

Revisiting the sublime in painting

Prof. Bert Olivier, Philosophy, Centre for Advanced Studies, University of Port Elizabeth, South Africa, e-mail: plaggo@upe.ac.za

The figure and experience of the sublime has haunted me for years, ever since I encountered it for the first time in intellectual terms in Kant's 3rd Critique — the *Critique of judgment* — during my undergraduate years and realized, in retrospect, that I had experienced it many times before in my life, mainly in relation to nature, without realizing that there was a special name for it (cf. Olivier 1983 for an account of this kind of experience in relation to music and silence).

Recently I had a pleasant reminder that the experience and contemplation of the sublime is not limited to one's relation with nature, and that, in the course of my adult life, it has occurred largely in relation to specific artworks. The occasion for this rediscovery was afforded by time spent with my wife in Philadelphia (USA) in the course of 1999 and 2000. My receptivity for experiencing the sublime in relation to artworks was heightened by an acute awareness that we live at a time when western culture is more subject than ever before in its history to the illusion that everything is epistemically or cognitively transparent and, moreover, technologically controllable. Needless to say, these assumptions go hand in hand with an aesthetic of "popular realism"—something to which advanced capitalism has contributed in no small measure. Experiencing the sublime within this culture — specifically as it is engendered by the perception and contemplation of artworks — provides a salutary counterbalance to what I have termed the illusion of transparency and controllability. Salutary because, as I hope to show in what follows, the sublime unfailingly alerts one to a moment of excess in relation to which one is constituted as a human being, who is therefore always more than any given state of affairs - whether such a state is conceived of in social, political, epistemic, moral or technological terms. (I shall return to this issue.)

In the course of our sojourn in Philadelphia we would spend our Sundays

by going to central Philadelphia to visit its museums, our favourite being its magnificent Museum of Art, which, as far as I am concerned, has one of the best collections in the United States. It is a collection, moreover, whose variegatedness itself provides a setting which prepares one for an experience of the sublime in a specific way. I shall try to explain why this is the case.

On every occasion we would look at and discuss totally different works than the previous time. For instance, on one occasion we concentrated on late medieval, Renaissance and 16th- to 17th-century works, and were struck anew by the uncanny way in which artworks record or register the changes in an era's collective sensibility. One could easily - armed with a certain pre-understanding - "see" the emergence of a more self-conscious subject in 16th-century paintings - antedating Descartes's famous turn to the subject by more than a 100 years, but more or less coinciding with Luther's similar inward turn to conscience.

Significantly, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, one of whose curators during the 20th century was an architect, has incorporated into its collection a number of architectural "ensembles" - entire, fully reconstructed choir entrances from late-medieval European chapels, for example, or Spanish courtyards architecturally reminiscent of the Alhambra. Unavoidably, this means a certain decontextualization and recontextualization, the ensemble in question carrying a certain "internal horizon", as Husserl would say, with it from its original medieval context to its new museum context. The same is true of paintings, of course, although one is not quite as forcefully aware of their dislocation as in the case of architectural ensembles, possibly because the latter consist of varying numbers of distinguishable components that appear to be more extraneous to one another than the "elements" of a painting.

The reason why this prepares the ground for an experience of the sublime should be apparent: the sublime concerns that which is unrepresentable (as well as unrepresentable) at the level of sensibility and the imagination, and the sheer diversity of decontextualized and recontextualized artworks of various kinds and from various countries and eras already confronts the visitor with a collection of representations that (paradoxically) represent something manifestly unrepresentable in spatiotemporal or historical terms. While it relates to the unrepresentable, on the one hand, however, the sublime also concerns the intelligible, on the other hand, in the sense that one is aware — painfully, as Kant so accurately observed in his third Critique (Kant 1952:106) — of the discrepancy between representability and intelligibility: one understands (pleasurably) even as you know (painfully) that you are up against the limits of your own cognitive powers. Faced with this collection of culturally dislocated artefacts, the experience of the sublime is adumbrated, enabling the spectator to attune him- or herself to the possibility that this experience awaits them in their perception and contemplation of particular artworks at the Museum. While, given the character of art museums or galleries in contemporary culture, a visitor to most of these museums would be prepared for an experience of the sublime as I have described it to a greater or lesser extent, a museum such as the Philadelphia Art Museum (or the Metropolitan in New York, or the Louvre in Paris), with the sheer number and variegatedness of its exhibits — including architectural ensembles — may therefore be understood as enhancing the likelihood of this experience considerably.

