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PAINTING THE SUBLIME

Transgressing Boundaries in the Production and Reception of Pictures

SCHWERPUNKT Beiträge von Johannes Grave / Sonja Scherbaum / Arno Schubbach, Elisabeth Ansel, Hélène Ibata, Aris Sarafianos, Caroline van Eck und Adèle Akamatsu

ABHANDLUNG von Dirk Westerkamp

PARADIGMA von Simon Kannenberg

Meiner



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Inhalt

SCHWERPUNKT
PAINTING THE SUBLIME

Johannes Grave, Sonja Scherbaum, and Arno Schubbach
Introduction 9

Elisabeth Ansel
The Aesthetics of Blindness and the Sublime in the Works of J.M.W. Turner, Thomas Girtin, and John Sell Cotman 17

Hélène Ibata
Deep Time and the Historical Sublime in J. M. W. Turner's Late Work 37

Aris Sarafianos
The Sublimity of Details and the Scramble for Reality –
From Panoramas and Géricault's »Horrid Facts« to Turner, »the magician« and »the simulated« Parthenon Sculptures 55

Caroline van Eck
The Animal Sublime Circa 1800 83

Adèle Akamatsu
Fjords, Waterfalls and Mountains –
Painting the »rough« and »grandiose« Landscapes of Norway from Germany (1820s–1860s) 105

ABHANDLUNG

Dirk Westerkamp
Der Name und das Namenlose –
Sprachphilosophische Bemerkungen zu Klemperers *LTI*, Kapitel XIII 125

PARADIGMA

Simon Kannenberg
Kulturwissenschaftliche Trauma Studies –
Ein fruchtbarer Ansatz für die deutschsprachige Musikwissenschaft? 145

Anschriften der Autorinnen und Autoren 163

SCHWERPUNKT

Johannes Grave, Sonja Scherbaum, and Arno Schubbach

Introduction[1]

I.

The second half of the eighteenth century was dominated by the sublime. The category of the sublime, originally located at the margins of discourse on rhetoric, not only became a central concept of the fledgling field of aesthetics, but also a source of fascination in literary and artistic production. This fascination with the sublime, however, quickly proved to be a complicated matter, especially for the visual arts. The sublime gave relevance to exciting subject areas that had previously been neglected, such as mighty mountains, raging storms, shipwreck scenes, and volcanic eruptions. It thus created new impulses for landscape painting in particular. At the same time, artists and philosophers contended with the question of whether the sublime can be depicted at all or, to put it more precisely, whether the events that can cause viewers to experience the sublime can be adequately represented in painting.[2]

As early as 1757, the concluding part of Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* outlined some arguments about why painting is largely incapable of convincingly representing the sublime and why poetry is able to do so. Painting is all too concrete, detailed and determined to create the evocative voids with which poetry is able to evoke sublime sensations.[3] Gotthold Ephraim Lessing later added another critical argument in his discussion of Alexander Gerard's *Essay on Taste* (1756). Gerard had asserted that artists could bring inconceivably large natural phenomena into pictures through the deliberate use of scale (»comparative magnitude«[4]), such as by placing tiny staffage figures in front of a mighty mountain. However, in the posthumously published (1788) addenda to the *Laocoon*, Lessing criticized

[1] This thematic issue and its introduction have been prepared within the framework of the Collaborative Research Center SFB 1288 »Practices of Comparing. Changing and Ordering the World«, funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), subproject E02 »Comparative Viewing of Pictures: Practices of Incomparability and the Theory of the Sublime«.

[2] See Johannes Grave: *Bilder des Erhabenen – Erhabene Bilder? Zu einem grundlegenden Problem der Ästhetik und Kunstpraxis der Aufklärung*, in: *Die Bilder der Aufklärung*, ed. by Élisabeth Décultot and Daniel Fulda, Paderborn 2024, 65–88.

