
Modern Theories of the Sublime: The Question of Presentation¹

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This article considers the question of the sublime with respect to modern aesthetic and philosophical attitudes, drawing on the notion of the unrepresentable. It refers to Bataille's concern with desire, Deleuze's concept of intensity, Lyotard's opposition between the sublime and nothingness, Lévinas's relationship between the self and the other, Derrida's parergon, Lacan's exploration of traumatic experience, Žižek's connection of the sublime and ideology, Jameson's exploration of technological sublime, and also theological effort to revive the links between the sublime and the beautiful. The aim of the paper is not to provide a comprehensive overview of the topic but rather to show its complexity, ambiguity and inspiring potential in contemporary culture. As Jean-Luc Nancy points out, since Boileau's translation of Longinus, aesthetics has not ceased to pursue the question of the sublime (Gasché and Taylor 1). The sublime constitutes our tradition as a transgressive category that is connected with philosophy, religion, literature, art, music, and architecture. The study of the sublime continues to inspire literary theory and becomes an important key to the analysis of particular themes and motifs, especially in the texts influenced by the English Gothic novels, which draw on the experience of fear and desire and highlight the role of imagination. As it has been pointed out by contemporary criticism, the postmodern revives the sublime as an important element of aesthetics. On the one hand, it retains the Romantic concern with the unlimited, on the other hand, it does not share the Romantic idea of a higher faculty of art that could synthesize and reconcile subject and object. To use the words of Philip Shaw, the difference between Romanticism and modernism with its nostalgia for the lost unity and postmodernism can be considered, with regard to their contrasting attitudes to the unrepresentable. While in Romanticism the unrepresentable is associated with the divine as the "religious or noumenal 'other' of human conception" (Shaw 119), postmodern culture focuses on the sense of the unrepresentable as "absolutely other" (Shaw 116), and turns the unrepresentable into a synonym of the sublime. In the present paper I attempt to discuss various aspects

¹ This article can be considered an attempt to delineate a brief outline of several tendencies in the development of the concept of the sublime in modern literary theory. In this respect, it will be revised and used as a part of a wider discussion of the metamorphoses of the sublime, which will be published by the University of South Bohemia in 2019.

of the sublime as defined by several representatives of modern aesthetic theory and philosophy, in particular, by Bataille, Deleuze, Lyotard, Lévinas, Derrida, Lacan, Žižek, and Jameson.

The central role of the unknown in the concept of the sublime is claimed by George Bataille's influential study *Inner Experience*, discussing the question of excess and the exceptional states of mind like ecstasy, rapture or mystical experience as the "ultimate in human potentialities" (Bataille 2012, 221).² Discussing the role of the sensual and intellectual visions and apprehensions of God as they are described by St John and St Theresa, Bataille enters polemics with traditional Christianity. For him, both kinds of visions represent particular knowledge that does not allow the subject to enter an authentic relationship with the power of the sublime. In accordance, Bataille does not find the sublime in any religious experience based on dogma, as dogma represents a limit preventing the mind from going beyond its horizon. Moreover, Bataille's analysis of desire, especially the association of taboo and transgression, is echoed in the work of Lacan, and his influence can also be found in the texts of Foucault, Barthes and Derrida. Dealing with the inexpressible, the impossible, as well as with the missed encounter with 'the Real' as the object of anxiety defying words and categories and recalling the effects of trauma, they connect the sublime with what lies beyond the system of language and resists symbolization.

The links between modern/postmodern discussions of the sublime and the transcendental philosophy of Kant are examined by Gilles Deleuze, whose treatise *Kant's Critical Philosophy* (1983) focuses on Kant's third critique, *Critique of Judgement*—a remarkable synthesis of Kant's previous inquiries. Though Deleuze represents a different kind of thinking, his account of the Kantian conflict between imagination and reason echoes his own understanding of intensity. In a discordant accord, faculties (sensibility, imagination, memory, thought) are "capable of relationships which are free and *unregulated*, where each goes to its own limit and nevertheless shows the possibility of some sort of harmony with the others" (Deleuze 2008, xi).

