

# The Sublime Now



# The Sublime Now

Edited by

Luke White and Claire Pajaczkowska

**CAMBRIDGE**  
**SCHOLARS**  

---

**P U B L I S H I N G**

The Sublime Now, Edited by Luke White and Claire Pajaczkowska

This book first published 2009

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2009 by Luke White and Claire Pajaczkowska and contributors

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-4438-1302-8, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-1302-0

To our students, who never fail to astonish.



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of illustrations .....	x
Preface.....	xiv
Introduction.....	1

## **Part I: Nature, Ecology and the Sublime**

Introduction to Part I.....	18
Chapter One .....	24
Thing Power and an Ecological Sublime	
Jane Bennett	
Chapter Two.....	36
Icy Scenes from Three Centuries	
Esther Leslie	
Chapter Three.....	50
Ecological Aesthetics—With or Without the Sublime?	
Eu Jin Chua	

## **Part II: The Sublime after Kant**

Introduction to Part II.....	70
Chapter Four .....	77
The Sublime and the Possibility of Meaning	
Bettina Reiber	
Chapter Five.....	92
The Sublime, a Discourse of Crisis and of Power, or: “A Gamble on Transcendence”	
Cornelia Klinger	

Chapter Six.....	113
Terror, Tears, Partaking: The Sublime in Burke, Adorno, Stevens	
Jan Rosiek	

### **Part III: Capitalism, Terror, Art and the Sublime**

Introduction to Part III .....	126
Chapter Seven .....	133
History, Sublime, Terror: Notes on the Politics of Fear	
Gene Ray	
Chapter Eight .....	155
Damien Hirst's Diamond Skull and the Capitalist Sublime	
Luke White	

### **Part IV: Baroque and Beyond: Art, Sex and the Sublime**

Introduction to Part IV .....	174
Chapter Nine .....	181
The Sublime in the Work of Cornelia Parker	
Luke White and Claire Pajaczkowska	
Chapter Ten .....	197
Sublime Love and Seduction, an Uncertain Requiem: Reading the	
Movements of k r buxey's Saint Teresa	
Gudrun Filipiska and William McDonald	
Chapter Eleven.....	222
Vermeer's Sublimity	
Griselda Pollock	



## **Part V: The Cinematic Sublime**

Introduction to Part V .....	238
Chapter Twelve .....	243
Ravishing Noir: The Unconscious in Hollywood's B-Movie Sublime Claire Pajackowska	
Chapter Thirteen .....	269
Manufacturing Landscapes, Disappearing Labour: From Production Lines to the Cities of the Future Sherryl Vint and Mark Bould	
Chapter Fourteen.....	286
A Clumsy Sublime?: Back Projection in Alfred Hitchcock and Mark Lewis Laura Mulvey	
List of Contributors.....	296
Index .....	300

# LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

## Figures

2-1 Caspar David Friedrich, <i>Sea of Ice</i> , 1824. By permission Kunsthalle Hamburg .....	37
2-2 Snow mounts up around Nemo's bed. From Winsor McCay's "Little Nemo in Slumberland," <i>New York Herald</i> , 1906 .....	39
2-3 Surrounded by polar bears in the valley of silence, Snowball tells Nemo to keep quiet, but Nemo does not listen. From Winsor McCay's "Little Nemo in Slumberland," <i>New York Herald</i> , 1906 .....	40
2-4 An icy lakes is transformed into grandfather's bald head. From Winsor McCay's "Little Nemo in Slumberland," <i>New York Herald</i> , 1909 .....	41
2-5 Nemo and friends turn into icicles. From Winsor McCay's "Little Nemo in Slumberland," <i>New York Herald</i> , 1909 .....	43
2-6 The city as a mutable space of terror and ecstasy. From Winsor McCay's "Little Nemo in Slumberland," <i>New York Herald</i> , 1909 .....	44
2-7 Jack Frost's palace, being torn down and sold for ice. From Winsor McCay's "Little Nemo in Slumberland," <i>New York Herald</i> , 1909 .....	48
8-1 Damien Hirst, <i>The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living</i> , 1991. Photo: Prudence Cuming Associates. By Permission Damien Hirst / Science Ltd. ....	160
8-2 John Singleton Copley, <i>Watson and the Shark</i> , 1778. By permission National Gallery of Art, Washington .....	163
8-3 Damien Hirst, <i>The Acquired Inability to Escape</i> , 1991. Photo: Prudence Cuming Associates. By permission Damien Hirst / Science Ltd.....	167

