

The Sublime and Contemporary Aesthetics

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I. The Neglect of the Sublime

Beauty is now back on the philosophical agenda. Is such a future possible for the sublime – does it have any relevance to contemporary aesthetics? Yes, I believe it does, but probably not on the scale of beauty, given the ubiquity of beauty, its role in historical debates and its recent revival. I'll argue here that the sublime is indeed relevant to contemporary aesthetics, but that its relevance is tied, in particular, to debates in environmental aesthetics and environmental philosophy more generally.

Why is the concept neglected, despite its continued importance in other fields such as literature and art theory? Well, presumably because the sublime is a concept considered of little relevance to current debates. Mary Mothersill's *Beauty Restored*¹ is usually credited with reviving discussions of another concept, beauty which, historically, was central to aesthetic theory and was usually set in contrast to the sublime.

Academic study of the sublime is vast, crossing disciplines such as philosophy, literature, critical and cultural theory, art theory, architecture, and no doubt other disciplines as well. My discussion is confined to philosophical aesthetics and issues that are especially relevant within that context.² I consider two different arguments for the neglect of the sublime: (1) the historical argument and (2) the egotistical argument. I'll consider each in turn, followed by replies. By the conclusion of this essay, I also show how Icelandic environments offer an interesting case of the contemporary sublime, and why the sublime is a useful category of aesthetic value for interpreting them.

II. The Historical Argument

The historical argument draws on historical reasons why the sublime has been neglected and argues that it is essentially an outmoded concept. Before addressing some of these reasons, it is worth giving a brief history of the concept. The first treatise on the sublime, *On the Sublime*, is now generally attributed to Longinus, the first century Greek critic. Influenced by classical discussions of rhetoric, including Aristotle's, Longinus articulated the sublime as a literary style. The treatise was apparently rediscovered in the sixteenth century, and its translation into English and French in the 17th century, was pivotal for its reception by eighteenth century literary criticism and aesthetic theory.

Philosophical discussion of the sublime reached a pinnacle in the 18th century, when it was unusual *not* to include it in theories of taste. Contemporary aestheticians are most familiar with Edmund Burke's and Kant's theories of the sublime, but there is significant work on the topic by others, such as

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Addison, Alison, Herder, and Mendelssohn. In Burke's empirical approach, the sublime is attributed to objects that are great, powerful, vast, infinite, rugged, dark, gloomy, massive, and even to loud sounds, bitter smells and stenches. Our feeling of the sublime is an immediately delightful feeling of terror in response to something dangerous which is distant enough not to cause actual pain. We are completely overwhelmed by sublime objects: 'the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it.'³ Burke and, later, Kant argue that the sublime response may only occur if the spectator experiences the sublime object first-hand, and when situated in a safe position relative to it.

Kant's mature theory of the sublime, as it appears in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790) was influenced by Burke and earlier theories. However, Kant develops the concept through his critical and transcendental philosophy, and his account is distinctive for its focus on nature.⁴ Kant distinguishes between the 'mathematically sublime', where the senses and imagination are pushed to the very limits of their powers when confronted by the seemingly infinite magnitude of nature, such as high mountains or the night sky, and the 'dynamically sublime', where the awesome power and threat of nature evokes anxious pleasure and calls forth an awareness of our distinctive capacities as moral beings, namely, freedom and the power of reason.⁵ We feel insignificant and powerless in comparison to the mightiness of nature, yet ultimately we judge ourselves rather than objects sublime as we discover our own capacity to measure ourselves against nature.

While the sublime was then taken up in Romantic poetry and literature and in some later philosophical discussions, it has since not featured as a *major* category of aesthetic value. The historical reasons for this are no doubt myriad and complex, and I shall address only a few of them, and those rather speculatively. These reasons are tied to shifts in both the empirical and theoretical bases of the sublime. The early development of the concept from its literary to natural treatment, and subsequent celebration by the Romantics, meant that the sublime became deeply associated with natural objects and phenomena. Moves away from realistic or naturalistic art and towards the expressive and avant-garde led to diminished philosophical interest in aesthetics of nature, including the sublime. The sublime has also been of less interest in art until recently, where it has enjoyed resurgence among artists and philosophers, such as Barnett Newman and Jean-Francois Lyotard.

