

The Sublime and its Connection to Spirituality in Modern and Postmodern Philosophy and Visual Arts

Ilona Anachkova (University of Sofia)

Abstract

This article reviews the notion of the sublime as it is seen in a few of the most influential texts in Western philosophy. The ancient text *Peri Hypsous* is the base, which the early modern thinkers Kant and Burke use to elaborate the notion. Later, Lyotard takes up the sublime to interpret Modern and Postmodern visual art.

The sublime is necessarily linked with art. It is the notion that presents deep existential questions such as the existence of God and the meaning of the human life. Thus, the sublime is the artistic way to spirituality, especially in works of Newman and Rothko.

Introduction

In this paper, I will trace the development of the notion of the sublime and its connection to postmodern and modern philosophy and visual art. I will first focus on philosophical views on the sublime, which I consider the root of inspiration for some Romantic and modern painters. Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant and Jean François-Lyotard will be considered in this part of the paper. The second part of my paper will deal with concrete examples of modern and postmodern art that directly implement some of the meanings of the sublime (Barnett Newmann, Mark Rothko and Bill Viola). I will examine how, in modern and postmodern art, the sublime and spirituality become stripped of a strictly ethical function as we know it in traditional religions, but still provide spiritual meanings that can be ethical. The sublime is related to metaphysics because it refers to the beyond and these spiritual meanings that the notion of the sublime evokes are of great importance to modern and postmodern artists. I use the term spirituality in the sense that Rina Arya gives to the notion—spirituality, she says, is a vague notion, however it includes the problem of human existence and mortality on the one side, and the search for meanings, on the

other. Spirituality is also related to the mystical and the creation of a work of art as well as some themes in the work of art can be called spiritual in a sense. It can be part of religious beliefs but it can also exist separately, since, I think, it is the basic of human nature and everyone can experience and develop it. It is also related to some kind of transcendence, something that is beyond what we see and our striving to attain it.

Spirituality as a term becomes exploited in Modernity as an opposition to the materialistic approach to the world. Kandinsky's appeal to pay attention to the spiritual in art and the thriving of the theosophical movement at the end of the nineteenth century shows how a one-sided rationalistic vision of the world and human nature was insufficient. Kandinsky also emphasizes the promethean role that art and the artist have for the change of the society. He does not use the sublime to focus on spirituality, however we can see how the two notions can be analyzed together in the work of other artists.

The artists' views on the primary role of the sublime and spirituality in art and the role of the artist raise awareness of the problems of the human condition and their solutions in a globalized and technological society. The sublime can serve as the point of awakening to the spirituality that can help "uprooted" individuals find deeper meanings in their lives and feel that they belong.

Origins of the notion of the sublime and its modern use

The notion of the sublime is a widespread and flexible notion. The first serious and systematic thinker thought to have dealt with it is the Greek critic Longinus. He is thought to be the author of the treatise *On the Sublime* (*Peri Hypsous*), although there are disputes about the authorship. The text is a product of literary criticism, dated around the first century AD, which associated the notion of the sublime with literary works and the observance of the magnificence of nature. Around forty sections have survived from this text. The ancient text came to Modernity through the translations of French and Italian authors. In France the treatise on the sublime became popular in the eighteenth century due to the representative translation made by Nicolas Despréaux Boileau (1636–1711). This was a crucial point in the development of the notion, which influenced most of the arts, particularly poetry and visual arts.

The meaning of the word "*sublime*" is of crucial importance for our understanding of the notion as the sign and path to spirituality. It

comes from the Latin prefix *sub* that was attached to different words, thus changing the meaning and pointing to something that was “below” or “under”. Sometimes however it would imply meanings of something “high” or “above”, although this is not the common case. The noun *limen*, which is the second part of the word, means limit, boundary.¹ In a sense the sublime has always been referred to the boundaries—of our understanding of the world, of our nature and its ethical implications. From ancient times until the present, the notion of the sublime has always been associated with some transformative power (ethical function). Unfortunately, today it seems that this ethical function of the sublime has lost most of its power, bringing the notion closer to associations such as sweet, interesting, beautiful, beautiful-but-outdated.

Since ancient times the notion of the sublime, however, implied loftiness, higher power, grandeur, awe, fear, something that is all-encompassing (thus violating our boundaries). It was associated either with the feelings we have when facing some natural or psychological phenomena, or with the objects that produce such feelings. The sublime also assumes the feeling of pain and this, in general is what always captures the attention and provokes reaction. While pleasure might be taken for granted because it is actually considered a normal state of being, it seems that pain always appears unacceptable. The sublime, then, is what can be more deeply sensed than beauty, which is associated with pleasure only and thus attended to *in a different way*—in an engaged but still calm and sometimes even superficial way. While the sublime feeling, namely because it includes pain, cannot be ignored and attracts one’s attention more deeply. In the course of the work we will see that the notion of the sublime implies both pleasure and pain. The history of philosophy and aesthetics shows that the sublime has been associated with Divinity and with different sorts of spiritual experiences as well.

Edmund Burke—Pioneer of the Modern Sublime

The notion of the sublime became very popular in British philosophy and art through the systematic work of the Irish thinker Edmund

¹ Riding, Ch., and Liewellyn, N., *British Art and the Sublime*. <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/christine-riding-and-nigel-llewellyn-british-art-and-the-sublime-r1109418>.

Burke (1729–1772). One of the crucial characteristics of the notion as it comes from Burke is *the feeling of terror*. Thus, landscapes with untamed nature or literary works that provided horrifying scenes such as those by Dante Alighieri and John Milton were considered sublime. Paintings that represented biblical scenes were also regarded as sublime. Biblical stories with suffering and extraordinary powers, which surpassed the boundaries of our ordinary understanding were chosen.

