

The sublime turmoil in recent paintings by Philip Badenhorst

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This article presents a reading of a selection of paintings by Philip Badenhorst (1957-) made during 2007 for the solo exhibition titled *A circle had closed; and another had opened again*. I briefly revisit the development of his visual language since 2003 to indicate consistencies and shifts in his approach. Relevant tenets of the theory of the Romantic sublime as defined by Burke in 1757 and Kant in 1764 are introduced and then applied in an exploration of elements of specific works by Badenhorst. Focussing on his landscapes and figures, parallels are drawn between Badenhorst's contemporary vision and 18th century aesthetics to make evident that his works have strong ties with this specific tradition, yet to indicate that as a contemporary artist his work departs from the paradigms of Romanticism to arrive at a postmodern sublime. The similarities and differences between Badenhorst's iconic images created through intuitive painterly mark and the influence of the Romantic painters are highlighted to reveal new associations, which contribute to a wider understanding of Badenhorst's *oeuvre*. I suggest that the artist presents a South African contemporary sublime. This particular analysis of the theory of sublime-aesthetics has not previously been applied to Badenhorst's work.

Key words: Philip Badenhorst; expressionism; Edmund Burke; Immanuel Kant; Jean-François Lyotard; Thomas McEvilley; Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe; unrepresentable; postmodern sublime

Die sublieme onrus in onlangse skilderye deur Philip Badenhorst

Hierdie artikel bied 'n interpretasie van geselekteerde skilderye deur Philip Badenhorst (1957-) aan wat gemaak was tydens 2007 vir die solo tentoonstelling getiteld *'n Sirkel het gesluit; en 'n ander het weer oopgegaan*. Ek heroorweeg die ontwikkelings van sy visuele taalgebruik sedert 2003 om ooreenkomste en verskuiwings in sy benadering uit te wys. Toepaslike beginsels van die teorie van die Romantiek se sublieme soos gedefinieer deur Burke in 1757 en Kant in 1764 word ingelei en toegepas word op aspekte van spesifieke werke van Badenhorst. Terwyl daar gefokus word op landskappe en figure, word 'n parallel getrek tussen Badenhorst se hedendaagse visie en 18^e eeuse estetiek om sterk bande met die tradisie aan te dui, maar om uit te wys dat as kontemporere kunstenaar sy werk af wyk van sienswyses van die Romantisisme deur 'n postmoderne sublieme te verbeeld. Die ooreenkomste en verskille tussen Badenhorst se ikoniese beelde geskep deur intuitiewe skildermerke en die Romantiese skilders word onder die kollig geplaas om nuwe verwantskappe uit te lig, en sodoende by te dra tot 'n breër insig van Badenhorst se *oeuvre*. Hierdie spesifieke analise van die subliem-estetiek is nog nie voorheen toegepas op Badenhorst se werk nie.

Sleutelwoorde: Philip Badenhorst; ekspressionisme; Edmund Burke; Immanuel Kant; Jean-François Lyotard; Thomas McEvilley; Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe; onvoorstelbaar; postmoderne sublieme

Philip Badenhorst is an established South African artist, typified by art critics and historians as an expressionist and at times as neo-romantic. His works have been described as "visually dramatic" and his approach as having a "Baroque flair". In his solo exhibition *A circle had closed; and another had opened again* of October 2007¹ this tradition is continued in his fondness for and tribute to Rembrandt's fiery reds and Turner's tumultuous atmosphere. In the context of these familiar territories he defines a private language of isolation and resurrection. We are introduced to the spirit of the show through its title, which was taken from the book *I dreamed of Africa* by the Italian writer and poet Kuki Gallmann (1991: 303):

It was another ending, another beginning, and it summarized, purified and made sense of all that had happened so far in all our combined lives.

The future stretched ahead, with all its challenges. A circle had closed; another had opened again.

Gallmann's romantic view of Africa builds on personal myth and resolutions. Similarly, Badenhorst creates his familiar romantic aesthetic, which we recognise, yet new challenges capture our attention. In novel associations the artist uncovers his personal metaphors, in conscious and at times subconscious ways. In my conversations² with Philip Badenhorst at the time his passion for his craft and his present focus on inner peace were evident, yet he embeds layers of meaning in his work that are far richer than those he can express in words.

When the American philosopher Arthur C Danto (2005:18) writes that "all art is conceptual art (with a small c) and always has been", he points to the place of the written text, in relation to

the visual text, as a mediating tool. The art writer has to "look for meaning of the art and then to determine how the meaning is embodied in the object" (Danto 2005:18). We understand that artists negotiate their world through visual texts, yet it is only when the intertextual meanings are teased out that we can become fully engaged with a work of art. One must consider in what way Badenhorst's intuitive painterly marks and his iconic images contribute to an existential understanding. In what way does his manipulation of oil paint undermine and diversify the initial impressions one might have of his pictorial presentation? I would like to consider the use of the landscape and its association with the theme of inner turmoil in relation to the Romantic³ tradition as it pertains to some of Badenhorst's recent exhibitions. At times his approach seems reflective, at other times playful. Yet in many instances in the exhibition *A circle had closed; another had opened again* (2007) the work lends itself to being read in the language of the aesthetics of the sublime. As not much has been written on this particular aspect of Badenhorst's work, I will argue for what I consider to be sublime in selected works.

