

**The Sublime in Visual Art:  
From the Romantic  
To the Postmodern Sublime**

by

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## Declaration

I declare that **THE SUBLIME IN VISUAL ART: FROM THE ROMANTIC TO THE POSTMODERN SUBLIME** is my own work and that all sources that I used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

I further declared that I have previously submitted this work, or any part thereof, for examination to the University of Pretoria or any other institution of higher learning.

Gwenneth Miller

November 1997

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# Introduction

The terrain of the sublime falls within the field of aesthetics. Although aesthetics is defined as the philosophy of taste and the perception of the beautiful,<sup>1</sup> the sublime may nonetheless fall outside both of these parameters. The aesthetic concept of the sublime is complex, because by its very nature it points towards that which cannot be defined, that which is larger than comprehension and that which is obscure and mysterious. Different eras and different cultures have rephrased and contextualised sublimity to conform to specific philosophical frameworks. Artists and interpreters have been influenced thereby to create art and art criticism according to the reigning debates.

This study will examine and define the concept of the sublime by contextualising the idea within its philosophical foundations. Researching the theme is not simply a matter of isolating a period on which to focus, for the present is forever in debt to its roots and has references to the historical past. Romantic notions from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are crucial to the development of the sublime in the twentieth century. Within this time span, paradigm shifts occurred that had an impact on the idea of the sublime, and enabled it to evolve into contemporary notions. The focus of the study will be to identify, compare and debate ideas and visual images that led to the embodiment of the sublime in the twentieth century. An attempt will also be made to clarify that to which the sublime refers.

As the sublime is a vast field, this study will focus only on selected philosophical issues and selected visual statements (mostly two-dimensional art works). More extensive criticism of the selected philosophies exists and many more art works could be used to explain similar views. The selections have mostly been based on personal preferences, because they inform the author's own art. A few works by the author have been included in the last chapter.

In Romanticism, the idea of the sublime was described as the ideal and the infinite (Cardinal 1975: 11), and as those phenomena or beings that are beyond all comparison, *absolute*, great (Flew 1984: 343). This is still the general idea of the sublime today. The term “sublime” is used today, as it has been used in the past, both *descriptively* to indicate vast or powerful things and *evaluatively* to indicate art of extremely high quality (Crowther 1989: 2). This study assumes that there are multitudes of other meanings to uncover, and aims to unfold the references and problematic cluster of words that surround the concept of the sublime.

It is the author’s hypothesis that the sublime has a legitimate place in contemporary art and aesthetics. The historic retrospection and intertextuality that is so typical of Postmodernism, weaves and intertwines older and contemporary ideas of the sublime, and this leads to a questioning of the absolute truth that the Modernists identified in abstraction. Moreover, it will be argued that in the disillusionment of our era, the sublime finds a purpose as the re-enchantment of the Enlightenment project that has lost its soul.

This study will address the concept of the sublime under three main headings. Firstly, it will analyse the view of the Romantic sublime, secondly the Modernist sublime and thirdly the Postmodern sublime.

The Romantic period forms the basis of philosophical and pictorial concepts of the sublime. A brief sketch of the cultural context of Romanticism in the late eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century will be followed by the development of the sublime and the views of Burke and Kant. It is therefore important to establish what was seen to be sublime and how it differed from the notion of beauty during that period. The way in which religion permeated philosophy and the views of nature and art as a striving to become part of the Absolute, will be highlighted in the work of representative artists.

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<sup>1</sup> Onions (1973: 32) also defines aesthetics as “The science of the conditions of sensuous perception”



The paradigm shift that occurred along with progress and the faith in the new and the original, will be discussed under Modernism. The traditional and therefore outdated perspective of naturalism was set in opposition to purity of abstraction, which was seen as part of the tradition of the new and the cult of the avant-garde. Within these parameters the sublime is contextualised as a search for the essence of form, as seen in the art of selected Modernists. The next part of the chapter will deal with the chaos of the anti-aesthetic breaking the borders, limits and rules of taste. The section will conclude with a discussion of the subconscious and the dream world, referring to Friedrich Nietzsche's perception of truth, and some viewpoints of George Bataille and Jean-Francois Lyotard. These perceptions will be analysed and compared with the visual art of the time. The Burkian and Kantian sublime will shed light on defining sublimity within the Modernistic perspective.

The third section highlights the arguments for and against the Postmodernist sublime. In order to comprehend the Postmodern sublime, the general mind-set of the late twentieth century needs to be contextualised. A pluralistic situation sets the background for redefining the sublime in terms of spirituality. The questioning of the truth and the disintegration of the ideal has led to a certain cynicism that is reflected in the writings and visual arts of the end of the millennium. This study postulates that Suzi Gablik's ethic of care, which acknowledges this cynicism but argues for an opening of vision, *the return of soul*, is interwoven with a possible contemporary sublime.

There are echoes of Kantian sentiment in the views of some Postmodernists - especially those which regard the artist as a bridge builder, having visionary powers to illuminate the meaning of life, linking traces of the mystical, the spiritual and healing. The concept of a new sublime of compassion will also be measured against a capitalist sublime. Paul Crowther redefines the sublime in terms of contemporary painting and philosophy, such as Deconstruction. The work of artists will be contextualised, reflecting aspects of the suggested contemporary sublime.

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which would be more applicable to the concept of the sublime.

The conclusion of this study will attempt to clarify why the Postmodern sublime either differs from or is in accordance with the Romantic and the Modernist sublime, how it has changed, and what the general view of a new sublime could be.

The following key sources have had a considerable impact on the direction of thought in this study: Edmund Burke's book *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1756), as an orderly analysis of the realm of psychological and physical manifestations of the sublime and Immanuel Kant's *Observations of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1764), as well as his *The Critique of the Power of Judgement* (1790). Crowther's book *The Kantian Sublime: From Morality to Art* (1989) highlighted essential differences between Burkian and Kantian perspectives on the sublime. This book provides a thorough reconstruction of the Romantic sublime within the contemporary context.

Robert Rosenblum's book *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko* (1975), is significant in that it redefines the boundaries of Romanticism. Rosenblum discussed the existence of the abstract sublime in his article *The Abstract Sublime* (1961), which shows the change from "pantheism" to "paint-theism". Lyotard's article *The Sublime and the Avant-garde* (1984) looks at how the modernistic avant-garde analyzes the concept of the sublime. Mark C. Taylor's *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion* (1992), deals extensively with the theoesthetics of the Romantic period, but it is the philosophically integrated sections on Nietzsche, Bataille and the Surrealist artists which have benefited this study most. In *Presenting the Unpresentable: the Sublime* (1982) Lyotard discusses the sublime in the contemporary, techno-scientific world and within the eclecticism of consumerism.

Crowther (1988) sees the influence of the concept of the sublime in contemporary deconstruction, as illustrated in *Beyond Art & Philosophy: Deconstruction and the Post-Modern Sublime*. In Rosenblum's article *The Abstract Sublime* (1961), he initially acknowledged the existence of the sublime, but in a later article, *Romanticism and Retrospection* (1988), he described the sublime as an impossibility. In her books *Has Modernism Failed?* (1984) and *The Reenchantment of Art* (1993), Gablik warns of the cynical and arbitrary attitudes contemporary thought can lead to

and pleads for a reconsideration of the ethic of care. These concerns link up with the work *Ecofeminism* (1993) by Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva.

The relevance of the sublime as a subject for research is undeniable. In the past ten years many contemporary philosophers have written on the subject of the sublime: Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, Neil Hertz, Thomas Weiskel and Lyotard, to name but a few.<sup>2</sup> These writers have all found new significance in Kant's theory of the sublime. Crowther (1989: 3) supports the actuality of this view:

*Whereas the concept of beauty seems outmoded - passé even - in relation to the current practices of criticism in the arts, sublimity has suddenly become - fashionable.*

Contemporary philosophy has frequently discussed the sublime as a topic, which has created lively arguments. At the same time there is a need in the discussion of aesthetics to connect visual art works with these arguments. Appropriate visual work may illuminate the changes in paradigms that influenced the idea of the sublime. This study will select a few relevant artworks in an attempt to bring philosophy and art together for analysis and comparison.

The contribution of this study to existing research will be to present an overview of the development of the sublime from Romanticism to Postmodernism with reference to other contemporary trains of thought (such as ecofeminism). Little has been written about contextualising South African artists within the debate of the sublime. Selected works by South African artists will thus be analyzed and compared with the notion of the sublime in order to establish the relevance of this research in this country. The important context created for the author's own work will testify to its continuing relevance.

In this study the aim is thus not to obtain a single answer to the many questions raised, but rather to gain an increased understanding of the complexity, and therefore richness, of the idea of the sublime.

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<sup>2</sup> Crowther (1989: 2, 3) gives more philosophers and refers to some titles of works on the subject.

# Chapter 1

The nineteenth century was the great age of aesthetic theory, preceded by the far-reaching and important speculation of the eighteenth century. The fashionable themes of these centuries were taste, beauty, sublimity and the pleasures of the imagination (Monk 1960: 1). For this reason a vast amount of written material, mostly influenced by German thought, is available on these subjects. The most influential figure was Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), whose theories of aesthetics, particularly that of the sublime, were said to be a synthesis of the eighteenth century (Monk 1960: 5). Kant was to reinterpret the kaleidoscope of aesthetics of his age:

*It was given to Kant to bring order out of chaos, to express perfectly a philosophical system and an aesthetic that were exactly suited to the needs of his time. In his critiques are expressed the philosophical ideas which form the basis of the art of his time, and this is true even if a given artist was not familiar with his works (Monk 1960: 5).*

## 1.1. Romanticism

The concept of the sublime became important within a wide context of political, social and cultural conditions at the end of the eighteenth century. It was as a symptom of a changed paradigm that Kant's philosophy and the art of the Romantics developed. Referring to Germany,<sup>3</sup> Roger Cardinal (1975:10) sketches an image of a politically restricted people trapped in a conservative world, who desired change and progress. The French Revolution (1789) first filled the Germans with excitement and thoughts of freedom, but left them cold when the realities of the Reign of Terror became apparent. Even though there was a wave of uprisings across Germany, the rigid system of government remained in place. Germans turned to the cultural world of art, philosophy, metaphysics and scientific theory as an escape from their harshly repressive environment (Cardinal 1975: 11).

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<sup>3</sup> According to Cardinal (1975: 15) Romanticism emerged in Jena with the establishment of the journal *Athenaeum*, in May 1798.

The search for an alternative world started when the division between the actual and the ideal manifested itself in the Romantic imagination, described by Cardinal (1975: 28) as *the darkness of yearning*. Examples of alternatives were a dream of perfect harmony, a dream of a better time, or a dream of another place. In the social dimension there was a heightened sense of individuality that brought with it the yearning for an infinite external reality, as well as a yearning for an infinity of the soul (Cardinal 1975: 30). These desires did not fit in comfortably with the aesthetics of beauty, the reigning taste at the end of the eighteenth century, but found expression in the developing taste for the sublime.

Since the Renaissance the word “romantic” had come to mean all that was wild and fantastic. This evocative quality was to be found in ancient castles, the branches of a giant oak, “grotesque and romantic” waterfalls or “wild and romantic” mountains. It was also found in “that imagination which is most free.” Indeed, freedom of imagination was an aspect that was defended by the artists and writers of the eighteenth century (Vaughan 1978: 13). The people who were associated with these views were the first to become known as the Romantics.

Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829), the German critic, adopted the distinction that “romantic” describes the work of art that emphasises the associative side of picture-making, whilst “classical” describes the work that dwells on formal values. The term “romantic” was thus seen as the opposite of the term “classical” (Vaughan 1978: 11). Schlegel associated the “romantic” with the spiritually inspired art of Christianity, and the “classical” with the pagan and the art of antiquity. Schlegel’s idea of art was that it is a suggestion of an unknowable reality, and that beauty is “a symbolical representation of the infinite” (Vaughan 1978: 11). For the Romantics the unknowable<sup>4</sup> was always the means of implying the Ideal.

Writings such as these by Schlegel appeared frequently during the eighteenth century, showing a gradual development of standards that characterised the Romantic age (Monk 1960: 5). The first change which occurred during the eighteenth century was

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<sup>4</sup> The term “unknowable” is a central concept which will be referred to in the chapters that follow.

the questioning of Neo-classical concepts and the breakdown of the rules of beauty of the ancients and of orthodox taste (Monk 1960: 236). It was the Anglo-Irish statesman Edmund Burke (1729-1797) in particular, who gave a very basic and detailed explanation of what the concept of the sublime entailed in the eighteenth century. Burke's publication *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756), was seen as part of the transition from the very strict ideas of Neo-classicism to the aesthetic of Romanticism. In this aesthetic, interpretation was far more individualistic and freer than in Neo-classicism (Monk 1960: 101).

## 1.2. The Development of the Sublime

The classical author Cassius Longinus (213-273 AD) described the sublime in his treatise *On the Sublime* (Nahm 1975: 207). The Platonic belief that the ultimate perfection of earthly forms is seen in heaven,<sup>5</sup> influenced Longinus to consider the sublime as an overpowering form of beauty which elevates the viewer. This is reflected in the following quotation from *On the Sublime* (Nahm 1975: 208): "For the effect of the genius is not to persuade the audience but rather to transport them out of themselves."

This quotation illustrates the difference between Plato and Longinus. Longinus denies the idea that art is mimesis (...*not to persuade*), the very grounds on which Plato devalued the visual artist as being twice removed from the truth (Nahm 1975: 192). Longinus's view is clear that the artist should, through the sublimity of art, lift the ordinary person to the closest experience of the Divine.

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<sup>5</sup> Nahm (1975: 193) writes of Longinus' emphasis on the artist as a genius who ought to lift the ordinary person to higher states through the sublime:

*"...Inspired wonder casts a spell upon us..." and it can do so because the sublimity which lifts the genius near "the mighty mind of God," has the power to create. It is important to observe that what is created are ideas in the perceiver which "often pass beyond the limits that enring us."*

Nahm states that the last line (*often pass beyond the limits that enring us*), was also found in Plato's *Symposium*.

The idea of the sublime remained dormant for many centuries. Joseph Addison (1672-1719) wrote essays on genius and the creative imagination, and also reinterpreted Longinus's theory of the sublime (Nahm 1975: 387).<sup>6</sup> Some of Addison's work was later published in the *Spectator* (1804), where his view that the sublime is an exhilarating feeling of self-transcendence was expressed. He wrote that the sublime involves a feeling of liberation from perceptual confinement when vastness is experienced (Crowther 1989: 7).

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), the noted French champion of Romanticism, formulated the notion of the noble savage<sup>7</sup> and made emotion the guide to reason. He stated that reason must always take the heart into account, for if it did not, one's actions would be insensitive and therefore unproductive (Vaughan 1978: 18). Rousseau's acclamation of the primitive led to an interest in aesthetic experience other than that of traditional beauty. The eighteenth century's sentimental reflection began to become more expressive, and developed in the direction of an awareness of the haunting sublime (Vaughan 1978: 29).

The sublime became known as the more mysterious experience of aesthetic pleasure, enriching human emotion, in addition to the better known stimulation of beauty. Burke's sublime was not as elevated as that of Longinus. Burke was concerned with the roots of emotion<sup>8</sup> and adopted a more psychological approach (Vaughan 1978: 33). According to Burke, attraction and repulsion constituted the expression of the two most powerful feelings: love and hate. Attractive objects would stir a sense of beauty whilst objects with connotations of aversion, such as vast size, darkness and infiniteness, would cause a sense of sublimity (Vaughan 1978: 33). It is this specific quality of ambiguity that makes the experience of nature sublime (Taylor 1992: 19). Burke's theory gave new importance to the disturbing and the suggestive powers of

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<sup>6</sup> Addison was not the only interpreter of the treatise of Longinus. There were interpretations by many writers but it is not possible to discuss all of them in this study. Boileau, Dennis, Baillie, Hume, Kames, Reid and Alison are mentioned by Monk (1960: 4), as well as Daniel Webb and Alexander Gerard (Monk 1960: 108).

<sup>7</sup> Flew (1979: 249) describes this Romantic concept as the time before civilisation corrupted people into possessing unnatural needs, a time when people enjoyed a natural, free and noble existence.

<sup>8</sup> According to Monk (1960: 110), the general eighteenth century idea was that the sublime was emotional, while beauty was intellectual.

art, which inspired Romantic artists to search for overwhelming and fear-inspiring experiences, often painting geographical wonders of sublime nature (Rosenblum 1975: 17). Burke's theory of the sublime will be explained in more detail in the next section.

The two categories of aesthetic experience, the beautiful and the sublime, were often referred to as "Burke's dualism." The beautiful remained true to Neo-classical taste, while the sublime was associated with that which falls outside this accepted taste. Within this dualism, the opposition between the sublime and the beautiful encapsulated the art of the Enlightenment, and the desire to escape from the formalism of Neo-classicism (Monk 1960: 235).

Uvedale Price added a third concept to Burke's dualism in 1794: the picturesque (Monk 1960: 157). Burke's dualism was then converted to an aesthetic trinity. When Price was attacked by George Mason in 1795, the criticism was focused on Burke's *Enquiry*, because it was on the basis of the Burkean aesthetic that Price had constructed his doctrine of the picturesque (Monk 1960: 160). Thus the argument returned to Burke.

Phrases like "he seems much nearer the Kantian than the Burkean sublime" (Monk 1960: 110), emphasise that the writings of these two, Burke and Kant, are generally seen as central works on the sublime in the eighteenth century. Burke and Kant will therefore next be discussed briefly, by focusing on selected ideas. Some of Burke's key concepts which will be discussed in the following section are those of a pleasurable form of fear caused by horror, uncertainty through obscurity or suggestiveness, and the emotion of greatness as experienced through the depiction of nature.



## 1.3. Edmund Burke's Delightful Horror

Paul Crowther (1989: 8) reasons that Burke's perception of the sublime is deeply bound up with our instinct for *self-preservation*.<sup>9</sup> Burke's fundamental claim is that anything that can cause pain or terror or some similar passion is a potential source of 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. 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.

Burke 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.<sup>10</sup> 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).

Whatever creates the ideas of pain and danger, or is associated with terror, is a source of the sublime, according to Burke (1990: 36). He states that thoughts of pain are much stronger than thoughts of pleasure, and that pain is the strongest emotion the mind is capable of feeling (Burke 1990: 37). When Burke discusses terror, he notes that more than any other passion, fear leaves the mind in a state where it cannot act or

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<sup>9</sup> In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Burke (1990: 123) mentions the following: "...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."

<sup>10</sup> It is in this context that Richard Payne Knight (in *An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste*, 1805) criticised Burke for not distinguishing between the practical and the aesthetic. Knight wrote that to be in a storm on a practical level (that is physically), the sublime would be destroyed: it would be merely terrible. Aesthetically though, the storm could be appreciated and therefore the viewer would have a sense of the sublime (Monk 1960: 162).

reason.<sup>11</sup> This view of the “mind being totally filled” originated with Longinus (Monk 1960: 110). According to Burke (1990: 53) this happens because fear is an apprehension of pain or death. This argument supports Crowther’s view concerning self-preservation expressed above. Longinus describes a sense of pride that would be experienced by the individual when he realizes his mind’s capacity to encompass such a “lofty conception” (Monk 1960: 110).

Henry Fuseli’s (1741-1825) work *The Nightmare* (1791; Figure 1), attempts to depict the sensations of terror and oppression experienced during a nightmare. At first the work seems to indicate sleep and the subconscious, but, as Vaughan (1978: 50) points out, the overtones of the work are erotic and suggest violent sexual assault, such as rape. Fuseli used the stallion as an association with rampant masculinity, surrounded by darkness and breaking through a curtain. The posture of the woman is either reminiscent of a dead person, and thus evokes the fear that Burke refers to above, or her posture is that of orgasmic swooning. Fuseli’s fondness for distorted bodies compares with the sublime distortion used by Michelangelo. Fuseli’s taste for the sublime was furthermore illustrated not only in his paintings, but also in his lectures at the Royal Academy (Monk 1960: 191).

### **1.3.1. The Uncertain and the Mysterious**

An important aspect of the sublime which Burke discussed in great detail, was that of obscurity. He states that a great deal of apprehension disappears when we know the full extent of danger. To make anything terrible, obscurity is necessary. Night adds to our dread. According to Burke (1990: 54), the druids performed all their ceremonies in the darkest woods and all the heathen temples were dark. Burke links the concepts “dark”, “uncertain”, “confused”, “terrible” and “sublime”.

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<sup>11</sup> This reminds one of meditative states or states of trance which primitive peoples induced to focus on the spiritual world. When Alexander Gerard (1728-1795) discusses terror in essays on genius and taste, he writes that it “occupies the whole soul, and suspends all its motions” (Monk 1960: 111).



Figure 1: Henry Fuseli, *The Nightmare*, 1791.  
Oil on canvass, 75,5 x 64 cm (Vaughan 1978: 49)

He explains that it is mostly things that we are ignorant of, that we admire and that excite us. If we know something well, it will not affect us that much. Burke gives the following as the reason why an obscure idea has a greater effect on us than a clear one:

*It is thus with the vulgar, and all men are as the vulgar in what they do not understand. The ideas of eternity, and infinity, are among the most affecting we have, and yet perhaps there is nothing of which we really understand so little, as of infinity and eternity (Burke 1990: 57).*

In nature dark, confused, uncertain images have a greater power than those which are clearer and more defined. To have greatness, a thing should have an aspect of infinity: we should not be able to perceive its bounds. Burke (1990: 58) calls a clear idea a little idea. Darkness is more sublime than light but sublimity is also found in the extreme lightness which obliterates sight (Burke 1990: 73). Burke argues that the reason darkness seems terrible is because we do not know the degree of safety we find ourselves in; we are ignorant of the objects surrounding us. Burke (1990: 55) calls darkness a “terrible uncertainty”.