Edmund Burke introduced his elaboration on the sublime in the *Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757). The text is considered to be the only purely philosophical work of art he made, since from a very early age Burke was inclined to political philosophy. He is thought to be the founder of modern conservatism. He was actively engaged in the social and political life of Britain. His attitude towards “pure” philosophy was shown later as he refused to expand the *Philosophical Enquiry* when he was asked to do so by his literary executors Sir Joshua Reynolds and French Laurence. The reason was that, according to his words, he didn’t want to deal with “abstract speculation.”

Burke wrote the text when he was very young (less than nineteen years old) and although he later discredited it, the treatise attracted the attention of other influential thinkers at that time, such as Denis Diderot and Immanuel Kant. This text appears crucial to Romantic art and modern philosophy as a whole. Kant himself admitted he was deeply influenced by Burke’s notion of the sublime. In turn, Lyotard drew from Kant’s philosophy and applied some of his insights. Burke associated the sublime with feelings of awe, wonder, dread, terror and fear and gave attention to works of art and natural phenomena when talking about the sublime.

Burke’s treatise is well organized, very detailed, with accessible language. Throughout the whole work the thinker elucidates the nature of the sublime and the beautiful in nature and works of art. According to Burke, the sublime is the strongest emotion possible because it touches on the passions of self-preservation, and because it is associated with pain, it has far more effect on us than pleasure. At the same time, however, the sublime provokes a feeling of delight, which is different than the feeling of pain, since it is a derivative feeling. The feeling of pleasure in the sublime comes after the pain of feeling terrified for one’s own life. Delight comes when we understand that we are not actually threat-

ened. This specific characteristic of the sublime—to feel passively terrified²—will be used by both Kant and Lyotard. Greatness or large size is not always characteristic of the sublime, for Burke, while terror is one of its essential features.³ Obscurity or lack of clarity is another characteristic of the sublime that we can associate with the feeling of terror. Obscurity is necessary for the feeling of terror because if we know each detail of something that is about to terrify us, we cannot actually be amazed, surprised, caught in the sublime. We will see later how the Burkean sublime is exploited in Romantic art and later modern and postmodern art.

The sublime in Burke is directly linked to the void, which we see in late modern and postmodern art. Void is the emotion, caused by the feeling of privation. Obscurity, solitude, silence and puzzlement in Newman's paintings, vacuity in war sublime—all of them refer to and can be called the sublime. Burke deals with the feeling of the sublime as it is produced by objects in nature and in art. In its utmost form, the sublime provokes astonishment—it captures the mind completely and even overwhelms it. "In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object [of the sublime], that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it."⁴ This is close to Longinus' text on the sublime where he mentions that the sublime throws a spell over us. It is a power we cannot control: "the influences of the sublime bring power and irresistible might to bear, and reign supreme over every hearer."⁵ It can also elicit feelings of respect, admiration and reverence. The feeling of the sublime is then closer to the religious feeling of honoring the objects of nature that are all-encompassing and beyond our mind, or honoring their Creator. Sometimes as it is the case in Kant and Longinus, it is beyond our capacity to understand, to grasp things. The inability to grasp things leads to the idea of infinity. If we cannot grasp something, we render it infinite, despite of whether this is so or not, Burke says. The inability to grasp things also appeals to great engage-

² I use this term to ascribe to the phenomenon of the sublime an experience of terror without being in real danger.

³ Not only magnitude but also minuteness in its utmost and ungraspable extreme can be sublime, Burke claims, as it overwhelms our rational capacities.

⁴ Burke, E. *Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, part II, section I. Of the Passions Caused by the Sublime.

⁵ Longinus. *On the Sublime*. Section I.

ment, to deep emotional connection with the object that appears to us as sublime. This is how we can be immersed in the sublime and moved by a poem, Longinus' text implies.

***Kant's Sublime—Toward an Awareness
of our own Spiritual Nature***

Not much later than Burke the central figure of modern philosophy Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) gave his account of the sublime in the second book of the *Critique of Judgment* (1790) titled “Analytic of the Sublime.” Sections 23–29 of the *Critique* focus specifically on the notion of the sublime. In this treatise, Kant made a crucial difference between his notion of the sublime and the notion of Burke, although Kant renders himself indebted to Burke when it comes to analyzing the sublime. Burke's notion could be applied both to an object and an internal state of the mind. However, Kant associates the sublime only with the subject. The sublime is a feeling, a part of one's reason rather than an objective property;

For what is sublime, in the proper meaning of the term, cannot be contained in any sensible form but concerns only ideas of reason, which though they cannot be exhibited adequately, are aroused and called to mind by this very inadequacy, which can be exhibited in sensibility.⁶

Thus, by appointing the sublime only as a subjective property, and not as a property of the object, Kant makes a breakthrough into earlier philosophical interpretations of the sublime. Unlike other authors who claim that the source of the sublime is the object in front of the spectator, Kant claims that the sublime is produced in our own mind when we find ourselves unable to fully comprehend the object in front of us, when we find it by means of our own measure as absolutely great. Kant's aesthetic sublime is associated with formlessness, disharmony and chaos, which can be compared to Burke's vision of some of the sources of the sublime: obscurity and privation (darkness).