9-1 Detail of Cornelia Parker, <i>Drowned Monuments</i> , 1984. By permission the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London .....	183
9-2 Detail of Cornelia Parker, <i>Measuring Niagara with a Teaspoon</i> , 2005. By permission the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London .....	186
9-3 Detail of Cornelia Parker, <i>Einstein's Abstract</i> , 1995. By permission the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London .....	188
9-4 Detail of Cornelia Parker, <i>Inhaled Cliffs</i> , 1996. By permission the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London .....	190
9-5 Detail of Cornelia Parker, <i>Shirt Burnt by a Meteorite</i> , 1996. By permission the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London .....	193
10-1 Still from k r buxey, <i>Requiem</i> , 2002. By permission k r buxey .....	198
10-2 Gian Lorenzo Bernini, <i>The Ecstasy of St. Teresa</i> , 1647-52. Photo: Peter Viktor Jurik, available under a Creative Commons Attribution Share-Alike 2.0 Generic License on Flickr.....	204
10-3 Bernini, <i>Ecstasy of St. Teresa</i> , closer view. Photo: Phil Atkin. By permission the photographer. ....	208
11-1 Johannes Vermeer, <i>Young Woman with a Water Pitcher</i> , c.1662. By permission the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.....	227
12-1 Story from the first issue of <i>Psychoanalysis</i> , first pub. EC Comics, April 1955. Story William Gaines, drawings Jack Kamen. Reprinted with kind permission from Cathy Gaines.....	244-68
13-1 Video still from <i>Minority Report</i> (Spielberg, 2002), distributed 20th Century Fox. The erasure of labour in a vision of the futuristic production line. ....	274
13-2 Video still from <i>Demonlover</i> (Assayas, 2002), distributed Palm Pictures. Pixelation of an act of penetration, implying that there is a “reality” under the image which needs to be censored. Distributed Palm Pictures. ....	276

13-3 Video still from <i>Demonlover</i> . The camera rotates around the protagonist, dropping through the floor to demonstrate an unreal mobility. ....	276
13-4 Video still from <i>Manufactured Landscapes</i> (Baichwal 2006), distributed BFI video. Close-up of a woman's hands testing steam iron nozzles. ....	280
13-5 Video still from <i>Manufactured Landscapes</i> . Deep shot down the assembly line. ....	280
13-6 Video still from <i>Manufactured Landscapes</i> .....	281
13-7 Video still from <i>Manufactured Landscapes</i> . Three people squat in a mountain of scrap metal, searching for salvageable scrap .....	281
14-1 Video stills: Marilyn Monroe, Robert Mitchum and Tommy Rettig in Otto Preminger's <i>River of No Return</i> (1954), distributed 20th Century Fox .....	287
14-2 Video still: Tippi Hedren in Alfred Hitchcock's <i>Marnie</i> (1963), distributed Universal Pictures .....	289
14-3 Video still: Robert Cummings and Priscilla Lane in Hitchcock's <i>Saboteur</i> (1941), distributed Universal Pictures .....	291

## Plates

1. Winsor McCay, Nemo departs from his bedroom to the land of Jack Frost, an episode of Winsor McCay's "Little Nemo in Slumberland," *New York Herald*, 1906.
2. Damien Hirst, *For the Love of God*, 2007. By Permission Damien Hirst / Science Ltd.
3. Cornelia Parker, *Drowned Monuments*, 1984. By permission the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London.
4. Cornelia Parker, *Measuring Niagara with a Teaspoon*, 2005. By permission the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London.
5. Cornelia Parker, *Einstein's Abstract*, 1999. By permission the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London.
6. Cornelia Parker, *Inhaled Cliffs*, 1996. By permission the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London.
7. Cornelia Parker, *Shirt Burnt by a Meteorite*, 1996. By permission the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London.
8. Johannes Vermeer, *Woman Holding a Balance*, c.1664. By permission National Gallery of Art, Washington.
9. Video Still from *Manufactured Landscapes* (Baichwal 2006), distributed BFI video.
10. Stills from Mark Lewis, *Rear Projection: Molly Parker*, 2006. By permission the artist and Monte Clark Gallery, Vancouver, Clark & Faria, Toronto, Galerie Serge le Borgne, Paris.

## PREFACE

This book started its life in a small and informal reading group where research staff and doctoral students of Middlesex University and the London Consortium met on a monthly basis to discuss a series of classic and contemporary texts on and around the idea of the sublime, and to discuss our shared interest in the subject. Regular attendees at these meetings were Luke White, Claire Pajaczowska, Suzannah Biernoff, Sandra Plummer, Eu Jin Chua, William McDonald, Bettina Reiber, and Colette Meacher. The sublime was for us the rich common ground to a series of very different research projects in the fields of philosophy, art history and visual culture, and the variety of our approaches led to some fascinating, inspiring and interdisciplinary cross-fertilisations.

During our reading of Edmund Burke's famous treatise on the sublime and the beautiful, it occurred to us that a significant anniversary was approaching: the 250th anniversary of its first publication in 1757. Burke's book, of course, was not the first to be published on the sublime, a topic which has a history going back at least as far as Longinus's *Peri Hupsous*, a text which lay dormant in medieval libraries for many centuries, but which became foundational to modern aesthetics, in particular after Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux's translation of it into French in 1674, and as it was picked up in the ferment of British critical discourses of the eighteenth century. Burke was, then, responding to an already-long history of the sublime, and his work is in many regards (as was Kant's even more famous work on the topic) an attempt to synthesise and systematise what previous writers had said on the topic: Longinus, Boileau, Silvain, John Dennis, Anthony Ashley Cooper (the third Earl of Shaftesbury), Joseph Addison, David Hume, Mark Akenside and John Baillie, to list just a few of the most significant. Burke's essay, however, was significant precisely in that it did, indeed, synthesise a tradition so comprehensively, and in that it went so far in integrating such scattered and contradictory observations into a coherent system. It was also significant in the extent that he placed the sublime in so fundamental a place within aesthetic experience: along with beauty it produced for Burke a pair of polar opposites which defined the space within which all such aesthetic experience could be plotted. Burke's essay,

furthermore, and in particular with regard to his structuring opposition of the sublime and the beautiful, served as a central reference point for Kant's exposition of aesthetic judgment in his third Critique, a book which defined European aesthetics for the coming centuries.