[3] See Edmund Burke: *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. by James T. Boulton, London 1958, 174 [V/vii].

[4] Alexander Gerard: *An Essay on Taste*, London 1759, 24.

Gerard's suggestion. Because the picture surface is limited, Lessing wrote, the gaze is never really overtaxed[5]:

> A great majestic temple, which I cannot possibly see in its entirety with one glance, becomes sublime precisely by virtue of the fact that I can let my gaze travel around it; that wherever I stand still, I notice similar parts of the same size, solidity and simplicity. But this very temple, brought into the small space of a copper plate [i.e. an engraving], ceases to be sublime; that is, it ceases to excite my admiration, precisely because I can see it in its entirety all at once.

The list of authors who expressed doubts about the pictorial representability of the sublime could easily be expanded. For instance, drawing on Kant, Christian August Semler and Carl Ludwig Fernow both voiced similar objections about landscape painting.[6]

Several fundamental characteristics of pictures prove to be a problem in these discussions. The limited space of the picture surface makes it difficult or impossible for it to achieve the excessive dimensions necessary to overload the recipient's sense of sight. The immobility of the picture prevents it from bringing dynamic physical forces to bear in a way that might convincingly convey an existential threat to the viewer. And the extensive, differentiated elaboration of everything that appears in the picture – at least according to the representational conventions of the eighteenth century – makes it difficult to structure indeterminacy into the picture in a way that might encumber the recipient's understanding and thus compel them to fill in the gaps through imagination.

The reorientation of the theory of the sublime ushered in by Immanuel Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* only exacerbated these problems. To this day, a large part of Kant scholarship holds that for him, a direct representation of the sublime is impossible.[7] Although the question remains the subject of productive

[5] Gotthold Ephraim Lessing: *[Paralipomena zum Laokoon]*, in: Gotthold Ephraim Lessing: *Werke und Briefe in 12 Bänden* V/2, ed. by Winfried Barner, Frankfurt a.M. 1990, 207–321, here 266 f.: »Ein großer majestätischer Tempel, den ich unmöglich mit einem Blicke übersehen kann, wird eben dadurch erhaben, daß ich meinen Blick darauf herum reisen lassen kann, daß ich überall, wo ich damit stille stehe, ähnliche Teile von der nemlichen Größe, Festigkeit und Einfalt bemerke. Aber eben dieser Tempel, auf den kleinen Raum einer Kupferplatte gebracht, hört auf erhaben zu sein, das ist, meine Bewunderung zu erregen, eben deswegen, weil ich ihn auf einmal übersehen kann.«

[6] See Christian August Semler: *Untersuchungen über die höchste Vollkommenheit in den Werken der Landschaftsmalerey* I, Leipzig 1800, 187–192 and 310–312; Carl Ludwig Fernow: *Über die Landschaftmalerei*, ed. by André Georgi, Hanover 2020, 46–49.

[7] See, e.g, Uygar Abaci: *Kant's Justified Dismissal of Artistic Sublimity*, in: *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 66/3 (2008), 237–251, esp. 249; Uygar Abaci: *Artistic Sublimity Revisited – Reply to Robert Clewis*, in: *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 68/2 (2010), 170–173, esp. 172; Alessandro Bertinetto: *Negative Darstellung – Das Erhabene bei Kant und Hegel*, in: *Internationales Jahrbuch des deutschen Idealismus* 4 (2006), 124–151.—For analyses that do not exclude an artistic evocation

debate, many analyses of Kant's account of the sublime conclude that he was right to focus on sublimity in nature. Still, scholars who have sought to detail how Kant's account might allow for the representation or evocation of the sublime in pictures have come up with some remarkably unconventional solutions that are not limited to what the picture depicts. Rather, these analyses have engaged in deep reflection on the form of representation and its implications. A recent special issue of the journal *Aesthetica Preprint* that emerged from the same research project as the contributions collected here discusses these novel approaches to Kantian conceptions of the sublime.[8]