Kant's notion of the sublime brings associations of destruction, chaos and violence. Violence over reason, which cannot grasp what is viewed as the sublime. “For while taste for the beautiful presupposes

⁶ Kant, I. *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (Indianapolis/Cambridge:Hackett Publishing Company), “Analytic of the sublime,” § 23. Transition from the faculty for judging the beautiful to that for judging the sublime., p.99.

and sustains the mind in *restful* contemplation, the feeling of the sublime carries with it, as its character, a mental *agitation* connected with our judging of the object.”⁷ Also, just like the Burkean sublime, the Kantian sublime elicits admiration and respect and brings negative feelings because it is a mixture of pleasure and pain. In referring to our judgment of an object considered to be sublime, Kant says:

since the mind is not just attracted by the object but is alternately always repelled as well, the liking for the sublime contains not so much a positive pleasure as rather admiration and respect, and so should be called a negative pleasure.⁸

He, just like Burke, shows magnitude to be an essential feature of the sublime. Even if we are not negatively attracted by the content of the object, we can be attracted by the size of the object and thus call it sublime, although as we pointed out, the object according to Kant, cannot be sublime. In such cases we are attracted because the size expands our imagination, Kant claims, it goes beyond our own boundaries of understanding. In sections 25 and 26 of the “Analytic of the Sublime,” where he offers an explication of the term and an estimation of the magnitude of natural things, Kant shows that we cannot render any object objectively sublime because the judgment of the sublime claims to have standards of measuring which are beyond any sensible standards and which are within us. And since we don’t refer to external standards, our judgment of the sublime can only be subjective, or aesthetic. The notion of the sublime also subjectively claims for measuring in total, it aims at totality. Kant makes distinction between our logical estimation of the sublime by numerical concepts, which progresses to infinity, and our aesthetic estimation of the sublime, which has a limit. This limit enables the feeling of the sublime indeed because when we feel it, we can feel the sublime, something that overwhelms our capacities to understand. At the same time, Kant mentions that we grasp objects of crude nature or the giant pyramids of Egypt as a whole, and this capacity to grasp things as a whole necessarily leads to the existence of a supersensible nature in us that can comprehend/intuit things as totality despite the incompatibility

⁷ Ibid, § 24. On the division of an investigation of the feeling of the sublime, p. 101.

⁸ Ibid, § 23., p. 98.

of logical and aesthetic estimation of the sublime. However man cannot apprehend logically, mathematically the progression to infinity, he always misses something out as he goes along the process of understanding and grasping things in intuition. Therefore, his experience of the sublime is always subjective. As we shall discuss later, the supersensible substrate of nature could be a starting point or the source of spirituality.

The aesthetic sublime is linked to morality as well. The sublime causes distress of the faculties. The ideas of reason surpass human sensibility and at the same time one finds pleasure in realizing that sensibility is obeyed to striving towards ideas of reason. The sublime is an important feeling because it gives us awareness of our own superiority to nature within us and outside us, that is sublimity gives us awareness of our own spirituality, it helps us see ourselves as part of that supernatural substrate that is the source and the measure of the sublime in us.⁹ It reveals ourselves as moral beings and it helps us not only to feel, which can be a deceitful feeling, as Burke's reflection suggested, but affirm infinity (and divinity) as real, according to Karise Elise Lokke and Kant himself.

The mind is forced beyond perception into the realm of ideas. Here it forms ideas of totality, endlessness and infinity suggested by the impressions which the senses are unable to comprehend. Thus the mind turns in upon itself, away from the senses, and gains awareness of its affinity with the divine.¹⁰

In her article "The Role of Sublimity in the Development of Modernist Aesthetics," Kari Elise Lokke appoints the moral and spiritual function of the sublime as one of Kant's best philosophical achievements: "It is this turning in upon the self in order to find in the spiritual world that which the world of the senses cannot provide which is the essence of Kant's analytic of the sublime."¹¹ In "General Comment on the Exposition of Aesthetic Judgment," Kant relates the sublime with the

⁹ It is very important to note that when natural disasters, which Kant describes as provoking the feeling of the sublime are considered to be expressions of God's sublimity (or wrath), we cannot but feel respect and prostration. Never could we feel sublimity as proof of our superiority to the given mighty nature.

¹⁰ Lokke, K.E., "The Role of Sublimity in the Development of Modernist Aesthetics". In: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Summer, 1982), pp. 421-429. Published by Wiley on behalf of The American Society for Aesthetics, p 4.

¹¹ Ibid.

exhibition of morality, which I relate to the notion of spirituality and human nature. Along with presupposing a supersensible nature in us, we can conclude that for Kant the sublime was necessarily linked to morality and spirituality. He links the sublime with the moral feeling and the freedom of man. The true sublime is a matter of moral feeling, or of elevation of the mind towards rational principles. There is a different elevation, which Kant is reluctant to call sublime, and which Melissa Merrit, in her article *The Moral Source of the Kantian Sublime*, acknowledges as the “aesthetic sublime,” which is quite different from the notion of the aesthetic sublime of Kant. It is related to the elevation of mind based on affect but Kant does prefer to link the sublime to reason. Melissa Merrit make another crucial distinction between Kant’s vision on the sublime. She argues that there is a natural sublime, which is only contemplative, and a moral sublime, which is related to respect and subjugation to moral law.

