

# Beauty, ugliness, the sublime, and truth in art

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Is it possible to articulate an aesthetic of the beautiful today, at a time when what Kundera's character, Sabina, describes as the 'uglification' of the world, has become pervasive, on the one hand, and when, on the other, social reality has become so complex that the harmonies required by the beautiful, conceived of as belonging within aesthetic space, can no longer be systematically justified in aesthetic terms? The answer given to this question here is negative, and goes hand in hand with the claim, put forward by Lyotard, that after *Auschwitz* one can no longer cling to the metanarrative of the universal emancipation of humankind. Similarly, it is argued, although beauty may still be experienced at an everyday, intuitive level, at a reflective, aesthetic-theoretical level it cannot be systematically sustained, given the complex, interrelated character of historical events, culture and social reality. It is further pointed out that Lyotard's claim, that the aesthetic of the modern as well as the postmodern amounts to an aesthetic of the sublime, albeit of different kinds, casts light on the reasons why, today, when one is surrounded by so much ugliness in the form of pseudo-beautiful kitsch, one cannot escape an aesthetic of the sublime, and several artists' work is alluded to, to substantiate this argument.

**Key words:** Beauty, sublime, ugly, Lyotard, aesthetic, modern, postmodern, complexity, truth, *Auschwitz*.

Is dit vandag moontlik om 'n estetika van skoonheid te artikuleer, in 'n era wanneer wat Kundera se karakter, Sabina, die 'verleliking' van die wêreld noem, alomteenwoordig geword het, enersyds, en wanneer die sosiale werklikheid so kompleks geword het dat die harmonie wat deur skoonheid vereis word (wat veronderstel is om tot estetiese ruimte te behoort) andersyds nie meer sistematies in estetiese terme geregverdig kan word nie? Hierdie vraag word negatief beantwoord, en gaan hand aan hand met Lyotard se stelling, dat daar sedert *Auschwitz* nie meer aan die metanarratief van die universele emansipasie van die mensdom geglo kan word nie. Daar word verder geargumenteer dat, ofskoon skoonheid steeds op alledaagse, intuïtiewe vlak ervaar kan word, sodanige ervaring nie sistematies gehandhaaf kan word nie, in die lig van die komplekse, onderling-verbandhoudende aard van historiese gebeure, kultuur en sosiale werklikheid. Daar word verder aangetoon dat Lyotard se bewering, dat die estetika van sowel die moderne as die postmoderne 'n estetika van die sublieme is – weliswaar van uiteenlopende aard – verduidelik waarom 'n mens vandag, te midde van soveel lelikheid in die gewaad van pseudo-skone namaakkuns ('kitsch'), op 'n estetika van die sublieme aangewese is, en daar word na verskeie kunstenaars se werk verwys om hierdie argument te staaf.

**Sleutelwoorde:** Skoonheid, sublieme, lelikheid, Lyotard, esteties, moderne, postmoderne, kompleksiteit, waarheid, *Auschwitz*.

In Milan Kundera's novel, *The unbearable lightness of being* (1984: 93), one of the main characters, Sabina, makes the following 'discovery', which is relevant to the theme of this article:

...she discovered that the transformation of music into noise was a planetary process by which mankind was entering the historical phase of total ugliness. The total ugliness to come had made itself felt first as omnipresent acoustical ugliness: cars, motorcycles, electric guitars, drills, loudspeakers, sirens. The omnipresence of visual ugliness would soon follow.

This passage may be read together with another one, occurring a little later in the narrative where Sabina remarks (Kundera 1984: 101):

'...Before beauty disappears entirely from the earth, it will go on existing for a while by mistake. "Beauty by mistake" – the final phase in the history of beauty'.

At first blush this strikes the reader as being merely expressions, on Sabina's part, of her idiosyncratic artistic character, which recoiled against the 'artistic' orthodoxy of communist Czechoslovakia, but when one considers that her departure from her country of birth to settle in the West does not change her attitude in this regard, it strikes one that these remarks may be understood in a wider, global context. Could this be why Jean-Francois Lyotard (1992: 6-7) refers approvingly to De Duve's remark, that '...the question of modern aesthetics is not "What is beautiful?" but "What is art to be (and what is literature to be)?"' One is afforded a clue

to the answer when he says a little later (1992: 10): ‘In particular, I think the aesthetic of the sublime is where modern art (including literature) finds its impetus, and where the logic of the avant-garde finds its axioms’. Why should this be the case, one may wonder, especially if one associates art primarily with the creation of beautiful things or artifacts. It has to be understood, I believe, against the backdrop of Lyotard’s argument, that the modern is inseparable from ‘de-realization’ – an insight not really that novel (Marx’s famous phrase, aimed at capital, comes to mind, namely that ‘all that is solid, melts into air’) – but one that Lyotard explains in a novel manner, which involves both science and capitalism.

One may get a better idea of what he means by ‘de-realization’ if it is kept in mind that the logic of modernity has been characterized as ‘creative destruction’ and ‘destructive creation’ by several thinkers from Goethe to Nietzsche and Schumpeter (Harvey 1990: 16-17). As Harvey puts it (p. 16): ‘How could a new world be created, after all, without destroying much that had gone before?’ This logic operates, in the first place, at the level of art where, in Baudelaire’s formulation (Harvey 1990: 10), the dual task of the modern artist consists in capturing the ‘transient, the fleeting, the contingent’, as well as ‘the eternal and the immutable’. This implies that, whether the artist concentrates on the first or the second of these incompatible tasks, something will have to be ‘destroyed’ in order to let something else appear: if the immutable is highlighted (for example in the constructivist painting of Albers), it would be at the cost of the transient, and *vice versa* (as in romantic art, where the ruin, among other motifs, functions to destroy any ‘classical’ affirmation of ‘eternal’ verities). The first half of the ‘modern’ artist’s task (affirming the fleeting or ephemeral), according to Baudelaire, corresponds to what Lyotard understands by the postmodern, and the second (finding ways to present the immutable or essential) to the modern proper. This is evident from his remark, that (Lyotard 1992: 13): ‘A work [of art] can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Thus understood, postmodernism is not modernism at its end, but in a nascent state, and this state is recurrent’. Both the modern and the postmodern therefore stand in a specific, necessary relation to ‘de-realization’ – the latter affirmatively and the former negatively, and in each case the other is presupposed. The logic of modernity therefore implicates the postmodern; if this were not the case, the oxymoron, ‘creative destruction’, would not make sense. It is also worth noting, however, that Schumpeter (an economist), seized upon the image of ‘creative destruction’ to ‘understand the processes of capitalist development’ (Harvey 1990: 17). This brings me back to Lyotard’s argument.