The trajectory of a private visual language

The undercurrent of Badenhorst's oeuvre is autobiographical in nature, and has been described as such by various South African art historians and critics. Louise marié Combrink, English lecturer at North-West University, wrote about his work as a "...treatise in self-discovery" (Combrink 2003:25). Ingrid Stevens, Visual Arts lecturer at Tshwane University of Technology, wrote that painting "...enables Badenhorst to remake himself..." (Stevens 2003:28). Badenhorst continually tends to return towards previous bodies of his own work, specifically responding to it as stimulus for new creative output. As much as historians and critics revise understanding in the light of present and past, the artist reflects through his or her medium on a historical and contemporary position, in order to reach some understanding.⁴ In 2005, for the exhibition *The Missing Year* at Fried Contemporary, Badenhorst invigorated his art by revisiting works which he had made for a 2003 solo exhibition (see figure 1, 2003) at the Everard Read Gallery.⁵ He turned the earlier canvases on their sides and partially over-painted his figures as landscapes, a not unfamiliar strategy. Highly emotive, dark and threatening abstract landscapes buried the figures under an onslaught of painterly drips, lashes and lines - for example in *As we speak* (figure 2, 2005).

These energetic works were a result of the interpretation of Badenhorst's personal life at that stage, which was apparently beyond his control on several levels.⁶ In the catalogue for the 2005 exhibition, Stella Viljoen, lecturer in Art History at Pretoria University, writes about "an underlying sense of displacement or alienation from what is desired" (Badenhorst 2005:17). In Badenhorst's own words,⁷ these works exhibited in 2005 became "a turning point" in his artistic career. In the reworked paintings (figures 2, 3, 2005) the distant idealism of the portraits from 2003 (figure 1) became infused with a search for symbols and references beyond the body itself. The 'conversations'⁸ with all the old masters that have accompanied him through his life form the road for this journey. This was particularly evident in his solo show *Philip Badenhorst* at the Association of Arts in Pretoria during 2006.

In the works from *The Missing Year* series (figure 3, 2005) Badenhorst over-painted Thomas Baines calendars. His figures pose, at times as a masquerade *ox pin-up boy* and at times as blank-faced torsos, in a detached yet somewhat performative manner, in front of the Baines landscapes. Even though technical virtuosity unifies his figures with the calendars, my reading is that all characters posed as if in an 18th century photographer's studio: foreign bodies in front of the romantic landscape. The irony is not lost on the artist. Badenhorst's mannered pin-ups beckon to be discovered and explored much as Baines' colonial eye portrays the wild and

exotic land of Africa. In *A circle had closed; another had opened again* (2007), the collection under discussion, this figure-landscape relationship is presented in such a way that the land at times, in its fleshy crepuscular inflammation, replaces the body as metaphor. This exploration increasingly closely ties Badenhorst's work to the Romantic tradition of the 18th century.

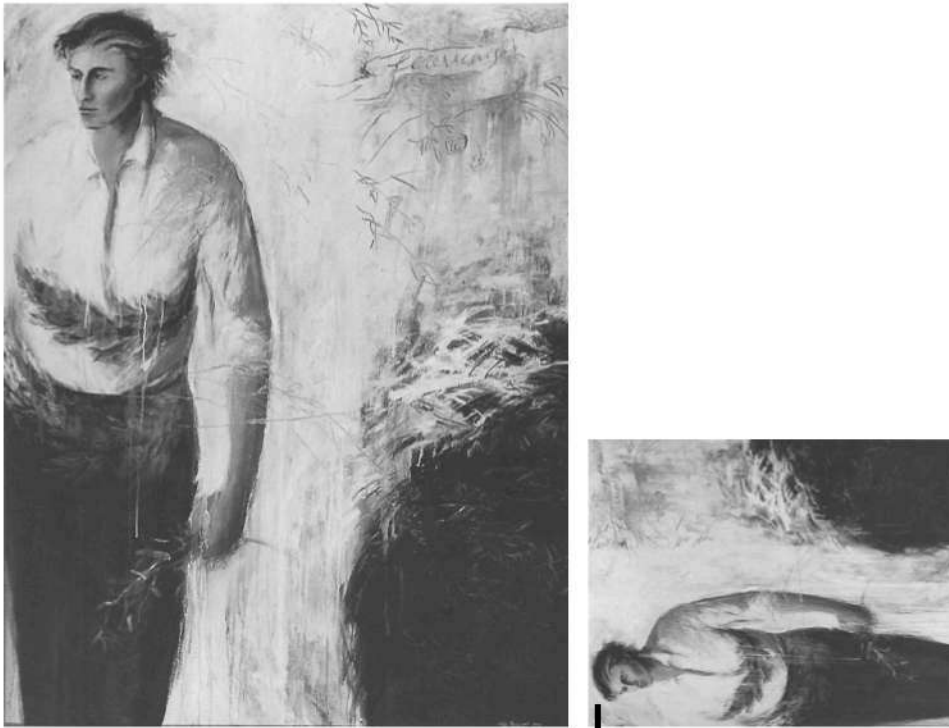


Figure 1

Philip Badenhorst. *Leaving*, (upright and turned on its side) 2003. Oil on canvass, 1400x1800mm. (Illustration: *Philip Badenhorst*. 2003. Catalogue to exhibition at Everard Read.)



Figure 2

Philip Badenhorst. *As we speak*. 2005. Oil on canvas, 1400x1800mm. (Illustration: Badenhorst, P. 2005. *The Missing Year*. Catalogue to exhibition at Fried Contemporary. Unpublished document.)



