

Disambiguating the Sublime and the Historicity of the Concept

Vrasidas Karalis  
*University of Sydney*

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**Vrasidas Karalis,**  
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**Abstract:** In his article "Disambiguating the Sublime and the Historicity of the Concept" Vrasidas Karalis explores the notion of sublime or sublimity as the field of colliding signifiers and of experiential frameworks in conflict. Instead of treating the traditional notion as a structural element of style of ideology, he analyses it from the point of its contextual validation and its very historicity: what makes sublimity emerge is the extra-lingual unease, the existential dysphoria of the world outside the text, as refracted through specific works of art. Such dysphoria is expressed through ungrammatical language or/and through the attempt in specific moments in history to reclaim a "totalising vision of experience." Through examples from various cultures Karalis addresses the difference of sublime perceptions that we see around the world. Ultimately, Karalis returns to Pseudo-Longinus's *Peri Hypsous* in order to explore sublimity as an expression of cultural and existential othering as an attempt to foreground the innovative differentiation in experience.

**Vrasidas KARALIS**

### **Disambiguating the Sublime and the Historicity of the Concept**

The main premise of the present study is that the sublime, or sublimity, is not a structural quality in any artefact, specific arrangement of words, or refined selection of poetic diction; on the contrary, it is an extra-textual framing strategy, a set of values superimposed by consciousness in its attempt to compare unknown configurations and localize the unknowability of certain types of experience. As such the sublime is not an intrinsic value of the artwork; and in that respect Immanuel Kant's conclusion that "sublimity is not contained in anything in nature, but only in our mind, insofar as we can become conscious of being superior to nature within us and thus also to nature outside us" (Kant, *Critique of Judgement* 147) is the beginning and probably the end of this discussion. Being a mental category, the sublime is not of the order of the transcendental qualities of space and time; it is a historically defined category of experiencing and interpreting objective realities which arises in the mind when conceptual paradigms collide with each other in periods of extreme cultural transition and re-orientation. During such historical periods of transition, an existing order of things and values is gradually undermined, dislocated, and transformed by different forms of perception and diverse patterns of ordering experience. The form that transition takes as representation is one of a simultaneous juxtapositions of contradictory opposites, which seem irreconcilable and pointing towards experiences of different order. The sublime then appears as the only form of representing experiences of antinomic nature, superimposing the absent on the present and the past experience on the immediacy of intense "newness."

Thus, the sublime emerges when taxonomies collide and their collision leads to perceptual neutralization; the experience is immediate and deep as perception but the conceptual framework remains semantically inert in a state of exegetical *aphonia*. The sublime as rhetoric emerged in specific moments in intellectual and literary history, especially when there were deep tensions within an established system of evaluating experience as a rival worldview attempted to question and appropriate its legitimacy. Its ambiguity therefore can be located in the instability it entails or encodes and furthermore in its very historicity. The historical moment of "sublime" artworks indicates intense conflict of meaning, interpretation, and exegesis. So the sublime is always ambiguous since it encapsulates a moment in history when the present dominant perception is confronted with its own limitations, creating thus a cluster of meanings which can be interpreted in multiple ways. This could also lead to semantic nihilism or relativism which means that the artwork is then considered as dehistoricized and abstracted from its conditions of production. But sublimity transcends this by establishing an implied hierarchy of significations: sublimity indicates a process of gradual ascent from simplicity to complexity, from singularity to plurality, and finally from a universe of individual experience to a pluriverse of totalizing experiences.

From the *Iliad* to *Paradise Lost* and from thence to the multiple expressions of sublimity in the ordinary experience of politics that we witness in the post-Enlightenment centuries, we observe an opening-up of the sublime to the democratic vision of life as the endless interplay of immanence and transcendence, of the immediacy of experience and of its constant deferral or postponement. The sublime emerges as the conflict of ambiguities within the perceiving subject intensifies and expands the horizons of meaning. Discussions about the sublime took place in the transitional period from the Hellenistic world to Christianity, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries during the transition from the medieval mentality to the new scientific humanism of the modern era; in the late eighteenth century especially during the passing from classicism to Romanticism; and more recently, during the constant juxtaposition of the Western aesthetic tradition with that of Oriental countries or of indigenous populations.