According to Deleuze, this paradox, in which sensibility becomes an origin of knowledge, allows *Critique of Judgment* to be considered as the "foundation of Romanticism." (Deleuze 2008, xi). At the same time, Kant's notion of "the split between the empirical ego and the transcendental subject," involving a possibility of reconciliation of the faculties, corresponds with Deleuze's idea of the "fractured

² According to Bataille, excess is connected with tears and laughter, eroticism and death, sacrifice and poetry.

self” and with his concept of difference (“difference in itself”).³

Dealing with the experience of shock or trauma, the postmodern concepts of the sublime draw on a paradoxical desire to speak about what cannot be uttered in words. In this respect, the sublime is a protest against the notion of silence as nothingness, or indifference. Corresponding with the inexpressible as an urgent presence of something (instead of nothing), it is associated with what cannot be spoken and cannot remain in silence at the same time. As, for instance, it is suggestively evoked by postmodern Gothic fiction, traumatic experience results in the collapse of the ability to describe a particular experience in a narrative (Hogle 268–9).⁴ Distorted, hallucinated and nightmarish images haunt the heroes with a recurrent urgency echoing the original, and repressed, moment of terror. In this respect, the inexpressible is associated with the uncanny as defined by Nicholas Royle: with the “strange, weird and mysterious” nature of “the beginning” that is “already haunted,” involving a notion of fatal coincidences and repetitions, and conveying a strong (though unconscious) sense of a “death-drive” (Royle 1–2).

It is the feature of unrepresentability that permeates J.-F. Lyotard’s definition of the postmodern. Drawing on Burke’s idea of privation in darkness, silence and emptiness as a source of the sublime, Lyotard discusses the experience of absence in terms of terror: a “threatening void” (Slocombe 65). Fred Botting, analysing the consequences of postmodern cultural fragmentation and plurality, connects this empty space with the growing gap between human subjectivity and technological / commercial concerns. The moral authority, as well as the individual, familial, or national identity are suppressed, giving way to the intensification of anxiety sprung from the cultural exhaustion, in other words, the “black hole of horror which no single figure can fill” (Hogle 277–99). The decline of moral and paternal authority leads to the idea of transgression as a “positive act” (Hogle 286), to growing uncertainty and the loss of meaning, to “excess, waste, and uselessness” (Hogle 285), permeating postmodern culture. Lyotard’s idea of the unrepresentable, however, reflects the influence of Kant and Lévinas (Slocombe 64) as it involves a demand of the ethical relationship towards the other. As Will Slocombe observes, Lyotard, in fact, adds Lévinasian ethics to Kantian aesthetics, replacing the Enlightenment’s rational moral code with a Lévinasian idea of the individual responsibility, which is considered a radicalization of rather than a deviation from

³ Cf. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/deleuze>

⁴ In particular, this idea is expressed in Stephen Bruhm’s chapter “Contemporary Gothic: why we need it,” where he describes the Gothic genre as a narrative of trauma.

Kant's ideas.⁵ The nature of postmodern discourse with its refusal of finality and totality, echoes, in a way, the ethical, face-to-face relationship between 'self' and 'other.' The desire for reunion and for knowledge – incorporating the 'other' into the 'self' – is replaced by a demand of responsibility towards the other: the demand that the other must retain its difference. Thus, the ethical aspect of the sublime is secured by the distance between the subject and object; the distance that must not be lessened but confirmed.

Renée van de Vall connects this distance with a special role of absence and silence in the postmodern sublime, considering Lyotard's concept of silence as something that is 'other' to discourse: "Silence indicates inevitable gaps in our comprehension, gaps that should be respected, rather than bridged." (Slocombe 64). According to Lyotard, silence does not lead towards expression but towards the notion of the inexpressible. In his discussion of the sublime, Lyotard uses the example of abstract painting to show that the absence of representation may result either in silence as the absence of a representative language, or in invisibility as the absence of representative symbols: "The current of abstract painting has its source, from 1912, in this requirement for indirect and all but ungraspable allusion to the invisible in the visible. The sublime, and not the beautiful, is the sentiment called forth by these works." (Lyotard 1991, 126).

