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# SUBLIME LIGHT

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An artistic and philosophical comparison of sublimity in the art of J.M.W.  
Turner and O. Eliasson



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# The Turner Syndrome

‘The Sun is God’

*Blind, I am*

*In the failure of language*

*Reaching towards you*<sup>1</sup>

One would be inclined to think of light as of overtly obvious importance in the visual arts. Without light, one could argue, there would be nothing to see and therefore nothing to paint, write or construct. Indeed, without light, there would be no life at all. The general source of light, especially before the invention of artificial light, is the sun. The illuminating effects of (sun)light are universally inescapable and have been an essential part of art from the beginning of time. In prehistoric and ancient rock carvings, the sun often played a key-role and the examples in Egyptian, Greek, Roman and Western (Christian) culture are countless. A nice example is Michele di Matteo Lambertine’s *Saint Dominic* (1447-1450), in which saint Dominic, the first Inquisitor, is shown holding (a small version of) the sun to symbolize his status as a bearer of light, which in turn symbolizes the Christian faith (fig. 1). Other examples are the myth of Helios, who was said to drive the sun across the heavens with his chariot, or the Egyptian god of the sun, Ra. The sun was often thought to be more than an enormous flaming clump of rock floating in outer space. Its powers were deemed magical in various cultures and the (surviving) myths about the sun are numerous.

The fascination only grew stronger, but the nature of the obsession seemed to change over the course of the centuries. John Milton, an influential poet during the seventeenth century, wrote poems which can provide us with a proper perspective on the significance of the sun about four hundred years ago. What makes Milton’s imaginative creations even more unique, is that he was blind at the time of writing. Nevertheless, his descriptions of dazzling light and heavy darkness are striking and unforgettable. Setting aside its preconceived mythical - and predominantly pagan - status, Milton parallels the sun to Christ and God. His first English poem, ‘On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity’ (1629)<sup>2</sup>, shares with us this interesting view on the nature of the sun. When we analyse this poem, the sun and Christ appear to be one and the same, which is also a puny little, long existing wordplay between the words ‘sun’ and ‘son’.<sup>3</sup> For example, Milton compares (the coming of) the infant Christ to:

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<sup>1</sup> Wawrzinek (2008), 12.

<sup>2</sup> ‘On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity’ (n.d.).

<sup>3</sup> Pecheux (1975), 316.

‘[t]hat glorious Form, that Light insufferable, And that far-beaming blaze of Majesty’<sup>4</sup> which immediately calls to mind a description of our well-known brightest star. Furthermore, in the second part of the poem, called ‘the Hymn’ or ‘the Ode’, the sun even consents to Christ:

And though the shady gloom  
Had given day her room,  
The Sun himself with-held his wonted speed,  
And hid his head for shame,  
As his inferiour flame,  
The new-enlightn'd world no more should need;  
He saw a greater Sun appear  
Then his bright Throne, or burning Axletree could bear.<sup>5</sup>

In this verse, Christ is notably described as ‘A Globe of circular light’.<sup>6</sup> Milton’s transcendental view on the sun and its nature can be underlined further by the verses of his world famous epic *Paradise Lost*, published in 1674.<sup>7</sup> His protagonist, very controversially, is Satan. He delivers an angry and exhausted speech to the sun on its occurrence during his journey back to Heaven after being banned to Hell by God. He blames the sun for reminding him of the heaven he was banished from and compares its celestial reign to God’s heavenly throne.<sup>8</sup> Milton’s poetic comparisons are, in my view, of great importance as they are examples which can help us understand the general artistic fascination with light and the sun in the centuries to come. It is important to realise here that the image of the sun had morphed from being a deity’s object or companion, or God’s construction, to the actual symbol or image of God and religion.<sup>9</sup> This did not mean that those living in this respective period of time worshipped the sun in a pagan manner; artists studied the sun in an attempt to find the truth.

In the decades to follow Milton, painters and poets, with Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851) as their leading figure, wanted and thus tried to paint the sun in a unique manner:

not as an anecdotal orb in an atmosphere sketch, but the sun *itself*<sup>10</sup>, core and being of the source of light and warmth. The sun’s soul. As if he [Turner] feared that this sun would be denied to the generations to come. Maybe he was even afraid that this sun may one day die. If so, Turner would have saved this sun’s soul of oblivion.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> ‘On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity’ (n.d.), v. 8-10.

<sup>5</sup> ‘On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity’ (n.d.), v. 77-84.

<sup>6</sup> ‘On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity’ (n.d.), v. 110.

<sup>7</sup> Leonard (2000), I.

<sup>8</sup> Milton (2000), Book IV v. 1-114.

<sup>9</sup> ‘God, who is infinite light’ (fig. 35).

<sup>10</sup> My own italics.

<sup>11</sup> My own translation of Zwagerman (2015), 112-113.

After Turner's initial academic phase, an example of which is *A bridge over the Usk* (1790s) (fig. 2) - in which the light of the sun is already extraordinary brilliant - he turned to wilder, maybe more sinister but at the very least darker subject matter. No matter how dark his works are, the sun is almost always 'explosively'<sup>12</sup> present on almost every single one of his canvases. This becomes even clearer when we compare one of Turner's darkest works: *Slavers throwing overboard the dead and dying - Typhoon coming on* (1840) (fig. 3) to the Dutch<sup>13</sup> Jan van Goyen's *The Storm* (1637) (fig. 4). Although both have an apparent source of light, Turner's sun(set) forms a radiant, almost otherworldly entity, casting light on the horrible events taking place on the wild sea below, sharply set against the blackish clouds of the oncoming typhoon. Van Goyen's light, by comparison, is only just enough to barely enlighten the small figure in the foreground. Van Goyen used light as an instrument; Turner's sun is no less part of the painting, probably even more so, than the ship, the sea, or the typhoon. Turner's later works fully embraced sunlight in all its forms, leaving most of his works in a yellowish hue, as for example can be seen in his *Scene in Derbyshire* (ca. 1827) (fig. 5), causing critics to accuse him of having problems with his eyesight.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, this phenomenon of artists concentrating on the sun, dubbed 'the Turner Syndrome' by Joost Zwagerman<sup>15</sup>, would prove viable for many centuries to come.

'The Sun is God!' are supposedly Turner's last, dramatically delivered words.<sup>16</sup> His alleged exclamation possibly meant that he had found what he had been trying to discover all along: that the true nature of the sun cannot possibly be depicted because the sun is God, and God can never be truthfully be portrayed either, since both the sun and God are both 'principally unknowable'.<sup>17</sup> The sun is omnipresent and simultaneously invisible, unfathomable, intangible and unreachable.<sup>18</sup> These terms could be seen as typical for the romantic zeitgeist. Especially Turner and the artists that followed in his footsteps 'put the sublime on a canvas from the inside out'.<sup>19</sup> But what is this 'sublime'?

The dawn of the Romantic Era gave new rise to an (old) artistic and literary phenomenon: the sublime. Many intellectuals contemplated the effects of certain (atmospheric) artistic tricks on the mind of a reader or beholder during this tumultuous period

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<sup>12</sup> Zwagerman (2015), 113.

<sup>13</sup> Turner has been known to study Dutch landscape paintings, and especially the skies.

<sup>14</sup> Dorment (2014).

<sup>15</sup> Zwagerman (2015), 110.

<sup>16</sup> Zwagerman (2015), 113.

<sup>17</sup> Zwagerman (2015), 110, 114.

<sup>18</sup> Zwagerman (2015), 114.

<sup>19</sup> Zwagerman (2015), 114.

in European history, which was characterized by (the dawn of) Industrialisation. Edmund Burke (1729-1797), in his *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, dictates that the sublime is: ‘whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror’.<sup>20</sup> Fear, in Burke’s opinion, is the strongest emotion a human being can suffer.<sup>21</sup> Burke imagined himself an empiricist, which means that he founded his theory on ‘sense impressions’.<sup>22</sup> According to Burke, every human being creates or constructs the world by means of touch, smell, taste, sound and sight. The experience of the sublime, then, lies in the link between the ‘exertion of the body and the mental strain of cognition’.<sup>23</sup> Although Burke, unlike others, seems to negate the divine in drawing up his empirical theory, it cannot be ignored that, involuntarily and possibly unconsciously, the exertion of the body and the mental strain of cognition is often linked to transcendentalism or some form of spirituality. This idea of a higher form or plane of being is possibly the most tenacious but simultaneously the most intangible theme in human history.

Burke’s favourite artistic medium was poetry, which he strongly preferred over painting. He argued that he could draw, for example, a tree, which would present ‘a very clear idea’<sup>24</sup> of the object in itself. The problem with the drawing would be that what is drawn is nothing more than exactly that: a drawing, an imitation of reality. ‘The most lively and spirited verbal description’, however, ‘raises a very obscure and imperfect idea of such objects’.<sup>25</sup> These obscure verbal descriptions, in Burke’s opinion, could raise stronger emotions than a drawing ever could, because words would be the link between object and emotion. Burke proposes ‘passions’, which are emotional experiences such as feelings of pleasure and pain. Words such as ‘pain’, ‘death’, ‘sickness’ and ‘darkness’ are said to cause feelings of pain and danger, while words such as ‘light’ or for example ‘flower’ would evoke happiness in the reader.<sup>26</sup> A quick demonstration of this theory can be provided by a short verse of the British poet William Wordsworth (1770-1850), from his *The Prelude or, Growth of a Poet's Mind; An Autobiographical Poem* (1850):

The immeasurable height  
Of woods decaying, never to be decayed

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<sup>20</sup> Shaw (2006), 48.

<sup>21</sup> Burke (1958), 53.

<sup>22</sup> Shaw (2006), 49.

<sup>23</sup> Shaw (2006), 49.

<sup>24</sup> Shaw (2006), 50.

<sup>25</sup> Shaw (2006), 50.

<sup>26</sup> Burke (1958), 36; Shaw (2006), p. 50-51.

The stationary blasts of water-falls,  
 And every where along the hollow rent  
 Winds thwarting winds, bewildered and forlorn,  
 The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,  
 The rocks that muttered close upon our ears,  
 Black drizzling crags that spake by the way-side  
 As if a voice were in them, the sick sight  
 And giddy prospect of the raging stream,  
 The unfettered clouds and regions of the heavens,  
 Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light  
 Were all workings of one mind, the features  
 Of the same face, blossoms up one tree,  
 Characters of the great Apocalypse,  
 The types and symbols of Eternity,  
 Of first and last, and midst, and without end.<sup>27</sup>

These words (still) evoke a deeply stirring, uncanny vision of nature and unknowable phenomena.

Words could, according to Burke, thus evoke a sublime experience, provided that there is a certain level of obscurity involved.<sup>28</sup> This too can be made clear through a short verse by William Wordsworth, taken from another poem, in which he speaks of the existence of a sublime quality in all of nature's creations:

A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
 Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
 Of something far more deeply interfused,  
 Whose light is the dwelling of setting suns,  
 And the round ocean, and the living air,  
 And the blue sky, and in the mind of man,  
 A motion and a spirit, that impels  
 All thinking things, all objects of thought,  
 And rolls through all things ...<sup>29</sup>

The sublime is thus everywhere, yet obscured. Too much of a direct confrontation would leave nothing to gain from a sublime experience. Distance is necessary and therefore an author (or an artist, eventually) should carefully obscure intended sublime elements in his works.<sup>30</sup> Referring back to the previously made point about the link between physical exertion and mental strain, there are certain concepts which include both types of exertion since these notions are incomprehensible on all levels, such as death and infinity. The nearest we could possibly come to understanding these concepts are thus, according to Burke, through the words affiliated with these concepts, as in the poetic excerpts above. It is therefore essential

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<sup>27</sup> Shaw (2006), 99 from Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1850), v. 556-72.

<sup>28</sup> Shaw (2006), 50.

<sup>29</sup> Shaw (2006), 8, from Wordsworth, *Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798*, 1789, v. 95-103.

<sup>30</sup> Burke (1958), 36-37; Shaw (2006), 54; The obscure is, in that way, inherent to sublimity.

that there is a certain level of ignorance. If the sublime marks ‘the limits of empirical understanding’<sup>31</sup>, the possibility of a sublime experience decreases with the amount of (specific) knowledge a person has.

I would however argue that visual depictions of such words or notions could be just as passion-instilling, maybe even more so, and Burke possibly would too, had he lived in a time of different artistic circumstances. Burke had simply never seen proper evidence of the other option, which I think is - however not in all instances - visual art bordering on the abstract or explicitly abstract art. These historiographical differences are crucial for our understanding of historic expressions. There are nonetheless universalities to be found in Burke’s *Enquiry*, meaning that these theories are still valuable today. Burke states, for example, that the most important passion when trying to accomplish sublimity is ‘astonishment’<sup>32</sup>, because it raises the mind above itself. Astonishment is felt when a scene is incomprehensible for our mind, when it exceeds everything one thought he knew or was familiar with, thus leading to a form of anxiety or even horror.<sup>33</sup> Considering all this, Burke’s claim - fear being the strongest passion - seems viable, for fear ‘robs the mind of all its powers’.<sup>34</sup> Vanessa L. Ryan stated that ‘Burke minimizes the role of the mind in the experience of the sublime as a natural force that is by its very definition beyond man's ability to control’<sup>35</sup>, which will prove to be perhaps even the most important notion we have taken from Burke’s *Enquiry*. Burke’s conclusion that everything terrible is (therefore) sublime<sup>36</sup> is however too strong, as we will come to witness ourselves at a further stage in this research. Nevertheless, Burke’s sublime theory has proven to stick: it has laid the foundations for all sublime theory and artistry to come.

Burke’s theory possibly spurred the creation of works with the purpose of inducing fear, and thus the sublime, in their beholders. Perfect possible catalysts for sublime evocation are, as we now know, nature’s force and also scenes of (biblical) terror. The research already done on these forms of the sublime, especially when it comes to Turner, is more than extensive. Well-known examples for sublime art are Caspar David Friedrich’s *Wanderer Above the Mist* (1818) (fig. 6) and Turner’s sea- and landscapes, such as *Stormy Sea with Blazing Wreck* (ca. 1835-1840) (fig. 7) and *The Eruption of the Souffrier Mountains, in the*

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<sup>31</sup> Shaw (2006), 51.

<sup>32</sup> Burke (1958), 53.

<sup>33</sup> Burke (1958), 53.

<sup>34</sup> Burke (1958), 53.

<sup>35</sup> Ryan (2001), 267.

<sup>36</sup> Burke (1958), 53.

*Island of St Vincent, at Midnight, on the 30<sup>th</sup> of April, 1812* (1815) (fig. 8).<sup>37</sup> In this short listing, especially Turner's paintings conform to the Burkean sublime, Turner eventually went on to paint extraordinary works which were not filled with darkness and horror. These works could nevertheless be deemed sublime - be it in their very own manner - because of their appeal to general notions of infinity, violence and bodily and mental exertion. *Light and Colour - The Morning after de Deluge - Goethe's Theory* (1843) (fig. 9) is possibly Turner's strongest genuflection to his yearning desire to understand the sublime in all of its merits. The swirling vortex of brilliant (sun)light after, as the title states, the deluge, a sublime theme in itself<sup>38</sup>, is positively overpowering to the senses and overwhelming to the eye.

The most predominant symptom of the Turner Syndrome is the exhausting attempt of all artists affected by the syndrome to 'try and situate themselves on the inside of the light'.<sup>39</sup> According to Zwagerman, Modern and Postmodern artists such as Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935), Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), Mark Rothko (1903-1970), and Barnett Newman (1905-1970) collectively fell victim to this very disease as well.

To Malevich, a black square formed the sublime. Kandinsky thought that art originates because of the 'cooperation of God and the artist'. Newman caught the sublime in his 'pure idea' and Rothko wanted his canvases to disperse a 'transparent light' from their place on the walls.<sup>40</sup>

Was it sunlight they had in mind? For the contemporary artist Olafur Eliasson (1967 - ), it definitely was when he created *The Weather Project* (fig. 10), a highly suggestive work, temporarily situated in the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern in London during the winter of 2003-2004. If we were to hypothetically place Turner's *Light and Colour* and Eliasson's *The Weather Project* next to each other, a strange similarity occurs. While in appearance, the most literal similarity is the radiating orb, the main similarity between the two works seems of a figurative, almost transcendental matter. There seems to be a shared desire or feeling. Both works could be deemed sublime, as I will clarify in the chapters to come, but do they share the same form of sublimity? In-between the creation of both works of art, rapid development of artistic practice, thought and discourse changed the (artistic) world. However, both Turner and Eliasson's artwork do indeed display a yellow 'globe of circular light', spreading an

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<sup>37</sup> Although we will soon discover these works to conform to different sublime categories.

<sup>38</sup> The deluge is a biblical event (described in *The Book of Genesis*) in which a devastating, God-sent flood poured down to purify the earth after the misdeeds of mankind. Noah's Ark and the creatures on it, both human and animal, were the only ones, according to the myth, to survive. After the flood, they set out to repopulate the Earth.

<sup>39</sup> Zwagerman (2015), 113.

<sup>40</sup> Own translation, Zwagerman (2015), 114.

(infamous) yellowish hue in their surroundings, like the sun. Is there an explanation for the likeness of these two works which are centuries apart, or is the similarity just a matter of pseudomorphosis<sup>41</sup> - pure coincidence? Can we even compare these works? In what sense can both works be understood as sublime? By diving further into the origins, development and present state of light, darkness and above all sublime theory, I hope to eventually be able to form an answer to the questions above, and more, but especially to the main question of this thesis: if we can agree that both *Light and Colour* and *The Weather Project* qualify as sublime works, what is the nature of this supposed similarity, both theoretically and physically, considering their very different respective historical contexts? I will thus research the larger question of the transformation of the sublime, using the works of both William Turner and Olafur Eliasson as case studies, representing their respective historical periods.

The tone of this introduction was set by two quotes or mottos. The first of which, 'The Sun is God', has by now been clarified. The second - a short verse - might however still remain somewhat of a mystery. I have chosen the lines of this enigmatic motto<sup>42</sup> as the supportive construct of this thesis.

Blind, I am  
 In the failure of language  
 Reaching towards you<sup>43</sup>

The first chapter will explore the origins of sublime painting, starting with analyses of the sublime by, among others, Burke, and elaborate on Turner's work. The hypothesis connecting the title of this chapter, 'Blind, I am', to the subject matter is the idea of blindness, both in the literal and the figurative sense. Whether it was from staring into direct sunlight too much or actually being blind, as mentioned earlier in this introduction, or in the allegorical sense - the darkness of the industrialisation and/or technical or intellectual abilities and open-mindedness - the path to sublime light was slowly revealed. The second chapter, '~~In the failure of language~~' marks a further step in our investigation. Again, the phrase can be taken both literally and figuratively. When language is, literally, no longer enough, as it used to be for Burke and earlier investigators of the sublime, what is the next step in expression? And secondly, in the wasteland of investigation, of trial and error and of sociological and artistic changes, how did the image surpass the text? More importantly, as the partial crossing out of the phrase in my opinion symbolizes: literal language seems to have been surpassed by

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<sup>41</sup> Rosenblum (1975), 10.

<sup>42</sup> Jennifer Wawrzinek, *Ambiguous Subjects: Dissolution and Metamorphosis in the Postmodern Sublime* (2008).

<sup>43</sup> Wawrzinek (2008), 12.

imagery, but this basically means 'the language of images'. Was, and can, language ever be excluded from the sublime debate? The third chapter, 'Reaching towards you', combined with the fourth chapter 'Contemporary Syndroms' marks the end of the path, or at least the stepping into the light sought by so many before. What is the contemporary influence of sublime art, and how does this new meaning relate to its origins? Are we still reaching towards someone in a spiritual sense through art, or is art and/or the artist reaching towards us so as to elevate us from our mundanity by sublimity?

# 1 Blind, I am

The sublime can - in summary - be characterized as an experience elevating the (individual) mind of the beholder. This elevation was, throughout the centuries, believed to have different causes. Longinus<sup>44</sup>, for example, thought the sublime could be found in that which excites and uplifts the spirits, filling the mind with ‘joy and exultation’<sup>45</sup>, Burke, as we have seen, found it in darkness and despair. Nevertheless it can be concluded, in my opinion, that a sublime experience transports the mind to a place where one sees everything more clearly: where one reaches an epiphany, as if someone has switched on the lights in the dark. Ever since, numerous philosophers took it upon themselves to investigate and explain the phenomenon that is the sublime. Their goal was and is to try to find what it is in the conceptual darkness before the sublime experience that opens our eyes. Although there have been and still are countless of theories considering the sublime, they all have one thing in common: in every possible way, the sublime is preoccupied with the notion of some degree of struggle<sup>46</sup>, whether it is struggling free from the darkness, or letting the darkness in to experience something new, it is never in its first instant pleasurable.

As mentioned in the introduction, during the eighteenth century, research into the nature of the sublime gained new popularity<sup>47</sup> through Burke’s famous treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757). To understand Burke’s point of view, on which I will thoroughly elaborate in the pages to come, it is important to note that the discourse on this had centred on poetics for a long time.<sup>48</sup> When (assumedly) Longinus wrote and published *Peri Hypsos*<sup>49</sup>, rhetoric was the main form of sublime evocation.<sup>50</sup> Political oratories and epic verses, both popular with audiences at a

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<sup>44</sup> Longinus, also known as Dionysius Longinus or Pseudo-Longinus is the name commonly associated with the Greek *Peri Hypsos* or, *On the Sublime*, as we know it. The work flourished during the first century A.D. By now, two thirds is lost. The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica (n.d).

<sup>45</sup> Longinus wrote about rhetoric instead of visual arts, proposing a couple of manners to evoke the sublime in one’s text: ‘*inventio* (the gathering of relevant subject matter), *dispositio* (the process of composition), *elecutio* (the use of rhetorical style to suit the occasion), *memoria* (the putting to memory of the various elements of discourse), and *actio* (the delivery or punctuation of speech’, Shaw (2006), 12-13; Boulton (1958), xlv.

<sup>46</sup> Shaw (2006), 4.

<sup>47</sup> Ryan (2001), 256.

<sup>48</sup> Sitwell (1941), 47-48.

<sup>49</sup> First century A.D.

<sup>50</sup> Boileau, in his translation, underplayed Longinus’s emphasis on the rhetorical nature of his sublime theory, Battersby (2007), 4-5; Shaw (2006), 4.

time when writing and reading were reserved for the intellectual elite, served to overpower the audience's rationality.<sup>51</sup> This tradition - the reliance on rhetorical force - endured for centuries. The visual arts, nonetheless, underwent remarkable developments as well and can therefore not be discounted as non-influential.<sup>52</sup> Think, for example, of the Italian Renaissance artists, and, closer to home, the Flemish Primitives. The developments in the visual arts, however, did not account for the sublime. Art-critics could of course speak of (a) sublime painting, but one could imagine the word being used as sort of a buzzword, as it had come to be (and still is) an indicator of general greatness as well. In the arts, sublimity, until the late eighteenth century, was still solely attributed to literature and especially to poetry. This is why Burke emphasized and outright favoured the status and supposed powers of the spoken or written word. Burke previously discussed metaphor of the difference between the drawn and the described tree explains this matter best. The visual arts were simply too literal, in his opinion. They left nothing to the imagination. The problem with the drawing would be that what is drawn is nothing more than a drawing, a direct imitation of reality, while 'the most lively and spirited verbal description [...] raises a very obscure and imperfect idea of such objects'<sup>53</sup> which could raise stronger emotions than the drawing ever could. Words were seen as the more common link between object and emotion. Therefore, Burke claims the 'imitative arts', a category to which painting can be assigned, are the weakest.<sup>54</sup> One thus has to keep in mind that Burke had the classics in mind. With Turner (and even more with later modern and postmodern artists) the context is very different.

When painters began to experiment with visual sublimity, biblical scenes, especially those from *The Book of Job*, Thomas Burnet's<sup>55</sup> religious writings and John Milton's *Paradise Lost*<sup>56</sup> proved to be prime subject matter.<sup>57</sup> However, the religious situation during the Romantic period was tense. The majority of the people on the European mainland and the British Isles turned against institutionalized forms of religion.<sup>58</sup> A prime example of the age's

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<sup>51</sup> Shaw (2006), 4-5.

<sup>52</sup> Sitwell (1941), 47-48.

<sup>53</sup> Shaw (2006), 50; Rosenblum (1975), 57.

<sup>54</sup> Burke (1958), 47.

<sup>55</sup> Thomas Burnet: 1635-1715, *Telluris Theoria Sacra* (1680-89), translated into the English *The Sacred Theory of the Earth* (1684-89). Shaw 2006, 5.

<sup>56</sup> John Milton (1608-74): *Paradise Lost* (1667). 'For Milton, the sublime is identified with the transformational power of language', Shaw 1006, 33.

<sup>57</sup> Boulton (1958), lix.

<sup>58</sup> Den Hartog Jager (2013), 55; 'The French Revolution advocated rebellion against all forms of social authority, with British propaganda labelling this attitude paradoxically as Catholic as well as atheist, attempting to discredit the ideological perspective and maintain the institutions of the monarchy and church. [...] [Despite

religious rebellion is Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason: Being an Investigation of True and Fabulous Theology* (published in three parts in 1794, 1795, and 1807). Paine proclaimed himself a 'Deist'. Deism, which became very popular then and which still has followers nowadays, could best be defined as:

knowledge of God based on the application of our reason on the designs/laws found throughout Nature. The designs presuppose a Designer. Deism is therefore a natural religion and is not a "revealed" religion. The natural religion/philosophy of Deism frees those who embrace it from the inconsistencies of superstition and the negativity of fear that are so strongly represented in all of the "revealed" religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam.<sup>59</sup>

These developments rendered biblical scenes less attractive as sources for artistic subject matter. Accordingly, the main goal of the period, as Hans den Hartog Jager described it, was: 'searching a form, a solution, for the existential dilemma of men, who had been abandoned by everything and everyone, by both God and his very own spirit'.<sup>60</sup> The solution seemed to be the combination of nature and art, both in poetry and painting. The name mentioned before, Thomas Burnet (1635-1715), belonged to a British philosopher and earth scientist who, together with his followers, created a new trend in sublime art. Although still heavily relying on 'the power of the word'<sup>61</sup> - in a symbolical, allegorical and religious sense - they turned to the vastness and grandness of nature. This inclination to turn towards nature was not entirely unique and unprecedented. Longinus had already hinted towards nature and its incredible features. The translator of Longinus's *On the Sublime*, Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux (commonly known as Boileau), translated this accordingly in 1674: '[s]o it is that, as by some physical law, we admire, not surely the little streams, transparent though they be, and useful too, but Nile, or Tiber, or Rhine, and far more than all, Ocean'.<sup>62</sup> A new form of sublimity arose.

Edmund Burke (1729-1797) can, for various reasons, be seen as the grandfather of this new natural sublime as it is most generally narrated. Having critically selected, read and dissected sections of work from his predecessors and contemporaries, plus being blessed with an extraordinary mind, Burke found himself in a unique position to propose a new theory of

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their efforts, they saw an] increasing prominence of divergent religious beliefs. Pantheism, for instance, flourished particularly in the Romantic period and arguably became one of its defining characteristics. Atheism was also increasingly defended, adhering to the empirical principles of the Age of Enlightenment', Cooper (2011-2012), 125.

<sup>59</sup> 'Welcome to Deism!' (n.d.).

<sup>60</sup> My own translation, Den Hartog Jager (2013), 55.

<sup>61</sup> Just as John Milton did, Shaw (2006), 33.

<sup>62</sup> Longinus quoted in Boulton (1958), xlvii.

the sublime. Burke was primarily interested in the nature of aesthetic experience, which, in his opinion, could be researched as if it were a scientific subject.<sup>63</sup> He agreed with David Hume (1711-1776), who wrote:

in the production and conduct of the passions, there is a certain regular mechanism, which is susceptible of as accurate a disquisition as the laws of motion, optics, hydrostatics or any other part of natural philosophy.<sup>64</sup>

To Burke, it were indeed certain physical qualities of objects which could cause a certain aesthetic experience.<sup>65</sup> Therefore, a sublime experience could probably be consciously induced too. Setting himself apart from various other thinkers of his time, for example Joseph Addison (1672-1719), who focused mainly on sight<sup>66</sup>, Burke thought the sublime involved all the human senses. His theory is therefore referred to as ‘sensationism’.<sup>67</sup> This sensationist approach led inevitably, although not willingly, to the inclusion of the visual arts in the sublime discourse, which laid out the first stepping stones to sublime theory as we now know it.

Burke wrote his (later) well-known *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* at the age of twenty-eight (in 1757). The treatise was generally (but not unanimously) well received.<sup>68</sup> According to Burke, there is a certain set of principles or factors which cause someone to respond to the sublime and its direct opposite: the beautiful.<sup>69</sup> There are, he posed, two ‘leading passions’<sup>70</sup> which needed to be distinguished when it come to his rigid division of the sublime and the beautiful.<sup>71</sup> The clarification of this boundary was his main reason for writing his treatise.<sup>72</sup> As described before, the sublime is dependent on (the strongest) emotion and the beautiful is dependent on matters completely different, such as aesthetic order and harmony. However, it seems that Burke did not actually describe emotions, or passions (to follow his terminology) as they are now understood. He

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<sup>63</sup> ‘In the Newtonian tradition Burke looks for – and finds – immutable laws governing human life and activities’, Boulton (1958), xxviii.

<sup>64</sup> Hume quoted in Boulton (1958), xxviii.

<sup>65</sup> Aesthetic experience for Burke lies in the ‘natural properties of things’, Boulton (1958), xxxv.

<sup>66</sup> Boulton (1958), xxxvi.

<sup>67</sup> Boulton (1958), xxxvi-xxxvii.

<sup>68</sup> Boulton (1958), lxxxii.

<sup>69</sup> ‘I believed that an attempt to range and methodize some of our most leading passions, would be a good preparative to such an enquiry as we are going to make in the ensuing discourse’, Burke (1958), p. 52; Boulton (1958), xxxix.

<sup>70</sup> Burke (1958), 52.

<sup>71</sup> Boulton (1958), xxxix.

<sup>72</sup> Burke (1958), 38; Boulton (1958), xxxix.

posed ‘self-preservation’ and ‘society’ as humankind’s two leading passions.<sup>73</sup> It is easier to understand these two terms as psychological factors, as James T. Boulton<sup>74</sup>, a professor who was specialised in eighteenth-century political writing, described them.<sup>75</sup> To explain Burke’s division between the sublime, the beautiful and the two passions belonging to them, I would like to discuss the second passion (‘society’) first. This passion, according to Burke, is directly linked to the beautiful and leads to ‘pleasure’:

[t]he second head to which the passions are referred with relation to their final cause, is society. There are two sorts of societies. The first is, the society of sex. The passion belonging to this is called love, and it contains a mixture of lust; its object is the beauty of women. The other is the great society with man and all other animals. The passion subservient to this is called likewise love, but it has no mixture of lust and its object is beauty; which is a name I shall apply to all such qualities in things as induce in us a sense of affection and tenderness, or some other passion the most nearly resembling these. The passion of love has its rise in positive pleasure; it is, like all things that grow out of pleasure, capable of being mixed with a mode of uneasiness, that is, when an idea of its object is excited in the mind with an idea at the same time of having irretrievably lost it. This mixed sense of pleasure I have not called *pain*, because it turns upon actual pleasure, and because it is both in its cause and in most of its effects of a nature altogether different.<sup>76</sup>

In case of self-preservation, which then obviously links to the sublime, the strongest emotion would be the diminution of pain<sup>77</sup>, which - eventually - causes ‘delight’:

[t]he passions which belong to self-preservation, turn on pain and danger; they are simply painful when their causes immediately affect us; they are delightful when we have an idea of pain and danger, without being actually in such circumstances; this delight I have not called pleasure, because it turns on pain, and because it is different enough from any idea of positive pleasure. Whatever excites this delight, I call *sublime*. The passions belonging to self-preservation are the strongest of all the passions.<sup>78</sup>

It should be duly noted that the sublime can only cause delight, when ‘the pain and danger [...] do not ‘press too nearly’ but involve us only through the effects ‘curiosity, sympathy or imitation’ could cause.<sup>79</sup> It may, then, be clear that ‘delight’ and ‘pleasure’ are not to be used freely when describing the sublime and the beautiful, at least in the definition of Burke.