This anniversary of Burke's seminal book, then, it seemed to us, was an event worth marking, though also an event which occasioned asking a series of critical questions about the legacy of the sublime for us, now. If 250 years had gone by since the publication of this book, written in the heyday of the original eighteenth-century craze for the sublime, what was this old concept doing today, in our contemporary culture, where it seemed to us to be undergoing one of its periodic resurgences in popularity (as was evidenced by our own interest in the sublime, by the flurry of recent publications we were coming across, and by a spate of conferences and seminars which were on offer on the topic). We asked: Why, then, the sublime now? What is the value of its legacy today? In what ways has the notion acquired a renewed urgency in the new millennium? To what extent is it a useful or a dangerous tool for understanding contemporary culture and history? To what uses can and should it be put?

To answer these questions, we put together a two-day symposium at Tate Britain, which took place on October 19th and 20th, 2007. With generous funding from Middlesex University, The London Consortium, and from the Tate's AHRC-funded "The Sublime Object: Nature, Art, Language" research project, which had serendipitously just started up, we were able to invite an international cast of thinkers from a range of disciplines to discuss the topic. Our speakers were philosophers, historians and theorists of art and culture, artists, poets, curators, critics, activists, writers or researchers on political theory, the history of science, and on the environment. Rather than looking for the "usual suspects" in a discussion of the sublime, we actively sought writers who we felt would have something important to say about the sublime, but who our invitation would prompt to produce something new which would add to the debate, rather than rehearse a series of arguments on the sublime which already had their airing elsewhere, and which were an established part of the discourse on the sublime.

We themed the symposium around a series of issues which seemed to be pressing aspects of what the sublime might be, now. It occurred to us that the sublime as an aesthetic of terrible and destructive nature seems to have powerful resonances—though perhaps problematic ones—with the ecological awareness which has emerged in the wake of increasing fears about environmental destruction at the start of the new century. Another aspect which we thought central to how we might think the relevance of the

sublime to the issues of the present was through its relation to an aesthetics of the “politics of terror” which has been with us at least as far back as the French Revolution: during the last decade of the eighteenth century the sublime provided a set of philosophical and representational schemata which were used by both opponents and champions of the Jacobins to picture the events of the day. Such an aesthetic of political terror is of renewed interest in the wake of the “September 11th” attacks on the World Trade Center, and in the context of an ongoing “war on terror.” If the environment and global politics lift us onto a grand historical scale, we felt that it was also important to register fact that the “ekstasis” which Longinus discusses as a synonym for the sublime is also—as his discussion of Sappho should remind us—a matter of the intimate and the bodily, and with the states of distress and pleasure which mark the boundaries of the embodied self; such ecstasies of the body play a central role in the contemporary arts, too, with their concern with the body as a locus of the intersection of sexuality, power, violence and desire. This marks a sublime which is inscribed not in the geopolitical, but within the immediacy of embodied human experience, and this too must be a legacy which discourses on sublimity have left to contemporary culture. Alongside such concerns, it seemed important to us to register that the sublime has also re-emerged as a key resource (though, again, not an unproblematic one, as the essays here note) in philosophical debates which attempt, after the “postmodern” turn, to reassert the importance of the ethical in particular, and the metaphysical more generally.

It was in particular around the relation of the sublime to these four themes (nature/ecology; politics/terror; sexuality/the body; ethics/metaphysics) that we organised the symposium, but there were also a series of threads which ran throughout the two days. The relation, in particular, of the sublime to contemporary art (and to British art in particular) was important throughout, as might be expected for a symposium at the Tate Britain, and given that this was also what united us as a group of researchers. Much discussion on the two days centred around art, film and visual culture, though the written word and sonic or musical cultures also played their part. From our discussions and the papers at the Tate also emerged a concern with the relation between sublime culture and contemporary forms of capitalism, and a strongly “political” and critical element emerged. The histories of the modern debates on the sublime, developed as they were alongside the rise of modern forms of capitalist social and technical organisation, serve very much as a moment of critical purchase on the cultures of capital, and on the cultures of resistance to it. A theme that resounded between the concerns of the debates in the symposium (and in this book) on ecology, and on political



terror, for example, is the problem of our increasingly “globalised” form of capitalism.

The symposium (if we may say so ourselves) was such a resounding success, and the papers given were so interesting, that it was clear to us that they should be published. These papers, then, form the backbone of this book, and of the questions which it poses. However, we have sought to produce something altogether more than the a volume of conference proceedings. Not all of the papers from the symposium have been included. The papers which have been included have been reworked and expanded. And we have added further essays to develop our themes and issues. We have also added introductions to each of the sections which finally make up the book.