In each period, discourse about sublimity introduced new dimensions of appreciating the experience or framing the actual object of study as reflection. However sublimity itself arose as a mode of experience and classification only during moments of friction between cultural paradigms, especially when conditions of producing and representing cultural objects were undergoing a radical osmosis in their structure and function. Through such osmosis new cultural paradigms and forms of rhetoric

emerged; so the sublime is not simply an aesthetic principle associated with terror, solitude, emptiness, magnitude, or the infinite. It is, on the contrary, the strategy which describes the fall of dominant discursive practices by infusing its established symbols with new meaning and function. The feelings of awe, terror, or ecstasy attributed to the sublime are in their essence nostalgia for a lost self-sufficiency, and at the same time the opening up of an accepted idiom to the arbitrariness of new experience. In periods where there is a dominant crisis of representation the sublime emerges as a category of classification intended to name the *unknowability* of the emerging order, as the new experience enters the mental, visual, and verbal space within a given culture. So there are various forms of sublime according to the spatial and temporal potentialities of each culture. In the Hindu cultures it could be expressed through the moral reflection in the *Bhagavat Gita* whereas in Japan through the allusive density of haiku poems.

This can be clearly seen in Milton's grand style, in the long poems of Wordsworth and the other Romantics, or, most recently, in the appropriation of the classical style by James Joyce's prose or Nikos Kazantzakis's re-invention of the main narrative hero of classical tradition, Ulysses. The sublime signals the unknowable dimensions within the text as a constant reminder of a fallen self-sufficiency and of the perspective of a new synthesis which has not yet been verbalized. Historically also the attempts to couple or juxtapose the sublime to the beautiful have failed to frame the former within the acculturated habits of the latter. Edmund Burke compared them in a very indicative fashion: "For sublime objects are vast in their dimensions, beautiful ones comparatively small; beauty should be smooth, and polished; the great, rugged and negligent; beauty should shun the right line, yet deviate from it insensibly; the great in many cases loves the right line, and when it deviates, it often makes a strong deviation; beauty should not be obscure; the great ought to be dark and gloomy; beauty should be light and delicate; the great ought to be solid and even massive" (Burke 113). Burke and the pre-critical Kant perceived the sublime in constant juxtaposition to the dominant value of their day, which they called beauty or the beautiful; and beauty was associated by them with an established order of things correlating with a dominant and hierarchically structured social order from which the imaginary drew its morphology.

Within the historical perception of the eighteenth century, sublimity destabilized the circular sense of certainty framed by such a concept of beauty; beauty as a confirmation of an existing hierarchy of values and not as a rupture with its valuation practices. That became painfully understood in the eighteenth century when the "universalism" of the European Enlightenment had to face the growing differences between European societies let alone the challenge from the "savages" in the "new" countries. The pre-critical Kant indicated: "All these savages have little feeling for the beautiful in moral understanding, and the generous forgiveness of an injury, which is at once noble and beautiful, is completely unknown as a virtue among the savages, but rather is disdained as a miserable cowardice. Valor is the greatest merit of the savage and the revenge his sweetest bliss. The remaining natives of this part of the world show few traces of a mental character disposed to the finer feelings, and an extraordinary apathy constitutes the mark of this type of race" (Kant, *Observations* 112). The association between beauty and goodness that dominated post-Platonic philosophy linked specific moral ideas to artistic expressions; the lack of them in other cultures created that sense of rejection and inaugurated a process of "othering" these traditions, as unable to decipher their own very complex societal values. Kant's later project, however, transcended his own youthful arrogance and in his third *Critique of Judgement* the association between morality and beauty will introduce the destabilizing factor of the sublime as a mental category to indicate those elements of feeling, structure, and representation that couldn't be accommodated to the dominant horizons for the production of meaning.

During this period of colonial expansion, European value systems were confronted by the invisibility of certain representations, especially of natural phenomena. Yet, were not such landscapes or natural phenomena "sublime" before being characterized as such? When the lonely explorer gazed at the vast immensities of the Americas, he was constantly comparing them to the domesticated and measurable landscape of Europe, a landscape laden with history, human intervention, and religious references. Looking at the new world and its pre-historicized landscape and without any sacred events to be associated with its presence exceeded the capacity of the European newcomer to cognitively perceive it and position himself within it; so the landscapes were "othered" and were deemed "sub-

lime." The romantics exoticized natural experience by infusing landscapes with the desire for organic unity, with the paradise lost of pre-lapsarian organic relatedness. The artist remained alone in front of the "grand spectacle" of nature.

