The Sublime Today

The Sublime Today:
Contemporary Readings in the Aesthetic

Edited by

Gillian B. Pierce

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PREFACE

The idea for this collection emerged first from a panel at the Northeast Modern Language Association in Boston in 2009, also entitled "The Sublime Today." The aim of the panel, like that of the current volume, was to investigate how the *Peri Hypsos* of Longinus or writings by Burke, Kant, Hegel, de Man, Lyotard, Jameson, Nancy, Badiou, and others help to frame or contextualize the current relevance of this aesthetic category. Is the sublime a "cultural dominant" in a postmodern mediascape of simulation and simulacra, or rather a singular aesthetic "event," in Lyotard's sense? In what other ways should one consider the relevance of the sublime in a post-9/11 world?

In their sheer diversity, the papers on the panel—which ranged from discussions of the sublime elements of both 9/11 and its media portrayal to the idea of performativity, from Harold Bloom's "literary sublime," which draws on Freud's idea of the uncanny, to readings of postmodern fiction—uncovered the wide and fascinating range of thinking on the sublime that defines the current critical landscape. The lively discussion that followed further revealed the active interest in the sublime across disciplinary lines taken by thinkers in the fields of history, film theory, politics, women's studies, literature, art, and popular culture, all of which I have tried to represent in this collection. The authors of these essays draw from a core body of texts by the thinkers listed above to provide careful readings of examples from contemporary art, film, literature, and culture. Taken as a whole, the essays explore the central question of the place of the human in an increasingly "immaterial" set of relationships with technology and an increasingly nostalgic relationship with the natural world. If the project of modernity was founded on a centered, Cartesian subject capable of "mastering" and "possessing" nature, how is this relationship altered by the existence of the new conditions of globalization and what Lyotard calls "technoscience"?

Many thanks go to all who participated in the original panel, and to all who have worked with me since then to make this collection a reality. I would like to thank James I. Porter, who first drew my interest to writing on the sublime, and all who contributed essays. Sumita Chakraborty provided expert copyediting and editorial assistance, and Bill Pierce provided both technical and moral support. I am enormously grateful to them both.

INTRODUCTION

THE SUBLIME TODAY: AESTHETICS AND THE POSTMODERN MEDIASCAPE

GILLIAN B. PIERCE

Why the sublime? Given the magnitude of the problems confronting us today in the political, financial, and economic spheres, this dynamic, which describes the experience of the human subject confronting and trying to make sense of that which lies beyond the horizon of his or her comprehension, seems particularly relevant. And yet, grounded as it is entirely within the mind of the experiencing subject, the category of the sublime may also seem like a retreat into the "merely" aesthetic, one that we must reject on moral grounds. In the rhetoric of postmodernism, we are frequently confronted with discussions of the eclipse of nature, the death of the humanist, positivist project associated with modernism, and the end of mastery by man of his destiny through knowledge. The intent of the current volume is to interrogate the range of ways in which the rhetoric of the sublime might be used to describe our current situation and to help formulate constructive responses to it.

But if we are to consider aesthetics as a possible response to our contemporary predicament, why not choose the beautiful? Tobin Siebers has taken up this question of which category from Kant's *Third Critique*—the sublime or the beautiful—is best suited to describe the political and aesthetic climate of postmodernism. Criticizing Jean-François Lyotard's reading of the sublime as a nostalgic return to the pre-modern categories of the sacred and the ineffable, Siebers suggests that postmodern critics might more usefully turn to the communal and communitarian ideal of the beautiful as a political and ethical model. Suggesting that such readings of the politics of the beautiful "have been largely ignored by postmodernists, who tend to brood about the sublime,"[1] Siebers rejects the idea that the

sublime offers a model for political revolution, as postmodern critics such as Lyotard would argue (see, for example, David Carroll's reading of Lyotard's "Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime" and the *differend* in his "Rephrasing the Political with Kant and Lyotard: From Aesthetic to Political Judgments").[2] Indeed, Lyotard's resuscitation of Kantian categories has been controversial, causing Timothy Engstrom to comment on his "odd complicity with the eighteenth-century metaphysics of ineffability," his "overdeveloped philosophical need to universalize a modern enthusiasm for the incomprehensible" and finally his "unwillingness to get over certain ancient Greeks and eighteenth-and nineteenth-century Germans."[3]

According to Siebers, in defining beautiful objects as autonomous and independent of the imagination of the viewing subject, Kant in fact provides a model for the "otherness" usually associated with the sublime which, after all, "must be sought in the mind of the judging subject, and not in the Object of nature that occasions this attitude by the estimate formed of it."[4] In other words, the feeling of radical difference or otherness occasioned by the sublime has no physical manifestation, as in the case of the beautiful object, but belongs to the realm of thought, in the mind of the experiencing subject. Siebers asks, "Which is the more radical conception of otherness . . . the imagined otherness of the sublime or the embodied difference of beauty?"[5]

As Siebers points out, many contemporary critics have resurrected the aesthetic category of the sublime to describe the phenomenological experience of the postmodern world.[6] The positions taken by Jean-François Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* and Fredric Jameson in *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* are perhaps two of the best known.[7] In addition to staking out crucial positions in defining the postmodern—either as a "crisis of legitimation" (Lyotard) or as a "waning of affect" (Jameson)—both have seen the sublime as the central to any description of postmodern aesthetic experience. But how do these paradigms apply today, under our current set of cultural conditions?

Throughout his body of work, Lyotard relies on a reading of Kantian aesthetics that would place the sublime at the center of postmodern experience. In "What is Postmodernism," Lyotard explains that whereas the sublime is also at the center of modern aesthetics, it is a nostalgic sublime that "continues to offer to the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure"[8]—not the true sublime which, following Kant, results from a conflict between a subject's faculty to conceive and the faculty to present, so that the imagination fails to present an object that can measure up to 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."[9] The idea of the postmodern itself is therefore linked to the sublime for Lyotard as a fundamental disadequation between form and content:

> The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable.[10]

In this sense, Lyotard does not see the postmodern as an historical period or as a rupture with an earlier "modernism," but rather as an impulsion and a tendency from within the heart of the project of modernity itself, an expression of an essential struggle and difference perhaps best expressed through the search for forms in the work of art, which is now seen as a singular "event."

