Sublimity & the Image:
A Phenomenological Study

by

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Abstract

The sublime has fascinated human beings for over two thousand years. Appearing in some of our oldest written works and most major religious texts, it has inspired literature, architecture, the fine arts, and even our forays into nature. Historically, "the sublime" was understood as the simultaneous experience of awe and terror evoked by something that exceeds our cognition. It was seen as the evocation of, or that which evokes, an enthusiastic terror. Some scholars deemed it to be the height of aesthetic excellence, while others claimed it evidence of transcendence and that which enabled one to glimpse the divine. More recently, the sublime has been called an emotion, an aesthetic judgment, and a theory. Over the last century alone, it has been reinterpreted by psychoanalysis, critical theory, feminism, postmodernism, and post-postmodernism. And yet, despite the sublime's persistence over time, its presence across cultures, and its prevalence as a subject for philosophers and artists, our understanding of it remains elusive. In order to gain insight into the sublime as a potential human experience, therefore, this study returns to a basic but fundamental question: what is it like to experience the sublime, specifically when that experience is evoked by an image?

This study uses the human sciences methodology of the phenomenology of practice. The purpose of the phenomenology of practice is not to explain or theorize, but rather to generate a descriptively rich and reflective text that evokes in the reader an embodied, *pathic* understanding of a phenomenon as it is experienced pre-reflectively. To this end, concrete experiential descriptions of the phenomenon were collected through interviews and guided writing activities, and were supplemented with descriptions from previously published material. The accounts were reflected upon using various philosophical, human science, and philological methods in order to identify variant and invariant dimensions of the experience.

In the resulting text, the sublime is explored through its manifestation as different paradoxes: awe and terror, the exquisite and the monstrous, horror and delight, clarity and mystery, and existence and inexistence. Also considered are the myriad ways in which the sublime can appear. The study concludes with a consideration of what the experience of sublimity reveals about our relationship with images, ourselves, and our world, and a discussion of the need for an expanded understanding of the impact images can have in our lives.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Erika Goble. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name "Sublimity & the Image: A Phenomenological Study," No. Pro00020579, April 4, 2011.

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For my father, Erik Goble,

and my grandfather, Frank Goble.

They were dedicated outdoorsmen and artists

who appreciated the sublime.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The Eyes of Chauvet Cave

In 1994, three speleologists discovered the entrance to a previously undocumented cavern in the Gorges de l'Ardèche of southern France. Within the cavern they found some of the oldest cave paintings ever created. Immediately recognizing the importance of the ancient site, the French government severely restricted access to what would come to be called Chauvet Cave. To date, only a handful of people have ever entered it. One of the few non-scientists given access was filmmaker Werner Herzog, who documented his experience in the 2010 film *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (Ciuffo, Nelson, & Herzog, 2010). In the film, Herzog describes the impact of seeing and working amongst the cave's images:[1]

> *Dwarfed by these large chambers illuminated by our wandering lights, sometimes we were overcome by a strong irrational sensation as if we were disturbing the Palaeolithic people in their work. It felt like eyes upon us. The sensation occurred to some of the scientists and also the discoverers of the cave. It was a relief to surface again above ground.*

An archaeologist interviewed by Herzog likewise tells of the effect of the images:

> *The first time I entered Chauvet Cave, it was only for five days. It was so powerful. Every night I was dreaming of lions.*[2] *Every day was a shock for me. It was an emotional shock. I am a scientist but a human, too. And after five days I decided not to go back in the cave because I needed time just to relax and take time to absorb it… I dreamt of both painted lions and real lions… I was not afraid. It was more a feeling of powerful things and deep things, a way to understand things that is not a direct way.*

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[1] It was an unusual move for the French government to give Herzog and a small crew permission to enter and film in Chauvet Cave. Herzog himself has acknowledged it may be the one and only time the caves are filmed.

[2] Lions are one of the many animals depicted on the walls of Chauvet Cave.

Watching Herzog's documentary, we may somewhat understand his and the archaeologist's reaction to being in the caves.[3] As revealed by the film, no light can ever fully penetrate the dark depths of Chauvet. Yet, even within the limited light, we can discern drawings of animals covering every reachable surface. Headlamps and hand-held flashlights flitting upon the walls' strange quarry set the animals in motion. Bison, mammoths, horses, lions, and bears—animals of all types—form not a menagerie but a wild landscape. Throughout the caves, animal after animal appears. Into and out of the light they move: red, brown, yellow, black. Sometimes they are fully formed, sometimes only in part; big and small; alone and in herds; still and in full flight. Image after image, side-by-side and overlapping, their forms are full of movement, full of life, despite their stillness. We recognize these animals even though few can name them all and some have been extinct for thousands of years. The caves are full of them, and yet even those standing among them cannot see them all. Darkness always encroaches, extinguishing the light and the reach of our eyes.

Herzog's film documents the majesty and strangeness of this place, a cathedral buried deep in the earth. It is a large dark space lost within a maze of small winding access ways, a space that is momentarily illuminated by human presence. It is uninhabited, uninhabitable, and devoid of life, except for these drawings. It is a place barely reachable and yet has called thousands to it over tens of thousands of years. Its images preceded the written word. It came before cities, before agriculture, before the domestication of animals. It is among our first art and it is that which, some claim, made us human (Ciuffo, Nelson, & Herzog, 2010).

Looking at these images, even through the medium of film, we may feel very much like those first humans who groped their way through long corridors with close walls, who felt the press of the earth and moved through the cold air to reach this darkened cavern. Like Herzog, the scientists, and all who enter Chauvet, they too lifted up a small light and moved with the figures, perhaps to add another, perhaps only to worship.[4] Gazing upon this ancient altar, the purpose of which we do not know, we may feel the same call of the drawings, sense in them the

[3] This may be due, in no small part, to Herzog's evocative capacity as a filmmaker.

[4] The purpose of the cave art is highly debated and can never be known. Some claim, however, that, given the inaccessibility of the caves, the fact they were not inhabited, and the appearance of something altar-like in the caves, the art must have served a spiritual purpose.

animal spirits, and feel the ancient longing to move among them. In Chauvet, we gaze into the ages. We do not look upon history for, until now, there has been no record of this; rather we look into time itself. As Herzog himself observes, “we are locked in history, they are not.”

Few today may reach this cavern, found deep in the cliffs of southern France. In a strange twist of fate, our very presence to which the cavern drawings attest brings about their destruction.[5] For millennia, the cold, dry air kept the artwork safe. Only now are they threatened by the moist warmth of human breath. And yet, the images are not fully denied us. What before could only be seen by dint of the will to traverse into the darkest reaches of the caves has been made accessible by our technologies. Although physical access to the caves may remain denied to us, the images they hold are not. With only a few keystrokes in a search engine, we can see films and photographs of the artwork in full colour.

The majority of people who see the images in Chauvet Cave are secondary observers. Even still, some small part of us may feel something akin to Herzog’s and the others’ response. Gazing upon the stunning images, we might momentarily feel the reverence, thrill, and wonder of standing amongst them. But what is this strange thing that Herzog, the archaeologist, the other scientists, and even we ourselves may feel when looking upon the walls of Chauvet? What is it about seeing these images, over 30,000 years old, that still holds an appeal to the human heart? How is it that they can speak of *powerful things, deep things* in a way of understanding more primal than speech? What secret do we seemingly disturb in illuminating them and bringing them back to human life? And what do we awaken in gazing upon them and find them gazing back at us?

Living in a World of Images

The fact that the images of the Chauvet Cave are disseminated so widely attests not just to our technological capabilities or the will of scientists to document all aspects of human life but also

[5] The Caves at Lascaux had to be closed after the humidity of tourists’ breath caused mould to start to grow on the walls.

to the *place* of images in our lives. More than ever before, we live in a world of images. We see them on billboards, buses, television, computer screens, through the various technologies that mediate our realities. Indeed, we see so many images daily that we remember very few.

And yet, there are certain images that have a *deep bite* (Sontag, 2003). They may stay with us, haunt us, and change us individually (Brunius, 1970; Ingarden, 1985, 1998) and collectively (Kracauer, 1995). Some, like the cave paintings of Chauvet, form part of a universal narrative of human history. Others, more recently created, form part of our collective memory. Depending on our age, culture, and class, they might be images of the moon landing, the Kennedy assassinations, the Vietnam War, or September 11th, 2011. Many of these images are violent, others are not, but each is an icon of a particular moment in time or of a shared experience (Hariman & Lucaites, 2003; Taylor, 2003). These images seem to hold our memories. With each sight of them, we may be transported back to that moment when we were standing on the street, sitting at home in our living room surrounded by family, or wandering through the gallery and first saw them.

Other images, however, have a force that is solitary, private, and individual (Barthes, 1980/1981; Brunius, 1970; Ingarden, 1985). They may be images to which we alone seem to respond. They may be highly personal, even when they are publicly visible to all. They might be a photograph that holds the eye, a film that cannot be forgotten, a drawing that touches the soul, or a painting that seems more real than the world around us. Whatever their form and no matter how we have encountered them, these images speak to us in a way that other images do not. Some of these images may have a *punctum*, a strange quality that "pierces" us, their viewers (Barthes, 1980/1981).[6] We not only see these images, but we also seem to be deeply touched by them. Encounters with them can even be life changing. They can have what Bachelard (1964) describes as a poetic resonance, which disperses and is felt across the different planes of our lives. While only a picture, a video, a painting, or a drawing among the thousands we see daily, these images seem somehow infinitely more. *They are sublime*.

[6] This is not to say that all images that have *punctum* are necessarily sublime, but rather to identify that sublime encounters with images can deeply pierce us much in the way that *punctum* does.

The Sublime: What a Curious Thing we do not Understand

The sublime has fascinated human beings for over 2,000 years. It has been the subject of hundreds of philosophical treatises and thousands of works of art. It appears in some of the oldest written works, as well as in most major religious texts. It has inspired writing, architecture, the fine arts, and even our forays into nature. Yet, despite the sublime's persistence over time, its presence across cultures, and its prevalence as a subject for philosophers and artists, understanding it seems to elude us.

Historically, the term has been understood as the simultaneous experience of awe and terror (Burke, 1757/1958//2008) evoked by something that exceeds our cognition (Kant, 1793/2000/2007). It has often been treated as beauty's unruly counterpart; an evocation of, or that which evokes, an *enthusiastic terror* (Dennis cited in Kirwan, 2005, p. 6). Deemed by some to be the height of aesthetic experience (Reynolds, 1785/1996) and the "highest excellence" of artistic expression (Longinus, trans. 1890), others claimed it evidence of transcendence (Schelling, 1859/1989) and even that which could enable us to glimpse the divine (Otto, 1958; Reynolds, 1785/1996).

In this sense, however, the term is now infrequently used and may even go unrecognized. Popularly, the word "sublime" is more often applied in a hyperbolic manner. We call something sublime to denote the highly pleasant,[7] much in the same way as we use words like "awesome," "great," or "fantastic." Our usage falls outside of these words' true meanings (for example, when we say "that dinner was fantastic!"). However, unlike many other words whose root meaning we may still be able to readily call to mind when pressed (as generating a sense of awe, being of high status, or having the quality of fantasy), we may not so easily recall what "sublime" might mean outside of colloquial speech.

Philosophers and academic theorists seem to have developed a similar uncertainty about what constitutes the sublime. Longinus' (trans. 1890) original conception of the sublime as being a feature of rhetoric "consist[ing] in a certain loftiness and excellence of language"

[7] This is not limited to the English language. In French, the term *sublime* is similarly used to refer to the very pleasing of the everyday life, as in *"c'est crème glaçée est sublime!"* which translates as "this ice cream is sublime!"

(Longinus, trans. 1890, p. 2) has long given way to innumerable philosophic reinterpretations (e.g., Burkean, Kantian, and Hegelian to name but a few), which in turn have been taken up and reinvented by psychoanalysis (Lacan, 1986/1992), critical theory (Adorno, 1970/1997/2013, 1973/2007; Ray, 2005), feminism (Battersby, 2007), postmodernism (Johnson, 2012; Lyotard 1979/1984, 1991/1994), and post-postmodernism (White & Pajaczkowska, 2009). With so many different coexisting mutations, to call something "sublime" today necessitates that one defines which "sublime" one means. Correspondingly, we can no longer claim to understand the conditions under which "the sublime" is experienced or whether it is an emotion (Burke, 1757/1958/2008; Cochrane, 2012), an aesthetic judgment (Kant, 1793/2007), a physiological response (Eskine, Kacinik, & Prinz, 2012), or an innate quality of things (Costelloe, 2012)—all examples of how it has been substantiated. It seems that over its two-millennium life, the sublime has changed from being a clearly identifiable thing to being an ideal postmodern subject (White, 1997): not only is it embedded with deep uncertainties and contingencies, any discussion of it is highly abstract. Few scholars feel comfortable pointing to something and saying, "That is sublime," for fear of being seen as naïve or silly. Indeed, to speak of the sublime as something encountered in the world has become largely associated with discussions of Romanticism, as if the possibility of experiencing the sublime was a historically situated event.

Yet, I wonder what might be the human phenomenon that underlies, motivates, and from which originates the multitude of attempts to define, analyze, theorize, and represent the sublime? Has that experience been lost to the annals of history? Or is it still capable of being encountered in the world, *through things like images*, if perhaps only rarely? What if the experience of the sublime continues to exist, but we have merely forgotten—or never knew—its name?

An Experience that Goes Unnamed: A First Attempt at Articulating the Research Question

How is it that we might experience the sublime without knowing what it is? Consider the following account:

I am in Beijing in what they term "the Silicon Valley of China," a colony of glassy towers and sterile sidewalks in the Northeast of the city. Eager to explore this new corner of the city, I decide to walk to my next appointment. This day has been particularly smoggy, and an eerie opacity is lent to the darkening evening air. I pass a tall building the façade of which is covered by a large electronic screen that broadcasts a series of flashy advertisements into the night. As the light thrown off by the screen is trapped by the smudgy air, the sky above me becomes a pulsating ceiling of murky blues, greens, yellows, and reds. I arrive at a massive intersection. There is an elevated pedestrian walkway that allows those of us on foot to cross it—a futuristic looking square of tunnels suspended in the air above the roadway. I climb the stairs and begin making my way along one of the caged tubes. Halfway across, I pause and turn to look out over the torrent of traffic below.

And that is when I freeze.

Sixteen lanes of highway. A constant flow, headlights, backlights, pouring, incessantly, smoothly. The thick air around me, still aglow, presides over this colossal manmade cascade with a surreal indifference. Despite the roar of the traffic, there is a well-oiled calmness to the entire operation. It is a scene both beautiful and terrifying; the portrait of dystopia, but a deeply compelling one. I am in the presence of a great monument testifying to human capacity. The boundary between my understanding of the constructive and the destructive is rendered obsolete, as is the line between the simultaneous attraction and repulsion I feel. What I see strikes me as wholly inhuman in its scale and speed, and yet, it is entirely human. I am staring Frankenstein in the eyes. There is no hiding from my complicity—the reflection of myself that I see—in what lies before me. A certain blankness or maybe dissolution of mind sets in in order to accommodate the immensity of what impresses itself upon me. And so I stand there, suspended, for who knows how long, subsumed by this awful, awe-inspiring urbanscape.

> *Eventually, I tear myself away and make my way back down to the other side of the street. Before long, the intersection is behind me, the air loses its surreal glow. From the perspective of the sidewalk, I retrieve the vocabulary and thoughts necessary to begin retroactively to explain what I have just seen.*

Andrew,[8] a friend, writes to me of this experience a few months after it happened. This moment stands out amid all of his worldwide travels. It is a simple moment that is also highly complex. Walking across a bridge, Andrew is frozen by the sight before him. It is a sight that is both real yet more than real, confusing yet calming, beautiful yet terrifying, attractive yet repulsive, awful yet awe-inspiring. What Andrew sees is both creation and destruction, human and inhuman, personal and impersonal. It is, one might posit, sublime—a term Andrew would later confirm that seems appropriate. And yet, Andrew does not immediately name his experience as sublime. Indeed, in the moments immediately following and for a long while after, the experience remains beyond words. He *retroactively* tries to *explain what he had just seen,* yet seems unable to do so. Nevertheless, while his experience may not immediately be explainable or definable, it does seem understandable to us when we read his description.

Although we may not have experienced the same thing as Andrew, there appears to be something meaningful and recognizable in his experience. Further, this understanding does not depend on our understanding of the term "sublime." Indeed, knowing the various philosophies and contemporary theories of the sublime may make Andrew's experience incomprehensible when considered in that light. When read through one of the various lenses, we may lose our initial recognition of the experience. This, however, is less an indication of some problematic dimension in Andrew's experience than of the problematic discourse surrounding the sublime. American philosopher Guy Sircello (1993) made an astute observation about the ongoing attempts to theorize the sublime. He said:

> Sublime discourse often is, in many respects, gibberish—even if in some cases splendid gibberish—as any language might be that tries to articulate the extraordinary and stupendous in the very throes of confronting it. And it

[8] Please note: Andrew is a pseudonym.

> probably does foil rationalism in more than one sense—as does so much else in the world. (p. 549)

Experiences like Andrew's seem little served by contemporary discussions of the sublime. By comparison with the former, much of the theory and philosophy can seem like "gibberish." But if we cannot turn to philosophy and theory to understand such an experience, what are we left with? Like the "so much else in the world" to which Sircello refers, the answer may lie *in* the world and in our basic experience of it. Quite simply, when philosophy and theory, abstraction and representation are put aside, we are left only with that from which our questions originate: our initial, embodied experience of something as sublime. We are left with experience like Andrew's on the massive Beijing overpass and Herzog's in the cave. Sircello, it seems, agrees. He claims that, while it is imperative that we understand the sublime, we can only achieve such understanding through an exploration of the "natural core" of sublime experiences. To explore the "natural core" of the sublime, we must turn back to experiences like Andrew's and Herzog's and consider them in their fullness and all of their messy complexity. To do this, we must understand what makes our experience of the sublime what it is—*before* it is "cleaned up" and explained (or explained away) by theory, abstraction, or philosophy. We must turn back to the lived experience of the sublime, for it is only upon this basis that we may gain any genuine understanding of the sublime and come to understand "what sublime experience at bottom has to tell us—if anything at all—either about the world or about ourselves" (Sircello, 1993, p. 542).

For the purpose of this study, therefore, I have chosen to focus on our direct and immediate experience of the sublime. I have further narrowed my focus to when our experience of the sublime is evoked by an image. I am interested in experiences like those of Herzog and the archaeologist that were recounted at the opening this chapter. My study, therefore, is oriented around a very simple but fundamental question: *what is the lived experience of the sublime when it is evoked by an image?*

Phrased this way, my study becomes grounded in our concrete, given experience of the sublime rather than in any one specific philosophical or theoretical framework, or even upon the general discourse itself. It also specifies the means by which the question is best answered. Specifically, it requires a methodology that remains grounded in our immediate lived experience

of the sublime and that does not require the adoption of any specific definition of, theory of, or philosophical position towards the sublime. Further, the methodology should be one in which the study's results can speak to everyone rather than to only persons within a specific field. These three requirements suggest the appropriateness of a human science approach, specifically the phenomenology of practice (van Manen, 2014), a description of which is offered in Chapter 3.

Assumptions, Limitations, and What I Mean by "Images"

In choosing to pose my overarching question as *what is the lived experience of the sublime, specifically when it is evoked by an image?* and to answer it using the phenomenology of practice, I recognize that I am making three important presumptions.

- First, I am positing that there is a phenomenon of the sublime that underlies our myriad of writing on the topic.
- Second, and in contrast to the some contemporary writers who treat the sublime as a purely theoretical construct, I am approaching the sublime as a potential human phenomenon. Specifically, I am allowing for—indeed, dependent upon—the possibility that the phenomenon of the sublime has a concrete, experiential nature that can be evoked by an image and can manifest within our pre-reflective experience of the world.
- Third, I am supposing that this phenomenon is both identifiable (i.e., one can point to a moment when one has encountered an image and say, "that was sublime") and understandable (i.e., recognizable as sublime and articulable via spoken or written description).

In addition, I have chosen to limit this study to sublime experiences that are specifically evoked by an image for both practical and personal reasons. First, a phenomenological exploration of the sublime is beyond the scope of one study. In order to have a study of a feasible size, I have limited my phenomenology of the sublime to a specific type of sublime encounter: one with images. Second, I have chosen to study the images because the most influential thinkers on the sublime have limited its causes to the natural world, despite the sublime's origins (with

Longinus) in the creative realm. To explore sublime experiences of images is to address an under-recognized area. Third, I have chosen to limit the study to images because of a long-standing personal interest in the experience of images and my own personal experience of the sublime (which I describe in the following section).

For the purposes of this study, images are defined as all "visual imagery," both visual art objects (paintings, photographs, film, sculpture, etc.) and non-art visual imagery (videos, movies, advertising, websites, etc.). Due to developments in art history, the anthropology of art, visual culture, visual studies, visual communication, and new media, there has been a significant blurring of the categories of art and non-art. This makes distinguishing art from non-art, at times, difficult. Even where this distinction is maintained and recognized, it is important to extend explorations of visuality, vision, and aesthetic experiences beyond the limited realm of art. As Elkins (1999) argues:

> Non-art images can be just as compelling, eloquent, expressive, historically relevant, and theoretically engaging as the traditional subject matter of art history and … there is no reason … to exclude them from equal treatment alongside the canonical and extracanonical examples of art. (p. ix)

Likewise, Berleant (2010) argues that studies of aesthetics—the area in which the sublime has traditionally been conceptualized—are not limited to art but found in everyday life. "The aesthetic is a pervasive dimension of the objects and activities of daily life" (p. 175), whether art or not. While textbooks, guides, and critics may tell us what images we should feel are important (Elkins, 2002, p. 86), experiences of the sublime do not limit themselves to their arbitrary evaluation. Being inclusive of all visual images allows me to explore the sublime as a potentially aesthetic dimension of our experience of any image. Moreover, it allows my participants to speak of their experience without having to subscribe to any particular understanding of art or aesthetics. In this study, therefore, any form of visual imagery is eligible for inclusion, so long as it is primarily visual in nature (i.e., was produced originally in a visual form and is reproducible via visual media) and has a concrete, even if temporary, form (i.e., the visual object is exterior to the viewer, as opposed to constituting purely mental visual imagery, such as dreams).

The Beginning: A First, Troubling Encounter

My interest in the meaning of sublime encounters with images began many years ago. It is an experience to which I often return when I think of the significance that images can have in a person's life. It is also an experience that points to the problems of something as profound and personal as an encounter with the sublime.

> *When I was in Grade 12, one of my teachers showed a film about World War II. The film was deemed "potentially disturbing" by the school district so parental permission had to be obtained before we could see it. As students, we anticipated that film. Up to this point they had been dreadfully dull and this one promised to be different.*
>
> *As the video started and the teacher dimmed the lights, we were caught by the black and white documentary. Although I do not remember its title, I remember the film distinctly. I had never seen anything like it. The footage of still living corpses of liberated internment camps, piles of bodies in open graves, shadowy rooms made all the more shadowy by the grainy film stock. All is burned into my memory. I was stunned, caught, by those images. I couldn't look away despite how horrible it was to see evidence of how inhuman humans can be.*
>
> *These images stayed with me, stay with me even now, as does what happened after.*
>
> *The teacher's timing was impeccable. The film ended just as the bell rang but no one moved.*
>
> *We just sat there.*
>
> *Silent.*

> *A normally loud, boisterous class of teenagers had been silenced and made still by images of war's aftermath. And in that silence we were waiting for something. What? I'm not sure. Perhaps a word to explain those images, explain them away or justify man's barbarism, or maybe just permission to return to what now seemed like a vacuous existence.*
>
> *After a few minutes, I heard the teacher's voice from the back of the room, perhaps a little confused, maybe even a little shaken, say "you can go now." We all stood, quietly picked up our books, and shuffled out into what now seemed like a too loud hallway.*

This is my first memory of encountering images in an unusual, unprescribed way. And this experience remains to this day one of my most troubling experiences of images. Not only were these images some of the most powerful that I had encountered in my early life; they were strange images, different. They fell outside what of I knew—not of history, for I was already familiar with the brutal facts of World War II, but of images themselves. Up until this point, the images I had seen simply were *not like this*.

And yet, again, in many ways, they were exactly like most other images I had seen. Their form (as photographs), their content (the Holocaust and war), even their mode of presentation (as an educational documentary) was readily familiar. The film was one of many Provincially approved audio-visual curricular resources for teaching about the Second World War. Objectively speaking, nothing about it should have made its images particularly distinct. And yet they were different. They affected me (and seemed to affect my classmates similarly) in a way that no other image ever had up to that point. There was something indescribable and beyond reason about them. They were stupefying, unimaginable, and inconceivable, yet *they were there*. They were harrowing to look at it, to see, and accept, but I would not have looked away from them for any reason, for they were images that demanded to be seen.

Those images affected me then and affect me even now. I was and remain caught by the sight of them; they caught and captured me in a way that so few images ever have. I distinctly remember this encounter more than half a lifetime later; it is one of the few specific memories

I have of that class and that teacher. Those images are indelibly etched into my memory as if into the very recesses of my soul. They alone remain clear amid the fog of school-day memories. They endure strong and present, even as the details of the context in which I saw them and that which preceded or followed the event have begun to slip away. And my memory of them does not fade when repeatedly exposed to scrutiny, unlike the visual objects upon which it is based.

And yet, I must ask: how did those images catch or "pierce" me (if I may invoke Barthes here)? What was it about my encounter with them that has made them so memorable? Was it their subject matter? That certainly is possible. Images of something as incomprehensible and unimaginable as full-scale war and the Holocaust are likewise incomprehensible and unimaginable. But I suspect there is more to my experience—as I have said, these were not the first images of war or the Holocaust that I had seen. Likewise, I cannot account for it through their form or composition. It was simply an educational documentary made up of historical images that were often grainy to a fault, over-exposed, and deteriorated due to the passage of time. Even the composition of the film itself was relatively unremarkable. The tempo, timing, and overarching narrative in no way compares to other, more evocative films on the same topic, such as Alain Resnais' (1955) hauntingly beautiful and horrible *Nuit et Bruillard.* And yet to me, the force of *Nuit et Bruillard* falls far short of that nameless film I saw years ago.

So, perhaps I was captured by the moment itself and, in that moment, those images became caught within me. *Capture* derives from the Middle French, *capture,* meaning "a taking" (capture, n., *Online Etymology Dictionary,* 2014). Just as the film, when first seen, somehow caught the self of a naïve youth, the memory of that encounter can take hold of some part me, no matter what my age. I seem to have become bound up in that encounter, marked by it and irreparably changed. No intellectualization, explanation, or theorization has ever freed me—should that freedom even be desired. In being ever drawn back up into my present through memory, my encounter with those image seemingly affects both the "I" that I was then, that person who was immediately shaped by the encounter, and the "I" that am now, the person who I have become because of it.

Although I recognize the documentary images' impact upon me, both immediate and long-term, I cannot deny that my experience of it is troubling. Highly meaningful, highly

memorable, but troubling nonetheless, for it begs many questions. Questions like: What did I encounter in that moment when faced with the inconceivable immensity, awe-inspiring incomprehensibility, and terrible horror of those images? How were they not merely horrible? What else did they seem to contain? Given their impact, what did they call upon, call to, or call from me in the moment? And how do they call me now? What keeps leading me back to them, to remember them? What do I search for within my repeated remembrances of them? If memory of past events carries present meaning, as van den Berg (1972) asserts,[9] what meaning does my memory of these images now hold? How did they mark me? And how is it that they continue to mark me? What impact does this kind of experience of images have on us? How do we experience the resonances of images that evoke such an experience? And what can it reveal about ourselves and about our relationship to images, to others, and to our world? This single encounter begs all of these questions and, also, the simplest of all: *what, exactly, was it?*

While my memory of those images holds fast and what was felt then is easily re-evoked by remembering that encounter now, I am still unable to give my experience a truly meaningful name. Whatever I might call it does not seem to do my experience justice; its force seems to slip beyond the limiting, ordering power of language (Lacan, 1986/1992; Lyotard, 1979/1984). Tentatively, I call it *sublime* because I recognize in my response something of the simultaneity of awe and terror in the face of the incomprehensible, something of an encounter with that which exceeds human rationality, as well as something of a strange attraction and repulsion. I also now call it sublime because, in the intervening years, I have had other, somewhat similar experiences that place it into perspective. My Grade 12 experience is somewhat like the time at the Guggenheim when I could barely force myself to enter the room with the Richard Serra sculpture—when, tentatively moving around it, I felt like I was moving around some unknown wild beast, simultaneously thrilled and terrified by it. It also has resonance with the time when, standing before Michelangelo's *Pieta* in St. Peter's, I momentarily perceived the true heart of the Catholic faith. And it bears similarities to endless other accounts that have been published

[9] Van den Berg (1972) further notes, "If the past has no task to fulfill, none at all, then it isn't there: then no recollection of this past is possible" (p. 82).

or been told to me about unusually moving—neither purely enjoyable nor purely terrible—experiences that can only be called sublime.

And yet, even as I write the word "sublime," I recognize how difficult my attribution of that term is, particularly to my own first experience. My experience of the documentary images, which obtains so strongly in memory and which seems to have shaped me to such an extent that it seems a logical—and the only logical—starting point for the exploration that will follow, can only be described as *problematically sublime*. For me to call "sublime" what was evoked by those iconic images of death and inhumanity invariably draws forth the moral judgments of others. In their question, "how could you find those images sublime?" lays censure of my response and a popular understanding of the sublime that does not fit easily with my experience. The question seems to carry within it an assumption that either I have made a terrible misjudgment or, if the term is truly reflective of my reaction, evidence of a serious personal shortcoming. Although I understand—and to a certain degree echo—this confusion and upset, I cannot deny my experience, its personal profundity, or the fact that the term "sublime" comes closer than any other I can find to describing what those images evoked. It is the only word I have for my experience.

However, I also recognize that others have different experiences of images that they call sublime, experiences that I myself have difficulty understanding. I have difficulty understanding the sublimity of James' experience (a person who volunteered for this study), who likened seeing an unexpected e-mail profile picture with viewing a corpse. Nor can I genuinely understand Stendhal's (2013) experience in Florence (which will be discussed in Chapter 4) or the experience of the Japanese painting said to be God (see: Elkins, 2001). The sublime appears to be an experience that is both highly personal and individual. Few images (perhaps none) seem to resonate sublimely for a large number of people. It seems that *most any* specific example of an encounter with an image that appears sublime is similarly problematic as my own. Whether it is a child's response to an illustration of a black hole or an adult who finds herself haunted by a specific photograph she stumbles across on the Internet (both examples told to me mid-study), there seems something inherent in the experience that leads anyone but the person recounting

the incident to ask: *How is this image sublime?* And, further, *why do you experience this image as sublime while I do not?*

This points to two unique problems when studying the sublime when evoked by an image. First, even though we may not be able to define the sublime, there is a "common sense understanding" of the word "sublime" that may be at odds with the experience of the sublime. To address this issue, I offer a review of the innumerable definitions of the sublime in Chapter 2. One simply cannot ignore the sublime's long and complex history. I hope that this brief review demonstrates the varied nature of the concept and shows how, at root, all are based upon a basic experience, which is to date inadequately understood. My second means of addressing the disjunction between someone's experience of the sublime and our own definition of it is through endeavouring to show, in each case, through description and reflection, the manifestation of sublimity. I hope that through the rich description offered, the reader may begin to recognize the singularity of the lived experience of sublimity.

The second problem faced by this study is that our responses to images are direct and largely seem given by the images themselves (Marion, 2001/2002, 2004). That is, we experience the image as beautiful, as boring, or as ugly, and yet these attributes are not universally experienced (the sublime seems ready proof of this). No single image is beautiful to everyone worldwide. To mitigate this particular issue, I have chosen *not* to include in this text copies of the images my participants identified as evoking the sublime, nor even formal references or internet links to them, but I give enough information to enable the reader to locate the images after the fact. This guards against the reader's response overshadowing the description offered by the participant. I have also sought to describe how the image itself was experienced in the moment, without resorting to reasonable explanations for why an individual responded as he or she did. Our response to the images comes first, and within that experience there seems to lie a fundamental truth that I do not wish to deny or diminish by offering up some psychological or theoretical explanations that would cover over the experience in order to make it palatable rather than reveal any genuine understanding of it. Although each person can justify his or her reaction, and each can offer an explanation as to why the particular image is sublime, perhaps in doing so we miss the larger questions raised by this strange, unique, elusive, and always problematic

experience: *What is it to encounter an image that evokes the sublime?* And *what might it reveal about ourselves as beings in the world with images?* My precise phenomenological question, therefore, is not whether this or that particular image is sublime (for you or me), but rather *what is it that we experience when we experience the sublime giving or showing itself through any image.*

A Reiteration of the Research Question and a Note on Language

The following chapters explore in-depth the basic question: *What is the lived experience of encountering an image that evokes the sublime?* Or, (turning the question from the what to the how) how is sublimity given through an encounter with an image? These chapters also engage secondary questions. Some are phenomenological in nature and explore dimensions of existence found in all phenomena, what phenomenologists call "the existential" (van Manen, 2014). These include:

- How do we experience our body when we encounter an image that evokes the sublime?
- How do we experience time?
- How do we experience space and place?
- How do we experience our relation with other people when we encounter the sublime? And, how are these relations affected afterwards?
- How do we experience the thing-ness of the image when it evokes the sublime?

Other questions are comparative in nature and are designed to draw out the uniqueness of the experience of the sublime evoked by an image. They include:

- How does our experience of an image as sublime differ from our experience of an image as beautiful or ugly?
- How does it differ from our experience of an appealing image or a repulsive image?
- As well as how does an image that evokes the sublime differ from an image that does not?

More latent, less direct questions include the exploration of concerns such as:

- What do we come to learn about ourselves, others, images, and our world through sublime encounters with images?
- And, what does our experience of the sublime reveal to us about the nature of images, of perception, and of our basic experience of the world?

While helping to answer my central question, all of these sub-questions further a secondary concern of this study, which is to understand: *what may a phenomenology of the sublime as encountered through visual imagery reveal about the phenomenological project in general?* Specifically, *how might we understand the givenness of the sublime in terms of images as that of phenomenality, in general?*

The descriptive answers to some of these questions will be readily evident within given sections of select chapters. The answers to other questions (the more latent questions) are largely woven throughout the entire text. Such is the nature of any phenomenological text.