The postmodern imagination searches for new ways of presentation to suggest a stronger sense of the unrepresentable, for instance, the concept of infinity, to present the failure of comprehension (and of the effort to present), to put the "unrepresentable in presentation itself." (Lyotard 1984, 81). In this respect, the ultimate mode of expression might be "pure abstraction" (Shaw 116), which will "enable us to see only by making it impossible to see." (Lyotard 1984, 78). In this regard, the sublime is considered a disruptive event, a shock that prevents the superiority of the rational over the real. A traumatic experience, however, can be interpreted as an "indicator of presence" (Slocombe 146–47), not of absence, and a bearer of meaning. In other words, whatever causes emotions makes the individual experience more authentic and intense. In the Gothic tales of terror, accordingly, the sublime as a disruptive event is implied by a wide range of uncanny images coinciding (as well as counteracting) with unutterable fears of nothingness and meaninglessness. In Lyotard's interpretation of Newman's paintings, the sublime counteracts annihilating terror hidden in the possibility that "soon nothing more

⁵ Lyotard's *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, for example, discusses Kant's idea of the sublime, pointing out in the final chapter that, for Kant, it is resistance, not morality itself, that is sublime, reflecting a tension between a moral will and empirical desire (cf. resistance to passions, fear, temptation).

will take place,” allowing us to feel that “something will happen,” that “everything is not over” (Lyotard 1989, 140–149). Lyotard’s analysis of the sublime moment as a point at which the self can be reconstituted, in a way, develops and modifies the Lévinasian moral demand to support the other person’s right for life in its otherness, and in its continuity: Lévinas’s demand not to kill corresponds, in fact, with Lyotard’s command to be. It is in the acceptance and support of the other (the unknowable and the inexplicable) that the sublime can be experienced and the fullness and intensity of life can be achieved.

The question of limitlessness in the Kantian theory of the sublime is discussed in Derrida’s *Truth in Painting* (1978). Analysing Kant’s distinction between the beautiful (which is given form by the presence of a limit) and the sublime (which is formless and unbounded), Derrida draws on Kant’s brief reference to the term “parergon” in *Critique of Judgment*, and gives it a central position in his concept of the sublime. Dealing with the meaning of parergon as a frame of the work of art, Derrida suggests that “there cannot, it seems, be a parergon for the sublime” (Derrida 127). Phillip Shaw, however, points out that the word “seems” offers a possibility that the sublime is perceived in the connection with limits, in contrast to the Romantic notion of the sublime, as wholly other or beyond.⁶

For Kant, imagination is unable to comprehend the concept of infinity (or the formless). Though the true sublime cannot relate to “any sensible form” and therefore, “refuses all adequate presentation” (Derrida 124), this failure to present infinity can be presented (or bounded), in the words of Derrida, by the unbounded power of reason. In this respect, the ability to present our inability to comprehend (pointed out also by Lyotard) constitutes the sublime. At the same time, as Shaw or Botting have claimed, there is no sense of the unbounded that does not refer to the idea of a limit, and there is no limit which does not imply the notion of the unlimited. In Botting’s analysis of the Gothic sublime, it is transgression that gives the limit its power (Botting 7–9). For Jean-Luc Nancy, the “movement of the unlimited” takes place “on the border of the limit,” that is, at the “border of presentation” (Nancy 35). As Philip Shaw sums it up, the pleasure of the sublime arises from “the setting of, rather than the overcoming of, limits” (Shaw 118); in other words, from the activity of framing.

Nevertheless, the sublime remains a “disruptive event, forcing critical thought to a crisis” (Shaw 129). In Derrida’s deconstructive concept of parergon, the sublime destroys the signifier or representer: it “expresses itself only by marking

⁶ Shaw uses Kant’s example of the pyramids, which can produce the sublime feeling only when perceived from a certain distance and a particular point, for instance, when a conceptual frame (parergon) is established (Shaw 117–118).

in its expression the annihilation of expression". In other words, the form, or the act of forming "is destroyed through what it expresses, explains, or interprets" (Derrida 125). Thus, the value of the sublime consists in its resistance to rationalist appropriation, as well as to any effort of finalization or totality as described by Lévinas and Lyotard.

