

The principal focus of this interest was the Kantian sublime. Toward the end of the 1980s, the aesthetician Paul Crowther noted a new confidence in defining the sublime, which had opened the category to discussions that extended far beyond the

traditional parameters: "While philosophers in the analytic tradition of philosophy have found new significance in Kant's treatment of beauty and art, philosophers from other traditions and, indeed, writers in a host of other disciplines have asserted the cultural centrality of the sublime—and, in particular, Kant's version of it."¹ At that time, the sublime was highly fashionable in such fields as poststructuralist linguistics, literary studies, psychoanalysis, and psychology. Its strongest impact, however, was to be found in the realm of art theory and criticism, particularly as applied to the high modernist and postmodernist avant-garde.

In the mid-eighteenth century, the sublime was seen to exist in great and awful objects. As Edmund Burke explained in his celebrated exegesis *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757):

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*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. . . . When danger and pain press too nearly, they are incapable of any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we every day experience.²

And it was through language that the sublime object—be it craggy cliff, charnel house, or graveyard—could be related to our fears of pain, death, and destruction, where the objective could be tied to the emotional.

For Immanuel Kant, in contrast, writing at the end of the eighteenth century, the sublime exists not in an object that has tangible form, contours, and dimension. This is the key difference

between the beautiful and the sublime. As Kant explains: "The beautiful in nature has to do with the form of the object, which consists in the boundary [*Begrenzung*]. The sublime, on the other hand, is to be found in a formless [*formlosen*] object, insofar as in it or by occasion of it *boundlessness* [*Unbegrenztheit*] is represented, and yet its totality is also present to thought."³ In other words, we can know the ocean through our senses and dip our toes into the briny, but the vastness of the ocean is an idea that cannot be an object of sense experience, because it lacks contours and boundaries. Rather than in the things of nature, the sublime is to be found only in our own perceptions, when our inability to estimate the magnitude of things makes us aware of a supersensible faculty within us. This is the paradox of the sublime. The gap between tangible, empirical objects, on one hand, and the world of the supersensible, on the other, is absolute and unbridgeable. Yet only through our failure to represent the supersensible can we have a presentiment of its existence. In this very ambivalence lies the power of the sublime. As Slavoj Žižek explains: "This is also why an object evoking in us the feeling of Sublimity gives us simultaneously pleasure and displeasure: it gives us displeasure because of its inadequacy to the Thing-Idea [the supersensible Idea], but precisely through this inadequacy it gives us pleasure by indicating the true, incomparable greatness of the Thing, surpassing every possible phenomenal, empirical experience."⁴ Even though our rational capacity to measure, assess, and comprehend is challenged by the sublime object, we take pleasure and consolation from the recognition that our supersensible capacities are not similarly constrained.

Mediated by an initial displeasure, therefore, at the inadequacy of our powers of reason to comprehend the object of our contemplation, we experience a state of delight at the triumph of our supersensible faculties. Provided they are viewed from a secure

position, the most violent, powerful, and boundless manifestations of nature—Kant points to the hurricane and to the great cataract of water tumbling down from enormous heights—can engender feelings of joy: “We readily call these objects sublime, because they raise the forces of the soul above the height of vulgar commonplace, and 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.”⁵ This delight in our supersensible faculties can be prompted both by the magnitude of the object and by its quality—in short, its scale and its power—which Kant treats separately under the headings of the Mathematical Sublime and the Dynamic Sublime.

Kant is ambiguous in the *Critique of Judgement* on the relationship between the sublime and the work of art fashioned by human hands. On one hand, he specifically excludes as possible stimuli of sublime awe such things as buildings, monuments, statues, and the like, where a human end determines the form as well as the magnitude of the object. This does not preclude, however, the attempt to make artistic representations of those natural phenomena that have the authentic power to stimulate a sublime response. In this context, text fares better than visual art in Kant’s estimation of sublime potential, with the suggestion that “even the presentation of the sublime, so far as it belongs to fine art, may be brought into union with beauty in a *tragedy in verse*, a *didactic poem*, or an *oratorio*, and in this combination fine art is even more artistic.”⁶ For Kant, however, the supersensible delight that might accrue from such works is related to their proximity with moral ideas. This may be seen to confirm the proposition that while the sublime is of dubious value as an aesthetic concept, it can stand indirectly for moral awareness.