In brief, Lyotard (1992: 1-9) argues that the appearance (not the character) of the postmodern goes hand in hand with a kind of ‘relaxation’ (p. 1), where one is urged, in various domains and with different justifications, to relinquish what he calls ‘experimentation’, which he associates with the *avant-garde*. It is clear that Lyotard’s philosophical diagnosis of the present era is predicated on his appreciation of the artistic *avant-garde* (his model for an art of the sublime) as the paradigmatic space of new modes of representation in the face of the de-realization characteristic of the modern, in which the very nature of extant reality is constantly interrogated. This contrast with all those attempts, in art and elsewhere (philosophy, linguistics, history, art criticism), which display nostalgia for a kind of stable, referentially ‘anchored’ notion of reality (pp. 1-2). What all these opponents of artistic experimentation have in common, however, is (1992: 4) ‘...the same call to order, a desire for unity, identity, security, and popularity... Artists and writers must be made to return to the fold of the community; or at least, if the community is deemed to be ailing, they must be given the responsibility of healing it’. Such neo-conservative sentiments do not reckon with what Lyotard (1992: 9) refers to as ‘...a sort of escape of reality from the metaphysical, religious, and political assurances the mind once believed it possessed’, however. Moreover (1992: 9):

This retreat is indispensable to the birth of science and capitalism. There would be no physics had doubt not been cast on the Aristotelian theory of movement; no industry without the refutation of corporatism, mercantilism, and

physiocracy. Modernity, whenever it appears, does not occur without a shattering of belief, without a discovery of the *lack of reality* in reality – a discovery linked to the invention of other realities.

What does this have to do with the theme of this paper? The relevance of Lyotard's thoughts on the sense of the divergent (conservative) reactions to what appears to some commentators as the hyper-reflexivity of contemporary philosophy (or theory) – '...speaking about speech, writing about writing, intertextuality...' (Lyotard 1992: 2) – lies in the following. Whether it is in the name of political totalitarianism (where the party demands of art the 'realistic' straitjacket of the approved version of social reality: 'correct' images and narratives are the rule; p. 7), or in the name of capitalism (where, in eclectic terms, 'anything goes', as long as it is recognizable by the consumerist public, and provided it is profitable; pp. 7-8), a certain conception of what is aesthetically acceptable, even (supposedly) 'beautiful', governs the approved, conventional taste. One might say that, underpinning these anaemic remnants of what, in Plato's work, functions as a fully-fledged (metaphysical) aesthetic of the beautiful,<sup>1</sup> there is the assumption of some kind of wholeness or oneness, which is accessible to human beings. In the case of capitalism this is clearly ironic, given its inescapable commitment to de-realization (creative destruction) of the world for the sake of economic 'progress' – a process that cannot escape any keen observer, but which is continually covered up by capitalism's implicit assurances (through the pop-art of advertising, for instance) that consumers share a stable vocabulary and behaviour. In contrast to these divergent instances of insistence on an innocuous, conventional artistic idiom, the *avant-garde* questions the very meaning of reality through its experimentation, and concomitantly – unlike kitsch<sup>2</sup> – questions, instead of affirming, the social, economic and political *status quo*.

Art of this kind makes us experience (see, hear) the world in a manner that is different from conventionally approved ways of looking and listening. This is the reason for Lyotard's approving allusion to De Duve's remark, above, that '...the question of modern aesthetics is not "What is beautiful?" but "What is art to be (and what is literature to be)?"' Whether it is for political – the call for 'patriotic art' by apartheid leaders comes to mind – or for economic (and indirectly also political) reasons, any orthodoxy that either forbids experimentation in the realm of representation completely, or encourages it only to the extent that it does not destabilize the representational ontological paradigm underpinning consumerist economic activity, adheres to a criterion of the 'beautiful', albeit a forced, straitjacketed, perverted (that is, kitschified) one (Lyotard 1992: 7). Such an orthodoxy cannot abide an aesthetic of the sublime, which would implicitly or explicitly interdict any form of mainstream orthodoxy's own ontological presuppositions and in the process allude to the truth, that human languages (including those of science) as well as other modes of representation always, ineluctably, come up against their own internal limitations; hence the never-ending need, to devise new ways of representing the 'real' (in the Lacanian sense<sup>3</sup>). It should not come as a surprise to find that art and science are, when it comes to the question of adequate representation of reality, in the same boat, as one may gather from Fink's remarks (1997: 134-135) about the upshot of Heisenberg's indeterminacy principle in quantum mechanics, namely the impossibility of knowledge as a complete system:

Naively, we often think of scientists as people who relentlessly refine their instruments until they can measure everything, regardless of its infinitesimal proportions or blinding speed. Heisenberg, however, posited a limit to our ability to measure, and thus a true limit to scientific knowledge... Heisenberg shocked the physics community when he asserted that there was something that structurally speaking could not be known: something that it is impossible for us to know, a kind of conceptual anomaly... Physics... when carried out in a truly scientific spirit, is ordained and commanded by the [Lacanian] real, that is, by that which does not work, by that which does not fit. It does not set out to carefully cover over paradoxes and contradictions, in an attempt to prove that the theory is nowhere lacking – that it works in every instance – but rather to take such paradoxes and contradictions as far as they can go.

This may explain why Lyotard remarks that (1992: 7): ‘Realism...can be defined only by its intention of avoiding the question of reality implied in the question of art...’; the point being that art faces the same challenge that Fink (in Lacanian spirit, above) attributes to science in the true sense, namely to face the paradoxes and anomalies that confront one in the complex world of postmodernity, and invent innovative ways of presenting what amounts to (in Lyotard’s idiom) ‘the unrepresentable’.<sup>4</sup> While I am in full agreement with Lyotard’s philosophical insights – which I believe to be consonant with (Kundera’s character) Sabina’s sentiments on the ‘uglification’ of the world – the time has come, nevertheless, to reconfigure the status of the beautiful via the experience of the sublime, which means that beauty cannot be conceptualized as before (say, by Kant, in terms of a harmony or unsullied aesthetic order, discussed below). How is this possible? To be able to answer this question, one has to traverse a complex philosophical and historical terrain.