Rosenblum describes *Monk by the Sea* (1809; Figure 2) by Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840) as possessing a strange, melancholic note.<sup>12</sup> He describes the light as a dense, haunting uninterrupted expanse of blue-grey sombreness, and the viewer is disturbed by the absence of the expected subject matter in such a painting (Rosenblum 1975: 13). In Burke’s terminology it is the undefined vastness that leaves the viewer with a feeling of deprivation. Underlying Friedrich’s outlook is the idea of the religious revelations that are to be found in nature (Vaughan 1978: 143).<sup>13</sup> Rosenblum (1975: 14) describes this religious aspect of Friedrich as pre-modern and not pre-Romantic:

*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.*

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<sup>12</sup> In *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition* Rosenblum (1975: 12) compares Friedrich with Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851). Friedrich chooses spectacular motifs in nature like glowing, mysterious calm sunsets and sunrises, while Turner paints furious, blinding blizzards and seas. In both cases there is a disquieting nothingness.

<sup>13</sup> The fact that Friedrich was influenced by Burke’s writing is acknowledged by Taylor (1992: 18).



Figure 2: Caspar David Friedrich, *Monk by the Sea*, 1809.

Rosenblum reads into *Monk by the Sea* a kind of artistic confession, wherein the artist portrays himself as the monk being dwarfed by nature, to indicate his own relationship with the unknown aspects of nature.

The destructive force present in Friedrich's art does not outweigh the healing powers of nature (Taylor 1992: 19). This is due to the paradoxical Romantic belief that the Creator is present in nature, thus offering both fear and consolation.<sup>14</sup> The pantheistic portrayal of the Divine in nature is called "theoesthetics" by Taylor (1992: 18-47). "Theo" means "stem of God" and therefore this literally indicates an aesthetic that reflects God in nature/art (Taylor 1992: 19).

According to Burke (1990: 65), all general privations such as vacuity, darkness, solitude and silence, are great because they are terrible. Vastness or greatness is seen as a powerful cause of the sublime and so is infinity. Richard Payne Knight (1750-1824), one of Burke's fiercest critics, actually supports Burke's view. When Knight writes about the mind being expanded by trying to grasp the infinite, he states that it is this expansion that causes the feelings of sublimity: "and it is the true source of the sublimity of darkness, vacuity, and silence, which share with infinity a lack of definite boundaries" (Monk 1960: 16).<sup>15</sup> Infinity is the truest test of the sublime, writes Burke (1990: 67), because it fills the mind with a sort of delightful horror. Similarly, succession, uniformity and magnitude in building also have a feeling of the infinite (Burke 1990: 68, 69).

This sublimity described by Burke, in which exaggeration and excess are emphasized, found expression in the engravings of Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778). He wished to enhance the dramatic splendour of Roman antiquity and was praised for his pure fantasies (Vaughan 1978: 36). *Carceri d'Invenzione* (1745-61; Figure 3) is an example of a suggestive structure that appears to be immeasurable and have startling contrasts. Figures are dwarfed by vast scale and the excess of detail seems to

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<sup>14</sup> This is the essential ambiguity that makes the experience of nature sublime (Taylor 1992: 19).

<sup>15</sup> Although the similarity is focused upon here, the difference is that Burke's argument places greater emphasis on the object, while Knight's places greater emphasis on the mind.



Figure 3: Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Carceri d'Invenzione* (*The Imaginary Prisons*), 1745-

61.

disorientate the viewer. Burke's (1990: 58) expression to describe crowded and confused images was that "the mind is hurried out of itself", and thus creates a picture that seems obscure and sublime.

Another source of sublimity is difficulty that is interpreted as greatness. When a work seems to have required a great deal of energy and dedication to produce it, the idea is grand, according to Burke (1990: 71). An abundance of things that are rare or valuable, is magnificent. This is also a source of the sublime because, like a starry heaven, grandeur<sup>16</sup> excites. The sublime was described as the grand and lofty style, as "something that astonishes and elevates the fancy that gives a greatness of mind to the reader" (Burke 1990: x). Burke linked this quality to the other fashionable eighteenth-century pleasure, the natural landscape, as already suggested.

In Friedrich and his contemporaries human passions were transferred to the domain of nature. 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). The attribution of human feelings to non-human subjects, especially to landscape elements, was later called the "pathetic fallacy" by John Ruskin.<sup>17</sup> This attitude was applied to trees in particular: the life of a single tree evokes empathy so strong; the viewer feels an almost human presence.

In Friedrich's *Two Men Contemplating the Moon* (1819; Figure 4), the leafless tree seems almost to be dancing before the magical power of the moon, leaning at an angle that rouses empathy with the instability of its position. The darkness of night could support the idea of the dying tree as a symbol of mystery<sup>18</sup> and even death. The figures are portrayed staring into infinity, at the moon, which seems symbolic of purity and the Divine.

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<sup>16</sup> Thomas Reid published *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* in 1785 in which he calls the sublime "grandeur" (Monk 1960: 146).

<sup>17</sup> As quoted by Rosenblum (1975: 36). This empathy was also used to express religious concepts outside traditional religious boundaries and symbols.

<sup>18</sup> Monk (1960: 142, 143) refers to James Usher's second edition of *Clio* (1769) for a near mystical interpretation of the sublime. Usher breaks with Burke "preferring to base the sublime upon an intuitive and mystic recognition of the reality of the soul".





Figure 4: Caspar David Friedrich, *Two Men Contemplating the Moon*, 1819.

The increasing interest of Burke's age in the idea of sympathy is reflected in his commitment to feeling as a means of insight, and not reason, as the earlier empiricism of the time dictated (Monk 1960: 146). This sympathy and dedication to feeling deal with the power of evocation. Both the beautiful and the sublime, in Burke's view, had an immediacy. They were both irresistible in different ways and this inevitably linked them with the passions, with some notion of what was essential in human experience.

Burke points out the differences between the sublime and the beautiful. Beauty is seen as measured proportion, and proportion according to custom, or the idea of utility. Burke (1990: xv) writes 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 this 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 is 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,<sup>19</sup> 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.*

It is 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. The object or artwork will make a stronger impression, however, if all its properties fall into either one category or the other, but not both at the same time (Burke 1990: 114).

The sublime, for Burke, is an odd mixture that reveals the overlap between pain and pleasure. When Burke and later, Kant, compared the sublime and the beautiful, it appears that the sublime was seen as more excessive than the beautiful. The sublime

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<sup>19</sup> 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).

was seen “as the key to a deeper kind of subjectivity” (Burke 1990: ix). It is important to note that Burke’s arguments embraced those aspects that would evoke the emotion of the sublime and through this argument he could link the sublime with self-preservation (Crowther 1989: 14).<sup>20</sup> In the following section it will be pointed out that for Kant, however, the basis of the sublime is the ability to transcend the self and thereby gain an understanding of the universal.

## 1.4. The Kantian Sublime

Immanuel Kant’s (1724-1804) writings, as a synthesis of the aesthetics of the eighteenth century, reflect the change of taste in favour of the sublime and the subjective. In his writings Kant justifies the *a priori* against the empirical, thus focusing on man’s intuitive characteristics and the absolute character of aesthetic judgement (Monk 1960: 4). This implies that judgement lies in the mind and not in the object that is to be judged, an important point which will be discussed in greater detail at the end of this chapter. This *subjectivity* on the part of Kant was a contribution to existing theories, but he, in turn, was also greatly influenced by the views expressed by those who came before him.<sup>21</sup>

In *A History of Aesthetics* Bosanquet (1934: 255) writes that Kant’s first work, *Observations of the Feeling of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1764<sup>22</sup>), shows how greatly the latter was influenced by Burke’s *Enquiry* of 1756. Kant’s great aesthetic treatise was *The Critique of Judgement* (1790).<sup>23</sup> In this treatise, Kant strived to make a different kind of knowledge (*a priori*) valid, a knowledge that cannot be attained through the senses, and to destroy the worship of reason (empiricism) (Monk 1960:

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<sup>20</sup> Also see Burke 1990: 38.

<sup>21</sup> Acknowledgements and incongruities between Longinus, Addison, Burke and Kant are discussed in Nahm (1975: 388, 389), centring mainly around the argument of genius-inspiration and imagination. These arguments support the statement that these philosophers influenced each other.

<sup>22</sup> The translated copy used in this research is dated 1981.

<sup>23</sup> The translation used in this research is by J.C. Meredith, in *Great Books of the Western World*, 1952.

146). The concrete idealism<sup>24</sup> which governed the aesthetic and the metaphysical world of the nineteenth century was founded on the notions contained in this philosophy (Bosanquet 1934: 256). The interpretation of the sublime by Kant is seen in the paradigm of this idealism.

However similar Burke's and Kant's approaches seem to be in the *Enquiry* and the *Observations*, there are some important differences. Burke emphasises that specific properties of objects produce the feeling of the sublime. Kant's emphasis is 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 *Observations* Kant (1981: 18) writes that there are four classifications of the temperaments of human beings: melancholic, sanguine, choleric, and phlegmatic. He writes that feelings correlate with the other characteristics of each type. The melancholy<sup>25</sup> person has a greater proportion of the sublime in his make-up; the sanguine or cheerful, of the beautiful; the hot-tempered or choleric, of the gloss of appearance rather than the substance of sublimity; and to the phlegmatic or nonchalant, no single aspect seems more important than another. Kant uses the term "feeling" to indicate our *ability* to experience such states, more than merely as a description of the particular state of being (Crowther 1989: 11). This is an "internal sense" he is referring to; an intuition or an individual ability. Very significantly, the interplay of the sublime and the beautiful generates a description of our moral<sup>26</sup> lives,

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<sup>24</sup> Flew (1979: 160): the philosophical theory that the external world is created by the mind. Kant's transcendental idealism "refers to his view that the objects of our experience, in the sense of things existing in space and enduring through time, are nothing but appearances, and have no independent existence outside our thoughts." Flew (1979: 96) also points out that Kant did not deny "things-in-themselves", but stated that something can only be known as it is.

<sup>25</sup> This classification goes back to the Greeks and was well known in the Middle Ages. Albrecht Dürer's *Melancholia* (1514) expresses the spirit of melancholy, in which Rosenblum (1975: 77) points out the "pathetic fallacy": "the despondency of a woman whose emotions seem to flow directly into the ambient landscape." In the next chapter, *Melancholy and Mystery of a Street* (1914), by Giorgio de Chirico will be discussed, pointing towards the continued use of this spirit of melancholy.

<sup>26</sup> The moral order is the sphere of understanding, the human intellect, which strives to understand (through synthesis) the natural order (Bosanquet 1934: 256). The natural order (reason) is the sphere of the Divine which is too vast for complete comprehension and can only be understood partially (Bosanquet 1934: 258). 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."

accounting for the various human motivations, including motivation by moral principle.

Kant (1981: 52) identified more situations which elicit feelings of the sublime than did Burke. For example, we can have the response of quiet wonder caused by things such as friendship, understanding and virtue, as well as the obviously “sublime” spectacles such as majestic mountains. One very important advance on Burke is that, for Kant, the sublime is not only something that can affect us, but it 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 that this conception of the sublime offers no threat to our physical being.

Kant implies that the sublime is created by powers that transcend the self. The reverence we experience is orientated towards the universal and expands our normal state of being. The sublime is grounded in self-transcendence from the normal level of our sensory perception to the universal (the whole), but it is not something external to us (Crowther 1989: 15). Monk (1960: 6) paraphrases Kant in distinguishing between the beautiful and the sublime, and in doing so, supports the link between the sublime and the universal or totality:

*Although points of agreement between the sublime and the beautiful exist (in so far as each is an aesthetic judgement), there are great differences. Beauty is concerned with limited objects, with forms; the sublime is to be found in objects that are limitless, that have no form, though they are always accompanied with a “super-thought” of totality. The beautiful, therefore, implies an effort of the “understanding”, the faculty that determines objects by specific conceptions; the sublime implies an effort of the “reason”, the faculty that seeks an unconditioned totality.*

The ideal for the Romantic artist was to be the interpreter, through the visuality of art, of the hidden mysteries of the greater whole. Through the power of Judgement and the free play of imagination<sup>27</sup> the artist was the genius bridging the gap between our limited understanding and the Natural Order (Bosanquet 1934: 261). It was in the

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<sup>27</sup> The imagination is an autonomous act of synthesis, according to Kant (Taylor 1992: 25). In this act of synthesis the mind creates its own order in which it stacks information (perceptions) next to each other. This order (of stacking) has nothing to do with empirical order. In this synthesis totally new combinations of perceptions can form new realities, thus transcending the senses (that is transcendental imagination).

sphere of Moral Order, the sphere of the soul, that understanding of Reason began, and it was the artist's responsibility to encourage this insight.<sup>28</sup> Fine art ought to be the product of imaginative and contemplative insight (Kant's "reflective judgement"), and not merely sensory perception. Monk (1960: 6) explains that in the *Critique of Judgement*, Kant postulated the idea that aesthetic experience is not a result of the intellectual comprehension of concepts,<sup>29</sup> but rather a result of the experience of being confronted by the real object. This experience interacts with *a priori* reason.<sup>30</sup>

The Romantic artist William Blake's (1757-1827) imaginative invention, personal symbols and cosmic concepts have been examined by many scholars. When Rosenblum (1975: 45) compares Friedrich and Blake, he points out that neither of them paints with a bodily eye, but rather with a spiritual eye. Friedrich, however, looked carefully at the appearances of nature, while Blake could almost have been blind if the detail is compared with the visible world. Rosenblum (1975: 46) remarks:

*Such a polarity between the abstract and the empirical, the universal and the specific was, in fact, common in the art of the Romantic period, almost as if the easy fusion of the specific and the general that characterised both the high and low styles of the baroque and rococo had been rent asunder.*

Blake's *Elohim creating Adam* (1795; Figure 5) and *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* (1806; Figure 6), have an interesting textural similarity in the wing of the creator (*Elohim*) and the tree next to the figure of Joseph. The "feathers" and the "bark" seem like fish scales, as if a mystical, universal logic<sup>31</sup> is present, giving structure to

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<sup>28</sup>As Snyman (1988: 205) states: "According to Kant, works of art symbolise the ideal of freedom and nature reconciled to each other."

Bosanquet (1934: 265) elaborates: "Moreover, the aesthetic consciousness is now recognised in its positive essence as the meeting-point of sense and reason."

<sup>29</sup>Aesthetic experience is not interested in discovering knowledge of the object, which is why Kant called aesthetic experience "disinterested" (Monk 1960: 6). Snyman (1988: 205) warns that this term is easily misinterpreted, and explains that it implies that utilitarian ends should be eliminated in order to focus on the aesthetic quality of the work of art.

<sup>30</sup>Pure reason is *a priori* reason "...what can be known by reason apart from anything derived from experience." Human knowledge is not only sensibility, according to Kant, but also understanding, which is greatly influenced by the way we think. "The way in which we perceive, identify, and reflect upon objects might itself have a form of structure which in some way moulds or contributes to our experience." According to Kant it is through understanding that we order and classify the sensory experience, and this is then our experience of the objective world or nature (Flew 1979: 190).

<sup>31</sup>George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1779-1831), successor to many of Kant's ideas, believed that there is *just one thinking substance* (Flew 1984: 139), which is the absolute truth. This is the Absolute Mind (Flew 1984: 142) or *Absolute Geist*, which is the expression of the infinite: God. Man, who is finite, strives to become one with this infinite. According to Bosanquet (1934: 357) it is Hegel's point of

living forms. This deduction is purely visual, but read with Rosenblum's (1975: 56) interpretation of *Rest on the Flight into Egypt*, it seems valid:

*[it]...belongs to so abstract a realm that the figures, like the landscape, seem totally ethereal, a kind of mystic ectoplasm contained in pulsating, wiry contours.*

Understanding is limited, according to Kant (Bosanquet 1934: 258). Ideas concerning the nature of the universe as a whole, especially the Divine, are not verifiable and are impossible to grasp. The whole can be known only in its parts, and not as a whole. This Kantian wisdom has led to the popular concept that if insight is gained into smaller sections of the world, insight into the bigger picture is ultimately assumed.

For the Romantic artist, like Blake, the purpose behind picturing the mysterious sublime is to get a glimpse of the greater mysterious whole. Rosenblum (1975: 44) focuses attention on the circular shape present in *Elohim creating Adam* by stating that the purity of circular forms is a primal artistic structure. The circle is the symbol of wholeness, holiness, the cycle of life from birth to death and the inner realm (Chetwynd 1993: 251, 292, 319). Visually the circle plays a role in unifying the images in *Elohim creating Adam*, reflecting once again the concept of wholeness in the work.

The Romantic notion of completeness, that everything in the universe belongs to a harmonious whole and has a single-minded purpose, is an assumption based on Kant's vision. In Appelbaum's (1995: 50) discussion of Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, this finality is described as a "synthetic *a priori* principle." It is a

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view that "Sublimity...involves on the side of man the feeling of his own finiteness and his insuperable remoteness from God."



Figure 5: William Blake, *Elohim creating Adam*, 1795.



Figure 6: William Blake, *Rest on the flight into Egypt*, 1806.



principle that is derived from reason to comprehend the object or the world; it is not a principle derived from the constitution of the object or world.

According to Kant (Monk 1960: 7) the object or nature can never be sublime, because it is a totality of forms and the sublime is unlimited.<sup>32</sup> The mind can have a reaction to an object which then creates the feeling of the sublime. Knowledge of nature can never be total, but reason always strives towards an absolute whole; therefore the sublime is found in ideas of reason.<sup>33</sup> Monk (1960: 7) elaborates on this theory, using Kant's division of the sublime into the mathematical and the dynamic, in other words, the great and the energetic.<sup>34</sup>

The mathematical sublime, that which is absolutely great (exceeding definitive quantity), has no standard against which it can be measured, while in nature everything is relative. This proves that such greatness only exists in our ideas. Even nature represented in art cannot represent absolute magnitudes; it is our imagination that is triggered. Kant (1952: 498) gives the following definition: "The sublime is that, the mere capacity of thinking which evidences a faculty of mind transcending every standard of sense." When trying to realise the mathematical *ad infinitum* by reason, every standard of sense is transcended and the feeling experienced will be the sublime. What Monk (1960: 7) points out here is the attempt<sup>35</sup> of the human being to grasp the absolute, thus attaining feelings of sublimity. Kant calls this a *Geistesgefühl* (Bosanquet 1934: 276).

The dynamic sublime implies the motion of the mind when an object or phenomenon inspires fear or power. Kant (1952: 496) phrases it as follows:

*...the feeling of sublime involves as its characteristic feature a mental movement combined with the estimate of the object, whereas taste in*

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<sup>32</sup> "For the sublime, in the strict sense of the word, cannot be contained in any sensuous form, but rather concerns ideas of reason" (Kant 1952: 496).

<sup>33</sup> 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."

<sup>34</sup> Flew (1979: 343) defines the sublime according to Kant: "That which is beyond all comparison (that is absolutely) great, either mathematically in terms of limitless magnitude, or dynamically in terms of limitless power."

<sup>35</sup> Hegel agrees with this "attempt", saying that it is this very inadequacy that stirs and invokes the mind (Bosanquet 1934: 356).

*respect of the beautiful presupposes that the mind is in restful contemplation, and preserves it in this state.*

Monk (1960: 8) characterises the sublime as a vibration that attracts and repels at the same time. The sublime experience could be understood as being intuitively frightened of something excessive, but inquisitive to comprehend it. The fearfulness of nature, the immensity and energy described by Kant (Monk 1960: 8,9), remind one of Burke's sublime (Burke 1990: 36). The sublime is experienced when we are lifted above nature through the realisation that we might be physically dwarfed by the storms or mountains, but, as Monk (1960: 8) states, "our reason remains undaunted, and the mind becomes aware of the sublimity of its own being."

According to Kant<sup>36</sup> both beauty and sublime feelings are a species of aesthetic judgement, but beauty has to do with form, while sublimity depends on "*unform*", the formless or the limitless. In Kant's (1952: 495) words:

*The beautiful in nature is a question of the form of the object, and this consists in limitation, whereas the sublime is to be found in an object even devoid of form, so far as it immediately invokes, or else by its presence provokes a representation of limitlessness, yet with a superadded thought of its totality.*

The sublime is thus a degree more subjective than the beautiful, making higher demands on the mind. The important contribution that the sublime made to eighteenth and nineteenth century aesthetics was the move towards subjectivism (Monk 1960: 8, 9). Moving from the emphasis on sublime qualities in objects to the effect on the mind and emotions of the subject, Burke and Kant typified the general trend amongst contemporary writers and artists.

Kant's view of the sublime is idealistic and typical of Romantic views, such as those which defined the artist as a genius.<sup>37</sup> This view included the ideal that the essential truth could be discovered in the search for synthesis and that this would hopefully lead to an understanding of the whole. These concepts have been discussed in this

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<sup>36</sup> Bosanquet (1934: 276) also refers to Kant's use of the word terrible, "grässlich", and not ugly, "hässlich," to describe the sublime feeling.

<sup>37</sup> Bosanquet (1934: 273) refers to Kant's view:

section and have been shown to be reflected in the attempted visualisation of the absolute in Romantic art. The next chapter will argue these points, taking into consideration the paradigm shifts that occurred at the end of the nineteenth century. There were revivals of Romantic ideas at the end of the nineteenth century, especially in the art of Vincent van Gogh, whose empathy with nature has been compared with that of Friedrich (Rosenblum 1975: 62). The changed implication of what the sublime referred to would only be grasped when the change became evident under the influence of abstraction. The search for the essence of life and meaning continued, but within the framework of new perspectives and a new questioning of the accepted “truth.” The stage was set for a dialogue that continued through Modernism and is still very much alive in the debates and discourses of Postmodernism.

