Flatness and immersion in Mariko Mori's *Pureland:* the possibility of a digital sublime

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The possibility of a "digital sublime" is investigated in this paper mainly as it may appear in a Cibachrome print entitled *Pureland by* Japanese artist Mariko Mori (Weintraub 2003). The pleasant appearance of the image is striking and seems to allude to the affirmative character of mass media images describing beautiful natural scenery. Sentimental images also appear in Japanese *manga* and *anime,* and in Western popular media such as Hollywood films. Furthermore *Pureland* seems reminiscent of landscape traditions that relate to idyllic yearning or nostalgia. It appears as if something is omitted from the image, however. This may indicate that what is *not depicted* (something un-pleasant?) may also be relevant, and is investigated as allusion to the digital sublime lurking beneath the smooth appearance, manifesting in brief moments of "presence" as Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (2004) interprets it. I derive what I understand as the "digital sublime" from Jean-Francois Lyotard's (1984: 36-43) sublime. The sublime as aesthetic concept is investigated in the context of the mystic landscape tradition which is fundamentally opposed to affirmative (idyllic) tendencies in both art and popular culture, which may be present in *Pureland.* The co-existence of conflicting idyllic and mystic strands in the image is investigated throughout as an uneasy relationship which may rupture to reveal the digital sublime. *Pureland may* be a hybrid image, not only digitally composited from existing visual material, but also comprised of traces of disparate Japanese and European visual traditions and conventions. This is dicussed in conclusion.
Key words: digital sublime, presence, *manga*

Mariko Mori se *Pureland:* "platheid" en "immersie" en die moontlikheid van 'n digitate sublieme

Die moontlikheid van 'n "digitale sublieme" word in hierdie artikel ondersoek, soos dit moontlik onderliggend voorkom in 'n fotografiese afdruk wat gebruik maak van die "Cibachrome"-proses. Die afdruk is getiteld *Pureland,* en is een van die bekendste kunswerke van Japannese kunstenaar Mariko Mori (Weintraub 2003). Die aangename voorkoms en karakter van die kunswerk is opvallend en dit blyk aanduidend te wees van die karakter van afbeeldings in die massamedia wat beeldskone natuurtonele uitbeeld. Sulke sentimentele beelde kom voor in Japannese *manga* en *anime,* en in Westerse populêre media soos Hollywood films. Die voorkoms van *Pureland* mag dalk ook veband hou met tradisies van landskapskildering wat met idilliese en nostalgiese maniere van kyk gepaardgaan. Die gladheid en aangename karakter van *Pureland* skep die indruk dat iets ontbreek uit die beeld. Dit mag wees dat dit wat nie uitgebeeld word nie (iets onaangenaams?) ook van toepassing is. Hierdie aspek van die kunswerk word ondersoek as 'n aanduiding van die digitale sublieme wat versteek is onder die gladde voorkoms van die kunswerk. Dit mag verskyn in oomblikke van "presence" soos wat Hans Ulrich Gumbrecth (2004) dit defmieer. Die "digitale sublieme" word hier geinterpreteer as 'n uitvloeisel van Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984: 36-43) se konsep van die sublieme. Die sublieme as estetiese verwikkelling word verstaan binne die konteks van die mistieke landskapskilderingstradisie, wat fundamenteel teenoor die meer positiewe en idilliese karakter wat in beide kuns en populêre kultuur mag voorkom staan. Ek ondersoek die moontlikheid dat die bevestigende karakter van die massamedia 'n gelyke het in *Pureland.* Die saambestaan van beide idilliese en mistiese strominge in *Pureland* is dus 'n teenstelling wat spanning veroorsaak binne die kunswerk. Hierdie spanning word in die artikel ontrafel as moontlike aanduiding van die digitale sublieme. *Pureland* is moontlik 'n hibriede kunswerk wat digitaal saamgestel is uit bestaande visuele materiaal maar ook 'n samevloeiing is van teenstrydige visuele landskapstradisies. Hierdie aspek van die kunswerk word ten slotte bespreek.
Sleutelwoorde: digitale sublieme, "presence", *manga*

This paper focuses on a Cibachrome print entitled *Pureland* (figure 1) by Japanese artist Mariko Mori (Weintraub 2003). The print is a still image from one of her 3D installations titled *Nirvana.* The process of printing a Cibachrome print (or Ilfochrome) entails printing directly from a slide onto a plastic base. The image is clear, colours are vivid and will not fade. It is also an archival process that retains critical accuracy to the original slide. *Pureland* may be found as a printed reproduction in calendars and books and certain of Mori's prints are even exhibited on light boxes. Because the image is digitally generated reproducing it in print has interesting implication in terms of authenticity. Mitchell (1992: 3-57) refers to this aspect of digital images in his book *The reconfigured eye.* The digital nature

of the work is not only important because of its ontology, but it is also evident in various aspects of its appearance. These aspects are unravelled as strands of meaning in this paper.

Figure 1
Mariko Mori (1967-), *Pureland* (1997-98). Glass with photo interlayer, edition of three. Five panels of 305 x 610 x 2.2 cm each. Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Weintraub 2003: 315).

What is immediately prominent is the colouring and idyllic tranquillity of the image. One may even go so far as to dismiss this as an image that originated within popular mass media. The pink colours, smooth surfaces and cute figurines floating around the female figure appear decorative and sweet. The landscape seems unreal and fantastical and impossibly tranquil. The female figure (a self-portrait of Mori) reminds one of a Buddhist deity and seems to be the cherry on top of this saccharine image. Is it possible to discern anything but affirmative kitsch here?