The editors would like to thank, first off, the authors who have contributed to this collection, for their fascinating and challenging papers, which without exception have been a joy to edit. We would also like to thank those who took part in the conference, but who do not—for a series of reasons which are not in any case to do with the quality of their thought—appear here: in particular Peter de Bolla, Marina Wallace, Jamal Jumá, Isaac Julien, Iain Boal, Rob Stone and Adrian Rifkin. Their contributions to the conference were invaluable. We must also thank all of the people in the sublime reading group with which this project began, not just for the stimulating discussion in our meetings, but also for their work in organising the conference: quite apart from all the administrative legwork which we shared, our shaping of its concerns and the selection of speakers was undertaken as a collective labour, and so the editors cannot take anything like full credit for assembling the essays represented here. We must also thank Middlesex University, the London Consortium and Tate Britain for their financial and administrative support for the symposium, and we are grateful in particular to several individuals within these organisations: to Richard Humphreys, Doris Pearce, Sylvia Lahav, Victoria Walsh, and Heidi Reitmaier at Tate Britain; to the Visual Culture and History of Art and Design Research Committee at Middlesex, in particular to Adrian Rifkin (who we have thanked already, but who is worth thanking again) and Jon Bird; and to Steve Connor at the London Consortium. We are also grateful for the continued support of the project, and more generally of our research, by Middlesex University and by the Royal College of Art. Claire Pajaczowska would like to thank the Leverhulme Trust for a research fellowship into the Sublime and the Transcendent and the Royal College of Art Research Fund. Luke White would like to thank Middlesex University for a generous PhD studentship

which made his research into the sublime possible. We would also like to thank Cambridge Scholars Publishing for publishing the volume, and in particular we would like to thank Carol Koulikourdi and Amanda Millar for their work on it.

We are grateful for copyright permissions on illustrations to Damien Hirst and Science Ltd.; to Cornelia Parker and the Frith Street Gallery; to Krux; to Mark Lewis; to the Kunsthalle Hamburg; to the National Gallery of Art in Washington; to Peter Viktor Jurik; to Phil Atkin; to Cathy Gaines; and to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. For being able to reprint essays in the collection that have now appeared elsewhere, we are grateful to Gene Ray and the University of Toronto / Blackwood Gallery; to Laura Mulvey and the editors of *Film Quarterly* and *Modern Painters*; and to Griselda Pollock and *parallax*.

# INTRODUCTION: THE SUBLIME NOW

CLAIRE PAJACZKOWSKA AND LUKE WHITE

## CP

*The Sublime Now* continues the tradition of enquiry into whatever lies beyond, or before, language. The respect for, and interest in experiences “where words fail us” is still the province of the sublime. However, the past century has seen a revolution in the understanding and status of language and representation, so that we now have a different relationship to limits, thresholds, liminalities and edges of culture; the spaces of sublimity are more evident to us, more various and more distinctive. With the proliferation of the dissemination of visual cultures on a global scale there is a multiplication of the limits of representation, and with this flux of noise and silence, horrified or awestruck, we are given cause to think about the relationship of culture to the experience of affective and ethical reflection, self knowledge or “interiority.”

This project started, I remember, when we discovered that we were both, independently, researching into the sublime and formed a reading group. When you, Luke, noted that the 250th anniversary of the publication of Edmund Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) was coming up, and that this was a moment that needed to be acknowledged, celebrated and discussed. This generated a collaboration between Middlesex University, the London Consortium and Tate Britain, to convene a colloquium as a commemorative event. One of the most immediate questions that comes from such a situation is that the commemoration of an historical event outside living memory raises interesting predicaments for thinking the relationship between “then” and “now.” It seemed, to me, that this dialectic between an awareness of a past and, simultaneously of a past being understood from the consciousness of the present moment, was a major change in the two hundred and fifty years since Burke’s concept of the sublime. One way in which the dialectic between then and now is articulated has been as the relationship between the two forms of language that the Structuralists called *histoire* and *discours*, with the former representing a disembodied “historical” knowledge and the

latter a knowledge that is marked by its point of origin, or enunciation. Which is why it seems appropriate to introduce *The Sublime Now* in the form of a dialogue. How did you discover the Sublime?

## LW

I've been interested in the sublime for a long time, and I think that my growing awareness of the concept had so many sources that I couldn't put my finger on a single text which woke me up to it. The sublime was very much a concept which was "in the air," and I became aware of it as an important idea slowly, and through the insistence of its reiterations in art's theoretical, historical and critical discourse. With this growing awareness of the concept, I started to find what was described under its aegis everywhere around me—and not just in the fine arts or high culture, where we would expect to find it (in the orientation of much modern and contemporary art to the extreme and unrepresentable, the disharmonious and the frightening), but also throughout the products of contemporary cultural industries: in horror movies, wildlife documentaries, the uncanny soundscapes of drum and bass music, horrendous news reports of disasters which nonetheless seek to thrill and entertain—I could go on... This is, of course, often hardly a very "sublime" sublime; it is the sublime, it would seem, deeply instrumentalised, set to use for the lowest of ends, and often ready to fall into the ridiculous; but it is the sublime, nonetheless, which animates such cultural products, and which they use to produce their e/affects for an audience. It seemed remarkable—and somewhat mysterious—to me that this concept from the eighteenth-century, a concept that for a long time has fallen into obscurity outside academic circles, should somehow be animating so much of our cultural, social, and even political life (the sublime is to be found as much in the sincere tones and solemn rhetoric of our leaders as anywhere else). This seemed to me to be worthy of investigation. This is, I think, exactly the problem you note of the relation of a discourse at once old, but also, very much, a matter of the "now"...

