

***The Sublime Now* edited by Luke White and Claire Pajczkowska,
Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009, pp. 320**

Writing in an essay entitled 'The Sublime Offering' Jean-Luc Nancy observes that, since its introduction in the Enlightenment period, the concept of the sublime has recurred in art and cultural discourse with a certain predictable and 'monotonous' regularity.³ Today the wheel of fashion regulating the vogue for the sublime seems to have come full circle once more. As one of the contributors to *The Sublime Now* states, 'The Sublime has made a comeback. We find it in conversations, educational programmes, in exhibition and book titles.' In the words of Griselda Pollock, another contributor, the concept of the sublime in art 'keeps cropping up a lot' nowadays. Nevertheless, she confesses with a certain candour she does not really understand the meaning of the concept.

In actual fact this is not so unusual or strange an admission since from the time it was introduced by Kant and others it was treated not so much as a concept, or as something to be understood, but as an affect or an experience that exceeded understanding. Thus, the sublime was not a matter of a question of knowledge, which Kant dealt with in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1780), more an outcome of the problematic of alterity and of a synthesis with the 'outside' that undermined *a priori* forms of knowledge and which was covered, therefore, under the rubric of aesthetics in the *Critique of Judgment* (1790). Of course, it is the very ineffability of the sublime that has made it so susceptible to ideological investment by the institutions responsible for supervising matters of religion, culture and art in today's society. Such institutions conceal their own standing in relation to power through using and promoting notions such as the sublime, which are purportedly intangible and therefore beyond conceptual scrutiny. On another level, and perhaps with less insidious intent, the sublime is adopted in many circumstances by writers and cultural practitioners as a kind of short-hand for any experience that is emotionally resonant, powerful or strong with which they are challenged and have difficulty in describing or representing.

Besides the question of why it recurs so frequently and regularly in discourse there therefore arises the question of whether the concept of the sublime can be used with greater precision or, at least, whether it can be used for purposes that are other than ideological or those stemming from simple laziness. Partly in response to these questions, the editors of *The Sublime Now* have compiled fourteen essays divided into five sections covering aspects of political and cultural theory, ecology, art and cinema. (The book was developed from a symposium, entitled 'The Sublime Object: Nature, Art, Language' held at Tate Britain in 2007.)

It may be recalled that for Kant the sublime is composed of two succeeding experiences: first, a painful experience of being overwhelmed coupled with a potential loss of subjective control and, then, a pleasurable experience of moral superiority as it is proven through surviving the potential catastrophe that the mind is capable of developing infinitely (Kant believed in Western man's infinite progress). As one might expect from a

book published in the early twenty-first century rather than in the late eighteenth century what interests a number of the writers is not the feeling of moral superiority that for Kant crowned the sublime event but rather the experience of powerlessness that precedes it. Indeed, it is notable the extent to which this idea of powerlessness is pushed, particularly with respect to a sense of social, political and ecological alienation as experienced increasingly by the Western subject over the last century. Esther Leslie in her essay 'Icy Scenes from Three Centuries' shows how the sublime imagery of the frozen polar regions deployed by various illustrators and artists in the twentieth century, including Winsor McCay, who drew a series of cartoons called 'Little Nemo in Slumberland' for the *New York Herald* in the first decade of the twentieth century, and Joseph Beuys in his installation 'Lightning with Stag in its Glare' (1958–85), touches upon anxieties concerning a perceived and unbridgeable divide between human beings and nature as well as between human beings and technology. Leslie's essay reveals how in the early twentieth century, for instance in McCay's cartoons, these anxieties and fears were largely unconscious, surfacing only in Little Nemo's dreams, but today fears of ecological or man-made disaster are the ubiquitous stuff of our collective cultural imagination and thoughts. For Sherryl Vint and Mark Bould, co-authors of 'Manufacturing Landscapes, Disappearing Labour: From Production Lines to Cities of the Future', however, a sense of powerlessness, at least in a political sense, is still largely unconscious owing to the seductive power of the technology employed by capitalist spectacle, particularly as this informs movie production. Vint and Bould observe how in films such as *Minority Report* (2002) the seamlessly enthralling and sublime image generated by CGI technology of a self-maintaining system of production that apparently requires no human knowledge for its creation or development and zero labour force for its functioning contrasts with certain classic modern movies such as Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1926) and Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936), which provided much starker accounts of a subservient labour force in conflict with the capitalist mode of production.

Gene Ray believes that the ravages of the Second World War, which left, according to some accounts, as many as seventy million dead, marked a key turning point in the history of humanity's sense of fear and powerlessness. For a long time in the history of the West, nature was the main force capable of inducing terror but the Holocaust and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki put paid to this, underlining the fact that technology has now become the primary instrument of fear and terror. Ray argues that the US has displaced this fear onto an 'outside' terrorist enemy, invoking a state of emergency in order to exempt itself from the rule of law. In a similar line of argument to Jacques Rancière's *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, Ray sees the identification of a 'terrorist' enemy bedevilling society as the lynchpin of an ideology that upholds the state's right effectively to terrorize its own citizens.² Ray is pessimistic about the power of art, or any other form of cultural production, to bring about change within this regime of state terror, although he grants that there may be counter-images to those of capitalist and state spectacle, such as the leaked images

of Abu Ghraib. In his view the solution can lie only in the possibility of new cycles of collective and social struggle.