Earlier thinkers on the sublime, such as Burke and Kant, identify Nature as the most powerful force to be reckoned with, associating Nature with the ultimate (and unpresentable) divine power of God. Today, however, according to Jameson, the "other" of our society is "something else which me must now identify," that is, the "whole new decentered global network of the third stage of capital itself."[11] "Technology," used as a metaphor for the complex workings of the late capitalist system, then becomes merely a "privileged representational shorthand for a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp."[12] In *Postmodernism*, Jameson makes clear that the sublime—now seen as "hysterical" or even as "camp"—refers to a radical eclipse of the natural as it has been destroyed by the forces of late capitalism. In his version of the postmodern, the sublime functions as a means of describing the postmodern subject's decentered position with respect to a vast, inaccessible and largely incomprehensible network of "technology"—that which is "immeasurably great," in Kantian terms, and exceeds the human mind's faculty of representation.

According to Jameson, under the conditions of late-stage capitalism, the fragmented, decentered subject is unable to come to terms rationally with his or her surroundings. This version of the postmodern condition is characterized both by a new "depthlessness" and a "waning of affect"—"a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense."[13] In an interview with Anders Stephenson, Jameson describes this "whole new type of emotional ground tone":

> A changeover from modern "anxiety" to a different system in which schizophrenic or drug language gives the key notion. I am referring to what the French have started to call intensities of highs and lows. These have nothing to do with "feelings" that offer clues to meaning in the way anxiety did. Anxiety is a hermeneutic emotion, expressing an underlying nightmare state of the world; whereas highs and lows really don't imply anything about the world, because you can feel them on whatever occasion. They are no longer *cognitive*.[14]

These intensities (the terminology comes from Lyotard) " can best be grasped by a return to older theories of the sublime."[15] The fragmented subject still feels emotions, but these have become superficial. They are "free-floating and impersonal and tend to be dominated by a certain kind of euphoria."[16]

Postmodernism is a "cultural dominant" for Jameson, and his notion of the sublime is also explicitly based on an idea of global society and culture under the conditions of late-stage capitalism for which there is no "other" or outside, so that the postmodern experience of the sublime becomes a universal one. He writes,

> The problem is still one of representation, and also of representability: we know that we are caught within these more complex global networks, because we palpably suffer the prolongations of corporate space everywhere in our daily lives. Yet we have no way of thinking about them, of modeling them, however abstractly, in our mind's eye.[17]

The subject no longer has the capacity to organize its surroundings coherently and experiences a kind of schizophrenia amid a "rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers."

In earlier accounts of the sublime, this is the crucial moment in the dialectic of the "sublime turn," the moment when power shifts back the experiencing subject, now elevated by means of a reversal that ensures the subject's self-preservation through praising his or her own powers of reason.[18] But under the conditions of postmodernity, the experiencing subject is no longer "centered," and is therefore denied any application of reason or intellect and also denied the subsequent empowerment or "expansion" of the Kantian sublime turn. The subject has lost all ability to cognitively "map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught."[19]

Jameson does, therefore, sketch out the possibility of a response to the "negative" dynamic of the sublime as cultural dominant under postmodernism. "Cognitive mapping" becomes a way for the subject to re-assert a position within this system of global networks and reconnect with

a political unconscious. Indeed, if a political form of postmodernism ever comes about, Jameson argues, it will "have as its vocation the invention and projection of a global cognitive mapping, on a social as well as a spatial scale."[20]

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Thomas Pynchon's novel *Vineland* (1990) vividly depicts the postmodern "mediascape" Jameson describes as a landscape saturated by media images, where characters struggle to locate themselves and find meaning. As Arthur Kroker writes in *The Postmodern Scene*: "In postmodern culture, it's not TV as a mirror of society, but just the reverse: it's society as a mirror of television."[21]

In *Vineland*, Pynchon equates the real world with that of television, and describes a society of spectacle in which the television and movie cameras not only capture the features of the cultural landscape, but determine their very contours. The northern California landscape of Vineland county is posited as a nostalgic realm of nature and family set against the world of television, a "tubal reality" so pervasive that the light from collective television screens casts a glow of light pollution over the night sky seen from up in the mountains: "[T]he light they thought they saw was coming only from millions of Tubes all showing the same bright-colored shadows."[22] Pynchon's characters journey through a twentieth-century America where nature has been fully eclipsed, fully mediated, and completely mediatized. In fact, reality in the novel is shown to be either an extended "tubal" fantasy or else mediated by a movie camera, what Pynchon calls the "24 frames-per-second truth."

Vineland has become overcrowded with strip malls and Zen pizza houses, so that it is impossible find an untouched region. For, as Pynchon writes, "idealistic flower children looking to live in harmony with the Earth were not the only folks with their eyes on Vineland,"[23] Zoyd Wheeler, the main character, occasionally gets into "skirmishes" with the cable company, which was

> compelled eventually to partition the county into Cable Zones, which in time became political units in their own rights as the Tubal entrepreneurs went extending their webs even where there weren't enough residents per linear mile to pay the rigging cost.[24]

Developers have discovered the untouched areas of the shoreline, "all born to be suburbs, and the sooner the better."[25]

Even the remote logging areas of Vineland County have been taken over by popular culture and the media. At the Log Jam bar, a former hangout for rough and rugged logging types, Zoyd finds people "perched around lightly on designer barstools, sipping kiwi mimosas."[26] Each detail in the description is over determined by brand names and signals of the cultural overload of the bar's atmosphere. Buster apologetically explains the radical change in the bar's image: "Well, we're no longer as low-rent as people remember us here . . . in fact, since George Lucas and all his crew came and went there's been a real change of consciousness." The value of the landscape is therefore determined above all by its suitability for use as a movie set: "They were talking about *Return of the Jedi* (1982), parts of which had been filmed in the area and in Buster's view changed life there forever."[27]