So far, Burke had been firmly standing on the shoulders of John Locke (1632-1704), a empiricist philosopher and physician of the early Enlightenment who, among other things, proposed the theory that men has two states of being, namely pain or pleasure.<sup>80</sup> Burke,

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<sup>73</sup> Burke (1958), 38; Boulton (1958), xxxix.

<sup>74</sup> James T. Boulton (1924-2013).

<sup>75</sup> Boulton (1958), xxxix.

<sup>76</sup> Burke (1958), 51-52.

<sup>77</sup> Of both physical and mental nature, because these two forms of pain inspire and enhance each other. Burke (1958), 131-2.

<sup>78</sup> Burke (1958), 51.

<sup>79</sup> Boulton (1958), xl

<sup>80</sup> Boulton (1958), xli.

however, added another state of being, namely indifference.<sup>81</sup> ‘We are so wonderfully formed, that whilst we are creatures vehemently desirous of novelty, we are as strongly attached to habit and custom.’<sup>82</sup> This commonly known state of indifference arises from a ‘natural cessation of pleasure’ which dulls all emotional sensations.<sup>83</sup> This is not necessarily an unpleasant state of being and one can pass from indifference to pain or pleasure without the inclusion of both sensations:

pleasure is only pleasure as it is felt. The same may be said of pain, and with equal reason. I can never persuade myself that pleasure and pain are mere relations, which can only exist as they are contrasted: but I think I can discern clearly that there are positive pains and pleasures, which do not at all depend on each other.<sup>84</sup>

He does not think pain definitively excludes happiness and vice versa, or that they are completely co-dependent. Nevertheless, because the sublime experience supposedly depends on the strongest emotion, which, as we recall is (the diminution of) pain, the corresponding aesthetic experience should then be irrational and violent.<sup>85</sup> As Burke (in)famously<sup>86</sup> stated:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in any manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.<sup>87</sup>

In line with this statement, Burke claimed that ‘the nearer [tragedy] approaches reality, and the further it removes us from all idea of fiction, the more perfect is its power.’<sup>88</sup> Burke found Greek tragedy to be a prime example. Burke states that human beings - apparently inevitably - find delight in sympathizing with the distress of others: ‘I am convinced we have a degree of delight, and that no small one, in the real misfortunes and pains of others’.<sup>89</sup> Burke states furthermore that: ‘[t]he delight which arises from the modifications of pain, confesses the stock from whence it sprung, in its solid, strong and severe nature’.<sup>90</sup> Now keep in mind

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<sup>81</sup> ‘a state neither of pain nor pleasure’, Burke (1958), 32.

<sup>82</sup> Burke (1958), 103.

<sup>83</sup> Burke (1958), 37.

<sup>84</sup> Burke (1958), 33.

<sup>85</sup> Boulton (1958), xl.

<sup>86</sup> For this statement Burke had to endure plenty of criticism, because, according to his critics, his ideas compromised the morality of the sublime, especially when he used the example of public execution as ‘the most sublime and affecting tragedy’, Ryan (2001), 276.

<sup>87</sup> Burke (1958), 39.

<sup>88</sup> Burke quoted in Ryan (2001), 276.

<sup>89</sup> Burke (1958), 45.

<sup>90</sup> Burke (1958), 39.

Burke's idea of positive pain<sup>91</sup>, which means one is deprived of something but (eventually) derives some form of pleasure from this deprivation.<sup>92</sup> One could now observe that these two are somehow connected. The common denominator here is distance. One can only indirectly enjoy pain, or, to put it less delicately: one (normally) can only enjoy someone else's pain. Once pain affects someone personally, no pleasure can be derived from the experience. Danger should therefore, as mentioned earlier, never 'press too close'.<sup>93</sup> Nevertheless, the fundamental idea that thus underlies the theory in which pleasure is derived from, albeit 'positive', pain, is that one has to come as close to actual pain or danger as is conceivably possible (whether the danger is caused by all-encompassing darkness or dazzling light is for now irrelevant, for the level of 'pain' remains equal). A certain degree of distance caused by rationally (and physically) overcoming some form or instance of terror is therefore absolutely essential to the sublime experience, but the right balance in the arts is hard to find.

Distance does not only lie in realising that you are 'just' looking at a painting or reading poetry, which is a rational distance. Nor does it lie in literal, and therefore physical distance. It starts at a more fundamental artistic level: obscurity. One can, both in words and in painting, obscure just enough but just as easily also obscure too much. Burke claimed that, because reading requires imagination, the written or spoken word was superior to painting, but when painters began to experiment with the depiction of the unknown, the unimaginable, suggestion and the abstract, the possible sublime content of their works could no longer be ignored. Paired with both the newfound admiration of nature and the concept of sensationism, the visual arts were thus inevitably, but probably involuntarily included in the sublime discourse. Since the dawn of the Romantic period, artists have ventured (and venture) into nature to try to capture and depict its awe-inspiring grandeur. They have translated their actual, personal, experiences and findings into paint on their canvases. One of the most well-known sublime artists conforming to this nature-trend was the German Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840). His painting *The Wanderer above the Mists* (fig. 6) is one of sublime theory's most celebrated works. Friedrich aimed to make silence speak. His audience was provided help by the means of a 'Rückenfigure', which served as an introductory motif. It is a figure seen from behind, which acts as an enhancer of the sublime and as a form of support.<sup>94</sup> The 'Rückenfigure' should be seen as a stand-in for the spectator: the figure helps to imagine

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<sup>91</sup> Burke (1958), 37.

<sup>92</sup> Burke (1958), 36.

<sup>93</sup> Burke quoted in Ryan (2001), 276.

<sup>94</sup> Den Hartog Jager (2013), 59-60.

oneself standing at the edge of the depicted abyss. Friedrich's sublime mountain range formed the perfect epitome of the ultimately Romantic aim to - in a controlled manner - depict uncontrollability, but in this case especially the inconceivable vastness of nature is depicted.<sup>95</sup> One can only guess but still hardly fathom the depth of the precipice and the wilderness lying at its bottom. There are no repoussoirs, which were traditionally used to confine the image to pleasurable measures. Now, the emptiness can potentially just flow unrestrictedly. As far as the eye can see, everything is unknowable and therefore possibly dangerous.

Hereby, however, I do not want to imply that a painting depicting an abyss, or an open sea, or any other form of natural grandeur, which is too vast in size for the human eye and mind to comprehend, is sublime. The same goes for the terror-instilling subjects Burke offered as possible instigators of the sublime, such as death, pain or darkness. The artistic evocation of the sublime is therefore a slippery slope. As an example I would like to discuss a work by the English landscape painter John Martin (1789-1854). His form of sublime could also be described as sublime by the book, meaning that basically all of Burke's instructions are, theoretically, carefully taken into consideration. However, *The Great Days of His Wrath* (1851-3) (fig. 11) visibly lacks intensity. This has one 'simple' explanation. The painting, though depicting (possible) sublime subjects such as listed above, lacks Burke's absolute shtick: the creation of the perfect sublime concoction calls for carefully adding, obscuring, embedding and then abandoning (painterly) details. As Burke states: '[t]o make any thing [sic.] very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary. When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes'.<sup>96</sup> Therefore, Martin's painting remains no more than an - however skilfully executed - illustration after a biblical narrative, instead of a conveyor of the sublime. No one, according to Burke's literary heart, has understood the need for obscurity better than John Milton, of whose *Paradise Lost* he quoted a passage which allows his message to come across, since 'all is dark, uncertain, confused, terrible and sublime to the last degree'<sup>97</sup>:

The other shape,  
If shape it might be called that shape had none  
Distinguishable, in member, joint, or limb;  
Or substance might be called that shadow seemed,  
For each seemed either; black he stood as night;  
Fierce as ten furies; terrible as hell;  
And shook a deadly dart. What seemed his head

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<sup>95</sup> Den Hartog Jager (2013), 56.

<sup>96</sup> Burke (1958), 59.

<sup>97</sup> Burke (1958), 59.

The likeness of a kingly crown had on.<sup>98</sup>

In painting around the time of Burke's writing, this kind of obscurity was not held as an aesthetic ideal. Later, in reaction to such new developments, some took the idea of the sublime and tried to pour it in a commercial mould.

The Biedermeier period, stretching from 1815-1845 and influencing furniture design, literature and painting in mainly Germany and Austria<sup>99</sup>, is the most extreme example of this last method. In their paintings, artists belonging to the Biedermeier movement created a form of domesticated sublime<sup>100</sup>, to soften the blows of the sublime for the delicate bourgeoisie.<sup>101</sup> Albert Boime, author of *Art in an Age of Civil Struggle 1848-1871*, explains that '[b]y framing the landscape with the residential lookout, the Biedermeier artist reduced the fearful potential and complexities of the sublime'.<sup>102</sup> Its paramount, or at the least one of the clearest examples of this trend is the work *Morning Hour* by Moritz von Schwind (fig. 12). This painting shows a prime sublime subject: the 'Zugspitze', Germany's highest Alp.<sup>103</sup> However, the frame of the room, coherently furnished in Biedermeier-style, immensely softens the sublime effect of the mountain. The 'Rückenfigure', so typical and effective for Friedrich's sublime paintings, is a girl in a frilly dress who, in the safe surroundings of her room, is completely shielded from all actual impact. This again stultifies the sublime.<sup>104</sup> Of course this is a rather extreme example of sublime domestication. Another less extreme but therefore possibly more clarifying example is *Ansicht des Dachsteins mit dem Hallstättersee von der Hüttenneckalpe bei Ischl* (1838) by the Austrian painter Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller (1793-1865) (fig. 13). The majestic mountain range's sublimity is fatally numbed by the precisely painted domestic scene in the foreground.

It might by now be clear that only a few in this period of time took it upon themselves to dive deeper into the possibilities of the obscure and thus of the sublime in the visual arts. There was one painter especially, whom I have previously discussed shortly, who defied the Academy's classicist ideals on order to reach a truly sublime expression. His name was Joseph Mallord William Turner.

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<sup>98</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book II, v. 666-673 quoted in: Burke (1958), 59.

<sup>99</sup> Coake (2003), 9.

<sup>100</sup> Cusack (2008), 125.

<sup>101</sup> Boime (2007), 492.

<sup>102</sup> Boime (2007), 492.

<sup>103</sup> Boime (2007), 493.

<sup>104</sup> Boime (2007), 493.

## The mind's eye

Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851), William Turner for short, not only defied the Academy (be it to a certain extent)<sup>105</sup>, but also managed to give new meaning to the concept of the sublime. Like Friedrich, he distilled nature's most primordial qualities: light, energy, elemental matter and atmosphere.<sup>106</sup> As we have already seen earlier, there is a difference between the forms of sublimity these two painters chose to explore of which notion has to be taken. Turner, in his sublime enquiries, preferred painting danger, or terror, in a rather Burkenian fashion. Friedrich, however, chose to (primarily) depict the unimaginable. Nonetheless, both introduced new elements to sublime painting, such as unease, unmanageability and, in Turner's case, danger. This last element has a twofold nature. First, it was introduced in paintings to make them mentally challenging yet alluring: to possibly evoke a sublime experience. Secondly, the addition of danger as a means of evoking the sublime notably meant changes in painterly styles.

The inclusion of (apparent) danger caused a merging of form and content: the paint had to speak for itself, because naturalistic or realistic depictions naturally eliminated obscurity.<sup>107</sup> This called for another manner of handling paint and appliances. Of Turner, for example, it is known that he did not only use the heads of his brushes to paint, but also the hard, wooden tips. It is also said that he used his fingers, nails and other untraditional appliances and methods, such as slapping the paint onto the canvas, to create his works.<sup>108</sup> Thus gradually becoming a master in obscuring painterly details, Turner seems Burke's ideal follower, that is, in the visual manifestation of the sublime. Others, such as Martin, of which I spoke earlier, did not exactly qualify for this position. If we, for example, were to compare John Martin's *The Great Day of His Wrath* (1850) (fig. 11) to a same kind of 'apocalyptic fantasy'<sup>109</sup> by Turner painted a few years earlier, *Shade and Darkness - the Evening of the Deluge* (1843) (fig. 14), the difference is, as they say, clear as day. Martin increased the drama of the scene by adding some 'sensational effects'<sup>110</sup>, such as dying people and

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<sup>105</sup> He may have artistically defied the Academy, but stayed a lifelong member and was even appointed professor there at one point in his life. Turner owned everything he had to the Academy.

<sup>106</sup> Rosenblum (1975), 12, 21; Den Hartog Jager (2013), 55.

<sup>107</sup> Den Hartog Jager (2013), 57-8; Both spectator and artists are rendered passive by the sublime, it renders reasoning impossible, Battersby (2007), 7, 24.

<sup>108</sup> Freeman (2014); Hamilton (2007), 215; Shanes (2012), 203.

<sup>109</sup> Benenson and Voyce (n.d.).

<sup>110</sup> 'The Great Day of His Wrath' (n.d.).

lightning bolts and did so with great skill. Turner's painting, although similarly apocalyptic, has a very different style and atmosphere. The details which could account for sublimity in Turner's painting are depicted in a subtle manner: they are obscured. The storm is a swirling and all-engulfing, dynamic mass instead of consisting of independent clouds. This illusion is created by Turner's use of light and apparently hasty brushwork. Martin's (general) clarity even expands to the clouds: it is one of the features in which his work lacks Turner's intensity. The experience of both paintings is therefore very different. Turner functioned as an example to future painters of the 'apocalyptic sublime'<sup>111</sup>, such as Martin, but his skill simply remained unrivalled. During the course of his career, Turner turned to 'abstract violence', and a new artistic ideal was realised: man was both confronted as well as elevated by his futility in the face of nature.<sup>112</sup>

This last point can probably not be clarified any more than by shedding a little light on Turner's most enthusiastic follower and his artistic musings. Turner had, especially in the beginning of his career, one great supporter, critic and benefiter to wit. This person had, throughout his further career, defended him against the, according to this critic, narrow-minded Academics. Of Turner's paintings, this man once spoke: '[they] move and mingle among the pale stars, and rise up into the brightness of the illimitable heaven, whose soft, and blue eye gazes down into the deep waters of the sea for ever'.<sup>113</sup> It was this John Ruskin (1819-1900), who, in a perfect, vivid manner described the difference between a harmonious and orderly - according to Burke possibly beautiful - painting, and a sublime (Turnerian) one.

This distinction has its starting point in the very beginning of the making of a work of art. According to Ruskin, to be able to make a distinction between two paintings, one must first understand what greatness is about. There is, said Ruskin, a distinction between the 'special excellences' of a painter and the 'general excellences' of the common man.<sup>114</sup> The difference between these respective excellences and of art in general, is language. 'Painting, or art generally, as such, with all its technicalities, difficulties, and particular ends, is nothing but a noble and expressive language, invaluable as the vehicle of thought, but by itself nothing', claimed Ruskin. Every man (or woman) can learn how to paint; it is the application and eventual outcome of such skill that determines one's excellence.<sup>115</sup> Ruskin further distinguished between 'language' and 'thought', language in painting being the execution of

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<sup>111</sup> 'The Deluge' (n.d.).

<sup>112</sup> Den Hartog Jager (2013), 59-60.

<sup>113</sup> Hoare (2014).

<sup>114</sup> Ruskin (1906), 8.

<sup>115</sup> Ruskin (1906), 8.

lines, naturalism and realism, and thought being the force and emotion behind lines and representation. Excellence in the execution of ‘thought’ is what makes a painter a ‘Man of the Mind’ instead of only an imitator.<sup>116</sup> To clarify this distinction, Ruskin elaborates on *The Old Shepherd’s Chief Mourner* (1837) (fig. 15), by Edwin Henry Landseer (1802-1873).

Here the exquisite execution of the glossy and crisp hair of the dog, the bright, sharp touching of the green bough beside it, the clear painting of the wood of the coffin and the folds of the blanket, are language - language clear and expressive in the highest degree. But the close pressure of the dog’s breast against the wood, the convulsive clinging of the paws, which has dragged the blankets off the trestle, the total powerlessness of the head laid, close and motionless, upon its folds, the fixed and tearful fall of the eye in its utter hopelessness, the rigidity of repose which marks that there has been no motion nor change in the trance of agony since the last blow was struck on the coffin-lid, the spectacles marking the place where the Bible was closed, indicating how lonely has been the life, how unwatched the departure, of him who is now laid solitary in his sleep; - these are all thoughts by which the picture is separated at once from hundreds of equal merit.<sup>117</sup>

Language and thought are more than often heavily dependent on each other. To achieve the best painting, however, it must be based on thoughts which must be the least dependent on language as possible. It is the underlying thought which touches us, the suggestion, the absence of clarity, and immediate satisfaction. As Burke wrote:

It is one thing to make an idea clear, and another to make it *affecting* to the imagination. It is our ignorance of things that causes all our admiration, and chiefly excites our passions. Knowledge and acquaintance make the most striking causes affect but little. A clear idea is therefore another name for a little idea.<sup>118</sup>

This statement profoundly attacks the love of clarity cherished by so many of Turner’s contemporaries. Considering all this, it appears to be the mind’s eye, instead of the physical eye, which acts as the main contributor to the sublime experience.

### Blinded by the light or going towards it?

Trailing back to the crux of this investigation, we must keep in mind the most quoted passage in investigations about the sublime: ‘God said, Let there be Light, and there was Light’.<sup>119</sup> This quote suggests, according to Boulton, the ‘unlimited power of the creator’.<sup>120</sup> For Turner, this must have been an ultimate truth, explaining his absolute fascination by light and,

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<sup>116</sup> Ruskin (1906), 9-10.

<sup>117</sup> Ruskin (1906), 9.

<sup>118</sup> Burke (1958), 60, 61, 63.

<sup>119</sup> Boulton (1958), liv.

<sup>120</sup> Boulton (1958), liv.

moreover, the sun, or at the least: radiating or emanating, light or dark celestial spheres or circular vortexes. Several questions should be pondered when it comes to Turner's use and creation of light: was he (physically and/or metaphorically) blinded by it, lost in a search he only completed - apparently - just in time, on his deathbed? Were the critics right, does his flawed sight explain his (over)use of yellow hues? Or, most importantly, was he possibly onto something and further in his investigations than anyone - except maybe for Ruskin - could at the time apprehend and appreciate? To further investigate these notions a concise comparative study might be in place. I shall discuss a couple of Turner's works and provide some comparisons to other paintings too.

A quick overview of Turner's artistic oeuvre clarifies that the artist oftentimes used, but maybe more so frequently rejected darkness as one of Burke's most definite qualifications for sublime merit. Note that Turner's most important quality was his quality to obscure. Obscuring cannot only be done by effective darkness, but also by dazzling (back)light. Light, reflection and other natural, optically dematerializing phenomena such as rain and fog can obviously add to the level of obscurity. A large number of his works show the sublime qualities of light. Furthermore, 'Turner was a master colourist and was captivated by light and colour'.<sup>121</sup> The symbolical significance of (his use of) colour will be elaborated on in the next chapter. For now, it is important to study his use of them:

Turner seeks to capture on canvas the luminosity of the most complex scenes - light as reflected from water, or seen through rain, steam or fog. [...] among other techniques, he utilizes the difference between additive and subtractive mixing of colors. In many paintings, Turner strategically places small dots of colors so the additive mixture would gain brilliance.<sup>122</sup>

These skills developed throughout his career. Turner has left us with beautiful examples of his trials and errors. An example is *Colour Beginning* (1820) (fig. 16), one in a series of his many explorations of light and colour. In this watercolour work, we can see the artist experimenting with a gradation of blue and yellow hues.

While experimenting, his works became ever more abstract in fashion, with light and colour replacing all solid matter and form. This process led to critiques about Turner eyesight<sup>123</sup>: the majority of the critics could not appreciate his radiating paintings, which moreover became gradually more abstract throughout his career. They especially disliked

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<sup>121</sup> Douma (2006).

<sup>122</sup> Douma (2006).

<sup>123</sup> Turner's eyesight was indeed flawed. He suffered from cataracts and might therefore have had trouble with all colours in the yellow spectrum. Nevertheless, later in his life he did still produce wonderful works. Dorment (2014).

paintings which were ‘too yellow’, such as *Rome from Monte Mario* (1820) and *Going to the Ball (San Martino)* (exhibited 1846) (fig. 17-18). More points of criticism Turner had to endure were, for example, the snappy ‘[t]he utter want of capacity to draw a distinct outline with the force and fullness of this artist’s eye for colour is astonishing’<sup>124</sup> and the lofty phrase by the then famous English art-critic William Hazlitt (1778-1830): ‘all is without form [...] pictures of nothing, and very like’.<sup>125</sup> Nevertheless, the fascinating matter of Turner’s pictorial development is indeed the manner in which he turned from rather traditional landscape scenes to ‘abstraction,’<sup>126</sup> especially considering his for this time exceptional use of light and colour.

The overwhelming natural forces depicted on *Snow Storm: Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps* (exhibited 1812) (fig. 19) are illuminated by an almost perfectly circular celestial sphere. One could argue about whether it is the sun or the moon, but the most important matter is its shape: it is by the book, as one would regularly paint either the moon or the sun when asked. The same sort of sun we can find in countless paintings before, during and after Turner’s age, by Turner himself and many others. This circular sun (or moon) and its evolution form the exact epitome of both Burke’s drawn and described tree and Ruskin’s difference between language and thought as discussed earlier in this chapter: the circular sun, drawn or painted, is much less impressive than an atmospherically lyrical description, or the real experience, of course, could ever be. However, this particular ‘solar orb packs such force that it can cut through the grandest meteorological event the earth can churn up’.<sup>127</sup> Although distinctly circular, this was therefore not a regular depiction of the sun as it was formerly known. In this painting already, but throughout his career, Turner kept blurring the boundaries to achieve the creation of the perfect atmosphere in paint. Eventually, he found it in the midst of his career. His painting *Regulus* (1828, reworked in 1837) (fig. 20) shows how no form of strict delineation would from now on limit the power of the sun in his works:

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<sup>124</sup> William Hazlitt quoted in Smart (2014).

<sup>125</sup> Hazlitt spoke these (in)famous words about Turner’s *Snow Storm: Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps* (fig. 19), Smart (2014). It is important to note here, that at the foundation of these critiques is an immemorial paragone that can be traced back to the Italian Renaissance, where artists and art-critics argued over what was more important in painting: *disegno* (design) or *colore* (colour). Supporters of *disegno*, the Florentines, favoured line and clarity over the Venetian preference for *colore*, which could obscure clear lines. The eighteenth-century supporters of the Academy, as were Turner’s critics, were heirs of the *disegno*-preference, while Turner seems to have followed the *colore*-enthusiasts.

<sup>126</sup> This term, of course, can only be used in hindsight.

<sup>127</sup> Herbert (2011), 456.

It is as if the has simply burned all drawing away<sup>128</sup>, as if these intense whites and yellows reach a critical mass of high saturation and then burst forth to spatter bits of light pigment across the rest of the picture. Compositionally, everything cowers back from the blast, vacating the center [sic.].<sup>129</sup>

## The great chain of being

The desire to capture nature's light might have stemmed from a Romantic philosophical current which might be said have adhered to sublime theory as well:

[t]wo of Romanticism's ascendant themes were the hope for a transcendental death - the presumed destiny of the artist of genius and the belief that all things in the natural world, both organic and inorganic, were linked in a rationally designed, hierarchal order: a chain of being.<sup>130</sup>

Susan Sidlauskas, who wrote an article about Turner's relation to this 'chain of being', finds his *Interior at Petworth*<sup>131</sup> (ca. 1837) (fig. 21) to be a prime example of Turner's apparent adherence to the theory. About the painting, she writes: '[t]hrough symbol and association, the painting represents the artist's hope that the transformation of nature through art was the means to immortality'.<sup>132</sup> The room serves as a protagonist in its own right because of the structural, material framework. Turner's use of light, however, emphasizes, dematerializes and deforms it and simultaneously shows not only the power of light, but also the desolateness of the room, which is believed to symbolize Turner's grief over the passing away of the former owner of Petworth, a dear friend of his.<sup>133</sup> The light is infinite, immortal, filling, fleeting and all-encompassing at the same time. 'Turner framed an allegory about art, in which a naturalistic model of the world's creation was a metaphor for the transformative powers, and ultimate triumph, of the artistic imagination'.<sup>134</sup> To do so, he deliberately made use of an eighteenth-century aesthetic principle called 'associationism', which means that by using 'natural effects' - such as light - a scene could 'inspire a sequence of historical or emotional connections in the observer's mind'.<sup>135</sup> He used both clarity and obscurity as aesthetic enhancements. Upon studying *Interior at Petworth*, Turner's use of light

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<sup>128</sup> Herbert must be referring to the background of this painting; to the greater atmosphere, for in the foreground, we can still, and easily, perceive living creatures.

<sup>129</sup> Herbert (2011), 459.

<sup>130</sup> Sidlauskas (1993), 59.

<sup>131</sup> This is the title Sidlauskas continually uses: the Tate uses the full title: *Interior of a Great House: The Drawing Room, East Cowes Castle*.

<sup>132</sup> Sidlauskas (1993), 59.

<sup>133</sup> Sidlauskas (1993), 59.

<sup>134</sup> Sidlauskas (1993), 59.

<sup>135</sup> Sidlauskas (1993), 59.

immediately captures the eye and the mind. According to Sidlauskas, the process of creating such a display of light on a canvas is ‘the quintessential Turnerian paradox’: ‘it took layers and layers of paint and unique skill to create this evanescent but dissolving, illuminated effect<sup>136</sup>, which is a creation powerful enough to transform ‘the raw material of life’.<sup>137</sup> Turner’s (use of) pigment replaces this raw material: it becomes matter itself<sup>138</sup> in a fervent play of light and colour. His struggle with the pigment could also be said to symbolize his struggle with the (depiction of) natural elements.<sup>139</sup>

As mentioned before, Turner’s evanescent vortexes take on a,beit blurred, round shape, like the sun: his God. This is the link, I presume, to the great chain of being. All these ideas - the chain, associationism, the Turnerian paradox - seem to be combined in four extraordinary predominantly circular works<sup>140</sup> created near the end of Turner’s life and career. These works are: *The Angel Standing in the Sun* (exhibited 1846), its counterpart *Undine Giving the Ring to Masaniello, Fisherman of Naples* (exhibited 1846), *Shade and Darkness - the Evening of the Deluge* (exhibited 1843) and the other half of the pair called ‘the Deluge Series’: *Light and Colour (Goethe’s Theory) - the Morning after the Deluge, Moses Writing the Book of Genesis* (exhibited 1843) (fig. 22-23-14-9). *The Angel Standing in the Sun* was exhibited a couple of years after *Shade and Darkness* and *Light and Colour*. However, since the actual dates of the making of these four works is actually unknown, they could have been created shortly after each other, or maybe even simultaneously. Both in theme and size, the paintings coincide. Furthermore, what is depicted is very similar in its nature, but the manner in which the respective works are created is also very alike. Turner neared the end of his life and was in a bad physical shape. His eyes were deteriorating; he was diabetic and depressed.<sup>141</sup> These paintings might thus even be somewhat autobiographical.

First, *The Angel* depicts the appearance of the Archangel Michael on the Day of Judgement in the middle of a scene filled with death and despair. The painting, and its themes, may be a reflection on the personal fears Turner conquered knowing that his end was near.<sup>142</sup> In a swirling vortex, which is coloured in shades of white and blue for the largest part,

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<sup>136</sup> Sidlauskas (1993), 59.

<sup>137</sup> Sidlauskas (1993), 62.

<sup>138</sup> Sidlauskas (1993), 63.

<sup>139</sup> Hoekstra (2015), 15.

<sup>140</sup> The pair *Shade and Darkness* and *Light and Colour* are said to be Turner’s ‘most inspired statements of the natural vortex’, ‘Shade and Darkness’ (n.d.).

<sup>141</sup> Dorment (2014).

<sup>142</sup> ‘The Angel’ (n.d.).

but dominated by yellow tones, Michael stands invincible. It is a complex piece. James D. Herbert, in his article ‘Turner’s Uncertain Angel’, described it thusly:

the painting does not facilitate any easy translation of what it does into written language. This impasse is far from an accidental characteristics of *The Angel Standing in the Sun* [...] Rather, Turner programmatically disfigured his picture to render it full of uncertainty.<sup>143</sup>

Herbert further argues that this uncertainty may stem from the arduous religious situation during the eighteenth century.<sup>144</sup> In the case of *The Angel*, and *Undine*, ‘[t]he frustration of clear meaning’ begins with excess.<sup>145</sup> *Undine* is a very complex allegorical work as well. Herbert even calls it a ‘visual cacophony’ in which fable, revolution and scripture are mixed together.<sup>146</sup> This is a very interesting theory I gladly encourage my reader to research, but which would be off-topic for me to discuss. What both paintings however have in common - a quality they also share with the Deluge Series - is that everything is drawn together ‘only by a similar central glow’.<sup>147</sup> Taking into account Turner’s possible adherence to the theory of the great chain and the fact that he might have been plagued by a deep religious uncertainty caused by the times he lived in, the theme and allegorical vagueness of the four paintings could be explained thusly. It might, in my opinion, be argued that this programmatic uncertainty, which in this context would be the notions of the unimaginable and the unspeakable, can also be detected in the other works by Turner (and Friedrich) mentioned above.

I would like to focus on this excess in particular: that of colour, light and obscurity. As mentioned above, I think the linguistic uncertainty can be found in all these four paintings. According to the experts at the Tate, both *The Angel* and *Undine* ‘represent spiritual power or transformation through a burst of brilliant light’.<sup>148</sup> In the case of *Shade and Darkness* and *Light and Colour*, this seems to be true too. In *Shade and Darkness*, the burst of light indeed represents both spiritual power and transformation. The flash of light could both symbolize the religious character of the deluge and the eventual, literally and figuratively, bright outcome. At the same time, it seems apocalyptic, like an explosion, and therefore rather frightening. Yet, the light furthermore seems to represent that one moment in a reality of chaos in which everything seems to fall still and hold its breath: the moment of transformation

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<sup>143</sup> Herbert (2011), 439.

<sup>144</sup> Herbert (2011), 439.

<sup>145</sup> Herbert (2011), 439.

<sup>146</sup> Herbert (2011), 441-2.

<sup>147</sup> Herbert (2011), 442.

<sup>148</sup> ‘Undine Giving the Ring’ (n.d.).

between the old and the new situation. Applying these ideas to *Light and Colour*, the source of spiritual power is evident: Moses writes down his ten commands in a new enlightened world of, indeed, transformation. Turner himself however, lightened the religious burden of the painting by stating that the transformation of nature taking place in the painting is caused by the ‘returning sun’<sup>149</sup>, emphasizing that man is subjected ultimately to nature’s (and therefore possibly God’s) will.