Here, I would like to briefly pause and address my use of language in the following chapters. In any phenomenological text, the words that one chooses to use are very important. Phenomenologists aim to create texts that are "deeply embedded" with meaning (van Manen, 2014); that is, texts where changing even one word changes the meaning of the text. The language used, therefore, needs to be specific and precise, yet also highly evocative. In any writing, however, there are also the practicalities of communication and the importance of the ease of reading. As I have articulated above, the object of this study is to understand what it is like to experience the sublime when it is evoked through an encounter with an image. Throughout my text, I have tried to remain clear on this point. However, to describe the phenomenon in this way is wordy and quickly becomes cumbersome to both reader and writer. Therefore, I have chosen to intersperse the term "sublime image" throughout as shorthand for my phenomenon of study. This is done for the sake of ease of reading. At no point, do I claim that the images of which I write are objectively sublime; they are simply those images that evoked the experience of sublimity for my participants. I ask my readers to keep this in mind whenever they read the phrase "the sublime image." Further, readers will notice that I use the terms *sublime* and *sublimity* interchangeably. Historically, "the sublime" has been used to refer to the abstract idea of sublimity, much like "the beautiful" or "the magnificent," while

"sublimity" was considered the "condition or state of being" sublime (-ity, suffix, *Oxford English Dictionary,* 2014)—the sublime manifest in the world. For the purposes of this study, however, my focus is on the sublime as it is experienced pre-reflectively in everyday life (not as an abstract idea), hence the identity of my use of the terms the experience of the sublime and sublimity.

An Overview of What is to Come

A final note on what is to follow. As has been remarked above, Chapter 2 provides a brief exploration of the different and varied understandings of what is the sublime. This is not a comprehensive study, nor should it be considered a history of the sublime. Those have been attempted by many others (see: Costelloe, 2012; Kirwin, 2005; Morley, 2010) and do not need to be repeated in this study. Rather, the overview is designed to familiarize persons with the various ways in which others have conceived of the sublime and to begin to point out incongruities between theory and experience within these various definitions. Next, I will briefly describe the methodology used, the phenomenology of practice, in Chapter 3. Here, I will offer a brief background to the phenomenology of practice, outline its philosophical orientation, purpose, and methodological devices as they relate to this study, as well as describe in detail the specific activities undertaken in this project. I also introduce the reader to a metaphor of conducting a phenomenology of the sublime that has guided my work. Chapters 4 through 8 form the heart of this study. They are chapters that explore the sublime when evoked by an image through various experiential paradoxes that appear inherent in the phenomenon: awe and terror, exquisiteness and monstrousness, delight and horror, clarity and mystery, and existence and inexistence. The reader may already recognize something of these aspects from Andrew's account above. In the final chapter, I move above any specific dimension of the sublime to explore what our experience may reveal about images, ourselves, and our world and why such a study matters. I hope that this work not only contributes to our understanding of the sublime, the experience of images, and the phenomenological project, but that it also promotes in its readers an attentive awareness of the aesthetic dimension of life.

Chapter 2: Research & Writing About Sublimity & the Image

We are never certain of the sublime.

– P. Shaw (2006), *The Sublime,* p. 11

Negotiating the Familiar and the Unfamiliar

What is the lived experience of the sublime when it is evoked by a visual image? This question involves two subjects: one highly familiar, the other largely unfamiliar. Let me begin with the easier of the two.

Most people will claim to know what is meant by the term "visual image." They know because images are prevalent in our everyday lives. Images grace the covers of books, appear on our digital screens, hang on our walls, and are part of nearly all visual advertising. They are photographs, paintings, projections, even film and animations (a series of images made into moving images). Certain images we create, keep, or collect. The majority, however, we encounter as having been made by others, designed to appeal and to catch our eyes. Some we may look at and discard, like our bad vacation photos or those found on junk mail. Fewer still we cherish and keep close. These might be rare family photos or special works of art. Images surround us; they are part and parcel of modern life. But while we may easily point to this book cover or that television screen and say "there is an image," what really is a visual image? What makes an image uniquely what it is?

All visual images seem to share two important qualities. First: they are representations. For something to be an image, whether it be an abstract image or a realistic one, it must refer to something else. If we consider a photograph, it is an image because it is a two-dimensional representation of an actual person, place, or thing, the likeness of which has been captured on celluloid or recorded in the camera's digital memory. By the fact of being "an image," a photograph is not the thing itself but rather is a reference to it. In this way, the photograph is distinct from that which it depicts even as it retains a trace of and a connection to the original

through its depiction. The photograph of my friend is not my friend and yet depicts my friend and reminds me of him every time I look at it. This distinction but connection similarly holds true for abstract images. In the case of something like an abstract painting, however, the reference is less immediately evident than with the photograph. An abstract image's reference may be to an emotion, a mood, or even an art historical idea or practice, but it is still present. It is the answer to the question "what is this image about?" When an image ceases to have or somehow loses its referent, it ceases to be an image and becomes a mere thing.

By nature of its always containing a referent, a visual image tends to be man-made rather than naturally forming, although images can be perceived in many naturally occurring things (for instance, see Elkins' [1997] discussion of naturally forming eye-like images on insects). Elkins (1997) remarks that, when we see images in naturally occurring objects, "the simplest objects can be the most unsettling because they remind us that the world is full of apparitions" (p. 51).

A second important quality of all images, however, stands in direct opposition to the first. While all images refer to something else, they are also more than mere referents As Marion (2005) writes:

> Even when the image is mimetic, it must fundamentally, by itself and for itself, count for more than an image; otherwise, it will tend toward being nothing but a shadow or a reflection. (p. 20)

We might say that for a mere image of something to become a visual image proper, the representation must become a presentation. It must be a thing in itself. The photograph taken of a loved one may be a representation of that person but the photograph also has a physicality, something that makes it distinct. It is both to be looked upon and an object to be touched.

All images have this two-fold nature. There is what the image is made of (celluloid, paint, pixels)—its object-hood—and there is what it depicts—its subject matter. In any given experience of an image, we may find ourselves focusing on one or the other aspect. But whether it is a question of if a painting of me bears my likeness or if the graffiti that mars my garage is

ugly, our experience of images is always a combination of their presentation and their representation.

A study that examines the experience of the sublime when it is evoked by a visual image, then, must account for both the image's presentativeness and representativeness in that experience. However, before we can explore those dimensions, we must first ask: What is the experience that the image evokes? What is the sublime as it is described in the literature?

The Sublime

Unlike the term "visual image," the sublime has a far less intuited understanding. The word itself may not be wholly unfamiliar. We may recognize it as forming part of words like *sublimation* and *subliminal,* the psychic pushing down and burying beneath (sublimation, n., and subliminal, adj. and n., *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2014). But *sublime* or *sublimity*—an understanding of those words, when we stop to think of them, comes less readily to mind. For some, they may vaguely suggest elevation or a loftiness, oddly the exact opposite movement of *sublimation* and *subliminal*. So what, exactly, is the sublime?

I argued in Chapter 1 that having a clear understanding of the sublime is not necessary for its experience and that knowledge of the philosophical writings on the sublime may impede, rather than aid, a consideration of that experience. To disregard the long and varied history of writing on the topic, however, would be to ignore the sublime's seemingly perpetual appeal and the corresponding question, *what about this experience has made it fascinating to a wide variety of people across millennia?* Further, to ignore past writing about the sublime is also methodologically unsound. An understanding of the literature provides a broad view of the landscape in which one is working. Moreover, in that literature, even in the most theoretical, there may be insights that can illuminate the sublime as it is lived. For these reasons, in the remainder of this chapter I briefly review the key theories and philosophies of the sublime (in chronological order) in order to identify what potential experiential dimensions may exist, as well as to highlight those questions about the sublime that recur throughout its history. To be clear, this chapter is not a comprehensive analysis of the various theories of the sublime or even

a complete history of the development of the idea of sublimity. Those have been attempted elsewhere and have proven how difficult (if not entirely impossible) it is to be comprehensive about this subject (for instance, see: Costelloe, 2012; Kirwin, 2005; or Morley, 2010). Rather, what follows is designed to provide a brief overview of the sublime, particularly for readers unfamiliar with the topic, so as to situate my study and its core questions within the context of ongoing discussions about the sublime. Further, with each theory, philosophy, and interpretation I consider, I have attempted to emphasize what it may reveal of the sublime as a human experience, trace any recurrent threads, and note any questions or problematic issues that arise.

Origins

The sublime is a very old concept with unknown origins. Its meaning is suggested in many ancient texts and images, but the first recorded study of it appears in a treatise dated from around the first century AD. Written by an unknown author, whom we now refer to as Longinus,[10] *Perì hýpsous* (*On the Sublime*) was a well-known but rare Greek text (Costelloe, 2012).[11] While of relative unimportance in antiquity, *On the Sublime* has become historically significant because it is from this text that all other writings on the sublime originate.

On the Sublime is largely a text about the power of language, specifically the unique power of sublime language.[12] According to Longinus (trans. 1890), the sublime, "wherever it occurs, consists in a certain loftiness and excellence of language" (p. 2). The sublime, however, is more than merely well-written and persuasive language; it is transformative.

> A lofty passage does not convince the reason of the reader, but takes him out of himself. That which is admirable ever confounds our judgment, and eclipses that which is merely reasonable or agreeable. To believe or not is usually in our

[10] Some scholars accepted the name due to the length of the text. Others confused the author of *On the Sublime* with Cassius Longinus, however this claim has been discounted (Adams, 1971; Morley, 2010).

[11] *On the Sublime* is doubly rare in that no other known Greek texts discuss the sublime and only one partial copy survived to be transcribed during the middle ages.

[12] Although his treatise is limited to the sublimity of language and this has caused many scholars to associate it exclusively with rhetoric, Longinus does not suggest that sublimity is exclusive to language (Meager, 1964).

> power; but the Sublime, acting with an imperious and irresistible force, sways every reader whether he will or no.

According to Longinus, the sublime is deliberately cultivated in a text by an orator to create an immediate and unwilled experience among his or her audience. Upon experiencing the sublimity of the text, audience members are suddenly transported out of their own attitudes and concerns and into those of the orator. This "transportation" occurs without warning or preparation, and is not to be confused with rhetorical persuasion. Whereas the later is diffuse and builds over time, the sublime "is often conveyed in a single thought" (p. 26). And with that thought, the sublime "does not merely convince the hearer," like a fine and convincing point, "but enthrals him" (pp. 35–36) and carries him away (p. 28). It may be even be felt as a "kind of 'fine madness' and divine inspiration, and fal[l] on our ears like the voice of a god" (pp. 14–15). For Longinus, in that moment,

> It is natural to us to feel our souls uplifted by the true Sublime, and conceiving a sort of generous exultation to be filled with joy and pride, as though we had ourselves originated the ideas which we read. (p. 12)

Further, this change is not temporary. "When it [a passage of text] takes a strong and lasting hold on the memory, then we may be sure that we have lighted on the true Sublime" (p. 12). The sublime, according to Longinus, stays with us long after the moment of reading or hearing the text has passed.

To be able to induce such an experience is the highest of artistic "excellences." It generates true insights and demonstrates the orator's artistic genius. Longinus (trans. 1890) writes, "a sublime thought, if happily timed, illumines an entire subject with the vividness of a lightning-flash, and exhibits the whole power of the orator in a moment of time" (p. 3). Indeed, the ability to create the sublime makes the orator god-like. "When a writer uses many other resources, he shows himself to be a man; but the sublime lifts him near to the great spirit of the Deity" (p. 69).

According to Longinus (trans. 1890), the capacity to write a sublime text, while rare, can be achieved by talented orators through practice and close study of other sublime texts (p. 3).

While Longinus never strictly defines what sublime language is, he points to five sources of it. It can be found in language that has:

1) A “grandeur of thought”
2) A “vigorous and spirited treatment of the passions”
3) “A certain artifice in the employment of figures” of speech
4) “Dignified expression, which is sub-divided into a) the proper choice of words, and b) the use of metaphors and other ornaments of diction” and
5) A “majesty and elevation of structure” (p. 13)

While no single source or even their combination guarantees the presence of the sublime, these sources tend to be evident when the sublime arises. Moreover, sublime texts (or rather sublime-inducing texts) tend to be striking with their parts combining into “one animate whole” (p. 22) of which there are no unnecessary or superfluous aspects (p. 25). When we consider sublime texts, there is paradoxically both the effective use of language and something that escapes logic (p. 34). As much as we may try to pinpoint what makes a text sublime, something about it escapes our grasp. The sublime, for Longinus, is best understood as the “soul” of rhetorical amplification (pp. 25–26).

As straightforward and practical as Longinus attempted to be, his formulation of the sublime raises many questions. Is the sublime a feature of the text? Longinus claims it is; yet he cannot firmly define what will guarantee a text’s sublimity. He can only point to potential sources of it. Is the sublime, then, the experience of the audience? Longinus claims the audience’s experience is evidence of the sublime brought forth through language, but not the sublime itself. But if the sublime is embedded in language, why can it not be straightforwardly identified and taught, as rhetoric is? And if writing sublimely is within the realm of possibility for talented orators, why does Longinus attribute to the sublime evocation a god-like aspect?

Even in this earliest of texts, problems seem to abound. Indeed, many of the questions Longinus’ text begs—is the sublime a quality of an object or an experience? How is it manifest? What is its relation to transcendence?—will dog thinkers throughout history, no matter how the sublime is defined. And yet, along with these questions, Longinus’ treatise also already reveals

the appeal and recognizability of the sublime. There is something in his text that may speak to its readers who might have once felt something similar when listening to a particularly powerful speaker.

A Medieval Sublime?

Between the first and sixteenth centuries, there are no known written texts devoted to discussing the sublime and only a few that even mention the word. Until recently, it was supposed that the sublime had disappeared from human thought until 1554 when *Perì hýpsous* was translated into Latin by Francis Robortello and published under the title, *Longinus on the Sublime.* More recently, however, reconsiderations of the Middle Ages have proposed that the Sublime and the Magnificent were central, but unspoken, aesthetic principles of Medieval Europe (Jaeger, 2010a). Jaeger and his colleagues challenge the traditional reading of the Medieval era by demonstrating how loftiness, exaltation, largeness, greatness, and lavishness were central to the experience of Medieval architecture, writing, religious experience, visual arts, patronage, and culture in general (see: Jaeger, 2010b). If Jaeger and his colleagues are correct, their re-reading of the Middle Ages not only bridges the history of the sublime from Antiquity to the Renaissance and provides a justification for why *On the Sublime* would be of such interest to sixteenth-century philosophers when it was "rediscovered," but it also suggests that the sublime can be a meaningful human experience even if it goes unnamed.

The Revival of Longinus

In 1554, Robortello's translation formally reintroduced the West to Longinus' treatise and was subsequently translated into various languages. Following Nicholas Boileau-Despréaux's popular French translation and commentary in 1674 and William Smith's English edition of the text in 1739, the idea became incredibly popular among European scholars (Adams, 1971; Shaw, 2006), most influentially Edmund Burke (1757/1958/2008) and Immanuel Kant (1793/2000/2007). It would be with John Dennis' (1704/1996) interpretation of Longinus,

however, that the sublime acquired its definition as being the simultaneous experience of awe and terror, delight and horror, which Dennis describes as an "enthusiastic terror" (p. 36).

Early eighteenth-century scholarship primarily addressed the sublime as a human passion and explored its appearance through man-made and natural objects. Whereas the former largely concerned rhetoric, exploring "the transformational power of language" (Shaw, 2006, p. 37) in such works as Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Dante's *Divine Comedy,* the latter concerned locating in the world an origin for that which appeared in the former. Beyond this dual exploration of the sublime as a passion induced by human creation or natural phenomena/ divine creation, philosophers also sought to differentiate those phenomena that were inherently sublime (such as God) from those that were relationally sublime (such as a storm or whale).

Interest in the sublime also appeared as theorization of the nature of the sublime "passion" or the *sense sublime*. For instance, John Dennis (1704/1996) proposes that the sublime is not a quality of a perceived object, nor is it a specific mental process, but rather what results in our encounter. A similar position is articulated by John Baillie in his *An Essay on the Sublime* (1747/1996). Baillie writes:

> every person upon seeing a grand object is affected with something which as it were extends his very being, and expands it to a kind of immensity. Thus in viewing the heavens, how is the soul elevated; and stretching itself to larger scenes and more extended prospects, in a noble enthusiasm of grandeur quits the narrow earth, darts from planet to planet, and takes in worlds at one view. Hence comes the name of sublime to everything which thus raises the mind to fits of greatness, and disposes it to soar above her mother earth; hence arises that exultation and pride which the mind ever feels from the consciousness of its own vastness—that object can only be justly called the sublime, which in some degree disposes the mind to this enlargement of itself, and gives her a lofty conception of her own power. (p. 88)

In contrast to Dennis' understanding, Baillie's definition of the sublime centres upon the object's ability to uplift and extend the imagination of the individual. The individual's mind is expanded through an encounter with vast and imposing objects.

Other early scholars like Frances Reynolds (1785/1996), however, firmly held to the belief that the sublime was purely mental. For Reynolds, it marked the achievement of perfection of the mental faculty, a procession that could be diagrammed within a system of representations of truth (p. 124). Beginning with nature, Reynolds diagrams the movement through common sense of the natural world and natural forms to truth and beauty, then to grace, and finally ending with sublimity. It marks, for her, the progression from base human creature to "the region of intellectual pleasures, genius, or taste" (p. 126), of which the sublime is the highest.

Few individuals achieve the sublime, according to Reynolds (1785/1996, p. 126). Yet, for those who do, the experience is marked by the collapse of categories such as cause–effect, certainty–uncertainty, subject–object. She writes:

> When pure grace ends, the awe of the sublime begins, composed of the influence of pain, of pleasure, of grace, and deformity, playing into each other, that the mind is unable to determine which to call it, pain, pleasure, or terror. Without a conjunction of these powers there could be no sublimity. (p. 126)

Retrospectively, Reynolds' work has been deemed religious because in it the sublime "also marks the limits of human conception, the point at which reason gives way" (Shaw, 2006, p. 46). The association between the divine and the sublime is prevalent in pre-Romantic period writings, as the latter came to be seen as the logical conclusion of the former. For instance, Dennis (1704/1996) notes that while many things could induce the enthusiastic terror of the sublime,

> The greatest enthusiastic terror then must needs be derived from religious ideas: for since the more their objects are powerful, and likely to hurt, the greater terror their ideas produce; what can produce a greater terror, than the idea of an angry god? (p. 36)

For these early scholars, what could be more incomprehensible, awe-inspiring, yet simultaneously terrifying than the divine?

Reynolds' formulation is also of interest because of her assertion that the sublime is the absolute limit of what can be encountered. Her formulation is unique, however, in making the claim that to encounter the sublime one must begin with common sense and pass through grace before being able to reach sublimity. The sublime is thus achieved through practice and attention rather than through spontaneous transportation or an accidental encounter.

Reynolds' text is further unique in its clear articulation of aspects of the sublime that would come to dominate its future definition. She writes of the sublime being an extreme experience in which opposites collapse and nothing exists beyond it.

> [The sublime] is a pinnacle of beatitude, bordering upon horror, deformity, madness! An eminence from whence the mind, that dares to look farther, is lost! It seems to stand, or rather to waiver, between certainty and uncertainty, between security and destruction. It is the point of terror, or undetermined fear, or undetermined power! (Reynolds, 1785/1996, p.126)

Here, we not only see the presence of the multiple paradoxes central to the Romantic understanding of the sublime, but also an understanding of the sublime as involving the collapse of meaning in an encounter with a limit—a definition that will come to dominate the postmodern articulation of the sublime.

Edmund Burke and the Romantic Sublime: Finding Sources of the Sublime in the World

While Dennis, Baillie, Reynolds, and numerous other scholars of the period wrote important texts that brought the sublime to the fore of eighteenth-century consciousness, it is Edmund Burke (1757/1958/2008) who would define what would come to be known as the Romantic sublime. In fact, aside from Kant, Burke is the most historically influential and popular scholar of the sublime.

According to Burke (1757/1958/2008), the sublime is distinct from and more powerful than the experience of beauty.[13] Indeed, for him, sublimity is "productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling" (p. 39). Building on Dennis' concept of enthusiastic terror, Burke describes the central feature of the sublime as the elicitation of terror. He says, "whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime" (p. 39). And yet, the sublime is terror mediated by astonishment, pain by delight. Mediation, for Burke, results from two factors: distance and exercise.

Making explicit what is latent in earlier writing on the sublime, Burke asserts that the sublime cannot be experienced if one is in physical danger. He writes:

> When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we every day experience. (Burke, 1757/1958/2008, p. 40)

As the sublime involves passions which Burke identifies as "belong[ing] to self-preservation" (p. 38), we can only experience the sublime when we ourselves are not in danger. And while this experience is founded in safety, it is also founded in ignorance or obscurity (Shaw, 2006). For, as Burke establishes, increased familiarity or knowledge causes the sublime to disappear.

The second mediating factor necessary for the experience of the sublime is what Burke calls the "exercise" of the "finer organs" (p. 134). He claims:

> Now, as a due exercise is essential to the course muscular parts of the constitution, and that without this rousing they would become languid, and diseased, the same rule holds with regard to those finer parts we have mentioned [on which, and by which, the imagination, and perhaps other mental powers

[13] Burke is attributed with being the first to identify the sublime as a phenomenon distinct from beauty. However, this claim is controversial. Most scholars prior to Burke differentiated beauty and the sublime, but Burke was the first to systematically differentiate them as experiences.

> act]; to have them in proper order, they must be shaken and worked to a proper degree. (pp. 133–134)

For Burke, this labour or exercise is found in those objects that bring pain but not violence and terror but not destruction, enabling the imagination to experience a "delightful horror" (p. 134) in them.

Burke's account of the sublime as beginning in horror and terror and becoming delightful may seem the inverse of Longinus' or Baillie's understanding of its originating in the evocative and moving power of an object (whether language or mountain) and becoming all-encompassing. Each, however, can be seen as an attempt to articulate that which lies at the heart of the experience of the sublime.

Burke's text is further like Longinus' in his provision of a detailed taxonomy of causes of the sublime. Instead of rhetorical forms, he describes objective qualities of things. These include natural or man-made objects with the qualities of "obscurity" (Burke, 1757/1958/2008, p. 59), power (p. 64), magnitude (p. 76), privation (including "vacuity, darkness, Solitude, and Silence" (p. 70), infinity (p. 73), and/or difficulty (p. 77). Likewise, positive aspects like magnificence (p. 77) and brightness of light (p. 81) can cause the sublime. Burke also notes specific things, such as the cry of an animal in pain (p. 84), as capable of inducing the sublime, as well as select smells or tastes (p. 85), and bodily pain (p. 86). In literature, he upholds Milton's *Paradise Lost* as an ideal example of the sublime.

Burke likewise describes how the sublime can overwhelm the individual. However, where Longinus focuses on the transportative and transformative nature of the sublime whereby the individual is changed by his or her encounter, Burke's treatise is far more concerned with the exact moment of encountering the sublime:

> The passion caused by the great and sublime in *nature*, when those causes operate most powerfully, is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises

> the great power of the sublime, that far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force. (Burke, 1757/1958/2008, p. 57)

When we experience the sublime, according to Burke, the object before us becomes all-important. We cannot attend to anything else. Further, we lose our rational capabilities.

While Burke's taxonomic *Enquiry* offers a lucid description of the sublime's various components and its experience, like Longinus and most other scholars of the sublime, he fails to identify what, exactly, is the sublime. Although Burke speaks of the passion of the sublime and qualities of objects that evoke the sublime, what the qualities and passion relate to remains unspoken. Even still, Burke's text is central in the development of the idea of sublimity. Through his exploration, Burke was uniquely able to bridge the division between the sublimity of language and art (the rhetorical sublime) and that of the natural world (the natural sublime) that had occupied many scholars, by arguing that the effect of language and natural or man-made objects can be the same. "Words have as considerable a share in exciting ideas of beauty and the sublime as any of those [natural objects, paintings, or architecture], and sometimes much greater than any of them" (Burke, 1757/1958/2008, p. 161). Burke also omits any reference to God, which historians of the sublime (see: Shaw, 2006) argue served to fundamentally shift the concept's subsequent development. After Burke, the sublime of the Romantic period largely becomes an exploration of, or "dark meditations" on, the nature of self and the world-self relationship in which the divine is absent (Shaw, 2006).

In the history of the sublime, the Romantic period is definitive in shifting the sublime from being the persuasive tool used by artists to move their audience to being an aesthetic category (Kirwin, 2005). It would later be refined as an "aesthetic intuition" (Schelling, 1800/1978) marked by transcendent greatness and the appearance of the infinite within the finite (Schelling, 1859/1989). Moreover, as the Romantic scholar often focused on the sublime's occurring in nature, the sublime came to be thought of as pointing to that which was beyond (whether it was called divine or not). However, while the Romantics believed the sublime could be represented in human creations, such as in Turner's paintings, those images were not considered sublime in themselves (i.e., they were considered *representations,* not *presentations*,

of the sublime). A notable exception to this position is Joseph Addison (1734/1996) who argues that art is uniquely able to transform a fearsome or terrifying experience into something pleasurable; thus, the artwork can serve as the site of the sublime. This view would be echoed a century later by Friedrich W. J. Schelling (1859/1989) in his claims that the sublime in nature is only an appearance; "only in *art* is the object itself sublime" (p. 90). Rather than being an effect of language, a passion, an idea, a disposition, a feeling, or a mind–object relation, the sublime could also exist in objects in the world.

Immanuel Kant: Establishing the Foremost Definition

Despite Burke's significant contribution to understanding the sublime, it is Immanuel Kant who has had the greatest and longest lasting influence on the subject. Although familiar with Burke's text (as translated into German by Garve in 1773) and using many of Burke's ideas, Kant considered Burke's study to be inherently flawed. Although descriptive of the feelings of the sublime, Kant felt Burke's analysis was too psychological and therefore "incapable of accounting for the demand to be communicable that the aesthetic feeling immediately entails" (Lyotard, 1991/1994, p. 51). In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* Kant (1793/2000/2007) sets out to offer this exposition and creates a near-mathematical formulation of beauty and the sublime.

In this seminal text, Kant (1793/2000/2007) argues that the sublime is an aesthetic experience composed of two parts. First, we encounter something that appears infinitely vast (the mathematical sublime) or powerful (the dynamical sublime) that can be contained by neither our faculty of reason nor our faculty of imagination, and thus calls our abilities to comprehend the world into question. This is a displeasurable experience that may threaten us. According to Kant, we are threatened not just because we cannot "grasp" the object but also because we cannot even "think it" (p. 143).

Kant, like Burke, identifies an important limit to the experience of the sublime. For Kant, this is particularly relevant in the case of the dynamical sublime, which is manifested by great

power. He argues that, although we may fear what threatens to overwhelm us, we cannot be afraid of it.

> Someone who is afraid can no more judge about the sublime in nature than someone who is in the grip of inclination and appetite can judge about the beautiful. The former flees from the sight of an object that instils alarm in him, and it is impossible to find satisfaction in a terror that is seriously intended. (Kant, 1793/2000/2007, p. 144)

For both Kant and Burke, the sublime can only arise from within a position of safety. In Kant's formulation, without this limit condition, the second movement of the sublime is impossible.

The second movement of the sublime, for Kant, immediately follows the feeling of incomprehension and being threatened. Here, we overcome that threat and our inability to understand or conceive of the object before us by realizing that, as human beings, we are not subservient to our responses. Kant (1793/2000/2007) writes:

> sublimity is not contained in anything in nature, but only in our mind, insofar as we can become conscious of being superior to nature within us and thus also to nature outside of us. (p. 147)

Whereas incomprehension is displeasurable (p. 142), overcoming the threat becomes highly enjoyable (p. 144).

The means by which we prove our superiority and overcome the threat of the object is through recourse to ideas. Sublimity, for Kant, is a mode of consciousness induced by an encounter with something in our external environment that, while initially incomprehensible, leads to great understanding. By pushing our ability to imagine or understand to their limits while still being unable to apprehend or comprehend a thing (and thus experiencing the sublime), we realize our transcendence of the world and become cognizant of certain *ideas of reason* through their relation to the infinite (Nancy, 1993b). Specifically, through an encounter with the mathematical sublime (something immeasurable), we come to understand *totality*; and through the dynamical sublime (something overpowering), we come to understand *freedom.*

Realizing these "*a priori* principle[s]" in aesthetic judgments moves our experience from being mere psychology to being transcendental philosophy (Kant, 1793/2000/2007, p. 149).

According to Kant (1793/2000/2007), our ability to experience the sublime is based in human nature (p. 149), but dependent on our exposure to moral ideas (p. 148). "…Without the development of moral ideas, that which we, prepared by culture, call sublime will appear merely repellent to the unrefined person" (p. 148). An appreciation for and a "disposition of the mind to the feeling of the sublime" (p. 148), for Kant, is both a necessity for its experience and not an unacceptable demand of all people.

Rather uniquely, Kant conceives of the sublime as neither a property of the object that evokes the experience (natural or human), nor an emotion, a relation, or a matter of taste. Instead, the sublime is the experience of our human capacity to overcome our own mental limitations when faced with something so overpowering that it cannot be comprehended. It is not the thing perceived which is sublime (though it may appear so to us), nor is it the conflicting emotions the two-fold process evokes; rather, the sublime is the aesthetic judgment underlying this process. Further, unlike his fellow philosophers, Kant offers his readers a concise (albeit not wholly comprehensive in terms of his ideas) definition of the sublime:

> One can define the sublime thus: it is an object (of nature) the representation of which determines the mind to think of the unattainability of nature as the presentation of ideas. (Kant, 1793/2000/2007, p. 151).

As noted above, the structure that Kant ascribes to the experience of the sublime has become the sublime's basic definition. All subsequent scholarship on the topic engages his text either wholly or in part. Indeed, failing to do so is considered a serious gap in one's understanding of the topic. Although Kant is singular in the history of the sublime in providing an absolutely clear answer to the question "what is the sublime?" his answer is highly abstract and not particularly experiential in nature. In his phenomenology of the sublime, Ruud Welton (2011) notes that, for Kant, sublime is a philosophical concept and wonders, "does it [the sublime] refer to anything outside of this *conceptual* context?" (p. 205). Although we might revel in the clarity of Kant's formulation, we might wonder the same. Rather than providing

insight into the lived experience of the sublime, Kant provides a highly refined theory that has spawned countless reiterations. Although it may be philosophically sound, when considered in light of the embodied human experience of the sublime, one cannot help but notice the stark contrast between Kant's pristine concept and the ambiguity of the sublime as lived. Reading his text, we may wonder: do we really first feel displeasure at being threatened and then pleasure at thinking our way through the threat? Is the experience of the sublime conditional on our being removed enough from its originating object that we may fear it but not be afraid? Must one be "cultured" to experience the sublime or is it an experience that may occur to anyone (including the "unrefined")? Asking these questions does not mean that Kant's understandings should be abandoned or disregarded. They only suggest that there is likely much more to the lived experience of the sublime that Kant ignored or passed over in developing his concept.

German Idealism: Art as a Corrective

From the moment it was published, Kant's text was highly influential. Although accepted by many, his formulation was seen by some subsequent scholars, particularly in Germany, as unduly separating *noumena* from *phenomena* (Kirwin, 2005). For many, the sublime was best articulated in its appearance in art where, they believed, it was able to join the ideal and real. "The artwork [is] not a thing but... a medium through which the sensible is reunited with the transcendental" (Shaw, 2006, p. 91). According to G. W. F. Hegel (1835/1975), Friedrich von Schiller was the first to articulate this possibility:

> The *unity* of the universal and particular, freedom and necessity, spirit and nature, which Schiller grasped scientifically as the principle and essence of art and which he laboured unremittingly to call into actual life by art and aesthetic education, has now, as the *Idea itself,* been made the principle of knowledge and existence and the Idea has become recognized as that which alone is true and actual. (pp. 62–63)

Exploring the sublime in art opened the possibility of finding a new ground for philosophy. Schelling, extending Schiller's view, claims that rather than merely "uniting" the

ideal and the real, art is the only thing in existence that innately reflects *the absolute* or the organizing principle of the world as it contains the *identity* of the ideal and the real (Schelling, 1800/1978, 1859/1989).

> The work of art merely reflects to me what is otherwise not reflected by anything, namely that absolutely identical which has already divided itself even in the self. Hence, that which the philosopher allows to be divided even in the primary act of consciousness, and which would otherwise be inaccessible to any intuition, comes, through the miracle of art, to be radiated back from the products thereof. (Schelling, 1859/1989, p. 230)

According to Schelling, philosophy must be based upon *the absolute,*[14] and only aesthetic intuition and its product, art, are able to represent *the absolute* objectively. Therefore, art should serve a central role for philosophers.

> If aesthetic intuition is merely intellectual intuition become objective, it is self-evident that art is at once the only true and eternal organ and document of philosophy, which ever and again continues to speak to us of what philosophy cannot depict in external form, namely the unconscious element in acting and producing, and its original identity with the conscious. Art is paramount to the philosopher, precisely because it opens to him, as it were, the holy of holies, where burns in eternal and original unity, as if in a single flame, that which in nature and history is rent asunder, and in life and action, no less than in thought, must forever fly apart. The view of nature, which the philosopher frames artificially, is for art the original and natural one… Each splendid painting owes, as it were, its genesis to a removal of the invisible barrier dividing the real from the ideal world, and is no more than the gateway, through which come forth

[14] "The whole of philosophy starts, and must start, from a principle which, as the absolute principle, is also at the same time the absolutely identical [*sic*]. An absolutely simple and identical cannot be grasped or communicated through description, nor through concepts at all. It can only be intuited. Such an intuition is the organ of all philosophy. But this intuition, which is an intellectual rather than a sensory one, and has as its object neither the objective nor the subjective, but the absolutely identical, in itself neither subjective nor objective, is itself merely an internal one, which cannot in turn become objective for itself; it can become objective only through the second intuition. This second intuition is the aesthetic." (Schelling, 1859/1989, pp. 229, 230)

> completely the shapes and scenes of that world of fantasy which gleams but imperfectly through the real. (Schelling, 1859/1989, pp. 231–232)

Art thus embodies, through its aesthetic articulation, that which philosophy can only approximate in language.

Like many of his contemporaries, including Hegel, Schelling's philosophy of art treats the sublime as a variant of beauty, rather than a distinct aesthetic category. The sublime, for Schelling, results when a real object begins to resemble the ideal; beauty is thus linked to *truth* (Schelling, 1859/1989). Although an aesthetic intuition, the sublime is also connected with the ethical dimension through the personal traits necessary to endure its experience.

> Moral and intellectual flaccidity, weakness, and cowardice of disposition invariably shy away from these great perspectives that hold up to them a terrible image of their own nothingness and contemptibility. The sublime… cleanses the soul by liberating it from mere suffering. (p. 87)

Also concerned with human suffering, Arthur Schopenhauer (1819/1909) took a simple view of the sublime as an emotion (p. 259) and, more specifically, a "disposition or frame of mind" (p. 266) distinct from beauty (p. 267). According to Schopenhauer, when one "is filled with the sense of the sublime, he is in the state of spiritual exaltation, and therefore the object producing such a state is called sublime" (p. 267). The sublime differs from beauty in how "pure knowledge" is acquired. Whereas it comes easily with our experience of beauty, the sublime requires a forcible distancing of ourselves. Facing a terrible object,

> the beholder… turn consciously away from it, forcibly detach[ing] himself from his will and its relation, and, giving himself up entirely to knowledge, quietly contemplate[s] those very objects that are so terrible to the will, comprehends only their Idea, which is foreign to all relation, so that he lingers gladly over its contemplation, and is thereby raised above himself, his person, his will, and all will. (p. 267)

The liberation from the "mere suffering" created by human will is, for Schopenhauer, the ultimate goal of humanity. Because, for him, the aesthetic experience of the sublime requires the conscious and forceful abandonment of will, he sees a *sublime character* in the individual who, through aesthetic experience or philosophy, stands apart from the excitement of the world. In being untouched or capable of distancing oneself to stand back and contemplate the Idea presented, s/he has escaped his or her will, however temporary that escape may be. In the moment it is experienced, the sublime may be considered a state of *pure contemplation* (although Schopenhauer admits there exist varying degrees of the sublime [p. 268]). Thus, "the aesthetic is merely a 'foretaste' of the more permanent pleasure of living without the will to live" (Kirwin, 2005, p. 102).