Pervasive media structures the reality of the world of the novel, and it takes on an active role of policing. People don't just watch television; it returns the gaze and watches them. The "house hymn" of the tubal detox center asserts that the tube sees "ev'ry-thing ya do . . . It knows your ev'ry thought." In this way, television is similar to the vast computer network containing the government payroll that links Frenesi, Flash, Zoyd, Brock Vond, and even Hector Zuñiga, and from which each is systematically erased. Frenesi muses that the binary pattern of ones and zeroes understood by the computer is "'like' patterns of human lives and deaths,[28] all part of the grand scheme of some "hacker" God. Hector senses the computer's change of attitude in the air, "As if the Tube were to suddenly stop showing pictures and instead announce, 'From now on, I'm watching you'"[29]

Once she is expunged from the computer record, Frenesi is, in a sense, dead. This is another model in the novel for what it means to be dead, "only different." Many of the characters called Thanatoids, in fact, "died" in Vietnam—a dispossessed group similarly erased from collective memory. Brock Vond dies a similar metaphorical death by expulsion from the main computer; his budget is cut right in the middle of his mission, which is aborted midstream. A few pages after Vond is winched back up into the helicopter, Blood and Vato, the tow truck team notorious for taking people over to into Shade Valley, get the call to come and take him. The God-like power of the computer is underscored by the night clerk in the supermarket where Frenesi tries to cash the government check she suspects may no longer be good: "'The computer,' he began gently, once again, 'never has to sleep, or even go take a break. It's like it's open 24 hours a day. . . .'"[30] But computers in *Vineland* can sense when humans

are taking a break, as when the computer at the retreat plays "Wake Up Little Susie" for Prairie when she starts to doze off in front of it.

In the novel, Justin and Prairie represent a generation of children brought up from the start on television. When Prairie was a child, she wanted to climb right into the television set and onto Gilligan's Island: "First time she ever noticed the Tube, remember Frenesi? A tiny thing, less than four months old. [. . .] after that, whenever the show came on, you'd smile and gurgle and rock back and forth, so cute, like you wanted to climb inside the television set, and right onto that *Island*."[31] The metaphor of entering into the television screen is a way of depicting the ubiquity of the televisual mediascape as well as our (often involuntary) participation in it. Prairie, at less than four months old, is sucked into its world. Justin, Frenesi's other child, spends most of his time in front of the television taking breaks that correspond with breaks between shows: "Justin came wandering in cartoons having ended and his parents now become the least objectionable programming around here, for half an hour, anyway . . ."[32] A kindergarten classmate advises him to tune in and out of family life the same way he does the television. "The smartest kid Justin ever met, back in kindergarten, had told him to pretend his parents were characters in a television sitcom. 'Pretend there's a frame around 'em like the Tube, pretend they're a show you're watching. You can go into it if you want, or you can just watch, and *not* go into it.'"[33]

This piece of advice ("You can go into it if you want, or you can just watch, and *not* go into it") brings up the question of agency in *Vineland*. Throughout the novel characters are portrayed as being at the mercy of a network of computers, the drug of choice now not marijuana, but television. The novel seriously questions the possibility of choice as radical political movements are reduced to scraps of film footage and erased from memory. Mere spectatorship no longer seems possible in a world where television structures the very modes of perception and thought. Television and the movies are part of the "lived experience" of the novel, so that choosing "not to go into it" no longer seems a viable path—"it" will come out to you.

In the conclusion of *Vineland*, some critics have seen a return to an aesthetics of the beautiful in Pynchon's work, and an affirmation of the values of family, community, and consensus.[34] I would argue that the novel's conclusion evokes these values in a highly ironic manner, underscoring its theatrical and artificial nature—a kind of "Hollywood ending." Pynchon's characters are struggling to navigate through a world in which they are increasingly losing control. The novel's conclusion represents not a move towards the radical otherness of the object, as in

Siebers's reading of the beautiful in the *Third Critique*, but towards a mental empowerment and connection with a political unconscious we can only see as a postmodern incarnation of the Kantian "sublime turn," Jameson's cognitive mapping.

Many of the essays collected here similarly propose versions of Jameson's idea, whether explicitly or implicitly, and think through concrete examples where Jameson himself only suggests the contours. Amid a resurgence of interest in the ideology of the aesthetic and the sublime, all of the contributions to the current volume investigate the current status of the sublime as a literary, aesthetic, and political category. The emphasis is on a thematic presentation of the ways in which historical theories of the sublime and recent theoretical approaches alike may be concretely applied to particular literary, artistic, social, and political contexts to reveal their contemporary relevance, or, conversely, the need for new theorizing of the sublime that would better reflect the post-9/11, globalized context. The contributions are thus international in scope, and cover a range of cultural phenomena.

For example, the sublime often stands as a trope for colonial power. In her essay on the postcolonial sublime in Coetzee's novel *Disgrace (*1999*)*, Jana Giles traces the history of the sublime from Longinus, through Burke, Kant, and Lyotard to demonstrate that Coetzee depicts a postcolonial, postapartheid world struggling to redefine the relationship between aesthetics, politics, economics, and the environment. Coetzee's sublime is rooted in the tradition of Burke and Kant, "and yet it isn't their sublime anymore," as over the course of his aesthetic education David Lurie confronts a series of differends (in the Lyotardian sense), forced to recognized the undecidable contradictions of the postcolonial situation. Ultimately, art offers the possibility for salvation, as Lurie increasingly adopts an aesthetics of immanence.

Alex Blazer's essay on the idea of "sublime solitude" in Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy*, *The Invention of Solitude*, and *Adventures in the Scriptorum* similarly interrogates the power of the artistic act to provide meaning for the human subject. Blazer performs a Lacanian reading of the sublime, considering Auster's metafiction as a way for the psyche to figure its place in the world. In this reading of Auster, art is seen as a process of questioning capable of grounding the self—the alternatives to which would be madness or annihilation.