It is this rejection of clearly defined forms that characterizes postmodern literature in its development from magic realism and absurdity to apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction. According to Slocombe, following Esslin's analysis of the theatre of the absurd and using Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969) as an example, postmodern fiction originates in the "absurd sublime," dealing with the conflict between what can be measured and controlled and what escapes all rules and definitions: "If totalitarianism, that which gave rise to the Holocaust, was a result of defining reality, then the promulgation of new realities [...] was a way in which ontological totalitarianism could be avoided" (Slocombe 117). As Martin Procházka points out, it is the "horror of emptiness," in other words, of "the absolute otherness of death" that accompanies the departure from traditional patterns of experience and permeates the fragmentary projections of imaginary worlds (Procházka 2005, 79–106). Postmodern techniques, in correspondence with Lyotard's views, reflect the intensification of fear and anxiety as a significant attribute of the sublime, which is supported by the traumatic events of the 20th and 21st centuries. All certainties are shaken by the gradation of the meaningless outbursts of violence, and a mind tortured by this unbearable reality can be relieved only by the power of imagination.

Accordingly, postmodern interpretations of the sublime confirm the juxtaposition of the sublime and the beautiful, referring to the notions of fragmentation and disharmony, as well as to the nihilistic concerns with absurdity, meaninglessness and nothingness. Moreover, the original (pre-Burkean) idea of the sublime as a transcendental experience is repeatedly challenged by materialist concepts of sublimity in deconstructive, psychoanalytic and feminist perspectives. For Derrida or Paul de Man, for example, sublimity is an effect of signification (Antal 22), while Christine Battersby and Barbara Freeman consider the sublime experience with respect to the concept of gender. The post-Freudian critics Harold Bloom, Thomas Weiskel or Neil Hertz defend a psychological approach, which is employed also by Jacques Lacan and his interest in alienated identity.

This French psychoanalyst, before Derrida, Paul de Man or Lyotard, connects his interest in the sublime (as the excessive and the unbounded) with the problem of individual identity. Drawing on Kant, Freud, and also on the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, for example, in his "Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason since Freud," he poses a new and original approach to

Freud's psychoanalytical concerns. For Lacan, there is no extralinguistic identity of the human subject, and the unconscious is structured like a language, which makes subjectivity (and identity) but an effect of language. The desire for the unattainable "ideal I" is urged by the gap between the "I" as a subject who speaks and the "I" as an object that is spoken of. The problem of alienated identity, or the split of the self, is related to the imaginary state of being. The subjects' inability to accept this split is connected with their insistence on their "idealized mirror image" (Shaw 133) in the desire for wholeness. The violation of the sense of wholeness, according to Lacan, is rooted in the experience of a child, who, after entering the symbolic world of linguistic and social structures, recognizes the difference between the symbol (the word 'mother'), and the real thing (the particular person). It is here, "at the heart of the symbolic" (Shaw 134), that the desire for the lost object (the 'real thing'), in other words, the desire for the other, is born. The 'Real' in Lacan's theory refers to what cannot be presented or imagined, what can be felt as a gap in our effort to complete the meaning, and, in this respect, it becomes sublime.

Lacan's discussion of the links between language and the sublime can be found in his study *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1960), including his interpretation of Sophocles's tragic character of Antigone. Antigone, as a sublime object, both attractive and fearful, whose defiance goes to the limit of signification, points to "the-beyond-of-the signified," in other words, to the "fundamental emptiness" of the gap without which no signification would be possible (Shaw 135). At the same time, the sublime object as an ordinary, unattainable object of desire may contribute to the tension between the sublime and the ridiculous, as it can be seen, for example, in the films of David Lynch. Here, 'the Real' emerges as an insistent and obscure image, reflected in the recurrent, enigmatic motifs implying the heroes' obsessions.