Alongside shifts in aesthetic theory and the arts lie key changes in aesthetic experiences and landscape tastes. Much has been written about how changes in landscape tastes made appreciation of the sublime possible in the first place, where fear and hatred of mountains, deserts and other wild places was replaced with admiration and reverence.⁸ These changes in taste were made possible by a number of

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Deleted: While these postmodern accounts have their own merits, I'm not convinced that the sublime, as it is best and originally understood, applies in important ways to art. We can find support for this claim in Addison and Kant – the view being, briefly, that artworks offer fewer opportunities for appreciation of sublime qualities – overwhelming power or vastness, terror, etc. Indeed, on many interpretations of Kant, artifacts are simply not candidates for the sublime response.

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economic, social, religious and technological factors that enabled people to have direct, relatively safe access to such places. Theories of the sublime emerged in line with these changes, where many people – typically the elite - were in a position to appreciate nature rather than simply fear it or view it as coarse and evil.

Does the current neglect in *discourse* on the sublime reflect changes in taste and experience away from sublime objects? Has there been a decline in ‘taste’ for the sublime? It could be argued that opportunities to appreciate the natural sublime have declined, presumably, because many cultures and societies are now even less awed by nature, less fearful of it, having developed technological means to control it, experience real power over it or engage with mountains, the sea and other environments in ways that are now so comfortable that the edgy feeling of the sublime –anxious pleasure – is hardly felt anymore. In other words, for many societies our relationship to nature has become much less troubled. There may still be room for neighboring categories of response, such as awe, majesty, and wonder, but not really (it might be claimed) for the complex experience of the sublime, at least if we reply upon an understanding of the concept as it was put forward in the 18th c. So, the main conclusion of the historical argument is that the sublime is no longer relevant theoretically because those very experiences so prevalent in the past just no longer exist, or if they exist, they are, in fact, rare.

This conclusion is too swift. The access we have to the natural environment does make many of our experiences, thankfully, safe. But technology has also allowed us to access places that are still wild to a great extent – huge waterfalls, raging rivers, volcanic eruptions, the vast sea, space, deserts and so on – in ways that still leave room for the sublime response. Although the concept of wilderness is highly contested, we still have experiences of more or less wild places which offer possibilities for the sublime. And the sublime need not be limited to remote places – on a clear night, away from light pollution, we can gaze at that very thing celebrated in Kant’s theory: ‘the starry heavens above’. Granted, the vast earth can now be examined at our fingertips through Google Earth and the like, there are still opportunities for direct experience of the natural sublime. It is also possible to argue that less technologically developed societies retain a greater taste for the sublime, but this is becoming much too speculative – proof would need to be found in empirical studies. The emergence of extreme sports provides an example of ways people find risk where it may no longer exist, and some small degree of risk (if only fear ‘incurred in imagination’, as Kant put it), is crucial to any experience of the sublime. I’m not suggesting that extreme sports are in themselves experiences of the sublime, but they offer opportunities for aesthetic experience of this kind because of how they situate people in the environment.

These points show that opportunities remain for experiencing objects and phenomena commonly associated with the sublime, thus making our use of the concept still relevant today. But the problem

doesn't end there. If the sublime is to be of interest in an environmental context, then it's important to tackle further key objections.