According to Ruskin, ‘the raison d’être of Turner’s art [...] results from this ultimately irresolvable tension between the imperative to show all and the need to recognize an excess, natural and divine, beyond art’.<sup>150</sup> Showing the sublime light of the sun, getting inside this light<sup>151</sup>, above all, was Turner’s ultimate challenge<sup>152</sup>, but no matter how close he got to the depiction of actual light, he needed the spectator’s imagination<sup>153</sup> - and maybe even more than that - to elevate his work to the level of the sublime. Ultimately, Turner painted to depict the truth.<sup>154</sup> Both literal language, which was surpassed in popularity by painting as a vehicle for the sublime in the course of artistic development<sup>155</sup>, and linguistic clarity in painting, did not seem sufficient to achieve that goal.

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<sup>149</sup> ‘Light and Colour’ (n.d.).

<sup>150</sup> Herbert (2011), 448.

<sup>151</sup> Zwagerman (2015), 113.

<sup>152</sup> Herbert (2011), 456, 459.

<sup>153</sup> Herbert (2011), 461.

<sup>154</sup> Lieverloo (2015), 98.

<sup>155</sup> This matter will be discussed more elaborately in second and third chapters, where I discuss the surpassing of painting as new preferred artistic vehicles for sublime evocation.

## 2. ~~In the failure of language~~

‘The limits of my language mean the limits of my world’ – Ludwig Wittgenstein<sup>156</sup>

You reach for the lightest light - and it seems as if you are carrying the darkest imaginable weight. Waiting eagerly for the promised silence, you strive for the ultimate appearance of the invisible and the ineffable.<sup>157</sup>

What is the attraction of a glowing celestial sphere? Is it just the common and everlasting fascination we feel for the burning star at the centre of our solar system allowing us to live? That is sublime subject matter in itself. But is it really that simple, or is there more to it? When language, in any form, fails, what else grabs our attention? The notion of language is a prime matter of concern in this chapter. Once again I quote Ruskin, as I did in the previous chapter, from his first version of *Modern Painters* (1834: ‘[p]ainting, or art generally, as such, with all its technicalities, difficulties, and particular ends, is nothing but a noble and expressive language, invaluable as the vehicle of thought, but by itself nothing’.<sup>158</sup> This chapter is titled as it is because of the issue Ruskin poses here: if painting can be seen as an indispensable form of language, what exactly is the communicative aspect of visual art and how does it communicate? Or, more precisely, how does an audience experience a painting’s silent communication? In the previous chapter we saw how Burke and others centred their theories on the power of words of actual, literal language. Turner provided us with a different language of thought, imagery, and above all: light and colour. Burke’s language might actually fall short compared to Turner’s nearly abstract imagery of light and colour. However, in the decades to come, the artistic world would again change significantly. This begs the question, as this chapter will discuss, what happened to (the reception of) Turner’s imagery, and whether or not it is consequently justified to ignore Burke’s linguistic theories?

### The Romantic decline

I think that when people look at art, they want to feel something, or to be given food for thought. Whether this comes from an artist’s personal touch, the feeling of being overwhelmed by beauty or stunned by something shocking does not matter. Whether it is the

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<sup>156</sup> Wittgenstein (2015), 86.

<sup>157</sup> Own translation, Zwagerman (2015), 350.

<sup>158</sup> Ruskin (1906), 8.

sensation of the tiny hairs on your arms and neck standing on end, goose bumps, tears, laughter, or in one way or another feeling connected to the piece or its creator, it all comes down to one thing: emotion. The art created during the romantic period had exactly that as its primary calling: creating an emotional response. The sublime was the highest goal. However, as it is common in world history, artistic and philosophical currents come and go and when one flame loses only a little brightness, people will soon try to light another. When Romantic language seemed to fail, new imagery was found in the visual arts to confer maybe most or at least some of the same values and emotions. It is, however, certain that the sublime did not go extinct. It can nonetheless be argued that it disappeared from the mainstage for a while. This is why, when walking into the Turbine Hall in 2004, Den Hartog Jager was surprised and needed to adapt himself to the possibility of having stumbled upon a case of sublime art in the twenty-first century<sup>159</sup>, for the truly Romantic sublime was something he had not seen or been able to see in a long time.

Den Hartog Jager reflected upon his discovery and concluded that Eliasson's work bared a resemblance to famous works by Rothko and Newman.<sup>160</sup> This resemblance was due to colour, he thought. More specifically, I would like to add, it was the *use* of colour and the size of the works that must have made Den Hartog Jager link the works of these artists together. Another resemblance I find between the works of these artists is best described by Zwagerman in his collection of essays *De stilte van het licht* ('The Silence of Light' 2013). Discussing a Rothko exhibition, Zwagerman reflects upon the unspoken understanding between spectator and work of art. He writes: 'You are under the illusion that you have a personal understanding with Rothko's works of art'.<sup>161</sup> Furthermore, Den Hartog Jager confesses that it was more likely that he saw the resemblance because, in the world of art history, the term sublime is as inseparable from Burke as it is from Newman. With strong associations like these, it is important to discover, for this thesis, what lived in-between Burke's treatise (1757) and Newman's essay 'The Sublime Is Now' (1948).

It is relevant, at first, to study the reasons for the decline of the sublime. As elaborated on in the previous chapter and the introduction, the object-centred thinking of the period of the Enlightenment precluded and to a certain degree accompanied the Romantic emphasis on the subject. Man and especially his relationship with nature became the most important artistic and philosophical subject, even replacing traditional institutionalized religion. The

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<sup>159</sup> Den Hartog Jager (2013), 4.

<sup>160</sup> Den Hartog Jager (2013), 9-10.

<sup>161</sup> Own translation, Zwagerman (2015), 93.

newfound inseparability of men and nature together with the mixing of religious and secular subject matter, formed the basis for the inevitable rise of the sublime in (landscape) painting.<sup>162</sup> Nevertheless, no matter how influential the sublime was, its popularity eventually meant its downfall. Around 1770 already, the general public was getting used to sublime vistas on paintings: fear was replaced by aesthetic pleasure and sublime tourism began.<sup>163</sup> Jean-Baptiste Dubos (1670-1742), a French author, probably described the situation best in his *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture* (1719): the difference between reality and art is that while art induces a passion similar to that excited by the object in real life, the art-experience is less violent and does not last as long.<sup>164</sup>

Nonetheless, the sublime had not already gone extinct before Turner was even born, but the domestication of the sublime, discussed in the previous chapter, was already creeping in. Sublime theory had, before Turner started painting, already undergone a tremendous development and Turner used the fruits of these labours freely and consciously. However, he needed and therefore created a new imagery that would prove to be the stepping stone for future artists. It was probably because of this that Turner chose to try and represent the unrepresentable, the untouchable and the incomprehensible.<sup>165</sup> He chose to represent the sun: the sun as (his) God.<sup>166</sup>

In the course of the eighteenth, nineteenth, twentieth, and well into the twenty-first century, the sublime has taken on various forms. The sublime-beautiful-dialectics slowly but surely disappeared from the surface of artistic discourse in the course of the nineteenth century and gave way, especially in France, to new styles, such as realism and symbolism. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), the famous and influential German philosopher, declared the sublime practically dead in 1886.<sup>167</sup> During the twentieth century however, the sublime resurfaced and was again ‘celebrated for its liberatory possibilities’.<sup>168</sup> It is a slippery subject, subject to metamorphosis.<sup>169</sup> However, from the start, the sublime was a manner of psychological manipulation<sup>170</sup>, and Nietzsche seems to have been jumping to conclusions too

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<sup>162</sup> Hoekstra (2015), 13.

<sup>163</sup> Artists and other people ventured into nature themselves influenced by ideas such as ‘wanderlust’ to experience natural sublime scenes, such as the Alps. Knolle (2015), 12.

<sup>164</sup> Boulton (1958), xlv.

<sup>165</sup> Zwagerman (2015), 114.

<sup>166</sup> Zwagerman (2015), 111.

<sup>167</sup> Knolle (2015), 12.

<sup>168</sup> Wawrzinek (2008), 33; Battersby (2007), 1, during the nineteenth and twentieth century, the emphasis was on infinity and how this could not be captured.

<sup>169</sup> Battersby (2007), 1.

<sup>170</sup> Boulton (1958), xxvii.

quickly. When painting surpassed poetry as the popular vehicle for sublime expression, sight became prevalent over hearing. The English politician and writer Joseph Addison (1672-1719), for example, thought sight to be an essential source for the imagination.<sup>171</sup> It is therefore important in this investigation to focus on the principles of sight, emotion, and their consequences, since ideas are sensual, and therefore can extend beyond what beholds the eye.<sup>172</sup>

## Perspective

Robert Zandvliet, a Dutch contemporary artist, once commented on the importance of ‘image building’. Especially the placement of the horizon is, according to Zandvliet, an integral part of landscape painting.<sup>173</sup> ‘The horizon determines the size of the painting [...] this seems trivial, but [...] the measurements immediately dictate what can or cannot fit into a painting’.<sup>174</sup> Jan van Goyen (1596-1656), a Dutch landscape painter, was famous for his depictions of bad weather. He managed to make these extra ambient by lowering the horizon to such an extent that almost or more than three quarters of the painting could be filled with threatening skies.<sup>175</sup> A prime example from his oeuvre, which I have mentioned briefly before, is *The Storm* (1637) (fig. 4). The horizon is placed very low, which causes the nearly black thunderstorm to fill most of the painting and emphasize the helplessness of the lonely, cowering figure in the foreground. According to Zwagerman, Van Goyen chose to place his horizon this low so he could redirect the emphasis from anecdotic realism to a more captivating suggestion of space and atmosphere<sup>176</sup>: ‘the atmospheric depiction of space, light and atmosphere was his main concern’.<sup>177</sup> When we look at this horizon properly, we can see that the black of the skies partly negates the horizon. This too happens in *Mönch am Meer* (*The Monk by the Sea*) (1808-1810) (fig. 24), an oppressive work by the now familiar Caspar David Friedrich. In this painting, too, the low horizon, darkness and lonely figure are cause for grave atmospheric effects. Abstraction engulfs figuration.<sup>178</sup> Especially this last point can

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<sup>171</sup> Boulton (1958),

<sup>172</sup> Burke, summarizing John Locke’s theory (1958), 11.

<sup>173</sup> Zwagerman (2015), 161.

<sup>174</sup> My own translation, Zandvliet quoted in Zwagerman (2015), 161.

<sup>175</sup> Zwagerman (2015), 161.

<sup>176</sup> Zwagerman (2015), 161.

<sup>177</sup> ‘The Storm’ (n.d.).

<sup>178</sup> Zwagerman (2015), 162.

also be attributed to works by Turner, in my opinion. If we take a look at the latter's *Light and Colour* (fig. 9), for example, there is not even a real horizon to speak of. Turner's use of perspective - namely a rather ambivalent one - causes a more atmospheric effect as well, especially because of his swirling and chaotic (but well thought out) use of paint and pigment. The placement of the horizon or, at least, certain choices about perspective could thus be seen as possible steppingstones for the creation of a sublime work.

### **Light and dark: the significance of colour**

I have touched upon the second matter briefly before: Turner and others used their pigments to create certain atmospheric and therefore psychological effects. The difference between light and dark(ness) and the colours that spring from these spectra are more than only optical: it is essential. Light objects, for example, always seem bigger than dark objects. Furthermore, colours can have different symbolic meanings. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) dedicated a treatise to this subject: *Zur Farbenlehre*, or 'Theory of Colours' (1810). This is also the 'Goethe's theory' Turner references in his extended title for *Light and Colour*. The first thing Goethe insistently clarifies in his preface is that 'colours are acts of light', both belonging to nature.<sup>179</sup> In fact, colours and light are 'in most intimate relationship' with each other.<sup>180</sup> This means that by studying colours, in all their passive and active modifications, it would be possible to abstractedly define the nature of light.<sup>181</sup> This might be a, or maybe even the, reason why Turner was so fond of both Goethe's theory and especially of the colour yellow, since it is most directly related to the (sun)light.

Starting with light and darkness themselves, there is a clear emotional and/or symbolical difference. In general, darkness carries with it more negative connotations than light. The horror of darkness could further physically be attributed to 'the contraction of the radial fibres of the iris'.<sup>182</sup> This natural phenomenon, to one all of a sudden confronted with it, causes shock and convulsion.<sup>183</sup> Light, on the other hand, does the opposite: it generally carries positive connotations, but can also dazzle the eye, leaving it out of function for a short period of time.<sup>184</sup> Its very important to realise that light in itself is invisible, despite the fact

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<sup>179</sup> Goethe (2015), xvii.

<sup>180</sup> Goethe (2015), xvii.

<sup>181</sup> Goethe (2015), xvii.

<sup>182</sup> Goethe quoted in Battersby (2007), 25.

<sup>183</sup> This contraction can also cause relaxation because it relaxes the retina.

<sup>184</sup> Goethe (2015), 2.

that it makes everything else visible.<sup>185</sup> Goethe explained: ‘all nature manifests itself by means of colours to the sense of sight’.<sup>186</sup> This means that we visually construct the world out of three matters: light, shade and colour.<sup>187</sup> Therefore, the abstraction introduced by Turner, in which light and colour completely consume all form and matter, confuses our senses and alludes to the intangible transcendental. The style can therefore carry the meaning of the transience of all matter. Goethe quoted an unidentified mystic writer: ‘[i]f the eye were not sunny, how could we perceive light? If God’s own strength lived not in us, how can we delight in divine things?’ and concluded that not only ‘dormant light resides in the eye’ but that both the eye and light are ‘identical in substance’.<sup>188</sup> There is a dormant light inside of us which can trigger the light residing in the eye.<sup>189</sup> Could this dormant light be our imagination, or maybe even more?

How do colours appear? As mentioned before, light, darkness, and obscurity are necessities for the production of colours in the mind. Next to light, yellow appears, next to darkness, blue can be found. Either colour can be condensed or darkened to form an infinity of shades. Grey is the intermediate colour between brightness and darkness, the shadow, the obscurity. Goethe’s ‘Chromatic Circle’ depicts the colours arranged in their natural order (fig. 25). The colours which are diametrically opposed reciprocally evoke each other in the eye. This means that yellow always ‘demands’ a purple hue. For example, when a yellow circle is placed upon a white background, the edges of the circle may appear to extend a purple glow.<sup>190</sup> The works this thesis eventually tries to reunite are both dominated by the colour yellow, but alternated by - in the case of *Light and Colour* - blue, and black and grey in the case of *The Weather project*. Goethe, in his *Zur Farbenlehre* wrote up a scheme in which he explains the difference between plus (colours derived from yellow) and minus colours (colours derived from blue).<sup>191</sup> As shown by the schematic outline on the following page, both sides of the colour scheme are capable of evoking multiple (emotional and/or sensible) associations.

‘Die Farbe der Romantik ist das Blau’, wrote Marcus Woeller, a German art critic, when the restoration of *Mönch am Meer* was finished.<sup>192</sup> When we look at the capacity of the

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<sup>185</sup> Zwagerman (2015), 337.

<sup>186</sup> Goethe (2015), xxvi.

<sup>187</sup> Goethe (2015), xxvi.

<sup>188</sup> Goethe (2015), xxvi.

<sup>189</sup> Goethe (2015), xxvi.

<sup>190</sup> Goethe (2015), 63.

<sup>191</sup> Goethe (2015), 151.

<sup>192</sup> Woeller (2016); The *Mönch* and another work by Friedrich (*Abtei im Eichwald* (*The Abbey in the Oakwood*))

colour blue (and its extensions) as determined by Goethe, the connected symbolisations do sound Burkean in their fashion. However, light can, according to this scheme, be frightening as well. It has the capability to blind and overwhelm. In combination with Turner's ideas about the sun, the colour's sublime attraction becomes rather clear. Turner was probably ahead of his time in preferring yellow over the romantic blue. However, 'Turner keenly sensed the emotional force of colors, and of color contrast, but, as we might expect, he remained skeptical of any *uniform* attempts to link specific colors to particular emotional or symbolic meanings'.<sup>193</sup> Both *Shade and Darkness* and *Light and Colour* can therefore be seen as a statement of Turner's own colour theory: '[b]elieving that all colors come from light, Turner paints his colors so as to produce optical fusions which create new colors and afterimages'.<sup>194</sup> The contrast between light and darkness is therefore probably emphasized as it is in his deluge paintings<sup>195</sup>: black covers, white erases<sup>196</sup>, God creates and God evaporates.

Plus	Minus
Yellow	Blue
Action	Negation
Light	Shadow
Brightness	Darkness
Force	Weakness
Warmth	Proximity
Repulsion	Attraction
Affinity with acids	Affinity with alkalis

When we look at the usage of colour by both Turner and Eliasson and their presupposed effects, we must admit that Goethe was not wrong when he wrote: 'colour considered as an element of art, may be subservient to the highest aesthetical ends'<sup>197</sup> and that chromatic colours each always act specifically upon the eye<sup>198</sup>, especially when one colour is allowed to completely occupy the eye.<sup>199</sup>

## The Romantic survival and revival

Robert Rosenblum's *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition, Friedrich to Rothko* (1975), challenged a dilemma similar to the one that is now subject to this research. It

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(1809-1810)), both underwent restauration by Francesca Schneider between 2013 and 2016. The works can, since recently, again be viewed at the Old National Gallery in the State Museums of Berlin.

<sup>193</sup> Shires (n.d.).

<sup>194</sup> Shires (n.d.).

<sup>195</sup> Shires (n.d.).

<sup>196</sup> Zwagerman (2015), 337.

<sup>197</sup> Goethe (2015), 167.

<sup>198</sup> Goethe (2015), 168.

<sup>199</sup> Goethe (2015), 168.

compares Friedrich's *Mönch am Meer*, which is - just like Turner's later works - difficult to place in the traditional pre-Romantic subject categories, to Mark Rothko's (1903-1970) *Green on Blue* (1956) (fig. 26), created over a century later. Rosenblum wanted to find out whether or not the similarities (predominantly in colour and emotional effects) between the two paintings are a matter of 'pseudomorphosis' or whether they can be attributed to a similarity of feeling and intention because of a long lasting tradition in Northern painting.<sup>200</sup>

Pseudomorphosis, as mentioned in the introduction of this paper, is a term coined by the German-American art historian Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968), meaning: 'the accidental appearance at different moments in the history of art of works whose close formal analogies falsify the fact that their meaning is totally different'.<sup>201</sup> Rosenblum eventually concludes that there is more to the similarities than just plain coincidence, by having tracked the survival and revival of the Romantic tradition after the period itself (seemed to have) ended. Since the sublime is such an essential part of the Romantic tradition, it is worth studying Rosenblum's findings. It needs to be pointed out that Rosenblum chooses to focus on Northern Europe, which means he omits the influence of the French, Paris-based artists, such as the impressionists, whose religious or spiritual art was generally anthropocentric<sup>202</sup> and also, but in a different manner, focussed on the translation of nature or natural phenomena into colour.

We must understand that, both before and during Friedrich's and Turner's periods of practice, genre paintings, such as landscape paintings, required a 'narrative incident'.<sup>203</sup> This meant that there had to be a story behind the work or, at least, a clear, descriptive scene. The 'disquieting progeny' of emptiness portrayed in Friedrich's *Mönch am Meer* and Turner's later works was (and maybe still is) very daring and unprecedented in the history of painting.<sup>204</sup> Behind abstract art lie, according to Rosenblum, existential anxieties: *Mönch am Meer* represents these in the form of the lonely monk – which could be explained to be Friedrich himself: standing at the abyss of 'the great unknowable' and exploring his relationship to it.<sup>205</sup>

Both Friedrich and Turner laced their works with religious connotations. The first in the figure of a monk, the latter in the depiction of Old Testament scenes of destruction and resurrection. However, the Romantic resistance against institutionalized religion, as discussed

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<sup>200</sup> Rosenblum (1975), 10.

<sup>201</sup> Rosenblum (1975), 10.

<sup>202</sup> Rosenblum (1975), 35.

<sup>203</sup> Rosenblum (1975), 13.

<sup>204</sup> Rosenblum (1975), 13.

<sup>205</sup> Rosenblum (1975), 14.

before, gave rise to the appearance of a new imagery: religious feelings were expressed through nature and (in combination with) secular scenes.<sup>206</sup> Of course, over the years, the influence and expression of religious beliefs, especially those of Christianity, was constantly subject to metamorphosis. In the later eighteenth century, it already became common to mix contemporary history or secular scenes with Christian formulas. This created a ‘language of modern semi-divinities’, which, especially in Northern Europe, was expressed in landscape (painting).<sup>207</sup> People used to be afraid of God, but this, as we have seen, changed. Rosenblum wrote that: ‘by distilling natural phenomena to so primal a condition that mythic experiences can be evoked, Friedrich expressed an ambition that would recur [...] throughout the later history of modern painting’.<sup>208</sup> For example: it could be said that Friedrich’s lone monk is staring into a nothing that is simultaneously everything. The (possible) religious doubt paired with his stare could also be frightening. Turner, as stated before, did the same, but added the distinctive qualities of brightness. The combination of factors mentioned above changed the manner in which religious - or spiritual - intent could be expressed in landscape paintings. Rosenblum mentions four manners in which the spiritual could be represented, namely through: (i) pervasive luminosity of which the source is hidden, (ii) emblematic polarity of light and dark, (iii) polarity of near and far, and of the (iv) palpable and impalpable.<sup>209</sup>

However, these changes in the depiction of meaningful subject matter from religious scenes from the Testaments to the permanent, transcendental truth<sup>210</sup> also meant a change in the formal qualities of works of art. In this blurring of the boundaries between the natural and the supernatural, artists gradually discovered the advantages of working on a large scale. The dimensions of these paintings increased visibly in general.<sup>211</sup> Some artists however, preferred working on a smaller scale but did figuratively speaking increase the size of their subject matters or their pictorial vehicles of artistic communication. Northern based painters such as Philipp Otto Runge (1777-1820) and the English landscape painter Samuel Palmer (1805-1881) searched for ‘a pictorial medium that would fix images in timeless symbols’ to reconstruct the ‘primal mysteries of creation’. To do so, they combined the ‘conceptual world of bounding contours and abstract structures’ with a close study of nature’s surfaces.<sup>212</sup> Large

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<sup>206</sup> Rosenblum (1975), 14-15.

<sup>207</sup> Rosenblum (1975), 17.

<sup>208</sup> Rosenblum (1975), 24.

<sup>209</sup> Rosenblum (1975), 26.

<sup>210</sup> Rosenblum (1975), 41.

<sup>211</sup> Rosenblum (1975), 18.

<sup>212</sup> Rosenblum (1975), 56.

orbs proved to be great structural vehicles for this because of their near-pagan character. The celestial orb in Palmer's *The Harvest Moon* (1830-1) (fig. 27), is described by Rosenblum as being 'overwhelming not only in its sheer size and luminosity but also in its fixed centrality'.<sup>213</sup> This, of course, sounds very familiar in relation to both Turner's and Eliasson's works and it might be possible that Turner and Palmer influenced each other. Iconic orbs such as this one would prove to be very popular in the centuries to come.<sup>214</sup> The concepts of polarity raised by Palmer's and Turner's painting and Eliasson's installation are those of the finite versus the infinite and the micro- versus the macrocosm. This could be seen as a reflection of the period's interest in the case of the individual versus the universe.<sup>215</sup>

Translating all this to a more recent history, the Romantic tradition to reconstruct the heavenly in the earthly did not - as is generally thought - expire in the mid-nineteenth century because of the developments of the avant-garde in Paris, but lived on with renewed passion. The French 'l'art pour l'art' did not protrude the Northern artistic world, where it remained more of an 'art-for-life-sake' situation<sup>216</sup> because of the emotional messages conveyed by works of art from the more Protestant regions. Rosenblum considered the aspirations of the famous Dutch artist Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890) to be an example of the Romantic survival. He argues that Van Gogh's art was inextricably linked to his own experiences and his passionate search for religious thoughts. The celestial orb was, coincidentally, an image frequently used by Van Gogh as well. *The Old Tower in the Fields* (1884) (fig. 28) not only shows such a radiant orb, but is also predominantly executed in darkened yellow hues, like Turner's previously discussed *Going to the Ball* (fig. 18), for example. Van Gogh's typical - according to Rosenblum - emphasis on the mystical individuality of objects often went at the cost of decorative unity, just like in Turner's works. Van Gogh's *The Sower* (1888) (fig. 29), is a prime example of both this last principle and Van Gogh's use of celestial orbs. Rosenblum wrote about this piece: 'the supernatural aura of this of this centralized sun, which has usurped some holy presence [...] takes on an almost iconic stature, an inaccessible, luminous presence'.<sup>217</sup> Rosenblum's supposed connection between Van Gogh's works and those of Friedrich and Turner seems therefore, in my opinion, not misplaced and its main points could also be extended to Eliasson's sun, but this connection will be more elaborately discussed in the third chapter of this thesis. However, readings such as these are to be handled

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<sup>213</sup> Rosenblum (1975), 59.

<sup>214</sup> Rosenblum (1975), 60.

<sup>215</sup> Rosenblum (1975), 62.

<sup>216</sup> Rosenblum (1975), 70.

<sup>217</sup> Rosenblum (1975), 90.

carefully: the genius in both Friedrich and Turner, says Rosenblum, is evocation, not the invention of a specific symbolic code.<sup>218</sup>

However, as we gradually climb the ladder from past to present, the artistic attraction to nature's powers seems not to expire or be only momentary at all. The Scandinavian (Norwegian) artist Edvard Munch (1863-1944) was also highly fascinated by sunlight, and used it to symbolize the irresistible powers of nature. According to Rosenblum, the sun and the moon dominate human destiny in Munch's works, and is thereby sometimes elevated to a sort of deity. Munch also distilled from nature the primal life-forces, as did Turner.<sup>219</sup> Munch's *The Sun* (1911-16) (fig. 30) is, 'all-pervasive, shining from the heavens upon land and sea, its rays reaching out to all eternity. Inhuman itself, it is the source of all life'.<sup>220</sup> Therefore, some would still characterize it as a 'violent image'<sup>221</sup>, as it overpowers the senses with its colour-depth and immediacy. In that sense, Munch's sun bares more similarities to Turner's than Eliasson's sun. Nonetheless, it is important to note that Munch's use of the sun as a primal life force was valued by many contemporary and future thinkers and artists.<sup>222</sup> This particular form of symbolism thus caught on.<sup>223</sup>

During the nineteenth century, the direct opposite of the overwhelming Romantic natural scenes came into picture.<sup>224</sup> Silence and stillness, like Friedrich's, became more important than, for example, Turner's, force and violence in symbolizing the 'ultimate questions of human destiny'. Planetary landscapes and symmetry gained popularity.<sup>225</sup> In style with the Turnerian tradition, for Van Gogh and Munch the sun suggests the very symbol of nature's omnipotence. Their work meant the reactivation of new inflections of the Northern Romantic search for divinity in nature.<sup>226</sup> The injection of silence and the planetary provided a platform for new ideas.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Romantic influences and images were everywhere, but their direct sources are hard to pinpoint. There was a sort of 'temporary eclipse' of Romantic values in the mid-nineteenth century<sup>227</sup>, which begs the question

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<sup>218</sup> Rosenblum (1975), 97.

<sup>219</sup> Rosenblum (1975), 119.

<sup>220</sup> 'The Sun, 1909' (n.d.).

<sup>221</sup> 'Edvard Munch: The Sun' (2007).

<sup>222</sup> Rosenblum (1975), 120.

<sup>223</sup> Rosenblum attributes this form especially to Scandinavian artists (1975), 121.

<sup>224</sup> Rosenblum (1975), 121-2.

<sup>225</sup> Rosenblum (1975), 126, 128.

<sup>226</sup> Rosenblum (1975), 120.

<sup>227</sup> Rosenblum (1975), 129.

whether or not the twentieth century Romantic revival was truly conscious or even if we can speak of an unbroken Romantic tradition. However, consciously or unconsciously, the use of seemingly Romantic motifs continues during the twentieth century.<sup>228</sup> Even after the Second World War, spirit was still preferred over matter and art stayed an important vehicle for communication. The mixing and matching of the religious and the secular remained a fairly common artistic practice, together with the exploration of spatial structures and the evocative quality of polarities.<sup>229</sup> (Post)apocalyptic scenes, especially the Romantic obsession with images of destruction and resurrection, regained their importance after the war<sup>230</sup>, but equally often, formal means such as Fauvism and Cubism disguise Romantic sources, argued Rosenblum.<sup>231</sup> This was possibly because descriptive language (whether in poetry or in art) seemed to fail after the war: description of the horrors seemed impossible.

Romantic nostalgia and nostalgia towards Romantic motifs seemed to have stayed close beneath the surface. Rosenblum wrote about the art of Piet Mondrian (1872-1944), that he:

Provided the clearest and most artistically compelling link between a nineteenth century tradition based on the themes of, the spaces and the emotion of Northern Romantic art and the transformation of these historical roots into a twentieth-century art where all explicit references to the material world were banned.<sup>232</sup>

Rosenblum considered Mondrian's work to express 'immeasurable boundlessness' and expansive openness and to be void-like.<sup>233</sup> New religious ideas and currents, like Theosophy - which holds that 'a knowledge of God may be achieved through 'spiritual ecstasy, direct intuition, or special individual relations'<sup>234</sup> - provided Mondrian's work with the same religious aspirations as the discussed eighteenth-century works. Among other works, Rosenblum mentioned Mondrian's early work *Woods near Oele* (1908) (fig. 31) for its Romantic significance, but its similar characteristics to the orb-works already discussed makes it even more important for this research. According to Rosenblum, a circle or oval in painting symbolizes: (i) a polarity between the particular and the universal and (ii) both matter and spirit. Furthermore, its 'pure geometric form is associated with the realm of divinity'.<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> Rosenblum (1975), 129, 143.

<sup>229</sup> Rosenblum (1975), 129, 149.

<sup>230</sup> Rosenblum (1975), 149, 163, 168.

<sup>231</sup> Rosenblum (1975), 149.

<sup>232</sup> Rosenblum (1975), 173-4.

<sup>233</sup> Rosenblum (1975), 174.

<sup>234</sup> 'Definition of *Theosophy*' (n.d.).

<sup>235</sup> Rosenblum (1975), 182.

In this particular work, the light source ‘elevates empirical observation to a more symbolic plane’<sup>236</sup>, as it also does, of course, for Turner’s and likely also for Eliasson’s work.