Stephanie Sommerfield's "Nature Revisited" is a reading of the eclipse of nature and the nostalgic sublime in the short fiction of Dave Eggers, an author often seen as the heir of postmodern fiction and representative of a "post-postmodern" construction of sincerity and self. In her reading of

How We Are Hungry, Sommerfield explores Eggers's return to an aesthetics of transcendence using the Emersonian category of "Nature" to "repair" the dehumanized postmodern self. Situating Eggers and his work within a culture of "cool" that surrounds McSweeney's, Sommerfield nonetheless demonstrates that Eggers's characters successfully locate natural experiences untouched by the high-tech world, and that Eggers ultimately reinstates the authenticity of the human, replacing the ironic, de-centered postmodern self with that of the "believer."

In the realm of the plastic arts, Katarzyna Zimna's essay on participatory art in Poland and in installations at the Tate Modern convincingly connects the sublime with Peter Huizinga's idea of "play," theorized in *Homo Ludens*. For Zimna, works such as Zuzanna Janin's 2003 *I Have Seen My Death* and Mirosław Bałka's 2009 *How It Is* use the participatory space of the exhibition to explore boundaries and test limits, even the limits between life and death. Zimna's work hinges on the idea of the sublime "turn" by means of which human reason domesticates that which is threatening. The work of participatory then becomes a kind of "playground" in Huizinga's sense, one on which the human subject can explore such dangerous boundaries within a space that is nonetheless safely domesticated.

Defne Tüzün also considers ways in which the sublime and its counterpoint, the abject, function in overcoming resistance to confronting an unspeakable and unrepresentable death, and ultimately the subject's own mortality and finitude. In "Abject's 'Ideal' Kin," Defne Tüzün uses Julia Kristeva's category of the abject as a counterpoint to the aesthetics of the sublime in her analysis of François Ozon's 2003 film *Swimming Pool*. Through a detailed reading of the film's mise-en abyme structure, Tüzün shows how the shifting frames of reality and fantasy both involve the viewer and maintain the viewer at a distance outside of the frame in a destablilizing structure of fantasy in which the swimming pool itself becomes an unrepresentable object, a sublime container. Drawing on Freud, Lacan, and Slavoj Žižek, Tüzün's reading demonstrates the central role of fantasy within in the symbolic structure to generate meaning.

Many of the essays in the collection make the connection between the sublime and a political unconscious, as in Ashmita Khasnabish's consideration of Sen and Sri Aurobindo in connection with Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, which leads to a rethinking of the sublime from a clearly postcolonial, feminist perspective and ultimately paves the way for a political sublime. Khasnabish uses political theory from John Rawls and Martha Nussbaum in her reading of the characters and the diasporic

situation depicted in Lahiri's novel to advance an idea of pluralistic, humanitarian, global identity based on empathy and moral imagination.

Marie-Christine Clemente's reading of 9/11 as an aesthetic event through its portrayal in the media similarly warns of the possible consequences of retreating into the aesthetic, drawing on a wide range of thinkers, including Christine Battersby's *The Sublime, Terror, and Human Difference* (Routledge 2007). Clemente considers the attacks on the Twin Towers as an aesthetic event, considering from an ethical standpoint whether their media portrayals can be considered beautiful, or whether they more properly belong to an aesthetics of the sublime. Her essay "tests" 9/11 as an instance of the sublime by drawing on the long tradition of thinking on the sublime, beginning with Longinus, through Burke, Kant, Jameson, Nancy, and underscoring throughout the moral dangers of associating "delight" with human loss on such a scale.

Finally, Rowan Wilken's "Unthinkable Complexity" connects the Kantian mathematical sublime with representations of the internet as a network so vast it cannot be conceived by the human mind. Wilken traces the origins of the metaphor of "cyberspace" to William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer*, and then goes on to describe further metaphorical attempts to rationalize or familiarize the vastness of these advanced technological networks, from the Pew Internet and American Life projects to Google. Here, too, we have recourse to the dynamic of the Kantian "sublime turn." As Wilken shows, the dominance of reason over imagination may well provide solace for the postmodern subject in the face of the inestimably large—a form of cognitive mapping.

In considering the contemporary relevance of the sublime, all of these authors have drawn on a longstanding philosophical tradition of speaking and writing about the "unpresentable." Such questions are clearly no less pressing today.

Notes

1. Tobin Siebers, "Kant and the Politics of Beauty," *Philosophy and Literature* 22.1 (1998): 31.

2. David Carroll, "Rephrasing the Political with Kant and Lyotard: From Aesthetic to Political Judgments," *Diacritics* 14.3 (1984):73–88. Carroll writes, "Like the aesthetic spectator of the Third Critique who much go through the critical process of freeing himself of all interest and freeing the aesthetic 'object of all utility before he can judge its beauty, the spectator to history much also be free of all personal interest if his 'sympathy for the players on one side against those on the other' is to be taken as 'universal' and 'disinterested' (82).

3.Timothy Engstrom, "The Postmodern Sublime? Philosophical Rehabilitations and Pragmatic Evasions," *Boundary 2* 20.2 (1993): 201.
4. Siebers, "Kant and the Politics of Beauty," 4.
5. Ibid.
6. Some have elaborated an idea of a "literary" or linguistic sublime based on tendencies toward irony and self-reflexivity in postmodern fiction, such as McHoul and Wills's discussion of "material typonomy," or the reduction of different genres to a single narrative plane in Pynchon, rendering heterogeneous objects and discourses materially equivalent by means of their simultaneous reduction to "marks on the page" (Alec McHoul and David Wills, *Writing Pynchon* [Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990], 53).
7. Lyotard's "report" was first published in French in 1979 and appeared in English translation in 1984; an early version of Jameson's work appeared in *New Left Review* the same year. See Jean-François Lyotard, *La Condition postmoderne: Rapport sur le savoir* (Paris: Minuit, 1979); Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Régis Durand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); and Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (July-August 1984): 59-92.
8. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 81.
9. Ibid., 77.
10. Ibid., 81.
11. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 35.
12. Ibid., 38.
13 Ibid., 9. Referring to the shattering of the unified subject position that defined earlier, modern and pre-modern formulations of the sublime, Jameson states that "this shift in the dynamics of cultural pathology can be characterized as one in which the alienation of the subject is displaced by the latter's fragmentation" (Ibid. 14).
14. Quoted in Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), 4–5.
15. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 6.
16. Ibid., 16.
17. Ibid., 127.
18. On the idea of the sublime turn, see Neil Hertz, *The End of the Line* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).
19 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 44.
20. Ibid., 54.
21. Arthur Kroker and David Cook, *The Postmodern Scene: Excremental Culture and Hyper-Aesthetics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 268.
22. Thomas Pynchon, *Vineland* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1990), 371.
23. Ibid., 319.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., 7.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid., 90.

