

The Egalitarian Sublime: a Process Philosophy

Chapter 1

Introduction [draft]

We call sublime all that is supposed to be the very best. What if the best is the worst? What if the best leads to inequality and exploitation? This book criticises the sublime, in its long history and recent turn back to sublime art and emotions. Demonstrating that the sublime has always led to inequality, through critical interpretations of Burke, Kant, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer and Žižek, and repudiations of recent environmental and technological sublimes, the book argues for an anarchist sublime: multiple, self-destructive and temporary, opposed to any idea of a highest value to be shared by all, but imposed on the powerless.

The sublime has always been a sign for the highest values, yet definitions of the sublime have also had social, cultural and political effects resulting in harsh and persistent inequalities. This is because, in historical cases, the way sublimity leads to superior values also implies a wide variety of distinctions around them. These distinctions entrench inequality in arriving at the highest. So a manner of searching for the most elevated values turns out to arrive at some of the worst political consequences.

Historically, and in recent thought, there is always the hope that superior values associated with the sublime will be long lasting. This is a dangerous wish, when the values and ways to them turn out to be divisive and damaging. Yet there have been no instances of the sublime free of this damage. Even when the aim is to share the highest values universally, the definitions of universal and of the sublime still retain their unequal effects.

Even when guided by the purest of intentions, the process going from the production of the sublime by a few, to its imposition on the many, makes the aim of universal access to the best impossible.

In response, I will claim that if there is to be an egalitarian sublime, it will have to be anarchic: multiple, creative, self-critical and self-destructive. It will have to work against systems giving rise to inequality, including those versions of the sublime implicated in unequal values. The sublime should also be subservient to a politics of equality, rather than a foundation for them. This is a sceptical version of the sublime. Since the sublime and values have always turned out badly, we should only follow the sublime and adopt values warily, looking to the decay and violence in them, and discarding them for others as they fail us. The sublime is only truly equal when it knows itself to be unequal.

For this sceptical sublime, value emerges in many different ways. This multiplicity is also a value: not one sublime but many. Does this mean the sublime is about individuals with different values competing with one another? This question misses the ideas of collective emergence and creation in the sublime. It also misses the point that value only makes sense when shared in some way. Though inequality and how to avoid it are deep challenges for any definition of the sublime, they are concerns because the highest values emerge and matter communally, across multiple, interconnected and shifting groups. Only thereafter do they serve to divide communities and individuals.

Why describe the sublime as production and creation? Historically, it has more often been defined as a kind of receptivity and passivity. The sublime happens to us. When it happens, the highest values are expressed and received, their certainty underwritten by the power of emotion. This line of thought misses three roles for production and creativity. First, if the sublime is simply received during the communication of value, why has it been

necessary for writers to define and redefine it, in order to promote it? As an idea, the sublime has always been invented as well as experienced. Second, while the sublime is supposed to strike at passivity, it is also taken to be something we need to be readied for, in order to experience it. As such, it only stands out for active and educated forms of attention. Third, taken not from the side of the reception but from that of the sending, the sublime message or event emerges over time; it is crafted, or occurs in settings that have been shaped or manufactured. Even at its most natural, it is preserved, or reinstated, or designed. The sublime object is constructed over time.

This essay is therefore about how the sublime is made as unequal. It will be claimed that the sublime is fabricated when it is defined, as it has been from its very beginnings in classical rhetoric, right up to its modern and postmodern definitions. It will also be claimed that it is partly made when it is experienced. How it comes to hit us is prepared for and followed in creative ways. Finally, the sublime is made whenever the world is imagined differently and changed.

There is a feedback loop from definitions of the sublime, to ideas and values about how the world should be transformed and experienced, to unequal outcomes for those who inhabit that world – whether they be humans, other animals, plants or objects – and finally back to new attempts to get the sublime right. Value begets value, but not necessarily the value it wants, or pretends to want.

References to history are repeated here because work on the sublime is necessarily historical. It doesn't matter how much you believe you have defined a new sublime, your novelty is but a figure in a very long historical series. It is a daunting line to belong to, haunted by some of the most influential thinkers, where they often come closest to

wretched and shameful conclusions, ending in racism, sexism, division between animals, belief in superiors among equals, and world-ending despair.

Even the most knowing recent moments in this history touch this baseness, when they reject the sublime, but leave the place of value vacant and ready for charlatans, cynics and nihilists. That's why this essay has a subplot tending towards the multiple, pessimistic, critical and self-destructive sublime, rather than concluding with its mere dismissal. We can't have done with value without inviting a return to discredited ideals that all wisdom should fear. This is one of the reasons the sublime is persistent. New thinkers keep returning to it, because getting our highest values wrong has such terrible consequences.