Whereas Kant's efforts were to clearly articulate the structure of the sublime and identify it as fully arising within and because of the human experience, the German Idealist writings returned to it a mysticism and transcendental quality. And yet, the critical questions raised against Kant can also be asked of Schelling, Schiller, and Schopenhauer: Does their description reflect our experience of the sublime as lived? Is it one of transcendence of, and liberation from, human suffering? Is it an encounter with the ideal? Or might their ideas themselves be as idealized as the one against which they were writing?

The Postmodern Sublime: Beyond the Thing

> ... if we are living in a time without a legend or mythos that can be called sublime, if we refuse to admit any exaltation in pure relations, if we refuse to live in the abstract, how can we be creating a sublime art?
>
> – B. Newman (1948/2003) "The Sublime is Now," p. 581.

Despite German Idealism's attempt to revise Kantian aesthetics, Kant's formulation of the sublime has remained the predominant definition. Indeed, there have been few significant

alterations to the concept since, despite a decline of interest in the sublime during the late nineteenth century (coinciding with the rise of modernism) and its revival and postmodern "recuperation" in the late twentieth century (Kirwin, 2005; Nesbitt, 1996). All proposed variations, including those of Schelling, Schopenhauer, and Hegel, have never been taken up with the enthusiasm as has been done with the Kantian concept. Rather than attempting to redefine the term, postmodern scholars, including Derrida and Lyotard, have focused on that to which the sublime might be ascribed or used to illuminate. And while contemporary critics, such as Kirwin (2005), argue that the postmodernists do not adequately take up Kant's philosophical standpoint—thus making their readings of the Kantian sublime bastardized versions—one cannot deny that in these contemporary theories the sublime's essential structure remains the same as that which was articulated by Kant, although the socio-political-cultural understanding in which they are embedded differs.

Two exceptions to Kant's dominance of the discourse must be noted. One exception is the slight modification to the concept of the sublime that occurred following World War II, when Adorno (1970/1997/2013, 1973/2007) argued that, in light of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, the experience of the sublime must now necessarily involve trauma. A second (possible) exception is the ongoing debate regarding the relationship between the sublime and the divine or beyond-the-human. Early scholars, like Reynolds (1785/1996), saw a direct connection between the experience of sublimity and access to the divine. The relation between sublimity and the divine, although downplayed by Burke and Kant, was disputed by neither.[15] However, postmodern scholars, such as Lacan (1986/1992), Lyotard (1979/1984, 1991/1994), Derrida (1987), and Žižek (2002), argue that the contemporary sublime no longer refers to the transcendental (i.e., that which is beyond human, which is based on the possible external existence of the non-human or divine) but only involves the immanent (i.e., that which is un(re)presentable) (also see: Nancy, 1993b).

The little change in definition, however, should not lead us to conclude that there has been little debate concerning the sublime over the last century. Rather, discussions abound over

[15] Indeed, Kant uses the example of a believer fearing God but not being afraid of him when discussing the experience of safety necessary for the sublime.

what, where, and to what ends the sublime can be applied. Given the decentring that is the core of postmodern theories, it should not surprise us that the sublime—that which (according to Kant) results from a recognition of our inability to grapple with that which is beyond our imagination, our reason, and even our art—regained prominence. Below I will briefly outline the key features of the postmodern approach(es) to the sublime.

A return to language. In Lacan's theorizing of the sublime, perhaps the earliest postmodern consideration of the term, the concept is returned to its origins in language. For Lacan (1986/1992), something becomes sublime when it is put into the place of the Thing, the unimaginable or the void in the Symbolic created by signification, "the-beyond-of-the-signified" (p. 54). The object then takes on the quality of referring to the Thing, thus becoming attractive and repulsive; that is to say, it takes on the quality of the sublime.

The presence and presentation of the unpresentable. While Lyotard (1979/1984, 1991/1994), Derrida (1987), and Žižek (2002) readily accept Lacan's theory of the sublime's relation to language, particularly to that which cannot be captured within language, they further see sublimity at play in all representation. According to Lyotard (1979/1984), "the postmodern [is] that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself" (p. 81). Where modern aesthetics fails is in its offering only a "nostalgic" version of the sublime, whereas authentic sublimity involves "the pleasure that reason should exceed all presentation, [and] the pain that imagination or sensibility should not be equal to the concept" (p.81). In this, he bases his argument that the (postmodern) sublime prevents reason from reconciling the unpresentable. And yet, sublime art—the ideal art—must guard against being itself domesticated by reason and market rationalism and thus ceasing to be sublime (Lyotard, 1989).

The sublime as limit and non-existence. Interest in the sublime for Derrida (1987) and Nancy (1993b) primarily concern its appearance at the limits of consciousness and its basis in the *unbound* and *unlimited*, while simultaneously being *bounded* or *limited* by reason. The sublime "sets a limit through its presentation of the failure of imagination... [and yet] it shows how this limit is, in turn, framed or bounded by the unlimited power of reason" (Shaw, 2006, p. 119). Further, both Derrida and Nancy are fascinated with how the sublime does not point to

that which is beyond but appears from within our recognition of what borders existence, simultaneously existing yet not existing. As Nancy (1993b) writes, the sublime is not

> a particular kind of presentation, [such as] the presentation of the infinite…. It is not a matter of the presentation or nonpresentation of the infinite, placed beside the presentation of the finite and construed in accordance with an analogous model. Rather, it is a matter—and this is something completely different—of the movement of the unlimited, or more exactly of "the unlimitation" (*die Unbegrenztheit*) *that takes place on the border of the limit, and thus on the border of presentation*. (original italics, p. 35)

This position is echoed by Lyotard who argues for the immateriality of the sublime, as it cannot be grasped by consciousness. "For any possible given set of routes of epistemological access to 'reality,' that set is insufficient to provide a *complete* understanding or grasp of 'the real'" (Sircello, 1993, p. 549). Indeed, the sublime "may not directly concern 'the real' at all, but only the limitations of any attempts to grasp it, whatever it is or is taken to be" (p. 549), relating to the Lacanian position that the sublime is that which resists being put into language. For Nancy (1993b), the sublime is a *movement* of unfolding at the limit of what is as presentation occurs.

The political sublime. One further development in postmodern explorations of the sublime involves its extension into the realm of politics. For both Lyotard and Žižek, the sublime is political—or rather there is a *politics of the sublime.* For Lyotard (1992), this is terror, necessitating that one approach politics with an *aesthetics of the sublime*. Žižek (2002) sees the sublime as a function of ideology, resulting in a *good sublime object* (or idea) and a *bad sublime object* (or idea). For example, Žižek delineates how post-September 11th, 2001, one cannot conceive of "America" (the good or positive sublime) without simultaneously thinking of "terrorism" (the bad or negative sublime). Both the *good sublime object* and the *bad sublime object* are impossible without the existence of the other, forming the necessary binary around which ideology is built.

The sublime as idea, not experience. Perhaps more than at any other time in the sublime's long history, the postmodern treatment of the sublime calls into question the relation

between theory and experience. For its postmodern theorists, the sublime is less a direct human experience than an idea, concept, or theory. Less informed by the sublime as lived, postmodern theorists and philosophers offer complex explanations (e.g., of the disconnect between what we experience and what we say) and fanciful thought-experiments (e.g., try to imagine the point where presentation comes into being) in their discussions of the sublime. Considered against an immediate concrete experience of the sublime, they offer no beginning for reflection much less any understanding of what the sublime (as lived) may be. With what, then, are we left? If the term "sublime" no longer refers to anything directly experiential, has the experience of the sublime simple ceased to be? Or, might it be that we are now left with a potential human experience that no longer has a recognizable name?

The Post-Postmodern Sublime

The question "what does postmodernism leave us?" has dogged even the staunchest postmodernist. When all certainties are destroyed, undermined, or shown as non-existent, how does one move forward? Given that the sublime served as an ideal postmodern subject (Johnson, 2012; White, 1997), it is rather paradoxical that the sublime has also proven to be its own way out of postmodern nihilism and mental gridlock. In conversation with Pajackowska, White notes:

> It [the sublime] has a fascination for a number of contemporary theorists precisely because it seems to express and answer something more fundamental about our current and ongoing condition than the idea of postmodernism did. The sublime, it seems, as a term, carries a certain charge of the expectation of something "more"—however differently this "more" is understood by different people, and whether it returns us to the authenticity of the material body or elevates us to the rational, ethical or even divine. (White & Pajackowska, 2009, p. 9)

Escape from postmodernism was enabled, it seems, because the sublime could never be fully, entirely turned into an abstract idea. Something of it always seems to escape and point back to

the possibility of a meaningful human experience, something that spoke to other important areas in human life. For instance, in 1976, Weiskel proposed that the sublime lost its relation to the sacred following the secularization of contemporary society. Extending his argument, we might wonder if the renewed interest in the sublime as relating to the sacred (for example see: Nelson, Szabo, & Zimmermann, 2011) reflects a larger, popular renewal of interest in religion and the spiritual.

Perhaps, it is only fitting that there should be an excess to sublimity that makes it relevant to life after postmodernism. And this excess, once recognized, seems to know no disciplinary boundaries. Indeed, writing about the sublime has exploded in popularity in recent years. Beyond continued work in the areas now routinely called the transcendental sublime (Blevins, 2012), the artistic sublime (Abaci, 2008), the natural sublime (Ferri, 2012), and the political sublime (Dikeç, 2012), there are texts now addressing:

- The animal sublime (Singh Bhogal, 2012)
- The apocalyptic sublime (Cook, 2012)
- The auditory sublime (Supper, 2014)
- The biological sublime (Tindol, 2013)
- The (bio)technological sublime (de Mul, 2012)
- The computational sublime (Moloney, 2009)
- The Darwinian sublime (Bradley, 2011)
- The feminine sublime (Hinrichsen, 2011; Sharpe, 2012)
- The geologic sublime (Furniss, 2010)
- The Hertzian sublime (Young, 2013)
- The historical sublime (Kellner, 2011; Gosta, 2012)
- The martial sublime (Shaw, 2013)
- The primal sublime (Cross Turner, 2011)
- The timeless sublime (Wright, 2010)
- The tropical sublime (Lowe, 2011)
- The uncanny sublime (Freer, 2013)
- And even the watery sublime (McKnight, 2009), to name only a few.

From the plethora of texts citing the term, it seems that the sublime can be found in, and may inform our understanding of, nearly everything. And this is not limited to philosophical considerations. The sublime has become an important component of the performance art of Marina Abramovic (1992/2010) and as a "negative aesthetic" directly associated with extreme violence (Berleant, 2010).

Like the postmodern scholars before them, many of the post-postmodern authors directly adopt Kant's formulation of the sublime, with a few adding in contributions from Burke. Yet unlike their predecessors, few seek to move beyond and develop these given definitions in novel ways. The few that do, however, find themselves grappling with the same question (that which is also mine): what, exactly, is the sublime? Given its history, what is called "the sublime" can either disappear into abstract theory, becoming a meaningless figure in our historical memory, or stand forth as a central way of understanding a core dimension of being human. Some conclude, like White in conversation with Pajackowska, that:

> There is no single tradition of the sublime but many, and what the word covers is not a single mechanism or experience. Rather, the motion of the sublime gathers—historically and artificially, by act of will—a series of affects, hopes, themes, images, textual strategies and philosophical and ideas. (White & Pajackowska, 2009, p. 12)

Yet, White's explanation is unsatisfying. There are things that we call sublime and those that we do not. A distinction exists; therefore, something must make the sublime unique. As Kirwin (2005) remarks, "Of course 'the sublime' is a construct; it would be absurd to expect it to be anything more…. Given that it is a construct, we might yet ask what it is constructed from" (pp. 159–160). That question, what is it constructed from? has led a few post-postmodernist scholars to reconsider it descriptively, specifically as a phenomenon in itself. Like my own study, they found this approached best by using phenomenology.

Recent Phenomenologies of the Sublime

One of the first contemporary phenomenologies of the sublime appears in 1997. Challenging the then-still-dominant postmodern view of the sublime, White (1997) attempts a phenomenological description in order to rehabilitate the sublime from its association with bad faith. Drawing from the features of the sublime put forward by Burke and Kant, White provides the following description of the sublime:

> In the experience of the sublime, the individual is confronted by the power and immensity of the cosmos in so far as this is made manifest by an exceptional part of the cosmos itself. With such an experience, however, the individual understands that she is basically "safe", for what she encounters is the image of something overwhelming and not an immediate physical threat. In this context, the individual can relinquish control as the power of the sublime pulls her away from her everyday concerns and reflections, and reveals the otherness which transcends her in a very lucid and immediate way. At the same time that the experience is overpowering, though, the individual is also empowered by it, for it allows her to apprehend a deeper sense of her own significance as a meaningful aspect of the cosmos itself. (pp. 130–131)

White's purpose in engaging in his phenomenology is to show value in the experience and, specifically, to identify how the sublime can give us a model by which we can authentically experience otherness. Unfortunately, White's description of the sublime, having been based upon Kant's and Burke's texts rather than actual experiences of the sublime, merely ends up mimicking his sources. While undertaken for a worthy cause, his "phenomenology" advances our understanding of the sublime very little.

A more recent phenomenology of the sublime was conducted by Welten. Taking a traditional philosophical phenomenological approach, Welten (2011) systematically works through various examples of the sublime in an attempt to identify the sublime's invariant aspects. Its central features, he concludes, are that the sublime:

> a) is not a property of the object, but a description of the condition of the subject: it is an experience, b) the sublime experience is characterized by the sensation of too much and c) this too much is transgressive and tranquil at the same time: it does not destroy subjectivity, but exceeds its horizon. (p. 211)

Based on these three characteristics, Welten claims that the sublime is incommensurate with traditional phenomenology, in particular phenomenology's dependence on intentionality and fulfillment (p. 212). He argues that a phenomenology of the sublime, therefore, becomes only possible when considered in light of Marion's notion of saturation and Henry's "non-intentional" phenomenology, which in turn changes the sublime from being a rare and exceptional experience (p. 218) into "sublime uneventfulness" (p. 220). Welten concludes that, when considered within the confines of phenomenological philosophy, the sublime can only be "the experience of the enigma of awareness as such" (p. 206).

Welten's phenomenology engages the philosophical difficulties of conducting a phenomenology of the sublime, and it offers some particularly unique insights into this project. However, his phenomenological description of the sublime falls short when he begins to digress into philosophizing about its possibility. Rather than answering the question, "what is the sublime when considered phenomenologically?" Welten's concern becomes one of "how is a phenomenology of the sublime possible?" Moreover, while Welten invokes a variety of examples of the sublime as lived in his arguments, his definitive and constant point of reference is, like White's, Kant's formulation. Once again, experiential description is put aside as more appealing philosophical considerations, made possible by Kant's text, arise.

In Cochrane's (2012) phenomenology of the sublime, he begins with the claim that the literature on the sublime identifies two central emotions: attraction and fear, the latter of which he revises as self-negation (akin to but not identical with fear). Cochrane then explores various potential models of the sublime as an experience and evaluates them according to their "psychological plausibility" and ability to fit the various philosophical descriptions of the sublime (p. 133). Cochrane concludes that the sublime is best understood using an "imaginative identification" model, wherein "we imaginatively identify with the properties of the sublime object" (p. 140).

Like White and Welten and so many others, Cochrane's dependence upon the existing literature for descriptions of the sublime, rather than actual sublime occurrences experienced by the individual, is highly problematic. Is the sublime so far removed from human experience that examples of it cannot be found in everyday life? Or might the sublime as lived prove to be too different from our philosophies? And, if so, then what do we do?

The history of the sublime suggests there is something to its experience that has ongoing relevance for human life. Philosophy and theory can inform our understanding of the sublime, but they cannot take the place of understanding the actual experience itself. Therefore, perhaps it is time to look again back to our original question, to what first inspired so many to write about the sublime. Perhaps it is time to return to the beginning, to where the sublime originates. Perhaps it is time to return to the sublime as it is given in our immediate, everyday, lived experience.

Chapter 3: The Phenomenology of Practice

A Suitable Approach for the Object of Concern

For much of its history we have grappled with the question of what is the sublime? As a phenomenon, it can seem evident—Longinus (trans. 1890) found it in the prose of Homer, while Kant (1793/2000/2007) felt it evoked by the pyramids of Egypt—and yet our explanations always seems to fail to do it justice. The seeming accuracy of any definition being offered slips away under scrutiny. For some strange reason, the sublime seems to escape any attempt to articulate it clearly, even as the phenomenon promises to be revelatory of human life. Therefore, in an attempt to gain some clarity about this strange, elusive, confounding thing, I have chosen to return to a very simple but fundamental question, framed within a limited context: *what is the lived experience of the sublime, specifically when it is evoked by an image?*

The manner in which the question is phrased and the specific object of my interest—the experience of the sublime as it is lived through by individuals and before that experience is theorized, abstracted, or interpreted using pre-existing definitions—suggest the appropriateness of a human science approach, specifically the phenomenology of practice (van Manen, 1990/1997/2007; 2014). A variant of phenomenology, phenomenology of practice is a research methodology in which researchers seek to understand a phenomenon as it is experienced immediately in the everyday world and reflectively to describe the meanings that inhere in that experience.

Phenomenology of practice is an ideal approach for a phenomenon as troubling, ambiguous, and contested as the sublime. First, it does not require the adoption of any specific definition of the sublime. Indeed, phenomenology encourages *not* limiting oneself to a prescribed definition. Rather, phenomenological inquiry begins with pre-reflective descriptions of specific, concrete experiences of the phenomenon and uses them as the grounding for the study. Further, phenomenology recognizes that, within any given example of the phenomenon, there may be significant variations. This opens the space of inquiry to any and all permutations of the sublime, thereby allowing me to include not just all of the different definitions of the

sublime but also to consider those sublime experiences that fail to conform to any prescribed definition.

Second, phenomenology acknowledges that some individuals may experience a phenomenon while others do not. Any topic of study is always approached as a *potential* human experience that has the capacity to illuminate dimensions of human existence. Phenomenological researchers, therefore, are not required to prove a phenomenon's existence. Such a stance enables this study to side-step the ever-present postmodern challenge of proving the sublime exists without, conversely, having to ignore entirely the contributions of postmodernism to the field. Instead, this study relied upon identifying and reflecting upon experiential materials: personal anecdotes about sublime encounters with images, descriptions found in literature, and examples from film. By being grounded in and based upon lived experience rather than theory, this study may act somewhat as a corrective to the rampant philosophizing that marks (and creates much confusion in) contemporary discussions of the sublime, and might thereby allow for a better understanding of the sublime's perpetual appeal and importance in human life.

Phenomenology: From Philosophy to Research Methodology

Phenomenology of practice is a research methodology that arose out of, and is based upon, phenomenological philosophy. Although they are not identical, the interconnection between phenomenology as a philosophy and phenomenology as a methodology is close and vital. Indeed, to understand the research methodology one needs to understand something of the phenomenological philosophy that underpins it. For the reader's ease, from hereon I use the term "phenomenology" when referring to both phenomenological philosophy and phenomenology as a research methodology, and differentiate the terms in those moments when they diverge.

Philosophers have used the term "phenomenology" since the mid-eighteenth century to denote a descriptive philosophical text—perhaps most famously Hegel's (1835/1952/1977) *Phenomenology of Spirit.* It was in the 1890s, however, that phenomenology became a distinct

philosophical project with the work of Edmund Husserl.[16] Husserl was interested in establishing a *first philosophy*: an indisputable objective fact that could provide the grounding upon which all forms of inquiry, including the sciences, could be based (Dreyfus & Wrathall, 2009; Marion, 2001/2002).[17] According to Husserl, our only certainty is that we experience our world—all else is without objective basis. Upon this single fact, Husserl argues, we may begin to rigorously understand our subjective experience of the world and create the basis upon which we can come to know the world objectively (Ladkin, 2005; Marion, 2001/2002). To that end, Husserl sought to describe phenomena as they immediately appear to human consciousness (Dreyfus & Wrathall, 2009; van Manen, 1990/1997/2007) or, to use the language of contemporary phenomenology, to describe them in their *givenness* (Marion, 2001/2002). By understanding how something immediately appears to consciousness, in all of its strange and innate meanings, we might determine its structures—that is, describe what makes it uniquely what it is as that particular phenomenon. Husserl's hope was that by understanding the structures of phenomena in consciousness, the structures of consciousness could be inferred since consciousness is always directed and never able to be conscious of itself.

Phenomenology is radical in its challenge to the Cartesian mind–body split. It requires that we recognize that we are always already in the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962/2006) and takes as its object of study human experience as it is lived pre-reflectively (van Manen, 2014). By "pre-reflective," I mean the direct and immediate experience of a phenomenon before we consciously think about or reflect on it. In the case of this study, I was interested in the instant, that particular moment, when someone saw an image and found it sublime. What happened leading up to the encounter? What was it like to see the image in that way? Was it a brief experience or did it linger? What did the individual think when it happened? How did s/he react? How did the sublimity of the image change the experience of the space the individual occupied? the person's relation to persons around them? sense of time? sense of his or her own body? How did the sublimity of the image change his or her experience of the image itself?

[16] Husserl is always described as "the father of phenomenology"; yet, like most projects, phenomenology "existed as a movement before arriving at complete awareness of itself as a philosophy" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962/2006, p. viii).

[17] Whether phenomenology can be a first philosophy is debated even among phenomenologists. Husserl believed it could, as does contemporary phenomenological philosopher Marion. Many others, however, do not.

What happened immediately after? I was interested in all these aspects of that single moment as it was lived through pre-reflectively—that is, before it was consciously thought about and interpreted.

The concept of pre-reflective experience is central to phenomenology because phenomenologists hold that our immediate, embodied, relational experience of the world contains a lived meaning that precedes any attempt on our part to explain it (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962/2006). This is because the world—with its things, its other people, its history, its cultures, and its events—exists for us before we think about it. We are firmly enmeshed in our world; we cannot escape it or think outside of it. In contrast to certain postmodern approaches, phenomenologists do not contend that we experience our world and then interpret it as meaningful. Rather, we believe that experience and lived meaning are intimately intertwined. Phenomenologists do acknowledge, however, that the meanings that inhere in our pre-reflective experience may be quickly covered over and even lost when our experience is theorized or otherwise abstracted. Such may be the risk with the sublime, wherein the confusing, complexity, messiness, and ambiguity of what just happened can be quickly ordered, made sensible, and therefore made acceptable and explainable by the application of a particular theory of the sublime. Phenomenology tries to resist this urge, however, by returning as closely as possible to the event as it is lived through, in an attempt to rediscover those lived meanings. Husserl's famous dictum, "return to the things themselves," was an exhortation of the need to return to these originary meanings. As Merleau-Ponty explains, "to return to things themselves is to return to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always speaks" (p. ix-x). Phenomenology's purpose then is to bring to light and begin to reflectively describe the original meanings embedded in our basic experience of the world, while knowing that any attempt to do this is always tentative, contingent, and never complete.

Central to Husserl's project was the description of phenomena without recourse to the language, ideas, and theories of other forms of inquiry, and without reliance on any assumptions (Dreyfus & Wrathall, 2009). While Husserl believed that phenomena and, by extension, the structures of consciousness could be fully described through the practice of phenomenology, many subsequent philosophers found this model problematic. Early on—indeed, beginning with

Martin Heidegger—it was recognized that any phenomenological description invariably brings in interpretation because to describe something requires that we use language (Gadamer, 1975/1989). Phenomenology that overtly accepts this position has been called *hermeneutic phenomenology,* a name that was shared for many years by the phenomenology of practice, which likewise recognizes the central role of language in any phenomenological study. Gadamer (1975/1989) writes, "[L]anguage is the universal medium in which understanding occurs. Understanding occurs in interpreting" (p. 390). Through the language used in the phenomenological description, interpretation begets understanding. A more recent limitation has been the acknowledgement by phenomenologists that, no matter the rigour of one's study, one can never complete an entire phenomenology, because even the simplest of phenomena invariably transcend our full understanding. This was recently described by Marion (2001/2002) as the *excess* of phenomena.

Following from Husserl's foundational work, phenomenological philosophy was further elaborated and revised by Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, Emmanuel Levinas, and Max Scheler (to name but a few), each of whom established what can be considered a particular phenomenological tradition (van Manen & Adams, 2010; van Manen, 2014).[18] Differences arose around particular interests and an ongoing questioning of what is foundational to human experience. For Husserl, it is consciousness, while for Heidegger, *being*. Merleau-Ponty focuses upon human *embodiment*, Sartre upon *existence*, and Levinas, *relationality*, to list but a few major phenomenological philosophers and their foci. Phenomenological philosophy was also taken up by many of those who have retrospectively been called "continental theorists," including Roland Barthes, Paul Ricoeur, and Hannah Arendt,. Some, like Barthes, undertook specific semiotic studies such as a phenomenology of the photograph (Barthes, 1980/1981), while others, like Arendt, merely incorporated phenomenological approaches and concerns into their work. Each philosophical articulation of phenomenology and each phenomenologically inspired text revealed a different facet of this complex philosophy. Although differences exist among them, each philosopher and writer—

[18] According to van Manen and Adams (2010) these include: transcendental phenomenology (Husserl); ontological phenomenology (Heidegger); hermeneutic phenomenology (Gadamer); existential phenomenology (Sartre); existential phenomenology with a focus on embodiment (Merleau-Ponty); radical linguistic phenomenology (Derrida and Kristeva); ethical phenomenology (Scheler); and phenomenology of otherness (Levinas).

both past and present—may be seen as having added something to the understanding of our basic experience of human existence. This enables researchers to read widely and draw upon a variety of phenomenological philosophers and writers who best speak to aspects emergent in their phenomena. For my study, philosophical inspiration was found in the texts of Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, Bachelard, Levinas, Marion, Henry, and Nancy, as well as the phenomenologically-informed writings of Barthes, Elkins, and Didi-Huberman. While this study is not a work of philosophy, it does—like all phenomenologies of practice—draw insights and inspiration from phenomenological philosophers and other phenomenological writers.

Phenomenology, as a philosophy, remains strong up to the present. However, beginning in the mid-twentieth century, the practice of phenomenology was taken up by a group of non-philosophers based in the Netherlands (Levering & van Manen, 2002; van Manen & Adams, 2010; van Manen, 2014). This group of practitioners and professionals would be retrospectively called "the Utrecht School."

The scholars of the Utrecht School adopted phenomenology because they saw in it a unique and revelatory way of exploring human experience. Surprisingly, they took a philosophy that is often dense and even highly abstract and reconceived of it as a research practice that could be immediately practical and relevant for understanding everyday life and what it means to be human (Levering & van Manen, 2002; van Manen, 2014). Although these various efforts drew directly upon and mimicked phenomenological philosophy in attitude (Levering & van Manen, 2002), approach, and at times technique, in moving beyond the limited concerns of pure philosophy, the members of the Utrecht School created what would come to be recognized as a new form of human science inquiry.[19] Despite their inventiveness, no member of the school ever reflected on their approach. Instead, phenomenology as a practice was learned through reading phenomenological texts, close and attentive observation of life, and being mentored, approaches that remain dominant in learning phenomenological research and writing to this day.

[19] It should be noted, however, that at times phenomenological philosophy and phenomenology as a research methodology can appear so similar that it can difficult to distinguish them.

Phenomenology as research methodology would only develop into a distinct, recognized research methodology with the increased acceptance and institutionalization of qualitative research, in general, towards the end of the twentieth century. Just as the various phenomenological philosophers had generated specific phenomenological traditions, so too did different phenomenological research methodologies develop as unique forms. Different phenomenological approaches often arose along disciplinary lines in accordance with which philosophy was conducted. For instance, Amadeo Giorgi sought to articulate a phenomenological research methodology for psychology by explicitly returning to and reconsidering Husserl's original texts. Max van Manen, however, drew upon the long human science tradition in Europe (van Manen & Adams 2010; van Manen, 2014), especially the interdisciplinary practices of the Utrecht School, to create the non-discipline specific but practice-oriented research methodology, the phenomenology of practice. Van Manen (2014) explains:

> Phenomenology of practice not only wants to be sensitive to the concerns of professional practices in professional fields, but also to the personal and social practices of everyday living…. [P]henomenology of practice is sensitive to the realization that life as we live and experience it is not only rational and logical, and thus in part transparent to reflection—it is also subtle, enigmatic, contradictory, mysterious, inexhaustible, and saturated with existential and transcendent meanings that can only be accessed through poetic, aesthetic, and ethical means and languages. (p. 213)

Phenomenology of practice is open and accommodating to phenomena, such as the experience of images that evoke the sublime, that cross disciplinary boundaries and arise in different arenas of life.

The Practice of Phenomenology: Methods for Studying the Sublime when Evoked by an Image

> Hermeneutic phenomenology is a method of abstemious reflection on the basic structures of the lived experience of human existence.
>
> – Max van Manen (2014), *Phenomenology of Practice,* p. 26.

The purpose of phenomenology is to reflect upon pre-reflective experience (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962/2006) in order to facilitate, in both researcher and reader, an attentive, thoughtful, awareness of our basic experience of the world through the creation of a rich, evocative text (van Manen, 1990/1997/2007; 2014). For a study of the sublime when evoked by an image, this means sensitively describing what it is like to experience *from the inside*, in all of its experiential complexity and ambiguity, without recourse to theory, explanation, or abstraction. This can prove challenging for a phenomenon that has been theorized as much as the sublime has been. It can be difficult for researchers to extricate their thinking from theory. In some ways, we might say that scholars of the sublime are more comfortable with its theory than its phenomenality.

To circumvent the seductive draw and destructive power of theory, phenomenological researchers deliberately only use specific, concrete experiential material as the basis for their studies. All other material may be drawn upon to inform their work, but one always begins with what is found in the descriptions of the experience and, further, one always returns to those accounts to ground all claims. The ultimate goal of phenomenologically reflecting upon this experiential material is not just to describe the phenomenon but also to uncover and lift up so as to illuminate those potential features that make a phenomenon uniquely what it is. We seek to uncover a phenomenon's *eidos* (van Manen, 2014).

Objectively speaking, phenomenology is simple in purpose. A phenomenological study does not generate theory, it does not analyze according to a framework, nor does it create a map of understanding. It merely seeks to evocatively and sensitively describe a phenomenon as it is experienced in order to show what makes it what it is and not something else. Phenomenology

is also apparently simple in that it has no prescription as to how a study should be undertaken.[20] Phenomenology has no set method (van Manen, 2014). In fact, one must discover anew with each project the most appropriate means of conducting one's particular phenomenology (van Manen, 1990/1997/2007; 2014). One uses what works best for one's particular topic. But despite—or perhaps because of—this apparent simplicity, phenomenology is a complex practice that draws upon philosophical, philological, and human science methods (van Manen, 2014).

The "data": Lived experience descriptions, anecdotes, literature, film, and of course images. In order to undertake a phenomenological study, whether of the sublime or any other phenomenon, phenomenology always begins with and constantly returns to concrete, specific examples of a phenomenon. "The best materials… are direct descriptions of the experience, rather than accounts about the experience" (van Manen, 2014, p. 299). Having pre-reflective experiential material to work with, according to van Manen (2014), is one of two pre-conditions for a phenomenological study's success—the other being the guiding phenomenological question itself.

Pre-reflective experiential material serves as the "data" in any phenomenological study, and it may be collected in a variety of ways. Often, the first experiential description collected in a phenomenological study is the researcher's own. Researchers will try to descriptively write their experience, as I have done in Chapter 1. This serves a three-fold purpose. First, it makes explicit the origin of the researcher's interest in the phenomenon. Second, by writing it down, it enables the researcher to step back and consider the experience in order to see how it frames, limits, or biases the researcher's thinking about the phenomenon. With this awareness, the researcher may be able to approach collecting other experiential description with a more open mind. Finally, the practice of describing one's own experience makes the researcher personally aware of the difficulty participants can have in describing, rather than recounting, their experiences.

[20] Nevertheless, researchers remain obliged to ensure they are meeting their institution's requirements for ethical conduct.

For my study of the sublime when evoked by an image, accounts were collected from individuals who self-identified as having the experience. Accounts were collected through one-to-one interviews, having participants write about their experience, and from published materials, both factual accounts (as found in biographies and diaries) and fictional accounts (as found in novels). As well, I drew upon experiences of the sublime as depicted in film, photography, and painting. In addition to these various experiential descriptions, I also collected and considered the images that sparked the experience of sublimity for my participants.

Accounts were collected over a five-year period from June 2009 to June 2014. Participants were recruited through word-of-mouth. All participants, having been informed as to the nature of my study, provided informed consent and were given the option of reading and providing feedback on my initial analysis and treatment of their accounts (see: Appendices A-E for documents used during the data collection process). Seven face-to-face interviews were conducted and another eight individuals chose to write about their experiences. In all cases, copies of the images that evoked their response were collected. Most interviewees recounted more than one incident of the sublime evoked by an image. People who offered written accounts only related one incident each. Interviews were transcribed, then both transcripts and written accounts were culled of interpretations, explanations, and other non-experiential material, leaving only lived experience descriptions (LEDs). During the writing of the dissertation, LEDs were revised into anecdotes to highlight select aspects of each experience. Participants' anecdotes are presented in italicized block quotes. These data were supplemented with anecdotes collected for a smaller, in-class study of the sublime in art (see: Goble, 2008). As noted above, I also collected and considered previously published examples, such as from Stendhal's experience in Florence, descriptions given in novels (e.g., *Middlemarch*), and depictions in film (e.g., *The Stendhal Syndrome*). Further insight into the experiences of the sublime were drawn from general depictions of the sublime, such as Philip James De Loutherbourg's *An Avalanche in the Alps* (1803), and insight into the power of images was explored through considering highly evocative (and sometimes sublime) images, such as the *Lingchi* photographs. Not all of the accounts given by participants or gathered otherwise appear wholly or in part in this dissertation; all, however, have informed this study.