Figure 3

Philip Badenhorst. *The Missing Year*. (Two works from the series of 11 works) 2005. Oil and collage on print, each 320x500mm. (Illustration: Badenhorst, P. 2005. *The Missing Year*. Catalogue to exhibition at Fried Contemporary. Unpublished document.)

A cryptic context of the sublime-aesthetic

In the late eighteenth century the Irish philosopher Edmund Burke (1990:ix) wrote that the aesthetic of the sublime was seen "as the key to a deeper kind of subjectivity". The increasing interest of Burke's contemporaries in the sublime is reflected in his commitment to use feeling as a means of insight. Both the beautiful and the sublime, in Burke's view had an immediacy about them. They were irresistible in different ways and this inevitably linked them with passion and with some notion of what was essential in human experience. Burke's fundamental claim is that anything that can cause pain or terror or some similar passion is a potential source for the feeling of the sublime. This feeling can be brought about in two ways: firstly, when objects overwhelm our perceptions to such an extent that they place a strain on us. In the second instance, when dangerous objects are met from a safe position and cause a weak state of terror, the feeling of sublimity is aroused. It is a theory about the power of evocation. Our delight in the sublime is due to the fact that the moderate states of pain or terror induced by sublime objects create a feeling of invigoration (Burke 1990:122). It is really the pleasantness of pain (Bosanquet 1934:275) that Burke describes as the feeling of the sublime. It will become increasingly evident how this applies to Badenhorst's work.

Burke (1990:123) makes it clear that to experience this delightful horror, the pain should not be carried as far as violence, and the terror should not lead to destruction of the person: "... a sort of delightful horror, a sort of tranquillity tinged with terror; which as it belongs to self-preservation is one of the strongest of all the passions. Its object is the sublime." It is this that makes artistic representations of the sublime tolerable and even thrilling: "When danger or pains press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we every day experience" (Burke 1990:36).

Burke and the German philosopher Immanuel Kant shared similar approaches in the texts *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) and

Observations of the Feeling of the Sublime and Beautiful (1764)⁹, yet I would like to highlight an important difference for the sake of this article. Burke emphasised that specific properties of objects produce the feeling of the sublime. Kant's emphasis was that it is not so much the properties of the objects as the subjective capacity for feeling that determines our response to the sublime (Crowther 1989:11).

People do not experience the same feeling about similar visual effects. In the essay *Observations of the Feeling of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Kant (1981:18) wrote that there are four classifications of the temperaments of human beings: melancholic, sanguine, choleric, and phlegmatic. He wrote that particular feelings correlate with the characteristics of each type. Kant used the *term feeling* to indicate our *ability* to experience particular states of being, more than merely a *description* of such states (Crowther 1989:11). This is an *internal sense*, an individual ability that he refers to. Kant's aesthetic treatise *The Critique of Judgement* (1790)¹⁰ argued for the existence of *a priori* knowledge, knowledge based on reason alone and therefore universal in its application, independent of knowledge gained through the senses.¹¹ *A posteriori* judgements, on the other hand, were those based on experience, and therefore uncertainty. Kant's approach implies that judgement lies in the mind and not in the object that is to be judged, which shifts from Burke's focus on the phenomena and the representation (Monk 1960:4). Kant's conception of the sublime is characterized by a conflict between the faculties of imagination and reason, where one 'understands' that which cannot be represented by the imagination, at the level of ideas. Significantly, the interplay of the sublime and the beautiful mirrors our moral lives.¹² The moral order is the sphere of the human intellect, which we strive to comprehend (through synthesis) via the natural order or the sensuous (Bosanquet 1934:263):

Thus aesthetic pleasure combines the characteristics of desire and knowledge, as the nature of judgement combines in the idea of purposiveness those of the reason (unity) and the understanding (diversity or dissociation). This seems to be why the "aesthetic judgement" is selected as the guide to the required meeting point of Nature and Freedom, Understanding and Reason, the sensuous and the intelligible.

In the Romantic's perspective the artist, through art, was therefore bridging different types of knowledge spheres by "...placing parts in relation to a whole..." through the power of judgement and the free play of imagination (Bosanquet 1934:261). The artist's task was seen to be negotiator for the truth, which could be apprehended (seen and recognized) although it could not be fully comprehended (Thompson 1999:25).¹³

Burke (1990: xv) wrote that in the comparison there is a remarkable contrast between beauty and sublimity. Beauty could be seen, as a category, as part of the history of taste (which was Neo-classical at that stage), while the sublime was that which disrupted the continuity of tradition (the ancient, the classical). The sublime was therefore more akin to the spirit of liberty causing disorder. The sublime was also seen as the mysterious by Burke (1990:114):

For sublime objects are vast in their dimensions, beautiful ones comparatively small; beauty should be smooth, and polished; the great, rugged and negligent; beauty should shun the right line, yet deviate from it insensibly; the great in many cases loves the right line,¹⁴ and when it deviates, it often makes a strong deviation; beauty should not be obscure; the great ought to be dark and gloomy; beauty should be light and delicate; the great ought to be solid, and even massive.