It is no accident that Lyotard – whose thinking seems to be the poststructuralist counterpart to Theodor Adorno’s uncompromising neo-Marxist critical theory – invokes Adorno to justify his contention, that the ‘project of modernity’ has not been neglected or forgotten (as Habermas claims), but has, on the contrary, been ‘destroyed’ or ‘liquidated’, and cites ‘Auschwitz’ as the ‘paradigmatic name’ for this ‘tragic’ abandonment of modernity as a project (Lyotard 1992a: 18). Why? What does *Auschwitz* mean, beyond its historical meaning as the name of a deathcamp during the holocaust? His elaboration on this is illuminating (Lyotard 1992b: 78):

Following Theodor Adorno, I have used the name ‘Auschwitz’ to signify just how impoverished recent Western history seems from the point of view of the ‘modern’ project of the emancipation of humanity. What kind of thought is capable of ‘relieving’ Auschwitz – relieving in the sense of *aufheben* – capable of situating it in a general, empirical, or even speculative process directed toward universal emancipation? There is a sort of grief in the *Zeitgeist*. It can find expression in reactive, even reactionary, attitudes or in utopias – but not in a positive orientation that would open up a new perspective.

The term ‘relieving’ comes from Hegel’s dialectical thinking, and characterizes the dialectical process according to which every former stage in the unfolding of spirit is ‘taken up’ in the successive stage(s), ‘cancelled’, yet preserved and ‘lifted up’ to a ‘higher’ level. Adorno’s point is that it is absurd to think of the nadir of human history as represented by the name ‘Auschwitz’ (one could perhaps substitute ‘Hiroshima’ for it<sup>5</sup>) as something that can be taken up into the subsequent historical process in this sense of *aufheben* – it would be similar to saying in all seriousness that Ted Bundy or Jeffrey Dahmer has developed serial killing to new ‘heights of perfection’.

My reason for this digression on the recent, tragic history of modernity is to illustrate just how difficult it is to speak cogently of ‘beauty’ as a legitimate ideal in art or aesthetics today (at least with adequate historical consciousness), in a manner analogous to the meaning of ‘Auschwitz’, formulated above in terms of emancipation – unless it is meant in the most unreflective sense, outside of the sphere of art or aesthetics, as being a quality of some everyday experiences (which are still possible), such as a beautiful sunset or the beauty of a little child sleeping, exuding as-yet-unspoiled innocence. The moment one thinks reflectively and historically, however, one realizes that, while these may indeed be experienced as beautiful at an everyday, intuitive level, there is a cloud of un-expiated historical ‘grief’ and suffering hanging over them, indicting every judgement on one’s part that affirms their beauty in a manner that requires encompassing theoretical-aesthetic corroboration. And if this is not enough, Richard Kearney’s assessment of contemporary economic processes invading even one’s most private experience of beauty drives the point home (Kearney 1988: 1-2):

It is virtually impossible today to contemplate a so-called natural setting, without some consumerist media image lurking in the back of one’s mind: a beach without an Ambre Solaire body, a meadow without a Cadbury’s flake, a mountain stream without a Marlboro cigarette, a wild seascape without a hairspray or tourism commercial.

Our inner unconscious has not been spared either. The psychic world is as colonized as the physical world by the whole image industry. Even the private world of sexual desire has been informed by the streamlined scenarios of TV soap operas like *Dallas* and *Dynasty*: multi-million dollar series which have been broadcast throughout the globe... The contemporary eye is no longer innocent. What we see is almost invariably informed by prefabricated images. There is, of course, a fundamental difference between the image of today and of former times: now the image *precedes* the reality it is supposed to represent. Or to put it another way, reality has become a pale reflection of the image.

This lengthy excerpt from Kearney's work impresses upon one just how complex the present situation has become (or rather, how complex it already was in 1988, when this text by Kearney was published; today it is even more complex). Simultaneously it helps explain why an aesthetic of beauty is unlikely to gain a purchase in postmodern culture. After all, as Kant (1969: 104-107) argued, the experience of beauty accompanies an aesthetic judgement of something where there is a harmony between the rational human faculties of imagination and understanding, unlike an experience of the sublime, where these faculties are in conflict because of a radical incommensurability between (the effort at) representation of the object, and understanding of it at the level of an idea. The point is that, the more complex the world in which one lives becomes – in epistemological, ontological and axiological terms – the less likely it is that the kind of harmony between the faculties, which is a prerequisite for the experience of beauty, can be sustained (see in this regard note 3). And then there is the historical baggage – the kind of pervasive 'grief' that Lyotard refers to – which weighs heavily, and inescapably, on human faculties today, and which unavoidably has to inform any aesthetics or philosophy of art. In saying this I am presupposing that no one can, *in principle (de jure)*, be innocent today, although I am aware that, in fact, there are millions of 'innocent' people in contemporary society who *do (de facto)* look at their world without the historical consciousness of past events (*Auschwitz*, *Hiroshima*) that militates against such innocence and naivety. This claim is the obverse of Kant's (1969: 115-116), that the experience of the sublime requires a certain level of cultural sophistication<sup>6</sup> (where the conflict or tension between imagination and understanding is not naively mistaken for fear, but is consciously registered as such a conflict); culturally unsophisticated people are more likely to experience even those things belonging to the category of 'hyper'-images (produced by consumer society for the sake of pushing representation to the limits of a certain kind of 'realism'; that is, kitsch) as 'beautiful'. This would not grant *legitimacy* to an aesthetic of the beautiful, however: history cannot be redeemed by *fiat*, but the extant world, which has been sullied beyond redemption, has to be re-conceptualized, reconfigured in terms of the relation between beauty, ugliness and the sublime. How could this happen? It could occur, as Lyotard suggests, via an aesthetic of the sublime, or through art that – to use Andrea Hurst's felicitous phrase<sup>7</sup> – somehow manages 'to bring chaos and cosmos together' in a paradoxical configuration.

In the early Foucault's work, where (in his hatred of suffocating, anaesthetizing, conventional morality) he valorizes the artist in so far as she or he is capable of 'transgression', one finds paradoxical formulations that seem to me to capture what is at stake here. For instance, in 'What is an author?' he claims that, in writing as artform one encounters the implication of (1977: 116):

...an action that is always testing the limits of its regularity, transgressing and reversing an order that it accepts and manipulates. Writing unfolds like a game that inevitably moves beyond its own rules and finally leaves them behind.

Although Foucault depicts art here as leaving its own rules behind, he is nevertheless in perfect accord with Lyotard, who focuses on what such art is searching for (new rules) where he writes (1992: 15; see also 1992c: 103):

The postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher<sup>8</sup>: the text he writes or the work he creates is not in principle governed by preestablished rules and cannot be judged according to a determinant judgment, by the application of given categories to this text or work. Such rules or categories are what the work or text is investigating. The artist and the writer therefore work without rules and in order to establish the rules for what *will have been made*. This is why the work and the text can take on the properties of an event... *Postmodern* would be understanding according to the paradox of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*).