Lyotard and presenting the unrepresentable

Jean-Francois Lyotard (1924-1998) was one of the most prominent postmodern philosophers who dealt with the notion of the sublime. Attracted by it through his reading of Kant’s political writings and employing the term mainly in a political context at first (Guion), Lyotard then expanded his philosophical view and elaborated on the notion in terms of aesthetics, ethics and theology. In Lyotard’s notion of the sublime we can see Burke’s and Kant’s specific vision of the term as a feeling of both pain and pleasure. In Kant’s treatise the pain is provoked by the inability of man to comprehend the vastness of the phenomena experienced whether they be of natural or religious kind. The pleasure comes when the individual realizes her superiority over the terrifying caliber of the phenomenon, her individual freedom over her animal nature and the elevation to her spiritual nature in a Kantian sense. When we feel the sublime, we can elevate over our sensible nature and realize the supersensible nature within us, we can grasp and strive towards ideas of reason. In Lyotard’s philosophy, pain is part of the sublime since the reality to be comprehended and represented is too big for the artist, it is incomprehensible as totality. This is also a characteristic of Kant’s sublime—the inability to grasp the totality of the world. However, according to Lyotard, this pain of trying to present the unrepresentable gives the unique feeling of pleasure, which comes namely as a result of the effort

of representing that ultimate and all-encompassing reality, which always remains half-represented. The relation to something which is beyond what we see can be seen as the revelation of and the possibility of spirituality in Lyotard's terms.

Lyotard is a postmodern philosopher. He tries to show how experiment in aesthetics and in all spheres of life is the motto of postmodernity. The experiment always involves obscurity in Burke's terms and thus can also be characterized as a sublime moment. The work of the artist is a sublime experience, where one does not know in any detail where his creative forces would lead him. The genuine artist necessarily works with the sublime and represents it as much as he can. "Lyotard considers 'the sublime' to be the driving force infusing transgressive and innovative artists in modernity and late modernity—that is the period from the Romantic age to now."¹² The artist gives form to the formlessness that he witnesses and thus tries to represent the unrepresentable. Abstract art, according to Lyotard, is the most adequate representation of the unrepresentable because it avoids figurative, phenomenal painting. It, along with conceptual art, is the realm of true innovation, which is associated with the sublime as a feeling, and with the power of creativity as a certain feature of spirituality. Lyotard interprets Newman's art especially the artist's work in the fifties, which deals with infinity and the myth of genesis as "the sublime" in terms of revealing vastness, infinity and something un-representable—the process of becoming, of creation. At some point, the traditional metaphysical connotations of the sublime have been discharged in Newman's painting, according to Lyotard, because they do not deal with something beyond, but with something that is happening now and in this world. However, we can still think of some metaphysical realm as revealing itself in the present. The feeling of the sublime refers namely to the allusion of an existing Absolute invading the present through the event. Besides, the notion of creativity is related to the notion of the sublime, and thus the sublime as the sign of the struggle of the creator is necessarily linked to the possibility of creation.

¹² Bukdahl, E. M. *Lyotard between philosophy and art*, https://www.fau.edu/body-mindculture/EMB_paper.pdf

The Sublime in Modern Visual Art

The philosophical idea of the sublime has been transposed to the sphere of art since the beginning of the modern age and, particularly, in art movements such as Romanticism and Abstract art. However it is used in diametrical ways in modern and postmodern visual arts. One of the most important modern movements—Romanticism—and another one, not less important—Abstract Expressionism—viewed the sublime and spirituality in opposite ways. Romantic paintings were representational, often identifying spirituality with the sublime. They referred to the existence of the Divine and the Absolute as it was elaborated in idealistic philosophy on the one side, and figural presentations of nature on the other. Landscapes and seascapes were considered the best expressions of the sublime in the Romantic painterly tradition that blossomed in Europe in the middle of the nineteenth century. This tendency set the tone for American Romantic painting as well. Contrary to this way of expressing the sublime, Abstract Expressionism dealt with presenting the universality of the world in an abstract way. The movement began at the beginning of the twentieth century and Wassily Kandinsky was one of its first most enthusiastic representatives. During his very fruitful artistic career he moved from figurative painting to abstract painting and commitment to *painterly realization of the spiritual essences of the world*, which, being noumenal, could not be depicted as direct copies of objects of the physical world. This tendency continued and other artists such as Piet Mondrian, Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko sought to move away from figurative painting in order to reveal the power of abstraction in representing the unrepresentable. Along with them the quest for spirituality and a minimalistic approach towards painting was seen in other artists as well, most of whom worked with the artists mentioned above. Theo van Doesburg worked with Piet Mondrian and they (supported by other proselytes) founded the De Stijl movement. Kazimir Malevich was one of the crucial avant-garde artists who also painted high abstraction and dealt with the question of infinity (sublime and spirituality). In his manifesto *From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism, 1915* Malevich claimed abstraction was the new, modern form of painting and actually real painting. He condemned representational art as dull and automatic reproduction. Artistic experience was viewed as a kind of discovery into the new and new art was to reveal truth. Abstract art was the true art because it

was a product of true creative process (which necessarily included the feelings of the sublime as Lyotard points out) in contrast to mere representational techniques.¹³ Paul Klee and other artists were also concerned with spirituality and the sublime.