There is a painting (the title of which eludes me at present) by Degas in the Philadelphia Art Museum that we contemplated and discussed for a long time. It shows a man leaning against the wall of a lamplit bedroom and a woman sitting on a chair in what seems like a state of either despair or shock, or perhaps melancholy; and it speaks eloquently, albeit non-specifically, about what has occurred between these two people without losing the enigmatic dimension of art's

multivocality, which here enters the domain of the sublime. The maudlin atmosphere created by the Victorian wallpaper in the room, echoed by the lampshade, an open (suit)case of some kind - is the man a doctor? (the expression of intransigence on his face seems to belie this possibility) - his coat on the bed, the vulnerability that emanates from the woman's rosy arms and neck, together with her hunched shoulders, suggest a lover's quarrel, or perhaps something more serious, like the presence of the Victorian counterpart of our era's disease of love (as Foucault called AIDS), namely syphilis. The interpretive possibilities — responsible ones, however, responding to the presented image-configuration - are endless, hence the intimation of the sublime. After all, what is represented here is intelligible, but in the fullness of its possible meanings not adequately presentable. Another way of saying this would be to point out that what is represented moves within the ambit of what Heidegger (1975:41-50) calls *world* (the realm of openness, within which human understanding takes its course) and *earth* (the realm of withdrawal that shows itself within *world* as being resistant to understanding in the sense of transparency). *World* and *earth* function in a kind of vital embrace in this work, which lends itself to interpretation even as it refuses to become fully transparent. What transports the spectator into the domain of the sublime is its suggestion of the dimension of a complex human relationship: it is there, almost tangibly, trailing its apparent, but opaque history like a comet's tail, refusing the spectator's attempt to grasp or decipher it once and for all.

One of the greatest assets of the Philadelphia Art Museum must surely be its collection of Duchamps, my personal favourite being *Nude descending the stairs*, because of the exemplary way in which it resists coherent self-presentation at a sensory or perceptual level, while still allowing the viewer to grasp it cognitively in so far as one is able to reconcile the desubstantialized, fragmented image with something intelligible. One's gaze being guided by what you "intend" there in the form of a moving woman, the shards of

colour tend to gel tentatively into a recognizable shape — even a beautiful one. But no matter how hard one tries to “hold” this intellectually intuited idea as a unitary image in one’s mind, so to speak, it always manages to slip from that mental grasp into the ambivalent space of the sublime. The elation experienced in the contemplation of this work is, I would argue, inseparable from being drawn into this space.

Philadelphia being within driving distance of some of the best museums in the United States, we have made as much use of the opportunity to visit them as time allows. Two of our favourites are situated in New Haven, Connecticut — The Yale Art Gallery and The British Art Center at Yale, which boasts one of the best collections of Turners and Constables in the world. As any lover of 19th century European romantic painting knows, among the works of British painters, Turner’s art, especially, is a rich source of the sublime. At this gallery my own preference in this regard does not go to one of his works, though, but to one of several paintings by the romantic John Martin, namely *The Deluge*. The sublime features unmistakably here. The enormous canvas, with its depiction of nature’s irresistible, cataclysmic power, manifested in gigantic tidal waves towering above insignificantly puny human figures, with the sun and moon in a strangely portentous, tensile configuration, rendered in black, red, orange and yellow pigment, defies one’s attempts to render it visually apprehensible as a totality. As your eyes stray from one side of the canvas to the other in an attempt to take in the whole spectacle, you have to let go of your visual grip, as it were, on one part of it to be able to move on to the next, so that, at no time, you gain a visual purchase on the vast scene depicted there in its entirety. To step away far enough to be able to see it completely, doesn’t help, either, for in that case you lose the visual detail requisite to engender the feeling of awe in the face of this rendition of the incommensurability between human power(-lessness) and the immensity of natural forces. Hence, one is made acutely aware of the impossibility of visually apprehending, in a sustained manner, the event represented on the canvas in terms of all the interrelationships

of its constituent elements. At the same time, however, one’s reflective engagement with the painting yields an exhilarating, satisfying comprehension of the interpretation it puts forward of the mythical, catastrophic event.

Just across the street from the Yale British Art Center in New Haven, where Martin’s *The Deluge* hangs, is the Yale Art Gallery, home of another of my personal favourites among those paintings that exemplify the (experience of) the sublime. I am thinking of Odilon Redon’s *Apollo* — a painting that elicits the experience in question in a way that differs subtly from those discussed earlier, although the characteristically ambivalent experiential structure is unmistakable. *Apollo* reveals and conceals simultaneously - as if it was intended as an embodiment of Heidegger’s notion of truth as *aletheia* or “unconcealment” (1975:51) - through iridescent shapes and colours, the figure of the god and his horse-drawn chariot. Art criticism will always be in a paradoxical position with regard to a painting like this, in the face of its irreducible excess at the level of the image-configuration that manifests itself partially, intermittently, at best, to perception. One’s visual grip on it vacillates constantly between a secure hold and a loss of it, as if man and steed were standing in swirling layers of fog — now appearing, now being covered up. But even as the viewer grapples with the tantalizing images, she or he realizes that this resistance to visual control is, intellectually speaking, a metaphor for the relationship between the divine and the human as seen from the latter’s perspective, or — although it can here only address one analogically, as it were — for the tension between the infinite and the finite. Where one may expect to find complete incommensurability, there is tension instead - an ambiguous blend of unrepresentability and intelligibility, excess of meaning combined with understanding. This is the enigmatic figure and dynamic of the sublime, which uplifts the human spirit even as it reminds us of our insurmountable limitations.

