



DOCUMENT

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The Real and the Sublime

For the event The Real Thing, Urbanomic brought together a group of writers to create new interpretative labels for the set of paintings grouped under the title Art and the Sublime at Tate Britain

INTRODUCTION

Speculative Realist philosophy asks how thought can access a reality that endures before, after, and without the human, a reality which the 'sublime' encounter with powers that exceed the capacity of the imagination also gestures towards.

Romantic theories of the sublime subordinate this traumatic encounter to a human economy—we witness our own extinction only long enough to yield a measure of 'delight' that consolidates our subjective integrity. However, in rearticulating the notion of the sublime during a period of theological uncertainty, scientific discovery and economic expansion, artists brushed up against an irrevocably weird 'outside' that disrupts this integrity: the contingency of death, the indifference of secularised nature, and the empty aeons of earth-history in which humanity itself is a contingent and vanishingly small episode.

Behind the depiction of the sublime, Urbanomic's collaborative interpretations uncover a 'complicity with anonymous materials'. The subjective experience of the sublime is understood as the mark of an intrusion into human culture of a weird 'outside'. The real presses upon human consciousness, forcing thought to behold its own contingency in ever more precise and appalling ways. Where the romantic conception continues to express conflicting tendencies of the organism—the will to inundation and the resistance against incorporation—SR encompasses the production of these drives as one contingent reality amongst others.

TURNER, 'SHIPWRECK'



Here, depiction begins to give way to a distribution of forces that retains or repeats something of the traumatic experience. One scarcely needs to register the subject of the painting to experience the restless, queasy motion induced by Turner's arrangement of colour and intensity.

The shipwreck scene has been untethered from the shore, which for earlier painters provided a stage populated with a chorus of figures reacting to the unfolding tragedy. Painting is also discovering an autonomy from representation: its dynamic relationship to the eye belongs to the same anonymous, turbulent nature it depicts.

Painting is then 'of' the sublime not in a representational sense, but in the sense that the sublime, as a particular disposition of forces, takes hold of it and works it from within. [RM]

TURNER, 'A DISASTER AT SEA'



Formally, the painting takes advantage of an invisible horizon line—which would, were this a painting of a placid, calm sea, coincide with the horizon of the sea itself. This invisible horizontal line is frenetically bisected by the jagged, incongruous, vertical line of the clashing waves in the center of the painting. In this zig-zagging motif, we see not only the waves colliding, but the debris of the ship, and glimpses of the bodies engulfed by the waves. This bisecting, erratic, 'savage' line blurs all boundaries: bodies become waves, the sea becomes the sky. This con-fusion of all boundaries, melding wood, flesh, and water, approaches the kind of pantheistic Naturphilosophie one finds in Schelling or Novalis. By effectively effacing the classical horizon line, was Turner also making a comment on the unbridled vitality of romanticism versus the static fixity of classicism? [ET]

SEDDON, 'JERUSALEM AND JEHOSEPHAT'



Seddon's meticulous realism unwittingly reveals how in this landscape, geology and topography, together with the patterns of settlement, agriculture and

religion that follow them, are complicit with a militarism that they continue to express even in this peaceful scene.

The valley forms a defensive moat around the fortified city of Jerusalem. With the settlement on the other side of the valley as a first line of defence and reconnaissance, this entrance was often left unguarded during the Crusades. Armies avoided the area as its water was contaminated by the corpses of Jews, Christians and Muslims interred on the slopes awaiting the Last Judgment. The small stone wall recalls that the valley also served as a quarry, supplying the city with stone for fortifications. [RN/RM]

WARD, 'GORDALE SCAR'



In his 'Tour to the Caves' (1781) Geologist John Hutton describes how a descent into Gordale Scar triggered the sublime struggle between reason and fear:

The idea for personal safety excited some awful sensations accompanied with a tremor. The mind is not always able to divest itself of prejudices and unpleasing associations of ideas: Reason told us that this rock could not be moved ... We stood too far under its margin to be affected by any crumbled descending fragment, and a very small one would have crushed us to atoms, if it had fallen upon us; yet in spite of reason and judgment, the same unpleasing sensations of terror ran coldly through our veins, which we should have felt, if we had looked down, though secure, from its lofty top.