The Sublime and Spirituality in Romantic painting

Romantic painting could be easily associated with the idea of the sublime. As the curators of the Tate museum write, when presenting the emblematic picture *Gordale Scar* by James Ward—the sublime landscapes were “fashionable” at that point. The art critic Robert Rosenblum on his side claims that during Romanticism the

sublime provided a flexible semantic container for the murky Romantic experiences of awe, terror, boundlessness *and divinity* that began to rupture the decorous confines of earlier esthetic systems. As imprecise and irrational as the feelings it tried to name, the Sublime could be extended to art as well as nature. One of its major expressions, in fact, was the painting of sublime landscapes.¹⁴

Romantic painting had different expressions of the sublime and most of them were influenced by both Burke’s sublime and Kant’s philosophy on genius and the sublime. The Romantic sublime included religious art and art representing nature. The crucial moment was to represent the sublime as horrifying. Painters, however, used other crucial characteristic of the sublime, among which was greatness or magnitude. It was represented not only in the content but also in the form and size of the paintings. From 1870’s on the size of the pictures started to become larger and larger, inducing feelings of awe and respect in the viewer. Painters such as Henry Fuseli, Francis Danby, Benjamin Robert Haydon worked on large canvases. The sublime as a characteristic of spirituality was shown both in religious and natural art, which sometimes overlapped. “As the Romantics

¹³ Malevich, K. *From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism, 1915*: “Objects have vanished like smoke: to attain the new artistic culture, art advances towards creation as an end in itself and toward domination over the forms of nature”, emphasis by the author.

¹⁴ *Beyond the infinite: Robert Rosenblum on the Sublime in Contemporary Art, in 1961*, <http://www.artnews.com/2015/03/27/beyond-the-infinite-robert-roosenblum-on-sublime-contemporary-art-in-1961/>, emphasis mine.

discovered, all of the sublimity of God can be found in the simplest natural phenomena, whether a blade of grass or an expanse of sky.”¹⁵ When it came to the disasters of nature with no specific reference to God, spirituality could be seen in Kantian terms as a feature of the human being, which is the only being that could *raise* above nature, while at the same time realizing its tremendous and destroying power. The possibility of death that nature opens for the human being shows him however his spiritual power over natural forces. In the experience of the sublime, the human being becomes aware of his spiritual essence.

The Burkean sublime can be seen in Fuseli's pictures, which explored mythological, religious and poetic themes. Terror was induced through dark colors and sinister themes such as the murder. *Ariel* (c.1800-1810), *The Creation of Eve from Milton's Paradise Lost* (1793), *Romeo stabs Paris at the bier of Juliet* (c.1809), and other works focus on the terrible in human relationships and the mystery of creation and thus provoke the feeling of the sublime. Francis Danby would paint biblical themes and heroic pictures (*The Deluge*, *The Death of Abel*, *The Crucifixion* but also *Calypso's Grotto* and *The Departure of Ulysses from Ithaca*), which was another way to evoke respect, wonder and fear. The solitude and the chaos in his natural paintings also contribute to the feeling of the sublime (*The Shipwreck*, *Ship on Fire* and *Sunset after a Storm*). Danby is also known for his paintings based on the book of Revelation in the Bible, which definitely induces horror and thus, following Burke, are sublime. They are related to spiritual essences of the world such as they are revealed by the Christian narrative. Benjamin Robert Haydon would also explore the potential of historical, mythological and biblical themes and their relation to the sublime. The supernatural or vastness in nature along with the size of the picture would form the sublime in Romantic painting.

The Sublime and Spirituality in Abstract Expressionism. Rothko and Newman

The sublime in Abstract Expressionism was thought to reveal life's "biggest mysteries."¹⁶ In this part, I will turn my attention to the ideas of the

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Alex Greenberger on the Robert Rosenbaum's essay *The Abstract Sublime*,

sublime and the spiritual as they are viewed in the paintings of Mark Rothko (1903–1970) and Barnett Newman (1905–1970). I will disregard Newman's and Rothko's own reluctance to accept being called abstract expressionists as most of critics do not agree with this statement. I consider Newman to be a painter who develops the idea of the sublime to its ultimate form since he moves one step forward from 'classical' Abstract Expressionism by using non-geometric abstraction. In this way, he comes closer to what he wants to depict—presence of and relationship with the Absolute. I chose Rothko and Newman because they are considered to be among the few masters of Abstract Expressionism in Rosenblum's terms.

The vocabulary of the sublime in Abstract Expressionism is, according to Rosenblum monolithic, however it has a lot of complex and mysterious effects. The more monolithic the language, the more complex and mysterious its effects. We can see this monolithic language in Newman's and Rothko's paintings as well. Rosenblum takes magnitude and boundlessness to be the leading characteristics of the sublime and he then analyzes them as he sees him in Romantic and Abstract expressionist painting. What we see as a tool and source of the sublime—magnitude—is also evident in Rothko and Newman as it was in Romantic painting as well. Romantic paintings, following Kant and Burke, would employ magnitude as an essential characteristic of the sublime. They would create big pictures (over 3 meters in both length and width) in order to surprise and overwhelm the viewer. Similarly, Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* is over 5 meters long and over 2 meters high (213 x 93 inches). Helen Frankenthaler and Jackson Pollock would also use huge canvases to create a sublime effect. Formlessness or disharmony as Kant puts them, are other essential features of the sublime, which Rosenberg traces in both Romantic and abstract painters such as Pollock himself. Boundlessness is also present in the technique of painting in some of the authors. Helen Frankenthaler talks about the limitless she experienced when she took the canvas off the easel and started painting literally from any side of the canvas she wanted. Vastness and puzzlement are the features of the sublime that I would ascribe to Newman's and Rothko's painting and they are also found in Burke's philosophy. The depth of the color and the puzzlement before the unrepresentable

are here to testify for the sublimity of modern art. Thus, some of Rothko's paintings hint of both formlessness and vastness: "Rothko, like Friedrich and Turner, places us on the threshold of those shapeless infinities discussed by the estheticians of the Sublime."¹⁷