I think however, that there are probably two texts which stand out as particularly important for my growing awareness of the notion of the sublime. One of these treated the sublime on the level of *discours*, and the other on the level of *histoire*. The first of these was Derrida's brilliant deconstruction of Kant's aesthetics in "Parergon," as part of his larger investigation of the play of the problem of "limits" throughout the Third Critique.<sup>1</sup> The second of these was Fredric Jameson's famous essay on the "Cultural Logic of Late

Capitalism,” where the sublime, albeit briefly, is used to make sense of a contemporary historical condition and its aesthetic expression.<sup>2</sup>

One of the things I find fascinating about the sublime in contemporary writing is precisely the gulf between writings which treat it as *discours* (largely in philosophy and criticism) and those that treat it as *histoire* (largely in literary/cultural history texts). But in the end, is either of the modes, on their own, enough? It seems that to think the sublime as *discours* is to run the risk of hypostasising it, and losing track of the fact that the sublime, though it has its origins in the ancient world, and though it describes the results of basically human relations to representation and its affects, is also a particularly and symptomatically modern aesthetic, and also one which has changed and developed, repeatedly been put to new ends, and lapsed in and out of fashion even in the period since its heyday in the eighteenth century. But similarly, to study the sublime only as an object of historical curiosity, is to run the risk of leaving it in the past, and losing sight of its persistence in the present. Thinking the double nature of the sublime as *discours* and as *histoire* seems essential—it is something that a number of the essays here set out to do. The shape of the history of the sublime seems, structurally, to beg the problem of *discours/histoire* and of the sublime as being at once a matter of “then” and “now.”

Jean-Luc Nancy has put his finger on the problem of the sublime’s historical temporality (its simultaneous nowness/thenness) in an essay entitled “The Sublime Offering.” He starts this with the striking sentence “The sublime is in fashion,” which certainly chimes with the situation today, but goes on to note that it “forms a fashion that has persisted uninterruptedly into our own time from the beginnings of modernity, a fashion at once continuous and discontinuous, monotonous and spasmodic.”<sup>3</sup> For Nancy this is because the sublime marks a limit of (modern) aesthetic discourse, towards which that discourse is oriented, but which it cannot achieve. The sublime marks modern culture’s constituting need to pass beyond its own boundaries, the boundaries of the knowable and sayable, and of the order of what is—perhaps of the modern condition itself. This makes a certain sense of its reiterations, suggesting that the sublime can neither simply be established in art (since once instantiated, it becomes part of the conventions of representation—there is nothing less sublime than a kitschy picture of an alpine landscape), nor can art let go of it. But it seems to me that there is more that could be said about such a “destiny” of the sublime in modern culture: its temporality of reiteration is also that of *Nachträglichkeit*, and of the essentially fragmented, fractured nature of modern discourse and historical consciousness. It is linked to the problems of modernity itself.

I'd like to know more about how you first became interested in the sublime; and also about your own ideas about the reasons for the importance of the sublime "now," its relevance to the particular circumstances we find ourselves today, 250-odd years after Burke. And what histories of the sublime might the demands of the present gather around them, "retroactively" as it were?

## CP

Some of the influences you identify are also familiar to me, but there are also some interesting differences. Like you, I first came across the concept in art theory, although, as a child, when, at moments when adult conversation was interrupted by children, adults would sigh, with a tone of *tedium vitae*, "From the sublime to the ridiculous." I sensed that the ridiculous was definitely whatever the children were clamouring, and that the sublime was something impossible to reach, but I took no interest in philosophical enquiry then, only a passionate interest in the mystery of adults. Later the tension between the ineffable mysteries of religion and the realities of the body were a great source of interest. At art school in the 1970s our art history teacher, Charles Harrison, brought us to investigate the definition of modernism in art. This meant reading Clement Greenberg and discussing the concept of "form" in art. Formalism was the principal adversary of nineteenth-century realism and naturalism, it seemed, and from the Soviet experiments in typography of El Lissitzky to Mayakovsky's poetry to the French abstract painters and to the New York artists, the protocols of both formalism and abstraction seemed to refer us to Kant's concept of art that was neither representational, nor useful, nor pleasing, nor valuable except in so far as it is art. This protocol of modernism interested me because it was a set of demands, quite difficult to observe, that was diametrically opposed to the popular misconception of modern art as a permissive "anything goes" culture of stylistic cannibalism. The relationship between the sublime and the modern, defined in this sense, was quite reasonable. But I experienced the sublime differently when absorbed in meaningful work. Whether this concept of the sublime, as a "passionate tranquillity" of work, is something that is specific to cultures originating in monotheistic religions, or whether the aesthetic of the sublime is also to be found in the cultural expressions of polytheistic, animistic or totemic societies is something very interesting. Since Burke the sublime has become a secular form of the experience which was once attributed to the "divine," and it is a concept that is capable of describing

experiences that might otherwise be seen as pertaining to the irrational, the spiritual, to faith or fundamentalism, or simply to the bizarre.

## LW

This is a theme, of course, taken up by some of the authors here—in particular, for example, in the section on the sublime “after Kant.” The essays by Jan Rosiek and Cornelia Klinger both explore, in somewhat different ways, the relation between the sublime, religion and the secularisation of Western discourse. Klinger traces a certain nihilism in the secularised sublime, in the wake in particular of Schiller, whilst in contrast to this Rosiek explores a counter-tradition to the rationalist, Enlightenment sublime that emerged as dominant in European thought. Rosiek discovers a strand of the sublime which continues alongside this, in for example the theory of Theodor Adorno and the poetry of Wallace Stevens in which religious sentiment, even if a religiousness shorn of theology, is key. Bettina Reiber also takes up the sublime (and the aesthetic more generally) as a mode of meaning-making which can be contrasted at once on the one hand to a rationalism which empties life out of its meaningfulness, and on the other to fundamentalism.