29. Ibid., 340. Paul Virilio explores this panoptic potential of television in *The Vision Machine* (Paul Virilio, *The Vision Machine*, trans. Julie Rose [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994]).
30. Pynchon, *Vineland*, 91.
31. Ibid., 368.
32. Ibid., 87.
33. Ibid., 351.
34. For example of this type of reading, see, Marc Connor, "Postmodern Exhaustion: Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland* and the Aesthetic of the Beautiful," *Studies in American Fiction* 25.1 (Spring 1996): 65–85.

OF GODS AND DOGS: THE POSTCOLONIAL SUBLIME IN COETZEE'S *DISGRACE*, OR, DAVID LURIE'S AESTHETIC EDUCATION

JANA MARÍA GILES

J. M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* (1999) deconstructs the metaphysical presuppositions underlying the sublime in the Western tradition. David Lurie, the protagonist, begins the novel as a post-apartheid, white South African professor of Wordsworthian Romanticism: "The great archetypes of the mind, pure ideas, find themselves usurped by mere sense images."[1] The question he confronts as the plot unfolds is, "Can we find a way for the two to coexist?"[2] When he is fired for seducing a student, he begins his journey to understand the obdurate embodiment of living and the illusion of humanistic pure reason. While visiting his daughter's homestead, he is set on fire and locked in a room while Lucy, his daughter, is gang-raped by black Africans. Shed of his previously enjoyed white male privilege, David endures a reversal of fortune and slowly begins to learn "sympathetic imagination" for the other. The novel ends with David caring for and euthanizing stray dogs, learning that all is immanence: "there is no higher life."[3]

Two significant interventions regarding the sublime in the novel are those by Kimberly Wedeven Segall and Sam Durrant. Both see the novel as staging the disruption of David's narcissistic romanticism, making the failure of the privileged to understand the experience of oppression a precondition for a new relation "grounded precisely in the acknowledgment of one's ignorance of the other, on the recognition of the other's fundamental alterity,"[4] and subjecting David to a bodily abjection rather than a mental process of imaginative projection.[5] My paper shares Durrant's view that *Disgrace* turns Romanticism "against itself" as David jettisons the egotistical sublime and begins to learn Keatsian negative capability.[6] However, while I come to a similar conclusion—that aesthetic judgment "is valuable not for its uplifting passage to transcendence but for

its anchoring of the human mind in the material world"[7]—this paper will turn to the theory of the differend in Jean-François Lyotard's postmetaphysical philosophy as an entrée into Coetzee's text.

Disgrace, I argue, represents the sublime as the differend which emerges from the clash arising from David's discounting of material existence in favor of the transcendent. It represents the political differend first in terms of David's behavior towards women, black Africans, and animals, which both reflects and attempts to reinstate their pre-apartheid status as differend; and second, in David himself becoming differend as he loses his social and political power, in the process discovering, or at least newly wanting to discover, that he has it in him to "become the woman,"[8] to become "like a dog."[9] The sublime in Coetzee's postcolonial and postmodern incarnation no longer guarantees access to the abstractions of pure practical reason, but redirects our focus to our immersion in material events, demanding that we witness and address our political differends. As that which signals the incommensurability between reason and imagination, the feeling of the differend gives us another means of interpreting our experience. Belatedly and only half-consciously recognizing his failure to imagine himself as other, his emotions signal his state to David, his heart blooming with thankfulness like a flower for the women who have enriched his life.[10] Indeed, as the novel progresses, the word "heart," which appears some twenty-five times, comes to signify the differend itself, the trace of ethical feeling and love that remains after rational systems have failed us. Moreover, the novel fulfills Lyotard's vision of art's disruptive power to testify to experiences not always discursively available. David's new understanding emerges in his becoming an artist of freedom rather than a scholar of dead masters as he writes a hybridized, postcolonial opera voicing a middle-aged Teresa Guiccioli, Byron's abandoned lover, singing herself back to life accompanied by an African banjo and a dog's soulful howls. In this agitated zone between creative life and abject death, David begins to travel the path back to grace. Coetzee's postcolonial postmodernism is not a reification of surface without depth, but a reminder that art may still claim an ethical appeal.

The sublime and its related aesthetic, the picturesque, often served as tropes for colonial power, enabling white settlers to rationalize incomprehensible new environments, reconceive hostile nature as imbued with the potentiality for cultivation, and valorize their efforts at domestication.[11] The postcolonial, post-apartheid world, however, still wrestles with new understandings of the relationships between aesthetics, politics, economics, and environmental issues.[12] In his 1988 essay collection, *White Writing*, Coetzee considers the dual role landscape

aesthetics played in South African colonialism: on the one hand, wilderness was where nature reigned and culture, even God, failed to control; on the other, it was a place of retreat for purification, as yet incorrupt in a fallen world.[13] Coetzee associates the first with the British separation of the colony from the barbarian wilderness and the second with Afrikaner isolationism. Yet, for reasons unclear, the reclamation of the African wilderness in the name of the sublime never occurred.[14] However, as in American literature, landscape and national character were related in early Afrikaans poetry because the wide spaces—though teeming with animal and human life—seemed to promise personal and national freedom. Thus, "while it by no means follows that the sublime must be sympathetic to the politics of expansion, conquest, and grandeur, it is certainly true that the politics of expansion has uses for the rhetoric of the sublime."[15] Coetzee further reflects in his 1997 Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech that, because of the apartheid legacy, "South African literature is a literature in bondage," and even when it is a literature of "vastness," it "reflects feelings of entrapment, entrapment in infinitude."[16] Coetzee understands not only the ideological function that landscape aesthetics played in European colonialism, but also that political domination is not necessarily integral to the experience of the sublime.