Themes in paintings also contribute to the feeling of the sublime, along with their size. Spirituality is to a great extent revealed by the sublime in its overwhelming power that transcends our own being and feelings. Sometimes, however, it is revealed by direct referring to religious symbols or myths. Barnett Newman names a lot of his paintings with names, coming from the Judeo-Christian religious tradition (*Onement, Adam, Eve, The Beginning*). Newman represents a new type of creation and transcendence, while Rothko's paintings try to deal with the "human drama" or ultimately existential (spiritual) questions of pain, life and death. Terror is another crucial characteristic and source of the sublime in Burkean terms. While in Romantic painting terror was created by the untamed and outraged nature or by dooming mythological and religious themes, in Modern art, especially in the second generation of Abstract Expressionism, terror comes from the atrocities of war. Such evidence can be seen even in Rothko's and Newman's art, although we can think of other artists who are directly connected to what we know as war sublime.¹⁸ Thus we can see the terror of war in Rothko's paintings that question death, life and human existence and in Newman's paintings that show the terror of the end. Along with giving birth to a new world (as I will show how in the next paragraph), Newman also laments or at least notices and shows the destruction of the old one. This is what Paul Crowther renders as the existential sublime, which is also related to Burke's view on the sublime and terror as the emotion that presents threat to self-preservation. However, along with the war sublime, we can see Crowther's view on the notion (based upon Kantian approach) as a path to self-apprehension and self-transcendence. Paul Crowther sees the terror of the sublime in Newman's paintings as it is discussed by the artist himself: "the self, terrible and constant is for me the great subject-

¹⁷ Rosenblum, R. *The Abstract Sublime*, <http://www.artnews.com/2015/03/27/beyond-the-infinite-robert-rosenblum-on-sublime-contemporary-art-in-1961/>.

¹⁸ Orpen, W., and Nevinson, C.R.W., were the artists par excellence of sublime art of World War I and Paul Nash and Richard Eurich would depict the negative sublime of the Second World War.

matter in painting.”¹⁹

The sublime in Abstract Expressionism is thought to be a post-war myth of the Genesis.²⁰ This statement of Rosenblum could be related to the idea of the proof of the sublimity and the existence of a higher power in art, of spiritual being-ness (whoever or whatever stays behind it). I would also relate it to Newman’s own conception of the artist as co-creator of the world as Paul Crowther exposes it in his article *Barnett Newman and the Sublime* where the depicting of positive sublime could be best expressed in terms of creativity (abstract art) rather than mere representation (figurative art). The artist creates new art, non-geometric art, which lets the being *be* on the canvas, without putting it into a specific form. The geometric expressionism is too close to the phenomenal experience and thus fogs true and absolute reality. That is why Newman’s art aims at pure color and absolute purity of the represented ideas, it aims at transcendence and noumenal reality. The power of creativity is one that is the most characteristic feature of a spiritual being. Devastated by the atrocities of a de-spiritualized and dehumanized century, the sublime in Abstract art is a chance for the artist to participate in the new genesis, to reveal his spiritual powers. This bold implication is possible I think because of the shaken religious authorities and the elevation of the ego and its creative forces as characteristic for any classic modern (and postmodern) thinking. Thus, transcendence can be seen not in terms of traditional notions of spirituality but in terms of self-elevation, self-transcendence and deployment of one’s own spiritual powers.

Rothko’s paintings also deal with the sublime and spirituality but in a slightly different manner. It seems that Rothko is the melancholic figure of modern art, at least in the last years of his artistic career. It seems that throughout his whole career Rothko deals with questions of human nature, which is undoubtedly spiritual. He employs mythical figures and symbols to deal with questions of eternity. In a letter, written in 1947 as a response to a critical review of his paintings Rothko, along with his co-worker Adolph Gottlieb, exposes the aesthetic ideas, which lead their work. One of them is the problem of subject matter in art. According to Rothko, art needs to address important philosophical/existential questions.

¹⁹ Newman quoted in Crowther, P. *Barnett Newman and the Sublime*.

²⁰ Ibid.

It is a widely accepted notion among painters that it does not matter what one paints as long as it is well painted. This is the essence of academism. There is no such thing as good painting about nothing. We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject matter is valid which is tragic and timeless. That is why we profess spiritual kinship with primitive and archaic art.

Rothko's art, in kinship with Early Abstract Expressionism, looks for universal spiritual principles and themes. He uses simple forms in order to avoid the trap of delusion. His art seeks truth. In this sense his art could be ascribed deep ethical meanings.

Rothko's art deals with the spiritual condition of man—tragic and indeterminate to a certain degree. As those questions are deep and sometimes lead to the unknown (obscurity) and fear (terror) his main theme can be called sublime. Rothko confesses nihilism about human nature and yet seeks for some universal meanings that could hold and explain the world and the human being. His mythological paintings retain the fear primitive people had before nature. In this sense we cannot really say they were sublime in the proper meaning of the notion, since primitive people did not have the Kantian awareness of their power over natural forces. They animated nature and never had the contemplative aspect of interacting with it from safe distance, which is considered necessary for the experience of the sublime. The experience of “awe,” which characterizes every sublime experience was fogged by too much fear. Respect towards natural forces and awareness of one's own spirituality lacked. Thus Rothko moved away from those pictures to present the sublime in a better way.