## CP

This whole question of the relation of the sublime to religion, and to monotheistic religion seems highly significant for our secular culture in the West “now”—now that we have been surprised, that is, by the strength with which religious fundamentalists are prepared to enact their beliefs. The sublime is a function of culture which can give form and expression to the depths of the experiences that are sometimes articulated, more violently, in acts of fundamentalism. The relationship between the defences that Freud called “acting out” and “sublimation” offer us a way of thinking this contradictory relationship between the id and our representational world.

Research into the concept of sublimation led me to theorists like Ernest Jones who was a bit dismissive of it, considering it a defence, and theorists like Marion Milner and Joel Whitebook who offer a different view. It was the scientific concept of sublimation, as it is used in chemistry, that Freud used as his metaphor for the psychoanalytic process, and he compared the process by which some elements can pass straight from a solid to a gaseous state, without an intermediary liquidity, as the prototype of the way that some

unconscious energies can take on a vicissitude that cathects them to an aim and object that is cultural and creative. The self that was divided between id and ego can, in the act of sublimation, become “whole” and unified in the making of a cultural artefact that is something “new”; although alterity and division exist again once the process is complete and the artefact takes on its own status as other.

This, I think, is the *discours* and process of sublimity. The something “new” which happens is new for the subject and it is new for culture because people are unique. And it seems that this process is integral to the sublime, and is responsible for the quality of the real, actual, present, eventfulness and “now” that characterise the sublime.

The historical perspective is equally interesting, and one interesting historical question, is whether the sublime characterises the art of a particular period, eighteenth-century landscapes of the Grand Tour for example, or the German Romanticism of Caspar David Friedrich, or whether the sublime is a quality that is present in great art from Ancient Egypt to Mark Rothko. And I am especially interested in the way that sublimity, as a process of making, can be traced in non-authored art, the generic works of industrial mass production for example. This raises questions of how the individual relates to the mechanistic and the systematic. The paradox between subject and structure is the core of what humanists call the “human condition.” The question of the historical specificity of different moments of modernity raises some very interesting questions for the analysis of period style in cultural history, and the twentieth-century exploration of its modernist movement can facilitate some incisive retroactive readings of the earlier modernities. For example if we take, as a problematic, the modernist idea that the textual characteristic of modern culture is its transformation of the ratio between form and content, so that form becomes the work’s content, then it is possible to rediscover the formal experiments and aesthetics in a range of historical cultures that have tended to be classified as “pre”-modern and have not been understood as having formalist significance.

I think we may differ on the concept of postmodernism though. I admire Fredric Jameson, especially his work on the Prison House of Language, but his analysis of postmodernism as the aesthetic of late capitalism was taken as a stylistic analysis by many. There was a problem with the idea that postmodernism could be identified as contemporary culture, rather than analysing changes in the formalist textuality of contemporary works. This has been demonstrated here by the textual analysis of Hollywood’s *mise-en-scène* by Bould and Vint, and in tracing the use of “archaic” technologies of special effects in Mulvey’s analysis of classic and avant-garde cinema.



The postmodernist textual or stylistic characteristic of the “waning of affect” and the need to produce cultural extravaganzas of intense sensorial and imaginative impact, as a culture of the spectacular was taken to be the “postmodern sublime.” And this was misjudged, as the sublime is not simply the spectacular or catastrophic or awful, but is the awesome which contains fear or apprehension because of its greatness. The so-called postmodern sublime inverted this and led to a vogue for the grotesque as exciting display of visceral agitation and imagination.

It was then that it became important that we revisit the sublime, in order to find the significance of the changes in late-twentieth-century textualities and in order to eliminate misunderstanding. The sublime is not the “traumatic” or the “dreadful” although its origins in the subjective encounter with the limits of textuality and cultural convention means that there is always a dimension of the abysmal and abject in its awareness of greatness, which differentiates the sublime from the merely beautiful.

If the sublime may derive from the encounter between an experience of the limits of representability, or what you describe as the “sayable,” it is interesting to trace how these limits, boundaries, liminalities differ in different textual structures. In painting for example the sublime is figured in explorations of the optical and material codes of the text. In literature the sublime is figured especially where language fails to be sufficient. In film there are textual structures of narrative, time, point of view and the apparatus that establish the conventional boundaries of the representable. Each textual form has its own conditions of representability and therefore its own textual sublimity.

The relation between aesthetics and economic mode of production is significant, and many of our authors analyse the structuring effects of global and corporate capitalism (which, even in a new moment of crisis, shows no sign of becoming “late”), and the concept of the sublime brings to this tradition of Marxist cultural analysis the possibility of going beyond the limitations of a merely sociological and anthropometric perspective on art and culture. The sublime starts with the question of value, and the relation of value to affective experience, quality and the encounter between subject and textuality. For me the most interesting dimension of this is the way that the subject makes texts at the same time as being formed by textuality. But this is a political question too.