The pleasant appearance of the image could allude to the affirmative character of mass media images describing beautiful natural scenery, such as screensavers or wallpapers decorating computer screens. The image also seems reminiscent of sentimental images as they appear in Japanese *manga* and *anime* (popular graphic novels and animated films and television series). I subsequently refer to these genres as interchangeable since they are often representative of the same series. Comparing Pureland to *manga* seems plausible since the artist is Japanese, but would it be possible to interpret this image by comparing it to Western visual culture? I will attempt to do so since I believe that along with its strong reference to Japanese visual culture, *Pureland* seems evocative of Western popular culture such as Hollywood films, as well as landscape painting traditions that relate to idyllic yearning or nostalgia. I suspect that *Pureland* is "composited" in a manner which draws from both Japanese and Western visual culture (Manovich 2001: 136-160). The composited nature of the image manifests in a flatness of representation that gives the image a screen-like appearance. The dynamics that exist between user and computer screen are important to my interpretation of the image and what I suspect it may conceal.

The insistent pleasantness of the image makes it appear as if something is omitted from the image. This aspect of the work forms the focus of the paper, since it may indicate that what is *not depicted* (something un-pleasant?) may also be relevant. That will be investigated here as allusion to the "digital sublime". Such an interpretation of the sublime is relatively unexplored in contemporary aesthetics, and I draw from existing aesthetic theory on the subject. The "digital sublime" may be derived from Jean-Francois Lyotard's (1984: 36-43)

understanding of the sublime. He interprets the sublime as "avant-garde", and discerns it within Abstract Expressionist art. The difficulty this art entails for the spectator is fundamental to his interpretation of the sublime moment. More generally the sublime is here investigated in the context of the mystic landscape tradition which is fundamentally opposed to affirmative (idyllic) tendencies in both art and popular culture. The supposition that any form of the sublime can be discerned in an image which displays affirmative tendencies is thus problematic. The co-existence of conflicting idyllic and mystic strands in the image is investigated here as an uneasy relationship which may reveal the digital sublime in moments when the merging of the two rupture. I suspect that such potential conflict reveal a "digital sublime" lurking beneath the pleasant exterior of affirmative mass media images, such as those mentioned above. This sublime would not be a fixed presence but rather a floating occurrence appearing at intervals and manifesting in brief moments of "presence" and "suddenness" as respectively defined by Hans Ulrich Gumbrect (2004) and Karl Heinz Bohrer (1994: 198-226).

1 Sublime expanse

In attempting to better understand the potential nuances of the digital sublime in *Pureland,* I return to the ontology of the sublime as aesthetic concept. Although the sublime is intertwined with developments in aesthetic thought and art practice, and has thus undergone many revisions, certain aspects of its ontology are still discernible in contemporary aesthetics. The sublime is associated with the inferiority of the human subject before greater forces and power as Immanuel Kant (1790-99) theorised on it in his *Critique of Judgement*[1]. Most importantly it is characterised by an emotionally charged implosion or reversal of feeling within the subject. The importance for Kant (1790-99: 26) was that the subject experienced a triumphant realisation of human dignity in the face of existential threat. This dynamic relied on the conception of the free rational human personality of the Enlightenment. As modernity and post-modernity dawned such a conception of the human personality collapsed. Following from this a contemporary sublime can no longer be expected to mirror the experience Kant thought it was.

Figure 2
Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840), *Monk by the sea* (1809-10). Oil on canvas, 110 x 171.5 cm. Berlin: National Gallerie (Koerner 1990: 168).

Rather than discuss the pleasant appearance of *Pureland,* I would compare it with an unlikely painting, which may reveal that *Pureland's* pleasant surface belies an underlying negativity. Caspar David Friedrich's *Monk by the sea* (figure 2) has featurelessness in common with *Pureland,* but this seems to be all, at first glance. Friedrich's painting simply depicts a miniscule monk-like figure on the edge of a gloomy shore. The painting as a whole can be understood in terms of the Kantian sublime. For him, the sublime confrontation with vast or powerfully threatening nature leads the human subject to overcome terror in the face of it, and eventually to experience a sense of elation at human intellectual superiority, despite sensory inferiority. He thus sees it as a dialectic of terror and attraction (Kant 1790-99: 5-42). The threat of being engulfed by the sheer magnitude of the expanse in *Monk by the sea* is clearly visible, the monk is dwarfed by it. In *Pureland'* there is no apparent threat however, it seems that *Pureland* depicts exactly what *Monk by the sea* does not depict. Is *Pureland* really comparable to Friedrich's painting? What does this comparison yield?

1.2 The Kantian sublime

Monk by the sea can be understood aesthetically with reference to the notion of the infinite in Kant's theory. He distinguished the experience of the sublime as judgements of the mathematical and the dynamic sublime. The former is related to the infinite vastness of the scene or object, and the latter to terrible forces of nature, as seen from a relatively safe vantage point. The monk in the painting seems trapped in a threatening and vast natural environment. Can the figure of the monk be interpreted as one that understands the forces of nature as sublime? For Kant the sublime is always excited by natural scenery, and not by artificial objects. To apply his theory to a painting is already changing its essence, but since he is of the opinion that the sublime can never be represented or "contained in sensuous form" (Kant 1790-99: 25), it follows that even nature cannot really be a *presentation* of something that is sublime. Nature can be regarded as a manifestation of God's power which is infinite, but nature itself is not infinite. The sublime ultimately takes place as an event within the human subject.2 Robert Rosenblum (1978: 21-24) argues that the monk may be searching for this manifestation of God's infinite power in his harsh landscape. Can the viewer of this painting access this notion of vastness as well? Can vastness be captured?