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*The essence of genius he finds in the power to portray aesthetic ideas; and aesthetic ideas are imaginative presentations such that no conception is able to exhaust their significance.*

## Chapter 2

### The Modernist Sublime

#### 2.1. Modernism

Jürgen Habermas (1929-) stated that the most “recent” Modernism appeared during the nineteenth century (Habermas 1993: 99). This indicates that the term “modern” has been applied to different times and phenomena. In the late fifth century and in the Renaissance, for example, the term was used when a new epoch appeared which delineated itself through a renewed relationship with the ancients (Habermas 1993: 98). The Enlightenment also used the term to designate an opposition to the ancients,<sup>38</sup> and, influenced by the development of modern science, it saw in the “modern” the “infinite advance towards social and moral betterment” (Habermas 1993: 99). The Modernism that was identified towards the end of the nineteenth century opposed the traditional assumptions with the present view, and it is this Modernism that is accepted as the comprehensive term to describe the character of most twentieth century art.

The word *modern* means “just now” (Latin: *modernus*), and implies making things new (Taylor 1992: 50). To make new, a certain erasure of the past is necessary, but, as Taylor (1992: 50) points out: “The forgotten never simply disappears but eternally returns to haunt the present and disrupt presence.” In the analysis of the sublime as perceived through Modernists’ eyes, this idea of the “now” and our awareness that existence in the present tense (as opposed to having our life based on the past), is always haunted by memory, is most appropriate.

The gradual metamorphosis which led to Modernism took place over many decades. Arnason (1986: 13) stresses that different dates have been indicated as the beginning of the Modern age, but a completely new beginning cannot be pinpointed. There were several developments that influenced the general paradigm shift. Arnason

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<sup>38</sup> The Romantic modernist idealized the Middle Ages and not the antique ideals of the classicists (Habermas 1993: 99).

(1986: 13) notes, for instance, changes in patterns of patronage, the role of the French Academy, the system of instruction, the artist's position, and the artist's attitude toward meaning and artistic issues.

These developments were influenced by still larger social, political and industrial events. The nineteenth century is seen as the great age of progress on all levels. Development in industry went hand-in-hand with scientific and technological development, and spread from Britain to other countries in Europe (Delouche 1993: 307). Under Prussian leadership Germany rose to become a major force on the European continent (Allen 1993: 169). Europe experienced an optimism that seemed to wipe away all fears and encouraged a view of a great future (Delouche 1993: 309). The faith in the new and the relentless search for the original were more intense than ever before.

By the end of the nineteenth century, artists did not consider the portrayal of nature a necessary prerequisite for art, and began to postulate the notion of the autonomy of art. The scientific analyses of colour by the Impressionists and the recognition of the flatness of the canvas by the Post-impressionists initiated this autonomy.<sup>39</sup> Kim Levin (1985: 2) defined Modern art as being scientific and based on objective truth: "Ever since Impressionism ventured into optics, it shared the method and logic of science." A movement away from subjectivism towards objectivism became prevalent. If Kant's genius played the role of "bridge builder"<sup>40</sup> through the intuition of the subjective mind, thus revealing truths of the formless and the absolute, where did this leave the artist with a taste for the sublime at the beginning of the twentieth century?

The artist's search was for exclusive laws, which art itself would reveal, and which would constitute the rules for making great art.<sup>41</sup> The metaphor of artists as the avant-garde arose with the understanding that unknown territory had to be invaded,

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<sup>39</sup> Rosenblum (1975: 71) refers to Gauguin: "...an artist who finally gave priority to the aesthetic, to the independence of art from life."

<sup>40</sup> The imagination of the artist reveals aspects of the Natural order.

<sup>41</sup> Worringer (1910: 3): "...specific laws of art have, in principle, nothing to do with the aesthetics of natural beauty."

which no one had yet discovered and in which the future was undefined (Docherty 1993: 99). Artists took the quest for the absolute and purity that was part of the idealism of Kant further and made it one of the essential qualities of Modernism. Towards the middle of the twentieth century, the critic Clement Greenberg (Hertz 1985: v) arrived at the notion of purity through self-criticism, which focused exclusively on the artwork and the qualities of the materials. This self-criticism meant that all effects that could possibly be borrowed from another medium, forms of art, or reality ought to be eliminated so that only the intrinsic essence of painting (for example) would be left. Similarly, Michael Fried emphasised “self-sufficiency” and “presentness”, and discouraged narrative content and the concerns of the viewer (Hertz 1985: v). Kant’s concept of *a priori*, where knowledge was intuitive and not experienced, contained the idea of purity. This linked up with the purity of the Modernists who wanted to exclude the world from the artwork. The Modernists, moreover, wanted to break with the idealistic past (Hertz 1985: 2).

The general optimism at the start of the twentieth century was not experienced positively by all. Before the turn of the nineteenth century Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) saw the German people as becoming soulless and self-satisfied (Allen 1993: 169). He saw the country “...substituting knowledge for wisdom, rich in possessions but miserably poor within” and claimed that it was a time of “decadence” with a need for new values (Allen 1993: 169). Nietzsche saw himself as a kind of prophet<sup>42</sup> who had to expose the hollowness and the self-deception of the time; he expressed the need to destroy existing standards to make room for new and better virtues (Allen 1993: 170). The questioning of the existing values or truths of his time had a vast impact on the acceptance of the ideas of the Romantics (Allen 1993: 175). The philosophy of Nietzsche was not necessarily an objective account of the conditions in Germany, but a subjective point of view which has remained influential to this day.

The central metaphors contained in Nietzsche’s works and which will be referred to in this and the next chapter, are those of Dionysus and Apollo. These are two tendencies found in Greek culture, which closely resemble “the passion of the night”

and “the law of the day” respectively (Allen 1993: 172). The Dionysian urge is seen as the ecstatic, the chaotic, the non-identifiable, the ungrounded, the indefinite, the unfixed, and the vague. This indicates the flowing, dynamic, unlimited power of life, which is vital and creative, but denies the centralised stance of romantic idealism (Janse van Rensburg 1988: 30). The Apollonian cast of mind relies on order, reason and discipline (Allen 1993: 172). To have order, the individual should understand limits and have a knowledge of self. Kant (1952: 495) links understanding and beauty: “...the beautiful seems to be regarded as a presentation...of understanding.” Therefore one associates the Apollonian illusion (or “the veil of Maja” [Janse van Rensburg 1988: 32]) with beauty, while the Dionysian can be seen as the sublime urge.

It is not the intention to discuss all the dimensions of Nietzsche’s philosophy, but his impact on certain aspects of the Modernist sublime will be pointed out in the creative work of some artists.

One thus discerns the Modernist sublime in two distinct developments in this epoch. The first, discussed under “Abstraction versus Empathy”, is the sublime search for the absolute essence. In this development the *essence* of art, life and spirituality leads to abstraction and inevitably the minimalist void. The other parallel development, discussed under “The Sublime Dream” below, plunges into chaos and chance, in order to uncover the original creative aspect of life. In this search the principle of excess seemed to be applicable in the search for the limitless sublime. The emphasis on idea/concept in Surrealism (and Dada) with its multiple layering of references and associations, inevitably led to conceptual art. In both of these constructed “directions”, many similarities and coincidences occurred, with the implication that an art work can possess elements of both “directions”. French philosopher Lyotard’s (1924-) insight has contributed greatly towards contextualizing both these developments within the discourse of the sublime.

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<sup>42</sup> The prophet image seems very romantic, as is the genius figure of Kant (Bosanquet 1934: 261). Both figures can uncover hidden meanings.

The aim of the section, “Empathy and Abstraction” is therefore to trace the gradual change from the naturalism of the Romantic vision to the abstract vision of the Modernists, and to indicate how this influenced the concept of the sublime and the visual rendering thereof. An attempt will also be made to indicate to what extent the Romantic vision remained and how reaction against it developed. The change will mainly be illustrated by means of short discussions of Wilhelm Worringer’s theories and the writings and paintings of Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), Mark Rothko (1903-70), Georgia O’Keeffe (1887-1986) and Barnett Newman (1905-70).

The aim in the section “The Sublime Dream” is to indicate how concepts of the irrational, chaos and the erasure of borders have been established in visual art and Dadaist and Surrealist thought. Nietzsche’s and George Bataille’s (1897-1962) influence on artists such as André Masson (1896-1987), Giorgio De Chirico (1888-1978), Max Ernst (1891-1976) and Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) will be discussed. Aspects of the melancholic sublime and the experimental sublime are evident in these artists’ work. An important difference from the more formalistic Modernism, namely the attempted break with aesthetics as such, will also be examined.

## 2.2. Empathy versus Abstraction

Important criticism of subjectivism was levelled by Worringer<sup>43</sup> in his book *Abstraction and Empathy* (1910). He criticised empathy and saluted abstraction, saying that empathy was inapplicable as an interpretative method for large parts of art history. Worringer (1910: 4) described empathy as the general name for the doctrine of aesthetic subjectivism, which took as its starting point the behaviour of the contemplating subject rather than objective aesthetics. As an opposite to empathy Worringer suggested man’s urge to abstraction.

In characterising empathy, Worringer (1910: 5) explained that “aesthetic enjoyment is objectified self-enjoyment. To enjoy aesthetically means to enjoy myself in a

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<sup>43</sup> Worringer wrote important articles on art theory for the magazine *Der Sturm* (Janse van Rensburg 1988: 61), and through this influenced many of the Expressionist artists. Worringer acknowledges the



sensuous object diverse from myself, to empathise myself into it.” Empathy was an activity of the will, an inner-self activation, rather than the sensation itself (Worringer 1910: 6).

Worringer’s aim was to prove that history cannot always uphold this notion of empathy. For example, he claims that in terms of empathy the viewer cannot appreciate any art that is different from Greco-Roman and modern Western art (of his time). Worringer (1910: 9) saw the history of art, as analysed through the process of empathy, as a history of *ability*, while he felt the new history of art ought to be a history of *volition*.<sup>44</sup> This implies that the art of other cultures (such as the “primitives”) ought to be appreciated in the light of their very different psychological directives rather than being perceived as exhibiting a lack of ability. Worringer (1910: 10) suggests that it is one-sided and naïve to think that visual art had the natural model as a goal throughout history.

Worringer (1910: 11) argues that imitation has nothing to do with aesthetics or art, a view that seems to echo Longinus, who denied that art is mimesis. The evolution of style in art tells us something about the way human beings see themselves in relation to the cosmos and the phenomena of the world - in other words, the psychic state of humankind at different times.<sup>45</sup> Worringer (1910: 14) wrote that empathy can only describe artistic volition that tends towards naturalism, because it inclines towards truths of organic life, and this criterion is not applicable to the pyramids, for example. He feels that the urge to abstraction is far more important in the evolution of art. This can be identified in the art of savage peoples, in the “primitive” epochs of art<sup>46</sup> and in the art of certain Oriental peoples.

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influence of Nietzsche’s philosophy on his work, even though Nietzsche is not mentioned in *Abstraction and Empathy* (Janse van Rensburg 1988: 64).

<sup>44</sup> Riegl introduced the concept of “*kunstwollen*” or “artistic volition” (i.e. an *a priori* “will to form”) which implies an inner demand, existing independently of the object and the creative process (Worringer 1910: 9).

<sup>45</sup> Riegl defined a trend of artistic forms in the context of the world view, i.e. the social, religious, scientific and aesthetic thought of the time (Bullock & Woodings 1992: 644).

<sup>46</sup> It is important to note that when Rousseau referred to primitivism and the noble savage in Romanticism, he steered the attention of aesthetics away from traditional beauty.

In order to analyse the psychic motives for abstraction, Worringer (1910: 15) turned to the world view and attitude of people. Contrasting the urge to abstraction with the urge to empathy, he describes the former as being characterized by immense inner unrest caused by the hostile outside world, while the latter reflects a happy pantheistic relationship of confidence between the individual and the world. The urge to abstraction would also be the outcome of a strong transcendental urge and a spiritual dread of space, implying insecurity and a feeling of being lost in the universe. An object would have to be taken out of its natural context, to be purified of all its dependence upon life, so that the arbitrary is removed and its absolute value can be revealed. Worringer (1910: 17) deduces that people (such as primitive cultures) who do not live in harmony with the world, will strive for abstract beauty. The experience of obscurity and spiritual helplessness will drive the subject to placing value on necessity and regularity. This offers an escape from the confusion of the world (Worringer 1910: 19). In absolute form and purest abstraction there would be no dependence on nature.

The urge to abstraction ought to be in the direction of clarity, free from three-dimensionality and the disquiet of inter-relationships. Worringer (1910: 23, 24) saw a need for self-alienation, a need to lose oneself in an art work, as the root of aesthetic experience.<sup>47</sup> This alienation is possible, according to Worringer, because the aesthetic essence revealed by abstraction is universal and has no fixed boundaries. To experience clarity, therefore, “deliverance...from the seeming arbitrariness of organic existence in general” is necessary, and can be experienced only through abstraction (Worringer 1910: 24).

In comparing Worringer’s views with the Romantic views discussed in the previous chapter, the following corresponding aspects stand out: the need to escape a specific reality, the transcendental urge, the search for the spiritual, the dread of space and the search for absolute essence.

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<sup>47</sup> This important point of view is reflected in the opinions of Rothko and Newman discussed later in this study. Worringer’s idea of “losing oneself” in art was visualized in the large canvasses of these abstract artists.

At the beginning of the discussion of the Romantic sublime, the emphasis was placed on the idealism of the Romantics, expressed in the longing for an alternative world and a dream of harmony. This was also an escape to “an infinitely more desirable world”, corresponding with Worringer’s sense of becoming “free from the whole world”, the necessary alienation he found in abstraction. The Romantics expressed this escape, the yearning for the infinity of the soul, in the art of the sublime. In escaping from the rationalistic traditional art of the day, which was Neo-classical in taste, the aesthetic of the sublime aimed at the transcendence of the self. Longinus and Addison, who influenced the Romantic mode of thought, also referred to the role of the artist as a transcendental one, lifting the soul to higher states. When Worringer thus states that the abstract urge is the outcome of a strong transcendental urge, the association with the sublime seems undeniable.

Worringer (1910: 15) refers to “a spiritual dread of space,” implying insecurity and a feeling of being lost in the universe, when characterising the abstract. There are two deductions to be made from this statement: firstly that Worringer saw the abstract as being associated with spiritual aspects and secondly, that fear or insecurity is a force present in the creation of abstract art. The problem here is that the characteristics of Worringer’s abstract category correspond to the description of the sublime of Burke and Kant, while conversely Worringer would possibly typify the art of the Romantic era as empathetic because of its resemblance to nature.

Cumming (1987: 33) defines the spiritual as follows: “The spiritual is understood to refer both to the artist’s subjective creative and intuitive impulse, a sense of ultimate harmony and balance, and a notion of the ideal and pure.” Most of the key words in this description have been used in the previous chapter to describe the Romantic sublime. The Romantic’s yearning for an ideal influenced artists to attempt to suggest the divine in nature: in the absolutely awe-inspiring, the great and the mysterious, as seen in the work of Friedrich and Blake. They used religious themes but suggested a wider concept of spirituality as portrayed by the sublime. When Burke (1990: 55) states that vastness creates a “terrible uncertainty”, when Friedrich’s lonely monk is described as looking lost and deprived, when fear is inspired by Fuseli’s *Nightmare*, and Piranesi disorients the viewer with vast scale, then

Worringer's description of the urge to abstraction seems a more fitting category than empathy. This implies that the sublime does not fit in comfortably with Worringer's empathy, while it could be classified as a doctrine of aesthetic subjectivism.

The confident individual, described by Worringer as being in perfect harmony with the world, would tend to agree with the definitions of beauty given by Burke, rather than with those which describe the sublime. Burke (1990: 114) stated that beauty should be of measured proportion, and that *beauty should not be obscure*. If Worringer described abstraction as being clear and free of the confusion of inter-relationships, the relation is stronger to beauty than to sublimity. One sees here a discrepancy between Burke and Worringer's description of art with a spiritual urge (i.e. the sublime). The abstract works of artists that express the spiritual and sublime suggest views of mystery, obscurity or infinity rather than clarity.

The aesthetics of both beauty and sublimity focus on the concepts of essence and the absolute in typical Modernist art. Worringer's view that in absolute form and purest abstraction there would be no dependence on nature is supported by the later statements by Clement Greenberg and Michel Fried, who emphasised that art, is independent of life (Hertz 1985: v). Greenberg (Taylor 1992: 23) calls Kant "the first real Modernist"<sup>48</sup> because of the latter's method of criticism, whereby autonomy from external determinants can be established. The Enlightenment was concerned with rational and critical theories and therefore Modernism, with its emphasis on self-criticism, is seen as an extension of the Enlightenment (Taylor 1992: 3).

The roots of the search for the essence and the absolute lie in the Romantic sublime, in which the artist strove to reveal the mysteries of the whole. In the quotation from Rosenblum (1975: 56) stating that Blake "...belongs to so abstract a realm" he emphasises the essential feeling of the landscape, and according to Monk (1960: 7), reason always strives towards an absolute whole in the Romantic world of Kant. The

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<sup>48</sup> Taylor (1992: 23, 24) elaborates:

*For Kant, freedom and reason are inseparable. Reason enables a person to overcome bondage by progressing from heteronomy, that is, determination by another, to autonomy, that is, self-determination. This movement toward autonomy takes place in both the theoretical and practical spheres of experience.*

greatest difference between the Romantics and the Modernists is a movement away from naturalistic reality (Worringer's empathy) towards abstraction, in which the visual world, as we perceive it, is only partly recognisable, or even totally unrecognisable. Lyotard (1993b: 44) sees the demise of the naturalistic image in Modernism as an embodiment of the sublime, for abstraction is like a presentation of the infinite. Lyotard (1993b: 43). refers to Kant who "shows the way when he names 'formlessness, the absence of form', as a possible index to the unrepresentable."

The traditional subjects of representational art lacked the power to express the purity of the Modern artist's vision. In this chapter, one's aim would be to identify and compare different aspects of the new aesthetic of abstraction which could be seen as expressing the sublime in Modernity. Kandinsky made valuable contributions regarding the spiritual values and concerns which prevailed at the beginning of the twentieth century. Rothko and Newman will be referred to as examples of mid-twentieth century artists who revived the association of abstract art with the spiritual.<sup>49</sup> These artists were searching for an immediate and powerful way to express the transcendent and the sublime (Taylor 1992: 65).

## 2.2.1. The Abstract Sublime

Kandinsky wrote *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (1911) at approximately the same time that Worringer's book appeared.<sup>50</sup> Kandinsky's spiritual vision is a mixture of philosophical idealism, Theosophy and Russian Orthodoxy (Cooke 1987: 6).

Kandinsky was interested in every form of "alternative" spiritual doctrine available,<sup>51</sup> which was in line with the sympathetic attitude towards the mystical atmosphere that artists and academics evinced at the turn of the century (Cooke 1987: 7).

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<sup>49</sup> Critics such as Greenberg debated the total autonomy of art, where art is only about art. Taylor (1992: 4) points out that this is contrary to what most artists express: that "their work cannot be understood apart from religious questions and spiritual issues."

<sup>50</sup> The English translation appeared in 1914 and is called *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. This book has been labelled the Expressionist's "Book of Revelation," and Kandinsky, St. John the Divine, for setting out the meaning of an apocalypse to the radical imagination (Ratcliff 1982: 105).

<sup>51</sup> Janse van Rensburg (1988: 335) refers to Nietzsche's influence on Kandinsky. The influence was through the work of poet Stefan George and Frank Wedekind, and his contact with the dominant figures of the Nietzsche cult.

*For [Kandinsky] the surfaces of nature were only the means to understanding the strange, spiritual forces below, forces that could carry us far away from the modern materialistic world on images that either warn us of terrible, impending doom and chaos, or comfort us in dreams of Arcadian simplicity and harmony (Rosenblum 1975: 148).*

Kandinsky was concerned with the Modernist's spiritual relationship with the primitives.<sup>52</sup> He saw temporary similarities of form between the art of his time and the art of the primitives, and believed that something deeper, an awakening of the soul, would follow. This is an important parallel with Worringer, who identified the urge to abstraction in the art of primitive people. The relationship between Modernity and the primitive is complex. In searching for the self-sufficiency that Greenberg would later refer to, the quest for the absolute is also the quest for originality. Taylor (1992: 50) formulates this as follows:

*To be original is to be present at an origin or "archè" that is not dependent on or derived from anything other than itself. The pursuit of originality is the quest for the primordial source of creativity. So understood, the desire for modernity not only is primitive and ancient but is, in a certain sense, the desire for the primitive and ancient.*

Kandinsky's belief in spiritual awakening, revealed his own apocalyptic hopes for the time (Taylor 1992: 65). Kandinsky's apocalypse was to be the product of his "inner life," in his quest for building "the spiritual pyramid"<sup>53</sup> which will some day reach to heaven" (Ratcliff 1982: 105). The Expressionists in general had strong feelings about the apocalypse, a concept that has its roots in the sublime terror and greatness of Romantic landscapes.<sup>54</sup> It was in the renewed interest in primitivism that the formal and spiritual implications of the sublime dream of a magical world, as expressed in Romanticism, developed further. This is implied by Tucker (1992: 22) who notes that a primal visual language was developing from the late-nineteenth century onwards.

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<sup>52</sup> This concept of the primitives is similar to the Romantics' idea (Vaughan 1978: 18) of the noble savage: a person of innocence, unspoiled by corrupting civilisation.

<sup>53</sup> The pyramid or triangle is Kandinsky's model of a culture. The point at the top symbolises the spiritual apex, and as insight grows the whole pyramid "moves upwards" (the spiritual advance of the whole). People are located in horizontal bands, and occasionally some people (like artists) can see beyond the limits of their segment (Cooke 1987: 8).

<sup>54</sup> Artists such as Oskar Kokoschka (1886-1980) and Chaim Soutine (1894-1943) expressed an apocalyptic sublime in many of their works. Owing to the space constraints in this study and the similarities between the essential qualities of the work of the above-mentioned artists and that of Kandinsky, a wider discussion of their work has been omitted.