With his massive, highly manipulated rendering of the 'awful, great and grand' scene, Ward aims to further 'heighten' this experience. [RM]

ROSSETTI, 'BEATA BEATRIX'



The painter arrests Beatrice at the impossible moment of death—the moment that may be said to define the structure of human experience, but is precisely the one thing we can never experience. In the moment of apotheosis, she would become completely, perfectly herself—but what is this if not to become an object?

Saving her from this fate, beatification allows Beatrice, although she has passed out of the sphere that delimits human experience, to contemplate her own death, bringing it into the purview of life's possibilities ('the new life').

Where death could be seen as sublime because it is an abrupt irruption of an alien contingency irrespective of the laws and possibilities of the subject, Rossetti instead sublimates personal death into a life-event. [RN/RM/TM]

MILLAIS, 'THE VALE OF REST'



In Millais's intensification of the poetic association between the end of day and the end of life, sublime elements of nature become a cue for a more inward reflection.

There is nothing especially awe-inspiring or terrible about the scene itself. The painting is almost photographic in its arresting of a singular, snapshot moment—the onset of dusk, the awkwardly frozen pose of the digging nun.

Unlike the Burkean sublime, where the picture plane is a distancing, protective screen, here the uncomfortable intimacy of the seated figure's gaze directly involves the viewer so as to pass from this singular moment to a universal reflection. The sublime becomes an appalling, private affair, an obscenity—Ruskin condemned the work as 'repulsive and ignoble'. Like a prurient voyeur, we are admitted to witness our own eventual absence—our own death. [RM/TM]

MILLAIS, 'THE NORTHWEST PASSAGE'



The sublime—the vast, uncharted and hostile realm, alluded to through the maps and charts, weighs

visibly on the faces of the two figures. The viewer, placed in the line of the captain's inward gaze, takes on the burden of the invisible nonhuman real around which the scene revolves—an icy obstacle that has already claimed lives, and which the human spirit must overcome.

The captain's defiant determination that the quest for the Northwest Passage must continue is reflected in Millais's subtitle: 'it might be done, and England should do it'. This entreaty reflects a belief in divine providence against profane contingency—The earth must prove to be passable 'for us' rather than an inhospitable set of tectonic and glacial fragments. But its nationalism combines this with a logic of economic accumulation—exploration driven by the imperatives of constant expansion and full exploitation of the earth. [RM/TM]

LEIGHTON, 'AND THE SEA GAVE UP THE DEAD WHICH WERE IN IT'



The ascension of the resurrected family, as they rise from their watery grave, diverges strangely from the vertical, possibly because of the painting's intended location.

During the renaissance, widely-read technical manuals tackled the problems of perspective for paintings executed on curved surfaces such as the dome of St Pauls, drawing on the sciences of mirror and lens images—catoptrics and dioptrics. In Leighton's era, these sciences had been revolutionised by new mathematics and sophisticated instruments.

Awareness of the gap between optical phenomena and underlying reality gives a new sense to St Paul's suggestion that the human soul reflects reality 'as if in a mirror darkly'; later painters would no longer seek to calibrate their depictions to suppress this disparity, instead entering into various examinations of the mechanisms of seeing. [KA/RN/RM]

COLLIER, 'LAST VOYAGE OF HENRY HUDSON'



Cast adrift by those whose instinct for self-preservation overcame the imperative of opening new frontiers for knowledge and profit, Hudson is shown with his hand still on the tiller. We are placed in the boat floating passively towards its inevitable fate, together with the few remaining crew who did not mutiny against him.

Hudson's stoically resigned gaze mediates between the boy's uncertain questioning of the situation and the glassy vacancy of the dead or dying man. In his radical passivity, Hudson's iron will becomes one with the real that now steers his fate.