Of course, artists around 1800 did not have to subscribe to Kant's ideas. Even a cursory glance at art production in the decades around 1800 shows that artists did not allow theorists' doubts to prevent them from painting pictures whose objects are associated with the sublime. Art historical research has repeatedly drawn attention to this rise of the sublime in art practice, including Morton David Paley's book *The Apocalyptic Sublime* (1986) and Hélène Ibata's *The Challenge of the Sublime* (2018). This special issue aims to pick up on the conversation initiated by these and other studies. In doing so, the contributors analyse a variety of approaches to the question of the depiction or evocation of the sublime and draw attention to issues that have often been seen as marginal. This course, we think, is both justified and productive. We work on the hypothesis that the very fact that the visual representability of the sublime was fundamentally called into question in the second part of the eighteenth century might have spurred visual artists to devise innovative, experimental solutions. The profound problem posed by the sublime could, we think, have become a catalyst for aesthetic innovation.

Artistic attempts to expand the boundaries of pictorial representation through the sublime seem to have contributed to the general shift in painting away from the pictorial subject matter and purely representational perception. Those who really wanted to evoke sublime feelings through painting realized that they could not limit themselves to depicting tall mountains, raging waterfalls or erupting volcanoes. Instead, they began to think about how images influence the process of their reception. Kant's theory, in particular, gave rise to such questions, regardless of the ambiguity over whether it could be applied in art. After all, Kant understood the sublime not as a property of external objects,

of the sublime in the context of Kant's theory see Paul Crowther: *The Kantian Sublime – From Morality to Art*, Oxford 1989, 152–174; Robert R. Clewis: *A Case for Kantian Artistic Sublimity – A Response to Abaci*, in: *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 68/2 (2010), 167–170; Paul Crowther: *How Pictures Complete Us – The Beautiful, the Sublime, and the Divine*, Stanford 2016, 57–78; Paul Guyer: *The Poetic Possibility of the Sublime*, in: *Natur und Freiheit – Akten des XII. Kant-Kongresses* I, ed. by Violetta L. Waibel, Margit Ruffing, and David Wagner, Berlin 2018, 307–326.

[8] See *Kant's Theory of the Sublime and the Visual Arts* [special issue of *Aesthetica Preprint* 124 (2023)], ed. by Robert R. Clewis and Arno Schubbach, Rome 2023.

but as the result of a particular (dis)function of the human powers of cognition. For this reason, it made sense for some painters to focus less on what was depicted and more on the processes of viewing the image.

Kant describes the (mathematical) sublime as »that which is great above all comparison«,[9] or as that »in comparison with which everything else is small«.[10] The sensation of the sublime presupposes the failure of an attempt at comparison. At least where the sensation of the sublime stems from the perception of immeasurable magnitude, the perceiving subject cannot succeed in finding a standard that would make it possible to grasp it. While »apprehension« (»Auffassung«), to use Kant's term, proceeds uninterruptedly, the imagination is overtaxed, as it fails to accomplish the »comprehension« (»Zusammenfassung«) needed to perceive the object as a single entity. Those who want to represent the sublime would therefore do well to develop strategies to encourage viewers to engage in comparative practices that ultimately fail. In its generality and abstractness, this insight had the potential to free artists from seeking to depict the sublime exclusively through the represented content and its mode of appearance, while enabling them to reflect on how the means of representation might play into artistic evocations of the sublime. After all, pictures are characterised by a fundamental duality: they make something appear, but at the same time they also appear as physical things in their own right. This duality harbours the potential for triggering sublime sensations. Therefore, artists around 1800 may well have wondered whether they might be able to create pictures that convincingly render what is depicted while at the same time drawing attention to their own artificiality, thus making it difficult or impossible for the recipient to successfully »comprehend« the painting in Kant's sense.[11]