Kant’s intuition that dramatic text rather than visual art is a more potent vehicle for the construction of the man-made

sublime proved prescient. While such tragedies as Friedrich Schiller’s *Die Räuber* or Aleksandr Pushkin’s *Boris Godunov* left few standing on the stage and no one in the audience unmoved by their relentless inquiries into the nature of evil, the sublime in painting tended toward kitsch. There are, of course, wonderful exceptions, such as J. M. W. Turner’s alpine landscapes or his fantastic watercolor of the eruption of Vesuvius in 1817. (See Fig. 1)

Equally convincing is Caspar David Friedrich’s *Chalk Cliffs on Rügen* (1818/1819), in which diminutive figures in the foreground peer tremulously down into the abyss formed by the chalk cliffs and spiky outcrops that plunge down into the Baltic on the island of Rügen. (See Fig. 2)

Indeed, the sequence of the three figures reading from left to right might be seen to exemplify the Kantian sublime, with the woman on the left pointing down in initial horror at the incomprehensible magnitude of the drop below. To her right, a male companion is momentarily incapacitated as his rational imagination fails to rise up to the vertiginous challenge before him. Farther to the right, however, a third figure leans nonchalantly against a tree, which provides a safe vantage point on the wondrous spectacle, as fear is transformed into joy in the experience of the sublime.⁷ As Friedrich himself observed, we cannot escape from thoughts of death and transience: “To live eternally once, we must often surrender to death.”⁸ Through the intercession of the work of art, physical fear can be converted into pleasing astonishment. Generally speaking, however, the sublime impulse in nineteenth-century landscape painting led to bland sentiment: the sunsets of Frederic Edwin Church, the waterfalls and mountainous vistas of Albert Bierstadt, or John Martin’s apocalyptic landscapes, “in which cataclysms are rendered on huge canvases with painstaking attention to the details of rending granite and screaming women.”⁹ The result is more ridiculous than sublime, endorsing

the researches of the nineteenth-century German aesthetician Friedrich Theodor Vischer into the affinities and differences that exist between the beautiful, the sublime, and the comic.¹⁰

Partially escaping from these quasi-religious catacombs, however, the realm of the sublime expanded in the nineteenth century beyond the excesses of nature to embrace almost any area of human experience marked by great wealth or power. With the emergence of industrial production and urban concentration in the nineteenth century, however, the inventions of man rather than nature offered a new focus for sublime contemplation. As Crowther has noted in his study of the Kantian sublime: "The structures of capitalism and the conflicts it engenders provide immediate and inescapable images that overwhelm our perceptual or imaginative powers, yet make the scope of rational comprehension or human artifice and contrivance all the more vivid."¹¹ In the nineteenth century, industrial production, the speed and power of steam technology, and the burgeoning metropolis or industrial city stimulated the sensations of awe, terror, and exaltation previously associated with such natural phenomena as cliffs, waterfalls, and deserts. In the context of the Victorian cities in Britain, Nicholas Taylor lists among the sublime delights of the new century "the haranguing of the Evangelical preacher; the ecstasy of the Anglo-Catholic Mass; the scientific wonders of panoramas and exhibition halls; the traveller's thrill in catching trains and climbing mountains; the capitalist's pride in the hum of mass production and hubbub of the market."¹² The city of brick and stone, driven by the limitless technological power of steam and iron, with its vast and ever-expanding scale and its brutal contrasts of splendor and deprivation, replaced the menacing mountains, crags, and cliffs of the eighteenth century. The conquest of the Alps and the conquest of the industrial city demanded similar qualities and provoked parallel aesthetic responses. To the

boundlessly large, one must add the minutely and incomprehensibly small, particularly when that which is invisible to unaided sight—the bacillus or virus, for example—has terrifying powers of destruction.