The strange rendering of the boy's eyes and his inappropriate clothing suggest that he may in fact be a spectre, and Hudson the last survivor. [RM/TM/KH/MP]

LANDSEER, 'THE HUNTED STAG'



Aligning in one grand flow sky, mountain, stream, hunter and quarry, Landseer casts the viewer as the lone sportsman face-to-face with nature. But the solitude of this encounter was a luxury brutally achieved.

The Highland Clearances saw thousands of tenants moved to the lowlands as a cheap labour force or forced to emigrate. Traditional territorial attachments were severed, but the low-maintenance, high-profit sheep farming which replaced them declined. Now effectively a wasteland, the Highlands were reconstructed into aristocratic sporting estates, free to be 'rebranded' as a site of sublime mythical tradition and natural might.

Choreographing nature itself into alignment with this new mythos, Landseer tells us little of the real political and economic forces that made it possible. [RM/KH]

TURNER, 'CONISTON FELLS'



Turner pays close attention to Milton's words. One of several references to 'exhalation', the passage concerns itself above all with the glory of the cyclical, living nature of creation: the rising and falling of water in the atmosphere is seen as a form of prayer:

Ye Mists and Exhalations, that now rise
From hill or steaming lake, dusky or gray,
Till the sun paint your fleecy skirts with gold,
In honour to the world's great Author rise;
Whether to deck with clouds the uncoloured sky,
Or wet the thirsty earth with falling showers,
Rising or falling still advance his praise.

Appropriately, Turner gives us a comprehensive portrait of the water cycle: stratus clouds rise from the peaks, to become cirrus clouds, and form cumuli as they descend, precipitating as rain into the springs, mountain streams and waterfalls. All that is missing is the ocean. [RM]

WATTS, 'HOPE'



In his essay 'Spectral Dilemma', philosopher Quentin Meillassoux addresses the theological problem of hope, in the face of the multitude of senseless deaths that occur in the world. If God does not exist, and we can hope for no redemption for the dead, then we can only despair. Conversely, any justice the dead might receive in the afterlife would be justice dispensed by the very God who allowed their senseless suffering—a perverse and cruel deity.

Meillassoux's speculative solution to this dilemma reignites hope with the thought that God's non-existence harbours the possibility of a God yet to come.

This emergence of God from a 'divine inexistence' is thinkable when we accept Meillassoux's argument that the laws of nature as we know them are not necessary, but absolutely contingent. Only reason's discovery of this paradoxical truth can ground hope. [RM]

WATTS, 'CHAOS'



Order is a perennial concern of Western philosophy and art. But for both, disorder is a more vexing problem. Watts, a self-styled 'thinker in paint', compromises by placing disorder within an orderly transition from 'chaos to cosmos'.

The progressive 'stratification' of the central flux implies a geological model. But geology has no scale from order to disorder—only endless foldings and refoldings of matter, an ordering which no longer requires the opposing pole of disorder. Perhaps this is why Watts's desultory image of chaos has little force.

Science now tells us that 'chaos' is not simply disorder, but an order lying beyond our perceptual capacities. It is no longer a question of ordering a representation of disorder; but of presenting structures that do not obey our inbuilt aesthetic sense of order. At this point aesthetics diverges from philosophy, and it becomes yet more difficult to be a 'thinker in paint'. [ET/RM]

WATTS, 'THE ALL-PERVADING'



Like all of Watts's major paintings, this was probably destined for his 'House of Life'—a Sistine Chapel-like great hall on whose surfaces Watts dreamt of portraying a universal metaphysical allegory taking in cosmic creation, biblical history, the 'ages of man' and the progress of civilisation.

Consonant with this vision – that of a grand systematiser—Watts may here be declaring that a universal order, a unifying sense, still overlooks the turbulence of a society uprooted by industrialisation, war, and continued imperial sorties into the undiscovered recesses of the earth. With Watts's characteristic ambiguity, however, this 'spirit'—depicted less numinously in another version, writing upon a parchment spread on the top of the globe—seems either dormant, blind or eyeless. [KH/RM]

HUNT, 'THE TRIUMPH OF THE INNOCENTS'



In the accompanying pamphlet at the Fine Art Society in 1885 Hunt explained:

[T]he flood upon which the spiritual children advance forms a contrast to the stream they cross [...] [This flood is] the stream of eternal life...Instead of being dissipated in natural vapour, the play of its wavelets takes the form of airy globes [...].