The free expressivity seen in the oil painting *Little Pleasures* (1913; Figure 8) was influenced by Kandinsky's interest in primitivism and child art. Various of Rudolf Steiner's<sup>55</sup> writings, dealing with theosophy and child art, had an influence on Kandinsky's intellectual and aesthetic paradigm (Cumming 1987: 35). This influence helped Kandinsky in developing his non-figurative visual language to present an inner truth beyond the recognisable world. Another source of inspiration was Nietzsche's theory of creation by catastrophe. This theory is found in Nietzsche's paradox of "crossing over by going under" (Gordon 1982: 85), in other words, creation through destruction.<sup>56</sup> It also refers to the purification of the soul through suffering (Gordon 1982: 84).

A feeling of primal chaos is present in *Little Pleasures*. The apocalypses of Kandinsky, like those in Romantic imagery, suggest physical and spiritual unrest. The horsemen,<sup>57</sup> presented by the more rigid markings in the centre, are surrounded by what appears to be a stormy landscape (not unlike the Romantic sublime landscapes described by Burke), suggested by zig-zags, swirling curves, waving diagonals and blurred masses. These markings give one the feeling that they symbolise something mysterious, like the primitive marks on cave walls which communicated the insights of the shamans of old. In this work, the sense of mystery is experienced through the ambiguous, undefined shapes, and thereby the sense of the sublime is awakened.<sup>58</sup> Here one recalls the sense of the limitlessness of the sublime.

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<sup>55</sup> In 1908 Steiner gave lectures in which the imminence of apocalyptic renewal made a great impression on Kandinsky and provided him with a major idea (Gordon 1982: 84).

<sup>56</sup> Gordon (1982: 78) quotes Nietzsche from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883):

*What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not an end: what can be loved in man is that he is an 'overture' and a 'going under'. I love those who do not know how to live, except by going under, for they are those who cross over.*

(It is from this paragraph that Die Brücke took their name.)

<sup>57</sup> Rosenblum (1987: 147) notes that the fourth horseman, Death, is missing in the work, suggesting a more optimistic interpretation.

<sup>58</sup> In the nineteenth century Hegel described the problematic situation of the artist attempting to portray the sublime, to have "to express the infinite without finding in the realm of phenomena any object which proves itself fitting for this representation" (Bosanquet 1934: 356). Ambiguity creates the feeling of the sublime in nature, as discussed in the previous chapter. This is an essential aspect of the new aesthetic of Modernism expressing the sublime.



Figure 7: Wassily Kandinsky, *Little Pleasures*, 1913.



Rosenblum (1975: 148) remarks that even though the title refers to the pleasure of horseback riding, the true implications of the theme are essentially Romantic: the end of time and the hope of a regeneration that will purify this world. The Romantic end of time and Nietzschean suffering both represent the struggle through which progress would be possible. The visualisation of chaos and unrest in a painting with a title that refers to pleasure, strongly echoes Burke's concept of the sublime as the pleasantness of pain (Bosanquet 1934: 275).

The contradictory idea of pleasure in violent confrontation (which is Burkean as well as Nietzschean), can be found in Kandinsky's visual and written work. In 1913 Kandinsky wrote in *Reminiscences*:

*Painting is a thundering collision between different worlds which are destined, in and from the conflict with one another, to produce the new world that is called a work of art. Each work arises technically just as the cosmos arose - through catastrophes, like the chaotic instrumental roar at the end of a symphony that is called the music of the spheres. The creation of a work is the creation of a world* (Gordon 1982: 85).

The concept of contradiction was important within Modernism. The principle of antithesis was in harmony with the age and "even musical *discord* and *ugly* dance movements could be considered *beautiful*" (Gordon 1982: 84). The classification of concepts contrary to traditional beauty reminds one of the Romantics' dilemma when describing the sublime.

In searching for an art form that is "internal" (pertaining specifically to moral and spiritual ideals), Kandinsky opposes the soulless copying of forms from another period, which he calls an "external" kind of art (Cooke 1987: 7). In this argument, Kandinsky and Worringer are allied in defying the naturalists. The insecurity that Worringer aligns with the urge to abstraction, is argued by Kandinsky to be a sign of the scepticism which is "modern" (Cooke 1987: 9). As a result of Nietzsche's influence, undermining old artistic certainties was a tendency of the time. Kandinsky felt that artworks should be able to alter something in the soul, and identified colours as an "affective force" that "causes vibrations" in the soul (Cooke 1987: 12). Kandinsky aspired to "a science of pure forms and colours that affected the viewer without intervention or the necessity for specific cognitive preparation" (Cooke 1987:

9). Kant's formulation of "disinterested aesthetics" comes to mind, focusing the mind on aesthetics and not on sensory knowledge.

Believing that the world had become soulless and Godless,<sup>59</sup> Kandinsky replaced God with the creative power of the artist. He finds the only true source of meaning in art and therefore the artist is central to the universe of genuine meaning. Nietzsche also gave art this central role of meaning: "For Nietzsche it is only through the *supreme jeopardy of will, art...which [is]...on the one hand the spirit of the sublime*, that man can heal his bonds with existence" (Janse van Rensburg 1988: 340). Kandinsky's belief that the artist should close his eyes and ears to the world and focus only on the inner need, can be seen as an ultimate subjective experience.

Like Kandinsky, Rothko focused on the essence of colour for the spiritual qualities it represents. The transcendent effect that art has on the viewer was important to this artist, as Cumming (1987: 58) states: "His abstract works were intended to act as monolithic sources for spiritual contemplation." Rothko's large, hazy colour rectangles, such as *Green on Blue* (1956; Figure 8) have been compared to Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea* (Figure 2), as both depict sombre, luminous voids. Rosenblum (1975: 10, 11) points to the formal similarity, and notes that both have the feeling of the haziest sunrise or sunset. The emphasis on the primordial elements, namely light and energy, evokes physical and spiritual (sublime) experience. In Kandinsky's work one finds the blurred masses, *the ambiguous, undefined shapes* that create a similar sense of the limitlessness of the sublime.

Rosenblum (1961: 40) refers to the Romantic sublime as depicting shapeless infinities, and indicates that Rothko belongs to the same sublime. To quote Rosenblum (1961: 56):

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<sup>59</sup> "God was "dead" for Nietzsche because the self-created individual had replaced him as prime mover" (Ratcliff 1982: 109). The Romantics had placed the artist in position as a substitute, accepting no authority but that of the artist's own creative power.



Figure 8: Mark Rothko, *Green on Blue*, 1956.

*Like the mystic trinity of sky, water and earth that, in the Friedrich and Turner, appears to emanate from one unseen source, the floating, horizontal tiers of veiled light in the Rothko seem to conceal a total, remote presence that we can only intuit and never fully grasp.*

Worringer's experience, *a need for self-alienation, a need to lose oneself in an art work*, seems to be a view shared by Rosenblum, demonstrated in the way he describes the viewer as being absorbed by the art work. The Romantic dream of forming a bridge to the absolute, the Reason of Kant, has reached a climax in these abstract works, where the viewer has to be totally engulfed to feel one with this limitless entity. Taylor (1992: 52) states: "Such abstraction is, in effect, a ritual of purification that leads to a *condition of complete simplicity*."

Abstract visualisation of an infinite, glowing void finds expression in *Light Coming from the Plains III* (1917; Figure 9) by Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986). Her paintings of plants and spaces become vast landscapes which seem to absorb the viewer into their radiant depths. Although O'Keeffe's works are not all non-figurative, they seem to transport us to the sublime place of wonder. Tucker (1992: 72) states that this feeling for the world "senses the presence of soul and spirit in all things," which he refers to as religiosity.

The size (242,3 x 541,7cm) of Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950-51; Figure 10), painted in a single warm red hue, with a few vertical divisions, has the effect of a terrifying void (Rosenblum 1961: 56). This work has the kind of simplicity that, as discussed above, totally engulfs the viewer. The sublime feeling lies in the subject and object becoming one. Rosenblum (1961: 56) describes the work as heroic and sublime, and says that it "evokes the primeval moment of creation." The striving for the sublime can be seen in Newman's titles: *Onement, The Beginning, Pagan Void, Adam, Day One*, to name but a few. The Modernist ideal has been achieved in that the sublime and the experience of the present as real have merged in these works by Newman.

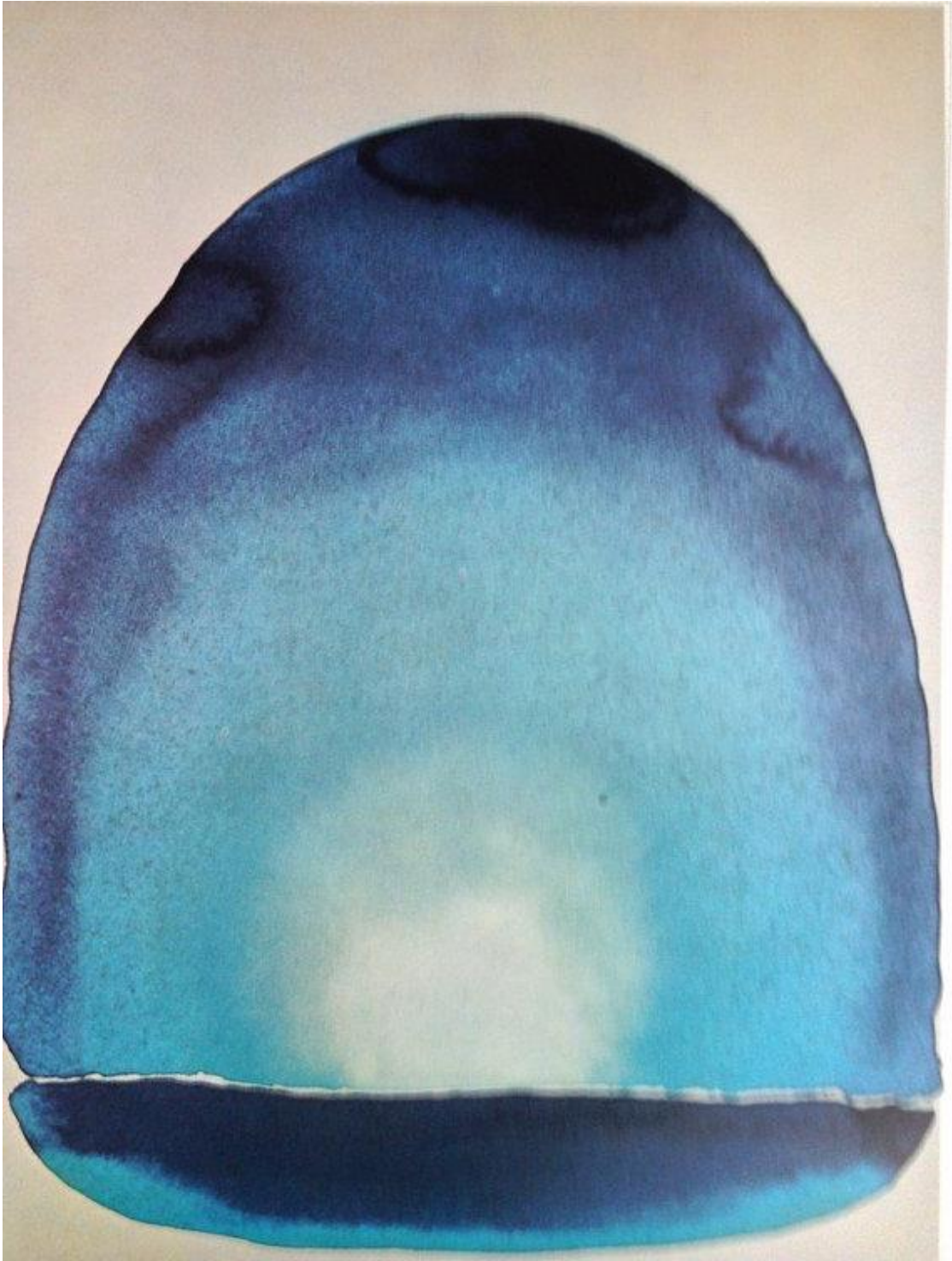


Figure 9: Georgia O'Keeffe, *Light Coming from the Plains III*, 1917.



Figure 10: Barnett Newman, *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, 1950-51.

While the Romantics used nature to create the feeling of the sublime, the abstract artists use the self-sufficient medium of paint. Rosenblum's (1961:56) pithy statement captures the situation: "What used to be pantheism has now become a kind of *paint-theism*." By emphasising the medium, Newman has brought the sublime into the present.

The *will-to-abstraction* has become the *will-to-immediacy* (Taylor 1992: 90). The image has totally disappeared, so that the artwork refers to nothing outside itself, not even to another time. The canvas itself has become the signified thing, and according to Taylor (1992: 90) this is the Real and the True. 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), and he adds that this is really where abstraction goes further than Kandinsky's version. While Kandinsky has "things" in his canvases that signify the essence, Newman attempts to experience the moment of totality in making art.

Two years before painting *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, Newman wrote an essay entitled *The Sublime is Now* (1948). Newman was concerned with the sensation of time (Lyotard 1984: 36), but not as a reference to history, or drama, or nostalgia, but rather as something else which he does not quite explain in his text. In *The Sublime and the Avant-garde*, Lyotard (1984: 37) examines the question: what kind of time was Newman concerned with? What "now" did he have in mind? Lyotard refers to the Hebraic Torah in which Makom is *the* place, which is actually an unnameable divinity. "Now" could then refer to the sublime being "here" and not "there." This is an argument supported by Taylor (1992: 91) who states that as a secret name for God, Moses would say "The place spoke to me" and not "The Lord spoke to me." Lyotard (1984: 37) explains that the Romantic sublime dealt with the indeterminate Thus, which was something inexpressible residing in another world and another time. To describe the avant-garde sublime, Lyotard (1984: 37) paraphrases Newman's sublime as follows:

*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 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. The event introduces an intensification of being. In the process of making art, the last work will never be done, there will always be another, and this is the unending process, the indeterminate, the anticipation of something to come.

The question Lyotard analyses is derived from Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, which is certainly Modernist in its aesthetics, but the relevance of the argument carries over into the Postmodern attitude. The fact that Lyotard's article was written in 1984 may be reason enough for this deduction, which will be elaborated upon in the next chapter.

The goal of the Modernists, Kandinsky, Greenbergian aesthetics and even Rothko, was absolutism. The contemplation of the ideal and the identification of the self with the self, was their ambition. Newman expresses the sublime through emptiness: the emptiness of plenitude. Burke has written that abundance of light which obliterates sight, will create the feeling of the sublime. The Kantian sublime is found in excess (whether mathematical or dynamic), which is translated by Newman as the power of formlessness that he found in the medium itself, as demonstrated in the redness of *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*. As Burke's light obliterates sight, excess is really nothingness. Taylor (1992: 92) points out that the Modernists' search for totality and unity has, as its dark side, obscurity and disorder. The creative origin has become the end: the artist has truly lost himself in his artwork.



This Minimalist climax of abstraction also indicates the end of Modernist idealism. The void is the anti-aesthetic which is in opposition to the beautified object/scene, naturalistically presented. The concept of the anti-aesthetic was also an important impetus of Dada and the Surrealist movement, which developed parallel with the movements towards abstraction. In the following section the anti-aesthetic will be traced to its climax, which one sees in conceptual art.

## 2.3. The Sublime Dream

The dream of absolute freedom at the beginning of the twentieth century sometimes manifested itself in the “dark side” of the mind. The irrationality and disorder of the dream world and the subconscious were explored by the Surrealists from the 1920s to the 1940s, with the aim of recovering the original powers of the spirit (Hughes 1991: 213). Modernism’s ideal of purity was violated by Surrealism’s aim of emphasizing the imagination through the “strange forces” (such as madness and folly) of the mind and by replacing the restraint of the Modernists with excess (Taylor 1992: 233). The aspects of Modernism discussed above, such as purity, order and clarity, indicated the rejection of naturalism.<sup>60</sup> In contrast, Surrealists were obsessed with refuse - the discarded, rejected, worthless, that which is impure and irrational (Taylor 1992: 235). Surrealist aims were closely linked to the aesthetic of the nonrational of the Dadaists, who explored the elements of chance, of randomness and coincidence in their work (Arnason 1986: 271).

Nietzsche’s philosophy denied “absolute value”, which was emphasised by Modernist abstraction. Therefore he denied the autonomy of art and spirit (Janse van Rensburg 1988: 178). This absolute truth (which is most often morality) creates categories which deny the unlimited possibilities of life, according to Nietzsche. As an alternative to the truth, he presents the labyrinth<sup>61</sup> as a symbol of the subconscious and the Dionysian affirmation of life (Janse van Rensburg 1988: 169).

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<sup>60</sup> This statement is supported by Worringer’s dismissal of empathy (or naturalism).

<sup>61</sup> As the leader in the labyrinth, Nietzsche describes the figure of Ariadne, mistress of Dionysus.

Nietzsche's Dionysian realm was an inspiration to artists and writers such as Bataille,<sup>62</sup> who associated themselves with the aims of Surrealism. By defining the difference between the sacred and the profane,<sup>63</sup> Bataille conclusively argued that the sacred domain of intimacy exists "where clear differences and articulate distinctions are lacking" (Taylor 1991: 234). Sacrifice through violence or eroticism will erase the boundaries separating one individual subject or "thing" from another (Taylor 1992: 235). Like so many individuals before him, Bataille searched for a way to escape the human condition. His escape is found in his fascination with the possibilities offered by evil and the transcendental act of erotic communion (Bullock & Woodings 1992: 47). In these possibilities all barriers will disappear and the final aim of fusion will be realised - one could say that Bataille's individual thus attained a state of sublimity.

This line of philosophy was visualised by Masson. His automatic drawings (around 1924), exemplify the true functioning of thought, described in the Surrealist Manifesto as "without any control by force of reason" (Ferrier 1990: 237). The sea of hybrid shapes in these drawings reminds one of the chaos of Dionysus, the labyrinth, and the loss of boundaries.<sup>64</sup> The transgression of boundaries is very much a part of the "tradition of the new" in Modernism, as can be gleaned from Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918) when he stated that the artist should "dive into the unknown to find something new" (Ferrier 1990: 237).

Masson's association with this aspect of the sublime is reflected in his own words: "Neither *realism* nor *fantasy* exists any longer, there is only the unlimited. A visual meditation, without the intervention of thought, can enliven the moment. What was a given becomes the unknown" (Ferrier 1990: 821). Masson describes his working

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<sup>62</sup> Bataille was the leader of the informal college, the Collège de Sociologie, which had as its primary concern "the exploration of the nature and function of religion" (Taylor 1992: 233).

<sup>63</sup> The profane world is the world of reason through which differences are articulated. Bataille associated this with Sigmund Freud's (1856-1939) concept of consciousness and Nietzsche's notions of the Apollonian. The profane world emerges from the obscure sacred world, where limits and separations do not exist. He associates the sacred with Freud's concept of unconsciousness and Nietzsche's notions of the Dionysian (Taylor 1992: 233).

<sup>64</sup> Jackson Pollock (1912-1956) and Willem de Kooning (1904-1997) experiment with the same "loss of boundaries" in their art (Ferrier 1990: 821).

method as freeing the mind of ties and, after entering a trance-like state, merely surrendering “to interior tumult” (Taylor 1992: 237).

In 1930 Masson painted *The Labyrinth* (Figure 11), a strange figure which offers the viewer a look at the interior of its being. In the image the limits of form and structure are disturbed in a presentation of the unconscious. Eyes and structures float in this labyrinth, where flame-like shapes create a feeling of volatile motion. Semicircles and diagonal lines strengthen the movement, while the stormy sky behind the figure sets the scene in a near-romantic sublime landscape. In the head Masson included an image of a sacrificial altar, a sign which fascinated Bataille. Taylor (1992: 240) describes Masson’s work as follows:

*Masson’s work neither represents limits nor re-presents de-limitation but represents the unrepresentable by representing the impossibility of representation. His work is painting/drawing-as-experience-of-limits, which figures the unfigurable by disfiguring figures.*

*The Labyrinth* is a grotesque image which is excessively loaded with symbols and rubbish, some of which seem to be only partially presented. The figure, which is ripped open, torn, broken and impure, nonetheless seems vitally alive, with a strange pulsating rhythm. Allen (1993: 173) discusses Nietzsche’s concept of Eternal Recurrence, and he states that it is not fatalism or sacrifice of freedom, but that “exuberant vitality” of Dionysian man that one has to keep in mind. This is man’s will to live:

*He demonstrates his freedom by taking up into his will this whole state of things and proudly affirming it. Standing in the present he says to what threatens him with a repetition of his suffering: “Come again and again, I will to meet you a thousand times more, and each time to conquer you”* (Allen 1993: 173).



Figure 11: Andre Masson, *The Labyrinth*, 1930.

Masson's labyrinthine figure does indeed reflect this description of Dionysus. The borderline state,<sup>65</sup> which is terrible, unthinkable, intolerable and vital, reflects the unrepresentable, which is the Surrealist sublime.

The Surrealists saw their work as unique because of the privileged access they had to deep-seated subjective states, the "unconscious" state. The dreaming mind was seen as harbouring the hidden truth: this concept was inherited from eighteenth century Romanticism, as expressed for example in Fuseli's *Nightmare*. This subconscious world reflected painful truths about human nature and society, in all its mystery, melancholy and fear.

Hughes (1991: 215) refers to the intense spiritual elation of the German Romantics as an irrational tradition that formed the background to De Chirico's art. In contrast to the abstract Modernists who strove for a progressive character and who were opposed to nostalgia, De Chirico's work reflects a mystery and a certain mood or feeling for the historical.<sup>66</sup> Titles of De Chirico's work, such as *Melancholy and Mystery of a Street* (1914), *The Nostalgia of the Infinite* (1913-14, Figure 12), and *The Disquieting Muses* (1916), echo aspects of the sublime as discussed by Burke and Kant in the eighteenth century.

