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Methods of Evocation: The Evocation of the Sublime in Digital Art

There is something inexplicable about nature's vastness – it evokes 'something' – a feeling connecting us to a greater whole – wonderful yet simultaneously frightening. The Romantics called it the sublime.

In the European Romantic arts the notion of the sublime was resurrected from its Neo-Classical lineage. A resurrection that contributes to our contemporary understanding of the notion; felt and experienced within the observer, rather than its earlier use describing grandness or terror as an attribute of natural phenomena. In a direct response to the thrust of growing Empiricism and its increasing impact on how people understood the world, the Romantics saw it necessary to evoke the sublime through representation; an attempt to retain mysticism associated with nature. This was done with aesthetic theory based on how the sublime is evoked through the natural.

It was Immanuel Kant the 18th century German 'Idealist' philosopher who in attempting to explain 'responses to the world' identified the sublime as an emotion evoked within. The sublime he saw as evoked when reason and the imagination failed to fully comprehend a phenomenon. He identified two types of sublime. The *mathematical sublime*; based on the advance of apprehension, which presents no difficulty, like maths it continues infinitely; but the difficulty lies in comprehension. Kant explains a "bewilderment or perplexity":

[On entering St Peter in Rome] ... a feeling comes home to him of the inadequacy of his imagination for presenting the idea of a whole within which that imagination attains its maximum, and, in its fruitless efforts to extend this limit, recoils upon itself, but in so doing succumbs to an emotional delight. (75)

The sublime is entirely aesthetic.

The *dynamic sublime* is associated with fear, and delight in the avoidance of fatality. For its evocation one cannot be directly under threat, as it relies heavily on imagined threat. Imagined fear contributes to the sensation of joy, which is derived from not feeling fear itself. To feel fear, of a powerful river, Kant says, allows us to measure ourselves against that power and in our consciousness raise a sense of power in relation to it, this fear is measured and respect is placed on the object. (78)

In the Modern age, the evocation of the sublime becomes apparent in the face of early technology. David Nye speaks extensively of this in *The American Technological Sublime*. Nye deduces that Victorian architecture and machines were held in the same awe-inspiring light. An influence, he indicates of an attempt by the Victorian 'state' (and later North America) at heightening its idea in the eyes of everyday man. Drawing directly, but in opposition to its ideals, from principles of Romantic aesthetic theory.

In the 21st century technologies that inspire awe in one generation soon stop being remarkable for the next, who expect technology to be increasingly complex. Nye states that by implication this "undermines all notions of limitations, instead presupposing the ability to innovate continually." (179) The shackling of the sublime to technology is based on the conflict between what is known and what cannot be reasonably conceived; dividing those who know and those who do not. I believe that it is rooted in an attempt to retain a sense of otherness in technology; an attempted transcendence of reason itself, through technological progress.

J. F. Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* describes Modern Art as evoking the sublime in a new way as it presents the unknown without representing it. Evoking the indescribable in its use of primitivism and symbolism. Modern Art however gives the viewer "solace of form", which Lyotard believes is not the 'true' sublime sentiment. The ability to evoke the sublime without "solace of form" he believes is a truly Postmodern and therefore a disruptive form that can bring about a change.

Walter de Maria's *Lightning Field* (1977), considered Postmodern (Rosaling Krauss) is a case in point. Lighting rods on a high altitude field in New Mexico, placed apart in delineations of kilometers and miles; yet the work is only truly complete when there is lightning. It alludes to a gap between formal abstraction and an unpredictable natural phenomenon, evoking the sublime in that 'gap' without the need for negative presentation.

Digital art evokes the sublime in a similar way. I use Ben Rubin and Mark Hanson's *Listening Post* (2001-2003) to show this. The effect of *Listening Post* is that of an overwhelming sense of the magnitude of data 'moving through' the installation. Like *Lightning Field* it creates a location or abstract framework for the unrepresentable. The snippets of text seen and heard are fleeting and do not amount to a singular understanding of the content or form of the data. The sublime is evoked where the extent of the data cannot be reasoned.

Yet there is an extension in the digital, particularly in this case where data is an epiphenomenon. Michael Ostrowski's 'The Anxiety of the Client' (2005)

speaks of the 'client'; the computer/installation also known as the art object. On the client's role in *Listening Post* Ostrowski states:

The paradox of the client as subject becomes our own as we participate and co-conspire in the artwork. Data lurks behind not only the physical phenomena of the world, but behind our interiority, as the very possibility of the subject dissolves into the inaccessible world of data. (10)

In conclusion, the 'anxiety of the client' indicates that technology can no longer in-itself evoke the sublime. When read further Lyotard's Postmodern theory relies on instabilities; the sublime and its return, for him is a model that questions Modernism. Ostrowski's 'anxiety of the client' is a reflexive model; showing technology as destabilised and reduced to a vessel.

References

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