As the instrument that makes possible the victory of reason over nature or chaos, the sublime has always carried with it extra-aesthetic dimensions, both social and political. While Kant's "mathematical" sublime refers to the faculty of cognition, the "dynamical" sublime points to the realm of human ambition and desire. David Hume had already made this connection in his *Treatise of Human Nature*, in which he notes that, "in collecting our force to overcome the opposition, we invigorate the soul, and give it an elevation with which otherwise it would never have been acquainted."¹³ Writing in the mid-nineteenth century, the German aesthetician Friedrich Theodor Vischer offered a more muscular account of the same insight, which proposed a distinctly positive understanding of the sublime: "We feel ourselves elevated because we identify ourselves with the powers of nature, ascribing their vast impact to ourselves, because our fantasy rests on the wings of the storm as we roar into the heights and wander into the depths of infinity. Thus we ourselves expand into a boundless natural power."¹⁴

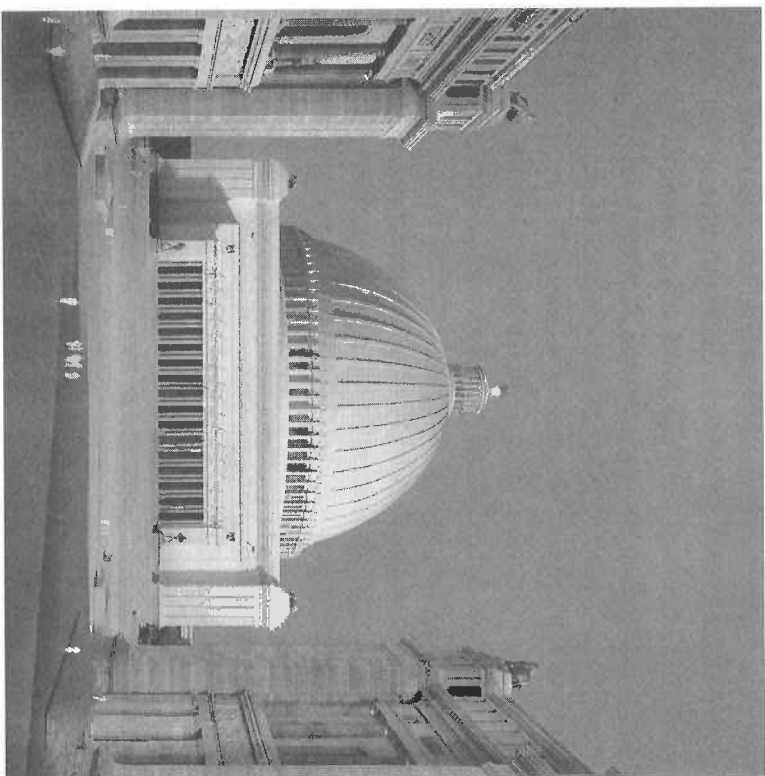
With the sublime response so closely linked to perceptions of power and achievement, it is little wonder that the guardians of totalitarian aesthetics looked benignly on this aesthetic mechanism. Indeed, as Gary Shapiro has argued, "an exclusive poetics of the sublime can lend itself all too easily to irrationalist, fascist politics."¹⁵ This nexus of sublime vision and concrete political ambition is entirely consistent with the logic of the sublime. A telling example from the early years of the National Socialist regime in Germany can be found in Martin Heidegger's exegesis of the Friedrich Hölderlin poems, written around 1800, in which

the poet wrestles with mortal man's attempts to portray the workings of the gods. In "Wie wenn am Feiertag," for example, Hölderlin offers this dynamically sublime vision of the workings of poetry:

Yet, fellow poets, us it behoves to stand
Bare-headed beneath God's thunderstorms,
To grasp the Father's rays, no less, with our own two hands
And, wrapping in song the heavenly gift,
To offer it to the people.¹⁶

The conclusions that Heidegger draws from this half-stanza are entirely compatible with the National Socialist ideology: "Thunder and lightning are the language of the gods, and the one whose purpose it is to bear this language without equivocation and place it in the being [*Dasein*] of the people is the poet."¹⁷