III. The Egotistical Argument

The egotistical argument stems from the claim that the sublime is inherently egotistical, especially in terms of the relationship that it sets up between humans and nature. The first thread of this argument claims that it is humanity that is valued rather than natural objects, such that the sublime becomes *self-regarding*. In many accounts of the sublime, especially those that have been most influential, such as Kant's, it is in fact humanity, reason, freedom, moral self-hood that is sublime, not nature itself. Kant writes 'what is properly sublime cannot be contained in any sensible form, but concerns only ideas of reason...' (*CPJ*, §23, 5:245).⁹ Through a process of 'subreption', we substitute respect for ourselves with respect for the natural object, or 'substitution of a respect for the object instead of for the idea of humanity in our subject' (*CPJ*, §25, 5:257).¹⁰

Kant's view is carried into the sublime of Romanticism, and it was the poet, John Keats, who described Wordsworth's 'The Prelude' as the 'egotistical sublime.'¹¹ 'The Prelude', a long autobiographical poem, is one of Wordsworth's most famous. Its lines inspire an appreciation of nature shaped by his loving relationship with the landscapes of his home, the English Lake District. These lines are from the section referred to as 'Ice-skating':

So through the darkness and the cold we flew,
And not a voice was idle; with the din
...the precipices rang aloud;
The leafless trees and every icy crag
Tinkled like iron.¹²

Although the poetry of Wordsworth and other Romantics may reveal a form of respect for nature, it precipitates the criticism that nature becomes the means to our own self-discovery, a mere trigger for realizing our place in the world – one that is in fact seen as greater than nature in many ways. Ronald Hepburn writes that Kant's theory downgrades '*nature's* contribution in favor of the one-sided exalting of the rational subject-self'¹³ and 'the natural, external world may come to be seen as of value in the sublime experience, *only* because it can make a person feel the capaciousness of his soul. Intensity of experience may become the solely prized value.'¹⁴ Given that the sublime is a type of aesthetic

experience – or aesthetic-moral experience – positing nature as other in this way might be seen as a type of aesthetization of nature indeed even a distorting, humanizing of nature, ‘degrading nature to our measure’.¹⁵

Leading from this, a second thread of the argument is that the sublime posits nature as ‘Other’, an ‘Other’ that is different from ourselves and something which we ultimately discover that we have power over.¹⁶ In William Cronon’s well known critique of the concept of wilderness, he argues that the sublime only serves to deepen the separation of humans and nature.¹⁷ There are many other objections that relate to the egotistical argument, they come from a range of positions – feminist, political, literary, sociological, etc.¹⁸

Let me attempt a reply to the egotistical argument and each of these objections. Elsewhere, in a reassessment of the Kantian sublime and aesthetic valuing of nature, I have tried to show that the Kantian sublime is not as egotistical as these criticisms suggest.¹⁹ Briefly, rather than reducing sublime appreciation to awareness of moral vocation, I argue that we cannot overlook Kant’s insistence that judgments of the sublime fall squarely within the aesthetic domain, and as such, natural objects are not mere triggers of the sublime response, I show how they may be given a proper role in appreciation, even if the valuing that goes on is indirect. Also, if the distinction between the aesthetic and moral in the Kantian sublime is understood properly, we may discover how this particular type of aesthetic experience characterizes an aesthetic-moral relationship between humans and nature.

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In this essay, I’m most interested in trying to defend the more difficult, metaphysical, Kantian conception of the sublime because I believe it to be truer to the concept as it has developed philosophically (and in relation to the natural sublime). In any case, and for the sake of moving my overall project forward, let me sketch out just why we should care about sublime appreciation of nature.

The relationship between humans and nature in sublime experience can be seen as involving elements of both humility and self-reflection.²⁰ This is not a cozy relationship, rather, it is characterized by agitation. Many theories of aesthetic appreciation in environmental aesthetics stress the deep engagement afforded by environmental appreciation as contrasted with many forms of artistic appreciation and scenic or picturesque appreciation.²¹ I agree with these views, and I do think the sublime affords a type of *environmental* aesthetic experience, but it is not one of the intimate kind. The sublime is typified by feeling overwhelmed, anxious, and insignificant in the face of crashing waves, towering cliffs, etc. This is not a delightful or contemplative experience of nature, as we might find in

varieties of the beautiful. In this respect, the sublime does not define a relationship of loving nature, or a friendly one, rather, it is uneasy, uncomfortable, even difficult.