Burke (1990:114) further argued that both the qualities of the sublime and the beautiful are sometimes found in one artwork, but that these qualities can still be individually distinguished. He argued that the object or artwork would make a stronger impression, if all its properties fall into either one category or the other, but not both at the same time (Burke 1990:114). In Badenhorst's painting *Leaving* (figure 1, 2003) the attempt to work with an idealistic image resulted in a painting that was more controlled than any of the works on the exhibitions that would follow. This contrast reminds one of Burke's (1990:14) words above describing beauty

as "...smooth and polished...". The aesthetics of the solo exhibition of 2003 could be seen to align with Thomas McEvelley's (2001:62) description of this vision: "Beautiful things are always in the comfort zone: they make one feel secure and happy about oneself." The "sense of completion" described by Stevens (2003:30) in the catalogue essay to the exhibition at Everard Read underlines this observation. In this sense Badenhorst's description of 2005 as "a turning point" in his artistic career reveals itself in his applied aesthetics, replacing the safety of beauty (2003) with an exploration of the sublime (2005, 2006, 2007). This will be analysed in greater detail below.

Where beauty belongs to the judgement of taste, the sublime is rooted in an emotion of the intelligence - Kant calls this a *Geistesgefühl* (Bosanquet 1934:276) "a feeling of the mind", or *Lebensgefühl*, "a feeling of life" (Guyer 1992:373). Kant (1981: 52) identified more situations that elicit feelings of the sublime than Burke. For example, one can have the response of quiet wonder caused by things such as friendship, understanding and virtue, as well as the obviously "sublime" spectacle of seeing mountains and considering them majestic. An important distinction from Burke is that, for Kant, the sublime is not only something that can affect us, but can also emanate from ourselves, for instance in actions of goodwill (Crowther 1989:12). The concept clearly steers away from the Burkean sublime of pain or terror. In this conception the sublime offers no threat to our physical being. McEvelley (2001:71) writes that Kant "tamed" the terror-sublime to become "hospitable" and conflated beauty with the sublime. Although seen as negative in the context of McEvelley's argument, this blurring of boundaries offered new definitions and possibilities for the sublime (McEvelley 2001:77).

The sublime as the aesthetics of awe has evolved over time through critical review, yet many of the key tenets defined in Romanticism still hold value for our experience today, if only at times as a philosophical ground to argue against.¹⁵ This holds true for Badenhorst's historical positioning. As a contemporary artist, he does not directly reproduce the style, treatment and content of the 18th century Romantics. His is a new private brand of the sublime, a postmodern or contemporary sublime emerging from the ironies of the contemporary *Zeitgeist*. The French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard (1992b: 1014) provides the following definition of Postmodernism in which he affirms the important interrelationship of the aesthetic of the sublime with the crux of Postmodernism, the unrepresentable:

The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable.

In this statement the perception of working beyond rules or boundaries towards new presentations pertains to the sublime. The sublime-aesthetic knowledge reads in Lyotard's definition as "the nostalgia for the unattainable".¹⁶ I aim to apply this idea here to Badenhorst's selected works from *A circle had closed; and another had opened again* (2007). South African philosopher Bert Olivier (2001:144) writes about the unmistakable contribution that a painter (in general) makes via consideration of the world through intuitive intelligence: "the individual always sees the world from a position which cannot wholly be colonized by the structures of broader social existence". These words echo the value of the individual painter in his relationship with the world as mediator of metaphoric knowledge, who, whilst being part of the spirit of the time, still retains some autonomy due to the nature of his discipline.

The figure and the land

One finds an uncanny resemblance between the vast and isolated compositions of the landscapes of Badenhorst and the 19th century German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich. (Interestingly

Friedrich was not one of Badenhorst's visual references.¹⁷) Compare Badenhorst's series where the figures are placed on hills or in the landscape (figure 4 was one of several paintings on this particular exhibition with this theme), with Friedrich's *Wanderer above the sea of fog* (figure 5, 1818).¹⁸ Friedrich was influenced by Burke's writing (as acknowledged by Taylor 1992: 18) and underlying Friedrich's outlook was the idea of the religious revelations that are to be found in nature (Vaughan 1978:143). Rosenblum (1975:14) describes this religious aspect of Friedrich:

Friedrich's painting suddenly corresponds to an experience familiar to the spectator in the modern world, an experience in which the individual is pitted against, or confronted by the overwhelming, incomprehensible immensity of the universe, as if the mysteries of religion had left the rituals of church and synagogue and had been relocated in the natural world.

Friedrich's figures are examples of personal projection, whereby the artist explores his own relationship to the natural world, reflected as "the great unknowable". The landscapes of both Friedrich and Badenhorst suggest the expansive qualities that relate to the idea that the world (the natural realm) is beyond our comprehension. This "terror" of the unknown will be familiar to anyone who has struggled to accept and integrate major life changes, as Badenhorst has.¹⁹



Figure 4
Philip Badenhorst
Op soek na die hoogste berg. 2007.
Oil on canvas, 1050x950mm.
(Illustration: photographed by
Francisca Badenhorst)



Figure 5
Caspar David Friedrich.
Wanderer above the sea of fog. 1818.
Oil on canvas, 948x748mm.
Kunsthalle Hamburg, Germany.