Hunt's artistic solution to a theological problem owes something to contemporary research into the interaction of liquids: to stabilise water bubbles, another liquid or insoluble gas is required to decrease the surface tension and prevent them from evaporating or dissipating into the air.

For Hunt, it is the non-homogeneity of the stream of eternal life that enables earthly water to form the mystical airy globes. His friend Millais endorsed a more prosaic solution: the sublime agent that preserves the fragility and lightness of this figure of purity and innocence, is Pears' Soap. [RN/RM/KH]

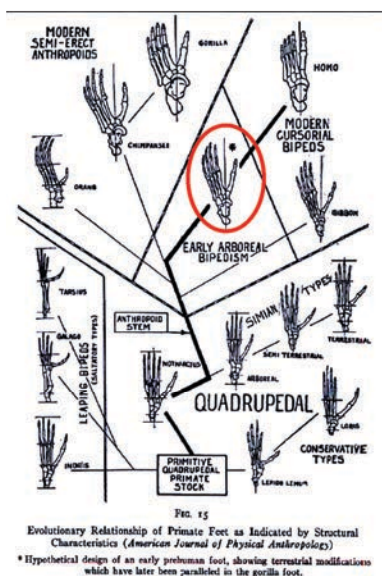


BLAKE, 'SATAN SMITING JOB WITH SORE BOILS'



Blake depicts Satan using Greek aesthetic devices: the genital area is rendered unclearly, with the penis small; and the feet have a longer second toe, a trait associated with royal blood and nobility.

The anatomical condition 'Greek Foot' is now recognised as an atavistic evolutionary trait: the longer second toe gave early bipeds the leverage to 'walk' up tree trunks. Our ape ancestors' final transition to an upright gait was enabled by a larger and stronger big toe, and a shorter second toe.



In his fidelity to a tradition of sublime anatomical figuration, Blake's visual translation of the biblical text harbours an ailment more serious than boils, and a more troubling, Darwinian, test of faith: even Satan is reduced to a primate shaped by a blind and indifferent genetics. [KA/RN/TM/MG/RM]

TURNER, 'DEATH ON A PALE HORSE'



Resisting the movement from the sublime personification of death (of which Milton is the last great poet) to the sublimation of personal death (where death figures as a singularity or apotheosis for the individual), Turner instead produces a sickly vortex of dissolution where even the symbolic personage of Death, swordless, is contorted and swallowed up, along with its steed.

This turbulent and vaporous maelstrom may owe something to the fear and public panic attendant upon the cholera epidemic which was raging in India, stirred up in the Bengal swamps by British colonial trade and troop movements, and was creeping westward soon to reach British shores, provoking biblical pronouncements ('one of the most terrible pestilences which have ever desolated the earth'). Testing the understanding of progress and the meaningfulness of natural events, this dread prospect may have inspired Turner's new conception of death. [KA/RM/RN]

WILSON, 'LLYN-Y-CAU, CADER IDRIS'



The depiction of the amphitheatre-like pool as an ominous 'black hole' repeats the common belief that Llyn-y-cau is an extinct volcano and is therefore connected to the bowels of the earth. Local folklore that anyone who sleeps near this bottomless lake is driven mad or becomes a poet.

The volcanic hypothesis, whose mythical associations Wilson reinforces, is mistaken. In fact, the lake is the product of the last ice-age—a melted remnant of the catastrophic Holocene extinction. The blackened areas inside the bowl, which recall earlier depictions of the lake-entrance to Hades, are not volcanic rock, but parts of the cirque glacial where the eroded soil can no longer support life. Llyn-y-cau is a silent marker of extinction, formed neither by a spectacular eruption nor by the catastrophic advent of a meteorite (two faces of the sublime), but by the slow glacial erosion of the landscape. [RN/RM/TM]

BRETT, 'GLACIER OF ROSENLAUI'

From William Paley, *Natural Theology*, 1802:

In crossing a heath, suppose I pitched my foot against a stone, and were asked how the stone came to be there: I might answer, that for all I know, it had lain there for ever...But suppose I had found a watch...we perceive (what we could not discover in the stone) that its several parts are framed and put together for a purpose [...] the watch must have had a maker [...] who formed it [...] comprehended its construction, and designed its use [...] It is the same in Nature.