There is something ominous about the way shadows fall in De Chirico's work. In many of his works the shadow is present, but the statue, object or person is absent, as Hughes (1991: 215) describes: "it merely announces itself quietly." The time of day, the twilight, has associations with nostalgia. According to Janse van Rensburg (1988: 170), the melancholy of twilight reflects longings to attain the wisdom<sup>67</sup> to negotiate

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<sup>65</sup> Taylor (1992: 240) refers to Julia Kristeva (1941-) as the formulator of the concept of the "borderline state".

<sup>66</sup> De Chirico acknowledges Nietzsche's influence on this aspect of his art:

*...I had begun to paint subjects in which I tried to express the strong and mysterious feelings I had discovered in the books of Nietzsche: the melancholy of beautiful autumn days, afternoons in Italian cities* (Janse van Rensburg 1988: 159).

<sup>67</sup> The nostalgia is for Ariadne, as the leader through the labyrinth (Janse van Rensburg 1988: 170).



Figure 12: Giorgio De Chirico, *The Nostalgia of the Infinite*, 1913-14.

our travels through the labyrinth of life. The architectural structures become symbols for the labyrinth, suggesting endless dark alleys (Janse van Rensburg 1988: 170).

The distorted scale and multiple perspectives employed by De Chirico have a disorientating effect, reminding the viewer of Piranesi's impressive ruins. In *The Nostalgia of the Infinite*, the human figures seem overwhelmed, not only by the vast scale of the architecture, but also by the silent emptiness of the world they inhabit. The spatial illusion of the work suggests an unlimited desertlike landscape. These figures share the loneliness of Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea*, only theirs seems harsher, more like a nightmare removed from nature, created by culture. Perhaps this is similar to a whole new world, *eine Zwischenwelt* (an "in between world") as described by Lyotard (1984: 39). This could be a lateral world with sublime potential: a beauty of strangeness, where unexpected meetings happen and incompatible things can meet. De Chirico calls this quality in his work "metaphysical painting" (*pittura metafisica*), which, according to Hughes (1991: 215), refers to the quality of mood, "the sense of a reality drenched in human emotion, almost pulpy with memory."

Ernst's drawings and paintings of forests have the atmosphere of German Romantic art in their haunting darkness and density. Plants are mostly fantastical as they seem to merge with insects, but according to Rosenblum (1975: 171), one frequently senses desolation and death in Ernst's art. Experimentation with the endless possibilities of technique is best seen in the *frottages* made by Ernst.

In *Europe after the Rain* (1940-1942; Figure 13), as in Ernst's paintings of primordial forests, the effect is hallucinatory: a strange, mysterious world, filled with vital energies. Through the automatism of the decalcomania technique, Ernst brought about the tension one finds in Kandinsky's apocalyptic visions and a merging chaos reminiscent of the Dionysian labyrinth. The birdhead figure in *Europe after the Rain* is associated with the wanderer who, like the bird, ventures beyond the boundaries of other people and creatures. Janse van Rensburg (1988: 244) notes that the wanderer is "...free of the regimentation which society imposes on its members."



Figure 13: Max Ernst, *Europe after the Rain*, 1940-1942.



In Ernst's series, rather oddly named *The Hundred Headless Woman*, the limitlessness of the sublime is suggested by specific symbols. In Plate 79, entitled *Truth will remain simple, and gigantic wheels will ride the bitter waves* (1927, Figure 14), large wheels are juxtaposed against a sleeping woman in a stormy landscape. The wheel is seen as a symbol of Nietzsche's concept of Eternal Recurrence, which makes the maximum affirmation of life possible (Allen 1993: 173). The circular shape<sup>68</sup> is described as the symbol of continuation (Janse van Rensburg 1988: 248), making endless meetings possible. The collage technique which Ernst used was chosen for the unlimited possibilities it offered to create, through chance, a strange new world. The photomontages and collages Ernst created in the 1920s did not have such a strong sense of the nostalgic sublime as discussed in the other artists' work in this chapter, but rather a sublimity of "the infinity of plastic experiment", as Lyotard (1982: 68) described the experimental approach.

The found materials and objects used by Dada and Surrealist artists were an attempt to bridge the chasm between art and people. The aim of these artists of transgressing borders was contrary to Romantic divisionism - the Kantian perspective of a disinterested aesthetic which does not need society (Cuddon 1991: 12). The anti-aesthetic nature of these objects or collages was a rebellion against the old traditional values of beauty and sublimity (especially the naturalistic representations depicting lofty or melancholic scenes).

While working in New York, Duchamp challenged the criteria of aesthetics with his shocking ready-mades, *Bicycle Wheel* (original 1913) mounted on a kitchen stool, and the urinal entitled *Fountain* (1917). Duchamp's idea was to break completely with aesthetics; he stated that his choices were totally indifferent to visual considerations (Arnason 1986: 229). Duchamp's elimination of the professional tastemakers was seen by some as making him a logical successor to the various neo-Dadaists of the 1950s and 1960s and of the Conceptualists (Arnason 1986: 563). The view was held that art as an *idea* was far more important than any formalistic considerations - in

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<sup>68</sup> Refer to p. 25 for a discussion of the circle in a Romantic context.

other words, that the intention of the artist is far more important than the craftsmanship or style of the art work.

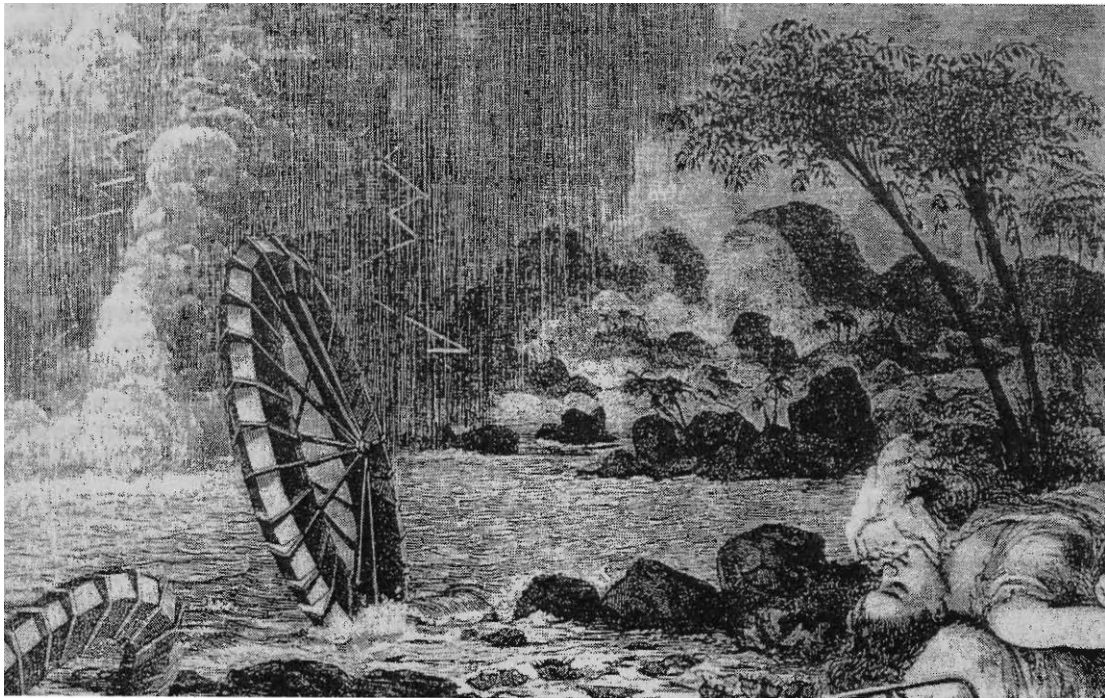


Figure 14: Max Ernst *Truth will remain simple, and gigantic wheels will ride the bitter waves*, 1927.

Lyotard (1982: 66) presents the context of how the avant-garde's ready-mades fit into the discourse of the sublime. Lyotard is of the opinion that in the (then current) state, community identity is formed by techno-science and accumulated capital rather than by spiritual allegiance and shared ideology. Within the "culture" of techno-science the "ready-made...presents itself as a potential for infinite production" (Lyotard 1982: 66). In other words, the art object has entered the *infinite* field of techno-scientific research. Lyotard (1982: 67) explains that because the sublime is not governed by consensus of taste, "it eludes the aesthetic of beauty." The public sees the work of the avant-garde as "monstrous, formless and purely negative" and since Kant used these words to describe objects that cause the sensation of the sublime, one may refer to these statements and artworks as sublime. The sublime of the ready-made belongs to the industrial, techno-scientific world and not to the realm where art attempts to present the lost absolute (Lyotard 1982: 68).

Out of Concept Art developed Land Art, Body Art, Performance Art and Process Art, in which the *idea* was pivotal. These developments in art explore a living historical situation and the intention behind them is to contextualize existing problems within the specific concept. This means that their discourse is no longer part of aesthetic criticism, as Habermas points out (Docherty 1993: 39). These developments took place concurrently with Minimalism and in a way undermined the sterility of Minimalism, indicating the start of Postmodernism.

There are, however, some parallels to be drawn between Newman's ideas (his art is minimalist in approach) and the concept of Happenings and Performance art. Newman's concern with the sensation of time (Lyotard, as previously mentioned, also refers to it as "the place" or "site") has to do with the occurrence or happening of the art work (Lyotard 1984: 37). The emphasis on "the sublime is This," that is here and now, links up with the Happenings and Performance art of the 1970s. The actual art work happens and is experienced, but all that remains is the documentation. Lyotard paraphrases 17th century writer Boileau, when he writes that the sublime is "...a marvelousness that seizes, strikes, and inflicts sensation" (Lyotard 1984: 39). He writes that imperfections play a role in this "shock appeal". Lyotard could have been

writing about Performance art and Happenings, for their power lies exactly in these described experiences.

In concluding this chapter on the Modernist sublime, the impact of abstraction can be reviewed. While art historians such as Levin have emphasized the objectivity of modern art, artists concerned with the sublime have tended to acknowledge the subjective (Hertz 1985: 2). Kandinsky's vision was that of the "inner life". Even when Kandinsky refers to "a science of pure forms", Kant's theory of subjective aesthetic experience haunts the newness of his concept. Janse van Rensburg (1988: 340) relates Kandinsky's "spiritual acquiring real form" to Nietzsche's Dionysian notion in art, which "relates to the deep, imageless levels of *pure being*, which Nietzsche often calls the state of *original pain*".

The strong transcendental urge underlying the urge to abstraction arises as a result of the experience of obscurity (Worringer 1910: 15, 17). By not referring to objective phenomena one becomes self-referential (Taylor 1992: 64), as in the work of Rothko and Newman, where luminous voids of contemplation focus completely on purity and immediacy.<sup>69</sup> In a sense the individual becomes obscure, becomes one with a reality removed from the outside objective world. Thus freed from certain interrelationships, these artists focused on the absolute essence of spiritual value, yet one is not convinced that the objective clarity of Worringer's abstraction is realised in the works.

Lyotard (1992b: 1012) writes that Modernity's shattering of belief in the traditional is akin to the discovery of the "lack of reality" that accompanies the inventions of new realities. He states that he finds the early modulation of the "lack of reality" (which is abstraction) in Kantian sublimity: it is in the aesthetic of the sublime that modern art finds its impetus and the logic of avant-gardes finds its axioms (1992b: 1012).

Lyotard (1992b: 1013) reminds us that the sublime sentiment takes place if the imagination fails to present us with an example of the concept (such as "totality" or "world"), therefore in the "empty abstraction" it avoids figuration or representation.

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<sup>69</sup> "The will-to-abstraction is a will-to-purify, which, in turn, is a will-to-immediacy" (Taylor 1992: 90).

Modernist abstraction thus featured as purist formalism (as seen in Expressionism, Abstract Expressionism and Post Painterly Abstraction) and as purist antiformalism (in Minimalism), both of which can be seen as the *expressive sublime*. In reaction to prevalent formalism, the *conceptual sublime* was in favour of content rather than the creative form of the work. Dealing with the notion of the anti-aesthetic, Surrealist and Dada art works thus focused on questioning the traditional ethic of taste.

Of the concepts discussed in Bataille and Masson, the loss of limits and fusion through chaos, impurity and disturbed emotions appear to be of cardinal importance. This is the sublime terrain of the unknown. These artworks of a form of limitless sublime, should be seen as works of a subjective nature, but even this does not seem an apt classification here, for one of the definitions of the subjective is that of being aware of the body as a *unified* whole (Nead 1993: 32). Kristeva uses the term “abjection” to describe this ambiguity and uncertainty of subjectivity/objectivity (Nead 1993: 32). The abject has to do with that which is cast off, in other words refuse: the rejected and the degraded (Onions 1973: 4). The abject “...does not respect borders, positions, rules” and according to Nead (1993: 32):

*The abject, then, is the space between subject and object; the site of both desire and danger. There are echoes here of the Kantian sublime, for both terms signify an immense power in their generation of attraction and repulsion in the subject.*

It is this borderline abject, the dissolving of margins and distinctions, that leads to the articulation of the Postmodern sublime.

The apparent “start” of a Postmodern sublime can be argued to lie in the handling of the theme of catastrophic apocalypse as evoked by Modernism. Bonito Oliva (1982: 46) describes the ideological changes that took place in the 1970s as a crisis or catastrophe which fractured people’s experience of history and therefore put an end to many Modernist concepts, such as the relevance of the avant-garde.

In this fragmentedness one sees the beginning of the complexity and inclusivity of Postmodernism, which will be discussed in the following chapter. Although the Modern perspective was seen as having come to an end, its continuity is evident, as

are the changes in the different periods discussed. As Lyotard pointed out, “the late twentieth century is contaminated by the eighteenth” and Postmodernism can be seen as the rewriting of Modernism (Docherty: 1993: 15).

## Chapter 3

### The Postmodern Sublime

#### 3.1. Postmodernism

In this century of technology and world wars, the fear of death and the promise of happiness created a balance between self-preservation and self-destruction, between the fear of being left behind and the risk of losing oneself. Nihilism stepped in where the destruction of country, ideals and beliefs ruled out the possibility of realising Utopian dreams. The new liberal standards of individual freedom in consumer society resulted in the isolation of the individual and a change in people's values. Purely material ends overrode the human element: a need for personal interaction and context.

Rebellion flared up amongst the younger generation in the 1960s, starting a search for alternative values and a questioning of the meaning of power and social formations. The radical slant in society of the 1960s is marked, more than anything else, by the perception that meaning is socially produced and that this formed meaning inscribes existing power (Harrison & Wood 1992: 801). Modernism's relevance was questioned on various levels: French philosophy re-examined opposition (especially language as a structure of differences and the distorting role of gender), contemporary Marxism addressed the detrimental aspects of social organization, and the philosophy of science contributed methodological and theoretical resources (Harrison & Wood 1992: 801, 802). The questions that were addressed had all been suppressed by the paradigm of Modernism.

The cultural and political discourse of the 1960s paved the way for Postmodernity. It is necessary to draw a distinction between the terms "Postmodernism" and "Postmodernity", for Postmodernism refers to the schools of thought and movements that are produced by Postmodernity, which is the condition and time the people find themselves in (Anderson 1995: 6). Before elaborating on the meaning of Postmodernism it is necessary to point out that it is not the only contemporary world

view. The construction of four different groups of world views can be held up as a “map” in which the “territory” of Postmodernity can be explored.<sup>70</sup> These four world views are:

*(a) the postmodern-ironist, which sees truth as socially constructed; (b) the scientific-rational, in which the truth is “found” through methodical disciplined inquiry; (c) the social-traditional in which truth is found in the heritage of American and Western Civilization; and (d) the neo-romantic in which truth is found either through attaining harmony with nature and/or spiritual exploration of the inner self (Anderson 1995: 111).*

The Scientific-Rational and the Social-Traditional world views are seen as a conservative return to or continuation of Modernist values, while the Neo-Romantic vision orientates itself even further into the past - to an era before the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. The Postmodern-Ironist world view is seen as being in constant flux and consists of different groups, but most definitively has the leading edge (Anderson 1995: 111). The official mainstream realities are found in the Scientific-Rational and the Social-Traditional cultures. These views carry political and social weight, but do not have the vitality and creativity of the Postmodern and Neo-Romantic views (Anderson 1995: 114).

These dominant systems have been fiercely criticized for not considering humanity as a whole, for concentrating upon a patriarchal projection with male-orientated world views (Mies & Shiva 1993: 22). It is said that to be successful and to survive in this world, one needs to be “multilingual”. Thus, a person “needs to be able to think rationally and understand science, able to appreciate and draw on a social heritage, and able as well to drink from the well of ecological and spiritual feeling that is tapped by neo-romanticism” (Anderson 1995: 116). The leaning is towards a more balanced society in which individuals reweave the loose strands in life. In order to be an empowered individual, one needs the insight to understand the interconnections of different views and disciplines (Diamond & Orenstein 1990: 74).

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<sup>70</sup> Levin (1985: 7) made the deduction that the map could be an emblem of Postmodernism, since Rosalind Krauss (1941-) proposed that the grid was an emblem of Modernism. The map indicates “territories beyond the surface of the artwork and surfaces outside of art” while the grid was a symbol for the “formal, abstract, repetitive, flattening, ordering, literal” preoccupation of Modernism (Levin 1985: 7).



Three different subgroups which can also be distinguished within Postmodernism are constructivists, players and nihilists (Anderson 1995: 112). People holding a constructivist world view actively think, live and build Postmodern philosophy, anthropology, psychology and theology. The players (the largest group) skim over the currents of cultural change without examining it too intently and find great satisfaction in mixing various aspects of heritage, rituals and nostalgia. The Postmodern nihilist sees conflicting truths in the world and concludes that since not all of the beliefs can be true, all of them must be false. The nihilists have a contempt for mainstream society. Their art (such as punk music) is dark and heavy, and they express transitory pain and pleasure (Anderson 1995: 112). The despair of solitude echoes the sense of not belonging (to this time or to the universe). The only hope lies in learning to live without hope (Gablik 1993: 5). One finds traces of the Postmodern sublime in all three of these groups.

The term “Postmodern” was probably used for the first time by Arnold Toynbee in 1939 in his book *A Study of History* to indicate a time “after modernism” (Docherty 1993: 1). “Postmodernism” was used in relation to literature in 1971 by Ihab Hassan, and began to be used in general at the end of the 1970s (Gablik 1984: 73). There seems to be no clear-cut definition of Postmodernism, but pluralism<sup>71</sup> and complexity are defining terms often used to describe art (and culture) in the 1980s (Docherty 1993: 309). The term “Postmodern” embraces diverse interpretations of current culture and stands for a multitude of interrelated phenomena. It does not represent a systematic theory or determine an end cause, but opens up possibilities and traces associations (Docherty 1993: 153).

It is in this spirit of diversity and interrelation that Lyotard criticises the understanding of “post-” in the term “Postmodernism”, as a simple succession (Appignanesi 1989: 8). The clear chronology of one period following another is a linear perspective which is wholly Modern. Postmodernism does not understand the present to be a total break with the past and a completely new start (as is the idea in Modernity), but

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<sup>71</sup> In this context pluralism refers to the willingness to hold more than one position or to have an open mind (without apparent commitment to any ideological, political, cultural, or ethnical group or stance) when approaching a text or art work (Bullock & Woodings 1988: 656).

rather that the past is repressed and forgotten, and will be repeated but never be wholly overcome in the present (Appignanesi 1989: 8). Lyotard (1992b: 1014) thus states that Postmodernism is part of the Modern, “not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant.” He furthermore states that rather than a return of the past, “post-” is about analysing, recollecting and reflecting Modernity.

Lyotard (1992b: 1014) provides the following definition of Postmodernism:

*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 Lyotard affirms the important interrelationship of the sublime with the crux of Postmodernism: the unrepresentable. The perception of working without rules towards new presentations pertains to the sublime.

The aim of this chapter is to indicate how sublimity has been affected by the complexity of plural perspectives of our time. As the context of sublimity has changed from Romanticism to Modernism in relation to religion and spirituality, an attempt will be made to establish the latest relationship. An effort will also be made to point out how the transformation from Cartesian<sup>72</sup> aesthetic traditions to integrative holistic modes of thought has had an impact on the sublime. A possible reconstruction of the concept of the sublime within Postmodernism will form the concluding section of this study.

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<sup>72</sup> The term “Cartesian” is a Latinised word derived from René *Descartes* (1596-1650), and relates to his philosophy or mathematical methods (Onions 1973: 289). The expression “Cartesian dualism” derives from Descartes’ conception that there is an absolute division between the mental and the physical, which also indicates that we live in a divisible world. Descartes saw mind and soul as interchangeable terms, and therefore this mode of thought indicates distance and separation between the material world and the soul (Flew 1979: 91, 92).

## 3.2. Pluralism and Spirituality

During the mid-1970s it was acknowledged that art would never change the world. This perception led to a loss of hope and changed the avant-garde from an ethical to an aesthetic movement (Gablik 1984: 74). The avant-garde's initial involvement with society to bring about change in the future dwindled and the age of scepticism devalued the concept of the sublime and artistic faith.<sup>73</sup> The ideologies of absolutism and high art were abandoned in favour of a pluralist situation (Gablik 1984: 75). Early Postmodernism was dominated by two themes, namely that art (and art history) has come to an end, and secondly that a power external to art - the market, is the driving force of art (Docherty 1993:180).

The period from the 1970s to the 1990s has been described as a time of major change in human history (Anderson 1995: 7), since societies are experiencing a culture shock as exposure to a global and pluralistic civilisation takes place. Through communication systems such as television and the Internet, the individual is exposed to traditions, religions and world views with multiple perspectives (Anderson 1995: 5). This ultimately leads to a questioning of existing "truths". Lyotard (1992b: 1011) states that a sense of "anything goes" seems to be rife amongst artists, critics and public alike, leading to a "slackening" in general culture. The Postmodern world questions the idea that self-concept and identity is a given, and believes instead that it is "made" out of many cultural sources. Similarly morality is "made" out of dialogue and choice, rather than "found". These constructed beliefs are based on the ever-shifting ground of the prevailing social culture (Anderson 1995: 10, 11).