## LW

It is interesting that you bring up the notion of the “postmodern” here. It seems interesting to me that the current rise of interest in ideas of the sublime was at first very much linked to this idea of postmodernism: as well as Jameson, we have Lyotard, who was such a key theorist of both postmodernity and the sublime. The novelty of this interest in the sublime in such theories of the postmodern is evidenced by a passage in Thomas Weiskel’s brilliant book from the 1970s on the Romantic sublime, in which there is little clue that just ten years later the sublime would already have become something of a buzzword in academic circles. In his introduction to the book, Weiskel proposes that the sublime seems, in what must have been 1973–4, a strangely anachronistic thing: “We have long been too ironic for the capacious gestures of the sublime,” he wrote, and concluded that “the sublime looms up retrospectively, as a moribund aesthetic.”<sup>4</sup>

But, as I think you are arguing, the postmodern is a very problematic concept, in particular when it is reduced to a series of stylistic features. It is doubly problematic in terms of claims for an end to “modernity” or “modernism.” The versions of modernity/modernism that were built up as targets for attack by proponents of postmodernism—usually articulated around Greenberg—were far too “local” a variety of the modern; and in fact, as Jacques Rancière has been arguing recently, an attack on Greenberg’s particular brand of modernism hardly amounts to a break with modern art as such. It is interesting that Rancière argues instead for the unity of an “aesthetic regime of art” that connects us to a longer project of cultural modernity which spans back as far as Schiller (and which would thus include the naturalism that modernism is often thought to react against). For those of us interested in the sublime, such an “aesthetic regime” would also surely extend back past Schiller into the development of the theories and practices of the aesthetic in eighteenth-century thought, within which theories of sublimity were so important.<sup>5</sup>

With all these problems, and since so many of the stylistic traits originally associated with postmodernism have been replaced by others more fashionable, the notion of the postmodern already seems rather outmoded. The interesting thing is that though the sublime and postmodernism were at first so closely linked, it is the notion of sublimity which seems to have lasted much better. Even if the initial enthusiasm for the concept of a “postmodern sublime” (with all the features you note) waned fairly rapidly, the sublime has remained on the menu, and in particular after the late 1990s it seems to me that it has only become, if in a transformed guise,

of increased interest. It has had a fascination for a number of contemporary theorists precisely because it seems to express and answer something more fundamental about our current and ongoing condition than the idea of postmodernism did. It also seems to me that the sublime, in a series of very different articulations, has offered theorists (and practitioners) a way out of some of the culs-de-sac of postmodern irony and nihilism, and from its endgame play with the “codes” of past art in the space of the hyperreal. The sublime, it seems, as a term, carries a certain charge of the expectation of something “more”—however differently this “more” is understood by different people, and whether it returns us to the authenticity of the material body or elevates us to the rational, ethical or even divine. We find such a search for the “more” in the authors within this volume: thus we have the “more” of numinous experience in Jan Rosiek’s essay; the reassessment of the aesthetic as a mode of the production of a meaningful life which Bettina Reiber undertakes; the excesses of the body and of sex in contemporary video art, as discussed by Gudrun Filipiska and William McDonald; or the possibility of a political position against the terror of the capitalist state which the sublime seems to promise in Gene Ray’s work, to name just a few ways that such a proposition might be worked out here. This move away from the postmodern might, again, be part of what makes the sublime a matter of the “now.” But there are also dangers in this desire for the “more” of the sublime, and for the forms of authenticity, truth, or immediacy which it may seem to offer. We should retain our critical faculties in front of such a phenomenon, and, remembering that the sublime is also a culturally mediated experience, wonder what forms of co-optation may be involved in its contemporary manifestations. Is the sublime taken up nostalgically? As consolation? In bad faith? Is it taken up more for what we would like it to be than what it actually is? If the sublime is “now,” it might also need urgent interrogation as a concept. Thus, for example, Eu Jin Chua’s essay here asks serious questions about proposals that have been made that the sublime is an aesthetic experience which leads to an ethical relation to nature; my own essay explores the relation between sublime and the ideological self-image of capital and its subjects; and Sherryl Vint and Mark Bould find the sublime to be open to a complicity with the erasure of labour in contemporary popular cinema. These are just a few examples, and hopefully throughout the book there is a critical relation to the contemporary uses of the sublime. Having said this, to my mind, one of the best ways of thinking this “something more” would be, as you propose, the cultural project of “sublimation,” which offers possibilities for the continuation of a project of artistic and intellectual modernity.

I think you are right, however, that we may not agree on Jameson, though. My feeling about his essay is that it is one of the texts on the postmodern which does not entirely reduce this to a series of stylistic traits. Certainly, it is at its weakest where it tends to do this, and also where it attempts to read off culture directly as a symptom of socio-political organisation. However, its exploration of what were then still relatively new social, economic and political changes, and its attempt to think the experience of the globalised, post-Fordist, informational, neo-imperial capitalism (or whatever we should call it), and to think through an array of cultural responses to this, nonetheless remains invaluable, because of the continuation—if not acceleration—of this system, even in the face of a War on Terror and, more recently, the “credit crunch,” which you mention, and that I agree will probably change very little once business as usual is restored.