From John Playfair, *Illustrations of the Huttonian Theory of the Earth*, 1822:

Nature supplies the means of tracing with considerable certainty the migration of fossil bodies on the surface of the earth [...] the most powerful engines without doubt which nature employs are the glaciers...The necessity of introducing [...] any other unknown agent, to account for the transportation of fossils, seems to arise from underrating the effects of action long continued, and not limited by such short periods as circumscribe the works, and even the observations, of men.

Ironically, during theologian William Paley's own lifetime, the discovery of certain stones would challenge the creationist implications of his 'watchmaker analogy'.

The various stones deposited in the foreground are what are now known as 'glacial erratics'. Realising that these stones had been displaced by the formation and melting of glaciers led scientists to conclude that physical forces had slowly shaped the earth over millennia; a conclusion that in turn would inspire Darwin's vision of the 'incomprehensibly vast' timescale of evolution. These scattered stones pose the question: How did we get here?

Although the work evokes the 'fractal' confusion of scale suggested by Ruskin, underlying this aesthetic is the sublime insight that both rock and ice are arrested flows, flows whose tremendous force and slowness requires a rethinking of our everyday understanding of physical cause, time, complexity and design. [RN/RM]

DADD 'THE FLIGHT OUT OF EGYPT'



After showing increasing signs of mental instability upon his return from travels in the Middle East, Dadd murdered his father in the belief that he was an 'enemy of god'.

He escaped England only to be arrested in France for attempting to cut another man's throat, overcome by the belief that he was driven by 'the will of mighty Osiris', the ancient Egyptian deity—A textbook case of the paranoid schizophrenic whose 'actions may be quite unpredictable, being controlled, as it were, by a third party'.

Dadd continued his work as an inmate at London's Bethlem insane asylum ('bedlam'). This inexplicable painting hyperbolises the subject of the oasis as crossing point of many stories—parts with no whole. It portmanteaus memories of Dadd's travels with multiple geographical and historical incongruities, and perhaps also recalls the delirium of sunstroke which reputedly triggered his 'nervous illness' and subsequent flight. [RM]

BLAKE, 'THE GHOST OF A FLEA'



From G.K. Chesterton, 'William Blake', 1920:

Every great mystic goes about with a magnifying glass [...] It will not be denied that Blake shows the best part of a mystic's attitude in seeing that the soul of a flea is ten thousand times larger than a flea. But the really interesting point is much more striking. It is the essential point upon which all primary understanding of the art of Blake really turns. The point is this: that the ghost of a flea is not only larger than a flea, the ghost of a flea is actually more solid than a flea. The flea himself is hazy and fantastic compared to the hard and massive actuality of his ghost.

FUSELI, 'LADY MACBETH SEIZING THE DAGGERS'



Both figures hesitate on the verge of the fathomless darkness their murderous act has summoned, and whose insomniac presence forms the centre of the image.

Enveloping Lady Macbeth like flowing matter, indistinguishable from the fabric of her dress, the light resists her dramatic diagonal thrust, pinning her down and dragging her arm back as she strains to burst free and commune recklessly with the darkness. Macbeth recoils at the irrevocable nature of his act, a skeletal leg pulling against the muscle of his recalcitrant shoulders, the daggers poised as if he is considering plunging them into his own limb, an act that would impede his abandonment to the night.

Not yet quite at the point of absolute complicity with the material force of the act, the two human agents are trapped in a moment that is situated both before and after (*sub-*) the undifferentiated force of the darkness (*limen*). [MP/RM]

DE LOUTHERBOURG, 'AN AVALANCHE IN THE ALPS'

The three human figures dwarfed by de Louthembourg's catastrophic avalanche offer a clear visual analogy for Burke's suggestion that terrifying, potentially fatal phenomena, when seen at a distance, can be the source of a unique kind of 'delight'.