Although we rationally know that a painting is not limitless, Friedrich's work evokes or invokes human vulnerability in the face of the infinite so vividly that one feels disorientated. Albert Boime (1986: 436) discusses Heinrich von Kleist's reference to this as a feeling of having one's eyelids severed. Von Kleist writes from a stance of animal absorption or immersion in the work, which may be represented by the unearthly subverbal howling of wolves and foxes (Flax 1984: 19). In other words, one is thrust into the desolation of the landscape (painting) with such vivid effect that one could almost imagine the howling of wolves. The viewer literally has no ground to stand on, there is nothing in the foreground to orientate the position of the viewer, and one is violently thrust into the position of the monk. The primary constituent of a sublime experience is not the danger of the threat of the vast or powerful, but lies in the dynamic of the human reaction to this. Triumph over the powers of nature also leaves the human subject with a sense of his or her freedom to act at will, but with the power to overcome temptations of the moral kind. The sublime experience leaves one feeling morally exalted. It is an awareness of human self-worth and dignity (Mothersill 1997: 410-411). The monk in Friedrich's painting represents such dignity. Although the monk seems physically threatened, he seems also to be on the brink of spiritual enlightenment or transcendence with regard to what is beyond the landscape in the metaphysical.

The spectator is prompted to search for depth in the shallow horizon of *Monk by the sea,* but the sky is opaque and offers no clue as to where the eye should focus. The monk is an insubstantial point of reference and does not satisfy the urge of the viewer to penetrate the depths of the landscape. What is strange with respect to the representation of the sky, is that it is painted in thick tactile strokes, making it physically dense. This forms a contrast to the foreground, as that which is nearer in perspectival terms, the figure and the beach, is painted in thinner veils of colour. This contrast between distance and proximity, fmitude and infinitude, figure and ground, subverts the principles of one point perspective and illusory depth. Following these principles, an artist would usually depict that which is nearer in a denser, intensely coloured manner to create a clear focal point, and that which is further away in thinner insubstantial layers of paint. Friedrich's contradiction of this creates the feeling of the painting disintegrating into its illusionary depth. The sky is no longer just illusionary sky because the illusion is contradicted by the appearance of paint. J.L. Koerner (1990: 119-121) surmises that this might be telling of what Friedrich wanted to depict. It is as if the human subject is simply overcome by the elements, and in the human yearning to transcend the material world, one ultimately becomes trapped in the very basic nature of physical humanity. The viewer experiences this frustration as the painting offers no clear transcendental meaning to the spectator. In attempting to find the deeper significance in the work one is hindered by the very element that would at first seem to be its crux; the sky. One is tempted to continue looking into that undefined distance for a revelation or apparition of some sort, but in the end one can only stare into an impenetrable surface of paint. This lack of depiction of the sublime relates to the mystic tradition and can be related to the Gnostic concept *ofkenosis* or an emptying of the vessel. Meaning is not carried by what is depicted, but by what is not depicted; the sublime.

The atmosphere in *Pureland* plays a similar trick on the eye. Although this is not caused by physical medium one is aware of the flatness of the Cibachrome print. Even if this were a digitally displayed image one could only skim its visible surface. The expanse that is evoked in Mori's work seems different from the space in Friedrich's painting. It is dense and tinged with an artificial pink. Where Friedrich's use of colour and medium refer to the limitations of the earthly realm, *Pureland* seems to refer to an artificial landscape, a digital space, or even cyberspace It may also seem that she is depicting some spiritual realm, but the presence of popular reference makes this implausible. It seems then that Mori does not utilise the negatory approach of mystic landscape representation. At the same time it seems too harmonious and resolved to be credible. What is hidden? Does the space in *Pureland* relate to the vastness of cyberspace as Baurdillard (1993) sees it; immersive and threatening?

1.3 Lyotard and the sublime

Whereas Kant understood the sublime as the experience of a manifestation in the natural environment, Lyotard[3] sees the post-modern sublime as manifest in avant-garde art. He surmises that it is the duty of avant-garde art to be sublime. Lyotard's understanding of the sublime relates to Abstract Expressionist art in as far as it is avant-garde, and employs the negative dynamic of subverting the representational expectations of spectators (Olivier 2001: 99). Accordingly the unpresentable (the sublime) can occur in art when representation is avoided. Avant-garde art is indigestible, not easily consumed by the public, as it does not follow the expected visual or aesthetic principles (Lyotard 1984: 36-43). Work such as that of Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Kazimir Malevich and other Abstract Expressionists leave the viewer puzzled. The paintings by these artists, such as Mark Rothko's *Blue, green and brown* (figure 3), seem to have little to them from a technical and visual point of view. This poses a problem for the viewer. What do the paintings allude to? What do they mean? According to Lyotard they deny the "solace

of good forms" and break the rules by seeking new possibilities for representation that are not subject to an established "consensus of good taste" (Malpas 2002: 202).

Figure 3
Mark Rothko (1903-1970), *Blue, green and brown* (1951). Oil on canvas. Upperville: collection of Mrs. Paul Mellon (van de Vail 1995: 70).

Renée de Vail (1995: 69-75) argues that Rothko's *Blue, green and brown* (fig. 4) defies comprehension as a whole, since there are no sharp contrasts for the eye to focus on. One is left floating one's gaze over the surface of the work, and yet not arriving at a solid impression of the work. The rectangular forms at the bottom of the canvas encourage the eye to move horizontally, and yet their low positioning on the canvas opposes this tendency. At the same time the rectangular forms are transparent and afloat. The movements in opposite directions draw the gaze of the spectator apart. The spectator is thus forced to open his or her eyes very widely, and this dreamy gaze encourages the viewer to be sucked deeper into the painting. This feeling of immersion is the crux of the sublime experience. It is similar to the feeling of having one's eyelids severed, associated with Friedrich's work. The lines around the outside of the work may act as a frame, directing the spectator's gaze towards the inside of the painting, but at the same time the rectangular shapes may be understood as a barrier to the gaze, opaque and flat. There is a constant oscillation between these two possibilities, and one cannot pin the image down to one possibility. One may get lost in this painting, and yet it is too unsettling to leave the viewer dreaming away in peace. Like Friedrich's *Monk by the sea* (figure 2), the eye is trapped on the brink of a transcendence that is simultaneously implied and negated.

