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The Sublime in Contemporary Arts

József Adalbert TILLMANN

Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design
Institute of Theoretical Studies
tillmann@mome.hu

Abstract. *The sublime* (elevated, lofty, supreme), a concept introduced to the philosophy of arts by Burke, today appears to be realized in *the technologically sublime*.

For our post *Star wars* generations the metaphysical has become more and more physical. We find the highest expressions of the sublime in movies (Stanley Kubrick, Ridley Scott), science fiction (Arthur C. Clarke, Ian M. Banks) and techno/ambient music (Brian Eno).

Music, though, is special among arts as it has always been the expression of *harmonia mundi* (best seen in the works of Steve Reich).

In visual art, Burke's theory of the sublime had a crucial influence on the work of Barnett Newman, who, based on a peculiarly American tradition, chose as his theme the inexpressible.

In our age of living "utterly distanced from God" the *Skyscape* series of James Turrel (*Space that Sees* in Jerusalem, *Roden-crater* in New-Mexico) focuses our attention on the remarkable qualities of space and light—light that is scientifically inscrutable and irreducible.

Keywords: technologically sublime (vs. Burke); except music (*harmonia mundi*) and the *Skyscape*s of James Turrel

Today the sublime is the technologically sublime, at least according to the book entitled *The Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime* by Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe (20). The concept of the sublime derives from Burke, and the meaning of the Latin

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original *sublimis* 'high, lofty, supreme, ascending-floating', and that of *Sub limen* 'reaching to the (upper) threshold'.

The "upper threshold" to which the phenomena (objects, works of art, things) regarded today as sublime are raised, is a cosmic threshold. "Beyond the threshold" there extend the borders of the realms of the infinite, of the realms of spatio-temporality, unattainable for humans, reached and mediated by current technology. This is reflected not only by the techniques of astronautics and cosmology, but it is also present in architecture; in the ever larger airports, in the ever higher "skyscrapers," which, as their name shows, strive for a dimension reaching the clouds, competing with the order of magnitude of the mountains. "Is it not stunning—Paul Virilio remarked a few years ago—, how physical the metaphysical has become?" (Ujica and Virilio 56)

While for Burke the most sublime (and at the same time the most fearful) spectacle, captivating the mind, is the ocean,[1] the mind of the post *Star Wars* generations is fascinated by the concept of galactic oceans. In this way the sublime, just like the beautiful, can be found outside the contemporary (high) arts; in movies, in science-fiction, in techno/ambient music. The films by Stanley Kubrick and Ridley Scott or the novels by Arthur C. Clarke and Ian M. Banks support Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe's thesis, based on Burke and Heidegger, according to which "today the sublime is the technologically sublime". This is valid also in such cases when nature of a cosmic scale and extension appears in the mentioned works (the last monolith in *Spatial Odyssey 2001*, or the artificial celestial body called Rama in the novel *Rendez-vous with the Rama* by Clarke). The cosmic natural background is present only as a framework, in order to highlight and to make perceptible a particular technological construction in its enormous proportions, the sublime character of which is also increased by the desired and at the same time feared exoticism of extraterrestrial intelligence.

Although in the case of these representational arts cosmic nature constitutes the framework of the sublime, today the relationship between technology and nature is actually the opposite of this: we perceive nature in a universal dimension, through the framework system of technology. Heidegger does not really exaggerate when he writes in his travel journal entitled *Aufenthalte*: "what the world means for us today is the puzzling confusion of technological information, which has taken precedence over the intact physis and has taken its place . . ." (62)

Of course, there are exceptions, and these are more interesting for us. With respect to the sublime, music—one can say—is exceptional from the first, on the

[1] "A plain of vast extension can offer such a huge spectacle as the ocean; but can it ever captivate our minds with things of such proportions as the ocean is itself?" (Burke 68)

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one hand, because it uses devices, instruments and technology, on the other hand, because it "has preserved its metaphysical dignity" (Böhringer, *Experiments* 61). Although Hannes Böhringer literally means that the exceptional character of the temporality of music is also valid to the spaciality, the spatio-temporality of music:

> . . . the time of music is the time that traditionally, since Plato, has been regarded as the likeness of eternity. Music is the expression of *harmonia mundi*, or the preliminary experience of the song of heavenly choirs. This philosophical-theological understanding of time and music could not be wiped out in spite of all kinds of enlightenment and criticism of metaphysics . . . (*Experiments* 81)

In the musical art of the past decades this is best represented, in my opinion, by two epoch-making works by Steve Reich, the *Music for Eighteen Musicians* and the *Violin Phase*. While in the previous piece the wave streams of cosmic vibration coherence resound, devoid of any kind of individuality, in the work composed for violin all this becomes audible by containing also the individual references.

Besides the contemporary technological concept of the sublime, Reich's music deserves special attention also because of the fact that he reflects, within music, on technologization, on the predominance of the electronically formed sound. The sound image of his music is close to the realm of the artificial sound, though it exclusively consists of acoustic instruments and voice.

In contrast to him, the sound landscapes of Brian Eno pursuing *ambient* music would not exist without electrical engineering. His musical pieces consist of hazy, blurred sound clusters and spheric sounds. In his life-work the cosmic references, just as the larger scale time dimensions, appear also directly sometimes, for example in his piece entitled *Apollo*, composed in the memory of the landing on the Moon, or in the case of his *Long Now* planned for ten thousand years.[2]

In connection with Burke and in general, with the appearance of the sublime today, it is inevitable to take into consideration the peculiarly American tradition of the sublime. For instance, Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe remarks that Barnett Newman's "pictures had to be large, so that they could be connected to the specifically American sublime, which Harold Bloom speculated on" (27). However, this is not a question occurring in the case of particular authors and artists, it is originally linked to the American spatial experience and to American mythology. "The Americans considered the surrounding world as boundless, and it followed from

[2] Eno is one of the founders of the *Long Now Foundation*, which aims to create a clockwork capable of functioning for 10,000 years, and an afferent library; 12 Nov. 2008 <http://www.longnow.org/>

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this that they did not see the bounds of their capacity of conquering and expansion either"—Richard Sennett sociologist writes (24). This world experience appears most illustratively in the western, which determines the American mythology: "The main character of the western is the great, lofty landscape"; there are no boundaries, only vast unpopulated territories (Böhringer, *The Western* 41). However, the specific geographical conditions proved to be determining also in the forming of the American self-esteem, of the individuality in the new world.

In modern arts the issue of the sublime gets directly into the foreground in Barnett Newman's life-work. "Newman's work belongs to the aesthetic of the sublime"—Jean-Francois Lyotard states—"Newman read Burke. He found him too 'surrealist' (in his monologue entitled *The Sublime is Now*). In spite of this, Burke, in his own way, was determining with respect to Newman's project" (15). He found him too surrealist because he regarded Burke's despising judgement on painting as being valid only to such an art which wishes to depict, to represent and to make recognition possible. But in Newman's life-work "the thematization of the inexpressible takes place," as Christian Pöpperl rightfully states (171).

But is it possible to represent the inexpressible? Newman's life work can be interpreted as an experiment aimed at solving this problem. According to his writings, Newman was strongly preoccupied with this problem also theoretically. Besides Burke's influence, he was also influenced by Jewish religious thinking, the specialist literature pointed out the influence on him of a cabbalistic concept of creation.[3] We have every reason to think that he was also touched by the question of the prohibition of representation. However, for him, as a practicing painter, this question occurred in relation to painting—and remained within the frames of this medium. In this way his solutions, for example his painting entitled *vir heroicus sublimis* (approximately 2,5 x 5,5 m) provides grand surfaces, measured in meters, covered with paint, which are not too convincing in this respect.

Is it possible at all to represent the sublime, the *unmeasurably great* (Kant), proportionally and in a worthy way, when it is beyond the thresholds, beyond the perceivable and the comprehensible? Doesn't it in fact have to do with the unrepresentable, which is incomprehensible, just as the world, the universe is not "conceivable," either conceptually, or for the media of fine arts?