The first figure, petrified, prays for deliverance from death. Fleeing, the second half turns back, fascinated by the magnitude of the disaster. But the third, at a comfortable distance, stands confidently, and points us toward the sublime spectacle.

Given his experience in innovative theatrical technologies, de Louthembourg would have been quite familiar with this production of delight through the dramatic presentation of danger without real risk. [RM]

HOGARTH, 'SATAN, SIN AND DEATH'



Hogarth's response to a text that was exemplary for the modern theory of the sublime can be seen as a study in the problematic transition from a 'rhetorical' (Longinian) to a 'visual' (Burkean, Ruskinian) sublime.

Burke describes in rather painterly terms Milton's 'significant and expressive uncertainty of strokes and colouring' in the description of Death, 'dark, uncertain, confused, terrible, and sublime in the last degree'; but little remains in Hogarth's painting of this ominous uncertainty, forced as he is to find figurative form for the horror of Milton's evocative words. [TM/RM]

DANBY, 'THE DELUGE'

The appropriately biblical proportions of Danby's canvas index a purely commercial economy of scale: like many of his works, 'The Deluge' was commissioned with a view to taking it on tour.

In the nineteenth century, early art entrepreneurs realised that the capital invested in producing an awesomely powerful and finely detailed painting such as this would be repaid at the box office, as paintings travelled from town to town and audience members paid to sit and thrill at the sublime scenes.

This one-frame disaster movie pioneers a key economic-cultural complex: Access to the sublime's promise of transcendence can only be reliably secured by participating in the distributed consumption of a capital-intensive cultural product. [RM]

DE LOUTHERBOURG, 'THE BATTLE OF CAMPERDOWN'

Between the beginning of the Seven Years' War and the Battle of Trafalgar, the second half of the eighteenth century in Europe saw almost continual sea warfare, driving a refinement and development of ever more devastating weaponry. More complex

artillery technology and a greater mobility of ships changed the dynamic of sea battles significantly, rendering the spectacle of violence equal to that of sublime natural phenomena, as suggested by the merging of seafoam, clouds and gunsmoke here.

Regular news of such battles effected a shift in painting, from theatrical depictions of shipwrecks from the shore, with a chorus of lamenting onlookers with whose reactions the audience could sympathise, to more direct and even gory images of the horrors of war. Tuned to reinforce nationalist sentiment, de Loutherbourg's images intensified this tendency. [RM]

DE LOUTHERBOURG, 'THE BATTLE OF THE NILE'

This victory was also a key moment in the re-imagining of war as a rival to the sublimity of nature: A historical account records how the flagship L'Orient was blown apart by a series of massive explosions and 'remained blazing like a volcano in the middle of the combat, rendering, for a time, the dreadful spectacle visible'.

The ship's crew had been busy painting it at the time since the Captain, Brueys, was confident that Nelson would not attack at night. When they finally saw the advancing British warships, the crew of L'Orient hurriedly manned their posts, leaving the body of the ship wet with paint and open containers of turpentine on deck, which served to spread the fire to the lower deck where incendiaries were stored. The 'volcanic' blaze that rendered the scene so eminently paintable was itself fuelled by paint. [RN/RM]

TURNER, 'FISHERMEN AT SEA'



The nocturnal fishermen trade one contingent regime of peril for another: fish move closer to land at high tide, under the full moon's gravitational influence, and nearer to the surface at night. The fishermen are able to maximise their yield whilst reducing their exposure to the dangers of deep sea fishing. But the murky light of the moon and tidal turbulence expose them instead to wreckage on the land and rocks.