Hegel's rejection of the sublime as a category was due to his suspicion towards what he thought to be irrational, "an abstract universal which never coincides with itself in anything determinate" (483). This defined the suspicious attitude towards the sublime that we see during the nineteenth century when it was psychologized and transposed into the great soul of a man or in the great thoughts of the same man. John Ruskin and Matthew Arnold "refined" the sublime so that it befitted "great men" more than aesthetic experience as such. The indeterminate element that Hegel noticed was a very important filter through which the sublime as an othering praxis emerged after the collapse of Romanticism. The sublime indicated an existential surplus, the excess of being irreducible to the exegetical norms of an era or the signifying practices of a culture. Hence if we want to understand the sublime as a framing method for difference we must return to the founder of the discourse, Longinus. Questions are posed when there is something missing; therefore let us contextualize: today the issue of the sublime becomes pertinent again because of the process of intermingling high and popular cultures that we witness in all spheres of artistic production. The question that arises from such intermingling bears on how we understand or appreciate works of art from previous ages, namely works whose aesthetic values are encapsulated within the generic tradition of the so-called "grand style" and of its philosophical underpinning called the "sublime" or "sublimity." Today the sublime is a contested notion, associated with antiquarian, aristocratic, and phallogocentric artistic forms that remained the privilege of the *haute bourgeoisie*, based on the discourse of subjection and the representational codes of subordination. However this remains an aestheticist reading of the sublime as a mainly literary category, without cognitive validity or ethical implications.

Defining the sublime is one of the greatest and most misunderstood ambiguities in aesthetics. Since it was first detected and analyzed in late antiquity, the sublime as an aesthetic category and as a style of writing has evolved into one of the most crucial ideas within the cultural debates of the western world. Certainly, this does not mean that the sublime is simply a European idea. And it also does not mean that other cultural traditions like the Indian, the Arabic, the Chinese, or the Japanese have not developed their own sense of the sublime in similar or analogous ways. But in order to understand both the meaning of the concept and its cultural significance we must try to delineate the history of the notion or, more specifically, to historicize the different notions encapsulated by this word. The way that the sublime was first represented by Homer in his *Iliad* in particular is completely different from the sublime as practised by the more self-aware and more communicatively active society of Aeschylus and Sophocles (historically speaking, of course the epic of Gilgamesh is the first written record in which "sublime" images and "ideas" have been recorded). By the same token Virgil's sublime and "sweet" style is completely new and represents a novelty in comparison to the rest of Greco-Roman aesthetics, thus inaugurating the western European tradition of self-conscious literary writing — indeed a process which had already started with the poets of Alexandria and specifically with Callimachus's self-referential style. And after this time, the Neoplatonic challenge of dematerialized experience — continued to a large degree by Platonic Christianity — raised the level of awareness to a critical point so that a new conceptualization of the sublime was necessary. The friction between the old and the new contributed to the emergence of this new principle of describing literary experience. Longinus uses examples from orators, historians, poets, and religious writers in order to locate the site of expression from which such a principle can draw its semantics. Today we may think of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* or Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* as sublime but for Longinus, Martin Luther King's speech "I have a dream," or Winston Churchill's "We shall fight them in the beaches..." would have also been appropriate examples of a sublime situation since their sublimity was not only a matter of articulation but of the historical moment it encapsulated and of the social energy it condensed. They are sublime because there can be no ambiguity about their significance at the historical moment of their articulation. The uniqueness and the extreme situation they expressed had nothing to do with Luther King or Churchill as individuals, themselves conventional and frustratingly mainstream. Their sublimity can be found in the then unknowable consequences of what followed what they said: World

War II and the Civil Rights movement as grand rituals of social renewal through sacrifice, death, and atonement.

In late antiquity when cultures collided and a process of gradual syncretism began, the short and extremely important treatise *Peri Hypsous* attributed to a certain Longinus appeared, and the actual practice of the sublime was translated into the language of literary and philosophical concepts. Ever since the sublime as a notion points in the direction of "ecstasy," as opposed to what classical tragedy called catharsis. Is, therefore, the sublime a psychological or a philosophical category of interpreting a literary experience? If catharsis is the virtually therapeutic effect that Aristotle (and, as a matter of fact, Sigmund Freud) posited to be the ultimate outcome of art, what is then the meaning of "ecstasy" as propounded by Longinus who declares that "grandeur produces ecstasy rather than persuasion in the hearer" (I, 4), adding that "It is our nature to be elevated and exalted by true sublimity. Filled with joy and pride, we come to believe that we have created what we have only heard" (Longinus 7, 2)? Is the purpose of the sublime the complete and self-extinguishing absorption into the greater collective myths, the transcendent reality of ideas or indeed the godhead? Or perhaps the sublime generates the psychosomatic continuum to which contemporary neurosciences attribute the functionality of imagination? Is it perhaps a kind of Jungian collective archetype indicating immersion into the inherited memory of symbols beyond individual existence?

Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant claimed that the sublime, wherever encountered, creates a meaningful continuum beyond words and offers the human mind a sense of completion and integration in which it is lacking. Longinus paved the way for medieval art and the Christian sublime as expressed by Gothic architecture, twelfth-century Byzantine mosaics, and frescoes, and can be easily detected in the background of Renaissance art of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, with its hypertrophy in Michelangelo's overcrowded ceilings. But it would be totally inappropriate to discuss the ambiguity of the sublime by seeing its variations in a purely chronological order, although this could be extremely useful for specific purposes. Studying the notion of the sublime means to confront a substantial search within the European cultural tradition and comprehend the validity of its articulation today. The professionalization of literary studies and their restriction within academe has gravely contributed to the limiting of the understanding of the concept to a rather esoteric cryptogram or even an aristocratic vice. Various forms of the sublime in opera (such as Händel's *Mithridate*, Mozart's *Don Giovanni* or Cherubini's *Medea*) or in the cinema (as in Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* or Kurosawa's *Run*) have remained rather obscure and highly personal visions of art, framing a problematic beyond the demands of the market economy or the exigencies of cultural vogues. Furthermore, beyond the artistic and artificial sublime there exists today the real sublimity of everyday life, of unexplored geography in nature, of the unexpected and terrifying moments of history. For example, the fall of the Berlin wall on television was not sublime despite the great sense of liberation it generated. Freedom, as explicated by Hegel, is never sublime because in all its forms it is the natural condition of being; natural law differs from ethical law, which is sublime and great because it represents pure consciousness in action and forces individuals into making moral choices. Only the "unexpected" and the "awesome," the tragically disastrous with its magnitude and its consequences could be so overwhelming that the whole world would fix their eyes on it again and again. The image of the two airplanes thrusting themselves against the Twin Towers in New York did have something of the terrifying sublimity or the sublime terror that inaugurates a totally new age. The spectacle of two monumental buildings collapsing had in itself something of the grandeur of a falling empire in the same manner as when Alaric broke down the gates of Rome and entered the city with the clear awareness that he was starting a new age. In more recent theory, Jacques Derrida in his *The Truth in Painting* stressed that the sublime depends on "superelevation": "very high, absolutely high, higher than any comparable height, more than comparative, a size not measurable in height, the sublime is *superelevation* beyond itself" (*The Truth* 122). If super-elevating structures could be aesthetically expressed then the real postmodern sublime is accurately described by Barnett Newman in his essay, "The Sublime is Now," where he claims that "the sublime consists of an effort to destroy form; where form can be formless" (171). This is the temptation already discussed by Kant in his third *Critique of Judgement* but, having today the picture of the Twin Towers in mind we must re-think sublimity as a state of total disintegration replaced by the nostalgic memory of completeness amidst ruins and disaster (in an example from popular culture,

the Statue of Liberty as it stands today cannot be considered as sublime; however, it is sublime when seen "buried up to her waist, her tablet battered and her torch fractured" [Woodward 1] in the closing scene of the 1968 film *Planet of the Apes*): its state in ruins superimposes the new quality of its historical predicament that envelops the statue with the sublimity of a ruined civilization.)

So the sublime is again an active comparison between the here and the there, between the now and the past, the whole and its ruins. In such a comparative understanding the mind that experienced both presence and absence, euphoria and dysphoria, joy and loss, lives in a constant "shaking of foundations" created by the simultaneity of opposite emotions. The cognitive translation of such contradictions articulates itself as moments of paradoxical opposition; however the aesthetic function of paradox does not "other" the new element that constitutes experience. Today we tend to isolate the sublime as an old story narrated by the tragic mortality of Gilgamesh, the savage beauty of Homer, the mellifluous sensibility of Virgil, the infernal hallucinations of Dante, the tempestuous pessimism of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Milton's demoniac grand style, Goethe's uncontrollable historical hallucinogenics in the second part of *Faust*, or James Joyce's verbal insanity in *Finnegan's Wake*. But anyone who sees the atomic bomb falling on Hiroshima, the eyes of the Holocaust survivors, the assassination of J.F. Kennedy, the white skulls in Pol Pot's killing fields, and finally the events of September 11, is immediately filled with the strongest and the most patent feelings of the sublime, awe and astonishment, and in a strange twist of psychology, the Aristotelian pity and fear (in the original *eleos* [empathy] and *fobos* [wonderment]). Modern sublime is a synthesis of emotions that cannot be distinguished or separated: the immediacy of the present as active reality makes the category of the sublime a fundamental locus of convergence for disparate and incongruous feelings.