The roots of the Romantic tradition are European<sup>237</sup>, but Americans changed it all. Or at least, so they thought. In the first part of his *Modern painting and the northern romantic tradition: Friedrich to Rothko*, titled ‘Northern Romanticism and the Resurrection of God’, Rosenblum compares Turner’s artistic style to that of the later American abstract expressionists, Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock (1912-1956), Clyfford Still (1904-1980) and Barnett Newman (1905-1970). Den Hartog Jager has stated that in abstraction the Romantic innovativeness and the ancient principles of universality are combined.<sup>238</sup> Nearly all paintings by these artists could also account as ‘pictures of nothing and the very like’, and there are more similarities between them and Turner. The introduction of abstract expressionism could be said to have aided or maybe even secured the survival of the Romantic era.<sup>239</sup> Turner, concluded Rosenblum, isolated nature’s primordial elements: light, energy and elemental matter.<sup>240</sup> The four abstract expressionists just mentioned did, in one way or another, exactly the same, contemplated Rosenblum. Rothko, with his expanse of dematerialized, luminous colours, conformed to Turner’s mystical and calm haziness. Pollock and his typical dynamic whirlpools of energy recreated Turner’s ‘furious perpetuum mobile’: his vortexes. Still’s ‘slow but relentless surface growth of incommensurable shapes’ made Rosenblum think of Turner’s errant geological patterns.<sup>241</sup> For the similarities between Turner, Eliasson and Newman, Den Hartog Jager posed the use of colour.<sup>242</sup> The power of colours is discussed earlier in this chapter, and fact remains that, for these artists (too), ‘the expression of experiences that lay beyond the aesthetic’<sup>243</sup> mattered, and seems to still matter most. The most important variables in this case seem to be space and colour, and especially the emotions they can evoke. Rothko once famously stated:

I am not interested in relationships of color or form or anything else... I am interested only in expressing the basic human emotions - tragedy, ecstasy, doom, and so on - [...] I *communicate* with those basic human emotions. The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them. And if you, as you say, are moved only by their color

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<sup>236</sup> Rosenblum (1975), 183.

<sup>237</sup> Den Hartog Jager (2013), 81.

<sup>238</sup> Den Hartog Jager ((2013), 77; Some might argue the exact opposite. Nonetheless, as we have seen in this thesis, the reversed statement makes more sense considering the essentiality of emotional evocation and its dependence on the obscure.

<sup>239</sup> Den Hartog Jager (2013), 79.

<sup>240</sup> Rosenblum (1975), 12.

<sup>241</sup> Rosenblum (1975), 12.

<sup>242</sup> Own translation, Den Hartog Jager (2013), 9-10, 31, 32.

<sup>243</sup> Rosenblum (1975), 215.

relationships, then you miss the point!<sup>244</sup>

I will discuss Newman's theories and work more elaborately in the next chapter, but the even greater emphasis that lies on atmospheric effects at the beginning of the twenty-first century is essential for our understanding of the relationship between Turner's and Eliasson's works.

Maybe Eliasson's twenty-first-century use of the grand, yellow sun could be explained if we look upon the survival of the Romantic, existential tradition. The first generation of Romantic artists created an empathically confessed subjectivity,<sup>245</sup> which seems to have lasted when we read the quoted words of Mark Rothko above. Like Turner, Eliasson uses probably, the most singular everyday reality in our known universe, the sun, to convey some sort of religious - may it be a rather contemporary vague one - message of existential anxiety, emptiness and, may be derived from all of that: nothingness. And in nothingness, we need guidance.

Artworks of nothing inevitably beat everything.<sup>246</sup>

The title of this chapter, and its general theme, is language. Language is very important for the sublime, as we saw. The Austrian-British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) was a language philosopher who attributed greatly to the foundations of logic and pioneered in the field of the analytical philosophy. He was (wrongly) considered a logic positivist, but his philosophy of language did have a lot in common with logic positivism. He too drew a line between useful and useless language usage.<sup>247</sup> Wittgenstein accordingly wrote in his well-read (but very complex) *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung* (first published in 1922): 'what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence'.<sup>248</sup> The positivists considered this the end of it: that which could not be spoken of, was therefore not useful, and so rejected the transcendental.<sup>249</sup> There are, however, according to Wittgenstein some matters that we cannot logically speak of, but which are present and, generally, important. Examples are ethics, logic and therefore mathematics.<sup>250</sup> Wittgenstein contemplated: '[t]he sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world, everything is as it is and happens as it does happen [...] all happening and being-so is accidental. What makes it non-accidental cannot lie *in* the

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<sup>244</sup> Rothko quoted in Rosenblum (1975), 215.

<sup>245</sup> Den Hartog Jager (2013), 54.

<sup>246</sup> Zwagerman (2015), 295.

<sup>247</sup> 'Ludwig Wittgenstein' (n.d.).

<sup>248</sup> Wittgenstein (2015), 9.

<sup>249</sup> 'Ludwig Wittgenstein' (n.d.).

<sup>250</sup> Wittgenstein (2015), 98, 108.

world'.<sup>251</sup> That which is ineffable does therefore still have a place in our world. For Wittgenstein, ethics equals aesthetics<sup>252</sup>, which logically means that the ineffable can be shown through poetry, music, religion and art.<sup>253</sup> For any reasonable human being, the limits of their language, their experiences, are the limits of their world, but since language is a logical system and logic exceeds our sensual world and is therefore transcendental, language might be too.

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<sup>251</sup> Wittgenstein (2015), 107-108.

<sup>252</sup> Wittgenstein (2015), 108.

<sup>253</sup> 'Ludwig Wittgenstein' (n.d.).

### 3. Reaching towards you

It was not Turner's conscious effort to pave the way for later modern art. His tendency towards abstraction cannot be compared to its present-day meaning. Nonetheless, Turner's revolutionary work offered, as we now know, a solid foundation and a subject of fascination for artists to come.<sup>254</sup> During the twentieth century, the sublime apparently re-emerged in international artistic discourses, especially in the postmodern debates after 1950.<sup>255</sup> As a contributor to the recent research-project: 'The Sublime Object: Nature, Art and Language', conducted by Tate Britain, Luke White, Senior Lecturer in Visual Culture and Fine Arts at Middlesex University, wrote about nature, capitalism and the sublime in light of Damien Hirst's shark (fig. 32).<sup>256</sup> In light of his research, he posed a valuable question for this study: 'what does it mean for the sublime to be at once a matter of *current* concern, but also a very *old* idea?'.<sup>257</sup>

The title for Hirst's work: *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* pertains a twofold importance to this matter. First, because it defines the nature of the (general) sublime: the human incapability to fully comprehend and, therefore, present death as a natural phenomenon. Secondly, it inadvertently seems to pose an explanation for the current status of the sublime in the postmodern mind: the sublime in postmodern society cannot be dead (as Nietzsche wrote) since that would mean that it could not be thought of and therefore not exist. What we are however capable of is making the observation that someone or something is dead. In the case of Hirst's piece, the shark is still there: we are able to observe it in its post-partum state as an inanimate object. However, the shark itself no longer *exists*. The interesting thing is that the sight of the shark, living and/or dead, may dwarf our imagination, yet our ability to 'conceive of this deficiency points to the existence of a higher faculty, something even greater than nature or imagination'<sup>258</sup>:

... we like to call these objects sublime because they raise the soul's fortitude above its usual middle range and allow us to discover in ourselves an ability to resist which is of a quite different kind, and which gives us the courage [to believe] that we could be a match for nature's seeming omnipotence.<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> Knolle (2015), 9-10; 'Olafur Eliasson: Turner colour experiments' (n.d).

<sup>255</sup> Battersby (2007), 2; Bell (2013), 1.

<sup>256</sup> Hirst, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991), White (2013), 1.

<sup>257</sup> White (2013), 1.

<sup>258</sup> Shaw (2006), 82.

<sup>259</sup> Kant quoted in Shaw (2006), 83.

Philip Shaw wrote in his chapter about the Kantian sublime. Although agreeing with Burke that the sublime is a source strictly of negative pleasure<sup>260</sup>, the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), had a slightly different outlook on the workings of the sublime. I have chosen to introduce Kant in this chapter instead of the first, for I feel the immediate importance of his theories for this chapter and the following would have been lost if I had elaborately introduced them earlier. Mind that, where Burke focused on physical limitations, Kant emphasized the transcendental. Kant theorized that our capacities of comprehension are not as limited as we might envision them to be, as Hirst's shark made us just realize. The sublime, in Kant's mind, is the exploration of transcendental dimensions, of the realm of Pure Reason. The idea of Pure Reason is an inherently Platonic idea, which means that 'an Idea, in the Platonic sense, is an eternal, transcendental reality, which may be conceived by the mind without reference to sense experience'.<sup>261</sup> According to Plato, there was a realm of Ideas or Forms where the soul had been in contact with universal standards or models of all animate and inanimate beings, which it would later encounter in the empirical world.<sup>262</sup> Kant called this form of knowledge, which came prior to sense impressions, 'a priori' knowledge.<sup>263</sup> '[R]eason allows us to transcend the natural realm [of sense intuitions<sup>264</sup>] and to pursue thought without restriction. The *a priori* principle of the faculty of reason is thus quite simply the *obligation* to think beyond the given'<sup>265</sup>, clarifies Shaw in his chapter on the Kantian sublime. S.H. Monk summarized Kant's theory accordingly: '[o]bjects must conform to our cognitions, rather than our cognitions to objects'<sup>266</sup>, meaning that we, as human, conscious beings, create our own world.

Kant differentiated between two forms of the sublime: the mathematical sublime, and the dynamical sublime. In the case of a mathematical sublime experience, 'the imagination is overwhelmed by spatial or temporal magnitude; the experience is too great for the imagination to 'take it all in' at once'.<sup>267</sup> In the dynamical sublime, 'a sense of overbearing

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<sup>260</sup> Shaw (2006), 79.

<sup>261</sup> Shaw (2006), 155.

<sup>262</sup> Shaw (2006), 155.

<sup>263</sup> Shaw (2006), 74-75; An example of 'a priori' knowledge is our understanding of time and space: a priori concepts such as these only exist in the rational mind, but help us shape, think about and therefore understand the empirical world we live in; Wittgenstein did not believe in the principle of a priori experiences, Wittgenstein (2015), 88.

<sup>264</sup> Shaw (2006), 74.

<sup>265</sup> Shaw (2006), 75.

<sup>266</sup> Monk quoted in Shaw (2006), 73, original source: S.H. Monk, *The Sublime: A Study in Critical Theories in 18<sup>th</sup> Century England*, New York 1960, 4-5.

<sup>267</sup> Shaw (2006), 80.

power blocks our will; in the face of this experience the subject is rendered helpless'.<sup>268</sup> The dynamical sublime inhabits the more romantic notion of the sublime and is, traditionally, centred on emotions.<sup>269</sup> There is a stronger sense of reason's dominance over nature, because we know ourselves to be safe in the face of natural danger<sup>270</sup>:

the irresistibility of [nature's] power certainly makes us, considered as natural beings, recognize our physical powerlessness, but at the same time it reveals a capacity for judging ourselves as independent of nature and a superiority over nature...whereby the humanity in our person remains undemeaned even though the human being must submit to that dominion<sup>271</sup>

Thinking about the works of art discussed in the previous two chapters, we can see that most of these would belong to Kant's dynamical sublime. The mathematical sublime, which frustrates our minds not because of the emphasis on our physical inadequacies, but because of our imaginative powerlessness<sup>272</sup>, however excited and interested Kant the most. A sublime experience seems to have three stages according to Kant's theory, the first being the physical experience or confrontation, the second the caused transcendence of the mind and the third and probably most important stage: being aware of, and surrendering oneself to the transcendental experience<sup>273</sup>, the exploration of a 'supersensible faculty'<sup>274</sup> inherently part of the human mind. The sublime frees the mind from being subjected to empirical reality and other boundaries forced upon us by nature:

The feeling of the sublime is a feeling of displeasure that arises from the imagination's inadequacy, in an aesthetic estimation of magnitude, for an estimation by reason, but it is at the same time also a pleasure, aroused by the fact that this very judgement of the inadequacy, namely, that even the greatest power of sensibility is inadequate, is [itself] in harmony with rational ideas, insofar as striving toward them is still a law for us.<sup>275</sup>

Sublimity, for Kant, therefore resides in the human capability to think beyond the bounds of the given.<sup>276</sup>

This thinking beyond the bounds of the given proved to be (and still is, as we will see)

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<sup>268</sup> Shaw (2006), 81.

<sup>269</sup> Shaw (2006), 81.

<sup>270</sup> Ginsborg (2014).

<sup>271</sup> Kant quoted in Ginsborg (2014), original source: *Critique of the Power of Judgment (The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant)*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, Cambridge 2000, 261-262.

<sup>272</sup> Ginsborg (2014).

<sup>273</sup> Shaw (2006), 83.

<sup>274</sup> Kant quoted in Ginsborg (2014), original source: *Critique of the Power of Judgment (The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant)*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, Cambridge 2000, 250.

<sup>275</sup> Kant quoted in Shaw (2006), 83.

<sup>276</sup> Shaw (2006), 83.

of great importance. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the sublime has the inclination not only to cycle ‘repeatedly between a key aesthetic or critical idea and becoming something seemingly irrelevant and outmoded’ but also to insistently ‘rise out of the grave’.<sup>277</sup> In doing so, the sublime aesthetic ‘asserted its critical rights overt art, and that romanticism, in other words, modernity, triumphed’.<sup>278</sup> Usage of the term ‘sublime’ requires knowledge of its aesthetic and philosophical stakes.<sup>279</sup> Today’s culture, one could say, is ‘haunted’ by the history of the sublime.<sup>280</sup>

After the aforementioned drop of interest in the sublime during the nineteenth century (in popular discourse and art circles as well<sup>281</sup>), the sublime returned to the main stage by grace of Barnett Newman (1905-1970) and his treatise ‘The Sublime is Now’ (1948).<sup>282</sup> His essay is deemed symptomatic of the desire of Americans to set themselves apart from the Europeans.<sup>283</sup> Newman side-tracked supporters of the natural sublime such as Turner and Friedrich in his goal to go beyond the limits of visibility, proportions, the capabilities of the mind and to aim at ‘absolute emotions’.<sup>284</sup> To do so, as previously discussed, he posed the works of his contemporaries and himself against the European tradition of Mondrian and others, for whose abstract works - which centred on balancing opposites and creating harmonies - proportions were deemed essential.<sup>285</sup> Newman and his fellow American avant-garde artists felt that they were both geographically and historically situated to lay the groundwork for a new artistic movement.<sup>286</sup> For this study of the sublime transgression and transformation Newman’s essay is essential and deserves to be elaborated upon.

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<sup>277</sup> Lyotard (e) (1991), 92.

<sup>278</sup> Lyotard (e) (1991), 92.

<sup>279</sup> Lyotard (e) (1991), 92.

<sup>280</sup> White (2013), 1.

<sup>281</sup> British painter James McNeill Whistler critiqued the current state of the sublime in his ‘Ten ‘O Clock’-lecture in 1885. ‘Rejecting the public’s ‘delight in detail’, the painter [Whistler] discarded also the stale, hackneyed discourse of the sublime: ‘how dutifully the casual in Nature is accepted as sublime, may be gathered from the unlimited admiration daily produced by a very foolish sunset’. The spread of a vulgarised vocabulary of sublimity had, in Whistler’s view, led to a decline in artistic judgement. For critics trained in this vocabulary, a mountain is ‘synonymous with height - a lake, with depth - the ocean, with vastness - the sun, with glory. So that a picture with a mountain, a lake, and an ocean - however poor in paint - is inevitably “lofty,” “vast,” “infinite” and “glorious” - on paper’, Shaw (2013).

<sup>282</sup> Bell (2013), 1.

<sup>283</sup> Harrison and Wood (2003), 580.

<sup>284</sup> Den Hartog Jager (2013), 81; Bell (2013), 11.

<sup>285</sup> Harmonious and aesthetically pleasing proportions are often linked to the category of the beautiful.

<sup>286</sup> Harrison and Wood (2003), 580.

The roots of both artistic creation as we know it and sublime theory lie in the Classical, Greek period. Newman claimed that:

Man's natural desire in the arts to express his relation to the Absolute became identified and confused with the absolutisms of perfect creations [...] the European artist has been continually involved in the moral struggle between notions of beauty and the desire for sublimity.<sup>287</sup>

This postulates an inevitable barrier the European artist has to overcome before he can possibly create something truly new. The Impressionists tried because they were repelled by the inadequacy of painting, which until then had focused almost solely on the beautiful. Despite their surfaces constructed of 'ugly strokes'<sup>288</sup>, the Impressionists never truly succeeded according to Newman. Even though '[t]he impulse of modern art was this desire to destroy beauty', they only succeeded in creating a 'transfer of values'.<sup>289</sup> Even if Newman identified the modern artistic period as a revolution, it nevertheless existed in 'its effort and energy to escape the pattern rather than in the realization of a new experience'.<sup>290</sup> The modern European artists formed a movement in the most literal sense: they were *in* the movement of making a difference, of overcoming the deeply rooted 'rhetoric of exaltation'<sup>291</sup> in European artistic tradition, but were not capable of actually forming a new form of art. They simply could not succeed, claimed Newman, because European art had long since failed to achieve the sublime and was therefore clueless of its perceived goal:

due to this blind desire to exist inside the reality of sensation (the objective world, whether distorted or pure) and to build an art within a framework of pure plasticity (the Greek ideal of beauty, whether that plasticity be a romantic active surface, or a classic stable one). In other words, modern art, caught without a sublime content, was incapable of creating a new sublime image, and unable to move away from the Renaissance imagery of figures and objects except by distortion or by denying it completely to for an empty world of geometric formalisms a *pure* rhetoric of abstract mathematical relationships, became enmeshed in a struggle over the nature of beauty; whether beauty was in nature or could be found without nature.<sup>292</sup>

The European artists had thus been stuck in the same apparently frustrating place for a very long time, and the American avant-garde would provide redemption and freedom. The Americans decided to ignore the concept of beauty, proportion, harmony and the traditional abstract as an art of 'perfect sensations'<sup>293</sup> altogether by choosing to live *inside* the abstract.<sup>294</sup>

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<sup>287</sup> Newman (2003), 580.

<sup>288</sup> Newman (2003), 581.

<sup>289</sup> Newman (2003), 581.

<sup>290</sup> Newman (2003), 581.

<sup>291</sup> Newman (2003), 581.

<sup>292</sup> Newman (2003), 581.

<sup>293</sup> Newman (2003), 581.

<sup>294</sup> Newman (2003), 581.

When asked how the Americans were going to create a sublime art from that position, their answer, according to Newman, was that they would reassert ‘man’s natural desire for the exalted’ by creating images that were ‘self-evident’ and were free from traditional artistic notions<sup>295</sup>, such as proportion and harmony. Newman wrote: ‘[w]e are freeing ourselves of the impediment of memory, association, nostalgia, legend, myth, or what have you, that can be devices of Western European painting’.<sup>296</sup> Newman titled his works accordingly: *Right Here* (1954), *Be* (1970), *The Moment* (1966), to illustrate that the ‘nostalgic glasses of history’<sup>297</sup> were thrown off and the sublime was revived, right then and there: not from history, nostalgia or myth, but from the actual moment<sup>298</sup>: the sublime is now.

Despite the efforts of Newman and the American avant-garde movement, the (new) sublime, according to Simon Morley, the author of the Tate article ‘Staring into the contemporary abyss: The contemporary sublime’ (2010), did not take hold. ‘The goal of art was seen to be to pare a work down to a minimal visual language in order to establish its purity’, and caused radical formalist tendencies in the 1950s and 1960s, which rejected all links to spirituality and transcendence, because the modernist aesthetics dismissed everything slightly theological.<sup>299</sup> Then, the movement had to encounter the formation of new movements: Pop Art and Conceptual Art. These currents drove the formalists even further in their quest for purity, rejecting every notion of a higher power or plane of being. However, spirituality, and consequently religion as well, can be seen as ‘an ever-latent condition of consciousness,’<sup>300</sup> and would prove to be indispensable. Its dismissal emptied the sublime to the point of becoming obsolete. What the artists of the 1950s and ‘60s had forgotten or probably just had chosen to cast aside because of its European origin, was Kant’s aforementioned theory that the sublime appealed to the capacity of the human mind to become conscious of the unimaginable, to reach a level of pure reason. Kant imagined the sublime to be found in formless objects, ‘while yet we add to this *unboundedness* the thought

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<sup>295</sup> Newman (2003), 581.

<sup>296</sup> Newman (2003), 581-582.

<sup>297</sup> Newman (2003), 582.

<sup>298</sup> On this subject, the exact why and how, of the workings of Newman’s works and their relation to time and space, I will elaborate more later in this thesis.

<sup>299</sup> Morley (2010); As we will come to discover later on in this chapter, Lyotard deemed Newman to be a postmodern artist at heart. So while Newman’s work inhabits modernist qualities (such as the emphasis on (seemingly) formalist qualities, the medium-specific preference and the rejection of the spiritual), one must be careful with haphazard characterisations.

<sup>300</sup> Bell (2013), 9.

of its totality'.<sup>301</sup> In this sense, the sublime outrages our powers of comprehension<sup>302</sup>, but is not absolutely unreachable and not without any sense of there being something *else*. It was therefore no surprise that when the Americans found themselves stuck, the much-needed anti-movement came from European radical philosophers. Nearly four decades later, the contemporary search for infinity on the basis of a very old idea - undiscouraged by Newman's claims - gained new grounds in the neo-Kantian writings of the French postmodern philosopher Jean-François Lyotard (1924-1998). In a period of rapid technological and political developments (much as there had been in Burke's age), which exposed nearly every inch of the known world and, indispensably, exploited it, the sublime again appealed to the imagination of writers, artists and philosophers.<sup>303</sup> However, its meaning had and has indubitably changed.<sup>304</sup> What did sublimity mean in the days of Lyotard?

### The Postmodern Sublime – Jean-François Lyotard

‘‘The sublime’ is a concept, and concepts belong more properly to writers who theorise [sic.] than makers of things to look at’, Julian Bell, artist, one of the contributors to another recent Tate research project on the sublime, ‘The Art of the Sublime’ (initiated in 2008), wrote.<sup>305</sup> Because of the fact that ‘[w]ith regard to a postmodern public, Newman can pass for the ‘vestige of a romantic metaphysics’’, philosophers, such as Lyotard, eagerly discussed Newman's work.<sup>306</sup> Lyotard recaptured and enriched the sublime with reference to what he deemed to be postmodern art. It is important to note that he did so from a predominantly Kantian point of view. He wrote a series of treatises and essays about his day and age, a period he referred to as ‘postmodernity’. Most importantly, he contemplated the consequences of the entrée of the age of postmodernity regarding to the arts. In 1979 he wrote *The Postmodern Condition*, a now famous book on a subject which he, some years later in 1991, revisited in a collection of essays titled *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*. One of these essays, ‘The Sublime and the Avant-Garde’, is possibly Lyotard's most famous essay on the

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<sup>301</sup> Shaw (2006), 78.

<sup>302</sup> Shaw (2006), 78.

<sup>303</sup> Hoekstra (2015), 13.

<sup>304</sup> Knolle (2015), 11.

<sup>305</sup> Bell (2013), 10-11; Bell is an artist himself and his article is therefore not always the most objective. Some of his contemplations I found very useful nonetheless.

<sup>306</sup> R. Shiff quoted in Leeman (2011).

topic of the sublime. Lyotard's most illustrious statement must be his rejection of the grand modern narrative:

The 'postmodern' that Lyotard presented was marked by a collapse of cohesive 'grand narratives' and as such was a development to embrace, since regimes on every level - political, cultural, epistemological - needed to be confronted with their own limits, the borderlines at which they ceased operating.<sup>307</sup>

Lyotard argued that sublime art should present the unrepresentable<sup>308</sup>, a confrontational quality which he recognized in the works of Newman and other modernists. Newman, to whose practices and theories Lyotard devoted the separate essay called 'Newman: The Instant', once said: '[t]he story of modern painting is always told as a struggle for and against space.... What is all the clamour over space? It is all too esoteric for me'.<sup>309</sup> Lyotard recognized qualities in Newman's oeuvre which - in his opinion - surpassed or even rejected the 'restrictions' of modernism.<sup>310</sup> What cannot be understood (in the arts), confronts, according to Lyotard, our understanding of the conceptual limitations by which we live.<sup>311</sup> This idea of shock because of a confrontation, first implemented by Burke and Kant - for Burke, shock had an empirical character, for Kant it was transcendental - and adopted by Newman, made for the appearance of new and deliberately radical and confrontational artistic acts.<sup>312</sup> I have touched upon this in the previous chapter: what cannot be phrased or proportioned is unrepresentable.<sup>313</sup> What does 'presenting the unrepresentable' mean exactly? To find out, we must study Lyotard's postmodern sublime theory in full. A quick recap of the history of the sublime provides us with the necessary context.

The romantic sublime represented 'the value of autonomous individuality', and, came modernity, with the two world wars (and later the events of nine-eleven), this 'imperialistic assertion of self was taken to the extreme', according to Wawrzinek.<sup>314</sup> As Newman said in 1969: '[y]ou must realize that twenty years ago we felt the moral crisis of a world in shambles, a world devastated by a great depression and a fierce world war', which made it impossible to continue painting 'flowers, reclining nudes and people playing the cello'.<sup>315</sup> He

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<sup>307</sup> Bell (2013), 11.

<sup>308</sup> Bell (2013), 11.

<sup>309</sup> Newman quoted in Crowther (1984), 52, original source: Thomas Hess, *Barnett Newman*, Tate Gallery Publications, London 1972, p. 47,

<sup>310</sup> Crowther (1984), 52; Genter (2011), 165-166.

<sup>311</sup> Bell (2013), 11.

<sup>312</sup> Bell (2013), 1, 11.

<sup>313</sup> Shaw (2006), 128.

<sup>314</sup> Wawrzinek (2008), 17.

<sup>315</sup> Newman quoted in Genter (2011), 165, original source: Newman's response to reverend Thomas F.

was also quoted saying that, in the light of these events, ‘the self, terrible and constant is for me the subject-matter of painting’.<sup>316</sup> He and his fellow artists had to start from scratch again, and in the beginning, ‘in order to gain an analytic lens with which to confront [...] global catastrophe,’<sup>317</sup> they turned to natural phenomena. The interest in biology, and for Newman also botany and ornithology, and natural sciences in general, linked their practices to romanticism.<sup>318</sup> The manner in which they chose to do so, however, made all the difference. Rothko, for example, searched for ‘biological immortality’: he ‘traced the rise of man’s consciousness back to a primordial essence’.<sup>319</sup> However, throughout the years to come, they took it further, reaching the level of abstraction we now immediately think of when hearing the names Newman or Rothko.

Coming into postmodernity, Lyotard, as one of postmodernity’s main protagonists, rejected all the boundaries the practice of starting from scratch could have brought with it. He discovered that ‘[m]odernity is constitutionally and ceaselessly pregnant with its postmodernity’.<sup>320</sup> This means that both modernity and postmodernity should not be identified and defined by clearly circumscribed historical entities. Just like the Romantic period and the age of Enlightenment, they cross, overlap and clash simultaneously. Periodization, wrote Lyotard, is however one of modernity’s structural obsessions.<sup>321</sup> When we read about and speak of postmodernity, ‘the postmodern’, and especially when we assign it to an object or situation as an identity marker, it is thus important to keep in mind that Lyotard stated:

Postmodernity is not a new age, but the rewriting of some of the features claimed by modernity, and first of all modernity’s claim to ground its legitimacy on the project of liberating humanity as a whole through science and technology<sup>322</sup>

This rewriting and therefore reworking of traditional notions, thus, was already happening during modernity itself<sup>323</sup> and continued into postmodernism. Modernity and postmodernity

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Mathews’ “The Problem of Religious Content in Contemporary Art.”, both published in *Revolution, Place, and Symbol: Journal of the First Congress on Religion, Architecture, and the Visual Arts*, papers of a congress in New York and Montreal, 26 August–4 September 1967, pp. 117-29. Published 1969.

<sup>316</sup> Newman quoted in Crowther (1984), 52, original source: Harold Rosenberg, *Barnett Newman*, Abrams, New York 1978, p. 21.

<sup>317</sup> Genter (2011), 166.

<sup>318</sup> Their style is referred to as romantic modernism. Genter (2011), 166; Their interest in these matters could also be linked to a fascination for (divine) creation.

<sup>319</sup> Genter (2011), 166.

<sup>320</sup> Lyotard (c) (1991), 25.

<sup>321</sup> Lyotard (c) (1991), 25.

<sup>322</sup> Lyotard (c) (1991), 34.

<sup>323</sup> Lyotard (c) (1991), 34.

thus cannot be seen as each other's absolute opposites.<sup>324</sup> Postmodernism, according to Lyotard, is additionally an event, not a period or movement. It does not work 'to confirm the familiar or to reveal the transcendental but rather [works] to precipitate the emergence of the 'now'.'<sup>325</sup>

We must note that Lyotard never advocated any 'particular form of visual sensibility [...] while he clove to his lineage of verbally articulate avant-gardists.' Therefore, 'an intellectually imposing, politically stirring<sup>326</sup> description of 'the sublime' entered into international 'artspeak' – its importation reflecting a widespread 1980s vogue for French theory.<sup>327</sup> Lyotard's sublime theory not only reflected on and put in perspective the past and current events, it also shaped the future artistic creation.

To understand his theory more fully, we must again travel back in time about two hundred years and once more revisit Burke's sublime theory, who also disparaged, as we know, visual works of art, albeit for a different reason. As previously discussed, Burke condemned painting as a vehicle for the sublime because of the limitation caused by realistic and naturalistic figuration.<sup>328</sup> Traditionally:

[a]ccounts of the sublime routinely describe an experience in which the appearance of a sublime object precipitates a sense of the limits of perception, thought or language, of a power or reality that exists beyond the merely human and, at the conclusion of the sublime experience, of one's own unique individuality.<sup>329</sup>

As time progresses, and mainly by 'fault' of German Idealism, the sublime had been subsumed under the principle that all thought and all reality forms a (hierarchical) system.<sup>330</sup> According to Lyotard, however, the sublime is formless and (hence) unrepresentable<sup>331</sup>, and therefore knows nothing of order, let alone hierarchy. This idea of the sublime residing in formlessness was first introduced by Kant. As explained earlier, Kant understood the sublime to frustrate our 'powers of comprehension': 'the sublime is 'to be found in the formless object ... while yet we add to this unboundedness the thought of its totality'.<sup>332</sup> Shaw adds: '[t]he

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<sup>324</sup> The classical age, however, would be the perfect opposite of modernity, also since this *is* a finalized period, Lyotard (c) (1991), 25.

<sup>325</sup> Shaw (2006), 123.

<sup>326</sup> The political side of sublime theory is one worthy of in-depth studying. However, for this thesis it is not essentially relevant.

<sup>327</sup> Bell (2013), 12.

<sup>328</sup> Lyotard (d) (1991), 85.

<sup>329</sup> Wawrzinek (2008), 33.

<sup>330</sup> Lyotard (d) (2013), 84.

<sup>331</sup> Lyotard (c) (1991), 33.