Badenhorst's figure-land relationship is one of being present in a vastness, not unlike a stage in its Baroque device of elevation and grandeur. As in Friedrich's paintings, this stage stretches on without boundaries. In Friedrich and his contemporaries the human passions became transferred to the domain of nature.²⁰ The human being was seen either as an intruder or as a silent meditator, totally absorbed by nature's quiet, almost supernatural mysteries (Rosenblum 1975:35). McEvelley (2001:71) described the hugeness of natural entities in Friedrich's paintings as "trivializing" human affairs. This emphasis on placing the well-dressed man in his humble hierarchy in the greater scheme of things adds to the distancing of the human being. Whilst in Friedrich's compositions the central human figure is in meditative communication with the overwhelming surroundings, Badenhorst's silhouetted figure in *Op soek na die hoogste berg*

(figure 4, 2007) faces the viewer as if he is only an outline, a container, part of the landscape itself, part of the represented infinity (similarly in figures 6, 7 & 8, 2007). In opposition, the typically Romantic figure in Friedrich's *Wanderer above the sea of fog* (figure 5, 1818) stands solidly apart from a world that can be objectively observed, which echo's Kant's theory of a disinterested aesthetic.²¹ The contemporary perspective that all perception and interpretation are 'contaminated' by our cultural and gender-specific perceptions, seems to set Badenhorst's work apart from eighteenth century perception.

Friedrich's landscapes are bathed in luminous mist and cloud, whilst Badenhorst's landscapes seem watery or marshy, like a lost Atlantis (particularly in figures 4 & 6, 2007). The figure seems to belong to this vast undefined terrain, asserting himself over his habitat, which appears less pure than the pristine German landscape. Historically mounds refer to holy rituals, sacrificial or sacred places. It is in the conceptual approach to *truth* where differences appear between the two. In Badenhorst's work a narrative is created with playful and liberal use of imaginary structures, whilst Friedrich's visualisation had the solemn spiritual overtones and conventions of the pantheistic vision of the time.

When McEvelley (2001:70) approached Kant's sublime critically, he remarked that Kant seemed to have "...censored and sterilized this ancient and mighty..." concept which Burke described with vigour. Badenhorst's turmoil is in all probability closer to Burke's terror. Badenhorst has found his own form of enlightenment in his visualisations - the twentieth century's cultural values of scepticism, irony and freedom of choice colour the mind of the artist in embodied form as much as they do that of the contemporary viewer. In this sense Badenhorst's landscapes do not pretend to reflect the quest for *absolute truth* as the Romantics did, but play consistently with suggestions of impurity: debris is usually found at the foothills or in the gullies (figures 4 & 6, 2007). Cages and grids can be seen in the shadows, whilst strange architectural mounds populate the vast land. The ladders (which have been part of Badenhorst's visual vocabulary since the eighties) represent the ascent to the summit, evoking an achievement of sorts. Thus even in the absence of an absolute, the works remind one of the unrepresentable or unattained possibilities, characteristic of the sublime.



Figure 6

Philip Badenhorst *Jy ligjou hande, wag op die beeld van waarheid.* 2007. Oil on canvas, 1400x1800mm. (Illustration: photographed by Francisca Badenhorst)



Figure 7
Philip Badenhorst.
We watched them go - shadows in the memory. 2007.
 Oil on paper, 420x560mm.
 (Illustration: photographed by Francisca Badenhorst)



Figure 8
Philip Badenhorst.
So 'n lang reits om afte lê. 2007.
 Oil on canvas, 1200x1700mm.
 (Illustration: photographed by Francisca Badenhorst)

The sense of victory reflected in some of Badenhorst's exuberant poses evokes pop art in their flatness and posturing, in contrast to the silent and prophetic figure of Friedrich. Compare *Op soek na die hoogste berg* (figure 4, 2007) and *Jy ligjou hande, wag op die beeld* (figure 6, 2007), with *Wanderer above the sea of fog* (figure 5, 1818). Badenhorst's figure is at times a prop, a stand-in and like Gallmann remaking her life, reinvents itself after setbacks. It is as if the artist is prohibited from taking himself too seriously by the irony of our contemporary *Zeitgeist*. Badenhorst's figures are like shadows or silhouettes. Where there is more than one figure one has the association of an alter ego.²² The wanderer figure expresses the yearning possibility of being free of all societies' prescriptions. Badenhorst's figures and vessels are often 'motifs' of visual display that do not refer to specific bodies or items.²³ This also distances his work from early Expressionistic work that searched for deep inner truths; rather, his works become a play with symbols and emblems. There is a move to present the unrepresentable and to de-familiarise in order to rethink and possibly to reform. The hero is presented somewhat tongue in cheek, alternatively as an identity freshly minted with the ambiguity of the figure still evolving.

In the differentiation between beauty and the sublime in the Romantic age, these two concepts of aesthetics were genderised. Beauty was aligned with the feminine and the sublime with the masculine as described by Burke (1990:114). Kant (1952:495) writes: "...the beautiful seems to be regarded as a presentation of an indeterminate concept of understanding, the sublime as a presentation of an indeterminate concept of reason" in the binary distancing of understanding and reason; beauty and the sublime. Critic and painter Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe argues that the contemporary sublime has to be androgynous, for thinking can by no means be biologically specific. The sublime and the masculine (along with categorisation of reason) were always associated with seriousness. Now that frivolity and playfulness cannot be reduced to it "...the masculine has become absurd" (Gilbert-Rolfe 1999:xvii) and has been replaced by androgyny. The body language of Badenhorst's figures, the omission of details in silhouettes, the smooth flowing outline of figures (figures 6 & 7, 2007) and the sense of lavish surface

decoration (figure 8, 2007) all problematise the strictly masculine. My contention is that Badenhorst's figures are aligned with this contemporary critique of gender within sublime-aesthetics analyses, in contrast to the more rigid binary categorisation of the Romantics' vision. However, McEvilley (2001: 75) criticises Gilbert-Rolfe and the "confusion that exists between beauty and the sublime which dominates the discourse today...". McEvilley (2001:78) states towards the end of his essay that our identity crisis is possibly a result of "capitalist globalisation" which will leave us with a feeling of "nostalgic longing for the wholeness of the age before self-doubt, the age when one simply was oneself, without knowing there were alternatives." This description evokes the prohibitions and denials of self-censorship, which do not align with the thrill and terror of change evident in Badenhorst's recent work. Here, his figures exist quietly in the indeterminacy of the androgynous.