Whilst the notion of the postmodern has rather gone by the wayside in recent theory, the problem of the global has not receded, and it is still, I think the concern of a number of the essays here. There is no particular section in the book which exclusively focuses on the global or on globalisation, but, rather, it is a concern which permeates the essays here. Most explicitly, it is dealt with by Gene Ray and I in our essays in the section on sublimity, terror and capitalism, but the global is also a concern in the section on nature and ecology, for example. Esther Leslie’s essay, for example, excavates a history of a sublime nature which is the imaginative twin of the mutable landscape of global capitalism, and the geographical imaginary of global empire stretching from today’s kids’ cinema, back through Winsor McCay’s “Little Nemo” comic strips of the 1910s (produced at the time when Peary was leading his expeditions to the pole, feeding a colonial imaginary), with their fantastical world where both icy wastes and property development are matters of a constantly transforming reality. Beyond little Nemo, such a history takes us right back to Friedrich’s forlorn and inhuman *Sea of Ice* (1824). The recent work of Cornelia Parker, an artist discussed here, has also latched onto the link between a global politics or economics and the global threat to the environment—as seen in her recent video piece *Chomskian Abstract* (2007), in which she interviews the famous thinker on precisely this range of issues. Her work should remind us of the extent to which the global scale of human activities is at once a problem of social organisation and of our relation to nature. These twin concerns are perhaps brought together in the sublime images of the earth from space taken by NASA in the 1960s, which Iain Boal originally showed at our symposium. In these images, the “whole earth” gives us a vivid picture of the scale of human

endeavour and of geopolitical nearness which was also that of the scale of a nature suddenly become small.

As a way of discussing such a situation of globalisation, I think Jameson's sublime (in spite of the ways in which the idea may have been taken up) does offer us something more interesting than the merely horrid or grotesque as a stylistic principle. Jameson's sublime, whatever its manifestations, always has behind it something more than mere spectacle or catastrophe. Behind all these paranoid images, suggests Jameson is the unthinkable Thing of global capital itself. For Jameson, this is what is the truly terrible, and truly "great" power which faces us in a sublime which I only hesitate to follow him in terming postmodern. I hesitate to do so because I think that such a sublime is something much older, and much more inherently tied to a longer "logic of capitalism," (and a "logic of modernity," even) than Jameson admits. I think Jameson's formulation of this sublime itself implicitly makes reference to the older ideas of Bertholt Brecht, who in his *Dreigroschenprozeß* essay argues that with the conditions of modern organisation, and of the factory, reality has "slipped into the functional," (*Die eigentliche Realität ist in die Funktionale gerutscht*) and no longer presents itself to the senses. No straightforward images of the modern world can quite capture the immateriality of the flows and the systems of power and control which now structure it.<sup>6</sup> Brecht's argument about the limits of representation in capitalist society directly prefigure Jameson's thoughts about its globalised form, and Jameson, who has written at length on Brecht, must surely have had this in mind when he formulated his "postmodern" sublime. Thinking capital and capitalism as being at the root of the problem of the sublime—or at least a certain dimension of the historical discourses on the sublime—in modern culture is very much the stake of my own essay here, and Gene Ray's, too. (I discuss Jameson, in fact, a little more in my essay, and in my introduction to that section.)

What Brecht's slippage of reality "into the functional" points to for me is an alternative way of linking the sublime to a rather different, and rather less positive, idea of processes of "sublimation" to the Freudian one that you take up. I am thinking of the alchemical conundrum of the relation between solid, heavy, base matter and more ethereal or immaterial states of being. Alchemy was notoriously understood to be about the creation of gold, but this, too, is really a matter of "value" in its many forms—economic as well as aesthetic, moral, intellectual and the like—which is in all these cases something immaterial, abstract, Ideal. Marx's understanding of the commodity form was that it involved a strange trick (he calls it theological, but it is also alchemical) of the transmutation of the material (labour,

raw stuff, bodily human needs and powers) into the immaterial realm of exchange-value. The world that is produced, according to Marx (and also according to a whole host of earlier commentators anxious about the effects of commerce on the modern world) was a terrifyingly formless one, a shifting phantasmagoria of dreadful spectres produced and animated by the ghostly unreality of exchange-value. Such might be the experience we have, just in recent months, of the “credit crunch,” a repetition of the early-modern stock bubbles in the wake of which were developed the vocabulary of Gothic images of credit to which Marx himself turns in order to describe such a modern world, images themselves in the tradition of the supernatural sublime. With the credit crunch we are faced with a vertiginous sense of the dizzying unreality, immensity and power—the awful sublimity—of the immaterial value of capital. This is very much what I discover as the “capitalist sublime” at the heart of the power of Damien Hirst’s diamond skull in my own chapter, which was written during the long run-up to the credit crunch, and under the spell of a perplexity about the flexible nature of value (of property, petrol, food, diamonds) under the conditions of our Neoliberal economy, and the terrifyingly material results of shifts and swings in the stock market, changes in the pattern of investment which amount, in the first instance, to no more than the shifting of numbers from one bank’s computers to another.

But to offer up this vision of sublimity, very different from yours, is not to contradict it, but only to highlight that the sublime is such a complex and multifaceted field. I don’t think I could comfortably speak of “the” sublime, as if it were only one thing. In its rich history, as a key aesthetic concept over a quarter of a millennium, it has been a hotly contested and deeply divided notion. There is not a single tradition of the sublime but many, and what the word covers is not a single mechanism or experience. Rather, the notion of the sublime gathers—historically and artificially, by act of will—a series of affects, tropes, themes, images, textual strategies and philosophical ideas. The sublime has been constantly regathered, for different purposes, by people situated very differently, and put to work within very different artistic, critical or philosophical projects. (This is the sublime as *histoire*...) It is this complexity and multivocality which makes the sublime such a fascinating and fertile ground but also lends the concept of sublime a certain vagueness, and has made it, at certain moments, so much of a catch-all term that it becomes essentially useless. I am often wary when I discuss the sublime about whether in fact I am talking about the same thing as my interlocutor at all! Thus I am interested and fascinated by your discussion of the relation between sublimation and sublimity, and of the experience of the ecstasy of