Twentieth-century scientific rationalism grew out of the Enlightenment project and held fast to a belief in linear progress, where science would be able to provide the answers to uncover absolute truth (Anderson 1995: 4). The assumption was that any question had only one answer. This was supported by "metanarratives" (theories of

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<sup>73</sup> The term "Transavantgarde" was coined by Achille Benito Oliva in 1979. The establishment of the Transavantgarde was marked by the 1980 Venice Biennale and is still relevant today. It values the figurative, past memory, reappropriation of myths and images and rejects the concept that art is evolving in a progressive linear history which is coherent and without contradictions (Ferrier 1990:

mythic proportions) which are deterministic because they have a “great goal.” Kant and Hegel subscribed to a deterministic ideology because they believed that the truth ultimately exists and will be revealed by uncovering aspects of the greater whole (as discussed in chapter 1). Aspects of this whole could, according to them, be revealed through the sublimity of art. Metanarratives such as creation of wealth are used for the legitimization of power for manifestations such as the social justice of scientific truth. The Postmodernist era is sceptical of metanarratives and the concept of the universality of great belief systems (Lyotard 1992a: 999). Philosophers such as Lyotard (1992b: 1000) feel that we may never rise above the inconsistencies of this plural age, but that we should be aware of differences and should grow to tolerate multiple realities and exposure to otherness.

The rational and objective laws of science created modern technological civilization, which was the first global civilization. Václav Havel (1995: 233) writes that even though we know more about ourselves, nature and the universe than ever before, science has brought about a sense of alienation in human beings. He describes science as “more a source of disintegration and doubt than a source of integration and meaning” (Havel 1995: 233). Therefore, human beings seem not to be able to grasp the spirit and meaning of the unique self. It seems as if the gap between the rational and the spiritual, the objective and the subjective is widening (Havel 1995: 235). However, a new paradigm is arising in science and society - one that steers away from this old mechanistic world view. The new world view is “much more organic, co-operative, ecological, feminine and spiritual” (Gablik 1993: 163). Whereas science was built on the Cartesian dualism that postulated that matter has nothing to do with the soul (Flew 1979: 92), the changing attitude is one of integration. Levin (1985: 9) states that the trend in science is away from objectivity, and one can thus assume that Postmodern science is transcending its own limits.

Lyotard (1989: 19) points out that in contemporary techno-science, machines do not necessarily replace mechanical operations, but rather certain mental and/or linguistic operations. There is therefore a merging of hard sciences and soft sciences, of mind

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756). This rejected concept was still upheld by the avant-garde in their “linguistic Darwinism” (Bonito

and matter. Lyotard (1989: 20) concludes that techno-science is gradually indicating a concept of the relationship between the human being and the world outside that is complex and removed from Cartesian divisionism.

An artist who seems to reflect this integrative perspective is the South African Karel Nel (1955-). He finds inspiration in esoteric literature (dealing with subjects such as Christianity, Eastern religions, Theosophy, Hawaiian and African mythology), and scientific sources to create complex works (Doepel 1993: 5). Stepping outside the Cartesian model, Nel's art and philosophy oppose the distinction between "out there" and "in here" (Doepel 1993: 4). When examining Nel's work one has to be aware of the interrelation of mind and matter, science and soul. In contrast to the Romantic individualistic view of the "solitary voice"<sup>74</sup> that is seemingly lost in a hostile world, Nel's artistic endeavour speaks of a world of spiritual ambiguity in which he personally participates.

*With the Muezzien, Moroni* (1990; Figure 15) radiates a life-energy and spiritual force typical of Nel's work. He associates the dots in his works with "particles" (relating to the atomic particle and wave theory of light) or with sperm (incorporating the generation of life), which evoke dynamic movement and sometimes chaos (Doepel 1993: 4). Grouped marks or lines suggest a spiritual energy, which seems to be in accord with Nel's belief that objects are filled with energy and are in a constant state of flux (Doepel 1993: 7). The dotted configuration or broken lines which indicate spiritual empowerment are also found in the art of the South African Bushmen or San (*A Hallucinatory Figure*; 1880s/1890s; Figure 16). The entoptic<sup>75</sup> phenomena (dots,

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Oliva 1982: 50).

<sup>74</sup> Gablik (1993: 148-152) criticises this "psychological distancing" and also the Modernist idea of being "self-contained" as being views that are out of pace with the new spirit of everything being interconnected.

<sup>75</sup> Entoptics are geometric configurations seen by people who enter altered states of consciousness (Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1989: 60, 61).

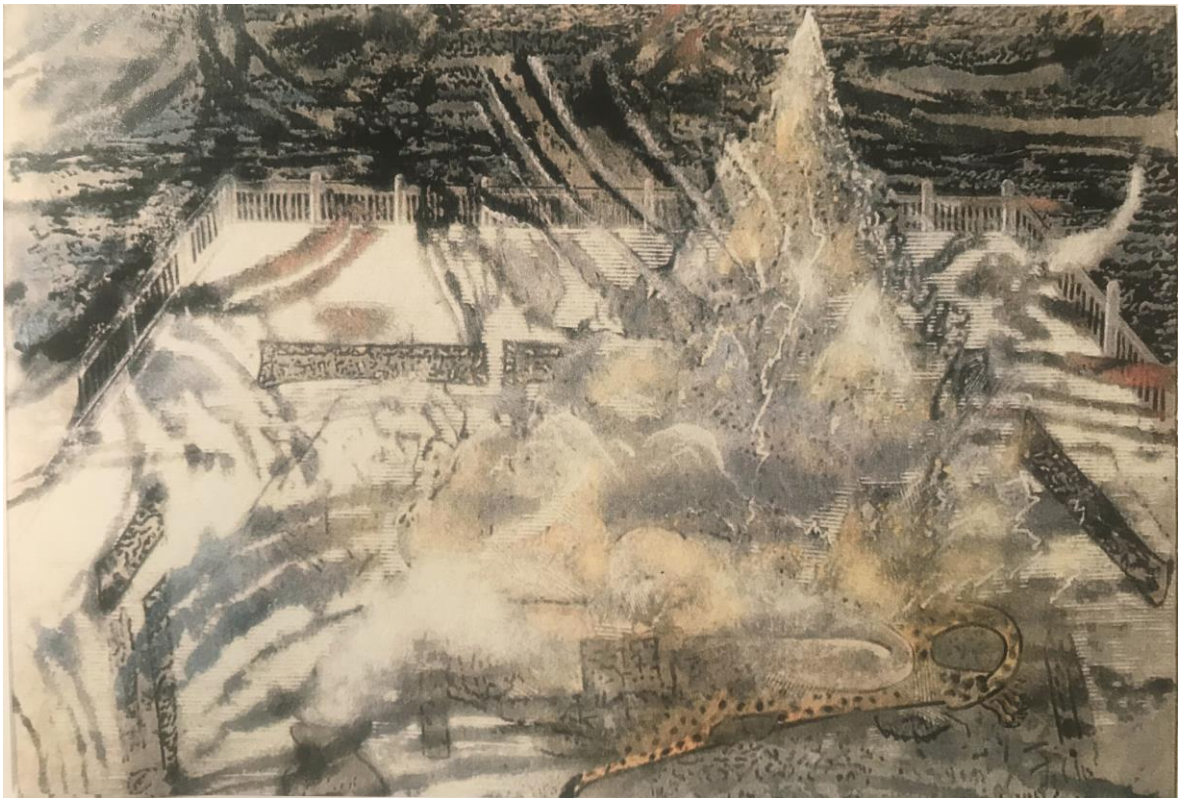


Figure 15: Karel Nel, *With the Muezzien, Moroni*, 1990.

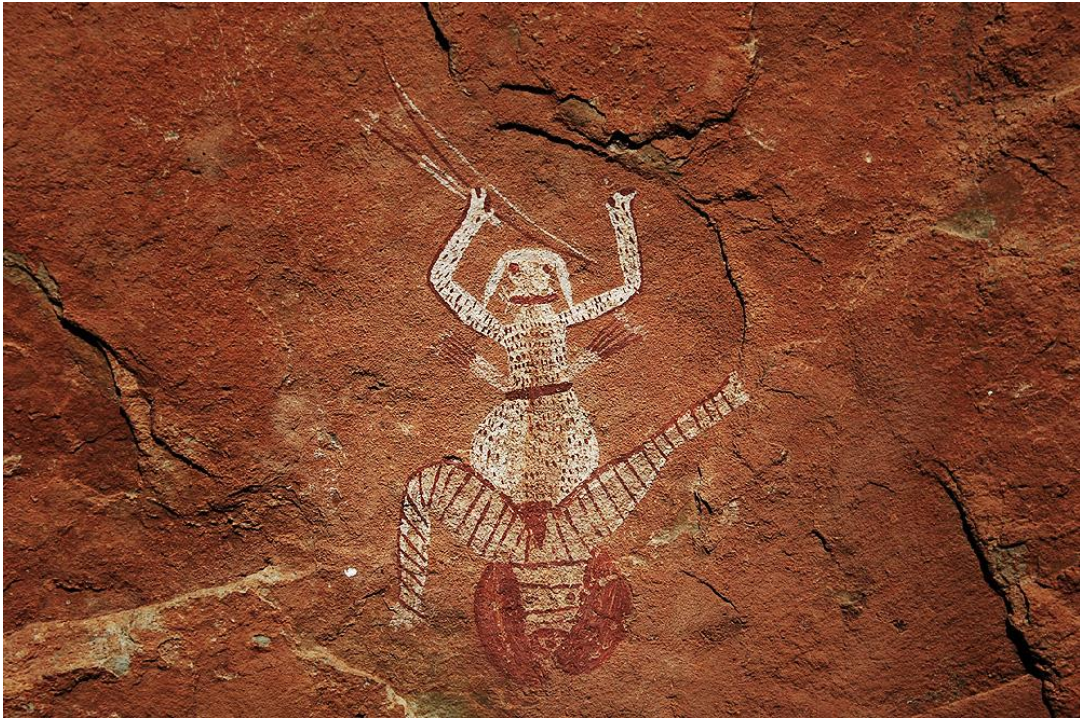


Figure 16: San Rock Painting, *A Hallucinatory figure*, 1880s/1890s.

zig-zags or grids), were seen by the shaman-artist<sup>76</sup> as he went into a trance (Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1989: 60, 61). These marks can be seen on their own or in combination with the therianthrope (human figure with the head and hooves of a buck indicating the trance state). These artworks are a personal revelation of the spirit world which the shaman enters (Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1989: 70, 73). One feels that Nel's works consist of similar *personalised* imagery that mixes religious and scientific concepts to form an interrelated visionary world.

The Postmodern condition has led to art that is eclectic, in which traditions are combined, and myths and rituals are borrowed. No specific style seems to dominate. Instead, improvisation and variation of themes have set the trend (Anderson 1995: 10). The complexity and dissonance of this age are seen as dark, dangerous, negative and empty by some critics, while others see it as a moment in time that is hopeful and brimming with opportunity (Anderson 1995: 11). The visualization of the sublime resides in the context of both the sceptical and hopeful modes of thought.

Gablik (1984: 77) addresses the impact of pluralism on the value system of society in her book *Has Modernism Failed?* She warns of the dangers of existing norms and truths being cancelled out by the unlimited alternatives presented by pluralism, and points out that the pitfall of unlimited freedom is arbitrariness (Gablik 1984: 77). The individual seems overwhelmed by choices,<sup>77</sup> from which he or she is free to select as desired. This breeds insecurity, where only the fame which the artist is able to achieve, seems to have any meaning (Gablik 1984: 78). Seldom is any authority higher than the self-recognised. This pragmatic liberalism renounces transcendental goals and does not move beyond merely personal goals (Gablik 1984: 80). There is a correlation between Gablik's concern and the previously mentioned statement by Lyotard that "anything goes" today.

Freedom and the private enjoyment of life seem to constitute the highest priority for Western society and this leaves little room for self-transformation, leading to loss of

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<sup>76</sup> The *shaman* is the seer of ancient cultures and is responsible for the health of the tribe. The shaman is an archetype of all artists as the one that can bridge worlds (Tucker 1992: xxi, xxii).



hope and meaning in life. Money seems to be the only realism by which any value of art can be assessed (Lyotard 1992b: 1011). Modernism's tendency towards specialization created the split between aesthetic and ethical standpoints. This gave rise to a one-sided kind of professionalism where the personality of the human being as a whole is neglected (Gablik 1984: 81).

What Gablik (1984: 83, 84) pleads for is a moral imperative in which the relationship between responsibility and freedom is more balanced. The function of a cultural tradition would be to create meaning and value, and thus be a model for society in which it can find archetypes and paradigms. Such a moral imperative can possibly be found in the life and work of Joseph Beuys (1921-1986). Declaring in the 1960s that "Everybody is an artist!" Beuys seems to have been implying that the aim of every human being should be to re-establish the relationship between society and nature, and the creative process. He was intensely aware of the torn reality of the industrial age (Ferrier 1990: 813). Reconciliation between culture and nature was signified in his performance *Coyote: I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974). At the end of the performance the tension between the coyote and the felt-wrapped artist totally dissolves as animal lies down next to human (Ferrier 1990: 706). This shaman-act of Beuys places him in the realm of "bridge builder" or healer. Beuys' reintroduction of Romantic imagery broke the contamination by Hitler of inherited German imagery. Before this, only abstract art was associated with democracy while any image that could remind the viewer of German tradition was rejected (Hughes 1991: 405). Beuys used a Volkswagen bus with sledges in 1969 (in *The Pack*), in 1965 a rabbit, and in 1982 rocks and trees in *7000 Oaks* (Ferrier 1990: 812). One feels that with these strong images Beuys evokes a spiritual sense of romantic redemption and healing in the present.

Rosenblum (1988: 8), in an interview with Hugh Cumming, seems to agree with the point of view Gablik holds concerning the art of the 1980s:

*I honestly think that most high-minded ideals about art and morality, art and society, art and Utopia have been almost completely dashed. A stake*

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<sup>77</sup> Gablik (1984: 78) writes that choice is a modern idea and "can become a burden and a danger, since everything now depends on the individual's own effort, and not the security of his traditional status."

*has been driven through the heart of all optimistic beliefs in art as a goal for purification and change.*

Later in the same article, Rosenblum (1988: 19) states that the days when the sublime was relevant, as in Rothko and Newman's art, are over. In the pluralism of Postmodernity, many historical ideals and styles are being reviewed. Rosenblum (1988: 7) points out that the romanticism of the present must be seen in the spirit of "neo-ism, revivalism and retrospection" and not as an organic continuation of earlier traditions. Rosenblum (1988: 8) states that we live in a "far more desperate and ironic age" and art is therefore done with a lighter touch, "as if it were in quotation marks."

Gablik and Rosenblum point out that there are only a "precious few" artists in this sceptical Postmodern age who create art with spiritual and moral force, but that they do exist (Rosenblum 1988: 8). In both cases the artist they refer to is the German, Anselm Kiefer (1945-). Rosenblum (1988: 11) calls Kiefer a "survivor of the endangered species of German Romantic painting" and compares Kiefer to Friedrich. Gablik (1984: 124) describes Kiefer's work in terms of "spiritual dignity" and "apocalyptic renovation." Kiefer, who regards the ancient healing function of art as most significant, uses richly evocative symbols of nature as a timeless reality. His work echoes the mysticism found in pantheistic Romantic nature paintings.

Art's transformational power is used as renewal in Kiefer's series of work of disused Nazi architecture (Gablik 1984: 124). Kiefer highlights the redemptive role of art in the artwork *Resurrexit* (1973; Figure 17). The viewer's gaze is directed by the serpent through the woods, through the clouds, to a wooden staircase. This leads to a closed door, which apparently is the door to the artist's studio (Taylor 1992: 294). The question posed is whether the artist is a prophetic figure who can provide an exit from this disastrous world through his art. Kiefer's opinion is that art will not cure social ills or heal personal wounds, and a history of disasters has proved that art cannot take the place of religion (Taylor 1992: 194). Kiefer does not offer a sentimental optimism, but affirms that something has been lost. He reminds us of the strong spiritual realm of our existence and rekindles our desire for it (Gablik 1984: 125).

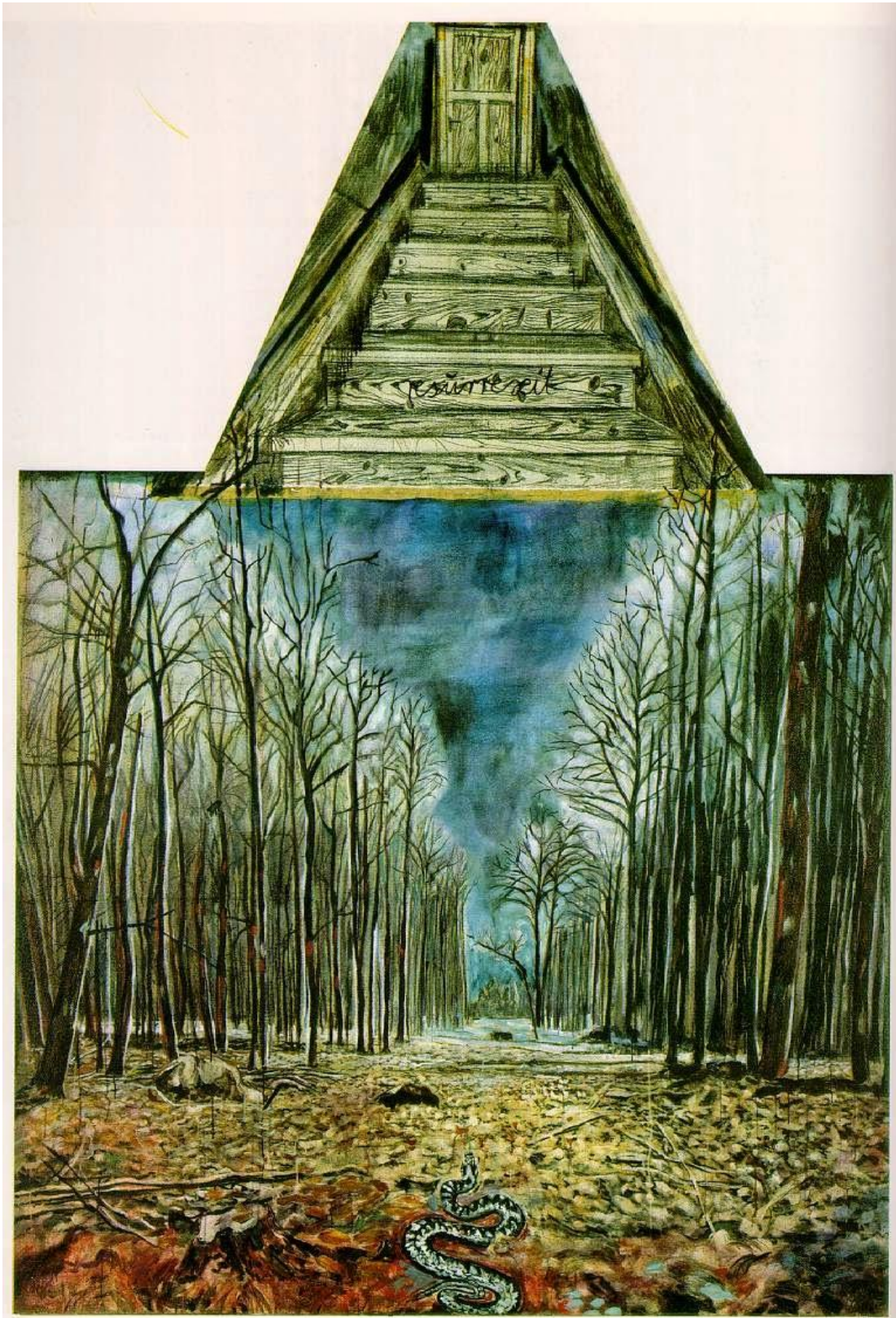


Figure 17: Anselm Kiefer, *Resurrexit*, 1973.

Kiefer's views on the healing power of art are debatable. Kiefer seems to contradict himself - admitting to the ancient healing function of art and then stating that it will not heal wounds. A personal opinion is that art can be instrumental in assisting and nurturing an understanding of one's personal growth and spiritual discovery. When becoming sensitive to one's intuitive responses, imagination and the world, it can be used as a creative stimulus. This in turn will help supplement the complex interrelationship between past and present, remembering and forgetting.

Since 1991 the author of this dissertation has created paintings and drawings depicting chopped-down forests, heaps of wood and labyrinthine vegetation integrated with various other symbols (1991; Figure 18 and 1996; Figure 19). This coincided with a series of in-depth discussions with a relationship consultant, in an attempt to combat a series of depressions that seemed to overwhelm life. In a fortuitous discovery of connectedness, paintings and treatment wove together to express, live and visualise memory and understanding. Traces of figurative associations led from purging (or shedding) to a discovery of oneness with nature, spirituality, belonging to community and meaning in art. The process of collecting natural materials and reworking them in an artwork proved to be therapeutic and life-enriching.

### **3.2.1. Retrospection: Capitalism or Compassion**

An important aspect that Rosenblum (1988: 7) points out is that art of the 1980s was concerned with the history of art. The Postmodern world has been described as: "...the world that has not yet discovered how to define itself in terms of what it *is*, but only in terms of what it has *just-now ceased to be*" (Anderson 1995: 3). In other words, the term strongly suggests looking back. This spirit of retrospection is a strong revival of the Romantic spirit (the high point of the sublime). One could see this as a mere repetition and refinement of the past (which is one view of Neo-Expressionism), an empty response to the market's demand for something new and innovative (Crowther 1993: 182). One could also see it as an opportunity for artists to create new art of a sublime character.



Figure 18: Gwenneth Miller, *Pine Stack*, 1991.



Figure 19: Gwenneth Miller, *Labyrinth*, 1996.

