

AMBIGUITY AS A SIGNATURE OF THE SUBLIME IN MEDIA ART

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The paper focuses on the effects of media artistic representations of ambiguity in perspective of the classical aesthetic question of presenting the unrepresentable. The concept of the sublime reveals how representations of indeterminacy in relation to decentralized systems are capable of creating a temporary gap in cognition, thus enhancing the feeling of *potentia* and opening towards the reality of nonconceptual mind and interconnected being.

The concept of the sublime has been widely appropriated within technological arts and culture: as the computational sublime in relation to *autopoeisis* in generative art (McCormack, Dorin); and in relation to immersive virtual environments, as the digital sublime (Mosco) and anti-sublime (Manovich) in relation to data art and data networks. At the same time, the principle of ambiguity is often placed at the heart of algorithmic art, hyperfiction, game environments, interactive cinema and other genres that engage narrativity. In this case, we do not claim to make any comprehensive and systematic account of how ambiguity states itself in various media arts. This is more a methodological introduction to one of the possibilities to expand and deepen understanding of media arts through the lens of aesthetics, in particular through the concept of the sublime taken as ambiguity.

The sublime is a term of both control and surrender, of a negative pleasure, associated with the impossibility of either mental or physical representation. This uncanny feeling of being confronted with the limits of comprehension, of facing the unpredictable and the unknown, often works as a sort of litmus, testing the “seriousness” of the produced effect, the transformative potential that reveals itself through nonattachment and groundlessness. As applied to contemporary life and culture, this category becomes a “sliding” or even “empty” signifier for the space of liminality; for limits as the basis for an ontology of interaction and communication at large. Privileging heterogeneity and difference (the transcendental “Other”), the framework of the sublime refers to the questions of individuation and authenticity of the self, which is especially relevant in today’s multicentric social environment.

This quality of being in uncertainty, accurately described by Keats’s famous term “negative capability” (productive doubt, precedence of intuition and imagination over consecutive reasoning) is fundamental for artistic production. It is also extended towards media theory’s concept of “interface”, or, “intraface” (Al. Galloway) that may be interpreted as a “‘zone of indecision’, between the inside and the outside” [1] (Gérard Genette) – a zone of nonchoice between the edge and the center, inside and outside.

In the fundament of any system of relationships — and at the base of any individuation— lies a heterogeneous manifold of potential differences, a pre-individual field of singularities (French philosopher Gilbert Simondon). The tensions of singularities frame a *marge d’indetermination* (“margin of indeterminacy”), described by Simondon as a characteristic in machine / human creator relationship), a concept that opens towards the broader paradoxes of structural and ontological causality (quantum indeterminacy).

Theories of distributed intelligence, emergence, and complexity present challenges for newer types of representation of reality as a self-organizing flux, with a role of the observer as a measurer of the operations of chance. Conscious appeal to “arbitrariness” in art started as early as work by Duchamp (Erratum

Musical), Morellet, Cage, De Vries, which technically was already a prototype of “algorithmic art.” It was not always an act of a visitor (observer/user) that determined further unfolding of a work, but of an artist. The important stage was to recognize that emergence happens through differentiation of pieces of reality: that their patterns are relative and the processes of their organization into structures indeterminate. The natural continuation of this aperçu became interactive art, where a viewer is an actor determining the development of the work. Relationality and, thus, unpredictability is an integral part of both relational aesthetics and art, and interactive media art. The latter is not surprisingly compared with the quantum wave function that produces an evolving “space of possibilities” (whereas object-based art is akin to classical particles). [2] One of the classic early examples of interactive media art illustrating the principle of ambiguity is P. Weibel’s “Observation of the Observation: Uncertainty” (1973), an installation that investigates the special mood of disorientation when self-perception is given only from a third-person perspective. Is it a perspective of the “transindividual”? Does it feel overpowering and totalizing enough to name this sensation “sublime”?

Effects like change of perspectives and disorientation of the senses that are often used in media installations (Olafur Eliasson’s experiments with optics and space, Carsten Höller’s “Text Site” CAVE environments by Jeffrey Shaw, Agnes Hegedüs) produce the image of specific kinds of distance between the self and the world, a gap through which enters the terrifying, stunning, revealing unknown. These illusionary worlds allude to a numinous realm which seems to have its own self-generated ontological substance. The projects like “Sensory Environment” (2003-2004) by Chris Salter, consisting just of barely perceivable threshold levels of light and sound, confront the visitor with a direct experience of intense concentration and restlessness that arises in the process of breathing during meditation. Inability to estimate the proportions of your own body in this kind of installations often creates effect of what might be termed overpoweredness.

A range of provoking questions is engendered by conceptual dualism of complementarity and metastability in works that collide the virtual into physical reality. One of the examples could be a work-in-progress by a Russian group “Where the dogs run” entitled “Quantum Mouse” that visualizes the double-slit experiment in a form of interaction between the movements of a live organism and its virtual doubles. A mouse is moving through a labyrinth, followed by camera. Every time it makes a turn, its virtual doubles make the opposite decision.

Other examples address the reactions of anxiety and perplexity in relation to the qualities of equivocality and vagueness, as in such natural and social phenomena as (respectively) the immune system, colonial organisms, cellular metabolism, spontaneous order in economic systems, social networks, etc.

The concept of the sublime reveals how representations of indeterminacy and ambiguity in relation to decentralized systems are capable of creating a temporary gap in cognition, a disruption of conventional contexting cues, thus enhancing the feeling of potentia and opening towards the reality of nonconceptual mind and interconnected being.

References and Notes:

1. *Gérard Genette, Seuil (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1987), 8 quoted in Alexander Galloway, “The Unworkable Interface,” New Literary History 39 (2009): 944.*
2. *Jeremy Levine, “Quantum Systems and Interactive Media Art,” Digimag44/Mag09, <http://www.digicult.it/digimag/article.asp?id=1456> (accessed August 20, 2011).*