For the sublime is not a matter of style or performance or appearance; it is primarily something that collides with the imaginary complacent universe constructed by a dominant taste in order to maintain its stability. Such brutal events represent the end of an era and the death of any aesthetic orthodoxy. In exactly the same way that there could be no tragedy after the Holocaust, there can be no wonderment at the starry heavens after September 11. The sublime sight of numberless stars on the night sky that made David celebrate god's grandeur and Pascal realize his insignificance looks now extremely dangerous and sinister. The same sight that made Immanuel Kant understand the universality of moral law makes us today shiver with premonitions of evil presences, of fear and danger. This is the universe of a Gnostic god who rules and reigns through terror, horror, and without pity. And yet is there no sublimity in the claustrophobic universe depicted in Scott's *Blade Runner* and described by Philip K. Dick's story, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* There is an awe-inspiring quality in the presence of evil even when it can be considered banal: evil decenters conscience and throws it into a vertigo of confusion that itself attracts and fascinates. Yet does the state of sublimity ever generate some sort of empathic union with perpetrators of evil? Can evil be in any case sublime? Stalin radiated a captivating sinister aura of evil remoteness which could never be deemed sublime; on the contrary, like Hitler or Eichmann, it was his absolute ordinariness that made him so evil through his spectacular inability to make moral choices and take personal responsibility. "Satan" is in most cases a comic figure, maybe a lonely one, an inner demon of personal phobias in front of the complex realities of everyday life; as a symbol, Satan could never be sublime, as Milton would have liked, because that would indicate semantic implosion, an introverted consciousness unable to establish relationships or impose meaningful projects.

The sublime presupposes an innate sense of benevolence and compassionate goodness. As the first theorist of the sublime noticed that "the lawgiver of the Jews, no ordinary man — for he understood and expressed God's power in accordance with its worth — writes at the beginning of his Laws: 'God said' — now what? — 'Let there be light,' and there was light; 'Let there be earth' and there was earth" (Longinus 9, 9). This is not simply effective style but creativity in action. The reader feels immediately the strength of vision and the magnificence of conception when we hear that several words can create universes. The creative word has a soothing and elevating effect with its fecundity and euphoria. The same can be said for Nietzsche's battle cry "we have killed God — you and I ... Gods, too decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him" (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* 181).

These excerpts are perfect examples of an active imagination in its most intense effectiveness. They both illustrate a creative energy that confronts the mind of the reader with an affective re-conditioning of its being. In the first instance, the image of an omnipotent being acts as the source of all beings in a state of creative illumination. In the second the same being is manifest in its complete disappearance and dissolution. We are very pleased indeed to know that this world was created and very relieved to be assured that the creator is now out of our way. The sublime is the benevolent source of all moral responsibility; and as such it abides in conscious moral choices. In another example Paul says: "and to keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to harass me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me; but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness," I will all the more gladly boast of my weakness, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weakness, insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12: 7-10). This is probably the most revealing articulation of the sublime in Christianity; because in its essence it contradicts the triumphalist perception of moral superiority and dominance established by organized imperialized Christianity. The last sentence epitomizes and brings to culmination the paradox of the Christian message: weaknesses are triumphs; strength comes from calamities; even god's power perfects itself in weakness. How can we interpret this when we believe in the omnipotence of the divine? Paul's sublime states the reversal of all powers, a vision too terrifying to be pursued and awesome enough to be asked for. In opposition to this and, strangely enough, its consummation, one must read Charles Darwin's final paragraph from the *Origin of Species*:

It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us. These laws, taken in the largest sense, being Growth with Reproduction; inheritance which is almost implied by reproduction; Variability from the indirect and direct action of the external conditions of life, and from use and disuse; a Ratio of Increase so high as to lead to a Struggle for Life, and as a consequence to Natural Selection, entailing Divergence of Character and the Extinction of less-improved forms. Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved (600-01).