Behind the problem of the sublime, there is hence also a problem of history. What is the right way of telling, or collating, or recreating the history of an old and yet tenacious concept like the sublime? The essay begins with a chapter on historiography and method. In following ideas of microhistory, a relatively recent historical practice, it develops an approach called microcritique. This method alternates between close-up views of precise historical evidence, taken from many influential texts on the sublime, and wide spans of more speculative and suggestive vision, where the two perspectives inform, correct and transform each other, allowing no reduction to a single picture.

This is risky work, as shown by the contradictions latent in ideas of transformation of evidence, or in the redundancy implied by the correction of a vision. If evidence is fact or truth, why would we need speculation at all? The study of the methods of microhistory is designed to address this question, but that's not enough, because even if it can be answered satisfactorily, another more difficult problem remains. What is the right form of speculation? Is it story-making, the weaving of a narrative thread through history? Or is it a more scientific type of hypothesis, to be verified by the evidence, or a moral and legal

judgement of history? Or perhaps it is a creative and artistic presentation, or maybe a debate within the confines of a carefully defined subject, with scholarly rules of engagement and representation?

The answer suggested here combines the analysis of definitions on the basis of historical interpretation, with the division and organisation of those definitions in terms of sets of concepts, and more speculative diagrams aiming to map the effects of those definitions, not only around those concepts, but much more widely on societies viewed in terms of equality. The method is to read, define, organise and map. It is necessarily a selective method. Not everything can be read. The definition will have to be reductive, as will the maps or diagrams. Many maps will be omitted. It's an essay.

Using ideas reflecting division and distinction, I will analyse the sublime through the effect of definitions. The complications of the concept are mirrored by the number and range of these ideas. They are: 'inside', 'outside', 'active', 'passive', 'individual', 'collective', 'multiplicity', 'classification', 'wild nature', 'tamed nature', 'urban spaces', 'catastrophe', 'spontaneous', 'inviting critique', 'repressing critique' and 'manufactured'. They appear in groups of four throughout the book, in simple diagrams mapping different versions of the sublime. The diagrams work together and they are followed by different interpretations. The variety of readings stems from the problem of value in the sublime. Since there are many different values there are also different views reflecting them.

A concept such as 'wild' occurs within a value system, sometimes invoking negative threats, at other times excitement and vivid existence. Even if we can draw a map of how a definition of the sublime pulls the world towards or away from wild nature, this is only a beginning, since we still need to decide on the value of wildness. Similarly, 'spontaneous' and 'manufactured' can stand for negative or positive values for the sublime, depending on

whether we think something occurring naturally, as an immediate truth, is superior to a work of art, as a truth shaped by techniques and imagination.

In response to this uncertainty, the direction of the essay is set by the problem of egalitarianism. Is it possible to devise a theory of the sublime that does not lead to inequalities? The ideas of collective, individual, multiplicity and classification are important in deciding how the effects of the sublime include new classifications and boundaries between people, how they split us into individuals, or shape a new universal collective, or encourage multiple and unstable accounts of the sublime. Less directly, so are the ideas of critique, manufactured, catastrophe and active. They determine how the sublime is open to challenge, how it might be made to deceive, whether it builds on, responds to, or even leads to catastrophe, and how it implies activity or passivity.

The selection of egalitarianism brings order and priorities to the interpretations, but also weakness and prejudice to the reading. At no point will I question the value of egalitarianism itself. This is not because it is an unimportant and open question, but rather because I have chosen to take this premise as a way to approach the sublime. The relation between the sublime and equality is at once a central aspect of modern ideas of the sublime since Kant, and a little studied aspect of the historical sublime.

It is well understood how Kant's sublime leads to ideas of universal moral laws, yet a feature of recent work on the sublime concerns the extent to which his philosophy has a legacy of inequality and corrosive values. I will expand on these ideas to show how all philosophies of the sublime suffer from problems of inequality. Their definitions connect objects, nature, art, science, technology, emotions, ideas, actions and morals to our highest values, but they also imply deep and damaging distinctions. I will map out these links, while

acknowledging that there are two more pressing demands beyond the scope of this study.

How can we be equal politically? When will we be equal?

After these reflections on method, the close study turns to Nietzsche, in Chapter 3. His philosophy seems to be the least promising for egalitarianism, yet it puts forward a sophisticated and original definition of the sublime. Despite its statements of deep inequality between masses and superior sublime creators, his writing promises a future for humanity in the sublime. This contradiction will be approached through the idea of the untimely, another historical term closely matched to the sublime in his work.