<sup>332</sup> Kant quoted in Shaw (2006), 78. Original source: Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. Walter S.

sublime [...] refers to things which appear either formless (a storm at sea; a vast mountain range) or which have form but, for reasons of size, exceed our ability to perceive such form. In either case, the object is considered formless because [Kant] ‘we cannot unify its elements ... in sense intuition’.<sup>333</sup> We can, however, acknowledge size because of our ‘a priori’ knowledge, and it is the sublime that helps us reach this level of pure reason. This automatically stipulates that the sublime does not fit in modernity’s favoured rigidly figurative aesthetic. This is why Barnett Newman’s art and sublime theory were very important to Lyotard in explaining his views:

For Newman, the escape does not take the form of transgressing the limits established for figurative space by Renaissance and Baroque art, but of reducing the event-bound time in which the legendary or historical scene took place to a representation of the pictorial object itself. It is chromatic matter alone, and its relationship with the material [...] and the lay-out.<sup>334</sup>

Generally, Lyotard stated, artists, and especially abstract-expressionists, are obsessed with the question of time.<sup>335</sup> Remember here what Kant understood to be mathematically sublime: when the mind is overwhelmed by spatial or *temporal* magnitude. We saw this in Friedrich’s, but especially in Turner’s works also. Whether time (and space) stretches on infinitely, as it does in Friedrich’s work, or is (albeit momentarily because of the suggestion of movement) captured and stopped in its violent tracks in Turner’s vortexes, time and its progression are essential and inevitable. In postmodern society, time is all we have (left) according to Lyotard. What sets Newman’s work (and that of other abstract expressionists) apart from other modern works is the manner in which the idea of time is incorporated or carried out by the works of art themselves.<sup>336</sup> The ‘warping of time and space’ Newman produces, feels deeply spiritual to Lyotard.<sup>337</sup> Along the lines of this obsession with time, Lyotard furthermore proposes five ‘sites of time’ included in (the appreciation of) a work of art. First, the time of production, secondly, the time of consumption, thirdly, the time of the story told, fourthly, the time of circulation and fifthly and most importantly, the time the painting *is*.<sup>338</sup>

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Pluhar, Indianapolis and Cambridge Massachusetts 1987, 98.

<sup>333</sup> Shaw (2006), 78; Kant quoted in Shaw (2006), 78. Original source: D.W. Crawford, *Kant’s Aesthetic Theory*, Madison 1974), 99.

<sup>334</sup> The material being the (possibly treated) canvas and the lay-out meaning scale, proportion, etc., Lyotard (d) (1991), 85.

<sup>335</sup> Lyotard (d) (1991), 78.

<sup>336</sup> Lyotard (d) (1991), 78; ‘My paintings are concerned neither with the manipulation of space, nor with the image, but with the sensation of time’ - Newman quoted in Lyotard (d) (1991), 86, original source: Barnett Newman, ‘Prologue for a new Aesthetic’ (notes), in: Thomas Hess, *Barnett Newman*, New York 1971, p. 74.

<sup>337</sup> Shaw (2006), 121.

<sup>338</sup> Lyotard (d) (1991), 78.

Since Newman's works, such as *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1951) (fig. 33), are - to borrow Hazlitt's phrase once again - 'pictures of nothing', the time to consume the painting is infinite.<sup>339</sup> 'The purpose of a painting by Newman is not to show that duration is in excess of consciousness, but to be the occurrence, the moment which has arrived,' stated Lyotard.<sup>340</sup>

Newman's work allows its spirituality, as Lyotard felt it, to present itself: it announces nothing and is therefore the announcement in itself.<sup>341</sup> Artworks, in this fashion, have become 'sites of engagement'.<sup>342</sup> This is the main difference between works by Turner, who gestured to something beyond his work, and Newman's, whose work is 'subject matter in itself'.<sup>343</sup> 'Normally', an audience consumes, so to say, what it sees on a painting. Whether it is a still life or for example a genre- or landscape-painting, does not matter: the gaze of the spectator is guided and defined by means of perspective, colour, (some form of) figuration and the moderate or at least agreeable size of the painting, making looking at a painting by definition a confined temporality. Modern painting was thus expected to conform to a 'communication.structure'-model [sic.], in which the painting performs the role of a messenger.<sup>344</sup>

Both Turner's and Friedrich's paintings were already (slight) exceptions on this 'communication.structure'-tradition. Eliasson, who deems Turner a large influence on his work in general<sup>345</sup>, dove into Turner's use of colour in 2013 and in response created the *Turner Colour Experiments* (fig. 34). In these circular works, Eliasson united the results of his efforts to analyse 'pigments, paint production and application of colour in order to mix paint in the exact colour for each nanometre of the visible light spectrum',<sup>346</sup> just as Turner had done before him (fig. 16). Eliasson explained that because of Turner's 'radicalisation' of his vision of the 'ephemera', his audience was put to work through his form of abstraction.

In the *Turner colour experiments*, I've isolated light and colour in Turner's works in order to extract his sense of ephemera from the objects of desire that his paintings have become. The schematic arrays of colours on round canvases generate a feeling of endlessness and allow the viewer to take in the artwork in a decentralised, meandering way.<sup>347</sup>

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<sup>339</sup> Lyotard (d) (1991), 79.

<sup>340</sup> Lyotard (d) (1991), 79.

<sup>341</sup> Lyotard (d) (1991), 79.

<sup>342</sup> Wawrzinek (2008), 29.

<sup>343</sup> Shaw (2006), 121.

<sup>344</sup> Lyotard (d) (1991), 81.

<sup>345</sup> 'Olafur Eliasson: Turner colour experiments' (n.d.).

<sup>346</sup> 'Olafur Eliasson: Turner colour experiments' (n.d.).

<sup>347</sup> 'Olafur Eliasson: Turner colour experiments' (n.d.).

The spectator had to make sense of the swirling colours, and possibly even tried to find themselves in Turner's paintings.<sup>348</sup>

Finding oneself in a work of art can, in my view, have multiple meanings, the first being that one could look for a point of perspective, something to hold onto, like an identification with Friedrich's 'Rückenfigure'. Secondly, one could search for oneself in a Turner painting on a more transcendental level: a level of spiritual and/or emotional recognition or connection. In the case of an abstract-expressionist painting and especially Newman's works, the matter is taken further: from then on, it was all about the addressee.<sup>349</sup> With Newman, the audience is left to the impossible task (according to Lyotard), to consume an occurrence instead of a neatly confined scene: the painting is simply a presence. There is however one thing that a spectator could distil from this experience: its meaning.<sup>350</sup> This seems paradoxical: how does one attribute meaning to a work in which there is no apparent subject matter? Newman, and Lyotard by extension, nevertheless emphasize the importance of subject matter. Otherwise, both argued, a painting is nothing more than ornamental. This begs the question what it is, then, this subject matter that sets the Newman and his fellow American abstract-expressionists apart from everyone else.

Lyotard, prompted by a similar statement by Thomas B. Hess (1920-1978), an American art historian whom Lyotard clearly and understandably<sup>351</sup> valued as a trustworthy source on the subject of Newman, declared 'artistic creation' to be Newman's subject matter.<sup>352</sup> He linked artistic creation to Creation with a capital 'c', symbolizing a creation such as in the biblical Genesis. Accordingly, this led to the deciphering of Newman's works as *beginnings*: inaugurations of the sensible world, a flash of determinacy in the midst of the indeterminate.<sup>353</sup>

## Chaos or the Abyss

John Milton designed in his *Paradise Lost* a special realm in between his Heaven and Hell

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<sup>348</sup> 'TateShots: Olafur Eliasson on Turner' (n.d.), 02:00-02:30.

<sup>349</sup> Lyotard (e) (1991), 97.

<sup>350</sup> Lyotard (d) (1991), 80.

<sup>351</sup> Hess was one of Newman's most careful and studious commentators, Crowther (1984), 52.

<sup>352</sup> Lyotard (d) (1991), 81.

<sup>353</sup> Lyotard (d) (1991), 82; However - a point I will more elaborately discuss later in chapter four - it is important to understand that Newman did not attribute creation to a higher power. The power to create resides, he theorised, in man himself. He was indeed searching for a depiction of creation, but turned away from history, myth and legend and localized it within human beings themselves. We create our own world, our own moment, our own now.

(fig. 35). Satan, the protagonist, persuades the personification ‘Sin’ to open the gates of hell so that he can start on his quest to Heaven. When he passes the gates of Hell, he enters the realm of Chaos and the Night<sup>354</sup>, a place of perpetual darkness, in which time does not exist: it is a total void in which Satan can only find his way by following the golden chain by which Earth is suspended from Heaven. This void - this chaos - knows no rules, no causality, and especially no order. The personification of Chaos, in this spirit, expresses the desire to destroy all instances of order.<sup>355</sup> It is incomprehensible, but yet, by following the chain, escapable. Nevertheless, in its exact place, between Hell and Heaven, or ‘God, who is infinite light’, it is unsettling. It is disturbing, and has a nature of disruption.

The one thing that can be deduced from sublime theory in general and especially from Lyotard’s writings is that the sublime is like Milton’s void. The sublime, and especially the postmodern sublime, must be disruptive of all systems. The beginning of the world, which I referred to at the end of the previous paragraph, and natural violence, are so too. Where romantic and modern artists could borrow (forms of) support-systems by for example Burke and Kant - their golden chains, so to say - postmodern artists striving for the sublime had to abandon all known forms of aid since they felt all former sources of possible help had been exhausted. Seemingly inevitably, postmodern culture - as had modern culture (but possibly in a lesser degree) - was gradually transformed into a fully industrialized and automatized culture by technical developments.<sup>356</sup> This developing culture accounted for all known systems: nothing could be unknown or unexpected, or questioned. Technological and sociological development, when handled without care, could create a particular form of hell.

What *value* is, what *sure* is, what *man* is, these questions are taken to be dangerous and shut away again pretty fast. It is said that they open the way to ‘anything goes’, ‘anything is possible’, ‘all is worthless’. Look, they add, what happens to the ones who go beyond this limit: Nietzsche taken hostage by fascist mythology, Heidegger a Nazi, and so on...<sup>357</sup>

Everything has to preferably be pre-calculated or on its way to being pre-calculated. Everything needs to be systematized: it has to be easy to digest, and to ‘be communicable’; ‘talk about humans in a human way, address yourself to human beings, if they enjoy receiving you, then they will receive you’.<sup>358</sup> In his introduction to *The Inhuman*, Lyotard confessed his fear that this ‘movement of restoration’, which centred on ‘norm-bound public reception’

<sup>354</sup> Both also personifications, Milton (1985), book II.

<sup>355</sup> Rumrich (1995), 1035.

<sup>356</sup> Lyotard (c) (1991), 34.

<sup>357</sup> Lyotard (a) (1991), 1.

<sup>358</sup> Lyotard (a) (1991), 2.

would destroy spontaneity (in art).<sup>359</sup> The humanists tried to eradicate avant-garde art, and its creators, who were wishing to be ‘inhuman’<sup>360</sup> to escape all norm-bound limits, were purposefully side-tracked as well.<sup>361</sup> This movement can be attributed to the humanists, who, after the horrors of the Second World War - which could be accounted for, in their opinion, by all things inhuman, such as technological development and the incommunicable - tried to gain control over human morality.<sup>362</sup> This meant the instalment of an environment of structure, in which safety and unencumbered progress of daily life stood at the basis: basically an environment of (Burke’s) indifference. By means of clear communication, rules, and a fast speed of development and therefore living, ‘[t]he system rather has the consequence of causing the forgetting of what escapes it’.<sup>363</sup> Lyotard feared that this would compromise the properly transcendental motive central to the analysis of the sublime<sup>364</sup>, for critical (existential) questions were now banned from the public and artistic debate for the sake of getting back on one’s feet without being distracted once again.

Lyotard found this situation harrowing. What if the humanists made us inhuman, but we are not aware of this?<sup>365</sup> What exactly *is* inhumanity? ‘Art remains loyal to human kind uniquely through its inhumanity in regard to it,’ said the German sociologist and philosopher Theodor Adorno (1903-1969) once.<sup>366</sup> Lyotard points out that even the only allowed means of shortly escaping the conformity of an imposed system, by which he means art, literature and philosophy, were now (and maybe are still) becoming structured under the common denominator ‘institutions’: everything is structured, confined and systematized.<sup>367</sup> There is no limit to the developments determining the way in which we live our lives in the postmodern world, except the end of life on earth caused by the end of the sun. Therefore, there is not even an idea or ideal behind the current development, argues Lyotard: only a cosmological change - because scientific developments decreased the possibility of a fatal biological change - can disrupt society’s systematically enveloping course. Only the death of the sun will silence all rational thought.<sup>368</sup> Minute moments of escape must therefore be offered by the

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<sup>359</sup> Lyotard (a) (1991), 1.

<sup>360</sup> Appolinaire quoted in Lyotard (a) (1991), 2.

<sup>361</sup> Lyotard (1) (1991), 2.

<sup>362</sup> Lyotard (a) (1991), 1.

<sup>363</sup> The sublime could only possibly hide in those things and thoughts that escape the systems of daily life, since the sublime has to catch one off guard. Lyotard (a) (1991), 2.

<sup>364</sup> Lyotard (a) (1991), 1.

<sup>365</sup> Lyotard (a) (1991), 2.

<sup>366</sup> Lyotard (a) (1991), 2.

<sup>367</sup> Lyotard (a) (1991), 3.

<sup>368</sup> Lyotard (a) (1991), 7.

unexpected, which has led to experiments in art and presentation which destroys the consensus of taste in order to create a shared collective ‘nostalgia for the unattainable’.<sup>369</sup> The unattainable - originally a concept of a religious or spiritual character - thus had to be reclaimed in a world in which it was felt that rationalization had been carried through too excessively, creating new sources of fear, infinity and unpredictable consequences. The sublime also ‘escapes’ all ‘demands for universal communication’<sup>370</sup>: it must not become a system in itself. Opening the gates of hell, of our current society, to venture into the unsettling, disturbing and disruptive void only to maybe catch a glimpse of heaven, is our escape.<sup>371</sup>

In summary, Lyotard’s sublime thus has four cornerstones. The first holds that the sublime is unrepresentable and therefore formless; the second that the sublime happens in a sudden occurrence, like an epiphany or Annunciation and therefore contains some degree of spiritual or religious connotation; and third, that the sublime is the indeterminate, which means it is absolutely infinite and therefore disruptive within the confined limits of (post)modern society: it happens in an immediate moment, the now.<sup>372</sup> Note that these three factors are, relatively, not all too different from the romantic sublime. The main differences are that, first, there is no stipulation of formal necessities, such as light and dark, which Burke did propose. Secondly, as we have seen, during the eighteenth and nineteenth century the sublime was expressed through representation in (landscape) painting, while the postmodern sublime does not avoid direct confrontation: it is a direct presentation of the ineffable.<sup>373</sup> Newman needed his zips to define the space, which could otherwise not be identified as a recognizable space without alluding to any literal representations. The fourth cornerstone is the very difference between Newman and Lyotard and what separates Lyotard’s theory from traditional romantic sublime theories the most: Newman’s sublime stimulated the constancy of the self<sup>374</sup>, while Lyotard advocated the disappearance of the self.<sup>375</sup> Lyotard dematerialized the art object. He saw the viewer as the work of art’s protagonist, the artist

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<sup>369</sup> Shaw (2006), 123.

<sup>370</sup> Battersby (2007), 37.

<sup>371</sup> However, as we will come to learn, one of the main subjects of this research, Eliasson, advocates for the opposite of escapism when it comes to art and the sublime.

<sup>372</sup> Wittgenstein: we can only experience the world as it is at the exact moment of your experience; ‘no part of our experience is a priori’, our logic - our reason - however is, Wittgenstein (2015), 87-88, 72-73.

<sup>373</sup> This reminds us of Wittgenstein’s philosophy as previously discussed at the end of chapter two: ‘what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence’, Wittgenstein (2015), 9.

<sup>374</sup> Newman never problematized or effectively defined the term ‘self’.

<sup>375</sup> Battersby (2007), 17.

only a humble servant: he extended the narrative of the work of art to the viewer, instead of limiting it to the artwork itself.<sup>376</sup>

Postmodernism rejects all forms of finality in favour of transformation, which poses the question what the ‘self’ actually is.<sup>377</sup> Everything in life is determined by its relation to time: there logically is a before and an after, an action and a reaction, a causality. Every form invites the creation of a new form: a habit which proves hard to shake.<sup>378</sup> The sublime, however, was there before the beginning, it is the beginning itself as much as it is also simultaneously the end, everything after the end and everything in between. Maybe it is alike God’s famous command which I have mentioned before as the most sublime line of all: ‘Let there be light’ (Genesis 1:3). God’s declaration was depicted by Newman in his *The Command* (1946) (fig. 36). The sublime, like God’s decision and Newman’s zip, happens suddenly, it is unpredictable, intangible and the end of life (if only for a moment) as we know it, such as it was when God declared the existence of light. Questions about general existence and our unconsciousness automatically arise, causing anxiety: what if there is no continuation or, equally disturbing, what if there is? The sublime could never be the absolute present instant<sup>379</sup>, because being the present instant would promise a definite continuation. It ‘simply is a ‘temporal ecstasy’, and one must embrace the momentary but essential disarming of all thought.<sup>380</sup> The sublime cannot be defined by consciousness, because it is ‘infinitely simple’ and must not be overthought<sup>381</sup>: it is a happening one must quietly, and will possibly at first involuntarily, undergo.<sup>382</sup> With Lyotard<sup>383</sup> and the avant-gardists, the character of the sublime had changed. The postmodern sublime is the distraction of the mind from time.<sup>384</sup>

What does this mean for contemporary aesthetics? Eliasson has said that artists should

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<sup>376</sup> ‘Olafur Eliasson, Royal Academy Schools annual lecture’ (2016), 32:30-34.38; Newman was also very concerned with the physical positioning of his spectator. He proposed that the ideal manner of looking at his works was to stand directly in front of the work ‘so as to undergo an overwhelming physical and emotional experience that gave them a sense of themselves and their place in the universe’, ‘Exhibition: Barnett Newman’ (n.d.).

<sup>377</sup> Wawrzinek (2008), 28.

<sup>378</sup> ‘A period of slackening’, Wawrzinek (2008), 51.

<sup>379</sup> Lyotard (e) (1991), 90.

<sup>380</sup> Lyotard (e) (1991), 90.

<sup>381</sup> Lyotard (e) (1991), 90; This is an oppositely different viewing point than Kant’s, for whom the sublime, as we now know, meant the nearly impossible and therefore very unpleasant stretch of the mind’s capacities.

<sup>382</sup> Lyotard (e) (1991), 93.

<sup>383</sup> We must however tread along a little carefully, says Bell, for when ‘scratchy ageing philosophers decide to address themselves to the theme of art’, such as Lyotard, they avoid to actually look at the artworks and ‘make it their business to disparage’ works of art, Bell (2013), 12.

<sup>384</sup> Lyotard (e) (1991), 107.

not be afraid of bold statements<sup>385</sup>, and accordingly it seems to mean bigger, greater, and more of everything: ‘when we talk about the contemporary sublime, we are very largely talking about the way that artists have tried to fill that bag with appropriately huge subjects’.<sup>386</sup> Mind that the quote is about subjects, not objects: the postmodern age has indeed seen the creation of enormous works of art, but it is mainly about the figurative size of the subject matter. Artists seek to depict or capture concepts, feelings, anxieties, rather than actual scenes. As examples of small works of possibly sublime art, I would like to pose an early example in the form of Marcel Jean’s *Spectre of the Gardenia* (1936), (fig. 37), the more recent *Unland: audible in the mouth* (1998), part of the ‘Unland’-series by Doris Salcedo (fig. 38-39) and Anish Kapoor’s *Descent into Limbo* (1992) (fig. 40). In the case of Marcel Jean’s small sculpture, the juxtaposition of the ‘anxious portrait’ with the ‘tactile surface of black cloth, faded red velvet, and zippers’ charges the work ‘with the eroticism of imagined touch’, rendering it uncanny and therefore rather heavy in its affective bearing.<sup>387</sup> Salcedo’s handmade tables, in which she and her volunteers hand-drilled numerous small holes to weave human hair through the wooden surface, embody the testimonies of witnesses of violent events.<sup>388</sup> The works are unnerving and carry a heavy burden:

While Doris Salcedo’s sculptures are concerned with the victims of violence in her own country, they are not bound by this frame of reference. In a much wider sense they deal with the life of anyone who has been bereaved and the manner in which those individuals’ experiences can be conveyed and understood by others. At the same time, Salcedo is preoccupied by the formal language of sculpture and its material presence for the viewer.<sup>389</sup>

Kapoor’s *Descent into Limbo* is another prime example of a relatively small sublime work. The apparent depth of the hole in the ground, together with its looming darkness, makes its audience nervous and careful. Works such as Jean’s, Salcedo’s and Kapoor’s prove that works do not have to be enormous to convey a possibly sublime message.

New experiments with art, aesthetics and sublimity have procured basically infinite artistic possibilities, but these possibilities have had their consequences and unanticipated struggles. As referred to previously, Newman wrote in his *The Sublime is Now*, that the Impressionists, but also the Cubists, were only able to achieve a ‘transfer of values’.<sup>390</sup> He further thought that ‘the elements of sublimity in the revolution we know as modern art, exist

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<sup>385</sup> Olafur Eliasson, Royal Academy Schools annual lecture (2016), 43:48.

<sup>386</sup> Bell (2013), 4, 10.

<sup>387</sup> ‘Marcel Jean’ (n.d.).

<sup>388</sup> Barson (2004).

<sup>389</sup> Barson (2004).

<sup>390</sup> Newman (2003), 581.

in its effort to escape the pattern rather than in the realization of a new experience'.<sup>391</sup> Lyotard stated that, because of all the efforts made to escape tradition, '[f]or the last century, the arts have not had the beautiful as their main concern, but something which has to do with the sublime'.<sup>392</sup>

In distracting the mind from time, shock, as was first introduced by Burke and Kant in a natural sense, was key. 'Shock is, *par excellence*, the evidence of (something) *happening*, rather than nothing, suspended privation'.<sup>393</sup> And artists tried to shock us with the unconventional instead of the natural. However, '[e]ven Mondrian [...] succeeded only in raising the white plain and the right angle into a realm of sublimity, where the sublime paradoxically becomes an absolute of perfect sensations'.<sup>394</sup> In casting aside every degree of figuration, harmony and perfection (and thus of the beautiful, as it is understood in postmodernity), the postmodern sublime strives for freedom of the mind. This postmodern sacrifice of the beautiful in favour of the mind has a major disadvantage. Unconsciously, and ironically in a very modern manner, the artists started to anticipate a certain public reaction: haste had again caught up and passed the concept of the quiet and open mind-set essential for a sublime experience. To determine what will exactly happen beforehand, is restricting<sup>395</sup>: an audience anticipating the sublime, is deprived of exactly that, but it apparently happens quite frequently. Eliasson said that he felt that the contemporary audience has become lazy: actually working for something has been taken away from us. Everything is 'pre-digested': we are used that things will work for us, instead of the other way around.<sup>396</sup>

Accustomed to the artistic climate of the last decades, Den Hartog Jager's surprise upon entering the Turbine Hall in 2004 was twofold. On the one hand he was surprised to have stumbled upon such an obvious case of (romantic) sublimity after the years of art following Newman's formalism and Lyotard's postmodernity, in which people, as they had to the romantic sublime about two centuries earlier, had become accustomed to the new manners in which artists allowed the sublime to manifest itself in their artworks. On the other hand, he was surprised because *The Weather Project* is so undeniably consumable, which is contradictory, a point which will be elaborated on in the next chapter. It does not fit in the

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<sup>391</sup> Newman (2003), 581.

<sup>392</sup> Lyotard (f) (1991), 135.

<sup>393</sup> Lyotard (e) (1991), 100.

<sup>394</sup> Newman (2003), 581.

<sup>395</sup> Shaw (2006), 122.

<sup>396</sup> 'TateShots: Olafur Eliasson on Turner' (n.d.), 02:00-02:40.

contemporary zeitgeist, for postmodern art had generally isolated itself from reality.<sup>397</sup> Furthermore, it forms a mix between figuration and abstraction<sup>398</sup>, as we also will discover in the next section. *The Weather Project* ‘reached out across class and geographical divides, using perpetual conundrums to dislodge received certainties about our relationship to art, our bodies, and our environment’.<sup>399</sup>

These are interesting paradoxes and ideas. The postmodern sublime goes back to the early stages of the sublime, with its fascination for disruption and destabilisation.<sup>400</sup> These characteristics all seem to conform to not only the contemporary standard for sublime evocation, but also older traditions. During the romantic sublime, the self was discovered; the modern sublime exploited it, and in the postmodern sublime, the self is in progress.<sup>401</sup> It has adapted to the secular postmodern world and is therefore still completely different from the romantic sublime. What is the status of the sublime in our day and age, almost thirty years after Lyotard’s statements? Some now even speak of post-postmodernity, or anti-modernity. What do the similarities to the romantic sublime entail? Is the sublime reaching towards us from across the abyss, after being lost again, as it had been on numerous instances before?

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<sup>397</sup> ‘Who decides what reality is?’ - Eliasson in his TEDtalk (2009), 01:54.

<sup>398</sup> Den Hartog Jager (2013), 8, 11, 14-15.

<sup>399</sup> Camhi (2008).

<sup>400</sup> Wawrzinek (2008), 47.

<sup>401</sup> Wawrzinek (2008), 51.

## 4. Contemporary Syndromes

Olafur Eliasson – *The Weather Project* (2003)

Only rarely do the things that terrified our ancestors scare the pants off us. Consider the sun, a fiery fist of hydrogen and helium on which all life depends. Once upon a time, sun worship required human sacrifice, a generous letting of blood. In this century, all it demands is a bottle of factor 25 and a pair of sunglasses.<sup>402</sup>

People are prone to take light for granted, and forget that reality is or can be constructed.<sup>403</sup>

As we have seen, the sublime has fallen victim to both these human inclinations. Nowadays, according to Simon Morley, the sublime is used in five different ways. The first is that the sublime is used to describe the unrepresentable in art, secondly, it is used to describe experiences of transcendence, thirdly, the concept of terror, fourthly, the unsettling feeling of the uncanny and lastly, the sublime has the possibility to induce an altered state of consciousness. All these usages come out of the two most dominant subjects in today's world (which do not seem all too different from those of the romantic period): nature and technology. Morley also recognizes an all-enveloping need for experiences of self-transcendence, a:

... desire to define a moment when social and psychological codes and structures no longer bind us, where we reach a sort of borderline at which rational thought comes to an end and we suddenly encounter something wholly and perturbingly other.<sup>404</sup>

In this spirit, thus possibly trying to reassert their grip on sublime aesthetics, artists and artistic institutions - possibly unconsciously - had kennelled the sublime around the turn of the twenty-first century.<sup>405</sup> Painting had been eclipsed by other technological possibilities and ideas since Newman and his contemporaries. With our experience, we are now more likely to deem a work by Turner beautiful rather than sublime. This seems inevitable in the process of sublime development: '[it] is part of the logic of the sublime experience itself' that the sublime in painting is eclipsed while painting formerly was the preferred vessel, '[f]or what once may have seemed sublime quickly becomes its opposite - the beautiful'.<sup>406</sup> Repetition harms the evocation of the sublime in causing inevitable habituation. Most of the works we think might inhibit the sublime today, are installations. Nevertheless, as it goes, during the last few decades, the audience started to feel frustrated with all the bombastic and

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<sup>402</sup> The original quote contains a minor spelling error which I chose to correct: 'Only', Cooke (2003).

<sup>403</sup> Eliasson in his personal TateShot, Tateshots (2011), 00:19.

<sup>404</sup> Morley (2010).

<sup>405</sup> Bell (2013), 5.

<sup>406</sup> Morley (2010).

‘megaphonic’<sup>407</sup> sculptures and artistic projects which had ventured outside the museum and gallery walls.<sup>408</sup> These were not always sublime, but often labelled as such. In the twenty-first century, the sublime was therefore met with unease: the idea had become partly merged with daily utterances and consumerism and seemed outdated.<sup>409</sup> The rut of everyday life, the yearning for consumable spectacle, had again domesticated the sublime.

The Danish-Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson (1967- ), notably an Honorary Academician of the Royal Art School<sup>410</sup>, seems to have resurrected actual sublimity by cleverly using the sun. That which is possibly the biggest (unconscious), most mundane influence on our daily lives and so seems to have captured the spiritual in the secular world once again. He made the ordinary extraordinary<sup>411</sup> in an infinitely simple manner. His installation *The Weather Project* (2003) (fig. 10) consists of monofrequency lights, projection foils, haze machines, mirror foil, aluminium and scaffolding<sup>412</sup>, was staged in the imposing Turbine Hall at the Tate Modern at the edge of London’s city centre. Eliasson suspended a semi-circular form made out of hundreds of monofrequency lights (fig. 41), which make any colours others than yellow and black invisible to the eye.<sup>413</sup> The semi-circular shape was reflected by the ceiling, which was covered with mirrors (fig. 42). A thin haze gave the enormous space simultaneously tangible and intangible character. The manner in which the fog filled the room made the space ‘explicit,’<sup>414</sup> but also blurred the edges of the created sun, providing the whole with a transcendental edge and feel, making it seemingly proportion-less.

The work gave new meaning to the contemporary sublime and was a spectacle in itself, despite the (seemingly) modest subject matter. The weather seems one of the most daily matters that exists. Therefore, especially in an often dreary city such as London, it seems a boring, simple and maybe even shallow subject matter. However, when you think about it, the weather is the one thing that constantly and endlessly dominates our lives, sometimes in extreme ways, but oftentimes in a more subtle manner. The scale of its influence might commonly go unnoticed, but that does not mean that it is not ever present nor of enormous influence. The weather dictates how we dress, how we go about our daily practices, and, most

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<sup>407</sup> Bell (2013), 5.

<sup>408</sup> Bell (2013), 4.

<sup>409</sup> Battersby (2007), 3.

<sup>410</sup> Olafur Eliasson, Royal Academy Schools annual lecture (2016).

<sup>411</sup> Cooke (2003).

<sup>412</sup> ‘Olafur Eliasson the Weather Project’ (n.d.).

<sup>413</sup> ‘Olafur Eliasson the Weather Project’ (n.d.); ‘Colour intensifies reality at all times’, Studio Olafur Eliasson (2016), 237.

<sup>414</sup> Eliasson used fog more often in his artistic pursuits for this very reason, Studio Olafur Eliasson (2016), 31.

definitely, how we communicate and socially interchange (both directly and indirectly) with the people and the world around us. The eighteenth-century writer Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) once famously stated: '[i]t is commonly observed, that when two Englishmen meet, their first talk is of the weather; they are in haste to tell each other, what each must already know, that it is hot or cold, bright or cloudy, windy or calm'.<sup>415</sup> The influence of the weather, and the weather as a subject in itself, is in fact unrepresentable, let alone the sun. According to the Tate Modern, Eliasson wanted to take 'this ubiquitous subject in his installation as the basis for exploring ideas about experience, mediation and representation'.<sup>416</sup>

'Perhaps it is to this new [digital (technological)] world, beyond the limits of the physical body and of time and space, that the sublime experience is now migrating'.<sup>417</sup> Perhaps a new golden chain appeared in the chaos-filled postmodern void? The work was quickly, by many of the record-breaking over two million visitors<sup>418</sup> and also by the Tate Modern itself, labelled as 'sublime'. One might argue that this is no more than an interesting 'presentational hook' or a buzzword<sup>419</sup>: '[t]he term has a rather archaic ring, and, to make matters worse, in relation to the philosophy of art means something completely different from in [sic.] ordinary usage, where sublime denotes the wonderful or perfect'.<sup>420</sup>

Since many found *The Weather Project* to be just that, wonderful and perfect, and therefore consumable and conceptually beautiful, what exactly sets it apart from an actual sunset? At its basis lies an existential question (among other question): '[w]hat would the existence of two suns do to our understanding of the universe and ourselves?'.<sup>421</sup> The word 'sublime' literally means 'above the threshold' or more figuratively 'over the limit', when you translate it directly from Latin<sup>422</sup>, and this is what Eliasson created. People seemed 'stoned on light [...] as if we had wandered into a Turner painting and were dancing like his peasant revellers on the banks of some golden ocean'.<sup>423</sup>

Nonetheless, Eliasson seemed to have been concerned with completely different issues than the sublime: the weather, as simple as it is, the question how and why humanity interacts

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<sup>415</sup> 'The Unilever Series: Olafur Eliasson' (n.d.).