In spite of this, however, it is not impossible. At least this is what James Turrell's works exemplify.[4] Especially his *Skyscape* series, which stands in several versions in several spots of the Earth. The building provides a shelter, forms protected, closed spaces in order to defend its dwellers from the vicissitudes of

[3] See Thomas B. Hess's writings.
[4] James Turrel link-collection <http://www.lasersol.com/art/turrell/rc_links.html>

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weather, from the intrusion of the outside world. In contrary to this, Turrell's constructions have been built around openness: their top is not closed, instead, it opens towards the sky. This gap, placed within frameworks of various forms, the framed openness itself constitutes the center of the construction.

From an architectural point of view, a *skyscape* is the turning upside down of the constructing activity, the reverse of everything that architecture has always aimed at. At the same time, in this respect it is not unique: in contemporary art Rachel Whiteread proceeds in a similar way when she casts the inner spaces of houses, sometimes whole houses in concrete, then she demolishes the original building from them—in this way she literally represents the "pure," materialized inner spaces. However, the subject of Turrell's works is not representation, but rather light and space. His works only create frameworks and conditions—architectural and artistic framework conditions—for the contemplation and experience of light and space. Of course, these frames exceed the traditional and contemporary art theoretical concept of the framework (Cf. Simmel 91, Marin 201).

In the case of the *skyscape* entitled *Space That Sees*, which can be found in Jerusalem—from which I have had the opportunity to gain direct experience—the "frame" consists of a square, 7-meter tall building, with a 10x10 meters basic area and of the passage leading to it. His frame opens "within" such architectural frames—opening a square of 8x8 m to the sky. Standing, walking under it or sitting—on the flooring jutting from the walls—the endless blue of the almost always clear sky, or sometimes the moving of the clouds, the change of the parts of the day and the lighting conditions can be contemplated.

Within these frames, the nuances of the blue, the references of light and shadow, up and down, celestial and earthly can be viewed. The place—in both the current and original sense—is the space of contemplation: it also refers to the *templum*, the square plane of reference, open to the sky, of the Augurs (more in details see Tillmann 171). However, contrary to the Etruscan-Roman *auspicium*, it is not aimed at the line of flight of the birds, but at the sky, the space, the light, and through them, to the position of their contemplator. In fact, all this is reached with the use of a minimal technology, as these constructions could already have been accomplished in the Neolithic Age (and he does not even need, as Yves Klein, to patent the sky-blue, the ultramarine[5]). Turrell's works are not regarded as a part of architecture, still, the outstanding examples of contemporary church architecture are closest to his works, just like Peter Zumthor's *Bruder Klaus chapel* from Wachendorf.

[5] *International Klein Blue* (IKB, =PB29, =CI 77007), 12 Nov. 2008. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_Klein_Blue>

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In the case of the *skyscape* which can be found in the Israel Museum, just as in his works created within other artistic media, besides the built, technological framework, his works are also framed by the art as institution, as a conventionally distinguished medium. In the case of his work on the largest scale, the Roden-crater in New-Mexico, which has been created over the last thirty years, there are no such frames. The places and gaps hollowed in the crater mountain in the desert are surrounded by the former petrified material of the volcano; the crater is not an exhibition space, and it is not public. Around the spaces serving for the contemplation of the spatial and lighting conditions of cosmic constellations, of celestial bodies, it is nature that forms the framework. In this way any kind of scientific and technological mediation comes to the forefront and proportion distortion can be avoided.

> I read—Turrell says in an interview—an article in the European journal *Parkett* by Hartmut Bohme. One of the phrases he used was 'we live in an age of consummate remoteness from God'. And although, in our age of scientific rationalism, we wouldn't want to say about light, 'It's God', still, at the same time, the experience of light is a phenomenon that somehow tends to nudge us past that. There's something about light which science can't quite fully encompass, or reduce. (Whittaker "Greeting the Light")

(Trans. Judit Pieldner)

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