Lyotard's philosophy enhances our understanding of how the self relates to environment in sublime experience. Although mainly interested in the sublime and art, Lyotard shows us how the subject of sublime feeling is de-centered through encounters with the 'inexpressible', the 'unpresentable' and the indeterminate. Discussing the sublime in Barnett Newman's artworks and ideas, Lyotard writes that, 'With the occurrence, the will is defeated.'²² In the context of nature, we might synthesize Lyotard's ideas to interpret the sublime as an overwhelming of the subject, where a dislocation of the self comes through a sense of nature not fully known, having some element of mystery; and thus nature *not* appropriated by human reason.²³ Lyotard interprets Kant's theory to show this movement beyond a subject that, 'feels in the object the presence of something that transcends the object. The mountain peak is a phenomenon that indicates that it is also more than a phenomenon.'²⁴ Against the egotistical argument, then, Lyotard shows how the sublime signifies a 'dehumanizing' of aesthetic experience, and renders a complex relationship between humans and nature arising out of an experience of great affect.

IV. The Contemporary Sublime in Iceland

In sublime experience nature is complex, mysterious, dark, great, huge, towering, vast, disordered, shapeless, formless, raw, tumultuous, raging, and so on. Where *do* humans fit into this? It's not surprising that in true experiences of the sublime we will still feel very small. This doesn't mean, however, that nature is somehow grasped as 'Other' or as *entirely* inaccessible to us. We *are* appreciating aesthetic qualities of nature of a particular kind. This is what affects us and causes the feeling of insignificance. The sublime, then, engenders a relationship that maintains a level of appreciation – it would not be the sublime if we were so fearful we had to run for safety – but one that also delineates a particular aesthetic character of environments. This should come as no surprise, given that the sublime emerged, originally, to cope with the great mountains, waterfalls etc., for which a new aesthetic taste developed.

This is nature appreciated for qualities that contrast strongly with the mixed environments of pastoral landscapes. These qualities, while not equivalent to ugliness, belong to a range normally contrasted with the beautiful. Recent discussions in environmental aesthetics have sought to identify forms of aesthetic valuing that recognize nature on its own terms rather than merely through the lens of the picturesque or the scenic, and some philosophers have argued for the importance of valuing

landscapes commonly thought of as ‘unscenic’. The sublime is not necessarily the unscenic, since there will be overlaps between some varieties of the sublime and scenic landscapes, but it is certainly closer to a ‘terrible beauty’ than a scenic one.

The concept of the sublime fits well as a way to characterize Icelandic environments. Many landscapes in Iceland are not conventionally scenic. Vast lava fields, glaciers, barren, treeless mountains, stunning calderas and so on, provide cases of the contemporary sublime, as well as a way to assign aesthetic value to such environments. The wonder of Icelandic landscapes – for someone like myself who lives closer to the very old highlands of Scotland – is that they are geologically young, and highly dynamic. This points to the imaginative component of sublime experience which, evoked by perceptual qualities such as black sand, ice, solid lava, etc., involves a kind of narrative imagining of the forceful natural processes which have formed the present features of the Icelandic environment. Climate change means that many of these processes need not be imagined through time at all, given the rapid changes that are taking place. And, fairly recently for some people, a volcanic eruption (viewed from a safe place) would be a rare experience of the sublime today. It’s important to remember that although the sublime is suggestive of the ‘Other’, these landscapes range from the remote highlands to more familiar regions for many Icelanders.

In conclusion, by replying to the historical and egotistical arguments, I hope to have shown that far from being an outmoded category of aesthetic value, the sublime has contemporary relevance, distinguishing a valuable and distinctive form of aesthetic appreciation of nature. Sublime aesthetic experiences potentially ground an aesthetic-moral relationship which can lead to care and respect for the natural world.

Notes

¹ Mothersill, Mary, *Beauty Restored* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1985).