Rothko's abstract works aim at presenting the “late modern” sublime or the sublime here and now. They do refer to transcendence and their size is very big, which automatically makes them sublime in form. The content however is also sublime. It is the happening of art viewing here and now that is the sublime, the experience of the viewer. Rothko's nihilism does let the sublime be more terrifying than pleasurable since although he admits the spirituality and infinity of essences and moral principles, he does not provide a solution to the human drama (mortality). He is obsessively fixated on it without giving an optimistic view of it as religions of salvation would do. Natalie Kosoi explains Rothko's

abstract paintings as the visual representations of our mortality.²¹ Based on Heidegger's philosophy she interprets Rothko's abstraction as presenting life, which remains always ungraspable and slipping away. Forms and objectivity are diminished in the chaos of nothingness, in the deep color sea of our own mortality. Rothko's abstract paintings are sublime in both size and content. They are fully sublime even if we follow Kosoi's interpretation because she asserts Rothko's positive presentation of our mortality (nothingness). With the *presence* of the picture as materiality however, he celebrates life, according to her, contrasting present to nothing. However, I still think that, given his own fate (he committed suicide on February 25, 1970) and the problem he most tackled in his paintings (human drama), Rothko contributes to "negative spirituality" in late modern art. He brings awareness of but not solutions to the human drama. This is not to say that his artworks are not sublime or don't have spiritual and ethical meanings. Rothko's austere struggle against the consumerist approach towards art shows deep engagement with art as practice that directs individual and social powers to a better direction and has then deep ethical significance. It seems to me, however that the doom of human drama hovers over most of his art.

Newman's abstract pictures are also said to represent the mortality of human nature. It can be properly seen only in opposition to infinity of the Absolute, according to Paul Crowther, and thus his zip-paintings are interpreted namely as the encounter between infinity and the finite, between the Absolute, the spiritual and the sensual, the physical.

The Sublime as Self-Apprehension and Connection to the Absolute

The sublime is connected to the spiritual as long as it brings all those feelings of overwhelming power that exists over us, and as long as it, as Kant claims, brings us the awareness of being spiritual beings that at some point become aware of their superiority to any kind of natural force. The sublime is the tool of artists to bring attention to transcendence as a possibility. Sometimes it brings awareness of a spiritual Being that is at the root of the world (a Creator). Sometimes it brings

²¹ Kosoi, N., *Nothingness made visible: The Case of Rothko's Paintings*, http://shortstreet.net/rothko_nothingness.pdf.

awareness of our own nature. It is a way of self-comprehension as we already indicated as one of Kant's most important insights on the topic. It is also a means of self-transcendence as we see our own limits and (sometimes) go beyond them.

The sublime is also connection to the Absolute. It reveals the absolute in its total un-graspability and in its other-ness. That is why pictures of Abstract Expressionism are difficult to interpret. Early Abstract Expressionism exhibited geometric abstraction and supplied it with explanations of the spiritual meanings of the pictures. American Abstract Expressionism went even further. It represented even more puzzling and free-from-representation paintings. It touched and brought down the absolute, or part of it, with the help of the sublime feeling. And it could not be otherwise because the totality the artist deals with, when he creates a painting, is sublime—it is vast, terrifying, infinite, formless, and delightful at the same time. The artist forms this metaphysical reality of chaos and wonderment and brings it into the sensual dimension. This is closely related to the idea of the genius, which separates the true artist and the imitator. The true artist touches upon infinity/metaphysics, noumena and makes the rules of forming the new and bringing it down to the realm of senses. The imitator or the ordinary artist deals with reproducing effects seen in phenomenal 'products.'

Contemporary Sublime and Spirituality—Bill Viola

One of the most important artists of contemporary art, who deals with the sublime and spirituality, is Bill Viola. He works in the field of new media art and explores the artistic possibilities of video installations. Rina Arya takes two of his significant works—*Five Angels for the Millennium* 2001 and *Nantes Triptych*—to be appropriate examples of the sublime and spirituality.²² *Five Angels* presents five videos with a man who is submerging in or re-emerging from water. Videos are all-encompassing and provoke fear, thrill, vastness, puzzlement and wonderment at the same time. Arya interprets Viola's work in terms of Burke's notion of the sublime and shows how dark rooms, in which the work is projected, evoke obscurity, and how the projections of the fig-

²² Arya, R., *Bill Viola and the Sublime*. <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/rina-arya-bill-viola-and-the-sublime-r1141441>.

ures create the perspective of infinity and show magnificence. The water shows sublimity of natural forces, while the title—religious sublimity.

The *Nantes Triptych* (1992) is also sublime because it shows the problem of mortality and infinity (spirituality). The video installation presents three videos that symbolize birth, life and death. They evoke terror and melancholia. At the same time the religious form they take—as a modern triptych—gives allusions to the possibility of salvation. The work is sublime because it gives the feeling of horror and ungraspability of this sinister and weird phenomenon of human mortality.

The sublime in Viola's work, according to Rina Arya, is exclusively about boundaries and their overcoming. However, in most cases, despite religious connotations of his art, the overcoming of those boundaries does not refer to any specific spiritual realm beyond what is here and now. Viola, like Newman and Rothko, is concerned with the human condition here and now. It does not give a consolation, it does not give a path to a spiritual impasse, although Viola is deeply interested in different religious practices. Stepping on other theories about the contemporary sublime, Rina Arya shows that Viola's (or contemporary) sublime does not lead to a metaphysical reality but with the help of thrill, shock and puzzlement refreshes our perspective on everyday life, reaffirming our hopeless mortality. This tendency could be seen back in Rothko's and Newman's paintings as well, although I consider Newman's artwork more positive. But the "new" sublime, as it became clear, is different than the Romantic sublime, which often referred to Divinity. Now the sublime is used to transform but not to transcend the individual, and keeps her within the reality we see. This, I can explain only with the grand destruction of religious narratives, which best characterizes Modernity.

Conclusion—Spirituality as a Way Out in the Globalized and Consumerist Society?