David Lurie could be said to shift from the first attitude of nature as barbarian to the second, nature as a place of retreat. Yet, as Rita Barnard has elaborated, the novel disallows the satisfaction of the colonial pastoral mode, in which the white South African can barricade himself on his farm.[17] If the wilderness is a place of contemplation and purification for David, it is also a place of hardship where he struggles like St. Anthony.[18] At the outset he is the quintessential white man of culture, the monastic if not celibate college professor; he ends as a man of nature, practically hermetic, experiencing a humbling self-knowledge in his withdrawal to the bush. David's revelation, however, is not direct knowledge of God's will, but a new sense of responsibility for his present community of others: women, black Africans, animals, the earthly immanent. If anything can return David to a state of grace, it must be a renewed appreciation of his life on earth shared with others, not the life to come.

The discourse of the sublime, however, has historically been grounded in an appeal to the metaphysical. The first treatise on the sublime by Longinus, *Peri Hupsos*, or *On the Sublime*, was influenced by Platonic and Christian thought,[19] and concerns how sublime writing does not merely persuade the listener but transports them with great emotion.[20] Although Longinus is primarily known as belonging to the rhetorical tradition, his treatise is riddled with references to the metaphysical. For him, the most

sublime writing is that of "the lawgiver of the Jews" who describes *fiat lux*,[21] representing the unrepresentable divine word. Literary geniuses, like the Romantic poets, surpass the rest of us, creativity being akin to the divine mind.[22] Nor does Longinus represent nature for itself but as an anthropocentric tool for accessing immaterial spirit,[23] establishing the Western tradition that true sublimity should be superior to and divorced from abject nature. Thus, a tension underlies *On the Sublime* which privileges the power of visceral emotion yet simultaneously reveals its ambivalence towards the materiality of the word in its appeal to metaphysics.[24]

As a student of stylistics during his doctoral program, Coetzee was familiar with Longinus's treatise.[25] Well known for his affinities for postmodernism, however, complex,[26] recently he has taken issue with Plato's suspicion of affect, stating:

> I might even go so far as to claim that we are never not in an affective or affectively inflected state—in other words, that Plato's ideal of affectless reasoning is a mirage. The extreme reach of this position would be to say that reason is always in the service of the passions.
>
> If there is no such thing as an affectless state, then the political life not only is but has to be a more obscure and perilous business than Plato allows it to be, since the forces at play come not only from without but from within as well, sometimes without our conscious awareness.[27]

David's aesthetic education is an affective and bodily one, discursive reason having failed to guide his ethical life. The novel is filled with examples of David's discovering himself and others through indescribable feelings which only later can be approximately translated into words. Nor should one conclude that his learning is assisted by divine intervention, notwithstanding the many theological references that appear in the novel. Coetzee has stated that he is not a Christian,[28] nor is his protagonist.[29] Nevertheless, the concept of a secular form of grace emerges as critical to David's development.

Edmund Burke's eighteenth-century version emphasized the sublime's emotional qualities over its rhetorical function. Relating the sublime to terror, he observed that it causes a temporary lapse of reason.[30] The sublime generates fear and respect, but not love, which is "much nearer to contempt than is commonly imagined,"[31] for "we submit to what we admire, but we love what submits to us."[32] Accordingly, while we may caress dogs, we also despise them, unlike their wild counterpart, the wolf.[33] This polarity also carries over into gender, with the sublime considered masculine and the beautiful feminine. Burke's cynicism

resonates in David's treatment of women and nature in the early pages of the novel. Only when he loses his power can he begin to love with the "heart." While it may seem that Burke's emphasis on emotion is more consonant with Coetzee's views, he not only appealed to Christian metaphysics[34] but also demonstrated his race and gender biases.[35] It would therefore be problematic to consider Burke the most apt theorist for understanding Coetzee's reconceived sublime.

Immanuel Kant attempted to identify the transcendental grounds for taste and move beyond Burke's empirical approach. While acknowledging "dependent" aesthetics, he argued in *Critique of Judgment* that a "disinterested" aesthetics should not be sullied by charm, emotion, appetite, or other interest.[36] The Greek term "aesthetics" originally meant "sense perception," but in Kant's hands the role of the senses was downplayed. Disinterested aesthetics draws its power from the sensory yet ultimately eschews it in favor of formalism without affect in the case of the beautiful. Regarding the sublime, Kant posits that an encounter with an object that incites the feeling of the sublime enables us to realize our *a priori* supersensible pure practical reason. However, he also problematically argued that we require *a posteriori* education to experience the sublime.[37] Moreover, not any education will do, as Lyotard observes: "If one does not have the Idea of freedom and of its law, one cannot experience sublime feeling." [38] Gayatri Spivak more pointedly argues that, in the Kantian scheme, only Europeans can potentially acquire proper moral education; those who are "naturally" uneducable because they are conflated with abject matter and lack true spirit—women, non-Europeans, animals—cannot develop pure practical reason.[39] For Kant, the iconoclasm of Abrahamic religions constitutes the true expression of sublimity, while other religious deities only inspire abject ingratiation.[40] Hegel follows in the same vein, identifying an iconoclastic, monotheistic idea of God as the perfection of sublimity.[41]

All the major philosophers of the sublime through the late nineteenth century regard the "true" sublime as grounded in a metaphysical God, entailing the separation of the aesthetic from the corrupting influences of the world. Such versions of the sublime can neither accommodate an ecocentric or posthumanist worldview, which considers the natural world an equal partner to the human, nor immanent religious systems in which the transcendent and material are symbiotic, nor Coetzee's objection that we are never not in an affectively inflected state and therefore can never achieve pure practical reason.[42] One factor in articulating a postcolonial sublime may then be to consider whether the sublime must entail an appeal to the metaphysical. Many scholars and critics have questioned whether

our feeling of transcendence in the sublime is not illusory, and even Kant recognized that the sublime entails a "subreption," in which we project our feelings onto the object observed.[43] The sublime without its metaphysical presuppositions might then entail a more humble cognitive-aesthetic experience, belonging to the family of affects of astonishment, wonder, awe, and experiences of shock and surprise which not only engage desire and fear, but may also challenge our habitual ideologies.