The sublime here does not simply emerge from Darwin's hesitant prose; it emerges through the implicit comparison that the mind draws with the dominant version of Genesis. As in Longinus, the "let there be light" was compared to the Platonic demiurge's command "let there be order," so in Darwin's vision the Christian creation is implicitly compared with the immense complexity of an ongoing creative life that envelops the reader and its future, and forces the mind to confront the sublimity of such situation. Finally, by putting the verb at the end of his sentence and of the whole book, Darwin created the grammatical fantasy of an open-ended process which makes the reader an active participant in an unknown future. Therein lies the sublime. At this point we meet Kant: "taste," he stated, "is a faculty for judging of the sensible illustration of moral ideas" (*Critique of Judgement* 202). But then if this is true, there must always be a moral presupposition in everything human and, even more so, a moral implication in everything done by humanity. According to Kant, against this moral background or ultimate reality imagination builds its own ideals which guide humans to reflection and self-understanding. According to him there is only great art, essentially ancient Greek art and nothing else. Kant wrote his third *Critique of Judgement* as an exposition of his aesthetics and yet he never refers to any kind of art or artistic form throughout the whole book. Nevertheless, he thought of the sublime as a negative sign of the inadequacy of imaginative power in relation to ideas of reason (Kant, *Critique of Judgement* 26). He associates such unrepresentability with the feelings of awe, astonishment, and terror that we have already found in Longinus and Burke but he adds that dimension of "formlessness"

which generates the feeling of the sublime with its numinosity leading thus to a complete failure of language to encompass the condition: Moses's god is formless, so is Plato's demiurge and Darwin's evolution.

More recently, Jean-François Lyotard tried to postmodernize the Kantian sublime by analyzing modernist attempts at presenting the unrepresentable. He stresses that "the sublime is that which is subjectively felt by thought as differend" (131) and yet refutes the Kantian belief that it culminates in a moral universe by pointing out that "the admixture of fear and exaltation that constitutes sublime feeling is insoluble, irreducible to moral feeling" (127). Furthermore, he claims that "there is no subjectivity that experiences pure feelings; rather, it is the pure feeling that promises a subject" (20). The promised subject is indeed one of the creative energies of the sublime as a concept. But yet one has the impression that Lyotard's analytic of the sublime (as indeed of art as such) is limited to a Eurocentric perception of artistic production, as was indeed Kant himself. It does not take in consideration the Buddhist sublime stressing the void as the generative principle of everything. The Buddhist dichotomy between "everything exists" and "nothing exists" has given birth to Acharya Nāgārjuna's vision in his *Verses from the Center* culminating in his extremely "postmodern" dilemmas: "If there were a problem, / how could I be rid of it? / Who can destroy what is real? / If there were no problem, / how could I be rid of it? Who can destroy the unreal?" (qtd. in Batchelor 152). In Basho's haiku the unreality of human questions is depicted with the meaningless sound of a frog: "The old pond — a frog jumps in. Blop!!!" (qtd. in Batchelor 152): "the origin of the Buddhist sublime lies not in the awesome power of the natural world but in the tragic excess of human life" (Batchelor 48). In the West European tradition such tragic excess of human life has led to a contraction of meaning within language, an excess of action decentered from any codes of meaningful representation. The Kantian "formlessness" has completely taken over the concept of the sublime and, in a paradoxical manner, defying its own presuppositions, has liberated sublimity from the limitations of cultural conditioning. Therefore these are some provisional conclusions about the sublime: We can't define or even determine what it is, but we can detect when it arises as an evaluative code within a given system of artistic perception and production. According to most theorists, the notion of the sublime is closely associated with the philosophical concepts of transcendence and ecstasy, concepts closely linked to a religious metaphorical language of union and participation in the divine other. This concept can be easily reduced to the prefix "trans" and can be thus interpreted as indicating the articulation of an experience outside the perceptual systems of the speaking subject. We can therefore link the concept of the sublime with a condition of intensified "trans-culturality" and argue that it emerges as a dimension in reading and writing when different cultural codes of representation confront each other and collide. The sublime emerges as self-awareness when opposite systems of representation co-exist and gradually converge. We cannot perceive the sublime simply on the basis of one cultural system and its internal differentiations except as a rhetorical category. On the contrary, it is a trans-cultural principle of systematizing, since it frames the sudden expansion of perception and its changes in order to inaugurate the semantic appropriation of the unknown and the unidentifiable.