<sup>416</sup> 'The Unilever Series: Olafur Eliasson' (n.d.).

<sup>417</sup> Morley (2010).

<sup>418</sup> Prins (2009).

<sup>419</sup> Bell (2013), 1, 10.

<sup>420</sup> Morley (2010).

<sup>421</sup> Studio Olafur Eliasson (2016), 108.

<sup>422</sup> Morley (2010).

<sup>423</sup> Jones (2014).

when the boundaries are changed<sup>424</sup>, and how space could be made tangible.<sup>425</sup> It is the only encounter with nature those in the city have left, plus, the weather still remains beyond the control of human kind.<sup>426</sup> Accordingly, he provided the following explanation for his choice of subject matter:

Every city mediates its own weather. As inhabitants, we have grown accustomed to the weather as mediated by the city. This takes place in numerous ways, on various collective levels ranging from hyper-mediated (or representational) experiences, such as the television weather forecast, to more direct and tangible experiences, like simply getting wet while walking down the street on a rainy day. A level between the two extremes would be sitting inside, looking out of a window onto a sunny or rainy street. The window, as the boundary of one's tactile engagement with the outside, mediates one's experience of the exterior weather accordingly.<sup>427</sup>

Eliasson wanted the audience to take the city with them (figuratively speaking) to see the work, and upon leaving he wanted them to take the (memory of the) work back into the city. Art, in his opinion, should not just be about decorating the world: if that would be art's sole function, it would make the world even worse. Creating works of art, to Eliasson, is about taking the responsibility of creating something that betters the world in any possible fashion.<sup>428</sup>

It is a fact that Eliasson likes to experiment. He 'uses approaches from science, psychology and architecture in order to make the relation between reality, reception and representation visible and perceptible through movement, projection, shadows and mirroring'.<sup>429</sup> Furthermore, by using 'natural' materials, such as water air, mist or ice, he produces 'environments in which visitors simultaneously become active participants of his art'.<sup>430</sup> His exhibition 'BAROQUE BAROQUE' (21 November 2015 – 6 March 2016) in the Vienna Winter Palace, was not only a showcase of Eliasson's innovativeness, but also a prime example of 'a startling marriage of, on the surface, two vastly different aesthetics',<sup>431</sup> as his modern-day works remarkably add to and in some manners even complete the beautifully preserved baroque interior of the historical Winter Palace (fig. 43-44).

*The Weather Project*, inadvertently, seems to exist out of such an unlikely marriage as well, but maybe even one of an even more controversial character. The location is almost

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<sup>424</sup> Petty (2016); Olafur Eliasson in his TEDtalk (2009), 02:53.

<sup>425</sup> Olafur Eliasson in his TEDtalk (2009), 02:12.

<sup>426</sup> 'About the installation' (n.d.).

<sup>427</sup> 'About the installation' (n.d.).

<sup>428</sup> Olafur Eliasson in his TEDtalk (2009), 03:30-03:33.

<sup>429</sup> 'BAROQUE BAROQUE' (n.d.).

<sup>430</sup> 'BAROQUE BAROQUE' (n.d.).

<sup>431</sup> Petty (2016).

completely opposite to the Winter Palace in Vienna. Originally known as the Bankside Power Station, the Turbine Hall was built between 1947 and 1963 in two phases.<sup>432</sup> It was designed by Sir Giles Scott. The hall is thirty-five metres high and a hundred-and-fifty-two metres long, there is an adjoined boiler house and a central single chimney. The site had been mainly out of function since 1981.<sup>433</sup> Since its opening in 2000, it has been the iconic spot for remarkable site-specific works and large-scale sculpture.<sup>434</sup> At this site, in this wedding, of *The Weather Project*, an entire group of partners seem to have come to the proverbial chapel: Longinus's joyful elevation of the spirits, Turner's, Friedrich's and Burke's awe-inspiring romanticism, Newman's and Rothko's abstract-expressionist modernism, Lyotard's unrepresentable postmodernism, and Eliasson's own experimental aesthetic ideals. The first two parties we see represented in the subject matter, in the overwhelming scale of the work and the reaction of the audience; the third in the dazzling use of colour; the fourth in the intangibility of the scene and unrepresentability of the subject matter; and the fifth in the contemporary mix of all.

'Our consciousness is the result of historical experience handed down to us through others'<sup>435</sup>, Eliasson believes. He is a prime example of his own theory: Eliasson is a modernist using postmodern and contemporary means. Note that Newman would have been opposed to such a statement since he believed one had to let go of tradition to create something entirely new, and that Lyotard would not be, since he recognizes the blending of periods of time. Eliasson stated recently that 'to a greater extent these projects are addressing a certain emotional need or desire we haven't quite verbalised yet'.<sup>436</sup> Eliasson is quite vocal about his ambition to represent the ineffable and unreachable. His spaces however are not beyond reach. Not to be underestimated is the manner in which Eliasson handles his spaces: it is all about the experience of actually being there.<sup>437</sup> This seems very different, maybe even paradoxical<sup>438</sup>, to the romantic sublime, which required that you were not *actually* there. However, the Romantic idea of distance still seems to apply to Eliasson's work: the visitors

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<sup>432</sup> 'History of Tate' (n.d.).

<sup>433</sup> 'History of Tate' (n.d.).

<sup>434</sup> 'History of Tate' (n.d.).

<sup>435</sup> Eliasson quoted in Morais and Koerner von Gustorf (n.d.).

<sup>436</sup> Eliasson quoted in Petty (2016).

<sup>437</sup> Petty (2016); Eliasson is fascinated by how the body moves through space, Cooke (2005).

<sup>438</sup> For an object or subject to be unreachable in the very moment of experience is not necessarily a paradox: according to Newman, it is confrontation in itself that causes self-creation. The distance in Eliasson's work is very different compared to the Burkean distance: there is nothing harmful about Eliasson's installation, but it is nevertheless overwhelming, Newman (2003), 581-582.

who went to see *The Weather Project*, were just stepping out of the London daily weather, and knew fully well that they were not standing directly opposite from the actual blazing sun. It was illusion, supported by the artificial fog, which created the experience, just as it was for the romantic artists. The illusory effect was paradoxically amplified by the fact that Eliasson chose to make the installation's technology completely visible (fig. 41). He does this more often and deems it an essential part of his art: 'I think the ability to immerse oneself in a work and then to gain distance again - to show the machine - is important today... my work has a lot to do with the positioning of the subject'.<sup>439</sup> Debunking the illusion added a layer of inception to illusion because it added something new to marvel about.

Considering the positioning of the subject, Eliasson deliberately and repeatedly chose the incomprehensible sun as the subject matter for his artistic endeavours. Eliasson theorises that the 'idea of wilderness, in a more romantic sense, allows for the more primordial part of our brain to become activated'.<sup>440</sup> The senses, both unconscious and conscious, are very important to Eliasson, whom thus also takes a sensationist approach. In his studio, which he calls a 'reality inducing machine'<sup>441</sup>, he creates or rather 'manufactures' 'immersive environments',<sup>442</sup> in which he deliberately, carefully and with great detail recreates the effects of natural phenomena (fig. 45), which are also (maybe even more importantly) reflected (upon) in our minds.<sup>443</sup> Morley claims that the atelier nowadays revolves around 'bringing the awesomeness of nature into the gallery'.<sup>444</sup> Eliasson's studio might be the epitome of this idea. However, since he cannot test his installations in his studio because they are site-bound, he is still often surprised by the effects his works generate, for example in case of the success of *The Weather Project*:

My God, my sun and the Tate Modern was just smoke and mirrors, right? Boom, boom, bit of mirrors, a little bit of yellow light, and some smoke [...] I did it with a lot of care, but it was very much driven to the success by the people [...] who sort of finished the narrative. The truth is, I did not anticipate or predict... how could I... that this would become like that.<sup>445</sup>

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<sup>439</sup> Eliasson quoted in Koerner von Gustorf (n.d.); 'I'd like my installations to induce viewers to observe themselves while observing, to make them aware of the methods that are implemented in the process' – Eliasson in Morais and Koerner von Gustorf (n.d.).

<sup>440</sup> Eliasson quoted in Petty (2016); childlike awe and primeval superstition, Jones (2014).

<sup>441</sup> Cooke (2005).

<sup>442</sup> Cooke (2005).

<sup>443</sup> Camhi (2008); Eliasson, as Jones describes it, thinks that 'light and space are created inside the brain', Jones (2014).

<sup>444</sup> Morley (2010).

<sup>445</sup> Olafur Eliasson, Royal Academy Schools annual lecture (2016), 40:12.

A fellow artist and attributor to the Unilever series, the Polish Mirosław Balka, did almost the direct opposite in 2009 of what Eliasson had done in 2003. The reactions, notably, were almost the same. When his time came to fill the Turbine Hall, he created darkness. He did so in the form of a pitch-black container, a ‘box of darkness’, which terrified and simultaneously awe-inspired the spectators (fig. 46-47).<sup>446</sup> The work of art, titled *How It Is*, also excited both personal and collective emotions.<sup>447</sup> Adrian Searle, art-critic for the *Guardian*, wrote:

At first, you can't see into the depths. Even perspective seems distorted; there's no discernible vanishing point. If the walls close in, so the dark seems to open out, both unfolding and enveloping. You wrestle for a sense of volume, and end up feeling the walls for guidance. They are lined, unexpectedly, with felt [...] the looming darkness inside the steel structure feels both palpable and impenetrable. There is nothing here except the contained dark, which itself seems to have mass and density, weight and substance [...] One searches for limits, as if they might offer some kind of comfort. Instead, the containment makes you feel even more puny. It is a space whose limits are sheer walls instead of a horizon, with more blackness overhead. It is a darkness you struggle to measure, or rather a darkness that measures you.<sup>448</sup>

Note how Balka’s darkness seems eerily similar to Eliasson’s light in its substance and density, but seems to evoke completely opposite connotations. Balka’s darkness, causing feelings of anxiety (‘will you go further in ‘touching the subject of disappearing’?<sup>449</sup>) seems to oppose Eliasson’s light of elevation and wonder. However, Eliasson’s work touches upon other unsettling feelings beneath the initial wonder: universal anonymity and absolute oblivion at the foremost. ‘The metaphors and myths of bedazzlement are even more forbidding than those of benightedness’<sup>450</sup>, writes Lorraine Daston in her contribution to the recently published monograph of Eliasson, *Unspoken Spaces*. Eliasson’s sun is unforgettable and maybe even unbeatable.

Theoretically, *The Weather Project*, ‘oblivious to barriers of any kind, whether psychological or physical’<sup>451</sup>, fulfilled all the requirements for creating a sublime content and even combined the earlier discussed multiple sublime theories in one instance. By now, it might have become clear that Eliasson seems to have his own ‘peculiar brand of anti-sublime-enchantment-smoke and mirrors’, next to which he has a ‘deft sleight of hand that turns dry

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<sup>446</sup> ‘The Unilever Series: Mirosław Balka’ (b) (n.d.); Note, however, that (the sublimity of) *How It Is* does not allow for representation through photograph. Photographs are only able to depict the dry details: the container and the darkness, but hardly any of the emotions or associations.

<sup>447</sup> ‘The Unilever Series: Mirosław Balka’ (a) (n.d.).

<sup>448</sup> Searle (2009).

<sup>449</sup> Mirosław Balka about his work in ‘The Unilever Series: Mirosław Balka’ (b) (n.d.).

<sup>450</sup> The disorientation caused cuts deep into both the human psyche as into the human capabilities of vision, Daston (2016), 94-95.

<sup>451</sup> This is characteristic for Eliasson’s work, finds Cooke (2005).

exercises in phenomenology into wonder-filled inducing spectacles'.<sup>452</sup> How does this work, exactly?

### Eliasson, postmodernity and the romantic tradition: light and space

When, in 2011, Newman's *Selected Writings and Interviews*<sup>453</sup> was reprinted in French<sup>454</sup>, the French journal *Critique d'art Actualité internationale de la littérature critique sur l'art contemporain* published a small summary and critique of the book in an article titled 'The Sublime was Yesterday. Latest news about Barnett Newman' by Richard Leeman.<sup>455</sup> Leeman raised interesting points of discussion. Newman's works seen as a 'vestige of a romantic metaphysics' raised it to the interest of many theorists and philosophers, Leeman wrote. Because of this philosophical meddling, Newman was 'straightjacketed' in 'a sublime and an 'inhuman' befitting a deathly boredom'.<sup>456</sup> According to Leeman, throughout the decades, Newman has become terribly misunderstood:

When it [the aforementioned book] juxtaposes serious and tragic writings with more contingent and less starchy texts, it gives Newman back a more complex and contradictory personality than might be supposed by the technicity of the formalists, the compunction of the hagiographers, and the tragic nature of the philosophers.<sup>457</sup>

Rereading his texts in a postmodern (or at least contemporary) manner, devoid of all the limiting nostalgic glasses of history and any other possible modern or older restrictions or influences, Leeman comes to the conclusion that Newman was, above all, a literary painter. Newman was very interested in historiography and it is a fact that 'he wrote a lot, but above all because his oeuvre is underpinned by a poetics which is, in reality, a philosophy and a theory of writing. The titles of his pictures thus illustrate this'.<sup>458</sup> Language, literature and history were undeniably important to Newman, which, when contemplated, is not strange. To free oneself from one's history, one logically has to have a thorough knowledge of it. Language was a platform for Newman: 'Once the most suitable and developed verbal form has been found to express his thought, the next challenge, quite logically, had to consist in

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<sup>452</sup> Camhi (2008).

<sup>453</sup> Originally published in 1992 (University of California Press).

<sup>454</sup> Barnett Newman, *Ecrits*, Introduction by Richard Shiff. Translated by: Jean-Louis Houdebine, Paris (Macula), 2011.

<sup>455</sup> Translated by Simon Pleasance.

<sup>456</sup> Leeman (2011), 2.

<sup>457</sup> Leeman (2011), 2.

<sup>458</sup> Leeman (2011), 2.

equalling it and transcending it in his painting'.<sup>459</sup> His subject matter however, remains a mystery until this day.<sup>460</sup>

According to Simon Morley, the contemporary sublime is the exploration of self-transcendence.<sup>461</sup> This exploration exists back-to-back with a history we now - because of, among others, Leeman's re-evaluation of Newman - understand might be impossible to ignore or simply do away with. In light of this, of its presentation, Eliasson has had to struggle with 'miraculous symbioses' between the northern European traditions to which his work is said to belong and his own and contemporary views. *The Weather Project* therefore becomes an even more special work of art. In many ways, the work conforms to the postmodern sublime as it is discussed above. Its scale (not only physically, but also in subject matter, for example, the manner in which it alludes to infinity) conforms to the Lyotardian ideas of the unrepresentable and the current artistic environment. As a child of postmodernity (Eliasson went to art school when Lyotard was widely read at art schools), Eliasson has worked in every medium but the traditional.<sup>462</sup> Nevertheless, Eliasson's work is in some manners distinctly modern. For example, in an interview with Rachel Cooke, one of *The Guardian's* art-journalists, he admits, maybe involuntarily, to an obsession with space alike Newman's: '[p]eople see space as a compilation, the placing of layers on top of each other. But you can also make space by removing all the surrounding elements and then seeing what's left'.<sup>463</sup> This search for purity led to, as was also the case with the abstract expressionists and their followers, consistent, and sometimes 'dry formalism', a quality Eliasson's works are also sometimes - controversially<sup>464</sup> - criticized on.<sup>465</sup> Eliasson's sublime, as touched upon earlier, is a product of a clash between multiple aesthetic currents and theories. For example, as we have come to know by now,

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<sup>459</sup> Here Leeman quotes from the book (p. 243) (2011), 2.

<sup>460</sup> Leeman (2011), 3.

<sup>461</sup> Morley (2010).

<sup>462</sup> Petty (2016).

<sup>463</sup> Olafur Eliasson quoted in Cooke (2005).

<sup>464</sup> 'Eliasson [...] pitch[es] challenging emotions and calls for response through the familiar language of pure formal play. The old-hat styles of the high modernists, when left alone, lead to the sort of artworks that endlessly refer back to themselves in cultural whirlpools that fetch prices like stocks and bonds. But in the hands of Eliasson [...] the comfort of simple, beautiful objects and images allows inroads to conversations that, if presented less palatably, might be too didactic or hamfisted to digest' (Young (2015); 'Modern sculpture and Minimalism add industrial processes and products to the mix [...] New-media artists know a great deal more about applied science [...] However, all this has tempted many a viewer to treat art as a straightforward copy after nature. It has also tempted formalist critics to mistake a medium for its materials', Haber (n.d.).

<sup>465</sup> Dry formalism is Eliasson's Achilles' heel, Camhi (2008); He has admitted that his interest in the technicalities of his work sometimes tends to make him numb, Cooke (2005).

showmanship, nowadays seems desirable for sublime works.<sup>466</sup> Technological developments have helped immensely in the creation of (phenomenologically) gigantic and/or technologically complex works of art. The Unilever Series, of which Eliasson has provided the fourth project, is an example of this trend<sup>467</sup>, and so are, for example, James Turrell's installations (fig. 48).<sup>468</sup> In the case of *The Weather Project*, 'the sheer scale of the piece is enough to make your hair stand on end'.<sup>469</sup> The Turbine Hall is 155 meters long and 23 meters wide and 35 meters in height<sup>470</sup>, but Eliasson used and even increased every centimetre of it by placing hundreds of mirrors on the ceiling.<sup>471</sup> Nevertheless, the emotions it evoked are actually very basic; maybe one could even call them primordial: they are small and large at the same time but seem to require the paradox of showmanship. The same clash can be found in the previously discussed work of Mirosław Balka: a huge container is erected to create the smallest insecurities, evoke the tiniest flashbacks and humble the viewer, with the eventual goal to create enormous psychological influences.

Even though *The Weather Project* alludes to collectiveness, it simultaneously and arguably paradoxically conforms to the Lyotardian want of deconstruction: to present that which is by definition unrepresentable and to refrain from collectivity, back to individuality and the self.<sup>472</sup> As described, Lyotard preferred an art which deconstructs society, which forms its own relation to the beholder, its own moment in the chronology of the earth, instead of following a grand narrative.<sup>473</sup> *The Weather Project* made its audience feel as if they were definitely present in the Turbine Hall, but simultaneously also wholly part of a more transcendental reality around them. This is a 'precognitive' and direct emotional experience.<sup>474</sup> Whether or not the references to Lyotard's postmodern sublime were conscious or unconscious, Eliasson wanted to deconstruct or, as he probably would prefer terminologically, dematerialize our traditionally Romantic image of nature.<sup>475</sup> This is why he

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<sup>466</sup> Bell (2003), 4.

<sup>467</sup> Bell (2003), 5.

<sup>468</sup> Den Hartog Jager (2013), 26.

<sup>469</sup> Cooke (2003).

<sup>470</sup> Prins (2009).

<sup>471</sup> Cooke (2003); Dorment (2003).

<sup>472</sup> Eliasson's perception of the world has more to do with people than with nature, Morais and Koerner von Gurstorf (n.d.). This of course is radically opposed from the romantic point of view as we have now come to understand it; *The Weather Project* was a collective experience: your idea of singularity is closely related to collectivity, 'TateShots: Olafur Eliasson' (2011), 01:56-02:24.

<sup>473</sup> Fava (2013), 164.

<sup>474</sup> Prins (2009).

<sup>475</sup> Prins (2009).

found it absolutely essential for *The Weather Project* to show its mechanics. For the Romantics, God appeared in nature's grandeur. The atheist and therefore sceptic Eliasson wanted to connect nature with our (artificial) lifestyle: 'transcendence is embedded in immanence and brought back to its daily finitude'.<sup>476</sup> People were therefore allowed to venture behind the sun and study the way in which the optical illusion was executed. 'The benefit in disclosing the means with which I am working is that it enables the viewer to understand the experience itself as a construction and so, to a higher extent, allows them to question and evaluate the impact this experience has on them', said Eliasson.<sup>477</sup> However, he consciously meant to captivate us<sup>478</sup>, and maybe he just did so a little too well. It is too difficult to ignore the clear goal of sublime evocation, especially since both the sublime and the sun are inherently linked to religion in our minds.<sup>479</sup>

Eliasson finds himself in the company of a small group of artists, who, according to Bell create artworks 'which give contained poetic shape to schemes of world-destruction and world-reconstruction'.<sup>480</sup> Another example is the work of another one of the artists who has contributed to the Unilever Series: Anish Kapoor (1954- ), whose humbling *Marsyas* (fig. 49), exhibited in 2002, was meant to be 'all about fear and vertigo and being confronted by something which one immediately has to recognise is bigger than oneself - bigger than one's imagined self, even'.<sup>481</sup> With *Marsyas*, Kapoor succeeded in conveying a 'more affirmative experience of the sublime - a kind of post-religious state of emotional transcendence in which, exactly because of the lack of ordered structures or codes, we feel a powerful sense of exaltation and release rather than fear'.<sup>482</sup> It might be argued that Eliasson's *The Weather Project* achieved exactly this, and was hence very popular. Maybe it even succeeded in this goal more than the Kapoor did.

Could we then conclude that exaltation (preceding and dominating the traditional aspect of fear), with all its inadvertent or maybe inevitable relations to the beautiful, is the new form of the sublime? Bell suggested as much at the end of his article. One could wonder whether, in our modern-day situation, the strict distinctions Kant and Burke made between the

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<sup>476</sup> Own translation, Prins (2009).

<sup>477</sup> 'About the installation' (n.d.).

<sup>478</sup> Prins (2009); Searle (2003).

<sup>479</sup> Searle (2003).

<sup>480</sup> Bell (2003), 6.

<sup>481</sup> Kapoor in Bell (2003), 5.

<sup>482</sup> Morley (2010).

sublime and the beautiful are still viable.<sup>483</sup> ‘Can the sublime in art [...] also at once be the beautiful?’, asks Bell:

Can the controlled-uncontrollable, or presented-unpresentable, that which pushes me to teeter one foot over my mental cliff-edge, somehow bed down comfortably within the zone that we simply term ‘taste’? – good taste being aesthetic experience that meets with contemporary social approval. Or rather, perhaps I should ask: how can they not? How can any sublime that is presented through art *not* get bound up in the take-it-or-leave-it luxury of spectatorhood, how can it not be complicit in sheer showmanship?<sup>484</sup>

However, counter-suggests Bell, asking these questions maybe means taking matters too seriously.<sup>485</sup> Maybe the nature of this ‘age of spectacle’<sup>486</sup> *is* simply showmanship. However, if we then must appoint sort of a general direction, some of our still existing fears thus stem from the status of the planet we live on. As mentioned before, fears for the end of all nowadays seem to have more of a cosmological source.<sup>487</sup> *The Weather Project* seems to nod to global warming, a very current subject which causes worldwide anxiety.<sup>488</sup> The twenty-first century is dominated, says Bell, by an apocalyptic pessimism<sup>489</sup>: we fear our future because of the lives we now lead, in the society we live in. ‘The unknown face of global capitalism is terrifying in its vastness. Art and technology and so on are just role-players in the grand game’.<sup>490</sup> This might indeed a truthfully terrifying object.<sup>491</sup> All in all, one could say we fear Lyotard’s aforementioned absence of light, language and life.<sup>492</sup> This fear swallows and enchants us. ‘It is as though some deep primeval instinct compels us to do something - waving our hands, scissoring our legs, huddling in groups, forming shapes with our partners - to reassure ourselves of our individual existence in the universe’<sup>493</sup>, said Richard Dorment, an art critic for *The Telegraph*, about the behaviour of the masses coming to see *The Weather Project*. Contemporary artists seem to find the sublime as a solution to the contemporary horror.<sup>494</sup> But if the sublime is actually a cure against (contemporary) horror, is it still sublime?

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<sup>483</sup> Bell (2003).

<sup>484</sup> Bell (2003).

<sup>485</sup> Bell (2003), 5; Lyotard (a) (1991), 1.

<sup>486</sup> Bell (2003), 5.

<sup>487</sup> Bell (2003), 5.

<sup>488</sup> Cooke (2003).

<sup>489</sup> Bell (2003), 7.

<sup>490</sup> Thomas McEvelley in Bell (2003), 6.

<sup>491</sup> Thomas McEvelley in Bell (2003), 6.

<sup>492</sup> Lyotard (e) (1991), 90.

<sup>493</sup> Dorment (2003).

<sup>494</sup> Bell (2003), 13.

### **‘Romantic art is not dead. It glows on, a blazing horizon’**

This title-quote comes from Jonathan Jones’s article about one of Eliasson’s recent exhibitions in France<sup>495</sup>, and it alludes to one of the most prominent questions in this study. Eliasson is seen by some as ‘the most contemporary of contemporary artists’, though being ‘more in tune with an older sensibility of artistic creation than you might otherwise have thought’, and he is very happy moving in between all of these forms.<sup>496</sup> Tim Marlow summarized it perfectly during his interview with the artist for the Royal Academy Schools annual lecture: ‘you can call it phenomenological, but it is always said that the link between the disparate body of work that you [directed at Eliasson] produced is spatial obsession and corporeal, visceral, physical experience’.<sup>497</sup> Possibly, the nostalgia feared and rejected by postmodernism is harder to shake than artists and philosophers thought it would be. *The Weather Project*, therefore, is in itself a paradox. It proves the indestructibility of the Romantic artistic tradition.<sup>498</sup> Nevertheless, when Marlow mentioned how *The Weather Project* is often associated with the works of Turner, Eliasson seemed to shift uncomfortably in his chair<sup>499</sup>, annoyed maybe by the connection everyone refers to, which he did not deliberately wanted to make? Or was it because of his discomfort<sup>500</sup> with the northern, and especially German sublime tradition? When asked directly, Eliasson admitted that a romantic sublime notion does indeed run through his work and that it is indeed related to phenomenology as well.<sup>501</sup> Furthermore, he confessed to an honest interest in the sublime and said that sublime in his works might manifest itself either distantly or openly.<sup>502</sup> He quickly added that he is not a theoretical person, but he does distinguish two ‘sublimes’: the first being the more totalitarian sublime, in which everyone preferably sees the same (the German sublime), and the second the decentralized sublime, in which it is important that everyone sees something unique. Eliasson devotes himself to the latter form, of course.<sup>503</sup>

Then what is his take on the transcendental so many associate with the sublime experience? We have seen how the modernists tried to rule out all spiritual connotations to the

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<sup>495</sup> Jones (2014).

<sup>496</sup> Petty (2016).

<sup>497</sup> Tim Marlow, Royal Academy Schools annual lecture (2016), 10:18-10:25.

<sup>498</sup> Prins (2009).

<sup>499</sup> Royal Academy Schools annual lecture (2016), 35:44.

<sup>500</sup> ‘In this regard the Weather Project succeeds almost too well, not least because it toys with a Sublime which Eliasson himself finds deeply troubling’, Searle (2003).

<sup>501</sup> Royal Academy Schools annual lecture (2016), 36:00-36:18; Morais and Koerner von Gustorf (n.d.).

<sup>502</sup> Royal Academy Schools annual lecture (2016), 36:19.

<sup>503</sup> Royal Academy Schools annual lecture (2016), 36:35-37:00.

point where the sublime (again) became obsolete, even though the spiritual is an ever latent human occupation. Eliasson handles this subject carefully: he does not want to pragmatize, functionalise or take away the strongly spiritual experience people link to the sublime. The spiritual is there, according to Eliasson, because ‘the general picture everyone carries around with them is called into question in a fundamental way’ by works such as *The Weather Project*.<sup>504</sup> Spirituality must therefore be seen as related to individuality (it must not be linked to God or any other kind of higher being).<sup>505</sup> In his TEDtalk in 2009, Eliasson asked his audience what the difference is between thinking and doing, and, more especially, what there is in-between thinking and doing. Lodged in-between these two, Eliasson finds, there is experience, which means a moment of taking part in the actual world and sharing responsibility.<sup>506</sup> Eliasson, throughout his career, ‘has been investigating whether direct physical experience can transform our idea of the world’, which is why he has dubbed his works ‘devices for locating perception’ or as ‘manufacturing instructions for natural occurrences’.<sup>507</sup> How does the sublime fit into this? Morley wrote:

Discussions of the sublime in contemporary art can sometimes be covert of camouflaged devices for talking about the kinds of things that were once addressed by religious discourses and nevertheless seem to remain pertinent within an otherwise religiously sceptical and secularised world.<sup>508</sup>

Often, too, conceptions of a self, soul or spirit are rejected by postmodern theory.<sup>509</sup> The sublime nowadays has a strongly transformative character and seems to only be signalled by references to our human insufficiency and anxieties.<sup>510</sup> The common folk used to turn to religion to satisfy their doubts and spiritual needs, but religion is a difficult subject nowadays. Newman, however, deemed the sublime to be primarily religious in orientation.<sup>511</sup>

‘Awareness’, said Eliasson, ‘is a possibility condition for religion’.<sup>512</sup> There seems to be no better way than light, or any method of enlightenment, to create awareness. Kant did

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<sup>504</sup> Eliasson quoted in Morais and Koerner von Gustorf (n.d.).

<sup>505</sup> Royal Academy Schools annual lecture (2016), 37:00; ‘Redemption, in the sense that modernism formulated it, does not exist, at the very most, we can find it in ourselves’, ‘You are always dealing with this theme’ - Eliasson quoted in Morais and Koerner von Gustorf (n.d.).

<sup>506</sup> Eliasson in his TEDtalk (2009), 08:50-09:22.

<sup>507</sup> Koerner von Gustorf (n.d.); ‘A fair amount of my time here at the studio is about addressing the quality of an experience’ - Eliasson quoted in Cooke (2005).

<sup>508</sup> Morley (2010).

<sup>509</sup> Morley (2010).

<sup>510</sup> Morley (2010).

<sup>511</sup> Shaw (2013).

<sup>512</sup> Studio Olafur Eliasson (2016), 350.

not choose his favourite saying: ‘sapere aude’ or ‘dare to know’<sup>513</sup>, in vain. To shine light upon something, is to be able to see, and therefore to know. Earlier in this chapter I briefly referred to James Turrell and his artworks of light (fig. 48). They exceed in ‘sublime nothingness’, just as both Turner and Eliasson’s works can be said to do. Turrell uses light to dematerialize and cause a state of sensory confusion which has simultaneously an unnerving and ecstatic effect on its audience. He was influenced by the Quaker Christianity’s ideas about divine light.<sup>514</sup> This usage of light to explicitly represent God, or more generally, spirituality, has a famous medieval precedent and seems to have a striking resemblance to Eliasson’s work, too. At the end of the eleventh and during the twelfth century (A.D.), Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis (1081-1151), had a dream. He wanted to embellish the Saint-Denis Cathedral so that it would be more suitable to its content<sup>515</sup>, and he decided to depend on light. He created the Gothic rib vault, which architecturally opened up the church’s interior, creating space for enormous stained glass windows through which the sunlight could dwell uninterrupted. The now created light was marvelled at, and called: ‘Lux Nova’.<sup>516</sup>

The descriptions of the effects of Suger’s invention come close to descriptions of sublime experiences. After finishing the church, he found himself ‘dwelling... in some strange region of the universe which neither exists entirely in the slime of the earth nor entirely in the purity of Heaven’.<sup>517</sup> The manner in which sunlight was now allowed to raid the space filled with gems and gold, transported him ‘from this inferior to that higher world’.<sup>518</sup> On a more recent moment in art history, Newman referenced the artistic endeavours of Michelangelo in his ‘The Sublime in Now’: ‘[i]t was no idle quip that moved Michelangelo to call himself a sculptor rather than a painter, for he knew that only in his sculpture could the desire for the grand statement of Christian sublimity be reached’.<sup>519</sup> Michelangelo wanted ‘to make a cathedral out of man’, something that painting in his day and age could not reach.<sup>520</sup> However, came modernity, Newman translated Michelangelo’s aspirations to a description more suitable to modern art and the modern, more individual way of living and perceiving:

Instead of making *cathedrals* out of Christ, man, of ‘life’, we are making it out of ourselves, out of our own feelings. The image we produce is the self-evident one of revelation, real and concrete, that can be

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<sup>513</sup> Daston (2016), 94.