If we bring Kant's deliberations on the connection between the failure of comparison and the sensation of the sublime into dialogue with considerations of the specific qualities and potentials of pictures, it becomes apparent that the »challenge of the sublime« (Ibata) may have provided a promising impulse for expanding the potentials of painting. Reflections on the possibility of evoking the sublime in pictures could have offered painters around 1800 the chance to develop a stronger awareness of the viewer's part. In other words, it could have contributed to a turn towards reception aesthetics. That which painting is unable to achieve on its own is transferred to the process of perception. If, as many theorists around 1800 argued with good reason, the sublime cannot simply be represented by the choice of certain pictorial objects, painting could concentrate on offering the viewer occasions to experience the ›sublime‹ in the process of

[9] Immanuel Kant: *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. by Paul Guyer, trans. by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, Cambridge/New York 2000, 132 [B 81].

[10] Ibid., 134 [B 84].

[11] See Johannes Grave: *Duality and Temporality – Evoking the Sublime through Pictures*, in: *Kant's Theory of the Sublime and the Visual Arts* [note 8], 79–100.

perception. The shift from the sublime as an objective quality of works of art or natural objects to a sensation constituted by the subject through the perception of an external object is, as mentioned above, inherent in Kant's theory of the sublime. The contributors to this special issue thus seek to address the question as to whether artists of the period around 1800 grappled with the ›challenge of the sublime‹ in their work and in this way took an important step towards overcoming a conception of painting focused primarily on the represented content.

II.

Numerous artists have taken on this challenge and explored how the means of painting might be employed to depict or evoke the sublime. Elisabeth Ansel and Hélène Ibata's contributions elucidate how artists pushed the limits of visibility in order to depict the sublime as something obscure that exceeds the powers of human imagination. In a study on the relation between the Ossian myth and painting, Elisabeth Ansel traces the entanglements of discourses on blindness and the sublime in order to explore how artists used visual means to translate sublime poetry into visual art. Aesthetic contemplation on seeing and not seeing that was integral to discourse on blindness led artists to concentrate on perceptual and visual processes. Ansel demonstrates that artists like John Sell Cotman, Thomas Girtin and J. M. W. Turner took up these reflections on blindness to investigate evocations of the sublime in Ossianic images. In doing so, the artists deliberately employed visual ambiguity, confusion and obscurity to evoke an experience of the sublime.

Hélène Ibata argues that J. M. W. Turner's late Venice paintings were concerned with a specific type of the sublime: the ›historical sublime‹. She argues that Turner's expressive and indistinct style allowed him to engage with two interwoven historiographic developments that inform the ›historical sublime‹. On the one hand, historians were gradually beginning to conceive of history as boundless and unrepresentable. On the other, the emergence and popularization of theories of geology developed by authors like James Hutton and Charles Lyell drew attention to the fact that the earth is much older than the human temporality of biblical chronologies. The concept of deep time conveyed by these works of geology greatly exceeds the bounds of human comprehension of time. These two developments could be regarded as sources of sublimity. By using faint contours and highlighting atmospheric phenomena, Turner's late Venice paintings depict the fragility of urban structures constructed by humans and their return to nature over the course of extended geological and historical time. These genuinely painterly means enabled him to bring forth the ›historical sublime‹.

While these two contributions demonstrate that artists deliberately used visual ambiguities to induce feelings of the sublime in recipients, Aris Sarafianos'

essay sheds light on a different, yet complementary visual strategy. Sarafianos argues that an often-overlooked passage in Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* describes how an abundance of figurative details can be a source of the sublime. Artists like Joseph Wright of Derby, J.M.W. Turner and Théodore Géricault draw upon this resource of the sublime through the careful use of micro-details to create a reality effect that bursts the boundaries between image and reality in order to evoke the sublime.