Spirituality, environmentalism and films such as *Dances With Wolves* (1991) reflect the New Romantic culture as updated forms of Romanticism's reverence for nature, personal development and the mystique of the noble savage (Anderson 1995: 114). As in the Romantic and Modernist eras, there is in the Postmodern era a need to escape. The need for escapism today seems to be from an alienated world (where mechanics and technology are dominant), to a place of belonging.

Movements such as Ecofeminism,<sup>78</sup> Green politics and creation-centred spirituality call for interaction and an ethic of care (Diamond & Orenstein 1990: 4). These movements' views are opposed to the view of the earth as a "stockpile of raw materials to be exploited and consumed" (Gablik 1993: 77).

The immense importance of our symbiotic existence with nature and the view that life is sacred, should once again fill us with reverence and awe. The dominator system with its mechanistic principles of retaining power and control is described as having failed the earth, with ecological disasters creating a crisis with devastating effects (Diamond & Orenstein 1990: 3).

In order to emphasize the earth's sacredness, feminist artist Ana Mendieta (1948-1985) made art that refers back to the images of the Great Goddess of ancient myths. In these myths the earth was glorified as being sacred and creation was imagined as female (Diamond & Orenstein 1990: xi). Mendieta's work was site-specific - images and symbols, like the female body, were carved out of sand or mud, or performed with fire (*Silueta en Fuego*, 1975; Figure 20; *Untitled*, 1982/1983; Figure 21). She bonds the woman to earth through her choice of materials and sites, in a sense making a sacrifice to earth (Broude & Garrard 1994: 258).

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<sup>78</sup> Ecofeminism grew out of radical feminism, during the mid-1970s. Radical feminism attempts to analyse the dynamics behind classical male domination over the female. This information gives one insight into the hierarchical, militaristic, mechanistic and industrial forms of patriarchal culture (Diamond & Orenstein 1990: 5). Ecofeminist thinkers realise that the dominance theory manipulates "everything defined as *other* whether nature, woman, or Third World cultures" (Diamond & Orenstein 1990: x). They "embrace men and women from different races...all forms of life - animals, plants, and the living Earth itself." They aim at a retelling and a reframing that will lead to a "more experiential ethic of ecological interconnectedness" (Diamond & Orenstein 1990: xi).

Burke's notion of the sublime, in its overlap between pain and pleasure, has been linked to self-preservation by Crowther (1989: 14). While in Romantic art the human being was depicted as a timid creature threatened or overwhelmed by infinite or terrible powers, the Postmodern world finds nature being threatened by terrible humankind. It seems that the view of the artist as an elevated "hero", with a role as a bridge builder between worlds, has changed in the light of our contemporary "sins" of lust, power and control.

Ecofeminists criticise the Romantic's view of "the terror of nature" which resulted from a patriarchal culture that cut men and women off from understanding their rootedness in the natural world (Diamond & Orenstein 1990: 6). Today the artist with a responsible view is a facilitator of the processes of life forces to be nourished, linked and healed. In this sense human beings are not in a hierarchy above matter, but are totally integrated in a complex web, inextricably linked with the survival of the earth. Where the unknowable of the Romantic sublime aimed at a great ideal "whole", the unknowable of the Postmodern aims at a much more immediate multitude of possibilities of interrelation. One can only conclude that the art of this new constellation is sublime in concept.

The mystique of the noble savage that was mentioned previously, opens up the field of dialogue about "otherness." As indicated previously, in Ecofeminism there is a realization that male dominance or an attitude of manipulation, influences everything defined as "other": nature, women and Third World cultures (Diamond & Orenstein 1990: ix, x). The refused and rejected "other" has undergone a degradation - an abjection. The abject as described by Kristeva above, is an ambiguous concept: "It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect





Figure 20: Ana Mendieta, *Silueta en Fuego*, 1975.



Figure 21: Ana Mendieta, *Untitled*, 1982/1983.

oneself as from an object” (Richards 1994: 12). Penny Siopis (1953-) deals with race and gender in her works dating from around 1994 (Richards 1994: 1). These works show a particular interest in the relationship between abjection, subjection and transgression. She concentrates on skin, being painted on and being made raw and sensitive in a video which was part of the installation *Per Kind Permission (Fieldwork)* (1994; Figure 22). This work and the use of body fluids in other works points to the margins, the borderline of the concept of the body. This visualisation is in contrast to the patriarchal representations of the female nude as an ideal of wholeness or an object of desire (Nead 1992: 33). The dangling masks in the above-mentioned installation (displayed as if they were exotic specimens), add to the sense of both attraction and repulsion one feels for the work. In this sense the Kantian sublime is echoed (Nead 1993: 32).

The disturbance of identity (that Kristeva [Nead 1992: 32] also labels as the abject) is articulated in the works where Siopis uses herself as a “prop”. Describing her feeling of being “betwixt and between” she is photographed with ethnographic exhibits (1994; *Mask and My Self*), her hands either gloved or smeared black with only her naked torso (partly) visible (Williamson & Jamal 1996: 132). When Siopis paints her face chalky white in *Comrade Mother* (1994), one feels the presence of death rather than of nurturing life. This layering<sup>79</sup> of meaning - visual references to different races, political realities of past and present South Africa, and the interwoven life of a white woman - evokes remembering and forgetting in intricate ways. Perhaps the remembering is in order to forget (Richards 1994: 8). The sublime consciousness is evoked since the borders between past and present become erased in a new visualisation which expresses the ambiguity of time, and blurs the borders between the secular and the divine. In Siopis’ description of how images of South Africa thrill

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<sup>79</sup> The layering of visual images is also mentioned in the Romantic sublime, in the work of Blake. The “abstraction” of Blake recalled universal logic and was brought into correlation with Hegel’s *Absolute Geist*. This aspect of infiniteness emphasized the sublime in the Romantic past. One feels the sublime in contemporary art is far more indirect in its visualization but suggests a direct presence of divine and secular layering/interaction.



Figure 22: Siopis, *Per Kind Permission (Fieldwork)*, 1994.

her and at the same time hold her back,<sup>80</sup> we perceive the complexity of Kant's dynamic sublime.

The fascination with "otherness" is taken up in popular culture as being alternative and unique. In the fashion industry of 1995, the "religious look" was very fashionable: rosary necklaces, giant crosses, Maltese crosses, ankhs and dresses resembling monastic robes (Anderson 1995: 1). It seems as though spirituality has again become idolized in a time that has in general been classified as a secular age.<sup>81</sup> Gablik (1984: 90) writes that symbols can be plundered for their picturesque quality and can be lifted out of the context of the real and divine. In this light, she criticises Julian Schnabel (1951-) for not having a religious impulse to inform his art and writes that the sacred symbols Schnabel uses are "deprived of any root meaning" (Gablik 1984: 90-92). One accepts the grounds for Gablik's criticism, but also feels that the criticism is too fierce, and that she pushes for total certainty from the artist.

On the one hand, Gablik (1984: 90) writes that Schnabel "has no *particular* feelings about God one way or the other". On the other hand, she describes Schnabel as wanting a "chapel-like feeling" or a "feeling of God" in his work. When Schnabel states that he wants his work to "message" him into "a state of unspeakableness" one cannot help but be reminded of the transcendental values that were so much a part of Romantic sublime art.

The article from which Schnabel was quoted (Herrera 1982: 139) featured the art work *The Raft* (1983; Figure 23). The painting has an apocalyptic feeling, with the figure's loneliness strengthened by the single tree or mast sticking out of the work. The context seems to be of our time: an alienated figure amongst modern debris, but the painting "quotes" (to use Rosenblum's term) from the Romantic era, using the pathetic fallacy and recalling the great disaster paintings. The composition seems similar to Théodore Géricault's (1791-1824) *The Raft of the "Medusa"* (1818-1819): the raft is placed in the lower half of the picture plane at a diagonal slant, while a

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<sup>80</sup> As stated in Williamson & Jamal (1996: 130).

<sup>81</sup> The dominant Scientific-Rational view developed with the secular humanism and scepticism of early twentieth century Modernism (Anderson 1995: 111).



Figure 23: Julian Schnabel, *The Raft*, 1982.

melancholic atmosphere of despair predominates. However, the fragmentation is reminiscent of Turner's *The Slave Ship* (1839), where catastrophe seems to affect sky, sun and clouds as much as the ship, drowning figures and water.

In the book *Dreaming with Open Eyes*, Michael Tucker (1992: 22, 23) agrees with Gablik's plea for artists to again be bridge-builders with visionary powers, rather than celebrities à la Andy Warhol (1931-1987). Tucker (1992: 23) writes that "...*Has Modernism Failed?* considerably exaggerates the extent to which a quest for visionary powers has been absent from...twentieth-century art." Tucker (1992: 23) observes that the statement by Gablik (1984: 94) "In modernist culture, nothing is sacred" ignores an enormous amount of art with spiritual value in this century. One feels that Tucker would probably agree about the sublimity of Schnabel's *Raft*, but Gablik's serious concern about a disenchanting world should not be disregarded. When Lyotard talks about the "sublimity of capitalism" he refers to the infinite power and wealth it assumes. This sublimity is certainly seductive, but unfortunately the value artists place on themselves through the measurement of either selling or not selling, erases morality, compassion and care. These erased qualities are the tools of the soul (Gablik 1993: 178). When life and art are without soul-consciousness there can be no relatedness. If art ought to be "of its time" then it can only be a spiritual relatedness of all life forces that can bring us sublime art in this pluralistic age.

### **3.3. The Reconstruction of Sublimity**

In the article *Postmodernism in the Visual Arts*, Crowther (1993: 180) addresses the Postmodern situation from a perspective slightly different to that of Gablik and Rosenblum. It seems that their point of view is closer to that of the Neo-Romantic, while Crowther's view is more constructive in the Postmodern-Ironist sense. Arguing against the point of view that Postmodern art is empty because it is post-historical and merely market-driven, Crowther (1993: 182) says that art has not come to an end. The ideals of Modernism have reached their logical limit (with the advent of minimalist and conceptual art in the 1960s and 1970s), but this has not exhausted the artistic creativity and advancement of art.

Crowther (1993: 183) stresses the notions of continuity from Modernism to Postmodernism. Referring to other artists such as Newman, Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), and Emile Nolde (1867-1956), Crowther points out that it is the expression of feeling that remains the most profound theme of Modernism (1993: 185). This expression gives art authenticity: whether it be the artist's response to religious sentiments, aesthetic experience, technological change or political ideals; what remains is "some kind of *elevating* expressive effect" that legitimises art. Crowther (1993: 185) calls this the "legitimising discourse" of art, and explains that it is the source of the continuity between contemporary and traditional art. This context reminds of one of the very first "functions" given to the sublime by Longinus. As mentioned in chapter one, Longinus remarked that through the wonder of the sublime the artist is lifted (near the mighty mind of God) to create inspiring works (Nahm 1975: 193).

Crowther links Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825) with this legitimising discourse. David said that the arts should "serve morality and elevate the soul" (Crowther 1993: 185) while Newman declared that "we" are making cathedrals out of our feelings instead of out of Christ or life (Crowther 1993: 184). Crowther (1993: 186) also argues that the legitimising discourse is a definitive feature of Postmodernism in the visual arts. In justifying the above statement, Crowther sheds some light on the link between Postmodernism and Deconstruction.<sup>82</sup>

Crowther (1993: 189) argues that Postmodernism has two fundamentally different aspects: namely *Critical Super Realism* and *Critical Neo-Expressionism*, which give art a *deconstructive* dimension, and *Secondary Super Realism* and *Secondary Neo-Expressionism* which are "uncritical". The artists Anselm Kiefer, Georg Baselitz (1938-) and Philip Guston (1913-1980) are described as Neo-Expressionists with a

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<sup>82</sup> Cuddon (1991: 222) clarifies the term "Deconstruction" as follows:

*Deconstruction is not synonymous with 'destruction', however. It is in fact much closer to the original meaning of the word 'analysis' itself, which etymologically means 'to undo' - a virtual synonym for 'to de-construct'. The deconstruction of a text does not proceed by random doubt or arbitrary subversion, but by the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification, within the text itself. If anything is destroyed in a deconstructive reading, it is not the text, but the claim to unequivocal domination of one mode of signifying over another. A deconstructive reading is a reading which analyses the specificity of a text's critical difference from itself.*



critical approach. In the work of Kiefer the overload of scale, the physical quality of the medium (grass, tar, photocopies or lead) and the catastrophic excess has as its theme “painting’s inadequacy in relation to life” (Crowther 1993: 188). In other words the pictorial aspects seem purposely to compromise the legitimising discourse so that it cannot articulate the complexity of contemporary existence.<sup>83</sup>

A similar theme can be read in French artist Jean-Charles Blais’ (1956-) art, for example in the work *For the Stars* (1985-6; Figure 24). The image of a leaning tree (the pathetic fallacy) and an intense figure clutching the hands of another unseen figure is disrupted by vertical veil-like bands of red colour. Blais uses deliberately torn and broken paper or cardboard on which he paints these fragmented images.

The legitimising discourse is questioned by including material or themes that are antithetical to high art and thus arouse scepticism concerning the possibility of high art. Crowther (1993: 188) reasons that “by internalising this scepticism and making it thematic within art practice, *Critical Super Realism* and *Critical Neo-Expressionism* give art a *deconstructive* dimension.” These works created a stylistic precedent and a market which the uncritical *Secondary Super Realisms* and *Neo-Expressionisms* moved into.

Crowther (1993: 188) describes the art of Julian Schnabel, Sandro Chia (1946-), and Francesco Clemente (1952-) as “painterly excess and unbridled eclecticism” that is more market-orientated and “uncritical”. The traditional expectation of virtuoso techniques is satisfied by the lavish use of paint and abundant images. The artwork offers the viewer a chance to become “elevated and improved” by engaging with the work.

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<sup>83</sup> The Arte Povera movement (the term means “poor art”) uses humble material such as twigs and newspapers to call up contradictions or reconciliations. The installations of Mario Merz (1925-) and Jannis Kounellis (1936-) are typical of this movement (Atkins 1990: 47).



Figure 24: Jean-Charles Blais, *For the Stars*, 1985-6.

In 1988 Clemente exhibited 108 watercolours that had been produced as a daily meditation exercise. *Watercolour VII* (1985; Figure 25) was part of this series. The watercolours were inspired by Oriental philosophy in which 108 (a sacred number to Hindus and Buddhists) prayers are said, using a prayer chain for keeping count. These works have a more obvious elevating quality achieved through glowing colours that create a “spiritual quality” (Billeter 1988: 180). These works as well as the works of Schnabel, often include imagery and abstract shapes in which meaning and content remain mysteriously hidden. If the viewer fails to understand the complex signs, this merely supports the concept of the profundity of the artist. These *Secondary Neo-Expressionist* works directly reinvigorate the legitimising discourse (Crowther 1993: 189).

Ironically, art with an internal critical intent and art which humours the elevating pretensions is eventually redistributed as a form of style, and is therefore assimilated by market forces and the legitimising discourse. As Crowther (1993: 189) observes: “For here, the deconstructive tendency succeeds in fulfilling the legitimising discourse *despite* itself.” Crowther finds the explanation for this in the theory of the sublime as constructed by Kant and Burke.

To Kant the extraordinary ability of the rational mind to articulate phenomena that overwhelm the human imagination and mind indicated the sublime. In the same way, the art of Critical Postmodernism makes the extraordinary scope of art, as a rational artifice, vivid (Crowther 1993: 190). In the attempt to express real life, with all its complexity and disasters, the *acknowledged* failure to signify this reality, paradoxically, points to art’s extraordinary scope.<sup>84</sup> Thus, like Kant’s sublime, one experiences in Postmodernism an *artistic sublimity* that is affirmative and elevating (Crowther 1993: 190).

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<sup>84</sup> This ‘failure to indicate reality’ that Crowther refers to reminds one of Lyotard’s (1992b: 1014) definition of the Postmodern as to “put forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself.”



Figure 25: Francesco Clemente, *Watercolour VII*, 1985.

As a further explanation of the artistic sublime, one may refer to Crowther's book *The Kantian Sublime*. Crowther (1989: 162) reconstructed Kant's theory to distinguish the artistic sublime from the mathematical and dynamic modes of the sublime formulated by Kant. He calls the mathematical and dynamic modes the *cognitive* variety, while the artistic sublime is subdivided into three more varieties, namely:

- the *artefactual* sublime "arises when some vast or mighty manmade product (or a representation of one) makes vivid the scope of human artifice;"
- the *personalised* sublime "involves some overwhelming personal significance an artwork holds for us, making vivid the scope of artistic creation;"
- the *expressive* sublime "arises when an artist's originality is able to evoke a sense of his subject-matter's universal significance and, in so doing, makes vivid the extraordinary scope of artistic expression" (Crowther 1989: 162).

The cognitive and artefactual sublime have a descriptive sense while the personalized and the expressive sublime are used evaluatively. Crowther (1989: 162) summarises the above analysis in the following general definition: "the sublime is an item or set of items which, through the possession of suggestion of perceptually, imaginatively, or emotionally overwhelming properties, succeeds in rendering the scope of some human capacity vivid to the senses."

Burke's sublime, which is based on thrilling shocks that do not pose any real danger or cause any pain, invigorates the senses. Lyotard (1984: 40) reminds us that Burke's sublime is not a matter of elevation, but a matter of intensification. Crowther (1993: 190) points out that in contemporary life, the standardisation and monotony of everyday work is jolted by things such as thrillers or violent films and shocking or surprising art. These phenomena "rejuvenate and heighten our sense of being alive." The return of great "Expressionist" paintings has been heralded by some artists as a response to people's need to be touched. The tactile feeling of "rough" art works seems to be a reaction against the world that modernized society has created: a world too slick and alienated for emotion (McFadden 1982: 72).

In expressing contemporary culture, the Burkian sublime of shock is utilised by artists who deal with the decadence of society. Two South African artists who address decadence in divergent ways (technically and content-wise), come to mind: Diane Victor (1964-) and William Kentridge (1955-).

Victor stated in an interview in 1995 that her work “wants almost to rattle people or make them take one step beyond their comfort zone” (Van Rensburg 1995: 31). This remark was made in discussing the critical social awareness of the artwork *Consumer Violence* (1995; Figure 26) that was exhibited on the fringe of the 1995 Africus Biennale in Johannesburg. The image deals with aspects of torture, violence and intimidation, and the marketing of these “horror stories” in the media - hence the presence of Mickey Mouse (Van Rensburg 1995: 31). Victor’s revelation of decadence in contemporary society is explicit in that it causes uneasiness and even shock. In contrast with this, her dextrous drawing technique sculpts the fleshiness of human figures with such mastery (evoking Crowther’s expressive sublime), that it affords the viewer the pleasure of a near-voyeuristic experience. Lyotard (1989: 22) hails this contradictory feeling of pleasure and displeasure as the contemporary sublime, which is as relevant today as it was in Burke’s time. The fascination with the discordant, in contrast with the aesthetic of beauty, is also evident in Victor’s work.

The transgression of clear limits between eroticism and violence has often been evoked in the work of Victor. Recalling Bataille’s statement<sup>85</sup> that clear differences and articulate distinctions disappear in the domain of intimacy, one is aware that the loss of separateness between sex and violence pertains to the limitless sublime. In Victor’s drawing *Nastagio*<sup>86</sup> (1992; Figure 27) two scenes are juxtaposed: in the foreground a wounded man, sitting opposite a sensual, beautiful woman, seems transfixed by seeing her finger being sucked by a black dog. The woman (with

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<sup>85</sup> In discussing Bataille, Taylor (1992: 234) also states that “Violence and the sacred joins in sacrifice.”

<sup>86</sup> The title and background of this drawing was taken from an illustration Sandro Botticelli (1444-1510) did of a story of a rich young man called Nastagio degli Onesti. This scene represents a tragic curse that will continue forever, witnessed by Nastagio in the woods (Horne 1980: 127-129).



Figure 26: Diane Victor, *Consumer Violence*, 1995.

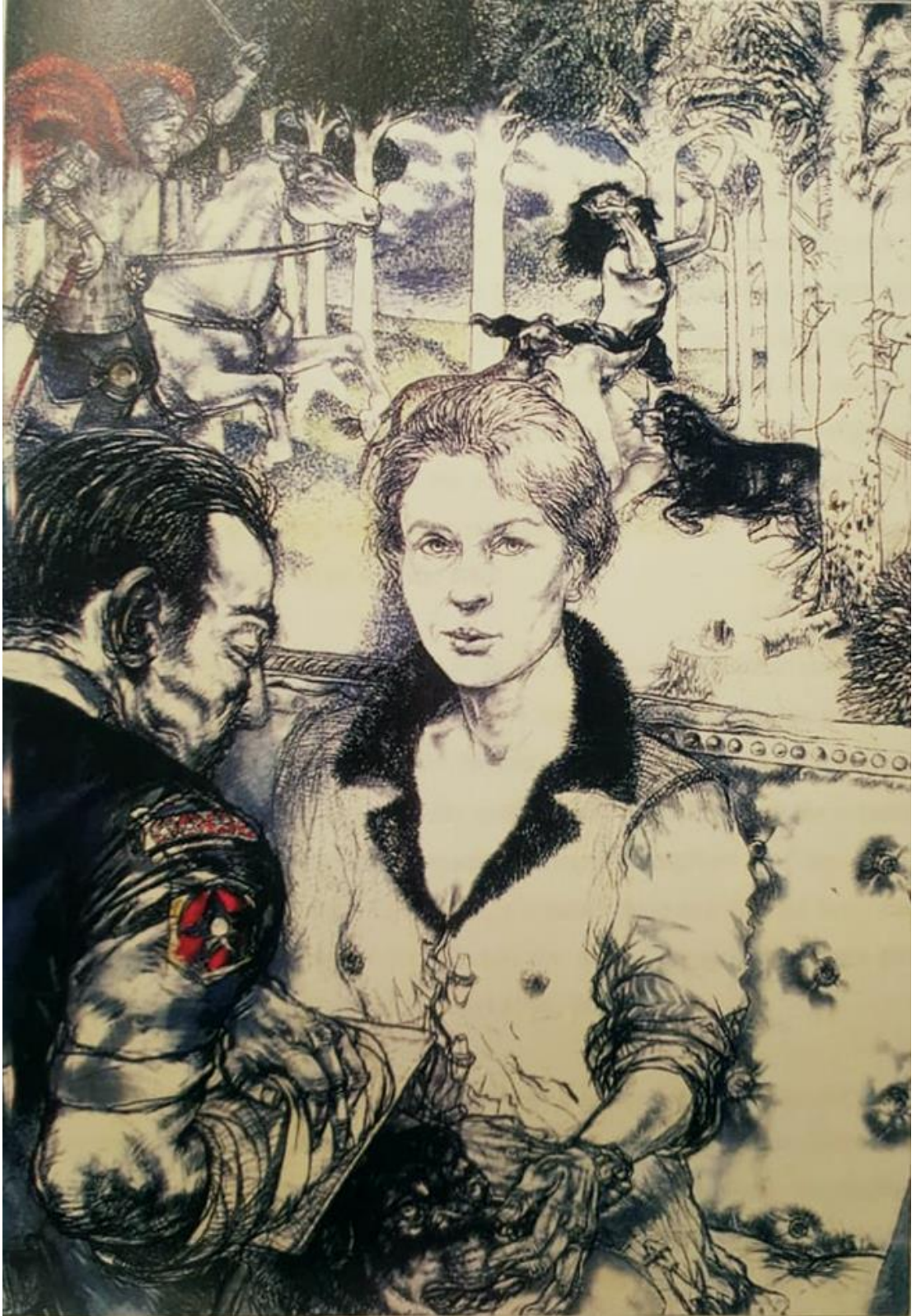


Figure 27: Diane Victor, *Nastagio*, 1992.



radiant nipples) stares confidently at the viewer, seemingly in total control of the animal. Against this scene, a horseman/noble knight (reminiscent of the rampant masculinity of Fuseli's stallion) approaches a naked woman who is being attacked and ravished by dogs.

