

The Sublime is

An essay by John Corfield / Apollo

The most often quoted statement about the sublime in modern art is that by Barnett Newman in 1948 talking about his 'zip' paintings which could evoke a sense of the sublime in the receptive viewer. This was in contrast to the earlier Romantic painters (Fredrick, Church, etc.) who were gripped by the idea of the sublime but who only succeeded in evoking memories of the sublime by representing the locations where the experience of the sublime might be found.

Whilst the Romantics found their ideas of the sublime expressed by contemporary philosophers (Burke, Kant, etc.) the ideas of the sublime in the arts goes back to the first century philosopher Longinus. He identified five sources of the sublime in literature: ability to conceive great thoughts, intense emotion, powerful figures of speech, choice of noble words and harmonious composition of sentences. Each suggests an experience that transcends beyond the normal. Moreover each of these sources result in the readers own sublime experience. Longinus: *"For as if instinctively, our soul is uplifted by the true sublime; it takes proud flight, and is filled with joy and vaunting, as though it had itself produced what it had heard"* (Weiskel, 1976)

In the 18th century Schiller suggested that there is more than a feeling of transcendence. *"The beautiful, says Schiller, is valuable only with reference to the human being, but the sublime with reference to the pure daeman in man, the statutes of pure spirits"* (Weiskel, 1976) Schiller suggest man's evil nature should be included in the sublime.

Burke *".. the sublime is an idea belonging to self-preservation. That it is therefore one of the most effecting we have. That its strongest emotion is an emotion of distress, and that no pleasure from a positive cause belongs to it."* (Burke, p79). Here Burke is introducing the notion of terror into the conception of the sublime.

"Beauty can connect us to the sublime, but as Burke .. explains, it is much easier and more straightforward for terror to do this as it reacts on the strongest of human emotions: self-preservation and fear of death" (Wixley-Brooks 1995).

Burke in discussing beauty sees it as essentially feminine – and thus harmless, whilst he views the sublime as masculine – and thus implicitly connects it with power and authority. *"The sublime is associated with an experience of masculine empowerment; its contrasting term, the beautiful, is associated with an experience of feminine nurturance, love and sensuous relaxation. This gender differentiation was implicit in the most famous treatise on the sublime published in the eighteenth entury,*

Edmund Burke's Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful (1757) (Mellor, 1993).

Anne Mellor in her *Romanticism and Gender* refers to female writers for whom “.. *sublime landscapes are home scenery, the location of blissful childhood memories. Confronting magnificent mountains and lakes, their characters experience a heightened sensibility, not of anxiety, but of love, reverence, and mutual relationship. .. represent it as a flowing out, an ecstatic experience of co-participation in a nature they explicitly gender as female. For them, this female nature is not an overwhelming power, not even an all-bountiful mother. Instead nature is a female friend, a sister, with whom they share their most intimate experiences and with whom they cooperate in the daily business of life, to the mutual advantage of each.*” (Mellor, 1993)

Curiously Gilbert-Rolfe in his somewhat obscure ‘Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime’ (Gilbert-Rolfe, 1999) “.. *suggest[s] a model in which the sublime is androgynous and beauty irreducibly feminine..*”. He cites the example of Mick Jagger (and of course Bowie and Beckham) as being the dominant male icon for many years and who is essentially androgynous and Madonna as the completely feminine idea of beauty.

Kant in his *Critique of Judgment* “.. *some significant differences between the beautiful and the sublime are also readily apparent. The beautiful in nature concerns the form of the object, which consists in the [the object's] being bounded. But the sublime can also be found in a formless object, insofar as we present unboundedness, either [as] in the object or because the object prompts us to present it, while yet we add to this unboundedness the thought of its totality.*” (Korsmeyer, 1998, p265). Kant's ideas on the sublime are often summarised as “..*involving the 'infinite', 'formless', 'unpresentable', 'respect'..*” (Oblak, 1995)

In developing Kant's ideas “*The important theme Hegel amplifies is the idea that the object which precipitates the sublime experience must remain inadequately presented to consciousness in order that inadequacy can be represented. As soon as the experience of the sublime is linked with a specific object, that object is defined sensuously or rationally, which precludes it from evoking our experience of the inadequacy of these faculties.*” (Hooker, 1995, p48).

“.. *Hegel emphasises the sublime as the process of representing something which cannot be represented, whereas Kant locates the experience of the sublime as a mental response to the failure of this process. As a consequence for Hegel .. sublimity as process .. can be extended .. to the process of painting .. where the same kind of unresolvable tension between representation and unrepresentable object might be thematised.*” (ibid).