But perhaps, having only characterized it in passing, above, I should elaborate somewhat on the figure of the

sublime to provide some philosophical-theoretical illumination regarding the paintings I have referred to. According to Kant's definition (1952:106) it is an aesthetic experience characterized by a tension between something unrepresentable as a whole or totality in imaginative or sensory terms (which, for that reason, occasions displeasure), on the one hand, and yet intelligible (giving rise to pleasure, therefore), on the other hand. This contrasts with Kant's characterization of the beautiful (1952:104), which consists in a certain disinterested pleasure accompanying the experience of harmony or equilibrium between what is imagined or represented, on the one hand, and what is understood, on the other hand. Instead of a tension, conflict or incompatibility between imagination and understanding, as in the case of the sublime, the pleasurable experience of the beautiful consists in their harmonious mutual confirmation.

It is worth noting that Lyotard (1984:77-81; cf. also Olivier 1997) — possibly the most prominent theorist of the sublime in the later 20th century — articulated the difference between modern and postmodern aesthetics in terms of the sublime. While each is, according to Lyotard, an aesthetics of the sublime, the former is “nostalgic” in so far as it alludes to the unrepresentable as “missing contents” (Proust — as well as Beckett; cf. Olivier 1996a — can thus be read as an exponent of the modern sublime), while the latter faces the difficulty of doing so “in presentation itself” (Joyce being an appropriate representative of the postmodern sublime, according to Lyotard). In the face of an “anything goes” cultural and (popular-) artistic eclecticism — an all-accommodating “realism” — fuelled by and in its turn fuelling contemporary capitalism in whose interest it is to provide “recognizable” and “comforting”, but for that reason, more importantly, *marketable* “artworks” to the public, Lyotard (1984:81) insists that “...it is our business not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented”. In this way contemporary artists and thinkers could work towards the destabilization of a collective “taste” that is invariably orchestrated, via for instance the advertising industry, by globally powerful

capital.

It is not surprising that the kind of eclecticism or “realism” setting the tone of the collective aesthetic according to Lyotard (1984:76) is a source of comfort to the public. In so far as this implies accessibility and a certain “harmony” — even if it is only a semblance of such harmony — it could be said to represent an aesthetic of “popular” beauty. After all, the experience of beauty is relatively easily attained, and comparatively easy to understand, as confirmed by the pleasurable sensation of beholding a beautiful child, a beautiful woman (or man), beautiful flowers, butterflies, animals — such as the magnificent Bengal tiger — or beautiful artefacts such as a beautiful sculpture or painting, one particularly striking example of which would be, to my mind, Ingres's *Grand Odalisque* in the Louvre. In all these cases one may be said to be confronted by beautiful things, and to experience beauty, because one has no trouble in grasping the beautiful thing or object as a *whole* at the sensory or imaginative level, and there is no incommensurability between one's perception and one's understanding of it. As Kant (1952:58) insists, the experience (or judgement) of an object as beautiful is characterised by imagination and intellect being in “mutual accord”. Moreover, such experiences of beautiful things are pleasurable and gratifying. When the experience of beauty becomes, as Lyotard's analysis suggests — and its consonance with Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis of “the culture industry” is obvious — something that is orchestrated, via a manipulation of collective taste, by the agencies of global capital, such gratification becomes suspect, however.

Experiences of the sublime are, I would argue, less frequent than those of the beautiful — Kant (1952:115-116) would agree: he regards a certain level of cultural “knowledge” or development as being prerequisite for such experiences — and probably less easy to understand. If one considers that most of Kant's examples of the experience of the sublime come from nature, one is struck by the paradox involved here: a certain level of “cultural knowledge” is required to

experience the sublimity of some *natural* phenomena — which, presumably, would not be experienced as such by less “cultured” people, even when they live in close proximity to nature. The reason for this paradox is not hard to find, though. It should be apparent from what has already been said that the experience of the sublime, which depends on a tension between an unpleasurable awareness of one’s limitations at the level of sensory or imaginative representation, on the one hand, and a pleasurable realization that one is nevertheless able to comprehend it at the level of the understanding, on the other, is likely to involve a fair amount of reflection, in the form of puzzlement, wonderment, and the like. And such reflection, although not dependent exclusively on “cultural knowledge”, would be promoted by a greater degree of such knowledge, especially if it is the kind of cultural knowledge that includes what Wittgenstein called “language games” of a specific kind, namely of imagination, of representation, of abstraction, of knowledge and intelligibility, and so on. Someone immersed in a culture where this *kind* of language game is absent, may be thoroughly versed in the “knowledges” of his or her culture, and yet not be prepared by it for an experience of the sublime.