But perhaps, given this emphasis on the (postmodern) artist, like the philosopher, being at sea, it is most instructive to take careful note of Lyotard's reflections on two kinds of sublime here, to be in a position to grasp why an aesthetic of the beautiful is not appropriate for the present era. Building on Kant's notion of the ('mathematical') sublime as the experience of a conflict or incommensurability between imagination (the ability to represent something in the form of images), and understanding as the capacity to form concepts (or, where empirical content is absent, ideas), Lyotard thinks of modern and postmodern art as different ways of 'presenting the existence of something unrepresentable' (1992: 11). In other words, each of these is, ineluctably, an art of the sublime, albeit with structural differences between them. Addressing the likely response of puzzlement ('...how do we show something that cannot be seen?'; p.11), he offers a reminder that Kant himself gives his successors a fruitful clue when he points to 'formlessness' or the 'absence of form' as 'a possible index to the unrepresentable' (1992: 11). Moreover, Kant continues by describing the feeling of an 'empty *abstraction*' on the part of the imagination, in its search for a way to present the (unrepresentable) infinite, as the '*negative presentation*' of the latter (p. 11), which leads Lyotard to say that painting, in so far as it rises to the challenge of an aesthetic of the sublime, would 'present' something, 'but negatively', avoiding 'figuration or representation'. This leads to a paradox (Lyotard 1992: 11): '...it will make one see only by prohibiting one from seeing; it will give pleasure only by giving pain'. As an instance of this, he refers to one of Malevich's 'blank' (*blanche*) squares – appropriately, given that the latter marks a kind of limit to figuration; simultaneously a prohibition and a challenge to the viewer.

That Lyotard's argument is in accord with the claim concerning the impossibility of justifying a 'pure' aesthetic of beauty today – and this historical qualification is decisively important – should be clear. Isn't it the case that, once innocence has made way for experience (*Auschwitz*), one cannot go back, unless one pretends that experience never happened, and acts accordingly? In contemporary art this pretence assumes the form of kitsch in all its varieties, from television soapies to lugubriously sentimental or saccharine paintings (for example of a wide-eyed child with a tear rolling down her or his cheek) and seductively slick advertisements featuring artificially 'beautiful' models with impossibly smooth skin and luxuriant hair. An historical reading of this kind of kitsch sees it as an expression of nostalgia for a lost innocence, or as an embodiment of what Nietzsche called 'passive nihilism',<sup>9</sup> where the realization of the axiological nullity of the world is met with a refusal or an inability to rise to the task of constructing new values – as 'active nihilism' does – and either wallows in sentimentalism or withdraws into a blind re-affirmation of defunct values, instead, of which a persistence in the aesthetic justification of beauty as conceived of by Kant would be an instance.

But why, one may object, should it be difficult, if not impossible, to justify an aesthetics of the beautiful today? Surely one should let bygones be bygones, and forget about *Auschwitz* and Hiroshima; after all, the world is still beautiful. Look at the sunset, at the light-reflection on the lake, at the geese flying in formation against the pale blue sky! Why should history be allowed to spoil our pleasure? The trouble is: history cannot simply be suspended, just as no one who has experienced something traumatic, can ever escape from it completely – either it 'returns' in the form of a symptom of sorts, or one 'works through it' and mends the symbolic fabric of one's life, but without ever escaping the reminders of its impact on one's life completely.<sup>10</sup> Hegel already realized that the historical role and ontological status of art had changed in his time, from being

the ‘highest embodiment of spirit’ to being something of the past in this capacity,<sup>11</sup> and would continue to change to what he anticipated, perhaps prophetically, as a ‘critical art’. Before him, in a classic modern, Enlightenment-gesture, Kant had relegated art and aesthetics to a separate sphere of its own, distinct from that of cognition, on the one hand, and morality (ethics and politics), on the other (see Habermas 1985: 9). This already represented a differentiation of reason (from its erstwhile, pre-Enlightenment, metaphysical status as substantive and unitary) into three separate discursive spheres – ones that Habermas still seems to cling to – but reason or rationality has become still more differentiated, as poststructuralist thought has demonstrated in so many ways, ranging from analyses of phenomena such as ‘forgiveness’ and the ‘gift’ (Derrida), to demonstrating the ambivalent structural dynamic of human subjectivity (Lacan) and the paradoxical discursive status of human beings (Foucault).<sup>12</sup>

With all of this in mind, is it at all surprising that art cannot, today, in modernist fashion, still be *restricted* to the aesthetic sphere – juxtaposed with the spheres of cognition and that of morality – as an art of the beautiful? While art can, and should, be *distinguished* from the domain of the theoretical and that of the ethical, thinkers such as Adorno, Heidegger, Gadamer and Derrida have argued convincingly that truth (formerly associated with the sphere of cognition or theory) plays a distinctive role in art; in other words, art cannot be hermetically sealed off from the sphere of the epistemological and the ontological. In the case of Heidegger (1975: 35-36), for example, art is a privileged region for the advent of truth as *aletheia* or unconcealedness, as his famous discussion of Van Gogh’s painting of the peasant shoes demonstrates, challenging the modern notion that science holds a kind of monopoly over knowledge and truth, and that art is the domain of beauty. In fact, it may be that, today – in the face of what Lyotard calls ‘technoscience’ – art is increasingly the domain where ‘truth’ in the sense of Heidegger’s *aletheia* or unconcealedness, is encountered, especially regarding the dehumanizing function of technoscience<sup>13</sup> and its partner in crime, as it were, namely advanced capitalism. Commenting on the ‘grief’ in the *Zeitgeist* (referred to earlier), Lyotard (1992b: 78-79) observes that:

Technoscientific development has become a means of deepening the malaise rather than allaying it. It is no longer possible to call development progress. It seems to proceed of its own accord, with a force, an autonomous motoricity that is independent of us. It does not answer to demands issuing from human needs. On the contrary, human entities – whether social or individual – always seem destabilized by the results and implications of development... The needs for security, identity, and happiness springing from our immediate condition as living beings, as social beings, now seem irrelevant next to this sort of constraint to complexify, mediatize, quantify, synthesize, and modify the size of each and every object.