Ray's thinking can hardly be accused of paranoia, any more than one might level a similar accusation at Fredric Jameson's ideas in his landmark article 'Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism' (to which Ray's essay owes much) concerning the overwhelming grip of multi-national corporate power upon the economic circuitry of today's globalized world.³ In both cases the sublime is adopted as the theory best suited to characterize the utterly excessive, even alien nature of US corporate and state power in ascendancy today ('alien' because, as both Jameson and Ray demonstrate, reasoning within these structures has somehow lost its reason: for example, in the way in which the US state pursues terror through its own legalized form of terror). It is not so much the content of these only too real and credible accounts that gives rise to certain misgivings but rather some of the assumptions that they rely upon. In particular, the idea that powerlessness is, by definition, a limitation, a form of weakness and even a lack. In relying upon a somewhat restrictive conceptual opposition between power and subjection, Ray's analysis, like Jameson's, abjures what is perhaps the principal legacy that the notion of the sublime has bequeathed to Western discourse and thinking: that is, as a potential site for conjecture about the ways in which power and loss conjoin in such a way as to engender an experience of the sublime. Indeed, the adoption of the sublime in the Enlightenment, particularly by Kant, foreshadows that loss of control which is a condition of transformation, and which in modern discourse has been figured as the notion of the unconscious. While it is true that Kant at every turn attempted to restrict the idea of loss as a basis for experience, this was contradicted by his exploration of the idea of synthesis in the first *Critique* and, in particular, in the sections on the sublime in the third *Critique* where he investigated what the experience of synthesis is like. In effect, this meant that Kant was one of the first modern thinkers to embrace (at least in part) an idea of subjectivity that is not based upon, or even formed through, *a priori* or extant conditions of knowledge or experience.

Both Griselda Pollock and Claire Pajaczkowska in *The Sublime Now* develop the connection between the sublime and the unconscious through the psychoanalytic term 'sublimation'. In her introduction Pajaczkowska affirms this relationship, albeit briefly, while, despite her professed lack of understanding of the sublime, Pollock finds the sublime in the face of the woman in Vermeer's 'Woman Holding a Balance' (1664). The underlying theme of Vermeer's painting, as Pollock sees it – that woman is always already separated from herself – does not, in itself, exceed patriarchal ideology but, seen in conjunction with the contrasting qualities of inwardness and receptivity that characterize the painting's representation of subjectivity, prompts the suggestion that this work is poised at 'a threshold . . . in which the elements of the social economy of the sign – meaning, representation, social and cultural conventions which mark the historical moment of its production – meet with and provide a form for pressures, possibilities, anxieties and pleasures'. Taken together these various elements are so remarkable and sublime that they seem to 'march to another

temporality, or even to none at all'. Pollock's account here of the social, cultural and philosophical implications of Vermeer's sublimity contradicts one of the abiding myths about the sublime, namely, that it is about the unrepresentable or that which purportedly lies beyond representation. In addition, it challenges Lyotard's well-known ideas about the postmodern sublime as an event composed of the failure to present the unrepresentable ideas of freedom and infinity. Instead, Pollock adopts a materialist reading wherein signification and meaning continue to be existent but are impelled into a libidinal economy of *jouissance* and change.

At different junctures in *The Sublime Now* there are various additional characterizations of the sublime. At one point the editors suggest that it marks the limits of representation while, at another, it is defined as a consciousness that meanings are socially constructed representations. While it may indeed encompass these characterizations there is a risk here of (re-)establishing the position of a conscious subject who stands outside the sublime and the process of transformation that is associated with it. If it is defined in terms of an overcoming of the subject's presence it may well be necessary to view it not just as a transformative *process* but also as an ontological event in the manner posited by philosophers such as Alain Badiou (with the consequence that it is conceived of as being utterly singular and, therefore, irreducible to its causes or conditions). Whatever the strengths or weaknesses of Badiou's conceptual approach, the fact is that this area of discussion, along with other recently related philosophical discussions about the sublime, lies largely outside the scope of *The Sublime Now* which, for all its serious and timely ambition, is primarily addressed to specialists in cultural and visual studies rather than readers of European postmodern philosophy.

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Notes

- 1 In Jeffrey S. Librett (ed.), *Of the Sublime: Presence in Question* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1993), 25–54.
- 2 Translated by Steven Corcoran (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009).
- 3 *New Left Review* 1, no. 146 (1984): 59–92.

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