The sublime can be perceived only because of its epiphanic phenomenology which destabilizes dominant patterns of representation and defamiliarizes the reader with the accepted schemes of articulation. Instead of claiming that the sublime indicates limits and liminal conditions we can argue that it creates an emotional *aporia* by generating a post-linguistic affective perception. Both limits and *aporia* indicate the end of networks of signifying practices and foreground still uncharted semiotic territories. In this aspect, we must probably return to Herbert Marcuse's concept of the negative character of creative culture in order to describe the effect of the sublime on contemporary readers. It simply fragments certainties and opens fissures to the existing culture of kataphatic complacency. By fragmenting the systemic coherence of the dominant forms of representation without replacing them with other coherent systems of dominance and alienation, the sublime articulates silence and gaps and frames the aesthetics of discomfort. If contemporary art has lost its sting and has become another commodity that further commodifies itself, the sublime as seen in movies, the news, and nature programs liberates the sense of creative competition with nature and therefore within society, intensifying moral dilemmas and leading to existential choices. Instead of looking at the sublime as a hegemonic strategy for domination we must re-discover it as a disruptive force employing dominant imagery and

ideology in order to completely and totally falsify it (as has been the case with Milton's *Paradise Lost*). The sublime emerges when the fallen reclaim language and struggle to articulate, or even explain, the unknowable state of their fallenness: Adam and Eve in paradise can not be considered as being sublime: but after their fall, the sweat of their face and toils of their body add the quality of sublimity in their cruel predicament.

Finally, the most important effect that the new sublime has is the ethics of its actuality. After the storm of deconstruction, we must not be afraid again to admit that when we are engaged in a dialogue with literature our cognitive and moral faculties are not totally suspended. On the contrary, in Beckett's nihilist paradise, Solzhenitsyn's dehumanizing archipelago, Primo Levi's sinister darkness, or even in Pynchon's verbal labyrinths, there exists a strong element of mythopoetic fulfilment that essentially affects and conditions the mind of its audience. In other words, the sublime creates a sense of an integrating vision to the perceiving subject which goes beyond words and cannot be conceptualized appropriately; the audience is left with the sense of awe and astonishment which has been the main characteristic of the sublime since conscious reflection started within the mental processes that created the necessity for a communicative form. Here we find again the essential ambiguity of the concept that emerges in an epiphanic manner through the most insignificant of things created or found when seen against the chaotic multiplicity of their historic background. Intentionality always comes after the recognition of the *aporia* we feel in front of such ambiguity. In a largely forgotten essay, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Simone de Beauvoir stresses that ambiguity means that "meaning is never fixed, and that it must be constantly won" and continues: "it is because man's condition is ambiguous that he seeks, through failure and outrageousness, to save his existence" (Beauvoir 129). The sublime has always been a specific dimension of perceiving and interpreting the world as something to be won and as a place where existence can be saved. If this is a humanistic reply, based on logocentric strategies, we think that it would be good to revisit the territory of critical reflection in order to fully realize the historicity of the sublime and the ethics of its presence in our daily experience.

In 1948, Newman stated in his essay already mentioned that "the failure of European Art to achieve the sublime is due to this blind desire to exist inside the reality of sensation (the object world, whether distorted or pure) and to build an art within the framework of pure plasticity (the Greek ideal of beauty, whether that plasticity be a romantic active surface, or a classic stable one). In other words, modern art, caught without a sublime content, was incapable of creating a new sublime image" (173). If therefore there is something missing in contemporary art, it is because sublimity and the sublime have both found refuge in history and can be seen everywhere except in art proper, which has been surrendered to self-negation. Probably today semantic ellipsis has replaced the representational excesses of modernity; and somehow the contemporary sublime abides in the very incommensurability between the representational certainties and the un-representable newness of experience which can be imaginatively captured and articulated only when exposed to the alterity of another gaze. Perhaps the uniformity of the modern world and the tendency to universalize patterns of expression and forms of understanding has transposed sublimity from unknowability to incomprehensibility, precisely because of its obviousness. The immediacy of experience makes the perceiving subject question its own understanding of reality: such *aporia* can be resolved only through the other gaze; only when looked at through the eyes of another cultural reality the sublime emerges as a category of structuring experience.