Lacan's concept is, in fact, developed in Slavoj Žižek's analysis of the sublime as an indicator of a traumatic emptiness "at the heart of all forms of symbolization" (Shaw 138). In his study *How to Read Lacan*, Žižek explains Lacan's employment of the Freudian unconscious: "The unconscious is not the preserve of wild drives that have to be tamed by the ego, but the site where a traumatic truth speaks out" (Žižek 2006, 3). In this respect, Lacanian psychoanalysis "confronts individuals with the most radical dimension of human existence," with an "unbearable truth" they have to live with as it emerges into their reality (Žižek 2006, 3–4). Žižek uses the examples of E. A. Poe's "Descent into the Maelström" or Kurtz's reference to horror at the end of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. According to Žižek, the notion of sublimity in these texts is evoked at "the intersection of the Imaginary and the Real," where imagination is stretched to the "very boundary of the unrepresentable," and "the Real" corresponds with the incomprehensible and "the most terrifying

[...] primordial abyss [...] dissolving all identities” (Žižek 2006, 64). The Lacanian sublime, in its link with the disturbing and indecipherable psychic processes, supports the idea that fantasy plays a key role in the development of our attitude to reality.

Drawing on Lacan’s ideas, Slavoj Žižek employs the Kantian definition of the sublime as something vast and powerful in his concept of ideology. Unlike Terry Eagleton, who in his *Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990) connects ideology with the beautiful (the presentation of harmony without dissonances), Žižek’s *Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989) points out that ideology focuses on what cannot be presented but must be presupposed, i.e. hinted at in political or religious discourses so that the notion of collective integrity could be achieved. In other words, ideology requires the “sublime objects” as God, the king, the fuhrer, the race, the party, people, or the obstacles (enemies) like Demon, Jews, the bourgeois, etc. There is a transcendent idea (the divine, the state) and its materialization, or, as Philip Shaw puts it, “the object that embodies the lack that is the Idea” (Christ, the king). In this respect, the concept of the enemy, for example, “the Jew,” becomes a “paranoid construction” (Žižek 1989, 127), rooted in the inability to accept the sublime in the terrifying emptiness of “the Real.” It is the parallel with the idea of the sublime in Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* that allows Žižek to explain why the subjects following a particular ideology cannot usually express in words what they believe in. As he points out, all successful ideologies draw on the sublime objects that should make the subjects realize the inadequacy of their perception and knowledge.⁷

Žižek’s concern with the aesthetics of the sublime involves also his analysis of art, literature, film and music, in particular, of the links between the work of art and the fascination with the repressed object of desire. Concentrating on contemporary art, Žižek observes the relation between the sublime and the ridiculous, connected with the fact that “anything [...] can serve as an indicator of the sublime” (Shaw 142). A detailed discussion of the above mentioned David Lynch can be found in Žižek’s study *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime* (2000), dealing with doubles, immoral and rude father figures, attractive young women as sublime objects, and the female/masculine sexuality based on the Oedipus complex. For Žižek, sublimity is an effect of appearances in finite and sensible forms drawing on contradiction: a material limit that resists sublimation is necessary for the sublime to be evoked.

The revival of the concern with the sublime is reflected also in contemporary analytic philosophy, drawing on formal logic, mathematics and natural sciences.

⁷ An extreme example of this situation can be found in the concluding passages of George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949).

Frederic Jameson, for example, reformulates the sublime in terms of technology: it is the terrifying power of technology that exceeds human abilities.⁸ Tsang Lap Chuen, a Chinese analytic philosopher, in his study *The Sublime: Groundwork towards a Theory* (1998), influenced by the ideas of Freud, Lévi-Strauss and Wittgenstein, connects the sublime experience with liminal situations in life considered to be crucial moments of human experience.

Jos de Mul, a Dutch philosopher discussing the influence of hypermedia on literary theory, deals with the term technological sublime.⁹ Jameson also uses the term “hysterical sublime,” which becomes an important component of his analysis of postmodernism. Rooted in the fascination with the enormous potential of human intellect and in accordance with the Enlightenment discourse, the technological sublime reflects the transformation of power from divine nature to human technology, which is (as it was suggested already by Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* or by Victorian literary reflections on the Industrial Revolution) marked by a similar ambiguity: in the course of the 20th century, enthusiasm for the possibilities offered by new technologies, reflected, for example, in Futurism, has transformed into fear of technology as a hostile force that both controls and threatens us (De Mul 2011).