As untimely, Nietzsche's sublime is predictive rather than descriptive. It foresees a different future thanks to the sublime. All definitions of the sublime have effects on their environments through their defence of different senses of value, but only some are explicit in departing from the temptation to use the sublime as a label, as a way of picking out some objects, natural features, individuals or artefacts in the world. Nietzsche is the strongest defender of the sublime as created rather than experienced.

In Chapter 4 the essay turns to two recent philosophies of the sublime that take the historical sublime and do something different and ambitious with it. In *American Technological Sublime*, David E. Nye defends a technological sublime allied to democracy. This sublime is experienced collectively and without recourse to high culture or theory. It promotes progressive values of social integration and improvement; for instance, in the joint experience of technological progress as presented in world fairs or national celebrations.

Responding to some of the most urgent ethical and political challenges of our age, in *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy: Aesthetics, Ethics and Nature*, Emily Brady advocates an ecological sublime. She argues that, timely rather than untimely in the Anthropocene,

sublime experiences of nature and responses to them lead to moral attitudes where nature is respected and esteemed. Far from Nye's belief in the progressive potential of sublime technology – though he tempers this belief as technology gains in power – Brady nonetheless shares his commitment to the moral value of the sublime.

Among recent works on the sublime, Brady and Nye stand out for their renewal of the sublime in a social setting where we are brought together by sublimity, the values it instils in us, the energy it conveys, and its paths to a better world. The essay examines both philosophies closely, not only testing them as opportunities for equality, but also drawing out new concepts and maps of directions for understanding the effects of the sublime.

These positive and progressive recent approaches to the sublime are unusual. Though there has been a return to the sublime over the last four decades, the return is more in mourning and mistrust than full acceptance of the historical legacy of the sublime. After the environmental and technological sublimes, the essay turns to this more sceptical vein. Chapter 5 is on sublime miseries, or definitions of the sublime focusing on its negative consequences, as well as its unconscious basis. They are many, ranging from individual despair to collective disempowerment.

To understand the reaction against progressive ideas of the sublime, the chapter begins with Kant, a figure all turn to, and then turn against, in seeking to uncover how sublime enlightenment ideals were followed by centuries of horror, despite the application of those ideals to international moral and legal institutions and to individual morality. The rejection of Kant began in the nineteenth century, with Schopenhauer's exceptionally subtle, but ultimately doomed, definition of the sublime as an elevation away from the will.

Having by-passed Hegel, discussed briefly in the earlier chapter on technology and the environment, the chapter on misery turns back to him through his heir, Žižek. Žižek's

philosophy can be seen as a relentless attack on the association of the sublime with the highest values. His critical view of the sublime is the culmination and closing moment for the sublime defined as universal. However, it is not the end of the road for the sublime. To show the potential for a multiple and internally conflicted definition of the sublime, the chapter closes with Kristeva's abject sublime, a refined and literary approach showing the way to new ways of thinking about the sublime after rejection of the universal and idealist traditions.

The final main chapter of the essay returns to the problem of equality. This time, the topic is the secondary position the sublime should take in relation to egalitarian political and economic aims and systems. Even when it is at its most egalitarian, the sublime must not be taken as the basis for an egalitarian society. Instead, its role is much more limited, involving criticism of the unequal tendencies of the sublime and a position within debates about values within wider egalitarian political systems.

Through the example of the exclusion of animals from the sublime, a return to the idea that the sublime is unequal by definition leads to greater scrutiny of how the manufacture of the sublime has direct and violent consequences, where its closeness to propaganda comes out most strongly. This appears not only in extreme examples but also in paradigmatic cases, such as Addison's praise for the natural sublime, where the sublime divides the world into leisured experience and hard toil.

Beyond brute propaganda and manipulation, the modern sublime is ideological and complicit in the most violent inequalities of modern thought. This occurs in Kant, not only in his racism, expressed in his early writing on the sublime, but also through the universality meant to guarantee equality, but instead promoting a particular ideology. The mechanics of

this self-contradiction are studied through Adorno and his critique of negativity in the sublime.

If the sublime is to survive its own negative legacies, it must lose its claims to universality. There are no justified and universal superior values communicated by the sublime. Intense experience, driving existence beyond its limits according to new values, must be part of an anarchic and chaotic multiplicity, constantly reminded of the dangerous temptation to impose false distinctions and inequality on others.

James Williams, Edinburgh, January 2019