The philosopher who offers the most complete reconfiguration of the sublime is Lyotard, who finds that Kant's sublime, "and everything in Western thought that had been building toward it—the Christianity insistent in Longinus's treatise," results in the aesthetic containing within itself its own disappearance.[44] Lyotard's complex, multifaceted, and postmodern concept of the sublime is a vital framework for considering the sublime in a postcolonial context, and in Coetzee's novel. As a materialist philosopher, Lyotard jettisons the metaphysical grounding of traditional aesthetics, reconfiguring the sublime as the feeling that signals the limits of representation and reason. Like Heidegger before him,[45] Lyotard observes that Kant revised his arguments so that while originally aesthetics meant sensory intuition, by the time he wrote his Second Introduction to the *Critique of Judgment*, sensory intuition was excluded from cognition, and aesthetics was redefined as the feeling of pleasure or displeasure.[46] In other words, Kant's later configuration maps onto Cartesian mind-body dualism. However, Lyotard objects to Kant's disallowing the aesthetic from cognition because, even in Kant's work, "Any act of thinking is [. . .] accompanied by a feeling that signals to thought its 'state.' But this state is nothing other than the feeling that signals it. For thought, to be informed of its state is to feel this state—to be affected." Therefore, Lyotard argues, the "object" and the "law" of reflective judgment are the same: feeling.[47] Pure aesthetic feeling is an immediate and "unconscious" sensation,[48] "subjectively final without the concept of an end."[49]

The sublime, for Kant, involves the failure of the sensory imagination to comprehend the totality of the sublime object, followed by the recuperation of that failure by reason. Hence the sublime demonstrates that "*the mind has a power surpassing any standard of sense*."[50] That is, since as an aesthetic experience the sublime cannot be reduced to discursive concepts, otherwise it would no longer be free and disinterested,[51] the absolute can only be *felt* in the sublime, though we can also think of the idea of the absolute using theoretical reason.[52] Yet according to Kant, reason demands totality, though this is an assumption that he cannot prove. Lyotard argues, "It is all too obvious that this desire for limitlessness is

useless, that it should be relegated to inevitable illusion, that the critique must finally place the sublime close to insanity, showing it to have no moral value, that in the end the analysis of this feeling must be given over to the aesthetic with the simple title of appendage, without significance."[53] Because of the split between feeling and cognition, the aesthetic idea cannot be rendered into concepts, while the idea of reason, or the moral law, cannot be represented intuitively.[54] Consequently, the aesthetic and the ethical cannot be reconciled, resulting in a "differend" between them.[55] This differend cannot be resolved, but it can be felt: "This is the sublime feeling."[56]

Only through subreption, in which we substitute respect (or fear) for the object with respect for the unrepresentable idea of our own humanistic vocation as ends in ourselves does the pleasure of the sublime emerge.[57] Thus the sublime does not indicate anything final in nature, but induces in us the feeling of "a finality quite independent of nature."[58] This finality is incompatible with the sensory imagination, and therefore, in the sublime the imagination must sacrifice itself, and by so doing it "sacrifices nature, which is aesthetically sacred, in order to exalt holy law."[59] The Kantian sublime is thus a "denaturing" aesthetic.[60] According to Lyotard, then, aesthetic theory may be seen as "the attempt by which the mind tries to rid itself of words, of the matter that they are, and finally of matter itself. Happily, this attempt has no chance of success. One cannot get rid of the Thing."[61]

Freed of the assumption of the finality of pure reason, Lyotard extends the concept of the sublime to all things which confound our ability to synthesize them into knowledge. In *The Differend*, he reconceives the sublime as the political differend, the non-discursive sign of heterogeneity. As in aesthetics, a political differend occurs when a conflict cannot be resolved due to the lack of a common rule, criterion, or discourse. Unlike in a litigation, the victim's wrong cannot (or will not) be acknowledged by the perpetrator: literally, cannot be heard.[62] Material and emotional events will always exceed discursive hegemony, but they can be repressed by political hegemony.[63] However, the differend offers the potential, if not the guarantee, of liberation because it can demand that the witnesses encounter alterity and be motivated to represent the unrepresentable of the victim's silence.[64] As I shall demonstrate, these demands are made of David when he is forced out of his position of privilege and becomes differend himself.

Finally, Lyotard believes in the power of avant-garde or postmodern art, that is, art which accesses the sublime differend in order to witness political differends and thus contribute to justice. Since art, as a sensory

aesthetic, can testify to feelings not always discursively available (even if the art form is a linguistic one), it can potentially disrupt hegemonic ideological and political structures:

> When we have been abandoned by meaning, the artist has a professional duty to bear witness that there is, to respond to the order to be. The painting becomes evidence, and it is fitting that it should not offer anything that has to be deciphered, still less interpreted. . . . Being announces itself in the imperative. Art . . . accomplishes an ontological task. . . . It must constantly begin to testify anew to the occurrence by letting the occurrence be.[65]

The postmodern artist rejects the modernist nostalgia for metaphysical meaning, and bears witness to the inexpressible; the postmodern sublime is "still sublime in the sense that Burke and Kant described and yet it isn't their sublime anymore."[66] Postmodern art may further defamiliarize the spectator's worldview by distorting the form as well as the content. It is that which, "in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable."[67] Kant's *sensus communis* is no longer possible because interrogative works of art offer no stability.[68] Avant-garde art is sublime in its astonishing and wondrous qualities, which open spectators up to the unfamiliar: traditional criteria of taste cannot be invoked, and spectators are prey to unforeseeable feelings such as shock, admiration, scorn, indifference. In so doing, art does not imitate nature, but instead "creates a world apart . . . in which the monstrous and the formless have their rights because they can be sublime."[69] Art makes us feel, simply, more alive, more ourselves, and so bears witness to our individuality, our differend, our monstrous formlessness. In the sublime, which threatens us with death, Lyotard observes that "Art, by distancing this menace, procures a pleasure of relief, of delight. Thanks to art, the soul is returned to the agitated zone between life and death, and this agitation is its health and its life."[70] An art that privileges our singularity may articulate the differend so that it may be witnessed outside of hegemonic structures.