Turner bases this work on an early naturalistic moonlight study of the Thames painted from Millbank and his observation of fishermen at Margate. In order to heighten the scene to the level of a tense meditation on the fishermen's situation, he introduces extraneous elements from the popular maritime imagination, including the seagulls on the shoreline, whose presence at night is highly incongruous. [RN/RM]

MARTIN, 'THE LAST JUDGMENT'



The painter's older brother Jonathan, known as 'Mad Martin', was convicted of arson in 1829 after setting fire to York Minster. His hatred for the laxity of the established church culminated in Romeruesque visions of apocalypse: 'I dreamed that I was called to

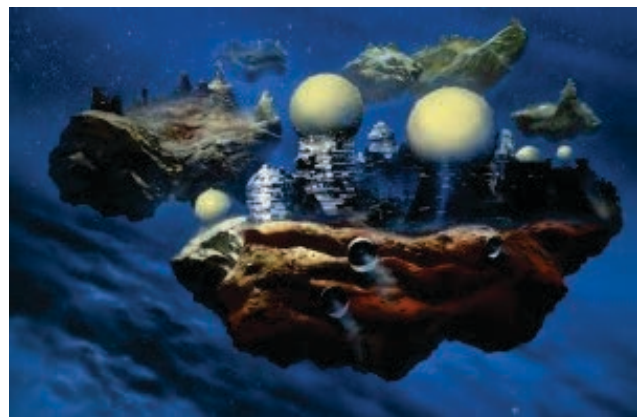
the city gates of London, and beheld the inhabitants tearing each others' flesh in the most horrible manner, and I heard a voice speak to me, "In one day this city shall be burnt to the ground." His drawing of this sublime moment of divine vengeance, entitled 'London's Overthrow', is in the archive of Bethlem Hospital.

A similar fate seems to await dwellers in the City of Heaven, whose lording over the slide into hot darkness is about as convincing and comforting as a house on a crumbling shale cliff. Martin's painting thus repeats his brother's warning that apocalypse is inevitably invited by mankind's insufficient awe for the sublime. [CM/RM]

MARTIN, 'THE PLAINS OF HEAVEN'



The real heirs of the 'Martinian' style were without doubt twentieth-century painters such as Chris Foss, whose airbrushed visions of spaceships, floating cities and distant planets reprise the principles of the sublime at a new order of magnitude inspired by modern astronomy and space exploration, but are distributed on the intimate scale of a paperback or record cover.



Chris Foss, *Travelling Cities* (1981)

The exclusion of such 'genre' artists from the artistic canon confirms that the aspirational vector from landscape to history painting that characterised the sublime ends in ridicule, with a relegation to the category of kitsch. But the supposedly 'juvenile' and 'escapist' impulses of such work belong to a perennial and culturally crucial realist instinct: to use imaginative experiment to render compelling and forceful the notion of entities and worlds radically external to our mundane experience. [RM]

WEST, 'THE BARD'



The sublime here is in the incommensurability between the human and the planetary scale of geology, intersecting with political guilt – an anthropo-politico-tectonic tension. The figure is constructed by the imperfect tessellating of continental blocs: The curve of negative space under his right arm describes, with startling accuracy, the coastline of South America; his robe below the waist an enthinned Africa. The two 'old continents' coagulate an unconvincing human figure into existence between them.

The noble self-martyrdom of Wales against an aggressive metropole is uneasily echoed by the constitution of the apparent subject by these jostling and ill-tempered landmasses, both homes of antique

civilisations that embarrass any claims to eternity offered by either the European or the newly exuberant American state West knew well. But what is key is not that the human is constituted by these landmasses, but that both human and landmasses are deformed by that constitution. [CM]

STUBBS, 'HORSE DEVoured BY A LION'



Stubbs exhibits nature as simultaneously serene and harmonious, and 'red in tooth and claw'. Free of overdramatisation, the tranquil background scene answers with indifference to the horse's distress as the lion, emerging from the cave's recessed darkness, devours it.

The painting's structure heightens the contrast between our sympathetic emotional reaction to this sublime drama of life and death, and nature's universal sanction of such cruelty.