Empathy and borderline states

In the work titled *Journey* (figure 9, 2007), a grotesque image, which is excessively loaded with symbols, some of which seem to be only partially presented, Badenhorst reflects a quiet apocalypse. This hill becomes a strange figure, which offers the viewer an infernal look at the interior of his/her being. In the image the limits of form and structure are disturbed in a presentation that could be the unconscious. Vessels and vehicles float in this heated island, where boat-like shapes create a suggestion of radiating light and energy. Semicircles and diagonal lines give movement, while the stormy sky behind the mound sets the scene for a sublime landscape. This merging chaos is seemingly brought down, or at least there appears to be a conflict between two small figures and the overwhelming elements to continually engage with this labyrinthine mass.



Figure 9
Philip Badenhorst. *Journey*. 2007. Oil on canvas, 1400x1800mm.
(Illustration: photographed by Francisca Badenhorst)



Figure 10
Arnold Böcklin. *Island of the dead*. 1880. Oil on wood, 800x1500mm.

In a compositional comparison between *Journey* (figure 9, 2007) and the 19th century Swiss Romantic painter Arnold Böcklin's, *Island of the Dead* (figure 10, 1880),²⁴ one finds similarly the bulk of land centrally placed in the gloomy night with a diminutive boat transporting two travellers. In vast contrast though, the figures and tone of Böcklin's narrative are permeated by silence. They have accepted the dead quiet that awaits them, whilst in Badenhorst's narrative the enigmatic struggle continues: there is an attempt to participate in this spectacle. The vitality of the image lies in the sustained struggle, not in the possibility of a resolve.²⁵ The feeling of an all-engulfing force or turmoil that can never be resolved or overcome is a reminder of both Burke's (1990:123) "tranquillity tinged with terror" and Lyotard's (1992b: 1014) "sense of the unrepresentable". It is in our irreconcilable relationship with the world (whether in relationship to other human beings or the environment - natural or artificial) as the impossibility of unity that the sublime is seen. Badenhorst's vision with its contemporary striving for the unattainable places the context in a postmodern, yet private world and its unspeakable ironies.

According to Kant both feelings of beauty and the sublime are a *species* of aesthetic judgement, but beauty has to do with form, while sublimity depends on *Unform*, which Bosanquet (1934: 276) described as a "useful idiom" that may cover both formlessness and deformity. Badenhorst's landmass in *Journey* (figure 9, 2007) becomes the deformed or alternatively is threatening a state of development that could go in any direction. The concept of *Zwischenzeit* is a psychological *place* where boundaries are not easily defined and one loses oneself in the twilight of a limited place of interstice. Badenhorst's works have the quality of dawn or dusk, neither day nor night. Light qualities ooze onto sombre darkness. Perhaps this is similar to a whole new world, a *Zwischenwelt* (in-between world) as described by Lyotard (1984:39). This could be a lateral world with sublime potential: an incongruous beauty of strangeness, where unexpected meetings happen and the threat of incompatibility lurks, as in the postmodern unrepresentability.

Badenhorst's paintings *Ek soek na die spore* (figure 11, 2007) and *The real voyage of discovery* (figure 13, 2007) are void of people²⁶ and are filled with an overwhelming and "terrible" melancholy. According to Burke (1990:65) all general privations, such as vacuity, darkness, solitude and silence, are experienced as great because they are all terrible, the principle being that it is something beyond the limits of our human capacity. Bosanquet (1934:276) refers to Kant's use of the word "terrible" (that is "grässlich"), and not "ugly" (that is "hässlich"), to describe the sublime feeling. Thus the word "terrible" needs to be understood as naming an emotion that dynamically stirs our state of being.²⁷ Kant wrote that the dynamic sublime

is that feeling which attracts and repulses, yet excites and heightens our sense of being alive (contrary to dullness). Filled with shadows and gestural marks that give way to structures that have long lost their function, these works exude the passion of German Romantic art in their haunting darkness and density. The flooding light also recalls Baroque strategies implemented by Rembrandt in the dynamic structure of *The blinding of Samson* (1636), which deals with a different terror, yet uses the same visual language to convey a story of catastrophe.²⁸ The borderline state, which is terrible, unthinkable and intolerable, reflects the unrepresentable, which is sublime.

A reading in terms of sublime aesthetics shows Badenhorst at his finest in these strong landscapes, which compare with the drama of Friedrich's painting *The Polar Sea* (figure 12, 1824)²⁹ in its fearsome desolation and structural angularity, and Turner's work *Rain, steam and speed- The Great Western Railway* (figure 13, 1844)³⁰ in its projection of anticipation.