As a philosophical notion, the sublime becomes important in the artistic life of Western culture in Modernity. It is explored and exploited even nowadays, changing its connection to spirituality. While in the beginning of the Modern age the sublime was related to Divinity, it is now related to our everyday life and some minute spiritual meanings in a this-worldly perspective. The emotions to which it gives rise, however, are still deep and aim at transforming the individual. Ethical connotations could still be sought in the contemporary sublime. According to

Rina Arya the sublime in Bill Viola's art has ethical purposes.

The sublime always refers to that, which is ungraspable for us, human beings. Therefore it always touches upon our smallness and the infinity of the source of the sublime feeling, whether it be real or not, as Burke reminds us. What we know fully, we cannot call sublime. Therefore, God or metaphysics as well as our own human nature are sublime. As Rina Arya states, we know of death but we cannot know what it is to die until it happens to us. Thus, the obscurity of our mortality and the lurking Absolute are classic sources of the Sublime in postmodern and modern philosophy. They are even problems of a spiritual nature. The question of spirituality is evident in contemporary art as long as the problem of mortality inevitably poses questions of existence, purpose and a way of conduct. These are all considered spiritual by Rina Arya and by artists such as Newman and Rothko who deal with the opposition "mortality-infinity." The subjective feeling of the sublime is a way to proof the supersensible substrate of nature, according to Kant. It is a way to show us a realm beyond, an Absolute. In contemporary art world this is often omitted. The sublime can be linked to spirituality, which also has changed its meanings, but only in the sense of here and now, without a promise to any other fuller experience of reality. This is what Rina Arya sees in Viola, who also deals with the problem of mortality. He refers to religious language and he is also honored by religious communities, however, he does not give any positive religious answer to his spiritual questions about life and death. Moreover, according to Arya, he reaffirms the unresolved problem of mortality.

However, the mere feeling of the sublime can be an allusion to something bigger and different in nature that can lead us to noumenal reality beyond the one we see now. Sublimity then can be both sublime and consoling in terms of religions of salvation or philosophy of freedom if art gives a positive solution when dealing with different sources of the sublime.

It looks like spirituality of whatever source is necessary today as a direct neutralizing power to the shattered, godless world of postmodernity, where individuals have lost meanings (Bauman) and where there are no meta-narratives to build and support social ideologies. Social ideologies are in a sense helpful for one's own identity since they provide one with feelings of security and belonging. Religion also helps for social binding and appropriation of meanings (Fry). The materialistic attitude and the consumer attitude of postmodern societies that are not tra-

ditional communities but actually a group of “uprooted” people in Bauman’s terms who live together without actually sharing their lives with each other necessitates some solution. This solution can be seen in the re-enchantment of the world as Mark Fry points out or exploring spirituality in the realm of art, where new meanings and perspectives could be elaborated. Art making and art viewing must be spiritual practice, Rothko reminds us, they must be elevated above the illusions of consumerist society and shows us human nature in its tragic condition.

However, some of the late modern and postmodern visual art spiritual questions around the fate of the mortal being are asked but not answered affirmatively. In most of the cases artists only pose the spiritual questions and let the viewer answer them himself. Whatever the idiosyncrasy of the spiritual longings today, where art is considered a spiritual experience par excellence, we can see that the tendency to connect art with spirituality is growing. We can only remember a few exhibitions that were put out in the USA such as *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985* curated by Maurice Tuchman and exhibited in 1986-87, *Negotiating the Rapture: The power of Art to Transform Lives* exhibited in 1996, *Beyond Belief: 100 years of the Spiritual in Modern Art* shown in 2013 and *Being: Spirituality in Contemporary Art*, which is to be exhibited in different art institutions in the USA next year. Throughout Modernity art can be seen as substituting religion to a certain extent (Andrew Boiwe: 2003). Shusterman claims that art can successfully play a role of the sphere where true wisdom and intellectual and emotional energy are catalysed. It can substitute religion and it is the better alternative to it because it does not provoke life-threatening arguments. Art, unlike religion is more inclusive. Atheists and agnostics, or those who have lost faith in the grand narratives are helped by art. The museum is their new cathedral, the temple where they can sit and meditate on Rothko’s paintings, for example. These paintings are devoid of specific religious command (prescription) and only call for attention to the most fundamental questions of the human being. Spirituality in art thus brings back man to his own nature, or at least to questions about his own nature. It requires experiencing of his own body in its simplicity and rawness, without any technological means, according to Rina Arya. The sublime with its function of shocking the viewer and evoking feelings of awe and respect can lead man out of the glut of information and “busy-ness” that characterize the globalized society. It can bring him to

critical evaluation of one's own life and the purposes he pursues. It helps for the development and effect of the notion of spirituality in art (Guion: 2008). For many artists the sublime and the spiritual can have positive effect on the society namely by mooring the human beings into some coherent system of beliefs and thinking, and showing them an alternative way of life to that, which is forcefully implanted by consumerism. "Now the sublime, surely we must all realize, is an experience essential to the preservation of our humanity. Especially, I would submit, since we are living in a sublimity-deprived society."²³

Spirituality today is problematic since it has changed. It is also threatened to become a commodity, just like other things in the postmodern world (Nicholas Buxton: 2003). Despite all of this, however, I think it is a good solution to the existential problems that we now have as effects of a globalized society and those that are related to our human nature in general. Spiritual matters in art are soothing, while provocative and sublime at the same time. They are, most of all, natural to the human beings, who despite technological advancement, remain mortals and with some consciousness of metaphysical reality within and around them.

²³ Philip Taaffe quoted in Guion, D. *A Study of Spirituality in Contemporary Visual Art and Foundations Funding*.
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