No discussion of the sublime in Modernism would be complete without referring to Barnett Newman's views as expressed in his article in

Tiger's Eye 1948 entitled "The Sublime is Now" ".. the European artist has been continually involved in the moral struggle between the notions of beauty and the desire for sublimity." (Harrison, 1992, p 572). " To us today there is no doubt that Greek art is an insistence that the sense of exaltation is to be found in perfect form .., in contrast, for example, with the Gothic or Baroque, in which the sublime consists of a desire to destroy form; where form can be formless." (ibid) "The impulse of modern art was this desire to destroy beauty." (ibid) "The failure of European art to achieve the sublime is due to this blind desire to exist inside the reality of sensation .. and build an art within a framework of pure plasticity.." (ibid, p 574). "I believe that here in America, some of us, free from the weight of European culture, are finding the answer, by completely denying that art has any concern with the problem of beauty and where to find it." "we are asserting man's natural desire for the exalted, for a concern with our relationship to the absolute emotions. .. We are creating images whose reality is self-evident .. Instead of making cathedrals out of Christ, man, life, we are making it of ourselves, out of our own feelings." (ibid).

Lytard in his 1984 article *The Sublime and the Avant-Garde* states ".. the extreme tension (Kant calls it agitation) that characterises the pathos of the sublime as opposed to the calm feeling of beauty." (quoted in Cazeaux, 2000, p 458). "The arts, whatever their materials, pressed forward by the aesthetics of the sublime in search of intense effects, can and must give up the imitation of models that are merely beautiful, and try out surprising, strange, shocking combinations." (ibid, p 460). "The art object no longer bends itself to models, but tries to present the fact that that there is an unrepresentable; it no longer imitates nature but is, in Burke, the actualisation of a figure potentially there in language." (ibid). Lyotard ends on a cynical point ".. one thinks one is expressing the spirit of the times, whereas one is merely reflecting the spirit of the market. Sublimity is no longer in art, but in speculation on art." (ibid, p 463)

These views on the sublime in Abstract Expressionism, are thoroughly rebutted by John Haber (Haber, 2000). He points out that there are no references to influences by earlier romantic artists in the writings or sayings of Newman, Pollock, Gottlieb or Rothko and goes on to make a number of other cogent arguments which suggest that these artists hijacked the use of the word, the sublime, for their own work.

This review of the evolution of the interpretation of the sublime suggests ways in which the term has been used over a long period. We see a strong emphasis on its being masculine to beauty's feminine. Notably this has always been by male writers. Gilbert-Rolfe suggests androgyny and Mellor implicitly denies its interpretation that way by many female writers.

The sublime is coming to mean whatever the writer experiences it as. This suggests it is not a universal and is losing its value as a term. Another interpretation is that these writers are referring to the same experience but are choosing to highlight elements that suit or interest

them. There is the suspicion that not only gender affects the definition of the sublime but also the personality of the writer. For instance, Thomas Huhn, another male writer, argues that the sublime is “.. the Nostalgia for Violence.” (Huhn, 1995). Perhaps we are seeing here the difference between the extrovert who needs and wants extreme stimulus, including horror and shock, and introverts who can sense the sublime in much more subtle ways. For this writer, horror is horror and barring this, the experience I can best identify with the sublime embraces all these elements – it is experienced not only when faced with the natural world, be it volcanoes and cataracts or a blade of grass minutely seen (a window on the infinitely small) but also in the presence of the formless whence nameless demons, dreams, delights or dreads may be sensed.

It is in the contemplation of the world of nature and the arts and the meditation thereon that the sublime is experienced. The place of the unrepresentable is essential to all these experiences and the idea of formlessness and unboundedness is central to the sublime. This has manifest itself in many ways in the visual arts be it in the abstraction of form or its simplification. The representational elements in an image preclude this unrepresentableness and in most fully representational paintings there is no experience of the sublime. It is to other images that one must look to experience it.

For instance, Titian’s “A Man in Blue” despite being highly representational has many of the elements which invoke the sublime – the abstract form of the blue silk sleeve and his hair, the indefinable space behind him. Features like these are available to the viewer in many paintings, but until modernism (including Constable, Turner etc.) are not the dominant component. Ben Nicholson’s white reliefs though tightly defined in form can be seen as nonetheless truly formless. Most fully abstract images can be viewed in such a way as to evoke the sublime. This is the ‘free-play of the imagination’ that Kant described. With the Abstract Expressionists the sublime can be experienced without the distractions of representation. In Fautrier’s and Dubuffet’s post-war images the elements of shock and terror are brought together with abstraction and expressionism. Goya achieved his effects through the terror in his images and many artists have sought to use shock to the same end, though with very variable success.

It is surprising therefore to realise that the romantic artists of the “American Sublime” (Tate, 2002), an exhibition of American landscape painters who so fully embraced the ideas of the grand spectacle as being the sublime, singularly fail to evoke any such experience in the contemporary viewer (beyond perhaps the size of the canvas).

The sublime has come a long way from the idea of being a grand emotion and now is more often to be sought by artists influenced by the ideas of Bataille on the *Informe*.

John Corfield / 24 November 2003

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