The argument that the kind of aesthetic valid for the present era is that of the sublime, must be understood against the backdrop of this drive towards ever-increasing complexity, which simultaneously explains why Lyotard views contemporary science as being complicit with the de-realization (discussed earlier in relation to the structural dynamic of modernity) that he attributes to capitalism. When things have become infinitely complex, as well as unstable, if not ephemeral, through the process of de-realization that is characteristic of modernity as well as (to an even higher degree) of postmodernity, the requirements for adequate *representation* in art or the imagination cannot be met (as would be required by an aesthetic of beauty), as opposed to the requirements of *thinking* complex structures at the level of abstract and mathematical concepts. Thought and presentation of complexity diverge,<sup>14</sup> and hence art finds itself in the difficult position of having to employ the means of presentation available to or inventable by it to present precisely that which it cannot, tied as it is to the sensible domain, (re-)present. Lyotard’s elaboration of two kinds of sublime explains why this is the case. It comes as no surprise that one of the two kinds explored by Lyotard is marked by nostalgia, albeit not of the ‘passive nihilist’ type referred to earlier. After all, in so far as an aesthetic of the sublime rises to Kant’s challenge to eschew figuration and representation, it cannot avoid being resourceful,

and hence 'actively' nihilist in the creation of new value. Hence Lyotard's characterization of the modern and postmodern sublime, respectively (1992: 14-15):

So this is the differend: the modern aesthetic is an aesthetic of the sublime. But it is nostalgic; it allows the unrepresentable to be invoked only as absent content, while form, thanks to its recognizable consistency, continues to offer the reader or spectator material for consolation and pleasure. But such feelings do not amount to the true sublime feeling, which is intrinsically a combination of pleasure and pain: pleasure in reason exceeding all presentation, pain in the imagination or sensibility proving inadequate to the concept.

The postmodern would be that which in the modern invokes the unrepresentable in presentation itself, that which refuses the consolation of correct forms, refuses the consensus of taste permitting a common experience of nostalgia for the impossible, and inquires into new presentations – not to take pleasure in them, but to better produce the feeling that there is something unrepresentable.

Malevich's suprematist white squares would therefore be an instance of the modern sublime in painting, given the 'absent content', which requires the spectator's imaginative participation in providing such unrepresentable 'content' in thought, if not in the form of images. Needless to say, if the viewer is sufficiently historically-minded (even intuitively, if not reflectively), the 'imagined' content would not be the anaesthetic images of capitalism-inspired interior decoration or sentimentalist 'sweet kitsch', but would shatter against the rock of its own unimaginability, at the thought of the insurmountable task of reconciling it with what *Auschwitz* stands for.

If innovative ways of employing form and formlessness, for the sake of alluding to the ineffable, unrepresentable 'real' (to use a Lacanian concept; see note 3) constitute the moment of the postmodern sublime, there are many works of art that one could turn to as representative instances. Paul Crowther (1993) discusses a number of artists that seem to me to exemplify this kind of aesthetic, in the process eschewing a (misguided) commitment to an aesthetic of the beautiful. Malcolm Morley,<sup>15</sup> for instance, whom he regards as the artist marking the crucial transition from modern to postmodern art (Crowther 1993: 187), renders a kind of representationalism (without regressing to former modes of representation, however) with his *S.S. Amsterdam at Rotterdam* from the middle sixties. That this painting avoids falling into the trap of pseudo-beautiful kitsch, and functions critically in relation to a complex social and natural reality instead, is apparent when one considers that it embodies a perceptual response to ubiquitous mass-produced images. The pretext of this 'super-realistic' work is an ordinary postcard, as communicated to viewers by the incorporation of the postcard-margin into the painting, in this way communicating the fact that, instead of exemplifying 'high' art as far as putative origins go, it has its provenance in a mass-(re)produced image.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, its critical implications regarding mass culture transcend that very culture – they imply that 'authentic' painting can *only* occupy a position of negation towards a world in which mass-produced images and objects have attained a state of suffocating self-referentiality.

Moreover, the process of producing the painting itself bears the hallmark of complexity, so characteristic of the postmodern world itself.<sup>17</sup> To begin with, the process by which Morley created the painting was quasi-mechanical – having the image enlarged to poster size, dividing it into a grid of squares, and finally transcribing it in paint to a canvas, one square at a time, with the others covered up. Crowther allows one to understand this as an instance of postmodern negation: 'We have a framed picture offered in the "big" format characteristic of "high art", but whose status as high is subverted by the image's banal content' (Crowther 1993: 187). The fact that it also constitutes a kind of parody of the ontological status that Plato derogatorily attributed to art, namely, that of being a 'copy of a copy', twice removed from the metaphysical, archetypal form, makes it even more complex – a postcard is, after all, hardly the kind of original that has archetypal Platonic status, or possesses what Benjamin called the 'aura' of a unique artwork.



Add to this that there is yet another moment of negation (of a traditional requirement on the part of the artist – ‘the virtuoso fluency of the skilled hand’ of the painter; 1993: 188), namely, that the painting was made by a kind of mechanical copying, and it should become apparent that, when one looks at Morley’s hyper-realistic *S.S. Amsterdam at Rotterdam*, what one sees is in a significant sense not what is there. One sees the ‘painted’ image of a ship, but even when all the complications of its provenance, as well as its convoluted relation to the tradition of painting, and the history of philosophical reflection on art, were to be considered, what one (not merely a completely uninformed viewer, but the most informed one, too) *sees*, would not really be Morley’s *S.S. Amsterdam at Rotterdam*. Its visible surface hides the complexities of its status as art. On the other hand, when all these complexities are firmly kept in mind – that is, when they are contemplated in *thought* – it dawns on one that the painting is, contrary to first appearances, an instance of the postmodern sublime. Unlike the modern sublime, which is recognizable by its ‘missing contents’, the postmodern sublime, it will be remembered, announces itself by its innovative, inventive means of presentation of what is, in the final analysis, unrepresentable – here, all the complexities within which its ‘production’ as well as its meaning(s) is inscribed.

Morley’s *S.S. Amsterdam at Rotterdam* therefore demonstrates well why an aesthetic of the beautiful cannot do justice to art in the present era, despite the fact that, as pointed out earlier, one may, and does, still encounter ‘beautiful’ things on a daily basis. Even this work of art by Morley may strike one as being ‘beautiful’ at first sight, but the attempt to justify such a first impression in aesthetic terms cannot fail to uncover the reasons – outlined above – why only an aesthetic of the (postmodern) sublime can account for it. But perhaps another, ostensibly simpler, example would make clearer what it means to say that an aesthetic of the beautiful is unthinkable today. In the Art Gallery of the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein, South Africa, there is a hyperrealistic painting (by an artist named Pettit) simply called *Two leaves*. It is relatively small, framed, and painted almost entirely in tones of green. When I first saw it I was transfixed – it was so evidently *beautiful*: two big, glossy leaves, stuck upright in a green, glazed, ceramic vase. It was so convincingly ‘realistic’ to behold that I had to resist the impulse to touch the vase, to feel its cool, shiny surface. But being a reflective person, I soon started wondering: why only two leaves, why the almost excessive, pervasive green, why the pointed understatement of the title? Why those ‘darkish’ shades of green – not exactly the hues I would associate with the joys of Spring? It was almost as if there was something funereal about it. And then it struck me – whether it was intended by the artist or not (all one has to work with is, finally, the work of art) – this apparently, undeniably ‘beautiful’ painting, when inscribed into the present time of nature being threatened, as never before, by the effects of long-term industrial-economic activities on the part of a short-sighted humankind (a phenomenon subsumed under the umbrella of ‘global warming’, or ‘climate change’), presents precisely the unrepresentable. The latter, in this case, is the infinitely complex, causal process, at the levels of both nature and society in their present state, as well as of their history and their interrelationship, which is increasingly manifesting itself in a wide variety of ways, ranging from changing climate patterns (including storms of increased strength and intensity, more severe droughts, and so on) and geo-physical conditions (such as the melting of the ice-caps and of glaciers) to the extinction and the threat of extinction of many species of animals and plants (including the Adélie penguin and caribou).<sup>18</sup> *Thought* of in this way – although these thoughts cannot be *seen* in the image of the leaves in the vase – this relatively simple image is, in a manner of speaking, the tip of an iceberg. It is a veritable requiem to nature, which can *never* be recuperated from the pathologizing effects that human activities have inflicted on it. Hence, what struck me at first as being beautiful, did not so much cease being beautiful; rather, its beauty was complexified by its (postmodern) sublimity, which means that it turned out to be susceptible, not to an aesthetic of the beautiful, but to one of the sublime. And this is the case despite the painting being framed