The "analysis": Phenomenological reflection using philosophical and human science methods. Phenomenological researchers wish to access and lift up the original meanings contained in our pre-reflective lived experience. These meanings, however, may be taken so for granted that they disappear from awareness. Van Manen (2014) explains:

> Normally we rarely reflect on the living sensibilities of our experiences, since we already experience the meanings immanent in our everyday practices through our bodies, language, habits, things, social interactions, and physical environments. Phenomenology is the method to break through this taken-for-grantedness and get to the meaning structures of our experiences. (p. 215)

Access is gained through employing "the reduction," which comprises two opposing movements: the *epoché* and the reduction proper. The *epoché*, also historically called *bracketing*, involves an active suspension of one's beliefs or assumptions about the phenomenon, while the reduction proper is the appearance of the phenomenon that arises in the space opened by the *epoché* (Ladkin, 2005; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962/2006; van Manen, 2014). Suspending what we think we know to be true about a phenomenon is important in phenomenology because assumptions, beliefs, and even "common sense" can cover over important meaning. "Being the presupposed basis of any thought, they [assumptions and common sense] are taken for granted, and go unnoticed, and ... in order to arouse them and bring them to view, we have to suspend for a moment our recognition of them" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962/2006, p. xv). With their suspension, we may momentarily perceive what they normally hide. The reduction is employed so that the phenomenon's *eidos,* its unique aspects, may be intuited. In fact, Marion asserts (2001/2002) that it is only through rigorously using the reduction that the *givenness* of the phenomenon is revealed and any certainty about phenomenon achieved:

> According to phenomenology, absolute certitude resides in the affectedness of consciousness by lived experiences from every origin, not only, or even entirely, by thought of self, on the express condition, nevertheless, that these lived experiences accomplish a givenness—that they give themselves completely and irremediably and, in certain cases, that they also engage

> intentional objects on each occasion involved. It is thus every lived experience (and possibly the intentional object) that, if it gives itself according to a reduction, is confirmed absolutely. (p. 20)

Van Manen (2014) identifies various *epoché*-reductions and reductions proper that may be employed singularly, but more often simultaneously, in a phenomenological study. Each, he argues, serves as a means to open oneself as a researcher and one's readers to the phenomenon as it is lived. They are what ground and guide the phenomenological reflection—that component of the project that other researchers routinely call "analysis."

The heuristic epoché-reduction (wonder) is the awakening of true wonder about the phenomenon. Although research projects, like my own study of the sublime when evoked by an image, may arise from a gap in or a question that arises from the existing literature, the driving force of any phenomenological study is to evoke and maintain a genuine wondering attitude towards what the phenomenon is studying. We conduct phenomenological studies not to find the answer to a specific question or to solve a puzzle, but rather to recover and maintain an thoughtful awareness of how truly strange the objects of our existence may be if we choose to look closely. Van Manen (2014) describes wonder as "the motive in human science inquiry" (p. 223). It is what compels researchers, like myself, to look at a phenomenon closely and see it as if they are encountering it for the first time. It is perceiving in the givenness of the phenomenon its strange and unique contours. In the moment of the heuristic *epoché*-reduction, researchers find themselves asking question like: isn't it strange how someone, seeing an image on the street, will find it so moving that she suddenly stops whatever she is doing and will stand there for hours, with everything else no longer seeming important? And isn't it odd that how, that the same person may go back the next day and may find the same image to be banal? These questions are asked, not looking to answer why? But to consider *what* is really happening here. Wonder is likewise what engages the reader of a phenomenological text with similar questions. When evoked, it causes readers to step outside of their taken-for-granted understanding of a phenomenon and be moved to similarly wonder "what *is* this thing?" and to keep reading in hopes of learning more.

The hermeneutic epoché-reduction (openness) is the constant questioning of one's own suppositions and preferences, as well as the critical self-reflection about one's phenomenological analysis. Complete freedom of one's beliefs and feelings is never possible; therefore, a constant interrogation of them may prevent the closing down of understanding. One must constantly question what one is assuming and what "preunderstandings" appear in one's work. In my own study, there were multiple, layered assumptions and unspoken wishes I had about the sublime due, in no small part, to the Romantic sublime. For instance, I wanted the sublime to be uniquely individual, an absolutely singular experience with an image in someone's life. Similarly, I wanted the sublime to be a positive experience. Both assumptions had to be challenged. I discovered an instance where the same image was sublime for many individuals and, further, if I presented the image in a particular way, the sublime could be deliberately evoked. I also had to open myself to the possibility that the sublime may be a terrible experience for some individuals. It can harm. Recognizing my assumptions made me think, "okay, so what if it isn't…? what appears then?" I also had to challenge my initial reflections about the sublime; for instance, how it manifests in the world. Because very few single images evoke the sublime for everyone who sees them, it is tempting to conclude that the sublime is some type of emotion or response. This was my first impression, supported by previous writing on the sublime. But I had to question this. Looking at individual descriptions of sublime encounters, it seemed as if the sublime was very much a quality of that particular picture at that particular time. Perhaps it is like van den Berg's (1972) description of time, as appearing through the objects of our world. But, then again, does it?

For van Manen (2014), such questioning of oneself and one's phenomenon is "a search for genuine openness in one's conversational relation with the phenomenon" (p. 224). Due, in part, to the experiential *epoché*-reduction a phenomenon can endlessly unfold. One must constantly question oneself, but this questioning also appears in one's text and can endlessly expand it.

The experiential epoché-reduction (concreteness) consists of choosing only to address "concrete experiential facticities" (van Manen, 2014, p. 225). A researcher must not only set aside the theories and beliefs one has, but must also resist the human movement towards

abstraction. Having pre-reflective experiential material to reflect upon greatly aids in achieving this *epoché*-reduction. Even still, the phenomenologist must constantly be aware of and pull back from the common urge in research to move towards generalities. In the case of my study, this involved carefully removing from the lived experience descriptions of sublimity the interpretations that were woven throughout. It was also achieved through consciously maintaining close relation to the experiential materials collected. The question "What is this?" was always posed to a specific aspect of a concrete description of a sublime encounter with an image. Moreover, I always sought to return to these concrete aspects in my reflections. In the process of writing and rewriting, those moments that seemed to diverge too far from experience were removed. The meaning that arose from the edited text, then, was more likely to have originated out of the pre-reflective experience itself, rather than having been imposed from above. This resulted in some surprising discoveries. One such revelation was that, with the sublime, an image comes alive; it seems to transcend its muteness, silence, and stillness. Even though it does not physically move or speak, we may experience it as if it does.

The methodological epoché-reduction (approach) is being open to exploring, experimenting, and eventually discovering the method that works best for conducting a phenomenological study of a given subject. This applies to both how a researcher locates experiential material and how she reflects upon that material in her text to effectively, evocatively illuminate the phenomenon's lived meanings. This may involve multiple different attempts with varying success, as was the case in my study. Initially, I sought to gather accounts through in-person interviews and yet that material proved so dispersed throughout the conversation that I would spend hours recollecting it into a coherent account. As the project proceeded, I increasingly relied upon written accounts based on specific directions I gave to participants, as well as using previously published accounts. Similarly, I struggled through various methods of reflection. I reflected on the phenomenon using the phenomenological existentials of body, time, space, relation, and things (van Manen, 1990/1997/2007; 2014). These revealed some dimensions of the sublime as evoked by an image, but they did not seem *inherent* to the phenomenon. I then turned to macro-thematic readings (van Manen, 2014), asking of the entire account before me, "What is this about? What is happening here?" While this approach proved effective for a small number of anecdotes, as my dissertation proceeded

and I considered them in greater numbers, the approach proved less fruitful. Finally, I resorted to line-by-line thematic reading of select well-written, highly descriptive accounts. This revealed even further depths to the phenomenon. At one point, I even began reflecting on the accounts through a process of recreating the images that participants spoke of in the form of woodcuts. The process of exploration and discovery extended even to the very structure of my text. Its first incarnation had to be entirely rewritten and reorganized—including removing reproductions of the woodcuts—because, as a whole, it distanced the reader rather than brought them into the experience. Van Manen (2014) notes,

> The phenomenological challenged is to create a text that is in some sense iconic in its entirety. This also means that the writer needs to become aware of the potential effects of the text on different readers. (p. 227)

To provide an alternate opinion of my work, through the study I engaged a group of fellow graduate students conducting phenomenological studies to read and comment on my drafts. They have provided three sets of good phenomenological eyes and their comments have been invaluable in improving the power of my text.

The eidetic reduction (eidos or whatness) is the first of the reductions proper (as opposed to the *epoché*-reductions) identified by van Manen (2014). It is, perhaps, the most classical phenomenological reduction and was first proposed by Husserl. The eidetic reduction is the process of identifying what makes a phenomenon unique by comparing it with similar phenomena or by slightly varying the phenomenon in order to determine at what point it ceases to be what it is. These comparisons form the basis of much of the study that follows. Each chapter is oriented around a paradox that may appear in the sublime and each of the polarities is considered singly and as it appears with its opposite in the sublime. Smaller, more focused comparisons have been used throughout the text. For instance, the experience of the sublime is directly compared with a religious experience in order to identify their differences and similarities. Traditionally, it is through seeing differences revealed by the eidetic reduction that phenomenologists begin to understand the eidetic (or "essential") structure of a phenomenon; that is, those features that makes it unique by virtue of comparison with all other phenomena.

The ontological reduction (ways of being) is the attempt to uncover the mode of being for a given phenomenon. This mode of being is the phenomenon's being in the world. Although it is impossible to summarize succinctly the sublime's mode of being, one aspect that was revealed through the course of this study was its paradoxicality. The sublime is neither mere awe nor mere terror. It is neither mere horror nor mere delight. It is always both. The sublime seems to appear as the holding-together of opposites. Indeed, this mode of being seemed so central to the phenomenon of the sublime that my dissertation is organized around these paradoxes. They alone seemed the only way in which the lived phenomenon could begin to become comprehensible, suggesting that the sublime's being as paradox may also be a way of understanding the world.

The ethical reduction (alterity) is the discovery of the appeal of the other *as* other and different from us in the world. While most evident in phenomenologies of subjects inherently relational (e.g., the pedagogical relation), the ethical reduction may also appear between ourselves and objects such as an image that evokes the sublime. In this study, the image in its sublimity appears as entirely unique, unlike any other image one has encountered. The image may even take on the quality of being almost human-like. It can appeal to us with the same demand as Levinas' face of the other.

The radical reduction (self-givenness) is the revelation of how a phenomenon *gives* itself, as opposed to what is experienced (van Manen, 2014). Based upon the philosophy of Jean-Luc Marion, the radical reduction moves from a concern about *what* is experienced by she-who-experiences to *how* a phenomenon gives itself. While I did not deliberately try to conduct this reduction, throughout the study my work kept leading me back to Marion's writing. Retrospectively, what becomes evident is that the what-ness of the sublime is only comprehensible because it is revealed through *how* the sublime fundamentally gives itself: through paradox.

The original reduction (Inception or originary meaning) is a flash of insight about one's phenomenon that reveals an originary truth (van Manen, 2014). Based on Heidegger's philosophy, the original reduction is thought to go back to the origins of meaning. "In the flash of insight we not only gain a phenomenological understanding of some object or thing, we also

gain an original sight of ourselves as humans" (van Manen, 2014, p. 235). Unlike the other reductions proper and the various *epoché*-reductions, the original reduction cannot be pursued; it must find us. As phenomenologists, we may only be open and wait for it. Van Manen explains how "inception does not depend on my creative agency; rather, an inceptual thought may happen to me as a gift, a grace—an event that I could neither plan nor foresee" (p. 236). In this study, there were many discoveries but only two key insights that could be considered moments of the original reduction. They are both found in the concluding chapter of this text. I leave it to you, my readers, to recognize them.

The text: Phenomenological research is phenomenological writing. In a very concrete sense, phenomenological research is phenomenological writing and rewriting and rewriting again (van Manen, 1990/1997/2007; 2014). One may interview individuals, collect other accounts, and even pour over anecdotes in search of themes, noting what seem to be variant and invariant aspects, but until one begins to write, one has not yet started doing phenomenology. Phenomenological reflections only originate in the act of writing or reading writing, making the text both the process and the product of phenomenology. Given the text's centrality to the phenomenological project, one may understand the importance of writing. As one conducts a phenomenology, one must consider the choice of language to be used, write, then reconsider the text and rewrite and revise in a search to come ever closer to lived meaning of the phenomenon. Indeed, it is through a long, arduous working and reworking of one's language that a phenomenological study comes into being.

In phenomenological texts, researchers rigorously describe, explore, and attempt to re-evoke the pre-reflective experience. However, unlike many other research texts, phenomenological texts also actively attend to their affective qualities: they show as well as tell. To use Gumbrecht's (2004) distinction, they involve both "presence effects" and "meaning effects," each reinforcing the other. Ideally, the aesthetic dimension and the meaning of the text become inseparable. The unique nature of phenomenological texts has been described as poetic. According to Henriksson and Saevi (2009), "the intention of a phenomenologist is to have the reader receive and respond to the otherwise concealed meaning of the lived experience" (p. 38). With a well-written phenomenological text, "we feel addressed by the experience" (p. 38) that

is *presented*, not *represented*, to us. "The vocation, or call, of a text is sensed as an implicit, felt understanding that is non-cognitive as well as cognitive, sensed as well as reflected" (pp. 38–39). For Buytendijk, this intuitive recognition is literally embodied in the *phenomenological nod* (in van Manen, 1990/1997/2007).

Van Manen (2014) identifies various philological methods that may be employed to strengthen a phenomenological text—to make it speak. Some are classical rhetorical devices; others are specific to phenomenology and other poetic, powerful texts. These include:

The revocative method, which is to create a lived-throughness quality in the text (p. 241). The reader should experience the phenomenon from the inside, as if he or she were directly experiencing it but with a reflective sensitivity.

The evocative method is the evocation of nearness (p. 249). Readers should experience a form of recognition in reading the text. Using anecdotes assists in both ground the text in the concrete and also making the text recognizable to the reader who responds by saying "this could be me."

The invocative method is the classical rhetorical practice of intensifying one's text. When highly intensified, the text becomes iconic and each word is essential to its overall meaning. One might say, the language becomes "deeply embedded" as with poetry (van Manen, 1990/1997/2007; 2014).

The convocative method refers to the ability of the text to speak deeply and meaningfully to its reader. According to van Manen (2014), strong phenomenological texts have a pathic power (p. 267). The reader gains insight into what it means to be human and, yet, the text's meaning is not easily summarizable.

The provocative method is the ethical impact of the text (van Manen, 2014). Strong phenomenological texts should induce a sensitive and thoughtful awareness of one's world. It should raise questions about how one should be, how one should respond, and what one should do. Rather than distancing the reader from the phenomenon as existing in the world—standing

back to consider it—the text should draw the reader attentively, reflectively closer to his or her being in the world.

Attention to language used and its vocative effects have a very specific purpose in phenomenology, for it is through the language of the text that one is opened to the phenomenon. In opening oneself to a phenomenon through the act of reading or writing phenomenological texts, one may come to embody the phenomenological attitude. For many philosophers and phenomenological researchers, phenomenology cannot be understood as a mere philosophical project, only a methodological approach, or even just a text. It is a way of being in the world, an attitude towards the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962/2006; van Manen, 1990/1997/2007) marked by *attentiveness, wonder, awareness,* and the "will to seize the meaning of the world or of history as that meaning comes into being" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962/2006, p. xxiv).

That said, according to van Manen (2014), phenomenological texts can be evaluated on very specific criteria. These should guide both the reader and a researcher in his or her rewriting. I encourage my readers to carefully note these in order to evaluate the chapters that follow:

- *Heuristic Questioning:* Does the text induce a genuine wonder attitude towards the phenomenon? (p. 355)
- *Descriptive Richness:* Is it descriptively rich with experiential material? (p. 355)
- *Interpretive Depth:* Does its insights extend beyond the given, everyday understandings of the phenomenon? (p. 356)
- *Distinctive Rigor:* Is the text strongly oriented to the phenomenon at hand? And is it marked by a constant questioning of it? (p. 356)
- *Strong and Addressive Meaning:* Is the language of the text evocative and strongly embedded? (p. 356)
- *Experiential Awakening:* Does the text cause a pre-reflective recognition? (p. 356)
- *Inceptual Epiphany:* Does the text reveal something deeper about what it means to be human? (p. 356)

If a reader can answer "yes" to each of these questions, the text may be considered a valid phenomenological text.

A Unique Challenge for a Phenomenological Study Involving Images

I have covered the philosophical basis of the phenomenology of practice, as well as addressed the base material used, its reflective approaches, and the ultimate importance of the text. And yet, now arises the question, given the subject of this study: How does one study images phenomenologically? Given that the phenomenology of practice is a form of hermeneutic phenomenology, those who use this method must consider both the experience of the phenomenon and the meanings embedded in that experience. However, when a phenomenon involves images, there is the additional question of what do with those particular images? With images, not only does someone's experience of the image carry meaning (the sublime), so too does the object of that experience (the image). Can I, and should I, account for the image as an entity unto itself?

Previous phenomenological studies offer no clear guidance. Howard's (2010) phenomenology of reading little addresses the content of the read text. Likewise, Marion's (2004) phenomenology of perspective in painting minimally addresses any specific image, but rather focuses upon the phenomenon of seeing perspective on *and in* a two-dimensional surface. Marion's revelations are, at times, astounding and may leave us wondering if exploring the images' content would have merely confused or diffused the power of his study. Heidegger's (1971) famous exploration of Vincent van Gogh's painting of peasant shoes, however, proves the exact opposite. His phenomenological exploration would have been impossible without explicitly taking up the painting's content. Likewise, Barthes' (1980/1981) phenomenology of the photograph suggests that one cannot genuinely understand the photograph if one does not take into account its content and the viewer's relationship to it. According to Barthes, a phenomenology of the photograph without including this dimension is an inadequate phenomenology. However, to focus on the content of an image runs the risk of delving into an exclusively hermeneutic study, such as is commonly found in art history.

But perhaps it is art history's dominance over how we think about images and think about studying images that is the source of my angst. Common contemporary art historical practices suggest that I must choose between *interpreting* the image based on its visible signs and exploring the human experience of the image (whether its creation or its viewing). The

former is concerned with the image's *representation*, the latter, its *presentation*. And the two appear to have entirely different foci: the first is found through considering the image's visible features and human understanding of those features over time; the second, through the individual's personal experience of seeing the image as an object. Moreover, the first presents itself as a study in hermeneutics, the second as a topic for phenomenological exploration. This assumed choice is so entrenched that the options are increasingly being split along disciplinary lines: art history retaining dominance over the study of images' representation, while the question of the experience of the image—including art images—is increasingly perceived as being the purview of visual and culture studies.

However, is this an actual distinction or only an assumed one? Experience and interpretation are closely interwoven with the phenomenon of an image. Indeed, for something to be an image it must both present something and represent something or, at very least, have a form of content and it must be seen. While one can choose to study the phenomenon of seeing an image (e.g., seeing perspective [Marion]) or the phenomenon of the content of the image (e.g., interpreting van Gogh's shoes [Heidegger]), to fully understand the phenomenon *of encountering an image*, one needs to include both. For Didi-Huberman (1990/2005), these two, in fact, are not merely complementary, they are interdependent. According to Didi-Huberman, the contemporary approach to images is an "incomplete semiology." The alternative Didi-Huberman offers is an approach

> based on the general hypothesis that the efficacy of these images is not due solely to the transmission of knowledge—visible, legible, or invisible—but that, on the contrary, their efficacy operates constantly in the intertwinings, even the imbroglio, of transmitted and dismantled knowledges, of produced and transformed not-knowledges. (p. 16)

Specifically, Didi-Huberman argues that when considering images one must account for the visual as well as the visible.

> [The visual] is not *visible* in the sense of an object that is displayed or outlined; but neither is it invisible, for it strikes our eye, and even does more than that. It

is material…. It is an essential and massive component of the work's pictorial presentation. (p. 17)

The effect of the visual, for Didi-Huberman, is that it creates a *symptom,* "the suddenly manifested knot of an arborescence of associations or conflicting meanings" (p. 19). It is the aesthetic presentation of an image beyond but related to the image's content. Any consideration of a phenomenon involving images that evoke the sublime must therefore allow and account for the "associations or conflicting meanings" that, for instance, arise between the image's content and someone's sublime experience of it.

Didi-Huberman's approach offers a third way to conduct a phenomenology of an image; an approach I have adopted in this study. In the phenomenon of encountering an image, viewer and viewed are inseparably entwined and mutually co-constituted. This may seem unusual or even strange to some readers, and yet it seems to re-invoke an earlier understanding of the image, one that has roots in the phenomenological writing of Raymond Klibansky and the art historical approach of Aby Warburg.

Why Phenomenology? A Reiteration

Given the difficulties posed by a subject (the sublime) that refuses definition, the practical issues of conducting a phenomenological study, and a limitation (evoked by an image) that contains its own challenges, a reader might wonder if an easier route is possible. I want to reiterate that I do not choose my topic or my methodology lightly or randomly. My choice of topic is driven by my own experience and a long-standing, puzzling question about our relationship to images. My choice of methodology, in turn, is driven by the apparent failure, thus far, of our philosophical and theoretical explanations to generate understanding of the sublime. To avoid adding further noise to an already confused discourse, I wish to return to its most basic element: the sublime as a lived experience created by an encounter with an image. My choice is also driven by a serious gap in the sublime's own history. Despite the hundreds of texts and thousands of articles concerning the sublime, there exist few phenomenological explorations of it, and those that exist have considerable gaps (see: Chapter 2).

I cannot help but wonder what might be revealed about the sublime if an in-depth phenomenological research study guided by the principles of phenomenology of practice were undertaken. Such a work would undoubtedly contribute to our evolving understanding of the sublime. Considering the state of the literature and our ongoing lack of understanding of the phenomenon, it seems both necessary and overdue. And I am not alone in this observation. The need for such a study at this juncture in history has been articulated by even the least phenomenological, most analytic of contemporary scholars of the sublime: Guy Sircello. For Sircello (1993), an exploration of the "natural core" or essence (to use a phenomenological term) of the sublime is urgently needed as "this 'natural core' will manifest what sublime experience at bottom has to tell us—if anything at all—either about the world or about ourselves" (p. 542).

Sircello's assertion of the need for a phenomenology of the sublime contains an important caveat that should not be avoided or glossed over, even at this early stage. It is possible that exploring the lived experience of the sublime may, in fact, reveal nothing at all. In asking, *what is the lived experience of the sublime, specifically when it is evoked by an image?* it is very well possible that I will find nothing of value. But such is the danger with all research, and to stop before one begins is to ensure that one discovers nothing.

Further Implications for a Phenomenology of the Sublime Evoked by an Image

Beyond addressing a gap in the philosophical history of the sublime, to explore the sublime phenomenologically may also have implications for the phenomenological project itself. In a reflexive capacity, such a study has the capacity to reveal how the sublime might inform contemporary phenomenological philosophy. According to Nancy (1993a), our entire aesthetic tradition has revolved around the *aesthetic as question*, specifically the *sensible presentation as question* (p. 1). That is, rather than being concerned with the development and evolution of the form and content of art (i.e., its *re*presentation), which is how art history and aesthetics are normally conceived, the history of art has centred upon the appearance or "presentation" of art objects.

> Representation is articulated in terms of conformity and signification. But presentation puts into play the event and the explosion of an appearing and disappearing which, considered in themselves, cannot conform to or signify anything. This explosive event is what the tradition passes on to us in the names of beauty and/or sublimity. (Nancy, 1993a, p. 2)

Understanding this "explosive event"—that is, what makes art appear as art, its *eidos*—is essential. It not only has implications for art, including the possibility of any future art (Nancy, 1993b) and other presentative forms (such as the image), it also has implications for phenomenological philosophy. If the sublime is the *offering* that makes presentation possible, as Nancy claims,[21] it directly relates to contemporary French phenomenological interest in the *givenness* of phenomena (Marion, 2008). "The question of phenomenology… is no longer concerned with the phenomena but the mode of their givenness, their phenomenality, not with what appears but with appearing" (Henry, 1990/2008, p. 2). And the *appearing* made possible by the *offering* of the sublime is not limited to the appearance or phenomenality of art. Nancy (1993a) writes:

> The question of presentation is the question of what is at play at the limit of the essence: thus, at the limit of what is more "essential" to art than its essence as "art" itself, just as the sublime is more "essential" to beauty than the very essence of the beautiful. It is also therefore a matter of something that overflows art in art itself, or of something that overflows out of art, and puts into communication or contact all instances of presentation. (p. 2)

A phenomenology of the sublime when evoked by an image may therefore serve to illuminate the *givenness* and *excess* of all phenomena; if one will, it can serve as a non-theological counterpart to Marion's phenomenology of revelation.[22] As Nancy (1993a) notes, "the question of presentation [which is the basic question of the sublime] is, in fact, nothing other than the

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[21] "But at the limit of art there is the gesture of the offering: the gesture that offers art and the gesture through which art itself reaches, touches upon, and interferes with its limit" (Nancy, 1993b, p. 52).

[22] It is interesting to note that Marion has applied his phenomenology of revelation to the "appearance" of the image, that is, not what it looks like but how it comes to be visible (2004).

question of existence as such. If you like: the question of being in the world" (p. 2). Such a phenomenology could be seen as a return to the purpose of phenomenology as proposed by Husserl: a call to return to the wonder of the lived world, which is "bound up with revelation and manifestation" (Reynolds, 2008, p. 262). Therefore, a phenomenology of the sublime has the potential to inform our understanding of presentation and phenomenality (of art, images, and otherwise), the current project or "questions" of phenomenology (Henry, 1990/2008), and possibly even of being-in-the-world (Nancy, 1993a).

Moby-Dick: A Suitable Metaphor for Conducting a Phenomenological Study of the Sublime when Evoked by an Image

Finally, I want to end with a discussion of the metaphor that has guided much of this project. I stumbled across it during my first serious attempt to reflect on the images that had evoked my participants' responses. By coincidence, at the same time, I was reading Herman Melville's (1851/2000) *Moby-Dick* in an attempt to fill a gap in my knowledge about the sublime in literature.

Melville's novel *Moby-Dick* tells the story of the final expedition of the whaling ship *Pequod* from the perspective of a lowly sailor named Ishmael. Leading the expedition is Captain Ahab, a man obsessed with finding and killing a whale that had previously maimed him, the famous "Moby Dick." More than merely recounting this story, however, the book also provides a comprehensive description of whales, whaling, and all things associated with both.

Moby-Dick is a literary and philosophical touchstone in the debate about the meaning of the sublime. It is readily evident that the infamous whale is sublime to the narrator. Early on in the book, we see one such description:

> Aside from those more obvious considerations touching Moby Dick, which could not but occasionally awaken in any man's soul some alarm, there was another thought, or rather vague, nameless horror concerning him, which at times by its intensity completely overpowered all the rest; and yet so mystical

> and well nigh ineffable was it, that I almost despair of putting it in a comprehensible form. (p. 272)

While Melville's description of the whale touches on many aspects of the historical understanding of the sublime, I do not invoke the book in order to join in the ongoing literary debate about *Moby-Dick* and the sublime. Rather I want to explore how the *Pequod*'s search for the white whale serves as a useful metaphor for someone, like myself, phenomenologically researching the sublime.[23] This should not be viewed as a simple and novel association. Studying the sublime can be as elusive, terrifying, and all-consuming as Moby Dick himself.[24]

The sublime, from all (historical) accounts, is a highly recognizable experience. Much like the sailors who saw Moby Dick, those who have encountered the sublime seem to recognize it. And, like Moby Dick, the sublime can appear unexpectedly and, as an idea, carries great mythic weight. As a phenomenological researcher of the sublime, I have chosen to rely on following the accounts of others, both published and not, in order to search out the sublime. Like mad Ahab tracking his white whale by mapping where it has been previously encountered, I hope that through exploring the accounts of others, I may somehow discover the sublime. But despite the accounts given by others to guide my study, I continuously run the risk of never finding the object of my search for, like Moby Dick, the sublime seems to be constantly moving. Where it appears one moment, it is not guaranteed to be found the next. This seems readily evident from the literature. And I recognize that my endeavour to phenomenologically articulate the sublimity of an image relies on both perseverance and a good deal of chance. The sublime seems a slippery phenomenon, much more so than many other, more concrete, subjects of study—just when I think I may have a hold of the sublime, it slips from my fingers. This is not just true of my attempted phenomenological description of it; it seems to be an essential part of the phenomenon itself. Like a whale's movement through the depths of the ocean, the sublime is not a static, concrete thing to which, from above, I can readily point and say with any confidence to you my reader, "you will certainly find it there, in that account of seeing that

[23] Rather strangely, parts of the text—particularly the chapter "The Whiteness of the Whale"—seem markedly similar to phenomenological writing.

[24] I am not the only one to find this connection. Rudd Welten (2011) proposed the possibility of a phenomenology of the sublime using *Moby-Dick*.

picture." To be able to do so would surely require that I kill my subject, make it inert and unchanging. And is this not something philosophers of the sublime have done throughout history? Indeed, I find that our historical attempt to philosophically "hunt down" and clearly define the sublime resonates with the rampant over-fishing of the whale population that arose alongside our industrial and scientific revolutions. As Melville writes, we cannot understand a phenomenon from simply studying its corpse.

> How vain and foolish, then, thought I, for timid untravelled man to try to comprehend aright this wondrous whale, by merely poring over his dead attenuated skeleton, stretched in this peaceful wood. No. Only in the heart of quickest perils; only when within the eddyings of his angry flukes; only on the profound unbounded sea, can the fully invested whale be truly and livingly found out. (p. 652)

Similarly, I suspect that it is only in the midst of the sublime as it appears in lived experience—in the ocean *eddies* created by its *flukes,* the reverberations left by its appearance as an experience—that we may begin to discern something of its wondrous, complex shape.

Given our history of the sublime, the prudent course of action for a contemporary researcher seems not to capture a specimen that we subsequently dissect with a scientific eye in order to "understand it," but to foster an attitude of caring, attentiveness, and wonder for this strange phenomenon, and allow it to be as it is when it is encountered living in the world. I would like to think that a phenomenological study of the sublime is a move in this direction; a move towards reviving this phenomenon and allowing it, once more, to emerge as it is in all of its mystery. I firmly believe that the sublime is a part of our being in the world as humans, an experience we may or may not personally encounter, but one which I hope my text enables you, my readers, to recognize and, perhaps, enables me to re-encounter myself.

I, therefore, have recognized the importance of moving forward carefully in the course of my study and the strong possibility that good leads will be false starts. The sublime, like Moby Dick, is troublesome to glimpse, much less to see in its fullness. Just as you think you have found it, it can knock over your boat, slip away beneath the waves, and leave you floating

in the ocean. In the course of my travels in this inquiry, I have found myself often floundering after the sublime has momentarily arisen before my eyes and, so appearing, caused me to lose my moorings just as it slips from sight. These moments are both exhilarating and dispiriting. Therefore, as I have studied and continue to study the sublime when evoked by an image, I continuously ask myself, who do I choose to be: Ahab or Ishmael? a wounded and fanatic sailor doomed to be destroyed by the object of my search? or an awestruck and, at times, bumbling chronicler of something that may forever elude me? At the end of this text, I hope that the first line of *Moby-Dick* reverberates as much for you as it now does for me, for as my study progressed and continues to progress I find ever more veracity in Ishmael's lament:

> The more I consider this mighty tail, the more do I deplore my inability to express it… Dissect him how I may, then, I but go skin deep; I know him not, and never will. (p. 547)

Chapter 4: The Lived Sublime as Awe & Terror

The Flight of Icarus

Wandering through the gallery, Anna's eyes slide over the people to the paintings. To the left is a portrayal of a battle. She is drawn to the cavalry. Though still—frozen in time—the horses seem to move as if in full charge. Their muscles strain against the reins; their feet claw at one another; mouths biting. They snort, rear, clash. Faintly, she hears the battle cries. Guns firing. Men speared. The crackle of fire.

Abruptly, it ends. Someone steps in front of her, clicking his camera.

Anna moves on.

In the Botticelli room, The Birth of Venus is instantly recognizable. As she stares at Venus, Anna's eyes slip from Venus' face, across her hair, through the sea to the wind and his lover. A soft, gentle breeze brushes Anna's skin.

Startled, she looks away, wondering: "how could this be?"

Primavera enchants her. The beauty of the forest. The dance of the seasons. The sheer detail. Leaves, flowers, begging to be plucked. As she reaches for one, an alarm instantly screams. Anna pulls back her hand and retreats. Glancing from side to side, nervous that anyone should have seen, she quickly leaves the room.

As she wanders down the corridor, paintings rise on both sides. Unsure, Anna begins to move more quickly. As she rounds Caravaggio's shield, Medusa shrieks as her severed head gushes blood. The sound echoes dizzyingly, making it impossible to see. Horses above gallop past; Anna fears being trodden. Grasping a nearby table for support, she closes her eyes and breathes in deeply, trying to compose herself, trying to pull herself together.

Feeling a bit better, she glances up to a seascape. The painting is beautiful, entrancing. Oddly, in the lower corner, two legs thrash about in the water. As she looks further, she is pulled in. The sun shines. The water shimmers. Birds call overhead. It is all so close that she feels the ocean spray.

She plunges into the water headfirst.

Anna floats in the murky depths, unsure of what has happened. From the distance, a strange creature moves towards her. It is huge… compelling… Confused, she does nothing but float… waiting… It closes in…

(Anna collapses, striking her head on the table).

Thus opens Dario Argento's film, *The Stendhal Syndrome,* with Anna Manni's strange experience in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. First described by the French writer after whom it was named, and for years called only "the tourist disease" or "tourist hysteria," the Stendhal Syndrome was officially identified as a rare psychiatric syndrome in 1979.[25] Graziella Magherini, the psychiatrist who named the condition, did so to account for a phenomenon appearing in Florentine hospitals (Magherini, 1989). Although no formal numbers have been released, the Santa Maria Nuovo Hospital has documented more than a dozen cases per year of tourists displaying similar symptoms following an encounter with a work of art. Those afflicted experience dizziness, disorientation, prolonged elevated pulse, confusion, and extreme emotion (Correll, 2014). They become light-headed, often faint, and sometimes hallucinate (Correll, 2014). Magherini posits that the syndrome is a psychosomatic illness caused by the stress of travelling. Or, given the region where these incidents occur, it could also be due the heat of an Italian summer. And yet again, we should not discount the sheer magnitude of the art that confronts one in Florence. This is the explanation suggested by filmmaker Dario Argento: it is the art itself, and the sensitivity of the individual encountering it, that causes the extremity of

[25] The *Jerusalem Syndrome,* a similar condition, has been documented as affecting approximately 400 people annually.

the reaction that we call the Stendhal Syndrome.[26] Somewhat surprisingly, art historians concur. In his exploration of extreme emotional responses to artworks, Elkins (2001) writes:

> Most of us look at paintings and feel a little something as the images sink in. Magherini's patients are nearly drowned by tidal waves of emotions. …
>
> The moral I take from the histories of the [Stendhal] syndrome… is that even outlandish experiences in front of paintings need to be taken seriously, because they are part of the spectrum of human response. (p. 54)

Elkins injunction reminds us that extreme responses to images are still possible human responses: paintings have an effect. But what, exactly, is the experience that Elkins is extolling us to take seriously? Consider Stendhal's experience—the "index case," so to speak, of this strange phenomenon.