² Recent extended work on the sublime in philosophy includes, Paul Crowther, *The Kantian Sublime: From Morality to Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989); Frances Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Kirk Pillow, *Sublime Understanding: Aesthetic Reflection in Kant and Hegel* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000); James Kirwan, *Sublimity* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005).

³ Burke, Edmund, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. Adam Philips (Oxford, [1757] 1990), p. 53.

⁴ Commentators differ on this point. I follow Paul Guyer, who argues that Kant is concerned exclusively with nature. See note 6 below.

⁵ This distinction can be traced back to Francis Hutcheson. See Kirwan, *Sublimity*.

⁸ See Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite* (New York: Norton, 1959); Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, rev. edn. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1967); Max Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

- ⁹ All references to *Critique of the Power of Judgment (CPJ)* with citations referring to section, volume, and page number of the German Academy Edition, *Kant's Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Royal Prussian/German Academy of Sciences (Berlin: Georg Reimer/Walter de Gruyter: 1900-).
- ¹⁰ For further remarks in which Kant says it is improper to call nature itself sublime, see *CPJ*, §28, 5:264; *CPJ*, §30, 5:280.
- ¹¹ Hitt, C. 'Toward an Ecological Sublime', *New Literary History*, 30:3, 1999, p. 4.
- ¹² William Wordsworth, 'The Prelude' Book I. In *Wordsworth's Poetical Works*, vol. 3, William Knight, ed., 1896 (www.gutenberg.org, accessed 26/10/07).
- ¹³ Hepburn, R.W., 'Landscape and Metaphysical Imagination', *EV*, 5, 1996, p. 201.
- ¹⁴ Ronald Hepburn, "The Concept of the Sublime: Has it Any Relevance for Philosophy Today?," *Dialectics and Humanism* 1-2 (1988), p. 143.
- ¹⁵ Hepburn, 'Nature Humanised: Nature Respected', *Environmental Values*, 7 (1998), p. 277.
- ¹⁶ See Sigridur Thorgeirsdottir's discussion of Icelandic landscapes and nature's otherness in: 'Nature's Wholeness and Nature's Otherness: Aesthetical Aspects of Sustainability.' In: C-H. Grenholm and N. Kamergrauzis, eds. *Sustainable Development and Global Ethics. Uppsala Studies in Social Ethics*, 33 (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2007), pp. 51-64.
- ¹⁷ Cronon, W. 'The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Kind of Nature', in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. W. Cronon (New York, 1996).
- ¹⁸ See, for example, Kate Soper's remarks in, 'Looking at Landscape', *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*, 12:2, June 2001, p. 134. Hitt cites several examples from literary criticism, including Eagleton, and feminist critics. See Hitt, p. 1. There are certainly others in feminist philosophy and feminist aesthetics, where the sublime is argued to represent masculine power (see for example, Battersby, C. *Gender and Genius* (Indiana University Press, 1990).
- ¹⁹ Brady, E., 'Reassessing Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature in the Kantian Sublime', manuscript, 2007.
- ²⁰ Many writers note this dual respect, including Hepburn (1998) and Hitt.
- ²¹ See Hepburn, R.W., 'Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty' in *Wonder and Other Essays* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984). First published in Bernard Williams and Alan Montefiore (eds), *British Analytical Philosophy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966); Berleant, A. *Aesthetics of Environment* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992); Carlson, A. *Aesthetics and the Environment* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Brady, E. *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003).
- ²² Lyotard, J-F., 'The Sublime and the Avant-Garde'. In Benjamin, A., ed. *The Lyotard Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p. 199.
- ²³ In environmental aesthetics, these ideas are similar to Stan Godlovitch's 'acentric aesthetic'. See his, 'Icebreakers: Environmentalism and Natural Aesthetics', *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 11:1, 1994, p. 26.
- ²⁴ See Lyotard, J.F., 'The Communication of Sublime Feeling'. In *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*. Trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford University Press, 1994). Reprinted in Crome, K. and Williams, J., ed. *Lyotard Reader and Guide* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), p. 260.