Thomas McEvilley (1996:45-90) draws parallels between the lack of perspectival depth in Abstract Expressionist paintings and the Japanese gaze of *śūnyatā*. This manner of looking relies on the simultaneous representation of multiple viewpoints of the subject. The spectator is left with the difficult task of making visual sense of such a composition. As such, unresolved representations may relate to the sublime, but this is discussed in section three.

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For Lyotard (1984) the sublime is about "now", the moment that takes place as opposed to nothing happening. The threat that all things may end and nothing will happen is what triggers the sublime experience. The event of the artwork's existence in the face of the terror of the sublime and its threat of privation constitutes that sublime "now". This "now" is at once the threat of privation (the end of all events), which is anticipation and the relief afforded by the artwork itself and which then meets that anticipation with its own existence. It is the unpresentable which cannot be pre-determined, for who can say what this "now" looks like. It is simply an event and can be seen as contingent. This event could be the "aesthetic appearance" of Nietzsche that Bohrer (1994: 118) also calls "suddenness" or the "presence" that Gumbrecht (2004) refers to. The event becomes the trigger of the sublime when it is experienced by the viewer. The sublime is the sudden appearance of the experience of aesthetic intensity (Gumbrecht 2004:118). This intensity can in Nietzschean terms refer to the chaos of rapture, which seems to refer to a primordial animal state in which the human intellect is negated in favour of surrender to the moment. Seen in this context, the avant-garde artwork has a sense of the ontological, as not mimetic of nature but as an existence of its own, as "elementary" or at the "origin" of painting as art (Lyotard 1984: 41).

Perhaps such an essential "now" is what is missing in *Pureland.* It seems that the image evades pinning down. In fact, I am of the opinion that the saccharine character of the work denies this appearance or manifestation of "now". The surface of the work is affirmative in appearance, and this is essentially the opposite of the negatory tone of Lyotard's avant-garde sublime. However, could a negation or denial of the negatory in *Pureland's* affirmative character in fact disguise an underlying sublimity in the work? The image seems to use every convention to appear agreeable to the viewer, the colours are saturated and sweet, textures are smooth, the landscape is calm and there are decorative details such as the beautiful costume Mori dressed herself in. Everything seems resolved. Yet something is not right. *Pureland's* expanse spreads one's eye across the surface of the work, denying any perspectival interpretation of the image, but also denying conceptual depth. It is this flatness that may negate the affirmative appearance of the work, facilitating a sublime experience. What is concealed beneath the smooth pacific appearance of the image is unstable. It manifests only momentarily, and while the viewer may experience unease when regarding the pleasant *Pureland,* the underlying presence is not visible except peripherally. What remains un-represented in the image can only be apprehended in the flickering of its screen-like character.

2 The immersivity of the screen

The tautness of *Pureland* relates to pictorial flatness but also to the computer and television screen. The sky and water in *Pureland* display a flatness which may be related to the computer screen. Water is a useful metaphor in explaining the dynamics of the user's interaction with the screen. Certain functions are performed on toolbars and other software interfaces which appear to be on the surface of the screen, but there is also virtual depth comparable to the depth of water. One is aware of information beyond the screen, the most obvious derivative being the internet and immersive cyberspace. The image from *Final Fantasy* (figure 4) clarifies the dynamics of the computer screen. There is a transparent surface similar to that of water, through which one looks. This refers to the virtual depth of the screen, the information contained within or potentially downloadable from the internet for example. On the other hand the screen has a surface that is visible, which is the interface. One is aware of it while looking through it. It becomes like a prosthesis, a medium for interpreting information (Baudrillard 1993:). One can become "immersed" in this environment, because one is always searching for the information which lurks beyond the interface. Immersion is not a concept pioneered in new media studies,

it can be related to spectator interaction with Renaissance paintings where perspectival depth was important. Oliver Grau (2003) discusses the ontology of the concept at great length in his book *Virtual art, from illusion to immersion.* What is of consequence here is the application of the concept to images that entice the viewer and seem to suggest depicted space for the viewer to "enter". In the case of *Pureland* this enticement is also resistant, since the conceptual shallowness of the image seems disappointing. The viewer is visually disappointed because the spread-out landscape is flat even if it seems to suggest depth.

Figure 4
Wallpaper from the film *Final Fantasy the Spirits Within* (2001). Directed by HironobuSakaguchi<www. gaming-age.com/media/2001/july/ffmov/l.jpg>

The sky in *Pureland* appears opaque, but one can intuit the activity and energy beyond the placid surface. Beneath the stable and uniform appearance, one may encounter on a computer or television screen a miasma of electronic activity. The image that appears on the screen as a whole is really never a complete image, but appears to be so because of the after-image left on the retina of the eye (Grau 2003: 192-204). The screen flickers, fluoresces and hums, it is constantly feeding information and obtaining feedback from the processor and it is potentially connected to the virtual digital world which is also what constitutes invisible cyberspace. Cyberspace is not only a vast expanse, but is also constantly in flux, such as a living body or entity.