Although he precluded man-made works from the imperium of the sublime, Kant, as already noted, admitted that the works of man might, nevertheless, produce a sensation of delight. He surmised, for example, that when a visitor enters St. Peter's in Rome, the resulting emotions would lead to a calming sense of reassurance: "A feeling comes home to him of the inadequacy of his imagination for presenting the idea of a whole within which that imagination attains its maximum, and, in its fruitless efforts to extend this limit, recoils upon itself, but in doing so succumbs to an emotional delight."¹⁸ In the context of National Socialist architecture, a similarly pseudosublime response—feeding off the tension between what is perceptually overwhelming yet still known to be artifice—would have awaited the visitor to Albert Speer's projected "Große Halle," a gigantomanic domed structure set as the terminal feature of an axis that would have cut through Berlin like a surgeon's scalpel.



Albert Speer's "Große Halle," model photograph, 1940, Private Collection, London

Courtesy of Lutz Becker

By its very nature, the sublime moves from an immodest overestimation of our human powers at one extreme to despair and nihilism at the other. The horrors of the Holocaust undoubtedly turned thoughts back to the latter, suggesting a world in which there was no meaningful reality beyond the finite.

A particularly powerful response to the nihilist position came in the visual arts from the New York-based color field painters,

who, in the words of Barnett Newman, were "reasserting man's natural desire for the exalted, for a concern with our relationship to the absolute emotions."¹⁹ Shunning the conventional props of history, myth, memory, or association, Newman and his contemporary Mark Rothko held that transcendent sublimity was the only defensible subject matter of painting. Preoccupied in the mid-1940s by Jewish myths of the Creation, Newman produced his large-scale "zip" paintings, in which broad, monochrome fields are divided by thin vertical lines in contrasting colors. Their titles, such as *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950–1951) or *Adam* (1951–1952) confirm the transcendent ambitions of these works and the desire to present the unrepresentable. These ambitions were underlined in Newman's writings from the period, and in particular by the essay "The Sublime Is Now," first published in 1948.

Newman's article was a key text for postmodern theories of the sublime, as formulated by Jean-François Lyotard in *La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir* (1979). According to Lyotard,

The sublime . . . takes place . . . when the imagination fails to present an object which might, if only in principle, come to match a concept . . . We can conceive the infinitely great, the infinitely powerful, but every presentation of an object destined to "make visible" this absolute greatness or power appears to us painfully inadequate. Those are Ideas of which no presentation is possible. I shall call modern the art which devotes its "little technical expertise" [*son "petite technique"*], as Diderot used to say, to present the fact that the unrepresentable exists.²⁰

While Newman pointed explicitly to Burke as his principle source on the sublime, Lyotard and his contemporaries were more drawn to the Kantian, a priori sublime, grounded on the interrogation of reason and its limits.

A precondition for the postmodern critique of production in the visual arts was the conviction that the work of art emerged from and addressed not only the eye but also the intellect. In the twentieth-century context, however, the essentially Kantian belief that the function of the artwork is to stimulate in us the sense of a supersensible ability was not a postmodernist insight, but rather one of the key presuppositions of early abstraction. Paul Klee, for example, once noted in a poem that "I am not to be comprehended in *this* world."²¹ Similarly, the claim to present the nonvisible was already entirely explicit in the founding manifesto of abstraction, Wassily Kandinsky's *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, first published in 1912. In a language indebted to the rhetoric of the sublime, Kandinsky announces the end of the old order of representational art as it is challenged by abstraction and the dawn of a new era in which the resonance between the artwork and the soul forms the foundation of a new, spiritual revolution.²² His description of the color white is symptomatic of his claims for the power of abstraction to satisfy our inchoate inner needs:

This world is too far above us for its harmony to touch our souls. A great silence, like an impenetrable wall, shrouds its life from our understanding. White, therefore, has this harmony of silence, which works upon us negatively, like many pauses in music that break temporarily the melody. It is not a dead silence, but one pregnant with possibilities.²³

The embrace of the spiritual realm by whiteness preoccupied Kandinsky in the early years of heroic modernism and was taken up again and embellished by the postmodern theorists at the end of the century.

The world changed radically, however, between Kandinsky's early-century optimism and the reinvestigation of the sublime in