The interaction between these two scenes suggests, amongst other things, a power play between sexual submission, provocation, or rape. An interesting substitution of the hero for wounded victim takes place - in the upper scene (seemingly a past age) the woman was the victim, while in the lower scene (possibly the Modern age) she seems a slightly cynical heroine. An alternative reading could be that the so-called confidence of the woman is haunted by Dionysian chaos, ecstasy and darkness intermingled in a labyrinthine forest of the past. The layering of references makes issues like sacredness, sacrifice, violence or eroticism more complex<sup>87</sup>, and this seems to present a fusion which reveals a sublime state.

Kentridge deals with the shocking violence in South Africa in his animated video *Felix in Exile* (1994). Using the metaphor of erosion in the landscape, Kentridge gradually erased sketches of the bodies of people in the charcoal drawings, until they become part of the landscape. The blotting out of the past is a way of dealing with the present, but traces of the old drawings in the sequential images strengthen the idea of the present being haunted by the past. In Kentridge's video there is a hint of hope and redemption in the organic feeling of growth and the use of layering of images and historical shifts of meaning (Williamson & Jamal 1996: 50).

Critical Postmodernism's questioning and parodying of our concepts of high art gives a life-enhancing shock to our traditional expectations, an experience that Crowther (1993: 190) calls the *protosublime*. One can agree with Crowther's convincing arguments that Postmodern art is more than merely a market-driven product, and that it is a critical and innovative development in history. The belief that "artistic innovation...is a complex relation between art and its past, rather than a kind of

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<sup>87</sup> Lyotard (1989: 21, 22) postulates that making things more complex is the infinite task of contemporary society.

absolute philosophical break” is reflected in this tracing of the sublime from Burke and Kant to Postmodernist art (Docherty 1993: 192).

The relevance of the sublime notion to art has been questioned since the beginning of Modernism. Lyotard (1992b: 1008) addresses the aspect of desublimation<sup>88</sup> in contemporary art in the essay *What Is Postmodernism?* He believes that the avant-garde that disqualifies art’s elevating effect, turns away from the unrepresentable. Lyotard (1992b: 1013) feels that the idea of desublimation is supported by some people because they assume that the beautiful is the only category that exists within aesthetics and do not acknowledge the sublime from the Kantian perspective. These people see the clarity and sentiment of the aesthetic of beauty as not befitting the complex spirit of the end of the century. Lyotard (1989: 5) is against the aesthetic of beauty (and therefore in a sense agrees with them), but defends sublimity as the aesthetic that is relevant at this stage.

Lyotard (1992b: 1013) feels that the Kantian sublime is also being confused with Freudian sublimation.<sup>89</sup> His openness to the value of experimentation and the notion of the Postmodern artist’s “nostalgia for the unattainable,” define an artwork as an inherent search for new categories and rules (Bennington 1989: 5). This perspective leads one to understand how Lyotard’s aesthetic cannot encapsulate the aesthetic of beauty (which is limited and contained) or Freudian sublimation (with the restrictive aim of socially acceptable behaviour<sup>90</sup>). He does not believe that Postmodernism is anti-Modernism but that there is instead a dialectical relationship that binds these two developments together. Both Lyotard and Crowther therefore emphasize the importance of contextualising the Kantian sublime in contemporary thought and art.

To contextualise the sublime within Modernism, Lyotard (1993: 46) indicates that an important characteristic of Modernism was the withdrawal of the real, and that the unrepresentable could only be put forward as the “missing contents.” As mentioned

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<sup>88</sup> Desublimation is against the refinement and elevated connotation of the tradition of the sublime.

<sup>89</sup> In psychoanalysis the term is used to describe the action of directing one’s primitive impulses (usually sexual or aggressive) towards a nobler aim. One may interpret it as a refinement of natural impulses. Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and his followers researched and wrote about this aspect of human behaviour (Bullock & Woodings 1992: 240).

<sup>90</sup> As defined in Bullock & Woodings (1988: 825).

previously, this featured in the melancholy of the German Expressionists as well as in De Chirico, as well as the creation of “the new” or what Lyotard calls “*novatio*” (Picasso and Duchamp). Lyotard (1993: 46) calls the sublime of Modernism a nostalgic one, but feels that this is not the “real sublime sentiment.” The combination of pleasure and pain should intrinsically be part of the artwork: “the pleasure that reason should exceed all presentation, the pain that imagination or sensibility should not be equal to the concept” (Lyotard 1993: 46). This, Lyotard (1993: 46) suggests, is what Postmodernism postulates. The unrepresentable is present in the presentation itself, and the new presentation should leave the viewer with a stronger sense of the unrepresentable. When Lyotard states “that the essay...is postmodern, while the fragment...is modern” one senses that the sublime of the modern (the fragment) is newly constructed (the essay) to form the Postmodern.<sup>91</sup>

In *The Kantian Sublime*, Crowther acknowledges that the sublime appears to have become outmoded. Crowther (1989: 163) suggests that it is because Kant linked the sublime with *nature* that the concept of the sublime seems to belong only to the Romantic era and therefore appears to be outdated today. In reality, the concept of the sublime has moved from nature to the urban experience, into the context of political conflicts and societal structures. The structures of capitalism with the conflicts it generates, revolutionary politics, military parades, mechanised warfare, science fiction and space travel, all have a power that overwhelms us and implies vastness.

The change in the condition of society has enabled the sublime to be part of the leading cultural discourse (Crowther 1989: 165). In line with this comes astonishment at human creativity - whether it be an impressive engineering feat, a monumental building, or a small art object. This is the artistic<sup>92</sup> sense of the sublime mentioned earlier. The movement of the sublime from *nature to culture* is once again relevant in the work of Kiefer. As symbols for history and culture, Kiefer’s work seems to be without earthly life or natural context. Where nature does appear, the

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<sup>91</sup> This is in line with Lyotard’s statement that Postmodernity is “rewriting modernity,” as paraphrased by Docherty (1993: 15).

<sup>92</sup> Crowther confirms that he uses “artistic” here in the broadest possible sense.

grey colours seem to express a world of sadness and loss. In his art, the present seems to be “swallowed up” by the past, or stated differently, the past seems to represent the present (Billiter 1988: 116).

The current cultural discourse of Deconstruction in philosophy and art seems to be an important and essential aspect of the Postmodern sublime (or *vice versa*). In the article *Beyond Art & Philosophy: Deconstruction & the Post-Modern Sublime* (1988) Crowther finds the symbolic representation of the unrepresentable in the Deconstruction of Jacques Derrida (1930-) and Michel Foucault (1926-1984). It is in the play of *différance*<sup>93</sup> - the ungraspable network of relations - that partial insight is offered into the unrepresentable, the totality. By making *différance* visible in text or painting, the “dignity of the rational project” is affirmed. This dignity is found in the pleasure the mind experiences by being confronted by overwhelming or complex objects. In other words, to engage in Deconstruction is to experience the sublime (Crowther 1988: 50).

A Deconstructivist approach reveals the potential meanings generated from the discrepancy that arises from analysing a work’s visual language in relation to the content (Atkins 1990: 143). As an example, the art of Baselitz seems to disrupt the content of typical Expressionist work. The essential idea of Expressionism deepening or encompassing the individual’s sense of self, is made futile through his upside-down paintings, as in *Black Mother with Black Child* (1985; Figure 28). Rather than possessing and affirming the world through history, Baselitz disrupts and inverts the world, disseminating the self (Crowther 1988: 51). He acknowledged that the figures, trees or vessels he paints, are “motifs” for visual display, and do not refer to specific individual items or bodies. His paintings and drawings can therefore be seen in a different light than that of the art of the earlier Expressionists. While the Expressionists’ work (such as Kandinsky or Kokoschka) reflected a profound depth, Baselitz’s figures are described as “generic” and “prophetic emblems” (Hughes 1991:

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<sup>93</sup> Derrida sees the text/artwork as a system of signifiers, and *différance* is the term he coined to indicate the movement or play of differences. Each meaning leads to another meaning or signifier, so that not only one, but many meanings will be suggested (Cuddon 1991: 246). *Différance* “concerns the principle of the continuous (and endless) postponement or deferral of meaning” (Cuddon 1991: 224).

405). Moreover, one feels that the imperfections, distortions and even ugliness shock in a way that Burke described as sublime.

The relationship between art, reality and humanity has changed from Romanticism to Postmodernism. Within Deconstruction the function of art is to question the nature of identity and the relationship of the individual with the universal. Deconstruction points out the fallacy of the theory that the individual's goal is total self-knowledge, and indicates that the gap between the ideal and real is unbridgeable. It has become important to break culture's code through appropriation, impermanence, accumulation, discursivity and hybridisation (Morley 1988: 27). All there is left to do is to lay bare the fact that there is no access to the ideal world.

Deconstruction offers no certainty but only doubt in our relationship of experience to the transcendent. Life is a state of flux and not even the signs used are controllable, for they do not originate from within the artist. This radical open-endedness could be described as the sublime of Deconstruction: unlimited possibilities. This is the context that becomes visible in some contemporary art. This view has also been described as tragic and absurd (Morley 1988: 30). Artists with the conviction that certain truths are universal are critical of the idea that there is no "presence", because for them art and life is more than a play of *différance*. One feels though, that through the chain of traces a Deconstructive approach can lead one to defamiliarise conventions and layer the richness of life. In this sense new contexts and associations can be evoked, never to conclude but "always to see through a glass darkly, enigmatically" (Griffiths 1988: 13). The tendency of Deconstruction to be "irrational" is strongly reminiscent of religious discourse in that both rely on lyrical and quasi-magical arrangements of signs and phrases (Griffiths 1988: 13).



Figure 28: Georg Baselitz, *Black Mother with Black Child*, 1985.

In the wooden panel *Map for Purification* (1997; Figure 29), the author has layered several signifiers in an attempt to create traces which can link and open possibilities. The chaotic bush is layered with a haunting fire, depositing grey ash where it has burnt out. Fire purges and scorches so that landscapes become altered and memory becomes affected. This is a sullen fire with a melancholic feeling of loss, a fire for loved ones who burned out too early.

In the context of the bush Moses comes to mind, to face a fire that does not destroy, but that promises to make holy, to make whole, to heal. While in Christian scriptures fire is a sign of God's presence, a symbol for the Holy Spirit, it also pertains to the spiritual in general (Tucker 1992: 297). Fire also transforms, and was used by alchemists in mystical traditions.

The image of clouds suggests that this might be an aerial view, or a promise of blessings, possibly rain. Plants with flame-like leaves overlay the clouds slightly, linking the feeling of life force, and breath, a theme continued in the void above the clouds. The wooden panel swerves away from bundled wood, which is earthy, seemingly raw and "primitive". It is a possibility of separation, of parting, this bent panel. Life is suggested by snails, a bird and a hart/reindeer, some collaged, others carved or painted. This is a Postmodern map with no clear indications, only possible connections of a complex process. While the work encapsulates the artist's personalised sublime, the use of tactile materials portrays an expressive sublime. The work attempts to depict the human capacity for exaltation and drudgery, pain and pleasure, life force and scorching.

The sublime open-endedness of Deconstruction finds an echo in the multitude of possibilities of interconnectedness, discussed above under the heading *Pluralism and Spirituality*. Religious people, Deconstructivists, Ecofeminists and Neo-Romantics feel that where, in the present context, there are offensive conventions, recovery from these should be attempted. The process might be to shatter or to connect, to evoke or to postpone (in order to recover/heal). This global mind-change is never self-contained, but ever dynamic, merging and disseminating - sublimely open.



Figure 29: Gwenneth Miller, *Map for Purification*, 1997.



## Conclusion

Changes in the way we think have influenced the idea of the sublime, percolating through our actions and culture to reflect the immense diversity of our organic existence. The major difference between the Romantic, the Modern and the Postmodern sublime lies in the ultimate context in which human beings place themselves. While the Romantic artist's ultimate context was the Absolute (God), the individual in the secular age establishes his/her relationship with nature, culture and history on his/her own terms. The contemporary artwork is not seen as necessarily reflecting the ultimate truth, but is seen to create a dialogue in the context of consumerism, market forces, ecology, morality and spirituality.

The role of the artist, who was formerly the hero (in revealing or unmasking the ambiguous path to the absolutely sublime realm), has changed. Whether the sublime was Godly, in a terrific void, or chaotic in a threatening sense, or whether the sublime was moral, or a revealed presence in the here and now, the artist was a dominator whose control was either threatened (Burke) or honoured (Kant). Female intuition seems to be one of the possible guides in a plural, relative, chaotic present (as Ariadne was the guide in the labyrinth.) What is addressed in contemporary literature is the *attitude* of the artist and every human being. It appears that this attitude reflects Kant's contribution to the sublime, namely that the sublime can emanate from ourselves (like virtue) and is not only something from the outside that affects us (Crowther 1989: 12). This means that moral consciousness is sublime.

While the loss of this hero-syndrome seems to the nihilist a black sublime of darkness and loss, and to the Postmodern player an indication of a game of shuffle-board (a thrilling sublime without much meaning), there is another vision. The sensitive human being, who is attuned to the ecological, spiritual and cultural world, sees the introduction of a feminine vision (not pertaining only to women) that would interact, heal, and discern moral responsibility in nature and culture. This *constructive* sense would preserve and connect life. It would, in a REAL way, cause us to revere and revel in the magic of our ambiguous world.

In this sense, recognising the impossibility of a perfect, clear, linear, controllable rationale is evident, but our vision and actions would reflect excitement in the *process* of relatedness or connectedness, with the human being as a facilitator, a *part* of an organic life force. Feminist Maureen O'Hara (1995: 155) writes: "...if it is true that we co-create reality, which in turn creates us - then we are called to a new kind of community. If I can make culture I must act responsibly." A new sublime can only be relevant if the artist, in a holistic sense of life, has the combination of humility and trust (faith, hope and love) needed to embrace the broken real and to be involved in the process of life - to reveal the marvellous in the ordinary.

The echoes of biblical and religious discourse are deliberate in this conclusion and are also evident in Deconstruction in general. Griffiths (1988: 13) states that Deconstruction has correlations with Christian and Jewish analogies in that they use "quasi-magical, narrative and lyrical discourse, arrangements of signs and emotive affinities to apprehend what [Aristotelian logic] kills." As previously noted, Griffiths (1988: 13) uses the phrase "We are condemned always *to see through a glass darkly*, enigmatically," which relates to the idea that our experience of reality can only be partial. The shattering of the Romantic (and Modernistic) ideal that the world can be *known*,<sup>94</sup> has left us with the concept that only through *traces* can we realize contexts and relationships. In Lyotard's definition of the sublime as "presenting the unrepresentable", as mentioned previously, it is clear that understanding can never be total. The art work as a sign of our experience is an endless network of traces which are used to reveal relationships and intersecting concepts.

Contemporary *questioning* of aesthetics mainly relates to the aesthetic of beauty. The aesthetic of the sublime is questioned only insofar as it claims to reveal the absolute truth, for this meaning seems unstable. It seems as though another aspect of the Romantic sublime that is either outdated or questioned, is the naive sentiment. If this

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<sup>94</sup> Lyotard (1992a: 999) criticises this deterministic ideology in the introduction to *The Postmodern Condition*. He implies that the whole is not determinable and that efficiency or maximum performance is inconsistent.

is visualised in contemporary art it is treated ironically, cynically or jokingly. One thinks of Umberto Eco's (1995: 32) statement:

*I think of the postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows he cannot say to her, "I love you madly," because he knows that she knows (and that she knows he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still, there is a solution. He can say, "As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly."*

In this sense the intertextuality of artworks seems relevant. Works of art do not merely echo each other but are transported into one another. Similarly, one feels the sublime aspects of Romantic works are integrated into Postmodern art. The artist finds that he/she is not the "free" individual who was so glorified in the Modern age, but is to some extent bound by context and by convention, especially since the tradition of "the new" and the avant-garde has become a convention. This shift in perspective influenced views concerning the notion of the genius. First questioned by Dada artists, the idea of wholly novel creation seems untenable in the Postmodern perspective. On the other hand, the total loss of this enigmatic persona would be lamented by critics and those still beckoning a shaman artist to reveal mysteries.

The important contributions of the tradition of "the new" were the language of abstraction and the apocalyptic sublime in Expressionistic art. Aspects of chaos and chance emphasised in these works are relevant today in Postmodernism. The avant-garde's relentless questioning of aesthetics encouraged new views, theories and creative problem solving.

The Transavantgarde makes use of a fragmentary outlook, which directs one's attention away from the linear approach of the avant-garde. The divisiveness that existed in Modernism between abstract and figurative art is seen to be overcome, through eclectic uses, by the transavantgarde (Bonito Oliva 1982: 52). Complex paintings are created by a network of abstract and figurative elements, opening the way for the awe that results from artistic sublimity, as defined by Crowther.

Crowther's (1989: 174) opinion that the aesthetic experience, especially the sublime, "has the capacity to *humanise*" stresses the importance of being aware of the human being's capacity for perception, imagination and emotion. It seems as though the

Burkian sublime of intensification provides us with the pleasure of the feeling of harmony between our human abilities (creative, cognitive, and emotional) and the sensible world. The kind of art Crowther (1993: 192) judges to be “profoundly creative” is not the criticism and eclecticism of Critical Postmodernism, but art that “involves an elevating reappropriation of the *life-world*.”

The escapism that we still look for may be a need for the marvellous: to be in touch with the magic of the earth and spirit, with creative power, with limitless power. Realising this is really a sublime of limitless interrelation to discover moments of truth, which would in contemporary perspective be a contradictory experience, if Lyotard (1993: 22) is to be believed. The discovery of chains of associations should be a revelation of life, whether through shock, amazement, elation or exhilaration. This is the sublime pleasure of life and art.

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## Abstract

This dissertation examines the sublime and the context in which it evolved. To explore the changes that have taken place, the investigation around this concept has been situated within three moments: Romanticism, Modernism and Postmodernism. Representative artworks within these periods have been identified and compared in order to bring art and philosophy together.

The Romantic understanding of sublimity finds awe in nature, in its vastness and terror. Sublimity was also found in the ability of the artist to open understanding of limitlessness and the mysteries of the mind and the universe. The Modernists developed some of the ideas of the Romantics in the essence of abstract art, but questioned Romantic aspirations of the absolute by probing the subconscious and the notion of chaos. The Postmodernists rewrite the previous movements in a vision of pluralism and (within the Neo-Romantic perspective) spirituality. The restructuring of the sublime within a contemporary paradigm attempts to point towards the future relevance of this concept.

**Key words:** absolute, beauty, Burke, aesthetics, empathy, infinite, Kant, painting, spirituality, unknowable

## Opsomming

Hierdie skripsie ondersoek die sublieme en die konteks waarin dit ontwikkel het. Om die veranderinge te ondersoek wat plaasgevind het, is die konsep binne drie tydsvases geplaas: Romantisisme, Modernisme en Postmodernisme. Verteenwoordigende kunswerke binne hierdie periodes is geïdentifiseer en vergelyk sodat kuns en filosofie bymekaar gebring kan word.

Die Romantiese vertolking van die sublieme vind ontsag in die natuur, in die wydheid en die verskrikking daarvan. Sublimiteit was ook te vinde in die vermoë van die kunstenaar om insig te bevorder om die grensloosheid en die misterie van beide die verstand en die heelal te begryp. Die Moderniste het sekere van die idees van die Romantici ontwikkel in die essensie van abstrakte kuns, maar het Romantiese aspirasies van die absolute bevraagteken, deur die onderbewuste ondersoek, asook konsepte van chaos. Die Postmoderniste herskryf die vorige bewegings in 'n visie van pluralisme en (vanuit 'n Neo-Romantiese perspektief) spiritualiteit. Die herstrukturering van die sublieme binne 'n kontemporêre paradigma poog om heen te wys na die toekomstige relevansie van hierdie konsep.

**Slutel woorde:** absolute, Burke, estetiëka, empatie, Kant, oneindig, onkenbare, skilder, skoonheid, spiritualiteit