If one understands *Pureland*'in terms of the screen then it follows that what is displayed is simply one aspect of its nature, and there is potential virtual or conceptual depth. The interplay between surface and depth is related to the concept of immersion which in turn reveals the unyielding character of the image (Grau 2003). *Pureland* draws the viewer in with pleasant details but conceals what the viewer suspects is also present. The lawlessness of the image is so implausible that one expects it to reveal something more nasty, yet the image does not respond. It almost becomes an unresolved experience in that the viewer feels unsure of what is being depicted and what cannot be depicted. *Pureland* does not instigate the Kantian sublime experience; rather the question arises whether *Pureland* does relate to the "digital sublime" in its immersive "screen" qualities. Can immersive viewing of digital imagery lead to the experience of a "digital sublime", as immersion within *Monk by the sea* led to the Kantian sublime? If so then it seems that the depiction or negation of space relates to the experience of the sublime.

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The underlying unpresentability, the threat or vastness, speed and power of the internet and cyberspace is manifest in many popular representations and new media artworks. The pleasant appearance4 of *Pureland* is one (albeit unlikely) manifestation of the unpresentability of cyberspace and digital culture. *Pureland* emphasises the presence of a possible threat by concealing it or omitting it from the image. Because the threat of the vastness of cyberspace is understood as unpresentable, it cannot be represented visually for direct experience. It can be hinted at or evoked, and Mori does this by deliberately *not* evoking it, and not hinting at it.5 Other strategies would involve the depiction of the abject, the grotesque or the excessively violent6. This is seen in the decaying boar demon from Miyazaki's *Princess Mononoke* (fig. 6). It is so horrible that it appears as an embodiment of the *informe* (Bryson 1993: 220), but of course it is not. It simply reminds the viewer of the possibility of the unpresentable or sublime or *informe,* because it subverts the mechanisms of an "aesthetic of popular beauty" (Olivier 2001: 99). It opposes reactions of neutrality, contentment and indifference in the viewer.

3 Flatness and immersion in Japanese visual culture
3.1 The gaze of *śūnyatā*

The spread-out perspective of *Pureland* with elements on the very edge of the picture, along with its flatness may relate to the Japanese concept of *śūnyatā,* which can be translated as emptiness or nihility (Bryson 1998: 88). This Japanese approach to seeing does not rely on the object/subject distinction employed by the gaze (of Lacan and Sartre). The object is instead regarded in the context of "the expanded field of blankness" (Bryson 1988: 100). *Śūnyatā* is a device that is employed in much of Japanese landscape representation.

What is important is emphasis on views of the object that the subject cannot see exclusively from one position. These views cannot be simultaneously represented or experienced by the human subject and in this sense becomes an unpresentable comparable to the unpresentable sublime in Abstract Expressionist art such as in the work of Mark Rothko (figure 3). In seeing a representation that refers to the gaze of *śūnyatā,* the viewer is immersed in a space that he or she is unable to grasp sensorily. This is comparable to the process the subject experiences with the dynamics of the Kantian sublime. It may also be compared to the immersion one experiences in virtual space such as cyberspace.

In *Pureland, śūnyatā* relates to the difficulty the viewer encounters with the image. Mori's use of horizontality and lack of depth perspective at once draws the viewer in and repulses the eye, since the viewer's gaze cannot penetrate the image but is spread out over the horizontal surface of the image. This feeling of being unable to penetrate the depths of the image leaves the viewer feeling disorientated since the expected Western convention of subject and object cannot be sustained. Even though the image appears tranquil and sweet it reveals nothing beyond this for the viewer to engage in. The image appears at once immersive and impenetrable.

3.2 The floating world

The particular "flatness" or lack of conventional depth of the image may also be investigated in relation to a more popular visual culture in Japan; that of *ukiyo-e* prints from the Edo period. *Ukiyo-e* originates from a Buddhist concept meaning the "floating world", and refers to the earthly world of transient pleasures. In the Edo period the word was associated with woodblock prints depicting the past-times and entertainment of the merchant classes (Screech 2002: 22-23).

Manga (Japanese graphic novels) and *anime* (Japanese animated films or television series) can be related back to Hokusai's range of woodblock prints entitled *Manga* (Brehm 2002: 15). Woodblock prints from the Edo period bear a striking resemblance to contemporary *manga* and *anime* in the use of visual conventions such as dark outlines and flatness of representation. Japanese woodblock prints are visually flat in different ways to Mori's image. In one such a print, Katsushika Hokusai's *Red Fuji* (figure 5), objects are outlined in black and colours are bright and not very realistic. The rainbow used to print the mountain in the image is characteristic of *ukiyo-e. Pureland* displays some of this rainbow quality. More striking perhaps, is that the rainbow results in a flatness of representation as it is always horizontal or vertical, but never three-dimensional. In Hokusai's print there is no foreground and no real vanishing point. It is hard to see the image as being representative of a localised point or geographical space, and it was clearly not constructed around the principles of the Western gaze and representational perspective. What is important in this investigation is that the flatness of the screen, the flatness of *sīinyatā* and *ukiyo-e* are all understood to inform the flatness of *Pureland.* The diversity of these concepts contribute disparate and seemingly irreconcilable connotations and meaning to the image. In the unifying glow of *Pureland* all differences are airbrushed into an uneasy whole that now sees to be verging on grotesque.

Figure 5
Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849), *Fuji in clear weather* (1823-29). Woodblock print, 26.1 x 37.6 cm.
Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum. (Hillier 1954: 35).