Drawing on David E. Nye’s study *American Technological Sublime* (1994), de Mul refers to the sublime of factories and nuclear power plants, the sublime of aviation, the sublime of war machinery, and, last but not least, the sublime of the computer: the “combinatorial explosion” echoing Kant’s mathematical sublime, or the manipulative and destructive potential of our inventions as a reconsideration of the dynamical sublime. As Nye observes, since the 19th century in American tradition the enthusiasm for the natural sublime has been gradually replaced by the eagerness about the technological sublime. The 21st century is considered a period which ends the individual’s choice between acceptance and rejection of technology. An attempt to re-examine the sublime against the background of new communication technologies, media and technological artistic production can also be found in the work of the Italian philosopher Mario Costa, following the ideas of James Kirwan. According to Costa, the manifestation of digital technologies influences art and aesthetics in the sense of weakening of the role of the subject in

⁸ See particular articles appear in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* or *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, for example, Anthony Savile’s “Imagination and Aesthetic Value,” in *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 46, No. 3, *British Society of Aesthetics*, July 2006, 248–58.

⁹ The term “technological sublime” was first used by an American historian Perry Miller in his study *The Life of the Mind in America* (1970), linking the technological growth of the early 19th century (the steamboat, the railroad) to the feelings of awe and wonder bordering on religious reverence.

art, as well as in the “suppression of the symbolic and the meaning.”¹⁰

On the other hand, theology scholars, including A.J. Milbank or Elaine Scarry, try to re-examine the notion of the divine in the sublime experience and question the separation of the sublime and the beautiful, linking it to the blockage of the mind in its passage from the sensible to the transcendental. Pointing to the medieval and Patristic periods, as well as to Platonism and Neoplatonism, they try to revive the links between the beautiful and the divine, between the limited and the unlimited: the unlimited could be considered as “an unimaginable infinite fullness of beautiful form” (Shaw 151), while sublimity could be perceived as a mode of beauty. For Milbank, the influence of the Kantian sublime results in “the divine emptied of all positive content” (Shaw 151), which, according to him, reflects the growing influence of Protestantism in the Western tradition with its selfless, disinterested form of love or worship instead of passion.

Nevertheless, as Jean-Luc Nancy observes, the sublime, in all its contexts, implies an intense experience and the feeling of desire together with the notions of movement and passage. Furthermore, it is through the sublime that the beautiful, paradoxically, retains its quality of beauty. Without the disturbing character of the sublime, the beautiful would be in constant danger of sliding into the merely “agreeable,” corresponding with personal liking or taste. To use Nancy’s words, “in the beautiful as satisfied or satisfying, the beautiful is finished – and art along with it” (Nancy 33). The role of the beautiful, according to Nancy, consists in the limit, in a place of equivocation but also of exchange, between the agreeable and the sublime, “between enjoyment and joy.” It is in the departure from itself into the sublime that the beautiful can attain “its proper quality” (Nancy 33–34).

In conclusion, the sublime permeates the history of our culture as a variety of “emotional configurations” responding to the changing social, philosophical, religious and aesthetic concepts, and defying any final definition (De Mul 2011). As with the phenomenon of Romanticism discussed by Martin Procházka in his analysis of M. H. Abrams, each period can be said to offer an opportunity to create a new space, and a new “interpretative frame,” for the study of the sublime (Abrams 363). It is the ability of the sublime to question the nature of frames that turns it into a constant challenge open to new interpretations and entering various fields of research. In the area of literature, it supports comparative and interdisciplinary approaches, enlarging the potential of the textual analysis.

¹⁰ Cf. Costa, Mario. *Phenomenology of New Tech Arts*. Artmedia: University of Salerno, 2005; or “Paysages du sublime.” *Revue d’Esthétique* 39. Paris, 2001, 125–133.

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