Like many literary characters before him who venture into colonial or postcolonial spaces assuming their cultural preconceptions to be universal, David finds that away from the safe haven of Western hegemony offered by the university and the familiar urban microcosm of Cape Town, his power and identity can no longer be taken for granted. On his daughter Lucy's smallholding, David runs up against what Coetzee characterizes as the "problems confronting Europeans when they found themselves in

terrain not lending itself to being picturesquely conceived."[71] After the rape, it emerges that one of the black perpetrators, Pollux, is a mentally disturbed adolescent and relative of Petrus, Lucy's assistant and co-proprietor. With a Land Affairs grant, Petrus is expanding his properties and, after the attack, he offers Lucy the protection of marriage (she would be his third wife) in exchange for her land. Against David's wishes, Lucy accepts; both must relinquish their autonomy, economic advantage (David had helped Lucy buy the farm), and white privilege to Petrus, who represents a changing South Africa. Although David does not consciously seek a picturesque landscape, nevertheless his desire for domesticable and attractive landscapes, social milieu, and women is an impediment he must overcome in his personal growth.

David's academic specialty, like his identity as a white South African, has predisposed him to psychological exile. A literary critic expert in Romanticism, Wordsworth and Byron figure prominently in his identity. Until he moves out to the farm, David demonstrates almost no interest in what we presume is his native country and culture, and for the first sixty pages, the novel might well be set in Britain; Soraya, the part-time prostitute he frequents, lives at "Windsor Mansions."[72] Except for the setting of Cape Town, the only sign of a South African milieu in these pages comes when David attends the rehearsal for the play *Sunset at the Globe Salon*, in which his student Melanie Isaacs is performing, and which is set in a hair salon in Hillsbrow, a neighborhood of Johannesburg which had previously been whites-only but has since succumbed to urban blight. As a literary scholar, David is strangely oblivious to the play's commentary on social change in the new South Africa, finding "its crude humour and nakedly political intent" hard to endure.[73] Cynically, he thinks, "Catharsis seems to be the presiding principle: all the coarse old prejudices brought into the light of day and washed away in gales of laughter."[74] David is skeptical that art can heal the new South Africa, preferring instead to work on his opera in progress, *Byron in Italy*, a chamber play about love and death which he thinks of as a way to leave a legacy as a male, feeling that being a father is "too abstract."[75] The opera at this stage reflects David's solipsistic anxiety of influence and dedication to canonical European forms rather than emerging from lived experience.

David's dismissal of the cathartic potential of contemporary theatre is dismaying, considering the priority the Romantic movement gave to the power of art to liberate and transform. Even if "Lurie's somewhat jaundiced description of the play's premise no doubt reflects his view that the process of coming to terms with the legacy of apartheid will be much more painful and long-drawn-out than is suggested by this cheerful

divertissement,"[76] at least it represents the voices of the South African present, rather than remaining in thrall, as David is, to outdated aspects of Western culture. If David dismisses the student play at this point, by the end of the novel he is writing his own amateurish and sentimental theatrical piece after realizing that the opera as originally conceived did not "come from the heart."[77] Coetzee implies spectators should not be quick to condescend to Melanie's play, even if it is only a very small part of the process of social and political change, lest we find ourselves, like David, wondering later what we missed.

But David has no time for a postcolonial theatre that features "flamboyantly gay" [78] beauticians performing a new sexual freedom. Instead, there are two different strains of Romanticism, one Byronic and one Wordsworthian, guiding his personal ideology, neither of which he regards as useful tools for navigating post-apartheid South Africa, and both contributing to his fall into disgrace. As Margot Beard observes, David might lecture his class on Wordsworth, but he "shows no sign of internalizing that vital Romantic concept, the empathetic imagination."[79]

First, David fancies himself a Byronic antihero, the Lucifer of the "Lara" poem, which he discusses suggestively in the classroom as a veiled come-on to his undergraduate student Melanie, with whom he is already having an affair.[80] Yet, as Beard points out, David misunderstands Byron as a mere seducer, and misreads the poem.[81] Obviously an abuse of power on David's part, the affair with Melanie is nevertheless ambiguously represented and, as Laura Wright points out, since David's voice controls the narrative, his interpretations of Melanie's behavior "should be suspect given David's desire to view Melanie as complicit in their sexual encounters."[82] Since Melanie reports the affair to her parents and the university, it is clear that the situation disturbed her. David, in his erotic preoccupations, refuses to read the available signs of her discomfort, failing to imagine himself as other. Before the university tribunal, which he enters with "vanity and self-righteousness,"[83] he regards himself as sublimely beyond good and evil, later rationalizing his behavior first in a quasi-metaphysical appeal to the daimonic ("I became a servant of Eros"[84]) and subsequently in an appeal to nature, comparing himself to a male dog punished for pursuing females.[85] Both appeals are, of course, beyond human reason and a sidestepping of his ethical responsibility. Yet he also thinks, "In the whole wretched business there was something generous that was doing its best to flower."[86] Emerging only slowly and painfully, this generosity is love, which David learns must involve recognition of the other's subjectivity if it is to be more than a destructive misinterpretation of Byronic hedonism.