Experiencing painting as action can be in itself a catharsis. In the action of negotiating a sea of hybrid painterly mass, one finds oneself in the chaos of the labyrinth, complete with loss of boundaries. Artists such as the Abstract Expressionists experimented with the same "loss of boundaries" in their art (Ferrier 1990: 821) labelled as "paint-theism" (in response to "pantheism" of the Romantic painters) by Rosenblum (1961:56). In many instances the image totally disappeared, so that the artwork referred to nothing outside itself, not even to another time. This focuses the attention on the action of the artist: to produce the painting. "In this way, painting is transformed into a technique for practising the sublime," writes Taylor (1992: 90). The "will-to-immediacy" (Taylor 1992: 90) is also described as an avant-garde sublime by Lyotard (1984: 37) to experience the moment of complete loss of oneself in making art. To describe the sublime, Lyotard (1984: 37) paraphrases an "avant-garde sublime"³¹ as follows:



Figure 11
Philip Badenhorst. *Ek soek na die spore*. 2007. Oil on canvas, 800x1200mm.
(Illustration: photographed by Francisca Badenhorst)



Figure 12. Caspar David Friedrich.
The Polar Sea. 1824.
Oil on canvas, 967x1269mm.
Kunsthalle Hamburg, Germany.



Figure 13. Joseph Mallord William Turner.
*Rain, steam and speed -
The Great Western Railway*. 1844.
Oil on canvas, 35670x26480mm.



Figure 14. Philip Badenhorst. *The real voyage of discovery*. 2007.
Oil on canvas, 800x1200mm. (Illustration: photographed by Francisca Badenhorst)

The inexpressible does not reside in an "over there," in another world or another time, but in this: that "it happens." In the determination of pictorial art the indeterminate, the "it's happening," is colour - the painting. The colour - the painting - as occurrence or event is not expressible and it is to this that it must bear witness. Perhaps the locus of the whole difference between romanticism and the "modern" avant-garde is to translate "The Sublime is Now" as "Now the Sublime is This" - not elsewhere, not up there or over there, not earlier or later, not once upon a time, but here, now, "it happens" - and it's this painting. Now, and here, there is this painting where there might have been nothing at all, and that's what is sublime.

In this quotation it is apparent that the "event" is very important. Lyotard (1984: 36-43) discusses the anxiety that the artist or philosopher experiences when searching for what has been inherited from the past and when attempting something that has not been done before. What comes "after"? This is the feeling of anticipation and the pleasure of the unknown, which corresponds to the contradictory feeling of pleasure and pain described by Burke and Kant two centuries previously. Although Badenhorst's work is not modernist, his working method of layering, painterly scratches and automatist mark-making³² enacts this sense of immediacy³³ Even though immediacy, the *being-in-this* moment, seems to be a common phenomenon, it is rare and is seldom fully achieved.³⁴ The use of red in the exhibition in general and in *The real voyage of discovery* (figure 14, 2007) specifically, achieves a point of saturation that alerts the viewer to the strangeness of atmosphere, a forceful presence. One senses that Badenhorst's intense and obsessive medium-manipulation strives for commensurability with the lyrical narratives of diarising his life.

The narrative element in Philip Badenhorst's work has become simplified in this exhibition. What interests me is the sense of repetition in the action of telling the simple story in these paintings: "I am victorious in starting this new part of my life".³⁵ Perhaps Badenhorst has established, along with his personal narrative rhetoric, his own brand of contemporary South African sublime, a somewhat melancholic sublime of ironies and posturing, of turmoil, of endings and beginnings. Whilst Badenhorst's metaphor of closure and opening a new circle is personal, the universal refrain of the continuous task in the myth of Sisyphus finds an echo in the aesthetic of the sublime as the unrepresentability of endlessness. Yet the labour of rehearsals has the role of attempting to clarify an act, to make the event evident. All new roles and new beginnings require rehearsals to impress deeply enough the new resolutions.