Ukiyo-e also has a particular relationship with European painting. Many of the Impressionists were influenced by *ukiyo-e* prints. Siegfried Wichmann (1985) discusses the influence and attraction of the exotic Orient for artists such as Monet and van Gogh. One may argue that *manga* retains some of the exotic attraction that *ukiyo-e* held for the West. It has certainly become immensely popular outside Japan. An exotic view of Japan may be entangled with the country's self-awareness in this regard. Japan has become both what the West imagines it to be and what it "remembers" nostalgically to be its traditional identity (Iwabuchi 2002, Sato 2004). As a South African educated in European art history I cannot extricate myself from Orientalist discourse in writing about Japanese culture. I think it is prudent to limit discussion of the complex relationship between Japan and the West in historical terms in this paper. I prefer to focus here on the perceived exotic nature of Japan as by nineteenth century Europe, and subsequent remains of this perception. I suspect that such remaining exotic views of Japan

are merged with a larger idyllic trend in global mass culture. *Manga* (along with Hollywood) is in turn participating in propagating such idyllic views of not only itself but the future of the globe and humanity. This Utopian picture of humankind is often contrasted with apocalyptic scenarios in popular culture, but I will discuss the possibility that these two scenarios are actually manifestations of the digital sublime below.

3.3 *Manga: kawaii* and violence

The tiny plastic aliens in Mori's image are computer generated, and although they seem three-dimensional in a sense, they are smooth and putty-like which gives them a flat appearance. The little aliens resemble figures frequently found in *anime,* such as the tree spirits in Miyazaki's *Princess Mononoke.* They also bear resemblance to Takashi Murakami's characters, Kaikai and Kiki, depicted in many of his paintings (Brehm 2002). These figures resemble toys, but also children. Japanese animation *(anime)* is known to be obsessed with "cute" things (in Japanese the word is *kawaii),* and this urge to "make things cute" is implicit in *Pureland* (Ngai 2005: 811-847). To my mind this cuteness can be compared with a greater idyllic trend in mass culture, and the two become complementary.

Figure 6
Still image from *Princess Mononoke,* directed by Hayao Miyazaki (1997) depicting a boar-demon.

The culture of *manga* and *anime* involves an affinity for extreme scenarios and thus it is understandable that the cuteness often depicted in *anime* goes hand-in-hand with implicit violence. Ngai (2005:811-847) argues that cute things are often depicted as vulnerable so that a consumer can impose his or her own will on them. The "cuteness" of *anime* characters and products also retain an element of mystique for the Western viewer because they remain essentially Oriental (Sato 2004: 335-376). What is of interest to me is the question of whether there is more to this cute appearance than one might think. Can excessive cuteness become uncanny or even point to the sublime? "Cute" images in *manga* and *anime* are comparable in contrast to examples of grotesque imagery in these genres, such as a scene depicting a boar demon from Hayao Myazaki's *Princess Mononoke* (1997). The demon itself is covered in a mass of leech-like worms that are dripping blood (figure 6). The worms form an outer body that

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is shapeless and crawls with spider-like legs. The worms become a force and can move of their own accord, separately from the demon's body.

Rather than discuss the pleasant appearance of *Pureland,* I would compare it with an unlikely painting, which may reveal that *Pureland's* pleasant surface belies an underlying negativity. Caspar David Friedrich's *Monk by the sea* (figure 2) has featurelessness in common with *Pureland,* but this seems to be all, at first glance. Friedrich's painting simply depicts a miniscule monk-like figure on the edge of a gloomy shore. The painting as a whole can be understood in terms of the Kantian sublime. For him, the sublime confrontation with vast or powerfully threatening nature leads the human subject to overcome terror in the face of it, and eventually to experience a sense of elation at human intellectual superiority, despite sensory inferiority. He thus sees it as a dialectic of terror and attraction (Kant 1790-99: 5-42). The threat of being engulfed by the sheer magnitude of the expanse in *Monk by the sea* is clearly visible, the monk is dwarfed by it. In *Pureland*'there is no apparent threat however, it seems that *Pureland* depicts exactly what *Monk by the sea* does not depict. Is *Pureland* really comparable to Friedrich's painting? What does this comparison yield?

Such an overtly grotesque or terrifying image is evocative of the *informe*[7] or unpresentable. Although it is not an image of the unpresentable, it is an indication or hint of what cannot be depicted (Bryson 1993: 216-223). I suspect that the unpresentable (which can be understood as that which triggers the sublime experience) is lurking in both the cloyingly sweet or cute, and the violent or grotesque depictions in *anime* and *manga. Pureland* employs a strategy of denial of the grotesque, but to my mind a latent sublimity is revealed by this uncanny exclusion of anything but the very pleasant and sweet.

3.4 "Superflat"

Contemporary artist Takashi Murakami employs and manipulates the culture of *anime* and *manga* in his art. He focuses on a concept he terms "superflat" and I attempt to relate this flatness to the flatness in *Pureland,* although it is not exactly the same thing. "Superflat" (Brehm 2002: 36) refers to contemporary consumer culture and *manga,* or fanatic followers of *manga* and *anime* in a sub-culture termed *otaku* culture. It is tempting to believe that popular culture and consumerism present a world that is conceptually "flat", devoid of depth. *Otaku* are followers of this "flatness" however, and are devoted to popular genres such as *manga* and *anime. Otaku* believe that they have the ability or the dedication to become more immersed in *anime* than most people, perhaps in a way that children can, and this may afford them the ability to experience *anime* as sublime (Steinberg 2004: 449-471). Escapist *anime* and *manga,* especially Miyazaki's films, are often thought of as entertainment for children (although *otaku* are mostly adults). It appears that children become immersed in what they see on television more easily than adults. What may not seem frightening or sublime to an adult may scare a child enormously, and this capacity to invoke child-like immersion may be what makes *anime* such a powerful genre. Magrit Brehm (2002: 16-17) also interprets *otaku* culture as striving towards "being a child". *Otaku* are escapist, preferring to live within the fantasy world of representation rather than society. I suspect that this escapism is essentially a reflection of a popular idyllic trend in mass culture. Mori's image seems to invoke the *anime* sensibility of *otaku* culture. It is pretty, smooth and artificial looking. It seems to be "superflat" itself. Is it possible for "superflat" culture to contain traces of the digital sublime, however?