in a rather conventional, modernist manner, which seems to indicate an aesthetic space within the frame, separated from the workaday world outside. Given the impossibility of divorcing the subject of the painting (including the way it is executed) from the ‘outside’ world – which is, on the contrary, implicated by it – the frame may be understood, not as a modernist device assuring aesthetic purity, but as a metaphor for sheltering a fragile nature, metonymically represented by the two eponymous leaves. Lyotard is therefore vindicated.

Another way to explain the structure of the sublime, as it functions in the painting by Pettit (*Two leaves*), is by invoking what I described earlier as a felicitous phrase used by Andrea Hurst, to wit: ‘to bring chaos and cosmos together’ in a paradoxical manner: as something beautiful, the painting represents the order (‘cosmos’) required by beauty; as something sublime, it engenders, via the tension between image and thought, the ‘chaos’ of complexity (which can be thought, but not presented). The same may be said of the ecological art of Andy Goldsworthy,<sup>19</sup> which combines the formal beauty (cosmos) of traditional art with the ephemerality (chaos) of natural materials such as ice and snow. Paradoxically, by subjecting his ‘artworks’ to the cyclical processes of nature, he both affirms the creative intervention of the traditional artist, *and* simultaneously negates it by eschewing the aim of rendering artworks of relative durability – ones that can be displayed and kept in an art gallery. Goldsworthy’s photographs of these works are, arguably, not the ‘ecological artworks themselves’, but an archive of them, although – as photography – they could be regarded as art in a different register. Such dual status of his work complexifies it even further. His art is therefore a particularly striking instance of Lyotard’s postmodern sublime (which, incidentally, corresponds to what is accurately describable as something with precisely the kind of aporetic or paradoxical structure that poststructuralist thinkers such as Lyotard, Lacan, Derrida and Kristeva uncover in their work).

Where does this leave one as far as truth in art (alluded to earlier) is concerned? It will be remembered that I have argued that, in contrast to an earlier (modern) situation, when art was relegated to the realm of the aesthetic (and banished from that of truth and morality<sup>20</sup>), several thinkers, not to mention artists, have argued or shown that today, art is an important – if not the *most* important – domain where truth is encountered. To drive this point home, I shall discuss an unusual case where the process of creating an artwork, as well as the finished, but unforeseeable, artwork itself is intimately involved in understanding, not only the happening of truth in the work of art, but also its relation (albeit not a *necessary* one) to ugliness of a certain kind. The work in question is a sculpture, *Fledgling*, made by the versatile Port Elizabeth artist (sculptor, painter and draughtsman), Nick Allen, and an account of its genesis demonstrates how truth occurs through art – sometimes, if not as a rule, contingently or in unexpected ways. On the day that Nick, having sculpted this piece as one in a series of ceramic dragons, put it into a new kiln for firing, he was aware that the rate of temperature-increase in different kilns differs, but was nevertheless taken aback when he later discovered that in this case the difference was such that his dragon, instead of being in the intended rampant position, had collapsed into a maimed, grotesque shape. More or less at that time he discovered that the United States space shuttle, Challenger, had exploded on that very day, January 28, 1986, shortly after being launched, incinerating all its crew members in the process. This unexpected, unpredictable confluence of events enabled him to look at his ‘unsuccessful’ sculpture with new eyes. The contingency of both events seemed to him to be embodied in the disfigured shape of the dragon, with its little wings appearing pathetically inadequate in the face of the imperative to fly, and its grotesquely twisted, upturned head and open jaws appeared to represent a moment of hubris, the outcome of an attempt – comparable to that of the mythical Icarus, who flew too close to the sun with his wax- and feathers-engineered wings, and plunged to his death when the wax melted – to achieve the superhuman, and consequently came to grief in a horrifying ball of fire. Hence, instead of destroying his collapsed dragon-sculpture, he painted the cracks in its body,

as well as its twisted jaws, blood-red, painted a small stars-and-stripes on its pedestal, and called it *Fledgling*. The complex truth about humankind and its technological endeavours is unmistakably instantiated in this sculpture that was produced partly through an artist's intention, partly by the unpredictable contingency of two events of a technological kind: humankind is a Promethean species – like Prometheus, it is constantly engaged in a titanic struggle to wrest new 'fire' from the gods (or from nature), in order to overcome some new barrier of its own imagining. But little do humans know that, as Lyotard has astutely reminded one, the process of implementing the fire tends to attain a momentum ('motoricity') of its own, and that in the end humans (have) become the slaves to the process, supervising their own dehumanization. *Fledgling*, which is anything but beautiful – it is ugly, or at least grotesquely striking – is therefore only comprehensible under the aegis of an aesthetic of the sublime, which can, unlike an aesthetic of the beautiful, accommodate the complexities of its provenance or history, and the intertwinements of all the significations that lie dormant in its maimed shape.