In his book, *Rome, Naples, and Florence*, Stendhal (trans. 2013) describes his visit to the church of Santa Croce:

> Within, upon the right of the doorway, rises the tomb of Michelangelo; beyond, lo! There stands Antonio Canova's effigy of Alfieri; I needed no cicerone to recognize the features of the great Italian writer. Farther still, I discovered the tomb of Niccolò Machiavelli; while facing Michelangelo lies Galileo. What a race of men! And to these already named, Tuscany might further add Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch. What a fantastic gathering! The tide of emotion which overwhelmed me flowed so deep that it scarcely was to be distinguished from religious awe. The mystic dimness that filled the church, its plain, timbered roof, its unfinished façade—all these things spoke volumes to my soul. Ah! Could I but forget! (p. 97)

And upon entering the chapel:

[26] Interestingly, this is also the explanation generally accepted by psychiatric professionals (see: Correll, 2014).

> There, seated upon the step of a faldstool, with my head thrown back to rest upon the desk so that I might let my gaze dwell on the ceiling, I underwent, through the medium of Volterrano's *Sybils*, the profoundest experience of ecstasy that, as far as I am aware, I ever encountered through the painter's art. My soul, affected by the very notion of being in Florence, and by the proximity of those great men whose tombs I had just beheld, was already in a state of trance. Absorbed in the contemplation of *sublime beauty*, I could perceive its very essence close at hand; I could, as it were, feel the stuff of it beneath my fingertips. I had attained that supreme degree of sensibility where the divine intimations of art merge with the impassioned sensuality of emotion. As I emerged from the porch of Santa Croce, I was seized with a palpation of the heart (the same symptom which, in Berlin, is referred to as an "attack of nerves"); the wellspring of life was dried up within me, and I walked in constant fear of falling to the ground. (Stendhal, trans. 2013, pp. 97–98)

How might I understand a phenomenon that is profoundly ecstatic, yet makes someone wish he could forget the experience? How might I appreciate an encounter that reveals "the divine intimations of art merge[d] with the impassioned sensuality of emotion" and yet leaves one disoriented and confused? How can I comprehend that which speaks to the soul and yet drains the body of life, leaving it weak, shaky, and at risk of collapse? At one time or another, we have all been moved by a work of art—sometimes even to tears (Elkins, 2001)—but rarely are our responses so serious that we need admission to an emergency room. To respond in such a way seems strange and unusual.

Some, like Tanke (2013), explain Stendhal's response and the similar responses of others as merely the result of "an overactive imagination" (p. 141). Others, like Magherini (1989), medicalize the phenomenon by way of explanation. Yet to draw upon popular psychology or to call it, in a more serious vein, a psychosomatic illness seems to cover over the experience rather than provide any genuine understanding of it. Discovering the cause of someone's collapsing in front of an image—although possibly useful for treating the individual—does not mean we understand what it was like for that person to see the image and be driven to his or her knees.

Argento's film, however, may offer one means by which we can begin to understand what this unusual response may be like. Uniquely, Argento provides the viewer with both an objective view of the experience and how it is subjectively lived through. Indeed, the director deliberately cuts back and forth between showing his viewers Anna's reaction from an outside perspective (from the point of view of someone in the gallery watching her) and having us see through Anna's eyes. In doing so, he invites us to begin to see the world as Anna does. At first, we merely watch Anna as she enters the gallery. Then, alongside her, we begin see how the countenances of familiar paintings start to change. The artworks take on a strangeness that at first lulls, then intrigues, and finally challenges and attacks. The paintings do not remain at a distance; they cease to be mere art objects hung on gallery walls. They become strikingly vivid and unusually evocative. The artful images are not just captivating; they appear alive. They move though still. They whisper and scream though silent. These images are at once beautiful and terrible, awe-inspiring and terrifying. They are quintessentially and classically *sublime.*

Awe and Terror: Basic Understandings

Awe and terror: two simultaneous aspects bound together in the experience of the sublime. These two emotions have long been recognized by philosophers as forming the heart of the sublime (Burke, 1757/1958/2008). Singly, neither awe nor terror seems a particularly strange or unusual response when evoked by an image. The paintings in the Sistine Chapel, for instance, can be readily awe-inspiring. Having rushed with the crowds to reach this renowned and holy space, seeing the paintings for the first time can be a physically striking event. As we move towards the centre of the room, our movements may slow and even come to a complete halt as we are stopped by the ceiling's frescos. We may crane our necks to try to take in every detail, our eyes sweeping back and forth across the ceiling as if in an endless caress. We may be struck silent by the magnificence of the images before us. Perhaps we are surprised and even taken aback by how the paintings in "real life" exceed all of the reproductions we have ever seen. We may realize that we could never have fully envisioned these murals, no matter how much we have tried. As we look upon each painted panel, we may be humbled by the creativity, skill, and mastery of their maker. We may even wonder *how is this possible?* Images that induce awe

seem to move us to stop, appreciate, and ponder that which exceeds us and is beyond our imagination. They seem to entrance us and may draw us towards them.

Terror, in turn, seems to elicit an entirely different response. One common experience of terror is watching a scary movie. As we stare at the screen, we may become engrossed in the story of darkness and fear being told. Every scene of an empty interior or every fright suggested but not realized can heighten both our anticipation and dread. We may be waiting for the terrifying moment. And yet, even though we expected to be scared, when the object of terror—spectre, madman, or monster—finally jumps out at us, we may not be able to stop ourselves from pulling back and covering our eyes. When we are terrified, we may find ourselves turning away and fleeing before we even think about it. This is in contrast to the awe-inspiring image that may stop us before we notice that we have ceased to move. Likewise, there is a contrast in our appreciation of the image. An awe-filled moment teems with reverence for its object. With terror, however, appreciation only seems possible retrospectively. Although we may tell a friend after the movie "you have to go see it; it is really scary," in the moment when we are brought to terror, we may fear its appearance and only wish to escape.

Awe and terror, therefore, seem to be experiences made up of contradictory and even paradoxical movements. One pulls while the other pushes; one entrances while the other repels. But while opposites in this regard, awe and terror also contain etymological connections and experiential similarities. In its origins, the term "awe" referred to fear, fright, and terror (*awe, n.*, Online Etymological Dictionary, 2014; *awe, n.,* Oxford English Dictionary, 2014). Even though it is rarely used in this way today, our experience of awe may retain something of this fearful root, not in the least because of the human tendency to fear that which we do not understand.

If we consider our experience of awe, we may notice how we describe ourselves as awe-*struck* by an awe-*inspiring* object. Awe appears as a state of being that is given to us by an object we encounter, yet its givenness contains an inexplicability and unknowability. Awe holds a deep, unfathomable mystery. In his book *Writing in the Dark*, van Manen writes of an awe-inspiring moment, a "transcendent incident of wonder" (2005, p. 5). He tells of driving home

late one evening and seeing the aurora borealis. Pulling the car to the side of the highway, he and his family get out to observe the strange phenomenon. He writes:

> It is at moments like this, when one is all surrounded by the stupendous starry sky and its immensely wondrous phenomenon of the aurora that I teeter at the edge of my agnosticism. Truly there must be something deeply meaningful in the universe around us. Gazing into the sky one may experience a strange sensation of being gazed at in return by something beyond oneself. It is as if one gazes into the mirror and in a moment of extreme reflexivity one experiences the reflection of one's own gaze as uncannily strange: Who am I? What is my place in all this? Why are we here? But these are questions without answers. They call for a turning away of the eyes. (p. 6)

For a few precious minutes, van Manen experiences something special and unique. The night sky ceases to be the ceiling that securely rests over his head and reveals itself as a startlingly magnificent world of which he and his family are both witnesses and a part. As he gazes up at the night sky, the aurora borealis shows van Manen "something deeply meaningful in the universe." Yet, what it is that is meaningful cannot be articulated in that moment. Even as this encounter leads him to consider the questions of life, he is unable to do fully consider them while still looking upon the sky. As he notes, to consider these questions call for "a turning away of the eyes" from their very source: that which has induced our awe.

In the awe-filled moment, we are infused and suffused (*inspire, v.* Oxford English Dictionary, 2014) with the object's mystery. We are not able to understand either object or response in any propositional sense—at least, not until we turn away. Indeed, awe seems dependent upon our inability to understand it. Once we begin to grapple with its mystery—once we *turn away* our eyes—to consider its questions and search for possible explanations, our awe may begin to dissipate. In fact, awe may be impossible to maintain with prolonged exposure. While we may find an image or a scenic view of nature awe-inspiring upon first viewing, this awe can wane and disappear after long and close study. Such is Elkins' (2001) lament following his repeated exposure to Bellini's *Ecstasy of St. Francis*. He writes that the first time he sees the painting "the word 'magical' doesn't do justice to what I felt" (p. 75). However, after seeing it

over and over again, studying it, and teaching about it, he has become "numb" to the painting (p. 77). This is the danger of coming to know that which is awe-inspiring: "the everyday object vanquishe[s] its magnificent rival" (p. 78). Awe seems to disappear once it can be explained.

Our experience of terror, likewise, seems dependent upon its incomprehensibility. One of the most terrifying aspects of the modern world is the spectre of terrorism. Compared with other acts of violence, acts of terrorism are unique in being logically incomprehensible. Although we may understand that an act of terrorism is driven by ideological values and its purpose it to instil fear in the general public for political gain, there is a disconnection between stated purpose and the act committed. If we take a terrorist bombing of a busy marketplace as an example, it is hard to fathom why someone should choose to blow up small vendors' stalls and innocent shoppers in protest of a government. Although we may understand what has occurred and for what purpose, the question of "why this act specifically?" eludes us. With a targeted assassination, by contrast, the victim is directly connected to the political motivation behind the violence (and often the form of the violent act reflects the political motivation). Terrorism, however, lacks a similar logic between victim(s), act, and motivation. Indeed, the public fear instilled by terrorism depends on this lack of logic. And yet, should an explanation appear—that the individual who bombed the market was severely ill and acted out of paranoia or that the group responsible was protesting genetically modified food that was being shipped through the market—the act ceases to be quite so terrifying and ceases to be an act of terrorism. Although it remains scary and the public may remain fearful of possible further incidents, the proffered explanation changes the act itself and our relation to it as terrifying (McHugh, Raffel, Foss, & Blum, 1974).

The experiences of awe and terror, therefore, while contradictory in the responses evoked, appear to be both dependent upon their immediacy yet incomprehensibility. How, then, might we understand the simultaneity of awe and terror in our lived experience of the sublime?

Awe and Terror at the Sublime's Unexpected Occurrence

Arina, a participant in this study, tells of her experience:

> *I am waiting in line to buy bus tickets. I happen to glance over my shoulder at the magazine rack and it is like BOOM! this image immediately grabs my attention. It takes me off guard.*
>
> *The picture is repulsive, but it is also oddly compelling. I am somehow unexpectedly drawn to it. In fact, I can't take my eyes off the picture. I just stare. Everything else falls away or like it is in suspended animation, where time and space stand still or have evaporated. There is just me and that image...*

Like Arina's trek to the store, we largely move through the world unthinkingly**,** following our daily, weekly, monthly routines. But then, in the middle of the seemingly ordinary—standing in line to buy tickets—something extraordinary can occur. An image may suddenly *grab* us. We may be seized by the sight of it.

Yet, what is it about the image that may seize and surprise us? Not its mere presence, for we encounter images routinely and yet rarely register their presence, let alone give them a second thought or glance. We might pause for a moment to appreciate the pretty face of the woman looking out from the bus billboard; or, perhaps we laugh at a cartoon etched on the back of a t-shirt worn. We may even cringe and look away from a cover story about the latest natural or manmade disaster, but rarely do we linger long before any of these. The attention we give to these images is of a secondary nature (Waldenfels, 2011). We meet these images with very little thought, if any, as they are a given part of our world. Even with artworks, objects that deliberately seek to cultivate an attentive gaze, we look but only momentarily—indeed, on average 15 seconds (Elkins, 6 November 2010). It seems that our normal mode of encountering images is for our eyes to briefly meet each one, quickly take in what the image readily offers up and that which is of interest to us, and then we move on. Even though we glance their way, we may remain preoccupied with whatever task is at hand, the movement towards which these images has only momentarily interrupted, oftentimes not even involving a break in our stride, much less a suspension of our intentions.

When considered in this way, we may wonder if we really see most images at all. They simply appear as we expect them to appear: as part of our daily landscape, readily given and blindly accepted. We move in and among them habitually, and so much are our reactions to them determined by habit—even when we regard the most violent or destructive of representations—that, at best, they form a visual white noise in our world. Those few images that do leave their mark and are somehow remembered are likely memorable for what they portray—a global crisis, an incredibly beautiful face, or an absurd situation. Rarely do we remember them for their image-ness. Indeed, by an image's very existence as image, we tend to perceive it as not unique, but as a referent of something else that exists in our world (Derrida & Stiegler, 2002). Everyday images form part of the backdrop of our modern, digitized world. They are a part of our world but rarely ever appear apart from it. But an image that evokes the sublime—a sublime image, so to speak—may not appear in this same way. Indeed, it may appear entirely differently.

Unlike the everyday image, which passively accepts our brief apprehension and ready release, the image that evokes the sublime may suddenly spring forth and demand we attend to it. Its very appearance may take us off guard, surprise and astound us, upset or scare us; for we do not find this image, it seems to find us. It may be that we encounter it in a gallery, on the Internet, or in a small shop, but wherever it is met it seems to stands forth as singular amid our world of images. Indeed, it may appear so different from all other images that we *cannot take* our *eyes off it*. We might say that it is not an image that receives our gaze but one that captures it. Moreover, the image may not only appear before us, it may reach out and grab or strike us, like the image's *BOOMING* appearance that startles Arina. And, like any explosion, the image may shift and "shake up" our world.

For Arina, the very reason for her being in the store *falls away*. She becomes preoccupied with the image, and even her environment seemingly changes. *Time and space stand still… have evaporated.* She continues:

> *As I slowly move further and further along the line, the space around me, what is actually going on—the line up, the people, the purchases—becomes an annoyance, because I realize that I need to make a decision about the image.*

Here and now I don't have the time I want, the time I need, to work through what the image is doing to me. Finally, I just grab for the magazine because I can't just leave it behind. I can't leave it on the shelf. I have to look at it some more. It needs to come with me; I am not done with it yet. I grab it off the shelf, pay for it, put it in my bag, and leave quickly.

The image that evokes the sublime may be considered a "loud" and powerful image. It is an image that cannot be ignored or overlooked. According to Elkins (1997), extremely powerful images, although rare, are "harsh and importunate" (p. 116). They have a force that can shout down and shut out everything else (p. 116). In its evocation of the sublime, an image can appear so present and vivid that it may mute much of what is around us. It may even seem to cause our world to contract. Daily concerns may fall away or become petty annoyances as the attention the image demands becomes all-consuming. Unlike other demands made of people—the need to shovel the walk, cook dinner, or answer the telephone—we appear unable to turn away from the image. "Demand" comes from the Latin *demandare,* a compound word of *de,* meaning "completely," and *mandare,* "to order" (demand, v., *Online Etymological Dictionary*, 2014). The experience of the sublime may be thought of as a complete ordering and reordering of our attention, our purpose, and even our world entire. Indeed, the image's presence may be so severely demanding that we might describe it as having a *usurping presence*. It may seem to overshadow and overtake all else.

But what, really, has changed? Objectively, nothing has changed; yet, for the person who experiences the sublime, everything seemingly changes. We have been thoroughly *grabbed* by this singular image. The etymological origins of "grab" lie in *ghrebh-* and *grabiti*, meaning "to seize, reach" in the sense of seizing a "possession or prisoner" and "to rob" (*grab,* Online Etymological Dictionary, 2012). Unlike other images that we may possess briefly through our selective attention, the sublime image may *seize us*. It can possess us and, in so doing, seemingly rob us of whatever purpose or intention that had previously occupied us. In this way, our experience of the sublime seems to involve *a taking away* of our current way of being. But if it is a taking away of what was at hand—or, rather, if our experience causes us to turn away from our present way of being in the world—what does it newly orient us towards?

An Unexpected Transformation in the Sublime Encounter

Let us consider the experience of Sheppard, another participant in this study:

> *I am in a gallery in London with a friend. We are wandering through the museum, looking at the different artworks, when I turn a corner and there is this painting. It is an image from a book I had in childhood, except it is the real thing! The painting is Van Gogh's* Sunflowers. *And I'm seeing it!*
>
> *Looking at it, I am transported back to the gold carpet and wood panelling of my parents' living room, back to Burl Ives playing on their large stereo, the wrought iron coffee table where the book sat, back to a body that was 12, lying on that carpet looking at the images in that book and thinking, "Who did these? Who thinks like this? What does this mean?" back to the time when the contrast in this picture was so stark to my own life. They* [the pictures in this book] *were otherwise to the life as I knew it. And they made me want to find more. They became part of the future story I had of my life.*
>
> *As I gaze at the painting, I feel again the wonderment I felt as an adolescent, knowing that there was something else, something more to life. I think about all these things that I have not thought about in years and years and years. My eyes burn and I try not to weep. The painting is drawing all of my memories forward and I realize that they were never gone.*
>
> *After a couple minutes, my friend wants to keep going, but I have to stop and stay here for a while. So I say, "I'm not ready to go yet. I'm just... I'm here and I'll be here for a bit." I just linger with the painting for a very long time…*

Art can be powerful. Not only can it evoke a variety of responses, it can contain ideas, understandings, and even memories. At times, they may come upon us gradually, such as when we consider what Picasso's *Guernica* tells us of the realities of the Spanish Civil War. In other cases, it can occur almost instantaneously, as happened to Sheppard. In the space between one moment and the next, Sheppard ceases being the museumgoer who has spent the day pleasantly

wandering through a London gallery with a friend, and she becomes her once, long-ago, twelve-year-old self. It is a change seemingly brought about by her simply looking upon van Gogh's *Sunflowers.* And yet, what really has happened? It seems that more has taken place than her merely looking upon a painting, or even upon a familiar painting. She had been doing that all day. Up to this point, Sheppard has looked at numerous painting and yet nothing evoked this response—until now. What might be the difference? The simple answer, we might say, is that the image is different from the others. It appears differently for it contains childhood memories, even though it is the first time she has seen it in person. And yet, it is less the case that Sheppard is reminded of her childhood when looking upon the image, than that her childhood is unexpectedly *drawn forward* out of the painting's very brushstrokes. The concrete details of her early life suddenly appear around her with a vividness that could not be called forth by volition. Indeed, the memories are so strong that they engulf her and return her to her 12-year-old self.

When we experience the sublime, we may be brought into a new or different way of being. Our experience can be so intense and unbidden that it may be experienced as a *transportation* rather than a transition. According to Longinus (trans. 1890), such a change defines the sublime. He writes, that which evokes the sublime

> does not convince the reason of the reader [or viewer], but takes him out of himself…. To believe or not is usually in our own power; but the Sublime, acting with an imperious and irresistible force, sways every reader [or viewer] whether he will or no." (Longinus, trans. 1890, section 1, p. 2)

The experience of the sublime seems to occur without our volition. It may strike unexpectedly and we may be moved without warning. We may find ourselves suddenly overcome, flooded by the experience, and "irresistibly force[d]" into thinking, feeling, and experiencing in a different way. Like Sheppard, the image may entrance us because it may reveal life as other than what we know it to be. In it, we may not see what we expect, nor respond as we ought, because it shows us what we have never known, or knew and thought past, or had long forgotten. According to Baudrillard (1987), "the problem [with most images] is that they leave us somehow totally indifferent" (p. 96). The experience of the sublime may break through this tendency by showing us what may be "otherwise." Contrived emotion—such as the normal,

acceptable response to paintings in a gallery—may be replaced by strangeness, awe, and terror. This may not be how images *normally* appear. Satiation, in turn—again, the acceptable, fulfilling pleasure of seeing an object of high culture—may be negated by our lack of known response, leaving us with only an aching, insistent need, something suggestive of there being *something else, something more to life.*

In being abruptly swayed in our experience of the sublime, we may find ourselves, like Sheppard, transformed. This change can be an astonishingly miraculous discovery, but it also may be terrifyingly unsettling. The certitude of our world and ourselves—of what was past and present, what is possible and impossible, of who we are and ought to be—may be split open by what the image suddenly reveals to us, terrifying us with its possibilities.

The Contradictory Impulses of Attraction and Repulsion

Awe and terror may arise from the sudden unexpectedness of the sublime, but how do they coincide in our experience? Helen (another participant) tells of a recent incident:

> *My friend had mentioned she had recently seen an exhibit by Catherine Opie while travelling. She tried to explain to me what the pictures were, but I couldn't understand how what she was describing was possibly art. So I went online to look up the show. They are these massive floor-to-ceiling photographs of women with cuttings on their backs. They have obviously been done to one another; you can't cut your own back.*
>
> *As I click through the images, one, then another, I find that the artwork is stunningly gorgeous—if you forget what you are looking at. One of photographs is even deeply moving. It is so thoughtful and creative. It isn't just a blob of blue. It is incredibly artistic and beautiful—but then I remember the context. But even when I focus on the woman's back and that someone is cutting her, I still find it artistic. That's what disturbs me the most.*

When we experience the sublime, we may feel ourselves, like Helen, both pushed from and pulled by an image. It may appeal, even as it repels. And we may be confused by the simultaneity of these impulses, for it seems at odds with our normal mode of being in relation to objects. In our everyday life, we tend to move towards those objects that we desire; should we dislike something, we move away. I lean my face towards the beautiful flower, drawn in by its stunning smell, even as I pull back in repulsion from the wriggling worm that thrusts forth from it centre. Of course, there are always instances when we must move counter to impulse, such as when I engage in a distasteful task of reaching out to grab the pest to prevent it from further harming my garden. My movement, however, may be difficult and forced because it is counter to what the worm calls me to do. In this way, the objects of our world seem to either push or pull at us.

Even when we are undecided about something—such as when we stand at the fridge deciding if we want a snack—it is not that we are simultaneously pulled in two opposite directions. Rather, we seem to waver. *Do I want to eat? Yes*, we grab for the fruit. *No, we're just bored*, and the fridge door closes almost on its own. When we are undecided, it seems we have two viable choices that are mutually exclusive. Our indecision may be marked by a weighing of these options, as if we are looking to discern our greater impulse.

Yet, with the sublime, we seem to experience two contradictory impulses at the same time. Or do we? According to Kant (1793/2000/2007),

> The mind feels itself *moved* in the representations of the sublime… This movement (especially in its inception) may be compared to a vibration, i.e., to a rapidly alternating repulsion from and attraction to one and the same object. (p. 141)

Caught at the sight of the image, we may vacillate between giving in to its draw and pausing or pulling back to consider its dark underbelly. In one moment, Helen finds Opie's photographs *incredibly artistic and beautiful—but then,* in the next, she *remember*[s] *the context.* The photograph's appeal seems to ebb and flow with each remembrance of what they are. In contrast to images with a very specific appeal such as the Sistine Chapel or the scary movie that clearly

pull or push at us, our experience of an image that evokes the sublime may be ambivalent in the double demand it makes. The image may be beautiful and beg us to stop and appreciate it. But it may also reveal something of itself that is not-so-beautiful and that we do not want to linger upon—and yet when we do, we once again find it beautiful. Each aspect seems to invoke and call forth the other.

However, can something be appealing if, in its very appeal, it is also somewhat appalling? For Helen, the stunning artwork seems tainted by its very mode of creation. It is as if our experience of the sublime carries within it a doubt as to the truth of the image's appearance. "Truth" derives from the old English word *triewe* meaning faithful or trustworthy and the Proto-Germanic *trewwjas*, which referred to "having or characterized by good faith" (*truth, adj.*, Online Etymological Dictionary, 2014). To experience an image as sublime may be to question the image's faithfulness and trustworthiness. We may even wonder, like Helen, if its appearance is given in "bad faith." We may sense that there is something about it that is not quite what it seems. To experience the sublime, then, may be to respond to an image but to also question the veracity of the image's character.

But what does it mean to question an image's character? Images often appear in a particular way to an individual, even if that appearance is contextual and may change over time. I see an image and I may find it comedic or serious, banal or entertaining, but my response is to how the image appears to me. Even when we encounter optical illusions—such as Jastrow's well-known rabbit-duck illusion—the image *appears* to me in one way (a rabbit) and then the other (a duck). What, then, in our experience of the sublime do we question?

Helen tells of the days that followed:

> *I am disturbed for days. I find I am thinking about the photographs when I don't want to. When I am walking around or riding my bike, the images will just pop into my head and it is like seeing them again. The same feeling comes back. I find myself involuntarily shaking my head, like I'm trying to shake them out.*
>
> *But the weird part is, then it gets to be that I just don't look at the images once. It is kind of like when you see an auto accident; the bystander thing, the need*

> *to look. I go back and look at the images a couple more times. I even read what the artist has to say about her work and I understand it at a cognitive level, but I just can't shake it. I can't wrap my head around it; creating art by cutting. It is so disturbing.*

When we experience the sublime, we may find, like Helen, that the image haunts us. It may unexpectedly reappear over the course of our day, in unusual places, and take us by surprise. Although possibly an unwelcome appearance, it may become part of the fabric of our lives. And we may find that it calls to us, tugging at us with an insistent demand.

We may find ourselves drawn back to view an image repeatedly over time. Helen likens her *need to look* to being the *bystander* of *an auto accident*. Bystanders, however, only look on so long as they are distanced from the scene, often from the safety of their own car. The moment they become involved—as First Aid providers or through recognizing one of the victims—the draw of the awful disappears into the immediate necessity of the accident. Is the urge to continue looking at the image (or to return and look again) perhaps a waiting for the image to draw near? Are we waiting to become directly involved or for a more personal recognition of the image so that it will finally fix itself as either solely wonderful or terrible? Or might our need to look repeatedly be a form of checking, also common to the auto accident bystander: the first look seeing and the second look confirming what we first saw? In repeated viewings, are we perhaps seeking confirmation of our strange response? Do we hope that, with each new look, we might have originally been wrong and the image is, in fact, merely one thing or the other?

The draw and push of the sublime seems not only a confusing combination of responses but also a fundamental questioning of our own innate response: that we might be deeply moved, even awed, by that which is terrible. Simon Morley (2010) writes, "Awe and wonder can quickly blur into terror, giving rise to a darker aspect of the sublime experience, when the exhilarating feeling of delight metamorphoses into a flirtation with dissolution and the 'daemonic'" (pp. 12–13). To encounter the sublime, then, may be to question what we have always found wonderful or, conversely, terrible. It may even be a questioning of self that can *disturb* the order of things in our world. And so long as the image, upon each return of our gaze, continues to evoke both

awe and terror, attraction and repulsion, these questions may remain open and the image may refuse conclusion.

The Sublime as Paradoxical Simultaneity

Images that evoke the sublime can hold us in a strange cycle of catch and release of appeal. But, is the experience the "rapidly alternating repulsion from and attraction to" (p. 141) as Kant (1793/2000/2007) claims? Do we experience first one (attraction), then the other (repulsion), and the first again? Looking at how Helen describes her encounter with Opie's photographs, we might be tempted to assume so. But is that the experience of the sublime? Or is her description merely the result of the limits of our ability to express a complex, paradoxical phenomenon in language? Perhaps the sublime can only be made expressible when described contingently; that what we experience in the sublime would be attraction if it were not also repulsion; that it would be awe if it did not also evoke terror. To make such claims suggests that we could easily categorize the experience of the sublime if only it did not also contain what appears to be each category's opposite.

The need for such contingency to describe a phenomenon is unusual. Something is "this" or it is not. Although we commonly qualify when describing, rarely are our qualifications the central aspect of a phenomenon. More often than not, qualifications allow for the development of subtleties of understanding, not basic understanding. For example, we commonly make the qualification that the opposite of love is not hate but indifference. And while we can say of certain relationships, "it would have been true love, if there hadn't been such intense hatred," we would not say, "it would have been true love, if there hadn't been such indifference." To say this would be nonsensical. To it, we can only reply: "It was therefore not true love," because love cannot also be indifference. And yet, in our experience of the sublime, attraction may also be repulsion, and awe, terror. How is this possible?

Let us look for a moment at an example of the experience of the sublime that is not bound by verbal or written language, but by another form of representation: the visual. De Loutherbourg's (1803) painting, *An Avalanche in the Alps,* is a well-known representation of

the “natural sublime.”[27] It depicts both that which in nature may evoke the sublime (an avalanche in the mountains) and the physical embodiment of the sublime when it is experienced. In the painting, we see three persons and a dog facing a massive oncoming avalanche. Andrews (1989) calls the painting “an experiment in the Sublime” (p. 42) for its deliberate attempt to evoke the experience in its viewers. However, even if we do not personally experience the sublime when we look at the painting, the image remains useful for exploring the contradictory impulses bound up in the sublime.

De Loutherbourg’s painting captures the moment when all four figures first recognize the oncoming disaster of the avalanche but as of yet have not been harmed by it.[28] The three responses shown are illuminating and reflect responses to the sublime.

The figure furthest from the rush of snow, a young man, stands arms outstretched as if awe-struck by the scene before him. He gazes straight at the flood of snow as if greeting, even welcoming, the great force of nature. He is entirely open to it, perhaps even captivated by its majestic immensity. One can imagine him mere moments later smacked flat and physically overcome by the wall of snow. This young man seems to embody the idea of sublimity as an admiring, uplifting, almost exalted experience of awe in the face of an immense power.

In exact contrast to the young man is the second figure, a woman who (along with the dog) is much closer to the avalanche. Both woman and dog appear to be fleeing in terror. Each is posed mid-flight. Their bodies are turned away from the onslaught of snow, arms and legs are curved in the act of running away. Just as we can tell from the direction of the young man’s gaze that the avalanche is what has induced his awe, we can infer that it is also the cause of the woman’s and dog’s fear. Although fleeing, both glance back over their shoulders as if unsure that they will truly escape the rush that appears mere metres behind them. The woman seems to

[27] Traditionally, the natural sublime has been understood as those aspects of nature that evoke the sublime. Common examples include mountains, seascapes, and waterfalls.

[28] Their responses are arising from a safe place; a condition that many philosophers say is required to experience the sublime.

embody the sublime as the experience of terror at being overwhelmed by something immensely powerful.

Finally, there is the third figure, a man who is closest to the avalanche. Unlike either boy or woman and dog, he appears neither wholly awe-struck nor entirely terrified, but somehow both. As the avalanche looms overhead, his legs are bent as if posed to run but his torso remains firmly turned towards the oncoming snow. His arms are upraised as if in surprise, terrified awe, or possibly prayer. Unlike the other figures whose movement is set and known, the man appears to be caught, frozen, by two opposing impulses. From his bodily response, we might even imagine him grappling with the question: does he remain and be overwhelmed by the inconceivable force to which he stands as an awed witness, or does he flee in self-preserving terror? Or, perhaps, he is not thinking at all but simply responding. Burke (1757/1958/2008) writes,

> No passion so effectively robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear. …Whatever therefore is terrible, with regard to sight, is sublime too, whether this cause of terror, be endured with greatness of dimensions or not… (p. 57)

Although facing his imminent demise, De Loutherbourg's character embodies the sublime as the simultaneous experience of awe and terror.

Like the characters depicted in De Loutherbourg's painting, when we experience the sublime we may feel both a desire to stay and draw nearer the image but also fear, terror, and the urge to escape it. Our experience of the sublime, then, may contain two opposing but equal forces that simultaneously coexist. The word "forces" invokes the idea of physics. However, the movements of the sublime are not wholly like the physical forces of our world. Unlike an action, which can be brought to a stop by the application of an equal and opposite reaction, the two movements of the sublime do not seem to cancel one another out. At best, they may create a tentative stasis, leaving one feeling a simultaneous pull and push. While one may be brought to a condition of immobility—where the forces exerted are in balance and thus appear to result in lack of motion—this stasis does not seem to be true, calm motionlessness. Calm, according to

Kant (1793/2000/2007), only occurs with the beautiful. Should either motion of the sublime give way even somewhat (such as in our meagre attempt to describe the experience), we may find that movement immediately resumes and we are flung one way or another away from the object of our concern. To speak—much less to write—of the sublime seems to risk this danger: should we become enamoured of one aspect over another, we will invariably lose our way. The sublime seems not just to be awe. Nor does it appear to be terror alone. It is not solely attraction, nor repulsion. It seems each at once. To study the sublime, therefore, may require the generation of a stasis much like *homeostasis*—a tense and delicate balance that is constantly correcting itself.

The Sublime as Awe, Terror, and Safety?

Avalanche in the Alps is a highly evocative painting—at the time of its creation it commonly induced the experience of the sublime amongst its viewers—and yet, we may wonder if all three persons depicted are truly experiencing the sublime. Although we may agree that the avalanche could be sublime-inducing, we may have trouble seeing the scene as De Loutherbourg's original audience did; that is, interpreting all three responses as sublime. Looking at the painting from the perspective of the twenty-first century, what we may wonder is: can one experience the sublime when one is in danger?

Although Burke (1757/1958/2008) was the first to identify that the experience of sublimity was contingent upon an individual's experiencing a degree of safety,[29] it was with Kant's (1793/2000/2007) formulation of the dynamical sublime (the sublime evoked by something overpowering) that safety became an absolute necessity for the experience. Over the years, this need has been extended by philosophers to all variants of the sublime (see: Fisher, 2002), not just those that threaten to physically overwhelm or overpower us. Both Burke and

[29] Burke (1757/1958/2008) writes that, although the painful and terrible are sources of the sublime, "when danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we everyday experience" (p. 40).

Kant reasoned that, faced with imminent physical danger, one would be incapable of responding with delight to a terrifying situation. And yet, is this really the case?

Intuitively, Kant's and Burke's reasoning makes sense. Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs would suggest that bodily safety trumps the more cognitive, abstract domains such as *self-actualization* where one might ascribe the pleasure of an aesthetic experience like the sublime. Moreover, there is something practical about this claim. Considering the participants' accounts presented thus far, it is difficult to imagine Arina noticing the magazine, much less experiencing its cover image as sublime, if she were being chased through the mall by an armed robber. Likewise, I doubt that Helen would have experienced Opie's photographs as sublime had her children been present and had she been immediately concerned about their physical or psychological safety. It seems apparent that to experience an image as sublime, one must first have the capability of noticing the image. But is safety an *absolute condition* for experiencing the sublime?

I pause before agreeing wholly, because it seems less the case that someone sees an image *and then* experiences it as sublime. Rather, the image simply seems to appear to that person as sublime and, in its appearance, the sublime breaks into the individual's everyday world and breaks apart one's everyday concerns, whether those concerns be the minor distraction of getting bus tickets or the focused attention of looking at art. Perhaps the sublime might likewise interrupt a world in which one is in danger or distress? But what might this look like?

Consider the account given to Elkins (2001) by a psychoanalyst referred to as Werner D.