Notes

- 1 Badenhorst's solo exhibition of October 2007 was held at the Absa Gallery in Johannesburg, South Africa.
- 2 The artist was interviewed on 21 August and 18 September 2007.
- 3 The use of "RomanticsVRomantic" throughout this essay refer to the tradition of 18th century theories and paintings that laid the base for the idea of the Romantic, which can be seen even in a post-Kantian way.
- 4 "Artistic innovation... is a complex relation between art and its past, rather than a kind of absolute philosophical break" (Docherty 1993: 192).
- 5 Titled: *Philip Badenhorst*, at Everard Read Johannesburg.
- 6 This was a topic, which arose during the interview on 21 August 2007.
- 7 Transcript of Badenhorst's interview on 21 August 2007.
- 8 Badenhorst refers to the strong influences and inspiration that he finds in the work of other artists (such as Rembrandt, Breugel, Turner, Gauguin and Battiss) as "conversations", indicating a sense of vitality in his relationship with the art and thinking of these artists. This dimension of his creative work was particularly celebrated in the solo he held at the Gallery of the Association of Arts Pretoria in 2006. In the opening address I typified the influences as "late-night conversations" in a form of "painterly writing" ("skilder-skryf").
- 9 As translated by John T. Goldthwait, 1981.
- 10 As translated by J.C. Meredith, in *Great Books of the Western World*, 1952.
- 11 This teleological perspective, with underlying aim to find the truth of *Geist*, implicated a translation of the sublime into a religious term. This is criticised in postmodern thinking in general and by Thomas McEvelley (2001: 70) specifically. See McEvelley (2001: 57-83) for a critical rethinking of the aesthetic of the sublime from Longinus, Burke, Kant, the "Modernist sublime" and the "post-Modern sublime".
- 12 See McEvelley (2001:63-77) for a critical rethinking of Kant.
- 13 The essentialist understanding has been under attack from an array of twentieth century thinkers, in what can be described as "the linguistic turn". It is not the aim of this essay to provide a systematic critical reflection of Burke and Kant, yet some remarks on the new definition of the sublime will come into the discussion. The focus is on providing new perspectives on interpreting Badenhorst's 1997 exhibition.
- 14 When Burke writes *beauty should shun the right line* in the quotation above, he agrees with Longinus' view that creativity is preferable to correctness in art, or put differently, the sublime has little to do with correctness (Nahm 1975:383). (There is a dispute around Longinus authorship - the treatise is now classified as 'Anon.')
- 15 Postmodern thinkers are sceptical of the concept of the universality of great belief systems. Post-structuralists such as Jean-François Lyotard's (1992:999) criticism of meta-narratives and Jacques Derrida's (Sarup 1993:36, 37) questioning of *logocentrism* are examples of rewriting an understanding of truth.
- 16 "...theorists of different persuasions, from Maurice Blanchot to Julia Kristeva, from Michel Foucault to Giorgio Agamben, seem intent upon defining 'the sublime' against a notion of implacable absence - the uncapturable, the unknowable, the unthinkable and, most important of all, the unspeakable - the vacant 'beyond' of language, unrelieved by any norm of transcendence" (Thompson 1999:26).

- 17 This was discussed in the interview on 21 August 2007.
- 18 Illustration: Available online at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caspar_David_Friedrich
- 19 This was evident in discussions with Badenhorst on 21 August and 18 September, 2007.
- 20 The pantheistic portrayal of the Divine in nature is called "theoesthetics" (Taylor 1992: 18-47).
- 21 According to Kant we should have the same common sense in the judgement of taste if we are free from extraneous considerations (Kant in Beck 1988:375).
- 22 The painting *We watched them go- shadows in the memory* (figure 6, 2007) is one of a series of works incorporating the silhouette and the work, *So 'n lang reis om afte lê* (figure 7, 2007) also forms part of several works presenting the double figure.
- 23 In the exhibition at Absa, Johannesburg, the large format of the work *So 'n lang reis om afte lê* (figure 7, 2007), brought the layered surfaces and richly worked symbols predominantly to one's attention. The impression that the floating symbols could be exchanged, adapted or shed at will, emphasised the postmodern understanding of identities being formed more by 'objects' and surface rather than being ingrained. We are aware of living in a world mediated by text and our identity is constructed through this knowledge (Gretton 1986:70).
- 24 Illustration: Available online at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arnold_B%C3%B6cklin
- 25 This reminds one of the Greek myth of Sisyphus, who was cursed to roll a rock up a mountain, only to have it roll back before he reaches the top. Whilst the task recalls the absurdity of existence, the very act of climbing to the top is an acknowledgment of life itself.
- 26 The withdrawal of the figure from the landscape becomes what Taylor (1992:292) describes as the "no-place of certain withdrawal". It is in the withdrawal that one finds the site of absence. The series of smaller paintings on this exhibition of Badenhorst, titled: *Jajurner, ekenjy loop al 'n lang pad*, employs the same desolate emptiness and acknowledge the Romantic's influence (oil on canvas, 300x400mm each).
- 27 It also refers to Burke's writing about terror as delightful horror.
- 28 Janson (1977:510) writes about "...a virtuoso performance of Baroque movement" when he analyses this work of Rembrandt: *The blinding of Samson*. 1636. Staedel Institute, Frankfurt. (Data and illustration: Janson 1977:510, 511).
- 29 Some references give alternative titles of this work: *The Sea of Ice* and also *Artie Shipwreck* (Vaughan 1978:151). Although this work is clinical in its colour and technique, the drama of the central pyramidal structure, along with the rhythmic build-up of lines adds to the understanding of the disaster of the sinking ship. Illustration: Available online 30 Illustration: Available online at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J._M._W._Turner
- 31 Lyotard's (1984:36-43) essay was focused on Barnett Newman's painting *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* and Newman's essay entitled *The Sublime is Now* (1948).
- 32 What seems to be an apparent contradiction here in describing the immediacy in Badenhorst's method of working and the intertextual references that this article is based on, is not contradictory: in the creative process there is a fluctuation between intuitive working, 'loosing oneself and standing back to assess, assuming a mode of analyses and comparison.
- 33 'Immediacy' also has the implication of direct access to meaning, a concept that has been criticized by Poststructuralists in deconstruction theories of lost essence. Thus meaning is not transparent in the making process for the artist.
- 34 Yve-Alain Bois (1996:139) writes that Barnett Newman's sublime does not always concur with Burke and Kant, yet that Newman strives to find "...his own *presence*, not of infinity of scale, not of *the sense of time* but of 'a physical *sensation* of time'... Bois continues to write that for Newman it is "...standing alone in front of chaos'. In this sense I see strong links in the abstract sensibilities of Badenhorst with Newman's works, even though the works are stylistically very different.
- 35 These words were expressed as a resolution and much as an aspiration in our conversations on 21 August and 18 September 2007.

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