4 Popular culture; the idyllic and mystic traditions

*Pureland*is not only informed by Japanese artistic principles and traditions and popular culture. Its pleasant appearance seems to be an amalgam of the pleasant appearance of Western and Eastern popular images, such as are found in Disney films and in *manga* and *anime.* It is my conviction however, that this pleasantness can be seen in the context of the artistic genre of landscape painting, specifically Romantic landscapes that relate to ideas of the "primitive", the idyllic and child-like. Children are sentimentally regarded as uncorrupted, and innocent to the point of representing a more primal or original strata of humanity by Romantics such as Philip Otto Runge8. In his painting *The Hiilsenbeck children,9* he depicts children as untainted by experience and regarding the world afresh, which accords with the Romantic notion that children are mystical containers of nature's purest raw energies. Children are in contact with the unspoilt realm of nature, whereas adults are not. They represent the vigour and animal energy of natural growth, and Runge painted children in such a manner as to depict their vitality (Rosenblum 1978: 50-54).

The idealisation of childhood or the "primitive", has become interwoven with popular ideas of "beauty" or "pleasantness" in contemporary culture, but it has a long tradition that is very different from its popular character. In the nineteenth century the Orient was a great source of inspiration to painters such as Henri Matisse. It represented idealised Otherness and exoticism. The Orient that Matisse painted is not a real place; it is an idealised combination of Seville, Morocco and even the *demi-monde* in Nice (Cafritz et al. 1989: 243). It represents a supposed "natural" or primitive lifestyle that is far from realistically "primitive", and draws instead on the pastoral tradition and the idealisation of Arcadia in Virgil's poetry. This notion of the idyllic, pastoral or primitive became almost formulaic in that certain conventions were ascribed to it. It was an ideal and fictional existence that artists could recreate, and those such as Matisse and Gauguin travelled to exotic lands to attempt to find the real Arcadia (Flam 1973: 56-64).

The mood evoked by Virgil's pastoral poetry can be traced back to what Lawrence Gowing (1989: 183-188) calls the first truly pastoral painting of the West; Giorgione's *Concert champêtrelO.* Gowing (1989:198) traces this tradition in the development of landscape painting. One of the most well-known artists who pioneered these conventions in landscape painting is Claude Lorrain. The work of this artist and of Rococo *fêtes galantes* painters such as Watteau set the scene for decorative landscape art and also for the Romantic movement's realism. On the other hand, the idyllic tradition influenced *popular* culture such as picturesque landscape painting which, as a "tourist landscape", can be regarded as the forerunner of landscapes in contemporary popular culture that are idealised or idyllic in tone (Andrews 1999: 129-149).

The picturesque landscape is a trope relating particularly to the depiction of landscape in popular culture[11] (Andrews 1999: 129). It is this urge of commodification that has appropriated landscape conventions from the idyllic landscape tradition and turned it into mass popular images. The idyllic principles of the Virgilian Arcadia (Parada 2005), as they manifest in the pastoral landscapes of artists such as Claude Lorrain, are reconcilable with the affirmative tendency of popular culture. Lorrain's paintings (figure 7) are "easy" or "comfortable" to grasp and appreciate, and their nostalgic view of nature is easy to consume, and can be appropriated and reinvented within popular culture (Flam 1973: 56-64). These landscapes are reinterpreted in popular culture according to the "aesthetic of popular beauty" which Olivier (2001: 99) refers to. These images also engender nostalgia in the viewer, and this is emphasised in the mass media. This nostalgia is usually related to an imaginary past or a Utopian future. Both can be contextualised within mass popular culture. To my mind this use of affirmative imagery has become so at home within popular mass culture that it can be discerned in genres such

as *manga,* that are ontologically very different from landscape painting traditions. I am not suggesting a direct correlation, but rather that *manga* as a genre joins other popular genres in a general idyllic trend.

Moments of epiphany or "suddenness", as Karl Bohrer (1994: 198-226) discusses it, are often accompanied by a specific interaction with memory. Bohrer refers to Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of things past* and his memory of the Madeleine biscuit. Eating the Madeleine involuntarily brought back memories of his childhood and grandmother, as the biscuit dissolved on his tongue. The experience manifested itself as a sudden sensory-induced revelation. What is important is that this epiphany is experienced as an inexplicable emotion conjuring either sadness or happiness to an excessive degree; it is overwhelming. Definite similarities between this "appearance" and "suddenness" and the sublime experience are to be found. Bohrer (1994: 209-212) argues further that epiphany is often accompanied by images that enhance feeling, such as images of peaceful natural scenery. This is symbolic of recourse to childhood and is also where memory and nostalgia play a part. The "presence" or sudden "epiphany" is the conflation of this idyllic nostalgic effect and the present moment of sensory experience. It may also be compared to Lyotard's (1984) sublime "now".

Figure 7
Claude Lorrain (1604-1682), *Landscape with rural dance* (1640-41). Oil on canvas, 114 x 147 cm. Bedland Estate: Woburn Abbey. (Andrews 1999: 98,50).