> Around 1971, during a time of considerable personal stress and sadness, I was in San Francisco, I recall, and visited a museum. I paused in front of a fairly large painting by Bonnard. It was the view he often painted, of a spectator looking out through a window. Suddenly I found myself crying, rather overwhelmed by intense sadness
>
> Later on, collected, I thought about the experience, and even though I am a psychoanalyst, the best I could come up with (and I'm comfortable with

> my interpretation) is that the utter serenity and harmony of the painting so shockingly contrasted with my own inner turmoil that it became a devastating experience. (p. 239)

Although Werner D. does not name his experience as sublime, one can see in his account how strong, visceral responses to an image can still occur at the lowest and worst points of one's life. The image may interrupt one's concerns and momentarily break open a space in which the image stands in contrast to the misery of one's life (devastation, n., *Online Etymology Dictionary,* 2014). Like Werner D., we may find the experience all the more powerful *because of* our painful, distressing existence.

Might this also occur when someone is in physical danger? What comes to mind are the various stories I have heard over the years of individuals who, faced with the danger and terror of the Second World War, hid and protected precious art objects even though it often put them at greater physical risk. I also think of the stories of images that gave comfort and peace to those tormented by persecution, terror, fear, and imminent death throughout the ages. Our relation to images does not disappear from our world simply because we may be in danger, nor, it seems, should their potential to touch us in deeply meaningful, non-rational ways.

Perhaps the question of safety, therefore, is better thought of as an issue of potentiality. Rather than being a necessary condition for the experience of the sublime, being physically safe may merely increase the likelihood that someone will experience the sublime. It does seem less likely that I would experience the sublime if I need to jump out of the way of a dangerous driver. But, then again, at that moment it also seems less likely that I would fall in love or recall my pet or even sneeze. However, in rare circumstances, all of those things—including experiencing the sublime—could possibly happen. The absence of safety does not seem antithetical to the manifestation of the sublime (at least, thus far in my consideration).

Awe and Terror at How we are Engaged by the Image

Encountering an image that evokes the sublime seems a highly unusual and unique experience. The responses it can generate can be startling, perplexing, and even upsetting, and they may occur at the oddest of times. But this study does not concern solely the sublime; it is attempting a phenomenology of the sublime when evoked by an image. In what unique ways does the image appear in our experience?

Let us return to Argento's depiction of Anna's experience in the Uffizi. Argento's film suggests that the artworks come alive before Anna's very eyes. And yet, the artworks have not moved at all. They remain firmly where they always have been and, in fact, are guarded against physical contact by elaborate alarm systems, layers of glass, and ever-present gallery attendants. When an image evokes the sublime, it may be an experience that is different from any other experience we have ever had. Moreover, the image itself may appear differently. It may not remain a mute inanimate object to be admired from a distance, both physically and aesthetically. It may breach the man-made barriers, whether physical or of convention, that normally guide and limit our interactions with images. Images that evoke the sublime somehow reach beyond any barrier and seem to touch us. For Anna, the artworks emerge with such violence that her encounter becomes an assault. It is as if, when we experience the sublime, an image can touch us without ever making physical contact.

To touch is to make contact. Most often, touch occurs when two beings come into physical contact with one another. My hand touches and briefly grasps the hand of another as we greet with a handshake. My same hand curls around my mug as I drink my morning coffee. Sometimes there are unintentional touches, such as when I bump into someone at the grocery story or knock over my cup as I reach for the newspaper. There are also touch-less touches. I may feel the angry stare of the person that I bumped into in the grocery store long after our bodies have ceased to touch. Or, my eyes may touch my partner's eyes across a room at a party to communicate the unspoken message "I would like to go now." And there are touches that can happen across even more remote distances. I may feel touched by the words that my mother wrote to me in a letter, her words bringing forth her comforting presence. Or, conversely, I may

feel slapped by the graffiti scrawled upon my garage door. Words written by another can mediate, transmit, the other's physical touch.

Yet, is our contact with an image that evokes the sublime in any way similar? To physically feel an image is not an uncommon occurrence. Elkins (2001) devotes an entire section of his study of painting that make people cry to the experience of feeling that one has been "punched" by an image, while phenomenologist Sobchack (2004) describes an incident where her hand bodily recognizes a filmic hand before she consciously recognizes what she is looking at. The relation between images and the body seems obvious but little understood (Sobchack, 2004). Unlike my cup or another person's hand, we do not physically grasp the image-object. However, we do meet it and metaphorically touch it with our gaze, much like when we meet eyes with another person. We touch all images in this way; physical possession is always secondary. And yet, the image is not a living being. It cannot respond to my eye contact as another person would. Is it, therefore, more like the trace of contact found in a letter or graffiti? Does the touch of the image, in fact, only point to the touch of the artist reaching through the medium? Is that who and what touches us when we feel "touched" by an image in our experience of the sublime? While this claim is appealing, it is also problematic.

We may see an image and say, "What a wonderful Mondrian!" But is this truly an encounter with the image or are we experiencing the image as a mere by-product of the artist? Is it s/he whom we are experiencing? Much like my mother's letter, the physical properties of which hold little interest to me (whether it is printed on blue paper or white, it matters little except as evidence of her), the image here may also become incidental. And while these encounters do take place, they are not the only or even the most common type of encounter. We can encounter an image and know nothing of the artist, nor care to know anything about him or her. Rather, the object of our interest is the image, specifically, the thing-ness of the image. Literary criticism of the last half-century has firmly established the importance of recognizing the created object as independent of its creator. Just as we should question the notion that an author is "confiding" in us through his or her writing (Barthes, 1977, p.143), so too should we question the idea that we are coming into contact with an artist through his or her image. What, then, is left in the claim we are "touched" by an image?

Let us again return to Anna's experience. Anna looks upon the art in the Uffizi gallery (as all gallery visitors do) and, rather surprisingly, she finds that it looks back. Unlike images that mutely meet our eyes, these artworks address her directly. Like the two hands touching in the moment of a handshake, there seems to be a mutuality to an encounter with an image that evokes the sublime. We see it and it seems to respond in kind—at least for as long as we remain looking at it. Like Anna, we may find the spell of feeling one's look returned by an image broken when someone steps into our line of sight.

At some level, all images that we recognize as images address us. In his study of images, Nancy (2005) claims that all images are portraits, not for being reproductions or mimicking particular physical traits of their originals, but because of their intimacy and force (p. 4). We are drawn into relation with them by the fact they are images. When we see them, they may even appear to be looking out at us. But their looking is largely passive (Elkins, 1997). The image may look—at times even with an uncanniness such as when an omnivoyant painting follows me around a room—but it is a limited looking. The painting's gaze, even when most life-like, often remains constant and invariant and, when the novelty wears off, it can be dismissed as a "technical trick" and cease to be noticed. One cannot dismiss the look of another human being in quite the same way. The looking of images tends to be a looking that is recognized by us, their modern viewers, as a result of the image's visual construction. As Nancy (2006) observes, the image may be looking but it never looks *at* something.

In this way, how we are looked at by most images seems merely as the appearance of looking, not "the real thing." Select images may mimic the looking of a person, but despite their lifelike appearance, they remain recognizably inanimate. We are the sole active and responsive agent; the image merely receives our gaze. Further, our encounter follows a well-known trajectory: the image (A), when seen by me (B), results in me (B) responding in this way (C). We can imagine this as the simple formula: A+B=BC. And this formula has a temporal flow and logic. I must encounter the image before I can respond to it in whatever way I do—whether with pleasure, dislike, or indifference, it does not matter.

But this does not seem to be what occurs when we encounter an image that evokes the sublime (despite the fact that my very sentence structure still reflects this formula). The address

of the image that evokes the sublime may be experienced as the address of an equal. Anna looks at the painting and it whispers to her. Anna gazes at Venus and the wind brushes against her face. Anna sees Medusa and Medusa screams back. Anna looks up at the horses and they gallop overtop of her. Rather than our simply responding to the image we see, when we experience the sublime the image seems also to react to us. Whereas our responses have always before been unidirectional, suddenly we are facing an inanimate object that appears animate. We look at it and it responds. Yet, the image does not physically move; so what has happened?

Nancy (2005) writes:

> The image touches me, and, thus touched and drawn by it and into it, I get involved, not to say mixed up in it. There is no image without my too being in its image, but also without passing into it, as long as I look at it, that is, as long as I show it *consideration,* maintain my regard for it. (p. 7)

It may be that, when we experience the sublime, our involvement with the image happens in the extreme. At the height of her encounter, Anna is shown falling into the painting (exactly counter to what Nancy says, "without passing into it"). Perhaps, however, Anna's immersion into the painting should be considered metaphorically. When we experience the sublime, we may be drawn into the image and it into us. It may become our image and our "being [is found] in its image." When we experience the sublime, we may become intimately intertwined with an image.

Nancy (2005), however, asserts that this relation occurs only so long as we continue looking at the image. When we look away, it ceases. If we consider Helen's encounter with Opie's photographs, however, we see how our entwinement with an image may continue long past the end our physical encounter. The photographs reappear to Helen without known cause in the days following and calls her back to look. The images do not appear when Helen calls them forth; they seemingly appear of their own will. Following our initial experience of the sublime, the image may take on an unusual agency. First, Helen experiences the images' reappearance unwillingly, then to see them becomes like a craving. Opie's photographs continue to refuse to be solely beautiful or terrible to Helen's eye. They insist they are both. Moreover,

Helen's attempt to understand them by reading what Opie has published about her work appears for naught. As Helen admits, *I understand it at a cognitive level, but … I can't wrap my head around it.* Once again, the images seem to refuse her reading of them. Like a stubborn child constantly saying "no" to any adult request, an image that evokes the sublime may seemingly assert its independence. It may be demanding we recognize it in its own being. Our experience of the sublime may give an image both independence and latency, forcing us to stand in relation to it as few other images may have required of us before.

Might our experience of the sublime, then, be an unexpected form of dialogue with an image? If this is a dialogue, it appears less to be a conversation of sorts than of physical aesthetic actions and reactions. For Henry (2009), if there is a mode of communication between art and ourselves, it occurs in sense perception and aesthetic experience. He writes:

> If communication takes place between the artwork and the public, it is on the level of sensibility, through the emotions and their immanent modifications. It does not have anything to do with words, with collective, ideological or scientific representations, or with their critical, intellectual or literary formulations, in short, anything that is called culture. (p. 73)

When our experience of the sublime is evoked by an image, what we encounter may not be what we are expecting from the image. It may be what the image independently seems to demand we see and acknowledge of it. As such, the sublime may be a return to a more primal mode of communication with art. The image may not only address us as itself, but may also reveal itself in a more genuine manner: in its image-ness. Such a revelation can be startling, intriguing, awe-inspiring but also terrifying. It may be something we have never before experienced, nor something we fully understand. Although we may not fully recognize the experience, we—like Anna, Arina, Sheppard, and Helen—may perceive within it that we are participating in—if only for a moment—something rare and precious.

The Fall of Icarus

In the Uffizi Gallery, Anna Manni collapses. In her encounter with the sublime, she plunges into Pieter Brueghel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, and what she finds there is both awe-inspiring and terrifying. When we experience the sublime, we may be brought face-to-face with a primordial beast that we may neither escape nor understand. Like Anna, we may become Icarus, explorers at the boundaries of understanding. And, like Icarus, the means of our experience of the sublime is given by another, the image's creator. And yet, it is we, its viewer, who may find ourselves daring the heavens by taking flight, soaring in wonder to the heights of the sky, and singed by the sun to plunge in terror into the depths of the ocean. Those around us, like the ploughman, shepherd, and angler, may not see our fall or may find it incomprehensible, and may offer us no solace. We may find ourselves in the waters alone, caught in its strange ebb and flow. For our encounter with an image that evokes the sublime is a solitary journey, where we leave the comfort and certainty of our received and preconceived notions and come face-to-face with the image as itself and are opened to new possibilities.

Chapter 5: The Sublime as the Experience of the Exquisite & the Monstrous

The Tate's Blue Butterflies

I am visiting the Tate Modern with my daughter, Erin. There is a travelling exhibition of my favourite artist and I am excited to see it. However, before we go there, we decide to walk through the main gallery.

We slowly weave our way through small rooms with big pictures, big rooms with small pictures, and rooms that are clearly designed to evoke mood through lighting in order to draw your attention to the solitary statue or shape housed by that room. Finally, Erin and I come to rest side by side on an ottoman set before a huge blue canvas. That is all it is—just a massive canvas painted in a brilliant shade of blue. We say nothing, just gaze at the canvas. I like the blue. It reminds me of the sea. I mention that I find this picture calming. My daughter agrees that it stirs something within her, too.

After a while, we get up to leave but as I move something catches my eye. I can't quite make out what it is. The painting is a rectangle of blue—but no, wait, it has other colours on it too, hundreds of colours in fact! I am drawn towards the canvas—I still don't know what these colours are but the painting is fascinating. I want to run up to it and yet I deliberately take my time in order to draw out the pleasure of discovery.

When I am standing directly in front of the canvas, the blue fades into the background and that is when I see them. Butterflies. It is like an entirely different work of art. The radiance of hundreds of beautiful butterflies that had once lived and fluttered consumes me. I am like a child again, looking through my kaleidoscope and being swallowed up by a new world full of colour and disorganization, a world where I can lose myself in the myriad colours and shapes.

I am motionless, marvelling at the beauty before me… until the blue starts to re-emerge. Staring at it, I am confused. What is this blue stuff? Why is it there? I don't get it.

Then, I do get it. The butterflies have been fused with the blue.

I start to feel that something is not quite right with this painting. I tell myself that it is okay, that the butterflies must have died naturally and been fused on afterwards in some way. But even before my daughter reads me the accompanying text, I know they were not. The full horror of what is actually before me dawns on me as Erin reads aloud how each butterfly was dipped into blue paint by the artist before being attached to the canvas. These dainty little creatures were drowned and bound in paint in order to create this piece of art.

I am confused. I am horrified—for I love butterflies—but I find the painting mesmerizing. I want to stop looking and I don't want to stop looking. I feel guilty for looking and yet I keep looking. I stare at the coloured wings and wonder if each butterfly had tried to fly away in vain as their little hearts ceased to beat. I am not aware of time, nor even aware of Erin being near me anymore. I stand there until she pulls me away.

As I turn to leave, I have the urge to go back and look again, but I force myself to head to the door. I won't go back.

We exit the main gallery and make our way to the visiting exhibition. I feel flat as I trudge along looking at the work of my favourite artist. The colours seem diluted and I am strangely pleased to leave when my daughter states that she is bored and wants to go home.

In the Tate Gallery, Mariel (a participant in this study) encounters a painting that, at first, seems pretty and pleasant. Then something happens: the image changes. In a moment of revelation, the painting seems to open itself to her. The simple brilliant blue canvas gives way to a kaleidoscopic splendour that amazes and entrances. This new image brings an all-consuming

joy that carries with it the freedom of childhood. It encompasses Marion in pure pleasure. She marvels at its exquisiteness and even begins to lose herself in the strange world that it is opening up, but then she is recalled to what she first saw: the blue.

At times, we may see an image and then find that we initially saw it incorrectly. Perhaps we discover that the large photograph we saw when we first entered a gallery is, upon closer inspection, a minutely gridded painting by Chuck Close. Or we may look at a photograph and realize that what we took to be a strange scarf is, in fact, a cat wrapped around the person's shoulders. In these moments, our experience of the image is one of seeing and then our seeing correcting itself. What we initially perceive is revealed to be something else and, in response to this correction, we may be amazed by the image's illusion or laugh at the absurdity of our initial perception.

This perception-as-misperception and correction, however, does not seem to be what has happened to Mariel. Rather than having "incorrectly" seen the image at first, the painting seems to show her two distinct, but coexisting, facets. The two aspects, moreover, are strangely contradictory in both appearance and mood. Whereas the first is monochrome, peaceful, and stilling, the second is vibrantly coloured, vital, and active. In fact, they seem so different from one another that Mariel experiences them as *entirely different works of art*.

In encountering one aspect and then the other, Mariel may have experienced the "dawning of an aspect" (p. 194e). According to Wittgenstein (1958/1963), the "dawning of an aspect" occurs when the picture appears in a way that we had not noticed before (p. 194e).[30] Wittgenstein gives by way of example Jastrow's rabbit-duck illusion, wherein we first see the drawing as a rabbit but then notice it is also a duck. For Mariel, the "dawning" occurs when the blue painting reveals itself to be a multitude of colourful butterflies.

A change of aspect in an image can be profound. As Wittgenstein (1958/1963) notes, it is "quite as if the object had altered before my eyes" (p. 195e). Even though the image has not objectively changed, Mariel's experience of the painting has. Moreover, her experience changes

[30] The dawning of an aspect is in contrast to the "continuous seeing of an aspect" (p. 193e).

the image for her. Even when the blue begins to visually re-emerge, she cannot forget the butterflies. According to Wittgenstein, the dawning of a new aspect implicates what had previously been seen. “If you search in a figure (1) for another figure (2), and then find it, you see (1) in a new way. Not only can you give a new kind of description of it, but noticing the second figure was a new visual experience” (p. 199e). Perhaps, Mariel did indeed experience two distinct images simultaneously coexisting in the single painted form.

And yet, Wittgenstein’s (1958/1963) understanding of aspects only takes me so far in understanding Mariel’s experience. In his discussion, Wittgenstein draws extensively on visual illusions wherein we see a drawing first one way and then the other. He concludes that “the aspects in a change of aspects are those ones which the figure might sometimes have *permanently* in a picture” (p. 201e) and that “what dawns here lasts only as long as I am occupied with the object in a particular way” (p. 210e). In the case of the rabbit-duck drawing, one may see the image as the duck and then the rabbit and then the duck again. One moves back and forth between these two aspects as one’s occupation changes. Wittgenstein continues:

> What I perceive in the dawning of an aspect is not a property of the object, but an internal relation between it and other objects
>
> It is almost as if “seeing the sign in this context” were an echo of a thought.
>
> “The echo of a thought in sight”—one would like to say. (p. 212e)

All of the illusions that Wittgenstein invokes to explore how different aspects of an image may appear and disappear, however, rely on their exclusivity and distinctness. It is *either* a rabbit *or* a duck. The double cross is *either* a white cross on a black background *or* a black cross on a white background. One never sees an image simultaneously as both. Although Mariel’s experience initially may have reflected this kind of changing aspect—moving from serene blue paint to vibrant colourful butterflies—it does not remain a flitting back and forth between aspects. *The blue starts to re-emerge* in and around the butterflies but does not overtake them. It is as if the first aspect seeps into the second. Indeed, the two contradictory aspects forcibly begin to merge as Mariel realizes *the butterflies have been fused with the blue.*

As Mariel slowly begins makes sense of the simultaneous appearance of what had initially been two distinct images, her understanding of the painting is pregnant with a terrible realization. *Then, I get it:* within the painting's exquisite beauty lies a monstrosity, but it is only because of its monstrous aspect that the painting's beauty is possible. *These dainty little creatures were drowned and bound in paint in order to create this piece of art.* The two facets are not mere opposites; they are mutually dependent. The existence of one requires the presence of the other.

Rather than offering clarity, this understanding brings confusion. Mariel wants to flee yet stay, to look away but continue to look. She is drawn to the artwork even as she is repulsed by it. The painting evokes an overflowing multiplicity of emotions and urges. And there is shame; for despite the terrible knowledge imparted and stark evidence of the violence committed against something she cares dearly about, somehow the painting only beckons to her more. The painting is simultaneously eloquent and hideous, alluring and awful, beautiful and ugly. The image is monstrously exquisite and exquisitely monstrous. It is sublime.

Beauty and Ugliness: Basic Understandings

The exquisitely beautiful and the monstrously ugly: two apparently contradictory states of appearance. And yet, within an experience of the sublime, they may not only appear to coexist but may be mutually dependent. Yet, how might I understand such a relationship between what are for all intents and purposes largely considered to be opposites? Moreover, how are beauty and ugliness, the exquisite and the monstrous, bound together in the experience of the sublime?

The sublime has long been associated with the beautiful and only rarely with ugliness. Up until the 1400s, the sublime and magnificence were the unacknowledged guiding principles of medieval aesthetics (Jaeger, 2010a). In the early Romantic period, the beautiful and the sublime became the two primary concepts in philosophical discussions of aesthetics. The beautiful and the sublime were treated, at times, as variants of one another and, at other times, as counterpoints. Burke (1757/1958/2008) proposed that the two were mutually exclusive opposites. Whereas the beautiful, for Burke, pleases and aesthetically appeals, the sublime

threatens and overwhelms. Others, like Reynolds (1785/1996), argued that the two states were distinct but coexisted on a spectrum of aesthetic experience. Schelling (1859/1989), in turn, considered the sublime to be a variant of the beautiful.[31]

The most important definition, however, was Kant's (1793/2000/2007), wherein he proposed a subtle yet important differentiation between the beautiful and the sublime. According to Kant, we find something beautiful because its form is harmonious and harmony gives us pleasure.[32] We also expect that others will agree with our view. The sublime, however, appears to be an experience of disharmony. It exceeds our comprehension and, indeed, is experienced as so vast that it cannot be attributed as a property of a given object (even though it may initially appear as such). Rather, the sublime has a formlessness. The sublime also differs from beauty in its appeal; whereas beauty is simply attractive, the sublime is both pleasurable (positive) and displeasurable (negative).

More recently—and largely due to the predominance of Kant's formulation—debate over the relation between the sublime and the beautiful has waned to a standard acknowledgment of their distinct but intertwined nature. According to Nancy (1993a), "the sublime is more 'essential' to beauty than the very essence of the beautiful" (p. 2). He notes further that "the sublime represents that without which beauty itself would *not* be beautiful, or would be *merely* beautiful, that is, enjoyment and preservation of the *Bild*" (Nancy, 1993b, p. 34). Indeed, to speak of one seems impossible without invoking the other.

Despite their close philosophical association, however, the relation between the sublime and the beautiful as experiences remains unclear. Therefore, let me begin with some simple differentiations that may be made.

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[31] Schelling's philosophy of art posits the sublime as a variant of *beauty*, rather than a distinct aesthetic category. The sublime, for Schelling, results from when a real object begins to resemble the ideal; beauty is thus linked to *truth* (Schelling, 1859/1989).

[32] Please note: I have deliberately avoided using Kant's (1793/2000/2007) term "judgment" here as judgment, colloquially, implies we experience something, reflect upon it, and then make a decision (i.e., "judgment") about it. This, however, is *not* how Kant uses the term. Kant asserts that the pleasure of the beautiful is derived from our immediate experience (i.e., judgment) of an object as beautiful, rather than being the case that we experience something as pleasing and then judge it to be beautiful. For Kant, judgment precedes pleasure.

Beauty. Unlike that which we understand as the experience of the sublime, the experience of the beautiful seems self-evident and something that can be agreed upon by a group of people. Consider for a moment Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* or Steve McCurry's (1984) photograph of an Afghan girl. When seen, the images strike many people as beautiful. Moreover, people (for the most part) generally agree that these two images are beautiful to a greater or lesser degree. The objects appear as beautiful, making "beauty" seem an identifiable given attribute of those objects.[33] But what does it mean when someone does not find the image beautiful? Perhaps I do not find McCurry's photograph to be striking or even pretty. Perhaps I mention this to my friends. They, in turn, may bring particular features to my attention. They might ask if I notice how the contrasting colours make the girl's eyes visually "pop"; they may even say, "See how you can't help but look into her eyes?" Or they may point out how the angle and highlight of her headscarf visually pulls they eyes around and to the centre of the image, further drawing viewers into the photograph's subject. They might also remark on the contrast between the simple appearance of the backdrop and the rich colour and texture of the girl's clothing. As my friends mention each of these items, my eyes will likely follow and I may likewise notice these aspects. Through their guidance, I can come to "see" how the image is beautiful to their eyes. While I may not fully change my own opinion of the photograph, its appearance of beauty to another becomes intelligible to me.

To return to Mariel's account: when mother and daughter first sit in front of the blue painting both Mariel and Erin agree upon its pleasantness and its ability to *stir them*. They agree it is (more or less) beautiful. This mutual recognition, however, does not seem to be the case with the sublime. While Mariel experiences it, her daughter ostensibly does not. Even when Mariel describes her experience in detail, when others (like the readers of this text) locate and look upon the image, they may find its sublimity largely incomprehensible. It seems that, even when standing in front of the same image, one person may experience the sublime while another will not. The sublime, moreover, may have a presence that is non-negotiable, unlike beauty. Whereas I may be convinced to see the beauty of McCurry's photograph (even if I did not initially experience the image as beautiful), this does not seem possible with the sublime.

[33] Kant (1793/2000/2007) offers an extensive explanation of this process.

Despite seeing the same image reveal itself in detail, reading the same accompanying text and discussing it, Erin seems no closer moved to experiencing the sublime than her mother is moved away from its occurrence. In this way, the sublime may be a uniquely individual experience. It may either occur or not and for no apparent reason.

In fact, the sublime may be so personal and singular that its experience may not even be communicable. Mariel tells of returning home:

> *I try to tell my husband about the painting—he doesn't seem to comprehend and looks at me like I am over-reacting. Frustrated, I give up and go upstairs.*

Despite Mariel's attempts to explain what has occurred, she is unable to convey the seriousness of the incident and gives up in frustration. "Frustration" derives from the Latin *frustra* (adv.) meaning "in vain, in error" (frustrate v., *Online Etymology Dictionary*, 2014). Our words may be inadequate to the task of describing what has transpired; any attempt to relay our experience of the sublime may seem in vain.

Conveying an experience of beauty, however, shares little of this difficulty. In a letter to composer Claude Debussy, Stéphane Mallarmé (2001) writes:

> My Dear Friend,
>
> I have just come from the concert, deeply moved: what a marvel! your illustration of the Afternoon of a Faun—not in the slightest disaccord with my text, except that it goes further, truly, in nostalgia and light, so delicate, disquieting, and rich. I grasp your hands with great admiration, Debussy.
>
> Your
>
> Stéphane Mallarmé. (p. 8)

Although only a brief missive, Mallarmé's letter is incredibly evocative of the beauty of Debussy's prelude. Even for those unfamiliar with the piece of music, the lyrical and poetic quality of Mallarmé's language may aesthetically resonate with the symphonic poem. It is as if,

through his very words, we can hear the music's elusive call. Language, it seems, is eminently better suited to expressing the experience of the beautiful. Certain words—*marvel, nostalgia, light, delicate*—seem to carry that which is beautiful. They embody it: they are beautiful words. The sublime, however, does not similarly adhere in particular words. Few words simultaneously appeal and repel in appearance, sound, and use.[34] Perhaps this why the sublime as an experience can be difficult to convey to another.

Despite the differences that may exist between the experience of the beautiful and of the sublime, however, one does not necessarily preclude the other. For Mariel, the painting is *both* marvellous and dreadful, exquisite and monstrous. The sublime seems to involve—but also be more than—an experience of beauty. Might this "more than" be beauty's inverse: ugliness?

Ugliness. In contrast to its frequent appeal to beauty, the philosophical literature rarely invokes ugliness in a direct comparison with the sublime. Rather, ugliness—in the form of excessive terror, fear, dread, horror, or a threat—is only invoked when it is described as appearing alongside the beautiful or pleasurable in the context of the sublime. For example, Kant (1793/2000/2007) claims that the sublime involves both the positive element of pleasure (that is found in the beautiful) and a negative element (fear or terror, that is not found in the beautiful).

In everyday life, however, the wealth of meaning in the manifestation of ugliness easily makes up for its dearth in philosophy. On the surface, ugliness appears to be a quality much like beauty: it seems to be a given, objective aspect of an object, culturally agreed upon and (within that culture) generally recognized. Like beauty, a group of people may more or less agree upon the ugliness of an image. And, as with a beautiful image, if I first do not see an image's ugliness, its ugly features can be pointed out to me and likely I will begin to "see" it as ugly.

Ugly images, however, have an obvious effect that often goes unnoticed with the beautiful. Looking at the images in the Canadian anti-smoking ads that curl around cigarette packages, I see a series of very ugly images. Looking at them, they are not just informative,

[34] Again, any occurrence tends to be highly individual.

their presence also "taints" the products they touch with their unsightliness and repugnance. After seeing these unsightly depictions, I do not want to touch the package, much less smoke their contents. In much the same way—but to a less conscious degree—I often want to buy, have, or access the product marked by the beautiful advertising image. Beauty and ugliness can draw us in or push us away, make its object appealing or repugnant, be pleasurable or unpleasurable, but never both at once. They appear as contraries. How, then, might the positive, appealing aspects of beauty and negative, repugnant elements of ugliness simultaneously manifest in our lived experience of the sublime? How is it possible that beauty and ugliness, the exquisite and the monstrous, can coexist in an image that evokes an experience of the sublime?

The Exquisite within the Monstrous

Consider George's account:

> *One morning I am on my way to work and I catch sight of my neighbour's newspaper lying outside the door. On the front cover is this picture, a beautiful and yet terrible picture of an incident that happened the night before. This image arrests me. I stop and lean over to get a better look at it. I am dismayed that it should be on the front page of the newspaper, but I don't doubt why it is. It is not just the topic—local "breaking news"—but also the image itself. With its pinkish-orange light against deep black and strong horizontal lines, the composition is perfect: a photograph rendered by a master. Its appearance, however, is at odds with its subject: a murderer sitting on a ledge, the body of his victim hanging out a window, and the shadow of police entering the apartment behind. But, in its own strange way, the photograph is incredibly beautiful. I have to consciously stop myself from picking up the newspaper and taking it. Even still, I have to have that image. I quickly leave, no longer interested in getting to work on time. Instead, I head straight to a convenience store to buy a newspaper.*

To find an image beautiful is not an uncommon or unusual occurrence—except when our response does not seem to correspond to the appearance of an image, such as when it is an image of violence. When we encounter an image that evokes the sublime, we may find that our response to the image is not what the image or logic seemingly calls for. There may even be a clear disjunction between what is (or would have been) expected and how we respond.

In life, the beautiful, striking, and attractive have an allure and appeal. They draw our attention, catch our eye, and can induce great pleasure from the simple act of looking. According to aesthetic philosopher Etienne Gilson (1965), the beautiful "causes admiration and holds the eyes" (pp. 22–23); it is the foundation of all art (Gilson, 1965). Conversely, we tend to turn away from the ugly, the grotesque, and the dreadful. It is as if we cannot bear to look on them, just as we cannot bear to be near them. Our eyes mimic our social shunning.

Images that evoke the sublime, however, may invert these common movements. Indeed, our reactions may become the exact opposite. Like George, we may find ourselves strangely captivated by what, in all respects, is an ugly image. And we may be surprised, for our response is not what we (or others) would have expected of such an image. Why might this be?

When we encounter an image that evokes the sublime, the form of the image may belie its content. For George, the striking image is premised on an ugly incident. And yet, the image appears to him as undeniably beautiful; it is an image *rendered by a master.* While "rendering" can mean to create or recreate, it can also imply the act of giving over or surrendering (render, v. & n., *Oxford English Dictionary,* 2014). In our experience of the sublime, one appearance of an image may give over to another, possibly its opposite. An ugly scene may turn into a breath-taking photograph. And the breath-taking photograph may starkly show its terrible subject.

The beauty of ugliness is well known in photography, even when the image does not evoke the sublime. Sontag (2003) writes, "images of the repulsive can also allure" (p. 95). How might we understand this allure? Some may claim that it is mere voyeurism; a vicarious enjoyment derived from looking at the pain of others. And yet, the sublime does not seem to correspond to voyeurism. Were George's response one of vicarious enjoyment, the appeal of the photograph would lie in the violence that the photograph documents. This does not seem the

case, however. He is upset by the very visible display of the murderer and the body: *I am dismayed that it should be on the front page of the newspaper.* Rather, George finds the photograph beautiful in spite of its terrible subject.

But is this, then, the opposite of voyeurism: the simple photographic practice of turning what in life is horrible into a beautiful image? Since the advent of photography, it has been a common practice to stage terrible events such as war, death, and poverty in such a way as to make them look beautiful. One famous historical example is found with the U.S. Farm Security Administration's photography program during the Great Depression. More than a dozen photographers were hired to document the state of rural poverty rampant throughout the United States, and they created some of the most iconic photographs of the twentieth century. Perhaps the most famous is Dorothea Lange's (1936) *Migrant Mother.* The photograph is a close-up of a mother staring contemplatively off into the distance while two young children bury their heads into her shoulder and a third, an infant, lies tucked low across her chest. The image eloquently captures the mother-child relationship instead of the poverty that Lange had been charged with documenting. Indeed, aside from the rough clothing, one can barely tell anything of the starvation that Florence Owen Thompson and her family were facing.[35] It is a photograph that is so beautiful in its portrayal of a mother with her children that the poverty of its subjects recedes into the background. The figures—nameless for years, because Lange never asked who they were—become mythic: they are a modern rendition of Madonna and child(ren).

Again, however, this kind of image does not seem to correspond to George's experience or any experience of an image that evokes the sublime. With the sublime, we may find that an image's terrible subject is beautifully depicted without its beauty negating its terrible aspect. The photograph George contemplates does not present itself as anything other than a murderer, his victim, and a soon-to-be police standoff. It is simply a violent scene beautifully depicted. The sublime, then, appears to stand in contrast to both voyeurism (enjoying the pain of another) and the beautification of the terrible (turning a terrible subject into a beautiful one).

[35] These conditions, however, were captured in the rest of Lange's photographic sequence, photographs that are not remembered.

How, then, might we understand the paradox of the ugly subject evoking the beautiful without becoming beautiful itself? How, in our experience, does an image seemingly become that which it is evidently not? In his study of ugliness, Umberto Eco (2007) notes:

> In the Middle Ages Bonaventure of Bagnoregio wrote that the image of the devil becomes beautiful if it is a good portrayal of his ugliness. (p. 20)

Although Eco doubts Bagnoregio's claim, the notion that "a good portrayal" can transform something terrible into something wonderful is interesting to consider. In contrast to beautification that covers over the terrible, Bagnoregio is suggesting that through the accuracy of a subject's portrayal (even when ugly), an image can become beautiful. This notion relates, once again, to the definition of rendering. As well as referring to a portrayal and surrender, "to render" can also imply a kind of transformation, specifically when we use the phrase "rendering down." Today, "rendering plants" process animal by-products into useable items such as bone meal. More narrowly used, however, the term "rendering down" refers to the processing of animal fat. When fat is subject to high heat, waste becomes purified into pure oil (as tallow and lard), something highly valued. When we experience an ugly image as sublime, might its very ugliness be rendered? Might its undesirability, its ugliness, its frightful and horrible appearance be transformed and purified in form? Purity of form and true likeness have long been associated with the beautiful. Might this be how the ugly and beautiful coincide?

Let us consider the work of an artist who is known for evoking this inversion. Describing the photographs of Edward Burtynsky, a reviewer writes: "Burtynsky uses a large format camera to document the human force on the landscape and create surreal, otherworldly, and sometimes unrecognizable imagery. The photographs are beautiful in their ugliness" (Wall, 17 January 2009). In Burtynsky's craft, horrible environmental devastation is transformed into stunning visual images. Scenes that appal are made strange, surreal, and unlike any other image of humans impact on the earth. The outcome: images that are both recognizable as the alarming events that they are and yet are also strangely, incredibly beautiful.