The last part of Longinus's treatise *Peri Hypsous* has been overlooked in scholarship since it advocates in the final analysis a moral understanding of sublimity (Shaw 18). Yet Longinus tried to contextualize the *aphoria* of his contemporary life and the metaphors he employed are of extreme relevance to our understanding of sublimity. "I wonder," he says, "what destroys great minds is not the peace of the world, but the unlimited war which lays hold on our desires, and all the passions which beset and ravage modern life" (Longinus 44, 6). What Longinus stresses here is the historicity of the *anthropeios physis*, of human nature; moreover the political *douleia* (despotic power) that distorts the ability to manifest the *psychika megethe* (natural capabilities) and allow them to speak in public without fear (*appareiaston*) in conditions of freedom. Political corruption of human life destroys human nature as naturality and leads to the inability to comprehend moral values or the moral significance of the other: "Amid such pestilential corruption of human life, how can we expect that there should be left to us any

free, uncorrupt judgement of great things of permanent value?" (Longinus 44, 9). Such questions culminate the treatise, as the text ends abruptly, and express what was always in the back of the mind of the person who wrote it: that in its function through words, ecstasy, and elevation, the sublime ultimately works on an ethical level for subjectivity so that the individual can recognize in the specificity of the text the missing wholeness of its consciousness. It essentially moralizes human beings because of its liberating potential. The most crucial element in understanding the sublime is its ethical dimension because it makes readers confront their own historical conditioning. So far from being an *agon* between texts or "rivalry between authors" (Fry 188) it is in its essence the articulation of the missing or imagined unity, which can be seen when the subject compares itself to the other. The confrontation redeems the individual from the constraints of its historical realities and therefore transforms it into an agent of moral self-understanding. The sublime moralizes individual conscience by infusing it with an ethical perspective and self-understanding where freedom and *parrhesia* exist as preconditions of the act of creation and point to the act of an imaginative self-institution. *Ekstasis* means the triumph of conscience over necessity. Language (literature) paves the way for the moment of actual presence in history when the individual becomes able to create "genuine activities proper to human nature" and not "spurious images and imitations of persuasion" (Longinus 39, 3). So for Longinus the sublime is the moment of the full actualization of human nature through action in history as an opening up of conscience to the realm of the potential.

In these terms, the sublime means essentially self-awareness, *gnothi seauton*, the knowledge of moral empowerment for creative disruption with historical necessity. When the subject sees or reads of the missing unity, by comparing and contrasting its own specific situation to one experienced by others before, then the mental category of the sublime emerges in order to bridge the lacunae within the incomplete or unintegrated conscience. The "distance," the "infinity" or the "terror" have been attributed to the sublime through "despotic readings" and not from the point of its democratizing potential; the sublime situates the subject within time and space, and incites it to form unities, to understand totalities and to act on its own conscience as well as on its society. The historicity of the concept for Longinus bears the ring of deep pessimism, an almost stoic surrender to negativity. But still the person who wrote the treatise ends the existing text with the promise to write a "commentary" (*hypomnema*) on the "passions" (*pathe*) which have "a very important place among the constituents of literature in general and sublimity in particular" (Longinus 44, 12), a project in which probably the subject would have to confront its own self-constitution; the *pathe* (passions) express the needs and changes within conscience, the creativity in its receptive and generative dimension. Rudolf Arnheim thought of art as a "call for structure," creating a sense of equilibrium, which yet does not stop the regenerative forces of human conscience. "But art," he concludes, "is not meant to stop the stream of life. Within a narrow span of duration and space the work of art concentrates a view of the human condition; and sometimes it marks the steps of progression, just as a man climbing the dark stairs of a medieval tower assures himself by the changing sights glimpsed through its narrow windows that he is getting somewhere after all" (Arnheim 56). The sublime is the mental state of being at its most unpredictable, at the point where one never imagined oneself to be and yet finds oneself confronted with the act of imaginatively constructing a missing formal *Gestalt* that will help its navigation through the fluidity of experience and the indeterminism of meaning. When Sigmund Freud observed that "where the Id is the Ego shall be" ("wo Es ist, soll Ich werden") (Freud 81), he pointed to the process of continuous elucidation of temporal conscience in its most intense historicity: the sublime emerges as the gradual elucidation of existential self-awareness. Its immensity and its colossal character lies precisely in the fact that self-awareness can never be a "lived experience"; the sublime conceptualizes the tragic character of human knowledge and the tension between the knower and the known. We know things, nature, and reality, and yet the knowing I is beyond understanding and cannot be an object of cognition. In such a great chasm and divide, we build all our theories about the experience of sublimity.

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Author's profile: Vrasidas Karalis teaches modern Greek literature at the University of Sydney. His interests in research include philosophy, aesthetics, and modern Greek, Byzantine, and New Testament studies and he has published numerous articles and books in these fields, including *Essay on Andreas Aggelakis* (2003) and the collected volume *Martin Heidegger and the Aesthetics of Living* (2008). Currently, Karalis is working on the aesthetics of Greek cinema. E-mail: <[vrasidas.karalis@sydney.edu.au](mailto:vrasidas.karalis@sydney.edu.au)>.