<sup>514</sup> Morley (2010).

<sup>515</sup> Kleiner and Mamiya (2006), 361.

<sup>516</sup> Kleiner and Mamiya (2006), 363.

<sup>517</sup> Suger quoted in Kleiner and Mamiya (2006), 361.

<sup>518</sup> Suger quoted in Kleiner and Mamiya (2006), 361.

<sup>519</sup> Newman (2003), 580.

<sup>520</sup> Newman (2003), 580-581.

understood by anyone who will look at it without the nostalgic glasses of history.<sup>521</sup>

Eliasson too, as you will, ‘sculpts’ cathedrals out of light (and other natural phenomena). Eliasson creates a form of Suger’s light, minus God. Is this possible? Eliasson has nothing against mysticism, but opposes general interpretations of the spiritual kind, especially the New Age ones.<sup>522</sup> Artists like Eliasson seem to be essentially forever in some kind of doubt. They can never fully surrender themselves to any historical categories, for this would be somewhat atypical to their zeitgeist. So they admit to some fascination, or interest, dabble and experiment, but never commit too fully. This is perhaps why Eliasson decides to show the mechanics behind his works: the paradoxes are needed to not fully submerge the work of art in a certain category: the sublime is in this manner simultaneously debunked, shown, induced and used.

‘Syndrome (noun) - A group of symptoms which consistently occur together’  
The Oxford English Dictionary<sup>523</sup>

Throughout these four chapters, I have tried to answer the question ‘if we can agree that both [Turner’s] *Light and Colour* and [Eliasson’s] *The Weather Project* qualify as sublime works, what is the nature of this supposed similarity, both theoretically and physically, considering their very different respective historical contexts?’. The first three chapters answered this question thoroughly: yes, both works can be seen as sublime works based on tradition and history, in subject matter, appearance and philosophical and artistic qualification. Be that as it may, while writing this fourth chapter and diving into the Lyotardian (and the) postmodern sublime, contemplating contemporary culture and reading the opinions of more contemporary critics, some questions began to dawn in the back of my mind. The most prominent one is this: if *The Weather Project* is a sublime work, then why does it seem to be the complete opposite from Balka’s haunting *How It Is?* Placing Eliasson’s *The Weather Project* under serious scrutiny, freeing myself from the nostalgic glasses of history as Newman and Lyotard would have wanted me to - thereby also looking beyond Lyotard to contemporary critics and philosophers - and casting aside the wonder that befell me upon my first encounter with Eliasson’s blazing sun, a feeling of disillusionment starts to creep in. But is this justified?

Looking back momentarily, I already started noticing some discrepancies early on. For

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<sup>521</sup> Newman (2003), 582.

<sup>522</sup> Morais and Koerner von Gustorf (n.d.).

<sup>523</sup> *English Oxford Living Dictionaries*.

example, in the late nineteenth century, the English painter James Abbot McNeill Whistler (1843-1903) critiqued the clichés of the sublime. He said: ‘how dutifully the casual in Nature [sic.] is accepted as sublime, may be gathered from the unlimited admiration daily produced by a very foolish sunset’.<sup>524</sup> What does this mean for Eliasson’s work of art? Are we now living in a time in which a sunset can (again) rightfully be described as sublime, or are we still prone to value Whistler’s critique on the vulgarised vocabulary of sublimity which, in his opinion, had led to a decline in artistic judgement?<sup>525</sup> As John Mullan, a writer and author for *The Guardian* asked and stated:

What has “the sublime” to do with us? In common parlance, “sublime” is one of those diminished words (like “fantastic” or “terrific”) used to exclaim at anything from the delights of a certain kind of ice cream to the skills of a foreign footballer. It seems, banally, just to mean, “much better than usual”. But if we can rescue its older, deeper meanings, “the sublime” catches an experience that we still recognise in a post-modern world, glimpsed in the dizzying reaches of interplanetary space or the vertiginous spirals of the human genome.<sup>526</sup>

Lyotard said that the (postmodern) sublime has to be disruptive, formless, and representative of the unrepresentable and the ineffable, and inconsumable in its appearance and subject matter. It is rather easy to argue that Eliasson’s sun is: disruptive because of its unexpectedness, formless, in a way, because of the fog, representative of the unrepresentable and the ineffable because of its colour, size and possible associations and connotations. But, as the observant reader has noticed: *The Weather Project* does not conform to the last prerequisite: inconsumability. Thousands of viewers found themselves basking in and mesmerized by the artificial sun. If anything, the work was consumable for the millions.<sup>527</sup> Backtracking and contemplating Lyotard’s other sublime markers, there seem to be more discrepancies. It does seem disruptive at first. The blazing sun is very different from the dreary London weather and the size and workings of the installation were, certainly at first, frustrating to the eye and mind. But on the other hand, that seems to be all considered its possible disruptiveness. After the initial shock based on size and colour, one easily adapts and is free to happily explore the installation without any discomfort. The formlessness first implemented on the eye soon fades away too and, very simply put, it is very clearly a figural circle<sup>528</sup>; a rather realist representation of the actual sun, the workings of which are clearly on

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<sup>524</sup> Shaw (2013).

<sup>525</sup> Shaw (2013).

<sup>526</sup> Mullan (2000).

<sup>527</sup> Which, as we have seen earlier, was one of the critiques on the work.

<sup>528</sup> ‘There is no such thing as blank forms, while there clearly is such a thing as a blank surface. A smooth surface can be blank but a smooth form is still a shape, with a figural relationship to an at least implicit field

view. It does however represent the unrepresentable and the ineffable. People admitted to being lost for words in the vicinity of *The Weather Project*, and the work, as we have seen, has mystical, environmental and utopian connotations. But was it capable of elevating our spirit? It did, can be argued, but in a matter in which Longinus' rhetoric sublime used to: it centres on joy and exaltation. Is it therefore sublime in our day and age?

Nietzsche once claimed:

How the theatrical scream of passion now hurts our ears, how strange to our taste the whole romantic uproar and tumult of the senses has become, which the educated mob loves, and all its aspirations after the sublime, lofty and weird! No, if we convalescents still need art, it is another kind of art - a mocking, light, fleeting, divinely untroubled, divinely artificial art that, like a pure flame, licks into unclouded skies.<sup>529</sup>

Keywords (and phrases) in this passage with regards to Eliasson's artwork are of course 'light', 'divinely untroubled' and 'divinely artificial'. His sun seems to conform to all the criteria of Nietzsche's proposal. During Nietzsche's lifetime, other concepts already were considered for the sublime in later modern art. A prime example is *The Source of the Loue* (fig. 50), painted by the Gustave Courbet (1819-1877) in 1864 which appears, at first glance, a model of the Romantic sublime. Its depths, darkness and raw natural characteristics are 'excessive' and 'brooding', the cave in itself 'maw-like'.<sup>530</sup> Be that as it may, Shaw uses the writings of the contemporary critic James Elkins (1955 - ) to show the difference:

the subject of *The Source of the Loue* is markedly different from the 'endless plains and panoramas' of the Romantic tradition 'because the view is cut off, ambiguously, by the mouth of the cave. In place of ... thrilling infinity ... there is an uninviting darkness' in the form of a huge and potentially boundless anamorphic stain. Elkins goes on to cite the literary critic Neil Hertz's influential reading of the painting as an instance of the 'dead-end' of Romantic sublimity: with nowhere to go, the viewer is confronted with the brute, material substratum of subjectivity, a realm of dead matter resistant to transcendental recuperation. In this alternative sublime the subject lured by the promise of individuation is scuppered on the rocks of its own impossibility.<sup>531</sup>

This recalls Miroslaw Balka's *How It Is*. The 'dead matter' that is the darkness of the cave - and of Balka's container - seems to resist transcendental recovery.<sup>532</sup> Both artworks offer an uncanny<sup>533</sup>, or maybe even abject experience.<sup>534</sup> The abject is a concept famously studied by

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and all that that implies.', Gilbert-Rolfe (1999), 117.

<sup>529</sup> Nietzsche quoted in Shaw (2013), original source: Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Preface', *The Gay Science*, trans. and ed. by Walter Kaufmann, New York 1974, §4.

<sup>530</sup> Shaw (2013).

<sup>531</sup> Shaw (2013).

<sup>532</sup> Shaw (2013).

<sup>533</sup> Unsettling.

<sup>534</sup> Shaw (2013).

Julia Kristeva (1941 - ), a French linguist, psychoanalyst, writer, philosopher and feminist.

The abject, in its horrifying and repulsive character, is, according to Kristeva:

related to the uncanny by virtue of its capacity to exceed the distinctions between subject and object, self and other. Neither one thing nor the other, as vomit, faeces or corpse, the abject is a reminder of the primal repression preceding the subject's entry into the symbolic order. As such, the abject marks the point at which the subject differentiates itself from the mother and thereby learns to discern the boundaries between 'I' and the other'.<sup>535</sup>

Artworks containing an abject factor are hence prime sources of the negative pleasure so important to the sublime experience. The threat of destruction here, in Kantian terms, stems furthermore from the confrontation with the excessive and the unquantifiable.<sup>536</sup>

Nietzsche, as others before him and after him, posed two forms of the sublime: the Apollonian<sup>537</sup> sublime, and the Dionysian<sup>538</sup> sublime. The first is a 'veiling, healing transfiguration' of the second: Dionysian horror.<sup>539</sup> The Apollonian sublime, which we can link to *The Weather Project*, 'converts terror into action', making '*ekstasis*, or being outside of oneself, intelligible'.<sup>540</sup> This is why, after coping with the initial shock, people feel free to lie down in front of Eliasson's installation: '[t]hus tempered, the mind paradoxically forgets the specificity of its initial encounter with the raw materiality of the world'.<sup>541</sup> Nonetheless, the Dionysian 'Other' is always on the verge of breaking through, a realisation harder to forget when an audience is confronted with Courbet's cave or Balka's 'subject of disappearing'. Arguably, this is a rather sublime threat, making one constantly at unease at the realisation of it. Nonetheless, the threat simultaneously affirms the 'terrifying pleasures of self-overcoming'.<sup>542</sup> Upon entering the, for the occasion, dark Turbine Hall, or, more directly, entering and exiting Balka's container, this disruption of a presupposed generally unencumbered state runs more deeply, I suppose, than Eliasson's immersive light.

The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901-1981), proposed two orders of being. The Symbolic order is a realm of 'sense-making'<sup>543</sup>, of 'signification or language that determines the emergence of and condition of the subject'.<sup>544</sup> The Real is everything that is

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<sup>535</sup> Shaw (2013).

<sup>536</sup> Shaw (2013).

<sup>537</sup> Apollo was the God of music and joy. He was a saviour and was generally associated with the sun.

<sup>538</sup> Dionysus was the god of wine, madness, fertility and ecstasy.

<sup>539</sup> Shaw (2013).

<sup>540</sup> Shaw (2013).

<sup>541</sup> Shaw (2013).

<sup>542</sup> Shaw (2013).

<sup>543</sup> Shaw (2013).

<sup>544</sup> Shaw (2006), 156.

not Symbolic or Imaginary.<sup>545</sup> It ‘may be gestured towards, but never grasped’, which makes the Real either ‘missing, or impossible’.<sup>546</sup> The Real embodies the ultimate, horrifying ineffable. It can therefore be described as a ‘traumatic abyss’.<sup>547</sup> Accordingly, Shaw discerns two forms of art in the twentieth century, which in my opinion are still valuable for this reflection on sublime art in the twenty-first century. The first is an art that radically sublimates to dispel the ‘illusory transcendence’ of the Real<sup>548</sup>, ‘thereby forcing an encounter with various forms of occluded matter’<sup>549</sup>, a practice Eliasson seems to undertake in making visible the techniques behind his installation. The second is an art that tries to ‘re-establish the minimal gap separating the void at the heart of the Real from the object that informs it, thereby reanimating an idea of the beyond.’<sup>550</sup> Sublime art, or the sublime object, reasons Shaw, ‘is nothing in itself, but is rather a mere secondary positivisation of the void or Thing that inhabits the Real’, which, if we force our way through to get to the Thing, will only confront us with the ‘suffocating nausea’ of the object.<sup>551</sup>

More recently, the contemporary philosopher Slavoj Žižek (1949 - ), has radically negated the Kantian sublime. Shaw writes:

Instead [...] of regarding the artwork as a sensuous object revealing through its very inadequacy the idea of the beyond, we may see it more bluntly as ‘an object which occupies the place, replaces, fills out the empty place of the Thing as the void, as the pure Nothing of absolute negativity’. ‘The Sublime’, Žižek concludes, ‘is an object whose positive body is just an embodiment of [this] Nothing.’ That which seemed, at first, to raise an idea of the divine thus comes to signify the fundamental nothingness, the absence at the heart of the Real, that a certain kind of art endeavours to inform.<sup>552</sup>

Balka’s work seems more exemplary of the idea of an object (literally) embodying this nothing. Eliasson’s space was made to be interactive, to play with notions of collectivity and individuality, while Balka’s work singled out the individual. What both works did have in common, though, is the fact that they were best experienced in absolute silence: ‘when the abyss is filled with symbolic chatter the man of reason is returned to his rightful place. And with his return comes the loss of tragic authenticity’.<sup>553</sup>

It is still to be decided what actually constitutes the contemporary sublime. In line of

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<sup>545</sup> The ‘Imaginary’ is a ‘condition prior to the entry into language [...] in which there is no clear distinction between subject and object’, Shaw (2006), 154.

<sup>546</sup> Shaw (2006), 156.

<sup>547</sup> Shaw (2013).

<sup>548</sup> Shaw (2013).

<sup>549</sup> Shaw (2013).

<sup>550</sup> Shaw (2013).

<sup>551</sup> Shaw (2013).

<sup>552</sup> Shaw (2013).

<sup>553</sup> Shaw references Freud, (2013).

the horrors of the modern and postmodern world, could we justly conclude that Balka's work, with its associations and references to the Holocaust, borders on the edge of Lacan's Real, while Eliasson's work seems more Symbolic, and is therefore less sublime? Furthermore, taking Balka's *How It Is* into closer consideration, can we state that it fits the (Lyotardian) postmodern and contemporary sublime better than Eliasson's *The Weather Project* does? Lyotard said about Newman's work:

Newman's *now* is a stranger to consciousness and cannot be constituted by it. Rather, it is what dismantles consciousness, what deposes consciousness, it is what consciousness cannot formulate, and even what consciousness forgets in order to constitute itself

and stated furthermore that Newman converted 'anxiety in the face of privation' to 'joy obtained by the intensification of being'.<sup>554</sup> Art historian Christine Battersby, whom Shaw quoted accordingly, stated that: 'this joy is not located in the "beyond" of the Romantic sublime, but in the "here and now"'.<sup>555</sup> In this sense, *The Weather Project* seems more compatible with the Lyotardian sublime.

If we pose that *How It Is* is abject, therefore sublime and therefore more contemporary, Julia Kristeva's definition of the abject gives rise to an interesting comparison. She defines the abject as that which 'does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite'<sup>556</sup>, which, in my opinion, borders closely on traditional definitions of the sublime. It might be clear that contemporary artists have struggled with and are still struggling with the tenacity of Romanticism. Žižek characterized this problem as such:

how to fill in the sublime Void of the Thing (the pure Place) with an adequately beautiful object ... [then] the problem of modern art is, in a way, the opposite (and much more desperate) one: one can no longer count on the Void of the (Sacred) Place being there, so the task is to sustain the Place, as such, to make sure that the Place itself will 'take place' – in other words, the problem is no longer that of *horror vacui*, of filling in the Void, but, rather, that of creating the Void in the first place<sup>557</sup>

Eliasson fills his empty space with light and fog, while Balka fills the emptiness with another level of emptiness. Furthermore, the presence of the abject apparently sustains the sublime.

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<sup>554</sup> Lyotard quoted in Shaw (2013), original source: Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, Polity Press, Cambridge 1993, 90. (The version I used for the rest of this essay offers a slightly different translation, but remains the same in its conduct.)

<sup>555</sup> Battersby quoted in Shaw (2013), original source: Christine Battersby, *The Sublime, Terror and Human Difference*, Abingdon and New York 2007, 190.

<sup>556</sup> Kristeva quoted in Shaw (2013), original source: Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez, New York 1982.

<sup>557</sup> Žižek quoted in Shaw (2013), original source: Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute – Or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?*, London and New York 2000, 26-7.

The religious sublime of the Romantic period and the abstract expressionists is however ‘unable to withstand object materialism’.<sup>558</sup> Nonetheless, there are more theories to take into consideration before discarding the sublime status of *The Weather Project* in the contemporary art-world. After all, even the most valued contemporary art critics deemed and labelled it sublime.

It is important to understand that, when we are discussing Lyotardian ideas, we are discussing theories developed over thirty years ago, and that the world as it is now is a quite different one than it was back then. Lyotard’s theories, as we will see, are however still important. Kant’s aesthetic theory underwent a revival. Lyotard’s neo-Kantian theories, professor of Philosophy and author Paul Crowther has written, were an immense help in helping us understand avant-garde and postmodernist art.<sup>559</sup> Crowther finds, however, that ‘serious difficulties accrue to Lyotard’s claim’ linking postmodern sensibility to the Kantian sublime.<sup>560</sup> As explained in the previous chapter, for Kant (and for Lyotard) it is not the vast or powerful subject that evokes the sublime, it is the supersensible factor of mental capacity that is. Kant furthermore ‘discounts products of human artifice from figuring in experiences of the sublime’, which Lyotard conveniently disregarded in his re-reading of Kant’s theories, but which, of course, is rather restrictive.<sup>561</sup> Crowther proposed a re-formulation which makes these constraints disappear: ‘[s]omething [...] which is encountered as problematic from the viewpoint of sense-perception, enables the rich scope of a rational capacity [...] to become all the more manifest and enjoyable’.<sup>562</sup>

In works by, for example, Friedrich and Malevich, both of which I have discussed earlier in chapter two, we find ‘a Romantic striving for a deep level of subjectivity - a striving for communion with an absolute self which can be conceived as an existing, but which cannot be directly encountered in perception’.<sup>563</sup> Therefore, Lyotard found the aesthetics of sublimity to define modern painting.<sup>564</sup> This form of the sublime, ‘this unrepresentable and ‘invisible’ level of spiritual being which elements of formlessness or abstraction in their painting or writing allude to’, Lyotard dubbed the ‘melancholic sublime’.<sup>565</sup> The melancholic sublime supposedly manifests itself in a ‘nostalgia for presence’ in which there is a strong emphasis on the

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<sup>558</sup> Shaw (2013).

<sup>559</sup> Crowther (1989), 67.

<sup>560</sup> Crowther (1989), 67.

<sup>561</sup> Crowther (1989), 68.

<sup>562</sup> Crowther (1989), 68.

<sup>563</sup> Crowther (1989), 70.

<sup>564</sup> Crowther (1989), 70.

<sup>565</sup> Crowther (1989), 70.

powerlessness of the faculty of presentation.<sup>566</sup> Nostalgia is, notably, generally defined as: '[a] sentimental longing or wistful affection for a period in the past'.<sup>567</sup> While both *The Weather Project* and *How It Is* allude to this powerlessness and obscurity, *The Weather Project* definitively has nostalgic connotations, while *How It Is* absolutely has not. Lyotard posed a second form of the sublime, 'novatio'.<sup>568</sup> Novatio-sublime can be combined with the nostalgia of the melancholic sublime, but forms the adequate response to the techno-scientifically influenced aesthetic changes: it questions the nature of art and is direct and uncompromising in asking this very question.<sup>569</sup> This form of the Lyotardian sublime placed emphasis on the jubilant effects and the 'increase of being' the new rules the techno-scientific culture implied. Artists which Lyotard deemed to meddle in this form of the sublime were for example Mondrian and Cézanne: '[t]heir sublime was fundamentally nostalgic and tended towards the infinity of plastic experiment rather than towards the representation of any lost absolute. In this, their works belong to the contemporary industrial, techno-scientific world'.<sup>570</sup> If we apply these ideas to the contemporary works of art which dominate this chapter, we might find them to still be at least partly justified. In the case of *The Weather Project*, which had nostalgic connotations, it could also be said that, with regards to the critiques of 'dry formalism', the work is more of a techno-scientific exercise than Balka's is, plus, that the *Project* is more of a plastic experiment and does not fully touch upon the lost absolute. In this sense, it seems that, according to the Lyotardian and therefore postmodern sublime, it is completely justified to label *The Weather Project* as sublime.

Nevertheless, since Lyotard found postmodernity to be the 'nascent state' of modernism instead of the end<sup>571</sup>, it could be argued that Eliasson's work is indeed more modern than it is contemporary. To reformulate: *The Weather Project* might be contemporary in style and execution, but is modern in its appearance, and, most importantly, in its feel. Crowther references Lyotard's opinion that nostalgic works do not fulfil their sublime potential, but as we have seen, there is more to *The Weather Project*, making it more fitting to the contemporary aesthetic:

those works of 'novatio' which make the nature of art explicitly problematic through *striving* to present it as a possibility of infinite (and thence unrepresentable) experiment and development. Since, therefore,

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<sup>566</sup> Crowther (1989), 70.

<sup>567</sup> *English Oxford Living Dictionaries*.

<sup>568</sup> Crowther (1989), 70.

<sup>569</sup> Crowther (1989), 71.

<sup>570</sup> Lyotard quoted in Crowther (1989), original source: Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi, Manchester 1984, 79.

<sup>571</sup> Crowther (2013), 71.

this avantgarde sublime anticipates the sensibility of a contemporary culture which is permeated by a sense of techno-science's infinite possibilities, we must regard it as a nascent state of postmodernism - rather than the mere highpoint of an outdated modernist sensibility.<sup>572</sup>

Especially the last line of this citation is important regarding the question whether or not *The Weather Project* is sublime today. If we regard our contemporary culture to be a nascent state of postmodernism<sup>573</sup>, which in itself is the nascent state of modernism, *The Weather Project* is definitely still, and moreover, Lyotardian sublime in today's world:

Modern techno-scientific culture has, therefore, created a genuine postmodern sensibility. We take pleasure not simply in the beauty of phenomenal surfaces, but in the de-materialization of these by techno-science. A realm that is perceptually and imaginatively ungraspable as a totality, in other words, not only vivifies, but, indeed, is opened up by the project of rational endeavour itself. The sublime can now be created in the laboratory, as well as in the artist's studio.<sup>574</sup>

Techno-scientific culture paved the way for a concept which is now more generally known as techno-sublime.

Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe (1945 - ), an abstractionist painter, art critic, writer and theorist, wrote a book on this subject, called *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime* (1999). In this book, Gilbert-Rolfe theorizes that the sublime is nowadays found in technology rather than in nature<sup>575</sup>, a subject which I have touched upon earlier. Summarizing the history of pictorial tradition, Gilbert-Rolfe stated: 'we have gone from that which takes place in a recognizable duration to that which takes an instant'.<sup>576</sup> Blankness is the new scene.<sup>577</sup> This blankness has links to and similarities with the traditional ideas of the Beautiful. It is flawless and complete.

However, its associations with the formlessness connect it to the sublime.<sup>578</sup> Eliasson created the sublime in his laboratory in the form of a sun, which would logically evoke romantic evocations. Gilbert-Rolfe wrote that the contemporary techno-sublime however 'does not seek to overcome the body by simulating the natural'<sup>579</sup>, but what if Eliasson did not mean to simulate the natural, but his installation is only perceived as if it did because it is a logical connotation? The techno-sublime strives to obviate the human body<sup>580</sup>, and with its emphasis on unification, it seems as if *The Weather Project* does exactly that. Now it could of

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<sup>572</sup> Crowther (1989), 71.

<sup>573</sup> 'The techno-sublime and all that comes with it looks back to the idea of the autonomous sublime'. Gilbert-Rolfe (1999), 126.

<sup>574</sup> Crowther (1989), 75.

<sup>575</sup> Gilbert-Rolfe (1999), 113.

<sup>576</sup> Gilbert-Rolfe (1999), 113.

<sup>577</sup> Gilbert-Rolfe (1999), 110-113.

<sup>578</sup> Gilbert-Rolfe (1999), 113.

<sup>579</sup> Gilbert-Rolfe (1999), 113.

<sup>580</sup> Gilbert-Rolfe (1999), 113.

course be argued that *How It Is* implied the same negation of the body, but it did not do so by means of techno-scientific methods. The reference to what techno-scientific methods could cause, however, was abundantly lurking in the dark, hence the associations with the Holocaust. Nonetheless, this does not make *How It Is* a techno-sublime work. As Gilbert-Rolfe put it: '[e]lectronic blankness occurs rather as an event rather than eschatology'.<sup>581</sup> The blankness that is nowadays preferred, as Gilbert-Rolfe says, is very passive-aggressive, and it is comforting to see how it works, which balances out the overwhelming sense of the whole. Eliasson, as we know, did exactly that, while Balka, whose work did not need any technology apart from its creation in a workshop, does not offer this form of completion: it is disturbing, confusing and disorientating on every level. Showing the workings of something mechanical is a Victorian tradition, in which the mechanical workings themselves and that which they produced were always on display in works of art, be it decorated. For us, however, 'the absence of decoration embellishes the absence of visible articulation'<sup>582</sup>: '[w]hat is ultimately unfathomable about [it] is their<sup>583</sup> lack of mystery, a condition of the sense in which contemporary things neither conceal nor reveal themselves'.<sup>584</sup>

The contemporary preference for blankness is all about communication and interaction. At the centre of the sublime discussion is still, as it always has been, the human being. In our contemporary society, the human subject, said Gilbert-Rolfe, has 'become active as data which could be retrieved, legible in electronic terms'.<sup>585</sup> Whether or not we envision the human being as redundant, they remain important, at least for the time being, as consumers<sup>586</sup>, and we therefore need consumable art. Lyotard believed us to live in an 'inhuman'-era, but Gilbert-Rolfe imagines us to have already moved on. This inhuman sublime was still occupied with terror, that which accompanies the human, the void, 'with what engulfs or is the field of extension for the human, with the idea of the not-human.'<sup>587</sup> The post-human, therefore, appears simultaneously as a form of being and a non-organic entity.<sup>588</sup> Gilbert-Rolfe argued that the post-human sublime, which succeeds the inhuman postmodern

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<sup>581</sup> Gilbert-Rolfe (1999), 114. 'Eschatology' is defined as '[t]he part of theology concerned with death, judgement, and the final destiny of the soul and of humankind', *English Oxford Living Dictionaries*.

<sup>582</sup> Gilbert-Rolfe (1999), 114; [c]ontemporary blankness is heir to both the Victorian's horror vacui and the [modern] transparency that sought to deconstruct it', Gilbert-Rolfe (1999), 119.

<sup>583</sup> Gilbert-Rolfe means here the contemporary works of art deemed sublime.

<sup>584</sup> Gilbert-Rolfe (1999), 132..

<sup>585</sup> Gilbert-Rolfe (1999), 137.

<sup>586</sup> Gilbert-Rolfe (1999), 125.

<sup>587</sup> Gilbert-Rolfe (1999), 137.

<sup>588</sup> Gilbert-Rolfe (1999), 139.

sublime, is made visible and possibly by modern-day technology.<sup>589</sup> Furthermore, it does not need terror, since it lives inside the void.<sup>590</sup> The terms for this form of the sublime are supposedly: ‘blank and static activity, intelligence without gestural expression, encoding without inflection or irregularity, pure measurement, and pure power.’<sup>591</sup> Gilbert-Rolfe also described where this form of the sublime can be found, and his description seems to point directly at *The Weather Project*:

It is found in machines that resist personification but nonetheless interact with the human, and its terms are the surface without debt, continuity as flawless and infinite extension, which are those of techno-sublime and the beauty which exists in a differential relationship to and within it and its blank energy.<sup>592</sup>

The (half) orb in *The Weather Project* indeed resisted personification, but did interact with the audience. This last effect was amplified by the mirror-covered ceiling: again, direct personification was made impossible, since the mirrors moreover emphasized collective unity over individuality, but people nevertheless actively tried to interact with it through movement, searching for themselves in the mirrors. Balka’s work of art recreated the void and absolutely needed terror. In response to Burke’s - and therefore every instance of the terrifying sublime, such as Balka’s - Gilbert-Rolfe posed a completely different new idea of the sublime:

the sublime proposed by contemporary technology may be terrifying but it is couched in terms as far away from astonishment, awe, reverence, and respect, as it can get. It is instead a sublimity lodged in an idea of the same as a condition of the singular. It is a user-friendly sublime - bringing together, as capitalism’s passive-aggressivity does so well, the banal and the benevolent. But it is nonetheless a sublime, marked as such by its otherness.<sup>593</sup>

By 2001, when Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe published *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime*, the institutionalisation of a concept that in Lyotard’s hands had been definitively anti-institutional was already a given. Gilbert-Rolfe contrarily proposed (as far as I can tell) that nowadays it was the category of ‘beauty’ (idiosyncratically defined) that was truly radical and liberatory.<sup>594</sup>

The meaning of the sublime has thus indubitably changed since the Romantic period. In one way or another, we as art lovers, critics and theorists, have all fallen victim to the Turner Syndrome. A syndrome constitutes ‘a condition characterized by a set of associated symptoms’<sup>595</sup>, and that is probably how we should look at contemporary works of sublime art,

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<sup>589</sup> Gilbert-Rolfe (1999), 142.

<sup>590</sup> Gilbert-Rolfe (1999), 137.

<sup>591</sup> Gilbert-Rolfe (1999), 142.

<sup>592</sup> Gilbert-Rolfe (1999), 142.

<sup>593</sup> Gilbert-Rolfe (1999), 121.

<sup>594</sup> Bell (2003).