The pleasant appearance of *Pureland* conceals an *informe* (Bryson 1993: 220) or unpresentable, that I interpret as a sublime presence. To put it simply: it seems that *Pureland* and Miyazaki's boar demon (figure 6) are two sides of the same coin. This underlying negativity reveals the mystic tone of *Pureland.* The "presence" or mystic sublime evoked by artists such as Caspar David Friedrich is informed by the gnostic concept of *kenosis* or "emptying of the vessels", which is a negative approach to depiction. The meaning of the work does not reside in what is depicted, but rather in what is *not* depicted or what *cannot* be depicted, the religious

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or sublime experience of nature (Rosenblum 1975). In a similar manner the mystic tradition is not *visible* in *Pureland,* but in the fact that it *conceals* a sublime presence beneath the pleasant surface of the image. This indicates that the image not only employs the affirmative nostalgic function of Japanese popular culture such as *manga,* but also paradoxically the negative disruptive quality of the mystic tradition.

5 Hybridity

Pureland is a unique amalgam, or hybrid (offspring) of the many popular and artistic traditions applied as sources in its construction. I have attempted to show that the image uses the immersive techniques of the computer screen to entice the user to "enter" the virtual space of the image. This immersivity is also misleading as the image only allows the viewer to see what is explicit. Elements of popular culture such as the smooth pink appearance, and the "cute" figures of the "aliens" entice the viewer, while engaging the nostalgic sentiments that the idyllic and exotic Japanese (relating to *ukiyo-e* and *anime)* imagery engender. On the other hand, the image is taut and rigid in its pleasantness. Hidden from view is the potential of its sublime experience; the "sudden" moment of aesthetic "presence", which is the manifestation of the digital sublime.

To attempt to discern an aesthetic construct with a European ontology such as the sublime in an image which references the consumerist nature of "superflat" Japanese *manga,* is dubious at best. What facilitates *Pureland'%* melding of these unlikely worlds is digital media. The process of compositing allows Mori to visually blend different visual traditions, but also to conceptually flatten these together. This results in the smooth screen-like image that seems to glow from within. The digital sublime which lurks behind the appearance of *Pureland,* may reveal itself when or if the strands of its makeup temporarily rupture in the viewer's struggle with the seemingly immersive nature of the image. It seems to me that the digital sublime is surprisingly embedded within digital mass culture. This sublime may be concealed behind idyllic appearance or evoked by grotesque images, as is often done in *manga,* but resides in the immersive nature of the user's interaction with the medium.

Notes

1   Bretall 1939: 377-402; Brockelman 2001: 93-120; David 2005; Ferguson 1998: 322-331; Mothersill 1997: 407-412; andNicolson 1973: 333-337.

2   This is an event that can also be characterised in retrospect as an aesthetic "epiphany" related to the insights of Gumbrecht (2004: 991-133), Bohrer(1994: 113-147, 198-226) and his understanding of the work of Nietzsche, Proust, Joyce and Musil.

3   here are many sources on Lyotard that are not explicitly mentioned here, including: Costello 2000: 76-87; Lyotard 1989; Lyotard 1989: 181-195; Lyotard 1990: 297-304; Rajchman 1998: 3-16; and Ross 2005: 33-45.

4   Bohrer(1994: 113-147) discusses Nietzsche's theory of aesthetic "appearance" which refers to the "presence" or "suddenness" of the aesthetic

rhetorical epiphany, but also to the deceptive nature of appearances.

5   This mechanism of negative representation is comparable to the concept of *kenosis* (emptying out) that underlies the mystic tradition of Abstract Expressionist work (Taylor 1992). McEvilley (1996) discusses emptiness in Abstract Expressionist art and in Yves Klein's art in relation to the Japanese concept *of śūnyatā* which connotes the painterly treatment of space but also the Buddhist concept of primordial space through which all beings come into being and pass away.

6   Noman Bryson (1993: 216·223) discusses how the rePresentation of the abject serves to connote that which can truly not be represented, the *injorme* or *unpresentable.*

7   Norman Bryson (1993: 216-223) discusses the *informe* with reference to the "abject" and the

photographs of Cindy Sherman. According to him, the physical human body in abjection, in pain or in depictions of horror is the only part of the human identity which cannot be absorbed into representation. He says that the body has essentially and always only existed as a construction of gender and identity, and in the digital age the body will disappear entirely, for it will exist only in representations. There is thus a return to the body in depictions of the body in abjection, which is triggered by the proliferation of represented bodies. I investigate the possibility that a similar occurrence could be taking place with regards to the landscape and landscape representations. The landscape that triggers the sublime experience denotes something of the *informe* in that it is un-representable. The concept of *informe* is discussed in *Formless: A user s guide* (Bois & Krauss 1997)

8   Philipp Otto Runge (1777-1810). *The Hiilsenbeck children* (1805-06). Oil on canvas, 130.4 x 140.5 cm. Hamburg: Kunsthalle (Rosenblum 1978: 52).

9   The *Songs of innocence and experience* (1795) by William Blake is a well-known source affirming the Romantic belief that children are somehow untainted by life-experience and as such innocent and guileless.

10   Giorgione (1477/78-1510) or Titian (1488-1576). *Concert champêtre,* 1510. Oil on canvas 109 x 137 cm. Paris: Musée du Louvre (Cafritz etal. 1988: 29).

11   Malcolm Andrews (1999: 129-149) discusses the picturesque tradition in some detail in its specific eighteenth century context, with reference to the sublime and how the picturesque landscape derives from the sublime tradition a "ready made" recipe for experiencing the raw powers of nature as sublime. This tourist urge of reproducing the sublime experience at will is essentially un-sublime. The picturesque landscape employs a strategy of appropriation and commercial transformation with regard to the natural world. Natural scenery became aesthetic commodities; "landscapes".

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