Elisabeth Ansel and Hélène Ibata's contributions illustrate that discussions on the possibility of the sublime in the visual arts must always be seen within their historical and cultural contexts. The representability of the sublime is not just dependent on discourses about the sublime. Shifts in other discourses can also affect concepts of the sublime or bring forth possibilities of representation that were not, or not explicitly, theorized in treatises on the sublime. Peter de Bolla's distinction between discourses »on« something and discourses »of« something is helpful here. A discourse »on« something is »to be taken as a discrete discourse, a discourse which is to be read in a highly specific way, within a very well defined context«.[12] Discourses »on« the sublime have historically been characterized by their explicit, focused thematization of this concept. This is particularly evident in treatises such as Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. In contrast, a discourse »of« something »is made up of a number of discrete discourses« that might include the discourse »on« the sublime, »but it does not, however, demand that it be read as a discrete discourse on something«.[13] Tracing these implicit discourses »on« the sublime within broader discourses »of« something else posed an opportunity for artists to visualize a sublime that had not yet been made explicit in specific theories of the sublime.

Ibata traces these implicit discourses within early nineteenth-century discussions on history and geology in order to show how J.M.W. Turner applied them to evoke the ›historical sublime‹. As noted above, she identifies how concepts of historical time as well as geological theories of deep time indirectly influenced Turner's techniques of producing the sublime in painting.

As Caroline van Eck argues in her contribution, confrontations with natural beasts and dangerous animals have served as another powerful source of the sublime, which is rarely theorized. But the apparent absence of animals in the discourse »on« the sublime does not mean that artists have never tried to engage with the ›animal sublime‹. Van Eck uncovers implicit elements of the ›animal sublime‹ in Rubens' explorations of the borders between humans and animals

[12] Peter de Bolla: *The Discourse of the Sublime – Readings in History, Aesthetics and the Subject*, Oxford 1989, 9.

[13] Ibid., 10.

and the influence they had on depictions of animal combat in later paintings. As she notes, Arthur Schopenhauer's *World as Will and Representation* offered a metaphysical account of the ›animal sublime‹ based on a conception of nature as the manifestation of the will. This manifestation of the will reveals itself in an endless struggle for self-preservation and survival as represented in paintings and sculptures of animal combat.

However, discursive shifts were not the only ones that enabled artists to visually represent and evoke the sublime. Shifts in practices of producing images also played an important role. Adèle Akamatsu explores the impact that trips to Norway taken by artists of the Düsseldorf School had on their artistic production and how these experiences changed the traditional understanding of the sublime that had long been associated with the Nordic landscape. On the one hand, the artists' experiences in Norway allowed them to revise stereotypes of Nordic landscapes as harsh and sublime. Accordingly, some of their paintings depicted Norway's mild climate and sunny weather, thus blurring the boundaries between the sublime and the beautiful. On the other hand, travel led the artists to explore new forms of representation that were informed by their own experiences of the Nordic landscape.

III.

The contributions in this issue offer a range of perspectives on the pictorial representation and evocation of the sublime. They illuminate artistic strategies and techniques as well as shifting discursive contexts and experiences that stimulated new approaches to the sublime and the pictures that sought to evoke it. While the contributions focus on pictures themselves, pictures can only exert their power in the process of reception. Accordingly, paintings can only evoke the sublime through a process of perception that not only recognizes depicted objects, but also engages with visual ambiguities and the withdrawal of visibility, shifting relationships of perspective and scale or hybrid beings that straddle the line between animal and human. The evocation of the sublime thus has a reflexive dimension. It leads to processes of perception concerned less with a determinate object and more with the free play of the faculties itself. In short, it occasions self-reflection. This might help explain why the sublime has seen a resurgence of interest today.

Since Kant, reflection has been understood as a constitutive element of the aesthetic experience of the sublime, but the sublime has also been grasped as an experience that occasions humans to reflect on themselves. Kant's view that human beings must reflect on their own faculty of reason in the face of nature may seem one-dimensional or even misguided to us today. However, the contributions in this issue demonstrate how the artistic evocation of the sublime often