<sup>595</sup> *English Oxford Living Dictionaries*.

at least in my opinion. It is a mixing and matching of tradition and innovation. Mullan, whom I referenced some pages ago, gave the following statement in 2000:

This [Gilbert-Rolfe's vision of technological limitless] is a paradox, for the sublime is precisely what we cannot master, while technology is supposedly what allows us to control nature. As neither of these theoreticians of sublimity acknowledges, it has for a long time been pure science, not technology, that has given us a sense of the sublime. Now the voids into which we are invited to gaze in amazement are the unimaginably huge ones of Godless space and time.<sup>596</sup>

I must agree with Mullan on this subject. As we have seen, both Balka's *How It Is*, and Eliasson's *The Weather Project* conform to and resist modern, postmodern and contemporary notions of the sublime. In my opinion, this is because - as Mullan also points out - the sublime is the one thing that we cannot master. Restricting it with labels or directions means undoing it, revealing it, means weakening it. The sublime is in the past, the present, and the future, it is there in immediacy, it cannot possibly be grasped or fathomed without diminishing its powers:

We see (...) how scale can become mere bombast, significance mere self-importance. Grandiosity certainly tumbles into the ridiculous in the post-modern aesthetics of Gilbert-Rolfe and Žižek. On this evidence, we have to keep looking for better ways to recover the frightening, necessary delight of knowing our own smallness.<sup>597</sup>

Chasing after the sublime, as we have seen throughout this research, might lead to 'bathos', a term coined by the English poet Alexander Pope (1688-1744). 'Bathos' is defined today as: 'an effect of anti-climax created by an unintentional lapse in mood from the sublime to the trivial or ridiculous'.<sup>598</sup> And we definitely would not want that to happen. The sublime is wonderful, awe-inspiring, and terrible in all its forms. It reaches towards us, whether from something beyond a canvas, as it did with Turner, or from the immediacy of the here and now.

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<sup>596</sup> Mullan (2000).

<sup>597</sup> Mullan (2000).

<sup>598</sup> *English Oxford Living Dictionaries*.

## ‘I feel myself coloured by all the nuances of infinity’

Paul Cézanne (1839-1906)<sup>599</sup>

As we have now become fully aware of, the sublime poses more questions than it answers. As a theoretical concept which can be attributed to both art and philosophy, it is in its nature to destabilize and unnerve.<sup>600</sup> Despite all the possible questions which could be asked, I asked myself what it was about this notion that it could survive throughout all these ages and through all the philosophical, religious, sociological, and (thereby) even political and because of all of this: artistic currents. How can a concept be subject to flux and metamorphosis as the sublime is, but still be an (until now at least) immortal phenomenon, constantly rising from the ashes like a phoenix, flaring up in the dark, or residing in it? I studied various works of art from different artists throughout different periods of time to come to an answer to this question, and posed a case-study of two particular representatives of their respective periods of time: Joseph Mallord William Turner and Olafur Eliasson, and their strangely alike works: *Light and Colour (Goethe's Theory) - The Morning after the Deluge - Moses writing the Book of Genesis* (1843) and *The Weather Project* (2003). I strove to answer what the nature is of the sublime theory apparently underlying both Turner's *Light and Colour* and Eliasson's *The Weather Project*? I have tried to answer this question in four chapters.

The question starts with the hypothesis that both these works can be attributed to the sublime as a rather fluid philosophical and artistic concept which nevertheless nowadays still bears resemblances to its original form. Eventually I am able to conclude that, yes, both these works can justifiably be labelled sublime, and moreover that, despite all the passed centuries and decades, the sublime concept is not all too different. The foundation of the sublime remains the elevation of the mind, whether through Longinus' joy and exaltation, Burke's terror, Kant's capacities of reason and Lyotard's disruptiveness.

However, a book can be written about a subject so fluid in its sudden appearance and evocation, let alone about how it rises, falls and *how* it appeared in the past, appears nowadays and will appear in the future. I therefore predict that sublime theory and research is long from finished. Seldom has a subject proved to be so immortal. As we have seen as the end of this research, the discussion about the sublime nowadays is perhaps more complex than ever. There remain a million questions to be asked and answered, making the sublime, at

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<sup>599</sup> Cézanne quoted in Shaw (2013), original source: Michael Doran (ed.), *Conversations with Cézanne*, trans. by Julie Lawrence Cochran, Berkley, Los Angeles and London 2001, p.114.

<sup>600</sup> Morley (2010).

least in my humble opinion, one of the most fascinating subjects in art history. In times of blindness, the sublime lifts us up to undiscovered heights, when language seems to fail, the sublime invents its own. It is always reaching for us, sometimes in the form of a saviour or teacher, sometimes lurking in the dark as a primal, unknowable force. Your confrontation with it will never be pleasant at first, but will change your life in one way or another. Paul Cézanne felt himself coloured by all the nuances of infinity, and I imagine the sublime and its influence on the art world to be precisely like that: it is able to colour every aspect of life, rather dousing it in dazzling light or covering all with stomach-tightening darkness. We might sometimes forget its effect, using its name as a buzzword, but upon confrontation, its impact will always, as unexpectedly as ever, be beyond our mental capacity.

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Fig. 6: Caspar David Friedrich, *The Wanderer above the Mists*, 1817-18, oil on canvas, 95 x 75 cm., Kunsthalle, Hamburg, <http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?/html/f/friedric/2/209fried.html>.



Fig. 7: Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Stormy Sea with Blazing Wreck*, ca. 1835-40, oil on canvas, 99.4 x 141.6 cm., Tate, London, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-stormy-sea-with-blazing-wreck-n04658>.



Fig. 8: Joseph Mallord William Turner, *The Eruption of the Soufriere Mountains, in the Island of St. Vincent, at midnight, on the 30<sup>th</sup> of April, 1812, from a Sketch Taken at the Time by Hugh P. Keane, Esqre, ex. 1815*, oil on canvas, 79.4 x 104.8 cm., University of Liverpool Art Gallery & Collections, Liverpool, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-the-eruption-of-the-souffrier-mountains-in-the-island-of-st-vincent-at-midnight-on-tw0352>.



Fig. 9: Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Light and Colour (Goethe's Theory) - the Morning after the Deluge, Moses Writing the Book of Genesis*, exhibited 1843, oil on canvas, 78.7 x 78.7 cm., Tate, Turner Bequest, London, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-light-and-colour-goethes-theory-the-morning-after-the-deluge-moses-writing-the-book-n00532>.



Fig. 10: Olafur Eliasson, *The Weather Project*, 2003, Monofrequency lights, projection foil, haze machines, mirror foil, aluminium, and scaffolding, 26.7 m x 22.3 m x 155.4 m, installation in Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London, <http://olafureliasson.net/archive/exhibition/EXH101069/the-weather-project>



Fig. 11: John Martin, *The Great Days of His Wrath*, 1851-3, oil on canvas, 196.5 x 303.2 cm., Tate, London.  
<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/martin-the-great-day-of-his-wrath-n05613>.



Fig. 12: Moritz von Schwind, *Morning Hour*, 1860, oil on canvas, 34.8 x 41.9 cm., The Pinakotheken, München.  
<https://www.pinakothek.de/kunst/meisterwerk/moritz-von-schwind/die-morgenstunde#>.



Fig. 13: Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller, *Ansicht des Dachsteins mit dem Hallstätter See von der Hütteneckalpe bei Ischl*, 1838, oil on panel, 45.5 x 57.5 cm., Wien Museum Karlsplatz, Vienna.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Waldmüller\\_Ansicht\\_des\\_Dachsteins\\_mit\\_dem\\_Hallstättersee\\_von\\_der\\_Hütteneckalpe\\_bei\\_Ischl.jpeg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Waldmüller_Ansicht_des_Dachsteins_mit_dem_Hallstättersee_von_der_Hütteneckalpe_bei_Ischl.jpeg).



Fig. 14: Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Shade and Darkness - the Evening of the Deluge*, exhibited 1843, oil on canvas, 78.7 x 78.1 cm., Tate, Turner Bequest, London, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-shade-and-darkness-the-evening-of-the-deluge-n00531>.



Fig. 15: Edwin H. Lanseer, *The Old Shepherd's Chief Mourner*, 1837, oil on canvas, 45.7 x 61 cm., Victoria and Albert Museum, London. <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O16452/the-old-shepherds-chief-mourner-oil-painting-landseer-edwin-henry/>.



Fig. 16: Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Colour Beginning*, ca. 1820, watercolour on paper, 33.5 x 42.4 cm., Tate, London, Turner Bequest (1856). <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-colour-beginning-d40304>.



Fig. 17: Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Rome from Monte Mario*, 1820, watercolour and scraping out on paper, 29.8 x 41.5 cm., Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh, <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/collection/artists-a-z/t/artist/joseph-mallord-william-turner/object/rome-from-monte-mario-d-5638>.



Fig. 18: Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Going to the Ball (San Martino)*, exhibited 1846, oil on canvas, 61.6 x 92.4 cm., Tate, Turner Bequest, London, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-going-to-the-ball-san-martino-n00544>.



Fig. 19: Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Snow Storm: Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps*, exhibited 1812, oil on canvas, 146 x 237.5 cm., Tate, Turner Bequest, London, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-snow-storm-hannibal-and-his-army-crossing-the-alps-n00490>.

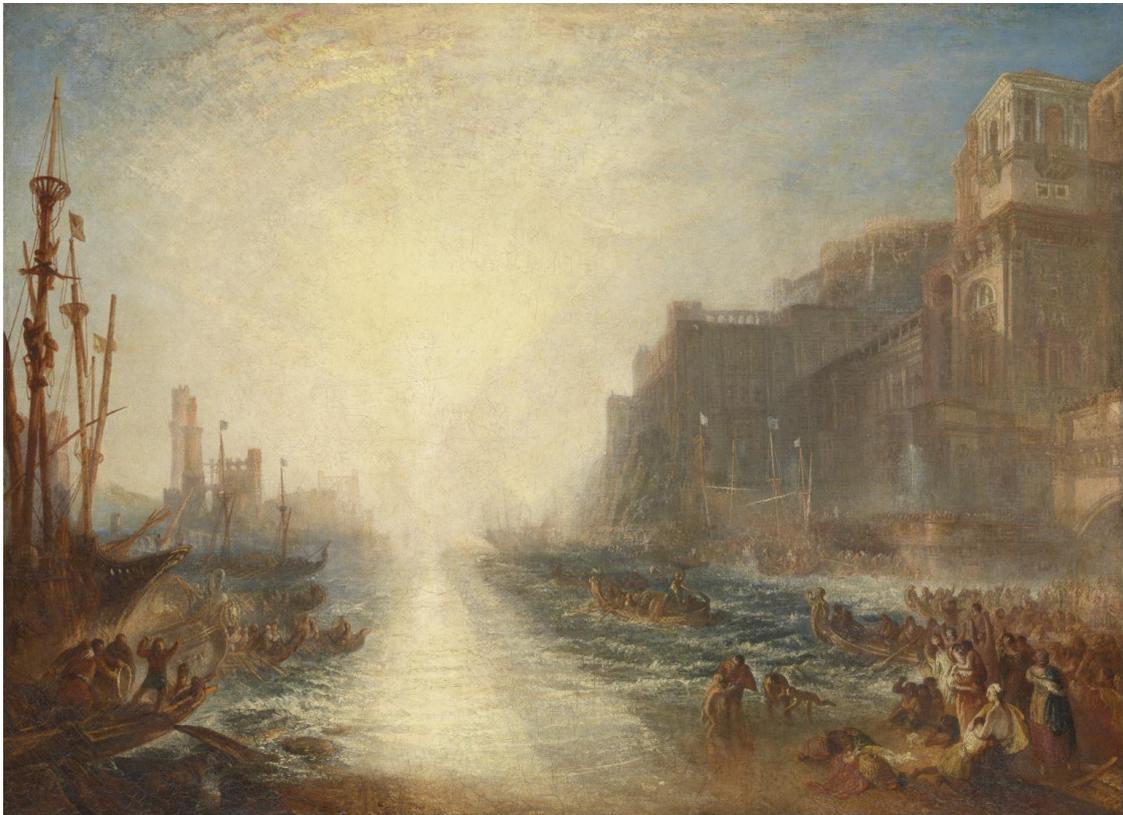


Fig 20: Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Regulus*, 1828 (reworked in 1837), oil on canvas, 89.5 x 123.8 cm., Tate, Turner Bequest, London, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-regulus-n00519>.



Fig. 21: Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Interior of a Great House: The Drawing Room, East Cowes Castle*, c. 1830-7, oil on canvas, 90.8 x 121.9 cm., Tate, Turner Bequest, London, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-interior-of-a-great-house-the-drawing-room-east-cowes-castle-n01988>.



Fig. 22: Joseph Mallord William Turner, *The Angel Standing in the Sun*, exhibited 1846, oil on canvas, 78.7 x 78.7 cm., Tate, Turner Bequest, London, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-the-angel-standing-in-the-sun-n00550>.



Fig. 23: Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Undine Giving the Ring to Masaniello, Fisherman of Naples*, exhibited 1846, oil on canvas, 79.1 x 79.1 cm., Tate, Turner Bequest, London, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-undine-giving-the-ring-to-masaniello-fisherman-of-naples-n00549>.



Fig. 24: Caspar David Friedrich, *Der Mönch am Meer*, 1808-1810, oil on canvas, 110 x 171.5 cm., Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Berlin, <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>.

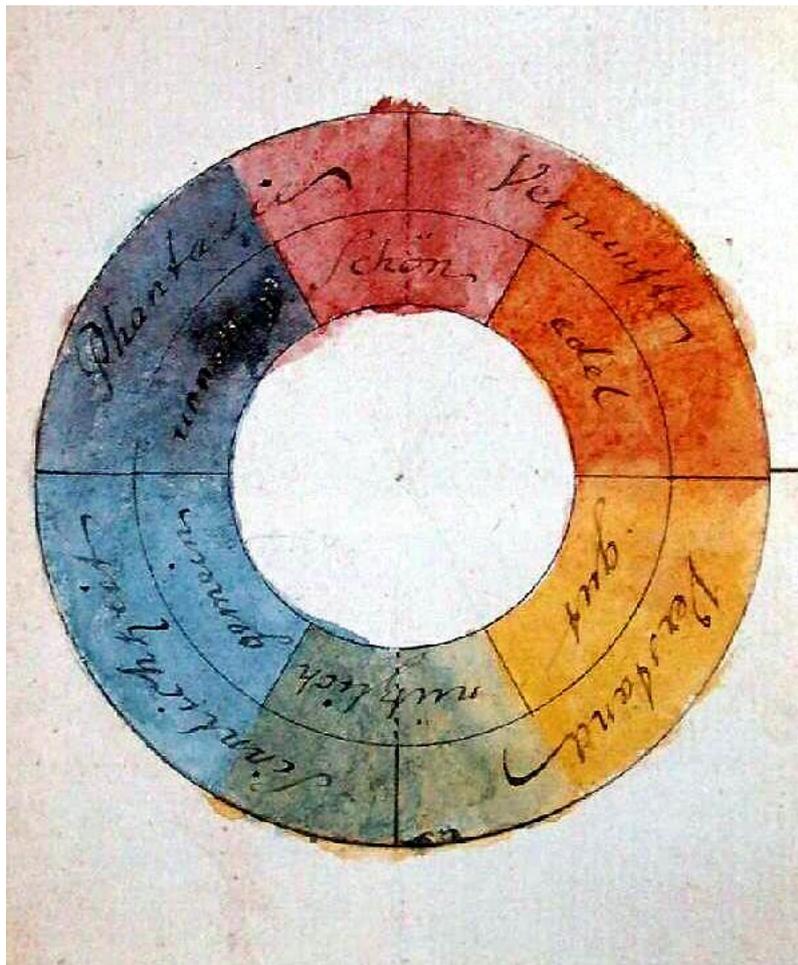


Fig. 25: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, symmetric colour wheel with associated symbolic qualities, in *Zur Farbenlehre* (1810), <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=6011583>.



Fig. 26: Mark Rothko, *Green on Blue*, 1965, oil on canvas, 231.7 x 136.5 cm., The University of Arizona Museum of Art, Tucson, via email.



Fig. 27: Samuel Palmer, *The Harvest Moon*, 1830-1, watercolour and gouache, 12.1 x 14 cm., Carlisle Art Gallery, scan from: Robert Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko*, Hampshire 1975, p. 60, 234 (painting can only be found in this book).



Fig. 28: Vincent van Gogh, *The Old Tower in the Fields*, 1884, oil on canvas, 35 x 47 cm., private collection, <http://www.wikiart.org/en/vincent-van-gogh/the-old-tower-in-the-fields-1884>.



Fig. 29: Vincent van Gogh, *The Sower*, 1888, oil on canvas, 32.5 x 40.3 cm., Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, <https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/nl/collectie/s0029V1962>.



Fig. 30: Edvard Munch, *The Sun*, 1911-1916, oil on canvas, 780 x 455 cm., The Oslo University, Oslo, <http://www.wikiart.org/en/edvard-munch/the-sun-1916>.



Fig. 31: Piet Mondrian, *Woods near Oele*, 1908, oil on canvas, 158 x 128 cm., Haags Gemeentemuseum, Den Haag, <http://www.wikiart.org/en/piet-mondrian/woods-near-oele-1908>



Fig. 32: Damien Hirst, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, 1991, Glass, painted steel, silicone, monofilament, shark and formaldehyde solution, 217 x 542 x 180 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <http://www.damienhirst.com/the-physical-impossibility-of>.

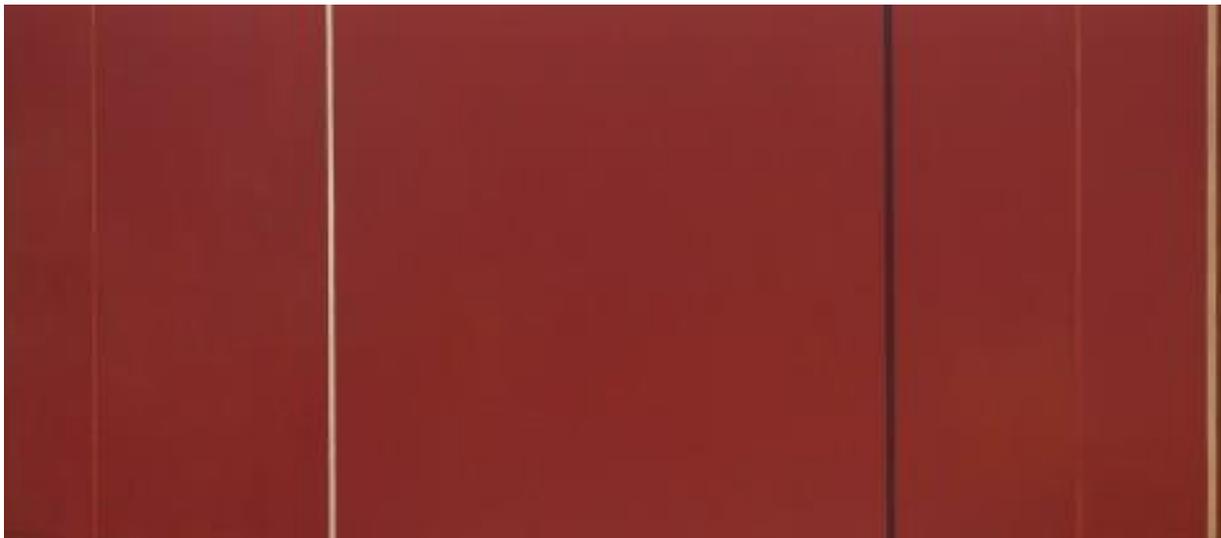


Fig. 33: Barnett Newman, *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, 1951, oil on canvas, 242.2 x 541.7 cm., MoMA, New York, [http://www.moma.org/learn/moma\\_learning/barnett-newman-vir-heroicus-sublimis-1950-51](http://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/barnett-newman-vir-heroicus-sublimis-1950-51).



Fig. 34: Olafur Eliasson, *Turner Colour Experiments*, Tate Britain, Linbury Galleries, London, 2014, oil on canvas, ca. 190 cm., Studio Olafur Eliasson, Berlin, <http://olafureliasson.net/archive/exhibition/EXH102309/olafur-eliasson-turner-colour-experiments>.

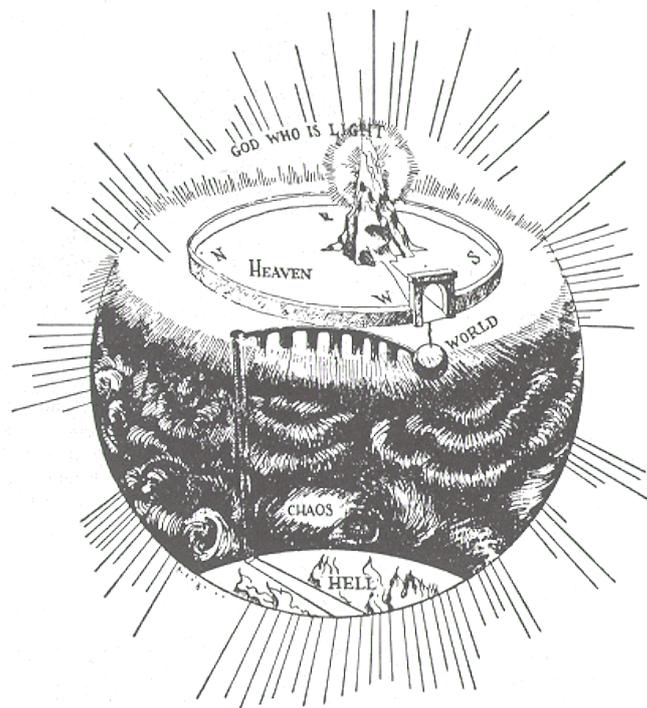


Fig. 35: Walter Clyde Curry, 'A diagram suggesting the relationship between God, who is infinite light, and total space with its content of emanated and created reality', in: Walter Clyde Curry, *Milton's Ontology, Cosmogony and Physics*, Kentucky University Press, Lexington 2015, 156.



Fig. 36: Barnett Newman, *The Command*, 1946, oil on canvas, 122 x 90.5 cm., Kunstmuseum Basel, [http://sammlungonline.kunstmuseumbasel.ch/eMuseumPlus?service=direct/1/ResultDetailView/result.inline.list.t1.collection\\_list.\\$TspTitleImageLink.link&sp=13&sp=Sartist&sp=SfilterDefinition&sp=0&sp=1&sp=1&sp=SdetailView&sp=12&sp=Sdetail&sp=0&sp=T&sp=0&sp=SdetailList&sp=0&sp=F&sp=Scollection&sp=11257](http://sammlungonline.kunstmuseumbasel.ch/eMuseumPlus?service=direct/1/ResultDetailView/result.inline.list.t1.collection_list.$TspTitleImageLink.link&sp=13&sp=Sartist&sp=SfilterDefinition&sp=0&sp=1&sp=1&sp=SdetailView&sp=12&sp=Sdetail&sp=0&sp=T&sp=0&sp=SdetailList&sp=0&sp=F&sp=Scollection&sp=11257).



Fig. 37: Marcel Jean, *Spectre of the Gardenia*, 1936, plaster head with painted black cloth, zippers, and strip of film on velvet-covered wood base, 35 x 17.6 x 25 cm., including base 7.5 x 17.6 cm., MoMa, New York, <http://www.moma.org/collection/works/81176>.



Fig. 38: Doris Salcedo, *Unland: audible in the mouth*, 1998, wood, thread and hair, 80 x 75 x 315 cm., Tate, London, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/salcedo-unland-audible-in-the-mouth-t07523>.



Fig. 39: Doris Salcedo, *Unland: audible in the mouth*, detail, 1988, wood, thread and hair, 80 x 75 x 315 cm., Tate, London, <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/01/unland-the-place-of-testimony>.



Fig. 40: Anish Kapoor, *Descent into Limbo*, 1992, fiberglass, acrylic medium and pigment, varying dimensions, Museum De Pont, Tilburg,  
[http://www.depont.nl/en/collection/artists/artist/werk\\_id/196/werkinfo/1/kunstenaar/kapoor/](http://www.depont.nl/en/collection/artists/artist/werk_id/196/werkinfo/1/kunstenaar/kapoor/).



Fig. 41: Olafur Eliasson, *The Weather Project*, the installation, 16 October 2003 - 21 March 2004, monofrequency lights, projection foil, haze machines, mirror foil, aluminium, and scaffolding, 26.7 m. x 22.3 m. x 155.4 m., Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London, <http://degenerateartstream.blogspot.nl/2011/12/its-too-soon-to-know-post-by-nik.html>.

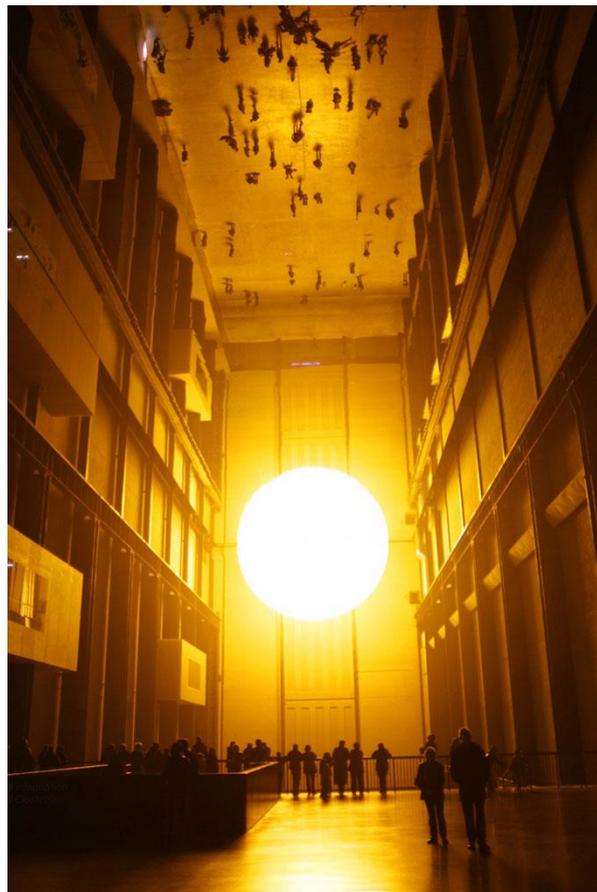


Fig. 42: Olafur Eliasson, *The Weather Project*, mirror effects, 16 October 2003 - 21 March 2004, monofrequency lights, projection foil, haze machines, mirror foil, aluminium, and scaffolding, 26.7 m. x 22.3 m. x 155.4 m., Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London, [http://www.artitude.eu/?p=articolo&categoria=news&id\\_pill=251&language=1](http://www.artitude.eu/?p=articolo&categoria=news&id_pill=251&language=1).



Fig. 43: Olafur Eliasson, *New Berlin Sphere*, 19 November 2015 - 6 March 2016, Stainless steel, coloured glass, aluminium, bulb, 140 x 140 cm., Winter Palace, Vienna,  
<http://olafureliasson.net/archive/artwork/WEK100333/new-berlin-sphere>.



Fig. 44: Olafur Eliasson, *Eye See You*, 19 November 2015 - 6 March 2016, stainless steel, aluminium, colour-effect filter glass, bulb, 230 x 120 x 110 cm., Winter Palace, Vienna,  
<http://olafureliasson.net/archive/artwork/WEK100607/eye-see-you>.



Fig. 45: Olafur Eliasson, *Riverbed*, 20 August 2014 - 1 January 2015, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk, Denmark, <http://olafureliasson.net/archive/exhibition/EXH102282/riverbed>.



Fig. 46: Miroslaw Balka, *How It Is*, 13 October 2009 - 5 April 2010, steel, Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London, <http://www.nouse.co.uk/2009/12/13/review-miroslaw-balka-at-the-tate-modern%E2%80%99s-turbine-hall/>.

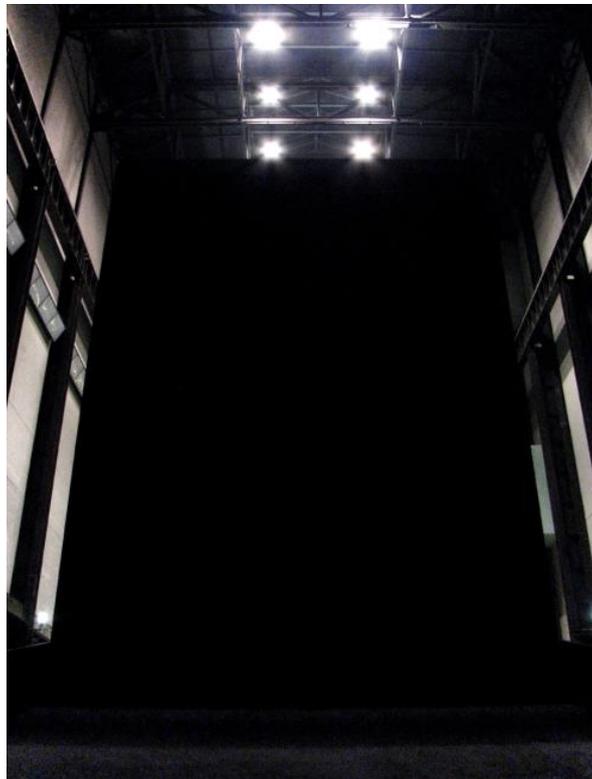


Fig. 47Bell: Miroslaw Balka, *How It Is*, frontal view, 13 October 2009 - 5 April 2010, steel, Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London, <https://urbanrichardlong.wordpress.com/>.



Fig. 48: James Turrell, *Virtuality Squared: Ganzfeld*, built space and LED-lights, 2014, 800 x 1400 x 1940.5 cm, Collection James Turrell, image: National Gallery of Australia, <http://nga.gov.au/jamesturrell/>.

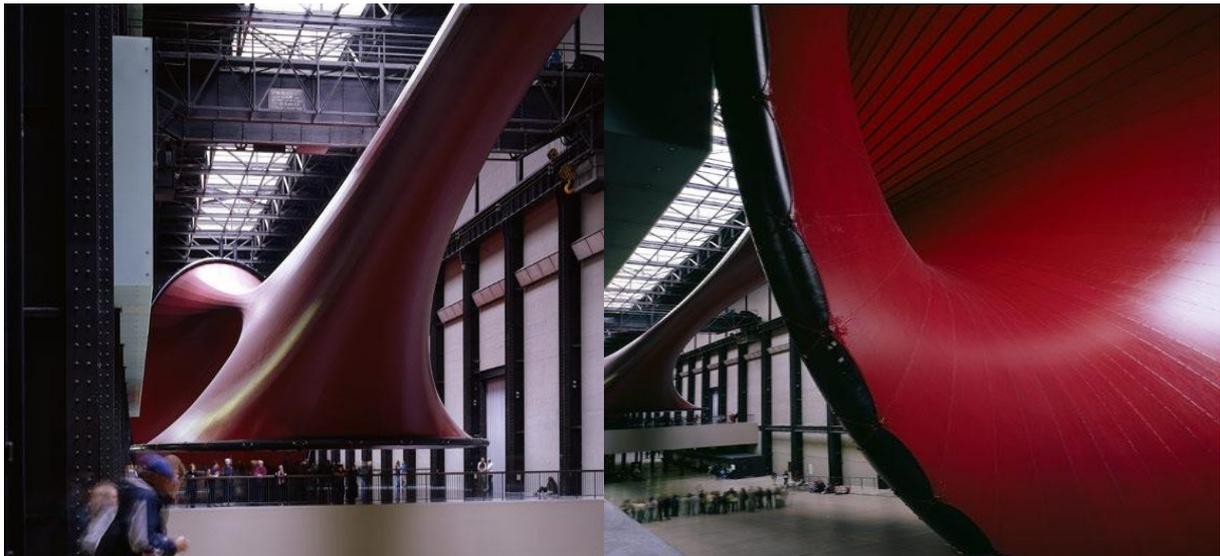


Fig. 49: Anish Kapoor, *Marsyas*, 9 October 2002 - 6 April 2003, steel and PVC, Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London, <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/unilever-series-anish-kapoor-marsyas>.



Fig. 50: Gustave Courbet, *The Source of the Loue*, 1864, oil on canvas, 98.4 x 130.4 cm., National Gallery of Art, Washington, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/philip-shaw-modernism-and-the-sublime-r1109219>.