There are many examples in the realm of painting that illustrate this relationship between “cultural knowledge” and the capacity to experience the sublime. Arguably, Foucault’s famous analysis of *Las Meninas* in *The order of things* (1994:3-16), establishing its status as the “pure” representation of representation in the “classical age”, may be understood in this light. The sublimity of this painting by Velasquez is scrupulously uncovered by Foucault, with painstaking attention to the complexity of the representational relations presented there, including the way in which the painter has constructed a point outside of the painting as its true locus of meaning — a place that marks a perpetual, (for the painting) constitutive absence in a triple sense, namely that of the subject of the painting, of its (forever changing, and therefore interminably unrepresentable) observer/spectator, as well as of the artist who composed it (Velasquez himself). One is here confronted by representational

difficulties that someone without the requisite knowledge of certain cultural practices or skills — such as a knowledge of historically changing conventions of painting, or, from the point of view of Foucault’s discussion of the painting, philosophical and analytical skills - would not be able to grasp in a manner adequate to inducing an experience of the sublime. If one can presuppose the necessary understanding (that is, “cultural knowledge”) on the part of a reader — and arguably this is precisely what constitutes a “reader” - even Foucault’s breathtakingly rich analysis of *Las Meninas* by itself seems to be sufficient to evoke sublime pleasure. On closer reflection, this is probably facilitated by the fact that one tends to page back and forth between the printed analysis and the photographic reproduction of the painting (1994: frontispiece) in the book, in an effort to maintain a sensory or an imaginative “hold” on the picture and its constitutive “outside”, as one reads Foucault’s illuminating discussion — an attempt that proves futile; hence the experience of the sublime. In any case, Kant’s insight concerning the role played by “cultural knowledge” as a facilitating factor, if not a prerequisite, for the experience of the sublime, seems to me to hold true.

Needless to say, it is not only painting that affords one the opportunity of experiencing sublime limitation of sensibility accompanied by intellectual elation. This could occur in one’s experience of architectural works — Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, would be a splendid contemporary counterpart to St Peter’s in Rome, mentioned as such an architectural example by Kant (1952:100) — or of scene-sequences in cinema, or in the experience of natural phenomena such as those Kant refers to (cf. in this regard my discussion of an instance from astronomy; Olivier 1997). A cinematic scene-sequence of this kind (one that I have discussed in more detail elsewhere; cf. Olivier 1996: 9-10) is encountered in an exemplary postmodern film, Beineix’s *Diva*. It involves the gradual, continuous visual tracking and uncovering, through the camera, of all the spatial dimensions

and “contents”, in the form of objects as well as wall and floor paintings, of a loft occupied by the central character. At no time is the audience able to form a comprehensive image of this apparently vast, variegated space; and yet at the same time one is able, through the successive images, to grasp its significance as an extended metaphor of the “postmodern condition” — with all its beauty as well as sordidness, creativity as well as destructiveness, in all its complexity and contradictions.

This brings me to the upshot of this paper: unless the arts — from painting through architecture, dancing and sculpture to cinema — find or invent ways of alluding to the sublime, they will be unable to avoid or resist what Lyotard has unmasked as the manipulation of collective aesthetic sensibilities by the popular “realism” (“kitsch” is a suitable synonym) which serves the exploitative ends of advanced capitalism. As I have tried to show, the history of painting offers many instances of such allusion, from which contemporary artists may draw valuable insights — even if they cannot escape the necessity of re-inventing ways of answering to the imperative of the sublime, namely: “Present the unrepresentable”. In the final analysis the sublime stands as a reminder that — as Kant understood — among the endlessly circulating commercial images of our time that compete with one another in their attempt to represent a commodified humanity conclusively as the object of desire, there is not one that is *not* put to shame by its (humanity’s) ultimate unrepresentability.

It would have been clear from the beginning of this article that I have focused exclusively on the western art tradition, with which I am most familiar. In a sequel it may be illuminating to investigate the art of other cultures, such as African art or Oriental art, with a view to ascertaining whether the sublime figures as prominently in those traditions as in the western, and whether there, too, it may offer a matrix of resistance to the assimilation of human life and culture to information technologies. And I don’t mean other traditions as they

have been appropriated by western artists from time to time. The sheer perceptual inscrutability that often seems to go hand in hand with such appropriation — Picasso’s *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*, in which historians of art have detected clear African motifs, comes to mind (cf. for example Read 1980: 68-70) — certainly seems to me to be conducive to an experience of the sublime. But this is still western art.

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