One might say that Burtynsky's photographs are "rendered well"—in all respects. They are created beautifully, their ugly subjects are given over to beautiful depiction, and the accurate

portrayal of ugliness results in its beauty. And yet, rendering has still another meaning. It can refer to the coat of plaster applied to a brick building (render, v., *Oxford English Dictionary,* 2014). This application, now a less common building practice, was traditionally a means of hiding the materials of the building and even suggesting the possibility that a more refined and expensive material (such as stone) had been used. When an ugly scene is rendered beautifully, might we be experiencing a similar "covering over"? Perhaps we should look more closely and ask: do Burtynsky's spectacular landscapes cover over their inherent abhorrent-ness? And might our experience of them as beautiful let us pretend that they are something other than the polluted rivers and the sweatshop factories that they document?

However the ugly becomes beautiful in a given image, I still wonder: how is this unique to our experience of the sublime? I might readily agree with the assessment of Burtynsky's reviewer, yet not experience Burtynsky's photographs as sublime. How, then, does the coincidence of the ugly and the beautiful, the monstrous and the exquisite uniquely unfold in the experience of the sublime?

The philosopher Schelling (1859/ 1989) writes:

> The relationship of the two [the sublime and the beautiful] resembles that of the two unities, each of which, however, in its own absoluteness equally encompasses the other. The sublime, to the extent that it is not *beautiful*, will for this reason also not be *sublime,* but rather only monstrous or adventurous. Similarly, absolute beauty always must be more or less simultaneously awesome or frightening beauty. (p. 90)

It may be that, without beauty, the sublime ceases to be. Perhaps it becomes something else entirely, something that had been bound up in the initial experience but tempered by the beautiful. Schelling notes two possibilities: the adventurous or the monstrous. Perhaps, for George, if the image were *not beautiful*, he would not have experienced it as sublime but merely very upsetting. He does note:

I am dismayed that it should be on the front page of the newspaper, but I don't doubt why it is. It is not just the topic—local "breaking news"—but also the image itself.

When we encounter an image that evokes the sublime, it is the image that catches us. Indeed, it is image that seemingly evokes the sublime, so much so that we may be tempted to call it "a sublime image." Our experience of the sublime seems to inhere with and in the image. As Schelling suggests, it may be that we may only experience it as sublime because the image is beautiful *and* ugly, monstrous *and* exquisite. Should they not be beautiful, they might not be sublime. And in their beauty they may indeed be "awesome or frightening." Although we often wish to claim our experiences of the world are distinct—for example, when we see an image we find it either interesting *or* boring, comedic *or* serious, beautiful *or* ugly—our experience of the sublime may suggest that experience, particularly an experience like the sublime, can contain a multiplicity. And this multiplicity can simultaneously surprise, shock, and even confound us.

Images that evoke the sublime seem to disclose a quality that makes them infinitely different from all other images of our world. They may draw our eyes, hold them, stop them in their continuous foray across our world. While our eyes may seek out these images, so too may these images seek us out. Like George, we may find that they detain us, cause us to pause. They appeal to us in such a way that we may feel that we *need* the image. It may urge us to take it, even steal it (or at least immediately run out and buy it). In some strange way, we may feel we need to possess the image, this beautiful yet ugly image, because this image may have possessed us. It may have taken hold of and gained mastery over us (possess, v,. *Oxford English Dictionary,* 2014).

The Monstrous Appearing within the Exquisite

We have, thus far, explored how the ugly image may appear beautiful in our experience of the sublime—but what of the reverse? Emma tells of an experience in Florence:

We climb the long, narrow stairwell that leads to the dome. It promises a close-up view of Brunelleschi's stunning mural. Finally reaching the top, a door stands open to radiant pink light, a welcome contrast to the dark, cold grey stone that has surrounded me for so long. A small ledge circles the dome. I am eager and step into the light, turning to see the famous painting. The painting is huge, garishly coloured, and the bodies depicted are enormous despite having appeared so small from below. Various saints reach up and around the dome, the windows above lighting their actions.

Moving forward to look at the church below, my eyes slide down across the floor and up the opposite wall to the dome. In an instant I am sick, vertigo rushes over me. It seems as if the saints have suddenly raised their arms against me. I want to flee, to leave, to get back down to the safety of the floor of the church, to where everything was so beautiful. But I am stuck, the ledge too narrow for me to pass those ahead or behind me. I close my eyes, but am awash in the feeling of this thing in front of me.

After a few calming breaths, I tell myself that I did not climb those steps in order <u>not</u> to see the painting this close. Looking up, I cannot take it in. Blues, reds, yellows, the flesh of sinners, wings of angels, the faces of giants stare back and I cannot meet them—I cannot even see them they are so vivid.

I glance back to my companion, but the mural is there. The mouth of hell opens up. An enormous devil swallows sinners. Souls are tossed to the flames. I look ahead and a victorious angel stands there. The angel is Athena angered.

I press to the wall trying not to look but unable not to. Slowly, I move with the steady flow of the crowd across the ledge to the opposite door. Slipping back through the narrow doorway, the dark stairwell is a welcome relief. I begin the long descent down.

Unlike George's encounter with the newspaper photograph, this experience of the sublime is not instantaneous with Emma's initial encounter with the image. She has, in fact, been observing

the mural from below for some time. It is only when Emma approaches the mural that, much like Mariel's experience, the painting unexpectedly changes and becomes sublime. It appears *instantly;* it *rushes over* her, flooding her perception and driving out all sense of the beautiful. The mural, having been observed from below as *beautiful*, becomes hostile, ugly, and monstrous.

The sublime appears to comes from and exist in our external world. And when it presents itself, it can threaten us. The sublime can be dangerous.

And yet, what about this experience is threatening? Emma is never in any physical danger but finds the mural threatening nevertheless. Quite distinctly, the sublime's being appears to emanate from the image itself. The exquisite painting that accommodated her gaze from below—that was merely something lovely to be seen—transforms into something that returns her gaze. When we encounter the sublime, we may even find the image staring back at us as would another living thing (Elkins, 1997).

The experience of being looked at is, for Merleau-Ponty (1964), at the heart of artistic creation. He writes, "painting evokes nothing…. It gives visible existence to what profane vision believes to be invisible" (p. 166). The painter only paints that which makes itself visible to him as it makes itself visible. Merleau-Pointy (1964) explains:

> It is the mountain itself which from out there makes itself seen by the painter; it is the mountain that he interrogates with his gaze.
>
> What exactly does he ask of it? To unveil the means, visible and not otherwise, by which it makes itself a mountain before our eyes. Light, lighting, shadows, reflections, color, all the objects of his quest are not altogether real objects; like ghosts, they only have visual existence. In fact they exist only at the threshold of profane vision: they are not seen by everyone. (p. 166)

For Merleau-Ponty, the painter experiences these unique dimensions as “emanat[ing] from the things themselves” (p. 167).[36] Might the experience of the sublime be a bodily recognition of one such ghost emanating from the image itself? Merleau-Ponty (1964) admits:

> Essence and existence, imaginary and real, visible and invisible—a painting mixes up all our categories in laying out its oneiric universe of carnal essences, of effective likenesses, of mute meanings. (p. 169)

Emma, however, seems far more physically affected by the image than most painters are aroused by the world that appears to them. In fact, her experience seems somewhat contradictory to the painter’s. Whereas the painter sees what is not readily visible to all, Emma cannot bear to look upon that which is readily evident to everyone around her.

What is it to look and yet be unable to see? When an image evokes an experience of the sublime, we do not merely look upon the image; we may be encountering the image in its absolute otherness. In *What do pictures want?* Mitchell (2005) argues that traditionally painting’s most basic intention was conceived as “a kind of mastery over the beholder” (p. 36). He explains:

> The painting’s desire, in short, is to change places with the beholder, to transfix or paralyze the beholder, turning him or her into an image for the gaze of the picture in what might be called “the Medusa effect.” (p. 36)

Might the sublime when evoked by an image be an experience of the Medusa effect? of our gaze giving way to the gaze of the image? We may even become subject to their demand.

When we experience the sublime, the image may appear fully other to us, as something undeniable, something there in our world with which we must contend as equals and not mere

[36] “The actions most proper to [a painter]—those gestures, those paths which he alone can trace and which will be revelations to others—to him they seem to emanate from the things themselves, like the patterns of the constellations. Inevitably the roles between him and the visible are reversed. That is why so many painters have said that things look at them” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 167).

observers. Emma's response is to flee, closing her eyes, coaching her thoughts, in her recognition of its presence.

Emma tries to describe this presence: *The mural is there. Hell opens up. The devil swallows sinners. The angel is Athena, angered.* Athena is the goddess of war, the goddess of philosophy and wisdom. She is herself "beautiful sublimity" (Schelling, 1859/ 1989).[37] Athena counsels heroes, yet, when she is displeased her knowledge is dangerous and the result is violence. One account (given by mythologist Robert Graves [1955/1988]) tells how the earth gave Athena Erichthonius in the form of a serpent to raise. Having placed Erichthonius into a box, Athena entrusts him into the care of three sisters, exhorting them not to open the box until her return. Ignoring her command, they open the box and, upon seeing the snake, are driven insane, ultimately throwing themselves off the Acropolis. The sublime, like Athena herself, may be a source of knowledge and yet, in its extremity, also suggests violence and contains the risk of insanity.

Like the box given the sisters, the possibility of the sublime exists in what may initially appear a beautiful image before us. When it reveals itself, when we unwittingly open the box, the sublime may appear like a monster and threaten to overcome us. We commonly think of monsters as frightening mythical creatures, something extraordinary or unnatural, or something of "vast or unwieldy proportions" (monster, n., adv. and adj., *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2014). In the medieval period, however, monsters had a more paradoxical existence. They were a combination of the divine (proof of God's existence) and of its negation (not his messengers, but tools of the Devil). Some scholars have interpreted this paradox as a violation of boundaries, the merging of upper and lower, divine and profane (Hennelly Jr., 2001**,** p. 73), the violation of categories we prefer to keep distinct. Our response to this violation is both fear and fascination, repulsion and attraction.

The monstrous also contains an element of the unknown and unknowable. It seems that the sublime is, indeed, monstrous. It appears terrifying, extraordinary, vast, and

[37] Specifically, Schelling (1859/1989) identifies Minerva, the Roman equivalent of Athena, as being "beautiful sublimity," in contrast to Juno (the Roman Hera) who is "sublime beauty" (pp. 90–91).

incomprehensible. In the past, cartographers drew monsters on their maps to indicate dangerous and unexplored regions of the world. Sea serpents, dragons, tigers, real and fantastic monsters of all kinds adorned the maps' edges, marking the ends of the known world and the boundaries of human knowledge. Sailors were warned *there be dragons.* One was not to venture there. And yet, like the sisters wanting to open the box, wanting to discover what lay within, the draw of those unknown regions proved irresistible and new continents were discovered. The danger of the sublime, like those warnings given explorers, may not temper its magnetic attraction and the promise of the possibility of discover new, formerly unrecognized, or unspeakable knowledge.

Encountering that which Cannot Be Seen

Once more I ask: how can an image that evokes the sublime be simultaneously experienced as both exquisitely beautiful and monstrously ugly? So far, several possibilities have appeared: an image may reveal both facets; an image of one may be portrayed in such a way that it becomes the other; or an image of one may evoke the other as response.

One of the most famous Greco-Roman myths concerns the very question of how beauty and ugliness can come together in one. Medusa is most often remembered for the part she (or rather, her head) played in Perseus' rescue of the princess Andromeda. However, her origin story proves an interesting tale for what I am exploring here.

According to Graves (1955/1988), Medusa was one of three Gorgons, all of whom originally had the appearance of beautiful women.[38] One evening, Medusa is caught having sex with the sea god, Poseidon, in one of Athena's temples.[39] Athena punishes Medusa for this violation by transforming her hair into snakes and making it so that, at the mere sight of her,

[38] It is interesting to note that rarely is Medusa described in Greek myth as a beautiful human woman who is transformed by Athena. It is only with Ovid's retelling that Medusa moves from being a mortal creature to being a mortal woman. In the original myths, Medusa had, from the very beginning, a monstrous quality.

[39] Why Medusa was in Athena's temple or whether the sex was consensual or rape varies according to the storyteller.

any human or animal will turn to stone.[40] In a single stroke, Athena transforms the beautiful Medusa into a horrible monster.

What is particularly interesting about Medusa's transformation is that Athena did not disfigure Medusa (unlike Aphrodite's transformations of those who angered her). Rather, Athena tainted Medusa's beauty with a monstrousness. Indeed, after her transformation, Medusa's original beautiful human face—that which had held so much appeal to men and gods alike—remained but became framed by a head of deadly snakes. To reach for her would mean the bite of something deadly. And even if those snakes were avoided, one was still blocked from touching her beauty, for her visage was given a monstrous but invisible quality: no longer could it be looked upon by any mortal man or beast without causing death. Medusa, therefore, was left still appealing to warm living flesh but it was an appeal that guaranteed one would harden, become cold, and die. In Medusa's encompassing the extremities of exquisiteness and monstrosity simultaneously, I wonder if Athena's curse was not to make Medusa ugly but to make her sublime.

What might be gleaned of the phenomenon of sublimity if to look upon Medusa was to look directly into the face of the sublime? When we encounter the face of the sublime—the exquisite and monstrous together as one in a single image—we may be turned to stone; that is, rendered immobile and struck silent by its strange power. Like Emma, we may wish *to flee, to leave*, but find we are *stuck.* Or, like Mariel, we may find ourselves entranced by the image, losing all sense of time and those around us. It is as if we become the object of the image's sublime stilling gaze (Mitchell, 2005). Movement may no longer be freely ours. Rather, we, like Mariel, may find ourselves *standing there* immobile until someone *pulls us away*.

In this respect, the myth of Medusa may be a cautionary tale of encountering the sublime. Looking upon an image that evokes the experience of the sublime, we may be drawn by an image's physical, mortal beauty—but only at the risk of also encountering its opposite and being

[40] Graves lists other changes Athena also wrought, including a similar transformation of Medusa's two sisters; however the two features noted above are the most important in Medusa's story and to our exploration.

irreparably altered by our encounter. Writing of the transformative power of art, Gadamer (1975/1989) remarks:

> [T]ransformation means that something is suddenly and as a whole something else, that this other transformed thing that it has become is its true being, in comparison with which its earlier being is nil. When we find someone transformed we mean precisely this, that he has become another person, as it were. (p. 111)

In seeking out the earthly beautiful flesh, our experience of the sublime may result in our becoming hardened, made un-flesh-like ourselves, and left with only the idea (perhaps, the Platonic ideal?) of being human. At the very least, one risks finding oneself transfigured by the encounter with it and turned into something else entirely unlike one's former self. Medusa's account suggests that, perhaps, such encounters are best left unexplored in life's dark caverns. Perhaps, we ought not to seek them out.

Medusa's account, however, does not end with her transformation, or even with her beheading by Perseus; for, even in death, Medusa did not lose her power. Her face, although lifeless and severed from her body, still had the power to turn living creatures to stone. Indeed, the man who famously wielded her power never looked upon her face but only at her reflection: Medusa's image, a pale replica of her original self. Might the sublime, when evoked by an image, be our experience of looking beyond the image as image and seeing the image as being? Might this be why the image seems so startlingly when it speaks back to us?

And yet, there might still be more that can learned about the sublime from Medusa's story. Consider Medusa's original form; that which she was before Athena changed her. It is claimed that Medusa was not only the most beautiful of the three Gorgons but that she was one of the most beautiful woman ever made and had many suitors. Medusa was, quite simply, so exquisite that she was near god-like. This fact may alter my previous assessment. What if Medusa's sublimity—her combined exquisiteness and monstrousness—did not arise from a curse applied for disrespecting the gods but out of her near perfection? Medusa was not just perfect in human terms; she neared total perfection, a god-like perfection. In one of his many

studies of world religions, Campbell (1991) notes how gods can be experienced as sublime when they appear monstrous, particularly in end-time accounts. "They represent powers too vast for the normal forms of life to contain them" (p. 278). Moreover, gods can rarely be looked upon directly by human eyes. Unencumbered by human form or a veil of dreams, the radiance of gods' being overwhelms and threatens to destroy those who see them. Medusa, one might argue, did not need to be cursed by Athena, for she was already sublime in her absolute beauty. From the moment of her birth, she already possessed the exquisiteness that simultaneously made her monstrous.

But what does this tell of the experience of the sublime when evoked by an image? In his essay "The Vestige of Art," Nancy (1994) writes,

> What matters, then, is this: a visibility of invisibility as such, or ideality made present, even if it be the paradoxical presence of its abyss, its darkness, or its absence. This is what makes for the *beautiful,* ever since Plato and even more, perhaps, since Plotinus, for whom, in the access to beauty, it is a question of becoming oneself pure light and vision, in beauty's intimacy, and thus becoming "the only eye capable of seeing supreme beauty." Supreme beauty, or the brilliant flash of truth, or the sense of being. Art, or the sensible sense of absolute sense. And once again this is what makes for a beautiful that goes beyond itself into the "sublime," then into the "terrible," as well as into the "grotesque," into the implosion of "irony," in a general entropy of forms or into the pure and simple position of a ready-made object. (pp. 89–90)

Both Nancy and Medusa speak of a beauty beyond the limits of the human. It is a beauty that makes that which is invisible visible and the visible unseeable; and in this transformation it becomes sublime. When we experience the sublime, we may momentarily perceive its "brilliant flash of truth" while simultaneously being blinded by that which is so exquisite and monstrous that it slips beyond our capacity to see.

The Change in the Appearance of the Image

My exploration of Medusa has led me to understand how, in extreme cases, monstrosity and exquisiteness may merge and become such that the image cannot be looked upon. However, I do not want it inferred from this discussion that any image that evokes the sublime cannot be looked upon. From the various accounts offered up thus far, that is evidently untrue. Rather, what the discussion suggests is that the simultaneity of beauty and ugliness in our experience of the sublime may affect the nature of our seeing. Specifically, their coincidence has implications for both the image's visibility and how we may look at the image. I must therefore not only consider how the image that evokes the sublime may simultaneously *appear* as beautiful and ugly or exquisite and monstrous, I must also consider how our experience of the image as sublime may change how we see—and, in extreme cases, whether we are able to see—the image. To appreciate this aspect fully, I need to understand not only how we see sublime images but also how we see all images.

Let me return to Mariel's account. First, I want to note that Mariel's experience occurs in an art gallery. It is not an uncommon place to be moved by an image. But Mariel's experience is uncommon, even though it does not start out that way. When we encounter images, particularly within public spaces, we tend to see them because they are meant to be seen. This is not, however, merely due to a chance encounter with something that has been placed within our sightline. As Marion (2004) articulates in his phenomenology of the visual image:

> This gift for making itself seen does not result from the propensity of visitors to come to see it; the painting does not become visible because we go to visit it, called in groups, attentive or distracted. We visit it, on the contrary, because its intrinsic visibility imperatively calls us—just as it is necessary to visit prisoners and the sick, who retain a right to company despite their fate; and just as it is necessary and inevitable to end up yielding to the desire of seeing again and receiving back the one whom one loves, simply because he remains there, waiting for an homage that is owed him, although distance and customs may oppose it. (pp. 29–30)

We see images because images demand that we see them. And images commonly demand we see them in particular ways (Mitchell, 2005). If the image is an artwork in a gallery, it may ask us to pause and momentarily ponder it. As we gaze at it, it might call to mind certain memories or suggest a particular place that we know. Or we may notice how its medium or the manner in which it is displayed generates a particular mood. We may like the image (or not), or find it interesting (or not), but our responses largely remain within the familiar well-known realm of responses we have to art. News footage, conversely, can similarly cause us to stop and ponder it, but the consideration the news draws is of an entirely different order. Rarely do we see the footage of a recent news story and say "it makes me think of the sea" or "it reminds me of the time we went to Halifax." To respond in this way (although not impossible) seems somehow out of place, almost inappropriate to what these images are. They are not the responses this type of image demands of us. The news story contains information about our world. It may tell us of the sea or of someone going to Halifax, but rarely does it serve as the springboard for an unrelated personal reflection. In those rare moments when we do see a news story and are reminded of a past event, the moment that thought enters our mind it is as if we have already left the image behind. Unlike the art object, the news image does not readily offer itself up as a place to rest our reminiscences.[41] It is even less likely that we would comment on the mood the news evokes as something intentionally or manipulatively created by its author. Rather, the emotions the news image evokes are seen to arise from the subject that the news is reporting.

As this brief comparison suggests, images act in particular ways. The manner in which they give themselves can be directed and intentional; they have agency (Gell, 1998; Mitchell, 2005) and are not mere receptacles of a viewer's random desires. We tend to encounter images as they call us to encounter them: as artwork in a gallery or as news images on a television screen. We tend to see and respond to the images according to what type of images they are and in their contexts.

[41] I am aware that many art critics would argue that those persons who reminisce in front of an art object are not experiencing it correctly. However, the fact they do not approve of how some laypersons experience art does not negate this manner of experience.

Not all experiences of images, however, remain within the familiar realm of responses. Sometimes something happens that may change our experience of an image. When Mariel stands to leave the pretty blue canvas, planning to move on to the next room and the next work of art, something about the painting catches her eye and causes her to stop. In that moment, something has changed. Something appears that was not there before. *What*, she cannot say. *I can't make out what it is.* However, whatever that "something" may be suggests there may be more to be seen with this image, and it causes her to consider the painting further.

When our experience of the sublime is evoked by an image, we may first notice it as something that catches our attention. Some, like George seeing the newspaper, may experience it from the first instant they see the image. For others, like Mariel, it may take some time to appear. However, in both cases something out of the ordinary is suddenly present. Something appears that was not there moments before. In some way, the image may snag on the ease with which we normally encounter the images in our world. Something about *this particular image* may seem different from other images (including itself moments prior) and, in its difference, our relation to the image can change. A single glimpse discloses the possibility of the image's revealing itself further; perhaps even promising the revelation of an unspoken secret that it may hold. And the possibility of this secret revealed may draw us in.

But what occurs when we stop to reconsider an image as Mariel does? Sometimes, nothing. A closer look reveals that that "something" was, in fact, nothing. The image remains what it initially appeared to be. However, sometimes what at first was only a possibility becomes a reality. The image may open itself to us. Like Mariel, we may unexpectedly find ourselves newly discovering an image we have already spent several minutes looking at and already thought we knew. The image shows itself as it had not done before. It may even reveal itself as an entirely different, entirely new image. In revealing its sublimity, the image may change.

When the experience of sublimity arises after we have already spent time looking at an image, it may seem as if the sublime emerges from *within* the image. It is as if the image itself is revealing its sublimity. Indeed, the sublime may be, at times, a secret held and only disclosed to those who look closely and open themselves to see. We might wonder how many individuals

wandered into the gallery, looked at the painting, and wandered out without ever seeing the colours, butterflies, and horror that was revealed to Mariel?

We might also wonder if upon returning to the gallery some time later, Mariel would still experience the image as sublime? Would she, like Elkins (2001), be "numbed" (p. 77) by her previous exposure and find the image less than expected? perhaps even dull? Or would the image appear just as vivid and strong? Or would the image, possibly, reveal yet another aspect, one previously unseen? All seem possible. Unlike beauty or ugliness, which once manifest often remains evident in subsequent viewings of an image, the manifestation of the sublime in one instance does not assure its future presence. Just as the sublime may spontaneously appear as a revelation of the image, so too may it withdraw and conceal itself.

But let me return to the moment of the sublime's appearance: what is revealed when the sublime appears through our encounter with an image? Consider again Mariel's description of this moment:

> *I am drawn towards the canvas—I still don't know what these colours are but the painting is fascinating. I want to run up to it and yet I deliberately take my time in order to draw out the pleasure of discovery.*
>
> *When I am standing directly in front of the canvas, the blue fades into the background and that is when I see them. Butterflies. It is like an entirely different work of art. The radiance of hundreds of beautiful butterflies that had once lived and fluttered consumes me. I am like a child again, looking through my kaleidoscope and being swallowed up by a new world full of colour and disorganization, a world where I lose myself in colours and shapes.*

In this moment, Mariel, the appreciator of art touring the Tate with her daughter in a bid to foster cultural appreciation, ceases to be an objective, formal appreciator of art or even a pedagogue. Instead, she seemingly returns to a more authentic, open, child-like relation to the image. In our experience of the sublime, we may find that when the image offers to open itself to us, so too do we open ourselves to the image. To experience the sublime, then, may be to experience the image in a moment of revealing. We may even feel as if we are seeing with new eyes. Our

expectations—of the picture and of ourselves—may drop away. We may find ourselves letting go of our customary ways of looking at the images. The habit, practice, and tradition of the customary (custom, n., *Online Etymology Dictionary,* 2014) can give way to a different kind of seeing when we enter the space of the image in its sublimity.

And yet, how do we see differently when we experience the sublime? Do we only see the image differently or is its transformative capacity much broader? Before we can explore these questions, I need first to better understand how we customarily see.

Seeing Images and How our Seeing Changes when we Experience the Sublime

Images are everywhere and everywhere they are seen. Using the closest example at hand, when I glance across my desk I happen to look upon a photograph. My eyes slide across it, perhaps briefly stop, and then they move on. Looking appears a simple and common act. However, let me consider it more closely.

> *In the middle of writing, I momentarily pause to think. My hands in mid-writing pause on my keyboard and my eyes have strayed away from the screen. They have moved of their own accord to the closest thing at hand, a photograph propped up in the corner of my desk. A face, not personally known but familiar, looks out from it. She doesn't look at me but past me, caught in mid-thought, perhaps even mid-conversation with someone I cannot see. She leans on a table slightly squinting due to the bright sunny day: a day out at the beach. One hand is lifted up to hold back her wind-blown hair. I briefly wonder what she was saying in that moment and wonder if, one day, I too will write such thoughts. I take all of this in in mere moments before I turn back to my computer and get back to work.*

In turning to look, I see the photograph of a young woman and I almost always see it as a representation or "image" of that young woman. As Wittgenstein observes (1958/1963), "We *regard* the photograph, the picture on our wall, as the object itself (the man, landscape, and so

on) depicted there" (p. 205e). Looking at images in this way, we tend to look through them. It is as if we see through the image's pictorial surface to gaze at what lies beyond it, both physically and metaphorically. Marion (2004) explains the reason behind this miracle of perspective: I can see the woman because of what the perspective of the image prevents me from seeing. She is created by that which is hidden but implied around her (the landscape and the rest of her body).

I, however, not only project a space as existing beyond the young woman (the space in which I perceive her to be physically situated), I also project a story, a memory, or an account (whether simple or elaborate) to accompany her presence. I may intuit that which led to the image's being created: a slightly windy day, the sun beating down, a photograph taken in the middle of a conversation that managed to capture the most subtle and unconscious gestures of interest in her companions. All this can seem immediately apparent at first glance. Our reading of most images seemingly takes no effort on our part. It appears our natural way of seeing, even though it is culturally and historically specific (Baxandall, 1972/1988).[42]

While this form of seeing may be self-evident when we consider representative images like photographs or realistic paintings, it also tends to be how we look upon non-representative images such as abstract paintings. When we look at an abstract painting, we may infer an account of the image's making much in the same way as we do for photographs. But instead of basing the account upon recognizable gestures and features of a perceived environment, we base our readings upon the telltale marks existent on the artwork's surface. We see in the drips splashed across the surface (e.g., with a Jackson Pollack painting), the ink silkscreened onto the canvas (e.g., an Andy Warhol print), or the brushstrokes left in the paint (e.g., Vincent a van Gogh painting) an account of how the painting was created. Images—abstract or representative—seem innately suited to induce these sorts of near-automatic readings-into. Such images can act much like the glaze of a window, seen through but not seen in themselves; even though it is the unique structure of their physical presence that enables to us to "see through them" and understand what we see (Marion, 2004). We seem to respond to such images less as images proper than as simple "images of." They become purveyors of narratives readily given up and that demand very little from their viewers (sometimes not even the urge to look further), so immediately evident do

[42] Baxandall (1972/1988) calls culturally and historically specific ways of seeing "the period eye."

their stories appear. Our looking takes on a lazy quality. All exertion occurs within the image. Indeed, we understand them without any seeming effort on our part. It is as if the image has opened an imaginary space wherein we slip immediately in and out of the briefest of reveries without even realizing that this movement has occurred.

Images that evoke the sublime, however, do not seem to show themselves, nor do they orient us quite in the same way. Once the blue canvas suggests to her that it might be something else, Mariel ceases to see it with the same ease with which she saw the other artworks in the gallery and even with which, moments before, she had seen the image itself. Moreover, the story that the painting had initially drawn her to imagine (the calming sea) falls away. Now, the image seems to resist that narrative, whereas before it had given way to this easily. Suddenly, Mariel can no longer penetrate the image as she had done. Instead, the image opens up an entirely different facet of itself to her, one that is both incredibly appealing and, upon further reflection, exceedingly disturbing. It becomes a difficulty and the story its materials tell her of its creation is unpleasant.

When we experience an image as sublime, we may experience the image as demanding something different, something more of us. For Mariel this is, at first, her attempt to reconcile how the beautiful image was monstrously made and, later, to accept the strange horrific pleasure it evokes. When faced with an image that evokes the sublime, we may try to make sense of what we are seeing and how we are responding, and yet we may be unable to do so. It may even draw forth a strange moment of reflexivity in which we may become aware of our own seeing. Because of the unusualness of our experience, we may even become aware of how routine and codified our daily seeing is, and how strange it is to "really see."

The Lived Sublime as "Seeing with New Eyes"

Yet, what does it mean to "really see"? How can we see with "new eyes," so to speak? What is there about the image or our world that is newly revealed by this kind of seeing? In the short story "The Man in the Rorschach Shirt," Ray Bradbury (1971) tells of one individual who gained such (in)sight. Dr. Immanuel Brokaw is a prominent psychiatrist who mysteriously disappears

after suddenly and unexpectedly retiring. Years later, a former student happens to see him boarding a bus in Newport, California.

The student greets his former professor, now aged and oddly attired, and they strike up a conversation. Inevitably, the young man asks about his mentor's sudden disappearance. Dr. Brokaw explains that one day he discovered that for years he had been mishearing what his patients were saying, despite his supposed eidetic (photographic) memory. This realization occurs simultaneously with his decision to purchase contact lenses to correct his "weak eyes." Dr. Brokaw asks his student, "Sight. Vision. Texture. Detail. Aren't they miraculous. Aweful in the sense of meaning true awe. What is sight, vision, insight? Do we really want to see the world?" When the student quickly replies, "Oh, yes," Dr. Brokaw tells him that his answer is "a young man's unthinking answer. No, my dear boy, we do not. At twenty, yes, we think we wish to see, know, be all. So thought I once…" (pp. 247–248). But Dr. Brokaw tells of how his conviction changed after getting contact lenses. The lenses cleared his eyes and strengthened his sight, but what did he see? "There is the world! There were people! And there, God save us, was the dire, and the multitudinous pores upon the people" (p. 248).

Upon clearly seeing and hearing the world for the first time, Dr. Brokaw is tormented by what he encounters. The vision that brings the world into acute focus prevents him from seeing the people around him as people, much less in the companionable or professional way that he once did. No longer does he revel in a woman's soft limbs, but can only focus on her fleshy body. He cannot even bear to look at himself in the mirror, forever acutely aware of his own physical person. He suffers as if in a "second adolescence." In nearly as traumatic a change, his suddenly clear hearing forces him to question his entire professional practice to date. He wonders how could he ever have helped—much less cured—his patients, being as blind and deaf as he himself had been? Dr. Brokaw laments, "The lame do *not* lead the lame, my reason cried, the blind and halt do not cure the halt and the blind!" (p. 250).

Bradbury's story is fantastic and highly humorous, but it points to ways that a seeming "clarity of vision" and "new seeing" can affect our perception of things. To see differently is not always a pleasant and welcome experience. Although the sublime does not cause us to acquire the objectively better vision that we gain when we put contact lenses in our eyes, it may

cause us to see and experience our world more intensely. With his new sight, Dr. Brokaw finds he is surrounded by the "multitudinous pores" upon the people, while Mariel is suddenly aware of all the colours of existence bound through the deliberate slaughter of hundreds of butterflies.

For both Dr. Brokaw and the person who experiences the sublime, this intensity may somehow seem "more accurate" than what they had previously perceived—even if *what* they now perceive appears ugly, painful, and violent. Neither Dr. Brokaw nor Mariel doubt the veracity of what they see, despite the pain of the experience. All of this had always been present, even if they had not known it before. The experience of the sublime, therefore, may not be an experience of imagination or fantasy. It appears firmly grounded in our experience of the world. It does not seem to "*extinguish* or *remove* actual experiences… of the surrounding real world," as Ingarden (1985, p. 310) describes of aesthetic experience in general. Rather, the world may be experienced as never before. The experience can "break open an open place, in whose openness everything is other than usual" (Heidegger, 1971, p. 70). In the experience of the sublime, we are still in the world, but it is a world suddenly altered.

When we experience the sublime, we are in the world, our experience is *of* the world, but it is a world ruptured, a world terrifyingly unusual, terrifyingly disrupted, and reordered. Our most basic relations may become altered. We may no longer be able to relate to those around us or to the world as we once did. For Dr. Brokaw, persons with whom he had once happily associated are revealed to be mere animated sacks of skin, physically repulsive creatures. He is no longer able to see beyond their physicality to their humanity. Likewise, Mariel finds her experience of art subsequently altered. The brightness of the butterfly painting makes all of the other work—even that of her favourite artist—appear dull and uninteresting. Even the gallery loses its appeal. What had been the expected highlight of her day is now boring and unimportant.

In our experience of the sublime, the world may become extremely vivid, as though our perception were suddenly distorted. Who has not stared at the night sky, admiring the infinite stars, only suddenly to recognize that it is physical space into which we are looking—infinite, empty space that never ends? The sky ceases to be a comforting blanket with its pinpricks of light and our eyes move forward through its depth, searching for an end but not finding it. Who has not felt the dizzying vertigo of that vast endlessness? and our own smallness in it?

And yet, we can easily pull ourselves back from perceiving the sky in this way. We need only look back to the ground to return to our former way of seeing. Dr. Brokaw and Mariel do not appear so lucky. To experience the sublime may be to experience a change that is given to us, unasked for, and irrevocable. In extreme cases, we may even feel like the victim of arbitrarily cruel circumstances. We may feel caught by a change that we did not request nor seek out. And yet, we may feel that the ways in which the sublime reshapes the familiar into the alien are excessive or unwanted. Our experience of the sublime may bring into acute focus both the beauty and the faults of the world and those around us. Even we ourselves may not be exempt from the necessary reconsideration and re-evaluation. Looking back, Dr. Brokaw questions all of his professional achievements, all of his recovered patients. But his new self is no more acceptable or tolerable and, with no escape, his only recourse is to "shut my eyes and [go] to bed for several days" (p. 249).

Likewise, Mariel's world and her sense of self are changed and challenged by her experience:

> *Looking around my bedroom, I see my cream wallpaper filled with aqua marine butterflies. I see my trinket boxes and the knick-knacks that I have collected over the years, all of which have ornamental butterflies attached to them. Everywhere I look, all I see now are butterflies trying to escape but can't. I can't stand looking at them. They need to come down. In that very moment, I decide it is time to redecorate.*

Although Mariel has left the gallery and the painting's butterflies behind, she is not free. At home, other butterflies now come to her notice. She sees them everywhere. They are no longer a pleasant motif; they are tainted with an ineffable sinister quality. They are dying before her over and over again. The painting has followed her home and her world now shares something of its sublime facet, something of its beauty and its ugliness.