Often read in terms of heraldic symbolism, perhaps it is the cold, distant aristocratic gaze of nature that this image is daring the viewer to assume. [RM/TM/KH]

WRIGHT, 'VESUVIUS IN ERUPTION'



Membership of Birmingham's pioneering Lunar Society brought Wright into contact with many scientific luminaries, including geologist John Whitehurst, whose 'Inquiry into the Original State and Formation of the Earth' (1778), fuelled the intense debates of the period.

In 1774, Wright wrote to his brother: 'Tell Whitehurst I wished for his company when on Mount Vesuvius; his thoughts would have center'd in the bowels of the mountain, mine skimmed on the surface only...' Perhaps in order to take the realism of his painting beyond such surface representation, Wright used actual ground sulphur for the final application of the lavaflow at the apex. [RM]

MARTIN, 'THE GREAT DAY OF HIS WRATH'



Splicing together a catastrophe of biblical proportions from multiple closely observed geological events, Martin's painting straddles the rhetorical sublimity of myth and the sublime vision proper to his contemporary science—that of the impersonal, contingent forces of formation and destruction.

The two prominent lightning strikes in the image reflect his ambivalent accommodation of tradition: The lower, in the dark shade of the great rocks endlessly falling to the left of the canvas, changes its trajectory with the abrupt and random crawl of a crack in glass. But Martin counterbalances this glimpse of a non-spectacular Real by including the inevitable sublime kitsch as a backdrop, heralded by the upper lightning strike, its childlike zigzag as unreal and stylised as Harry Potter's scar. [CM/RN/RM]

ORPEN, 'ZONNEBEKE'



In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud observed that in dreams—previously understood to be wish-fulfillments—as in their bodily tremors, shellshocked WWI soldiers returned repeatedly to the traumatic moments of their injury. He concluded that stronger than the drive toward pleasure is the drive to repeat, so as to psychologically 'bind' the still-raw trauma.

The war artist plays this role on a cultural level: re-presentation repeats and relays the sublime effects of war-trauma in order to exercise mastery over it. With this blasted, quake-ridden landscape Orpen rediscovers the sublime for modernity, in the convulsive violence of mechanized war.

In this new guise, the sublime experience is revealed to be that of an unbound trauma that compels the subject to mechanically and blindly mimic and repeat the effects of its overwhelming force. [RM/RN]

MORE, 'THE DELUGE'



Remarkable here is the lack of grandiloquence: the viewer has to do a considerable amount of work to reconstruct the sublime event on the basis of this gloomy corner of a post-apocalyptic world, with its rather stoically resigned, faceless humans, apparently sailing in a coffin.

Apocalyptic events are common in the Judaeo-Christian tradition; but More's painting reminds us of the geological and environmental aspects of apocalyptic texts. The apocalyptic event is not simply a supernatural intervention of the divine; it is manifested in the material, physical, geological substrate of the planet. It is rarely the appearance of the divine in itself. Even in the moment of apocalyptic revelation, the divine remains hidden, shrouded. [ET/TM/RM]

MILLAIS, 'DEW-DRENCHED FURZE'

Tennyson's requiem for a friend who died young finds the poet grappling with the implication that nature is a mere physical system, amoral, meaningless, and separated from God's will. Beyond the evocation of the effects of early morning light, then, Millais means to explore the tension between the beauty of the scene and the reality of the life it depicts.

Although the emptiness and subjectlessness of the painting allies it with Tennyson's doubt, in the movement from the icy foreground to the incipient warmth of the sunrise in the distance, Millais joins with the poet's ultimate return to faith. Devoid of any grand or awesome aspect, the painting heralds a transition from narrative presentations of the natural sublime into the impressionist technical examination of perceptual effects.



Are God and Nature then at strife,
That Nature lends such evil dreams?
So careful of the type she seems,
So careless of the single life;
That I, considering everywhere
Her secret meaning in her deeds,
And finding that of fifty seeds
She often brings but one to bear,
I falter where I firmly trod,
And falling with my weight of cares
Upon the great world's altar-stairs
That slope thro' darkness up to God,
I stretch lame hands of faith, and grope,
And gather dust and chaff, and call
To what I feel is Lord of all,
And faintly trust the larger hope.
[RM]