But more should be said about ugliness – the 'total ugliness' of the world, which has passed through the phase of acoustical ugliness towards visual ugliness, according to the fictional Sabina – which I pointed to at the outset in this article. If one reads Kundera's novel (1984) – where historical facts and fictional events intertwine in characteristic postmodernist fashion – carefully, it is apparent that this perceived development towards the 'omnipresence of ugliness' is tied to precisely that process that Lyotard refers to as 'development' (which, it will be remembered, cannot be regarded as emancipatory 'progress' any longer, according to him). Nor should this surprise one – apart from the ugly mechanical noises that bother Sabina, it is not difficult to think of countless occasions where an inhabitant of the present era, with its blind commitment to 'development', winces inwardly at the sight of a devastated natural landscape – wrought by bulldozers and other 'earthmoving' equipment – for the sake of yet another golf estate or (unmistakably South African) 'security complex'. On a recent trip from a Sun City conference past the Hartebeespoort Dam in the direction of Broederstroom in Gauteng, we were aghast at just this kind of violation of the landscape – an all too telling instance of what Heidegger (1977: 15-17) describes as technology's 'setting-upon' of nature. This is true ugliness: the transformation of the earth by means of, and in the name of, technological development – which is fuelled by, and reciprocally fuels, neoliberal capitalism. To be sure, such ugliness is not immediately evident everywhere, especially in the sophisticated, glitzy interiors of upmarket buildings, equipped with the latest technological gadgets such as flat screen televisions, ultra-sonic sound systems and the like – in fact, one of the most seductive aspects of capitalist-inspired technology has always been its capacity to produce, as Baudrillard (1990: 160-162) points out, 'cool' seductive apparatuses (like television), where the 'cold seduction' effected by them is intimately tied to phenomena such as image- and sound-reproduction. But this should not fool one into believing that such seductive technological development is innocuous – it comes at a price. And while few people, myself included, would like to abandon the convenience of air travel, or the pleasures of listening to our favourite music on compact disc, it should not blind us to technology's other side, which is the systematic 'assault' on the earth and its 'resources'. Technology is a *pharmakon* (a poison and cure at the same time), and its poisonous nature manifests itself in the 'uglification' of the world – particularly where 'development' scars and destroys natural habitats.

Here, too, of course, art can and does allow transformative (perhaps 'epiphanic') experiences to happen on the part of individuals. When I recently screened the first of Godfrey Reggio's Qatsi-trilogy<sup>21</sup> – *Koyaanisqatsi*, 'Life out of balance' (1983) – for second-year students, some of them found the images of majestic natural landscapes, juxtaposed with industrial-technological scene-sequences, together with dystopic urban scenes of mindless traffic and commuter flows, immensely moving. One of them borrowed my DVD of the film for a second viewing, and

later reported crying in the course of viewing it because of what he experienced as a ‘colossal tragedy’ being enacted before his eyes. This powerful effect of the film is enhanced, in no small measure, by the fact that there is no dialogue or voice-over narration – only image-sequences accompanied by Philip Glass’s evocative music, specially written for the film. In terms of the argument of this article – in fact, of the theme of this special edition of SAJAH – one could say that the natural cinematographic sequences in this film are primarily experienced as being overwhelmingly beautiful; possibly, in some cases, awe-inspiringly sublime, given the sheer magnitude of nature that they convey, while the technology-sequences, because they attest to technology’s undeniable power to transform the earth and all life on it, strike one as being awe-inspiring in their own right. The difference between the former and the latter may be formulated in terms of ugliness: where huge machines are seen operating against a natural backdrop, or where people are shown, trying to soak up the sun, as if on a beach, against the backdrop of a nuclear reactor, the clash between awesome, world-transforming technological power, on the one hand, and (what used to be) ‘natural’ surroundings, on the other, produces the ugly. In the case of the urban scenes of traffic-movements in large cities the emphasis is somewhat different, especially with the accelerated movements of car-lights (white and red) at night, describing what seems like hyper-kinetic, disembodied pirouettes and arabesques. At a purely *formal* level these movements are, like the natural sequences, strikingly beautiful, perhaps even sublime in their awe-inspiring complexity (which Reggio likens, through image-juxtaposition, to the intricate circuitry of computer-networks), but when one reminds oneself that, at the level of content (that is, what they refer to in realistic terms), they represent traffic-flows of such intricacy and magnitude that this innovative way of presenting them visually and auditorily actively asserts the impossibility of presenting them ‘adequately’, so that one could comfortably ‘take them in’ at a sensory level. The result of this interplay between seeing (images) and reflecting (thoughts) is an experience of the postmodern sublime.

In the light of this, my earlier contention may be corroborated, namely, that under the prevailing circumstances on earth an aesthetic of the beautiful is out of the question – while the natural image-configurations in *Koyaanisqatsi*, as well as the nocturnal traffic-light sequences are certainly experienced as beautiful (perhaps with resonances of sublimity), in juxtaposition with the technology- and ugly, dystopic urban image-sequences (for example of urban decay), the effect that is produced is one of the sublime, given the tension enacted by what Hurst has called the ‘bringing together of cosmos and chaos’. More accurately, Reggio’s three Qatsi-films are instances of Lyotard’s postmodern sublime, in so far as their means of presentation – film-images and musical sounds – are used in exceptionally innovative ways to conjure up the distinct experience that what is presented, and experienced, far surpasses the means of presentation themselves. Small wonder that the unusually sensitive student I referred to earlier, was overcome by the sheer power of this experience of the postmodern sublime. It should also be evident that Reggio’s film(s) parallels the effect of Goldsworthy’s ecological art – on the one hand neither rejects or eschews human intervention in natural processes – if they did, neither Goldsworthy’s ‘unstable’ ecological works of art, nor Reggio’s technology-critical films would have been possible – but on the other hand both affirm, in distinctive ways, the irreducible primacy of nature, even when it is always, unavoidably, a humanly appropriated nature, as well as the *urgent* need that humankind take note of the effects of human intervention in such natural processes, which can be either (and are, on a large scale) technologically devastating to nature, or of a symbiotic kind (like Goldsworthy’s artworks) which respect the rhythms of nature. And what they share, is the invocation of an aesthetic of the sublime, predicated, not on the complete abandonment of beauty or its affirmation in specific contexts (what Sabina calls ‘beauty by mistake’), but on the ineluctable truth that instances of beauty, and of ugliness (as characterized in this article) have to be – in fact, cannot *but* be – seen in relation to a history of

art and of social as well as political (including military) events on a global scale – events that have ruled out both innocence regarding beauty as well as its artificial and cynical manipulation in the form of kitsch, for the sake of capitalist gain.

