

# The sublime

An expanding field of rhetoric, forever

**Beyond the Finite: The Sublime in Art and Science**, eds. Roald Hoffmann and Iain Boyd Whyte (New York, Oxford University Press, 2011), 208 pp.

An anthology which, according to the editors, for the first time makes inroads towards the sublime in science, seems at first blush to be a rather far-fetched project. The umbrella for such a deviation from philosophy and *Kunstwissenschaft* emerged out of the symposium, 'Image and Meaning 2', held at the Getty Center, Los Angeles, in 2005.

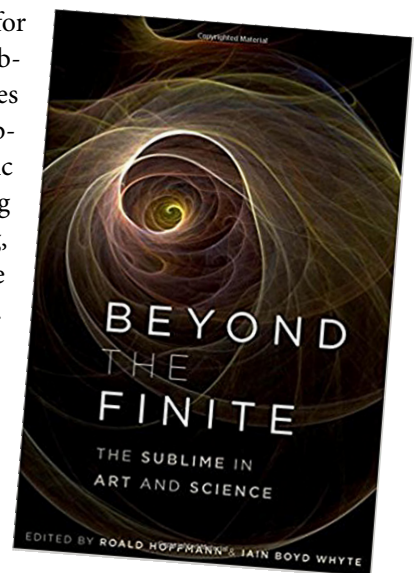
Among the writers we find the editors of the book, Iain Boyd Whyte, a historian of architecture, and Roald Hoffmann, a writer of poetry and a Nobel Prize laureate in chemistry. Editors Whyte and Hoffmann have imposed limitations on the quest, excluding the task of 'the category seeking definition', rather using '(the sublime) as a catalyst to provoke responses from a group of distinguished scientists and cultural historians.' Other contributors represent academia in the United States, Great Britain and Australia.

The nine essays could, with some difficulty, be grouped into two sections, the first one also including the editors' preface. Here we find the introductory essay by Whyte, who positions himself rather between the history of the sublime and its modernist, urban applications, such as those in art and architecture. Another voice takes the form of a critical contribution by James Elkins, giving up on the concept of the sublime altogether in his paper 'Against the sublime'. The second group displays a variety of enthusiastic and scholarly commentators from the frontiers of science and society, reflecting arguments for an aesthetics of the sublime pertaining to the natural sciences. Without playing much of a role in the discussion, one might surmise nevertheless the pres-

ence of a sustained respect for Longinus' rhetoric on the sublime, which, as it were, argues for new cases where the sublime is offered as an aesthetic focus when approaching elevated areas of reasoning, reading and talking about the invisible and unreasonable. Immanuel Kant notwithstanding, however readily referred to, the *Stimmung* of the essays are mainly given to discovery and fascination, wherefore my procrastination between rhetoric and

poetry, between awareness of the historical discourse and of case studies on new venues of experiencing one's experience.

The cases and the themes testify to the agility of the concept of the sublime as well as to its power 'to retain its core yet take on diverse and different guises over the centuries', Whyte notes. Scott Bukatman makes a survey of 'disobedient machines', distinguishing the uncanny from the sublime in cinema and comics, from Pinocchio to Frankenstein, and applying cases of 'creation of the unnatural', automata and animism in literary and visual phantasy. The power of augmented visual images of far away stellar objects is the topic of Elisabeth A. Kessler's contribution. In her survey of the 'prettier sublime' objects, ironically, it seems, she discusses the impact of popularizing scientific images of the galaxies by means of image manipulation. Barbara Maria Stafford makes a clear break from Longinus and verges towards the forms of modern anguish in her



focus on the 'non-conscious sublime', proposing an archaeological metaphor of 'submergence', elaborating an 'elevation from below' and a 'material monism where mind and matter [have] acted instantly as one'. Roald Hoffmann makes his case for a sublime 'in the middle', not at the extremes, presenting a chemical sublime of atoms and molecules.

That the notion of the sublime nowadays may be presented with regard to the theme of 'posthuman' is reflected in the contribution by Jaak Panksepp, on how creativity is fed by the affective foundations and 'the biology of the soul' shared by animals and humans alike. Ian Greig, academic and artist, argues for the viability of the concept of the sublime in Kant's version within the 'Romanticist' discourse of contemporary physics, especially related to the 'holistic conception' of the British physicist David Bohm. Following up on the frontiers of neuroscience, Professor John Onians elaborates on the Burkean sublime onwards to Kant and Jean-François Lyotard, each time backing up his arguments on the scholarly presentation with fact-finding in neuroscience, that 'helps us to understand Burke's "physiological" sublime' and further, assists in understanding the Kantian mathematical and dynamic sublime in relation to cognition and desire, respectively.

Is not science, however, about the finiteness of nature? Where science makes advances, the finite expands a little. Can the fact that scientists arrive at the attempt to include the sublime as useful in their vocabulary, perhaps, be granted permission by reference to Richard Rorty? Elkins favours the demise of the sublime and quotes Rorty as saying: 'One should see the quest for the sublime as one of the prettier unforced blue flowers of bourgeois culture' and the sublime is 'wildly irrelevant to the attempt at communicative consensus which is the vital force' of common culture.

Two analytic philosophers; Rorty, 'mistreating' epistemological dream work and 'representationalism', and Ludwig Wittgenstein have together changed the status of language as the correspondence and 'mirror of nature' – admittedly, following Kant on theology. Step by step philosophy advances back to the (Longinian?) future: elevated rhetoric and aesthetics where modelling little-known items of physics or astronomy may and will equal poetry and our response in trying to grasp the categories of Time and Space themselves. As a result, the thin lines between philosophy and other genres of writing disappear;

why not also, then, between aesthetics and science, which accounts for the contemporary deep reliance on the Burkean sublimity of a hegemonically specular world only accessible by representation, albeit often in terms of terror and dystopia.

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Over the course of reading the book, my appreciation grew, as I was initially sceptical of such a broad discussion on an already vague discourse and its feasibility to encompass the natural sciences. Nonetheless, I continued reading the book until the end (*sic*) with a, perhaps sublime, feeling tinged by an ever-expanding view of holistic immensity. Considering the completion of the transcendental (limit) with the philosophical, aesthetic, empiricist and material worlds presented here, the essays offer samples of the, now sublime, limits (= lintels) of 'everything'. This is a book for friends of the sublime within aesthetics, less for those entrenched in their specific fields of natural science. ■

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