The world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has become irretrievably complex, and only an aesthetic of the sublime (which nevertheless acknowledges the fragmentary existence of beauty and the increasingly pervasive existence of ugliness) can adequately account for it. After *Auschwitz*, and in light of the ongoing de-realization characteristic of both modern and postmodern processes in technoscience and in capitalism, a conception of reality as ‘whole’ – which is presupposed by an aesthetic of beauty – can no longer be maintained. Social and natural reality have been fractured. Moreover, in the process an art of the sublime serves the interests of truth in the Heideggerian sense of unconcealedness (*aletheia*), that is, an art committed to uncovering, making visible and comprehensible, the global process of ‘development’ as one which continually complexifies (and ‘uglifies’) the relation between human society and nature, and does so in a way that – as Lyotard has argued – relegates human concerns to the position of irrelevance. An art of the sublime – such as Goldsworthy’s or Reggio’s – is in a unique position to ‘uncover’ this inhuman aspect of techno-scientific development. In the process it could perhaps bring about a growing, critical, social praxis intent on finding ways to change this kind of development to one that is less inimical to the life-sustaining relation between humankind and nature, lest even the contingent experience of beauty that (given its complex relation with the sublime and with ugliness) is subsumed under an aesthetic of the sublime, become a thing of the past, as Sabina anticipates.

## Notes

- 1 In Plato’s *Symposium* (1965: 93-94), for example, the lover’s arduous journey towards the ultimately worthy object of his or her love culminates in an ecstatic, mystical union when he or she beholds the immutable Form of Beauty. Not only does this presuppose the possibility of a kind of metaphysical-aesthetic oneness and wholeness that humans should strive for, but it also implies a belief in a reality – albeit here a supra-sensible one (the Forms ‘exist’ outside of time and space) – which is conceived of as whole. As I shall attempt to show, this presupposition of a reality characterized by wholeness is no longer believable, and with it collapses the possibility of an aesthetic of the beautiful.
- 2 For an elaboration on the question concerning the function of kitsch in contemporary culture, see Olivier (2003). Suffice it to say, for the moment, that kitsch is ‘bad’ art, characterized by its anaesthetizing effect, that is, by its sentimentalist affirmation of the social and political *status quo*.
- 3 The ‘real’ in Lacan’s theory of the subject is one of three registers in which the subject is articulated, the other two being the symbolic, or language, and the imaginary (that of images). Unlike the latter two orders, however, the ‘real’ is not susceptible to linguistic or iconic articulation; it is the internal limit of the symbolic – where language falters, one encounters the real, as in the case of the experience of something traumatic. See in this regard Olivier 2005a & 2007c).
- 4 See in this regard Olivier (1998: 207-209) and Crowther (1993: 162-176) for a discussion of the experience of the sublime in the context of postmodernity, and especially the part of the discussion (in each case) that pertains to Lyotard’s curatorship of an unusual art exhibition or installation – titled *The Immaterials* – which testifies to the connection between the experience of the sublime and the complexity of contemporary culture.
- 5 Arguably ‘*Auschwitz*’ and ‘Hiroshima’ share the dubious (absurd, in fact) factor of a technical or instrumental rationality predicated on the principle of ‘the most quantitatively efficient way of disposing of (that is, murdering or destroying) human beings’. Just how absurd it is becomes clearer when one compares it with the already absurd rules of conventional warfare, according to which it is acceptable to wage war by means of certain types of conventionally *acceptable* weapons (such as assault rifles, machine guns, bombs, rockets, hand grenades, etc.), but not by means of conventionally *unacceptable* weapons (such as poison gases,

- nerve gases, and so on). Why absurd? Because the mere fact of destroying human lives in systematic warfare (or through so-called ‘acts of terror’, for that matter) is already absurd, that is, meaningless. I should add a proviso to this, however: in a time (among the ancient Greeks, for example) when war or battle occurred with a completely different understanding of what it meant – specifically in the form of engaging in hand-to-hand combat – in terms of valour and honour, one could argue that such acts of war were meaningful. But that context of meaning has not existed for a long time; the most recent era of its relevance was probably the era of the ‘samurai warrior’ in Japan.
- 6 See Olivier (2001) for a discussion of this, among other things, in the context of the question regarding the sublime in painting.
  - 7 In the course of a conversation on the present topic.
  - 8 Needless to stress, Lyotard’s characterization of the philosopher here is a normative one that few so-called ‘philosophers’ in the sense of ‘teachers of philosophy’ would satisfy. Most such teachers fall into the category of what Pirsig (1992: 376-381) calls ‘philosophologists’ – ‘professionals’ who use books to acquaint students with certain philosophical text, and expect of them to regurgitate these texts to them during tests and examinations, for the teachers to ‘grade’. There is scant sign in such ‘standard’ philosophical teaching of any of the always provisional, revisable, searching activity that philosophy (and art) really is.
  - 9 See in this regard Olivier (2004a) for an investigation into the prevalence of passive nihilism in two recent films.
  - 10 With regard to ‘trauma’ in the psychoanalytical sense, see Olivier (2007c), for a sustained examination of the traumatic impact of the event of 9/11 in the light of Derrida’s and Habermas’s reflections on it.
  - 11 See Olivier 1998a for an account of the place of art in Hegel’s thought.
  - 12 See Derrida 2001; Lacan 1977; Gutting 2005; Hurst 2004; and Olivier 2004.
  - 13 How this kind of truth as unconcealing occurs in art is shown by an examination of Cameron’s two *Terminator* films (1 and 2), where, as science fiction, they both showcase and critique the power of science and technology to set up new worlds, as it were, and simultaneously threaten to undermine human autonomous decision-making. See Olivier 2002 for a thoroughgoing investigation of this problematic.
  - 14 See Olivier (1998) for a clarification of this claim by means of the analysis of several instances of such divergence of thought and representability, ranging from an astronomical example (in terms of unimaginable magnitudes of time and space) to a mathematical (the Mandelbrot set), an economic (the sublimity of capital as process) and a social one (the intricate, ever-complexifying interrelationships among members of a historically changing community – the ‘social’ sublime).
  - 15 Elsewhere (Olivier 2001) I have discussed the work of Morley and other postmodern artists such as Anselm Kiefer in relation to the work of Merleau-Ponty and the question, whether a *raison d’être* can still be provided for painting in the contemporary world of technological innovation.
  - 16 Crowther (1993:187) reminds one that Morley’s work announces unmistakably that it is serious and critical, despite ostensibly resembling pop art (e.g. Warhol’s), whose humour, hedonism or irony it lacks.
  - 17 See in this regard Olivier (1998), for a sustained examination of the sense in which postmodern culture may be described as being complex, and of its relation to the sublime.
  - 18 On several previous occasions I have had reason to address the complex question of the effects of human activities on nature, and the reciprocal effects of environmental degradation on human psychic health – and what could be done about it. See, for example, Olivier 2005; 2006; 2007a; and 2007b.
  - 19 For a more thoroughgoing interpretation of Goldsworthy’s work as ecological art, see Olivier (2007).
  - 20 See Olivier 2007d for an investigation of the ethical dimension of art.
  - 21 For a more lengthy treatment of Reggio’s magnificent film-trilogy in the context of the question concerning an appropriate ‘model’ for contemporary art, see Olivier (2005b).

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