When we experience the sublime, our world changes and this change may be permanent. What the sublime newly reveals may not quickly dissipate, and we may find this knowledge troubling and terrible. We may try to remove it—Mariel takes all evidence of butterflies out of

her house—or we may hide from it, like Dr. Brokaw. We may even choose to refuse it, like Dr. Brokaw when he shouts, "Reality is not all! I refuse this knowledge…. I accept instead those truths we intuit, or make up to live by" (p. 249). We may attempt to take out our contact lenses, re-muffle our hearing, and attempt to return to some semblance of our former lives, although now with better understanding of its untruth, imperfections, and agreed-upon lies.

But can we ever truly un-see that which we have seen? Can we forget our experience of the sublime? Mariel no longer collects butterflies, despite continuing to love them. The painting seems to follow her still. And even though he is once again "blind and halt," Dr. Brokaw cannot bear to return to his practice and, therefore, decides upon immediate retirement. To conclude his story, Bradbury tells how Dr. Brokaw now wanders the beaches of California informally acting as a psychiatrist to strangers, always in his strange Rorschach shirt. In much the same way, although we may desire to return to it, we may not necessarily find our previous life bearable after we have experienced the sublime. Or, rather, we may find that life impossible to ever fully regain. Even though it may no longer be present, it seems that we can never fully leave behind the sublime or the image and return to our former lives. We have been marked by what we have seen, even when we could not bear to look upon it. We may be forced to wander, like Dr. Brokaw, wishing to reject but aware of our inability to ever fully erase the impact of our encounter. And what we become in its aftermath may be interpreted either as a shadow of our former self—comical, yet sad (as the student first saw Dr. Brokaw)—or as an awakening (a "sunrise," as the student concludes). Just as our experience of the sublime is an experience of the revealing of the image, it may also be a revealing of our selves.

Chapter 6: The Sublime as the Experience of Horror & Delight

The Raw Appeal of a *Figure with Meat*

The day is like the others. I sit in the partial darkness of the amphitheatre writing, writing, writing without stop in the halfways-shorthand that has come to represent my experience of art. My hand scrambling to keep up with the tumbling words, my fingers cramped and aching, the white paper gradually turning black. Writing endlessly, my mind floating—transmitting without pause or thought the professor's lengthy descriptions of the paintings we are studying. My eyes dance between two depths of field: the scrawl of notes on the desk and the distant projection screen. I glance up and down… up and down… up and down…—the slide changes—up and…

I stop.

My first thought comes as a smell: the copper-penny odour of blood. A smell from my childhood, packaging fresh meat from hunting, standing on a floor stained and sticky with spilt blood. The image, huge and looming in front of me is wet with it; the gore translated perfectly through projected light. My hand, moving seconds earlier, hovers motionless above the page. The image of blood and meat and figure—all of them emerging from the darkness of the canvas—is beautiful, horrible. I feel the skin across my scalp crawl and tighten as my body reacts. There is a taste to this type of image; I swallow with a mouth that is suddenly dry. It is too much to take in. The other paintings now take on a pretty sheen. The ominous room, the figure of the man, the glistening sides of meat hovering like wings above him are painted with incredible detail and beauty. They are raw, demanding. They command my full attention.

My eyes move across the image—the professor's voice continues on, heedless of me, as I stare—at the man in the forefront. His face is in torment, empty sockets staring blindly forward, the anguish augmented by the juxtaposition of dripping meat. I am frowning now, a wrinkle of concentration furrowing my

brow as I am drawn further into the painting. The man's hands are clutched in pain or anger, his mouth slightly agape. Smiling? Screaming? The entire painting writhes with emotion. Lines of paint—tears or blood—pour down his face, through the meat, across the canvas. Distantly, it seems, a part of me wonders at the strength of the artist. I want to paint like this. Raw. The amphitheatre and the shuffling of students have disappeared; my awareness focused entirely on the small space before the screen. I'm conscious only of the power of the image, my sensory connections to this painting—smell, sight, touch—and of my breathing as I try to take it in, swallow it whole, understand "how." The power of the artist's intention and message overwhelms me. I am amazed, entrance, in awe. I do not understand.

Without warning, the image flashes briefly white as the professor changes the slide—the sudden brightness interrupting my thoughts, now confused, as my consciousness returns into the present. Like surfacing after diving, I am momentarily disoriented.

I glance down at my blank page. A glowing after-image of the painting stares back at me.

With the switch of the slide, Caitlin (a participant in this study) encounters a painting that draws forth a strange and unusual bodily response. Its effect ripples through every fibre of her being and seems to speak to the depths of her soul. It somehow pushes aside all thought, all action, other than being present to—being with—*this* image. Somewhat surprisingly, this response is evoked by a painting that is not even physically present to Caitlin. It is only a projection on a white screen. And yet, somehow, this duplication does not dull its effect; Caitlin responds to this image with a physical intensity she has never before felt towards another artwork.

We are often disconnected from our actions and our bodies, even as they are our means to move in and through our world. Like Caitlin, whose mind was initially *floating* with her endless writing and whose only bodily awareness was her cramped and achy hand, our bodies move with unconscious ease and largely go unnoticed unless pained or otherwise. Suddenly,

however, we may encounter something that calls us back to our physical selves. For Caitlin, the force of the image's presence is so strong that she is literally stopped without warning from doing that which was previously so customary, so pressing: taking lecture notes. The image interrupts her normal mode of being a student in the art history lecture. And yet, she does not merely pause in her note-taking to contemplate a striking painting—an act to which some may relate. Rather, Caitlin is *overwhelmed* by the image. It draws her attention with such force that it pushes out all other thought. In an instant, her concern changes from transcribing the professor's lengthy descriptions of artwork to the visceral image that looms before her. Indeed, Caitlin's orientation changes so drastically that she is no longer even able to attend to the professor's voice. The image and what it makes her feel is all.

The painting floods Caitlin's senses and is felt throughout her entire body. It fills her nose and throat with the coppery smell of blood. She feels its wet sticky gore upon her fingers. Her eyes rove and plumb its rich, dark depths. Her scalp crawls, skin tightens, and brow wrinkles. She breathes in deeply and swallows as she *tries to take the painting in.* Although she tries to understand, she is unable to. She seems only capable of feeling. The viscerality of the painting—the *glistening sides* of bloody meat, tears, and blood; the hands clenched *in pain* and *anger*; the mouth *agape*, *smiling* and *screaming*—draws forth her own viscerality. It is body calling to body. Indeed, the painting seems to draw forth a near-primal response, emerging from Caitlin's very being, prior to thought, undeniable.

Yet, how may we understand having such a strong physical reaction to a mere projected image? Although it is a highly evocative painting, there is no blood for Caitlin to smell or taste, no sticky gore to feel, no scream to hear, no smile or pain to feel. There is not even a physical object for Caitlin to stand before and look upon. There is only the flicker of light across a dark amphitheatre projecting an image of paint on canvas, which itself shows a modernist depiction of the pope sitting between two sides of beef. It is an image of image—an image that is itself relatively unrealistic. There seems to be infinite distance between Caitlin and the blood, meat, and smiling screams of the painting, and yet, somehow, they have become so incredibly near that they are hers to experience. And she revels in them. Caitlin does not cringe from the viscerality she encounters, as we often do when we are exposed to blood and gore. The

tormented face with its *blind empty sockets* does not repulse her but rather *draws her further in.* Giving in to its raw demanding beauty, Caitlin carnally responds to the painting's writhing emotion. *The "prettiness" of other paintings* have become *unnecessary*, even excessive, as has the mediating voice of the professor. The *ominous* and horrifying painting with its bloody meat, horror, and torment gives way to deep appeal and strange pleasure. For Caitlin, this is true art. It is utter horror and pure delight. It is sublime.

Utter Horror and Pure Delight: Basic Understandings

Utter horror and pure delight: The strange painting that Caitlin encounters both depicts and evokes a strange combination of these two responses. Like awe and terror (explored in Chapter 4), the coincidence of the pleasure of delight and the pain of horror has long been philosophically associated with the sublime. Perhaps the most famous is Burke's (1757/1958/2008) *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful.* Describing the possible causes of the sublime, Burke (1757/1958/2008) notes:

> If pain and terror are so modified as not to be actually noxious; if the pain is not carried to violence, and the terror is not conversant about the present destruction of the person, as these emotions clear the parts, whether fine or gross, of a dangerous and troublesome incumbrance, they are capable of producing delight; not pleasure, but a sort of delightful horror, a sort of tranquility tinged with terror; which, as it belongs to self-preservation, is one of the strongest of all passions. Its object is the sublime. (p. 134)

According to Burke, the experience of "delightful horror" is "the most genuine effect, and truest test of the sublime" (p. 73) and in his text he outlines various causes of "delightful horror" such as the experience of infinity. Yet, how might we understand "delightful horror" and its possible inverse, horrible delight, in our experience of the sublime when it is evoked by an image? Let me first consider delight and horror separately.

Delight. We experience many delightful moments in our lives. The first taste of a delicious meal, receiving unexpectedly happy news from afar, being swept up in a lover's arms, playing tag with a child, or the smell of rich wet earth after a rain: these delightful moments form the pleasurable tapestry of our lives. Some delights are mild, others are extreme. All, however, are fleeting, ephemeral moments. Each must end. But always, they are highly visceral experiences.

We feel delight bodily. Delight shivers across our skin, stretches through our bones, and reverberates to our very core. In fact, we may only know delight by our body. Without an embodied response, delight cannot exist. Moreover, the cause of our delight is often due to the play of our senses. The pleasure of the food resides in its sight, smell, and taste. The elegantly displayed meal may draw our eyes and cause our mouth to water. At its mere sight, we may spontaneously breathe its scent in deeply. The first bite hopefully confirms the pleasure promised by our eyes and nose. We may find we close our eyes to focus our attention on our palate, savouring the delightful blends of flavours. We may even roll the food around our tongue and linger over its aftertaste long after it is swallowed. Once finished our delightful meal, we may feel satiated, content, happy.

The delightful belongs to the realm of the body. Etymologically, delight relates to sexual desire,[43] underscoring its visceral, embodied nature. The delightful (sexual or not) engages our senses and, in giving us pleasure, has the power to bring us back to the present. Concerns of past and future slip away in a moment of delight. It is as if we are "enticed away" from our everyday concerns (delight, v., *Oxford English Dictionary,* 2014). Delight can open us to an immediately and all-attentiveness enjoyment of what is at hand. Through the delightful, the world is revealed as pleasurable.

In this way, the delightful has an allure and a charm that can be hard to ignore and refuse. Any fan of rollercoasters knows the beckoning call of the machine when seen across the fair ground. At the mere promise of being delightful, we give in and, when we do, we give ourselves

[43] "Delight" originated from the Old French *delit*, meaning "pleasure, delight, sexual desire" (delight, n., *Online Etymology Dictionary,* 2014).

over to it. The delightful both pleasures and pleases. Our responses may be difficult to control. Often, we cannot help but smile and laugh. We may experience an effervescent bubbling inside. In extreme cases, we may even shriek with the pleasure and thrill of it. The delightful, in extreme, can become ecstasy. But whether we experience large or small delights, we feel more alive for them.

And although always ephemeral—a meal will finish and the rollercoaster ride will end—we often seek out that which is delightful again and again. Delight is why we have our favourite meals at restaurants. Pleasure once experienced becomes pleasure sought out again. In extreme cases, we may barely breathe before seeking out that which is delightful once more. After a particularly thrilling rollercoaster ride, we may immediately shout to our friends, "Let's go again!"

Upon second return, however, the rollercoaster ride is rarely quite as exciting, thrilling, and fun as the first time around. Likewise, the delightful meal eaten day after day can become boring or even repulsive. The delightful, it seems, is somewhat dependent upon its novelty and unexpectedness. This may be why knowing the punch line of a joke may make it less funny—unless, of course, we are telling it to someone who has not yet heard it. Once that which causes delight is well known and expected, it may cease to be delightful at all.

Horror. Like delight, horror, too, is an experience that belongs to the body and originates through our senses. The delightful meal, left far too long in the refrigerator, can easily become a source of horror. The sight of its fuzzy mouldy contours, its original shape having long transformed to a soft wet slime, may turn our stomach. Its sour rotting smell may repulse us. Its stench may fill our noses and stick to our tongue, even as we try not to breathe. We may hesitate to touch the filth (even to throw it away), so disgusting and unfamiliar the food has become. At the mere thought of consuming the mouldy green sludge, our throats may spontaneously close against it. It may revolt us.

In much the same way, a horrifying image—although solely of a visual nature—can speak to the entirety of our body. When we see a particularly gruesome image, we may not be able to help but shudder with disgust and revulsion. We may shut our eyes, turn our head away,

or physically recoil from it. In extreme cases, we may even vomit as if our body is trying to physically expel what we have taken in visually.

It seems that in all cases, our experience of horror is marked by a bodily rejection of and visceral repugnance towards the horrifying object. Like its inverse, delight, horror's etymological roots also trace its embodied nature. Originating in *horrere*, "to bristle with fear [or] shudder" (horror, n., *Online Etymological Dictionary,* 2014), our physical response to horror appears automatic, unmediated by thought. Perhaps it is unsurprising, then, that horror can be hard to evoke solely through imagination. Closing our eyes, it can be difficult to imagine something that induces a feeling of horror, unless we remember a particularly horrible image or scene that we once saw. That which horrifies, much like that which delights, seems to depend on its unexpectedness and unimaginability. This appears true for both mild and extreme instances of horror.

When I think of images that horrify, one incident readily comes to mind: the first time I saw the only four images of the Holocaust taken by its victims rather than its perpetrators or the witnesses to its aftermath. They were in a book written by an author I much admire, a book I had ordered for this study. When it arrived by mail, I opened the package excitedly. I ran my hand over the book's shiny new cover before cursorily thumbing through it and then settling down to read the first chapter. As I read through the documented personal correspondence and historical record, I immediately recognized the need for the book, the need to understand these special images. But then I turned the page and saw the first two of four images. I stopped reading and just stared at them. My stomach felt like it had fallen through the floor. They were worse than I could ever have imagined. Even through the window of which the photographs were taken, I can clearly make out the bodies of the dead and the workers throwing them into incineration pits. These were unlike any other Holocaust photographs I had ever seen, unlike any photographs of war and death I had seen. These were not death on parade or death displayed. They were a vile, routinized, ignored death that had become everyday life and I senses in their rough shadows the desperation of those who sought to document it. With cold hands, I resolutely turned the page to look at the next two photographs. The first image took me a moment to make out and the second was, thankfully, an unrecognizably blur. I flipped the page again: only text,

but I could not read it. I shut the book and set it on my bookshelf, then walked away. I couldn't read more that day. I wouldn't open that book again for many months. Every time I would approach it or look on it, I would remember those images. I couldn't. But then, when I finally did open it again and force myself to look upon those images, I found them slightly less bad than I remembered: not their content—that was still awful—but my response to them. Now, I can open the book and flip to the images without flinching. They have become simply historical images that should be handled with respect.

Horror, it seems, can "wear off." What was once intolerable can, with repeated exposure, become manageable. Like delight, exposure to the horrifying object over time may lessen our response. It may be that, in anticipating what we will experience, our response fails to arise. Indeed, the ability for our horror to dull seems to be the case with many of the horrifying aspects of our lives, not just with images. When travelling, for instance, we might be horrified by someone eating live grubs. Upon repeated exposure to the people, the food, and the culture, however, we may cease to find the meal disgusting. After a prolonged period, we even dare to try them ourselves. What had initially appeared unpalatable may become a tasty treat.

There may be some experiences of horror, however, that do not dull with time or take a long time to dull. Although both horror and delight are ephemeral experiences that must eventually end, horror can have a latency that can continue to disturb long after the fact. I was bothered by the memory of the images for over a year after I saw them. Indeed, after a horrifying encounter, we may wish that we had never seen the horrifying object, want to scratch out our eyes, or feel like we need a bath. Moreover, the mere memory of these horrible things can re-evoke an echo of these same feelings. It is as if the object has tainted and sullied us. We may feel that it has left an indelible and irreversible residue within our memories, upon our bodies, and even in our souls.

As this brief exploration has shown, both horror and delight are bodily responses. And in being fully of the body, they are largely not understandable outside their physicality. While we may point and say, "That is horrible" or "That is delightful," we make these claims based on

our physical reaction to the objects, not upon some objective quality of the objects.[44] In this way, horror and delight can be highly individual. In fact, something horrible to one person—a particular food, for instance—can be delightful to another. And while explanations, whether personal or cultural, may be offered, they are not able to fully account for either horror or delight. Horror and delight are not limited to preference (e.g., you love shrimp while I am repulsed by them. Or, my culture views them as an honoured delicacy, while your culture views them as an abomination to be avoided at all cost). As we have already noted, in excess, each can lead, first, to indifference and then to the manifestation of the other. As Smith (14 January 2013) remarks, "the same things that excite our desire most—the naked bodies of other humans, the bright red shell of a boiled lobster, a cigarette glowing in an ashtray—are the things that always, simultaneously threaten to excite our revulsion" (¶7).

By being immediate and of the body, delight and horror are, to a certain extent, responses beyond reason. When they become familiar, understandable, and subject to repeated scrutiny—when they become reasonable and well known—oddly, they both seem to disappear. For their full effect, each depends on its novelty.

But while delight and horror contain many similarities, delight is not horror and horror is not delight. Delight and horror seem to be distinct responses, occupying opposite ends of the spectrum. We may therefore wonder what Burke was referring to when he describes the "delightful horror" of the sublime? How does one delight in horror or feel horror in delight? How do these seemingly opposite states emerge simultaneously in the experience of the sublime when it is evoked by an image?

[44] Although the objective qualities of the object may be the cause of our response of horror or delight.

Falling Under the Sublime Spell of the Image

Stephanie, a participant in this study, tells of an encounter:

> *For the umpteenth time, I am daydreaming in class, totally zoned out, as the teacher rambles on. Today, she's talking about the Middle Ages and their use of torture. I have already caught on that the lesson's message is, "This is what they used to do to people; isn't it barbaric." To kill time, I am randomly doodling. I hear the faint click that indicates the teacher has changed slides and glance up just as the whole class groans with disgust.*
>
> *I cringe at the sight of the painting graphically showing a man strapped to a table being flayed alive. It is nasty. Half the skin from his leg is already removed and the torturers are beginning to work on his arms as a group of people watch in the background.*
>
> *Questions swirl up around me—the painting has sparked an unexpected class discussion—but I am not listening. I just sit there quietly and stare at the painting. I am thrown by it, disturbed. They have pulled the skin off the leg, the musculature is exposed like meat—but the man's still alive! and has absolutely no control over what is happening. It is twisted. Even worse is the crowd, who look on as if it were just a completely normal thing to happen.*
>
> *The painting is gross, but at the same time, I cannot look away. In a strange, weird way, I am enjoying it; intrigued by it. I wonder what it would feel like it to have your skin pulled off like that? I become acutely aware of my legs as shivers run through them; my hands clench in response.*
>
> *I do not know how long I have sat there staring when the teacher finally changes the slide, suggesting we get on with the lesson. Her words are as boring as before and I quickly lose interest again. I return to doodling, but this time preoccupied with the painting that I cannot forget.*

Like Caitlin, Stephanie is stopped by an image presented in class. And, as it does for Caitlin, rather than serve as an example in the teacher's lecture, the painting evokes a strong, visceral reaction that overshadows the lecture, the teacher, and the entire class. It holds a strange appeal for Stephanie, both physically and intellectually. It causes her to *cringe* and pull back in disgust at its *grossness* and yet it also entrances her, intrigues her, and gives pleasure. She *enjoys* looking at it, even wonders what it would be like to experience such torture. It is as if Stephanie is mesmerized by this painting.

When we experience the sublime, we may find ourselves taken in by the image, captured and caught by its strange spectre. For Stephanie, it appears in the simultaneous repulsion and appeal of a dark side of history: medieval corporeal punishment. Instead of seeing the painting as an object lesson as the teacher had likely intended, Stephanie responds to the painting as a possibility. *What would it be like to see that? Perhaps even to feel that?* She feels horror at the man, helplessly alive yet reduced to living meat, but also takes a strange pleasure in looking. Like the painted crowd that bothers her so much, Stephanie is fascinated and held by what she sees. It is a confusing response for Stephanie, *strange and weird*.

Images that evoke simultaneous horror and delight may be disturbing, but they are also compelling. Stephanie admits, *I cannot look away.* These images hold the eyes and the imagination. And yet, perhaps it is less a case of the images' being compelling than of us being compelled by the images. Images that evoke the sublime may compel us—not as we are compelled to look at the beautiful, the noticeably ugly, or even the highly comic—but rather, they may compel us towards that which, by all logic, *should be* repellent. When we experience the sublime, we may find that the image evokes a strange pleasure as it drives our desire (compel, v., *Online Etymology Dictionary,* 2014) in a new and unusual way. For Stephanie, it is not only the appeal of looking upon the horrifying image, but it is also a matter of the question arising out of this tension. Between desire and repulsion, she wonders: *what would it feel like?* And she responds physically as if in anticipated answer. Such images may drive our desire towards that which we had never before considered or even thought possible, leaving us helpless before the movement of our soul.

When we experience the sublime, an image may not only compel us, but it may also enchant and bewitch us. Stephanie does not merely feel compelled to look; she *wants* to look at what initially appeared a *nasty* image. The painting has captivated her. Enchantment is closely linked to fascination (enchantment, n., *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2014) yet extends beyond it. In fascination, we are held and intrigued by a puzzle that something presents to us. We look at an object from various angles, whether physically or metaphorically, and perceive in it a secret or mystery to be discerned. Often, with time, fascination wanes. And yet, this does not appear to be case with images that evoke the sublime. While we may be certain that our eyes will search out the various details of the image—the victim, the torturers, the bystanders—their movement seems less directed towards a specific goal that, once achieved, releases us from the image's grip. We may see all, yet be unable to look away. At times, we may even find ourselves simply *staring*.

While we may apparently be doing little, "simply staring," much may happen in our enchanting encounter. Our purpose and intentions may change—we may shift from killing time by doodling to attending directly and explicitly to this particular image. As our purpose changes, so too may our experience of time. Stephanie, like many others, recounts losing track of time. She *does not know how long* she *has sat there staring* before she is called back to the classroom and the lesson. Stories of being enchanted often tell of how someone who is bespelled enters a state of timelessness. In much the same way, when we experience the sublime, our experience of time may both compress and extend. Moments may be drawn out into hours, and hours shrink into moments as if time, marked by the clock and ringing school bells, has slipped away.

The sublime may even seem like a strange and enchanting world that the image has unexpectedly opens up. Without even realizing it, we may slip into and find ourselves dwelling in the horrifying and delightful space of the image. For Stephanie, the classroom discussion fades into the background and her doodling stops. Suddenly, she is fully engrossed in this image. And yet, its topic was of no interest to her mere moments before. What happened? According to Morgan (2009):

> The enchantment of art commonly consists of the way it speaks to you, mysteriously, directly, out of the blue, addressing matters you'd only dimly

> glimpsed, but which now suddenly rush forward into the uncanny light cast by the work of art. (p. 14)

In the midst of the sublime, we may find ourselves presented with something that *speaks to us* in such a way that its subject may suddenly seem incredibly important. The artful image's concern may immediately become our concern. This seems less an abstract, objective concern, as might be fostered by having the historical use of torture discussed to contextualize and question torture's modern use—the type of concern that is commonly encouraged in schools and what we might imagine was the teacher's overall purpose to the lesson. Rather, the kind of concern that appears in our experience of the sublime may be a highly personal, individual concern. For Stephanie, the painting reveals itself not as an issue of torture, in general, but of this man being treated as meat; of that man cutting his arm; of that man flaying his leg; and of those people looking on as if it were normal. Not an intellectual, broad-spanning concern, this concern appears a focused, particular, up-close concern. The sublime may draw forward a concern that is so immediate, personal, and all-encompassing that it can only be responded to physically.

But while the experience of the sublime can be powerful and all-consuming in the moment, this moment does not last forever. Like all spells and enchantments, the sublime moments end. And much like in stories of enchantment, it is rarely the person under the spell of the sublime who "breaks the spell" or revokes its power. Indeed, the experience of the sublime may be so entrancing, so out of the ordinary, that the individual experiencing it may lose the ability or even the will to end it. Rather, the spell of the sublime may be broken by another's actions.

Consider how Caitlin's encounter ended:

> *Without warning, the image flashes briefly white as the professor changes the slide—the sudden brightness interrupting my thoughts, now confused, as my consciousness returns into the present. Like surfacing after diving, I am momentarily disoriented.*

I glance down at my blank page. A glowing after-image of the painting stares back at me.

The sudden brightness interrupts Caitlin's thoughts as the image is removed from her sight. When our experience of the sublime is interrupted, we may feel forcibly *returned to the present*. Yet where have we been? Where does the sublime take us when we encounter it? Where do we go when we "dwell" in the space of the image"?

When we experience the sublime, we may be ever-present of our surroundings (though they may cease to have significant meaning), yet our consciousness may be altered. Did Caitlin return to the everyday with the flick of a switch? Did Stephanie? Though one can be pulled away from a painting, a photograph, or an image in a book, can one ever be pulled back from the sublime once it has revealed itself? Perhaps in some cases, but there are also other instances where it seems less possible. Bachelard (1964) writes of the power of the poetic image found in all art: "the imagination takes its place on the margins, exactly where the function of unreality comes to charm or to disturb—always to awaken—the sleeping being lost in its automatisms" (p. xxxi). Likewise, Ingarden (1985) writes how the "phenomenon of return" in the aesthetic experience of an artwork involves a change of attitude to that held prior to the encounter (p. 311). In awakening back into the world after an encounter with the sublime, perhaps we are not merely returning to the everyday but re-awakening to ourselves.

It may be, as Caitlin describes, that a sublime encounter with an image leaves an *afterimage.* While the intense moment of the experience may end, the sublime may not be gone. Stephanie cannot forget the painting, while Caitlin continues to see its echo long after it is gone. The sublime may be burned into us, continuing to stare at us, continuing its demand. It may be in this regard that the experience of the sublime differs from that of merely being captivated by an enchantment. Both take hold of us, both seize us. And yet, one is released from captivation, from captivity. One gains one's freedom. The experience of the sublime may not be so kind. Even when the object is gone, we may not find ourselves released. Its image may become carried within us, as if its pleasure and its horror has become embedded in our souls like the image that has been burnt into our retina.

The Delight and Horror of an Encounter with an Uncanny Image

We have seen how the delight and horror of the image's enchantment may be captivating and bewitching. Morgan's (2009) description of the way in which art enchants, however, suggests another possibility. Consider Sofia's (a participant) experience:

> *My eldest child recently entered the military; we had no contact with her for the first month of training. A few days before she was due home from military college, a photograph arrives. It is of my daughter in military fatigues, holding a rifle.*
>
> *The morning my daughter is to arrive home, I take the photograph, buy a frame, and put it on the wall. After I hang the photo, my husband and I stand back to look at it. Looking at it, all I can think is, "The only thing that is familiar is—the only reason that I know that is my child is because this figure has crystal blue eyes. Otherwise, I can't tell. I can't even tell if it is male or female." I am just sick. Where is my child in this photograph? Who has my child become?*

Many parents can recall a moment in which they saw their child as a stranger (van Manen, 2002). It may be a fulfilling, mysterious moment of genuinely recognizing the child as other or it may be an unsettling and upsetting encounter. For Sofia, it is the uncanny experience of looking upon an image that is both of her daughter and yet not her daughter. To use Morgan's (2009) phrasing, Sofia sees her daughter in the "uncanny light cast by the [photograph]" (p. 14).

While photographs are commonly taken to mark age-grade milestones, such as graduation or marriage, the photograph that Sofia hangs on her wall is unlike any other image that has marked her child's maturation from infancy to adulthood. In it, Sofia sees more than the maturing and growing independence of her child. This photograph seems to show a fundamental change of being: her daughter has become a stranger. And yet, it is not the case that Sofia is unnerved by seeing her daughter as a soldier—she herself comes from a military family and has married a serviceman—but by the apparent effacement of her daughter. Sofia asks: *Where is my child in this photograph?* for she does not see her in it. Sofia only sees a body that has been so stripped away of identity that it is no longer even gendered. And Sofia finds

this sudden change—it has happened in a mere month since she last saw her daughter—to be bewildering, frightening, even sublime. Her child, whom she carried, birthed, and cared for, whom she knows through the closest of relationships, suddenly appears to her in an unknown way. Nearly all traces of the familiar are gone, all but her child's vivid blue eyes. They remain the single recognizable aspect in the image and they pierce Sofia.

In certain moments, an image that evokes the sublime may appear uncanny. It may be both unrecognizable and yet familiar. Like Sofia, we may be horrified by that which is alien to us, even as we are drawn to the few remnants of the recognizable and known that shine through. As we look at the image, we may strangely perceive both what is there and what is now absent or become strange, and we respond bodily. According to Trigg (2012),

> The uncanny is to be understood fundamentally as an effect, a felt experience that disturbs the body, resulting in a departure from the everyday. Yet no less a displacement from the everyday, the uncanny simultaneously places us in the midst of the familiar. Here a disturbance occurs: The uncanny refuses to concede to stillness, and instead presents us with something genuinely novel: an augmented familiarity, thus (un)familiar to the core (*unheimlich*)… Based on the disjunction of opposed twins—the familiar/unfamiliar, near/far, homely/unhomely—the uncanny circumvents laws of logic, yet at the same time frees itself from the need to be resolved of its paradoxical status. At its genesis, the uncanny takes up residence in the manifold space between experience and thought, perfectly at ease with its ability to invoke repulsion and allure in the subject experiencing the uncanny. (p. 27)

As Trigg describes, the uncanny aspect of the sublime may occupy a liminal space in experience. For Sofia, the photograph is both of her child and not of her child, familiar and unfamiliar. For others, like Caitlin, the liminality may manifest in the physical and visceral nearness of a highly removed, abstract image. Rather than move between these two poles, we may experience them simultaneously. In being both near to us and yet far away, they may both delight and horrify.

In its uncanny countenance, the sublime can unsettle our expectations. It can make even that which is most familiar and known—those closest to us like children, friends, and lovers—appear strange, even alien. Waldenfels (2011) describes the alien as "what is excluded from the existing structures and orders of experience" (p. 111). It is that which does not belong yet appears within, such as the child appearing as stranger. But the experience of alienness is more than mere recognition or knowledge of the other. Waldenfels (2011) explains:

> Being affected by and exposed to what is alien to myself [*ichfremdes*] depends neither on our knowing nor on our willing, i.e., on our consciousness; it points back to our body. The domain of corporeality includes all that indubitably has to do with me yet without being done by me. (p. 47)

We do not invoke the alien, it occurs to us. We encounter it and know it corporeally. The image that evokes the sublime may contain an aspect of the alien. It may show us the familiar in a new and sometimes unpleasant way. However, what we see is never entirely foreign, for what is wholly alien cannot be seen and this may make it all the more terrible. Specifically, Waldenfels (2011) notes how

> a disturbing, animating, and threatening effect can emanate from the alien only when what is excluded remains virulent in its exclusion and in a certain way belongs there. This is the case when the alien dwells in the midst of the familiar world and not apart from it. (p. 111)

The sublime may be experienced as uncanny when that which does not belong seems, at the same time, inherently to belong in the image before us. At some level, Sofia's daughter *is* a stranger to her mother, as are all people to one another. In these instances, what is delightfully and horrifyingly uncanny may not be that which we have never conceived, but rather that which previously we may only faintly have perceived and ignored, but which is now brought into full light. Once revealed, this may not be ignored.

According to Waldenfels (2011), the alien awakens an originary attention through a response of *pathos*. *Pathos* is a form of suffering that is evoked by an encounter with the authentically alien. He explains:

> Suffering [associated with *pathos*] means that something occurs to us, tearing us out of the familiar…. The unexpected relies on the contrast with the familiar. This contrast brings about the tension (*tensio*) which permeates attention (*attentio*). (Waldentfels, 2011, p. 65)

The *pathos* induced by the uncanny tension between the unexpected and the expected may cause us to attend to our world in a new and different way. It may reveal our deepest, most buried fears and desires, dredging forth that which we suspect but may not want to know or accept. For Sofia, it may be the knowledge that all soldiers were once someone's children, children who become anonymous by being soldiers.

In our experience of the sublime, the image may show us what we already suspected its subject to be—both horrifyingly familiar and delightfully strange. Despite its unsettling unusualness, it may seem as if the image is clearly showing us the world as it is, whether we like or despise what we see, whether we speak it or maintain a wilful silence. Merleau-Ponty (1964) observes, "Before our undivided existence, the world is true; it exists…. We experience in it a truth which shows through and envelops us rather than being held and circumscribed by our mind" (p. 6). The world that the sublime may reveal to us can be unpleasant. It may upset and distress us. And yet, as we look upon this disagreeable appearance, it may be as if we are seeing something correctly for the first time. We may feel as if our eyes have been opened to the reality of the world, existing around us, telling us *what is* rather than being the subject of our will, desires, or rationality.

Yet even as what we see may readily be apparent to us, others may not necessarily be able to understand our new perspective, our new sight. Sofia tells of wanting to share her feelings with her husband. But when she comments to him, *"The only reason I know it is her is because these blue eyes,"* rather than see it as she does, her husband only replies, *"There's rust in the barrel of the gun. You can see there is rust in the barrel."* A soldier by profession, Sofia's husband does not react to seeing his child as Sofia does—an anonymous soldier—but responds instead to the danger rust in the barrel poses to a soldier. *And I'm stunned.* Sofia says. *All I could think was "no."*

Paradoxically, what the sublime image may make obvious to us may be entirely incomprehensible to another. Like the Greek myth of Cassandra, who having received the gift of prophecy from Apollo and, having refused him his payment, was doomed to be disbelieved by all (Graves, 1955/1998),[45] others may not recognize the truth that is given to us. But unlike Cassandra who foresaw what was to come, we may be disbelieved for what we know of the world around us. Even those who know us most intimately, who are most closely attuned to our way of being and understanding, our spouses and dear friends, may not see what appears self-evident to us. And this may leave us feeling bereft and alone, questioning why we see as we do.

Perhaps, however, I should pause to question how closely the experience of the sublime is a manifestation of the uncanny. While Sofia's experience is recognizably uncanny, there are many uncanny things that do not evoke the sublime. A photograph of someone who looks remarkably like ourselves, a house we once lived in and that is now occupied by another, or a robot that seemingly moves on its own—these are all uncanny, but rarely do they affect us as Sofia has been affected. Indeed, we may even wonder if it is only in its extremity that that which we find uncanny can also be sublime. And yet, if we consider Sofia's account in relation to the others we have thus far explored, we may see what makes the sublime beyond its uncanniness. While the photograph Sofia speaks of may seem strange, more importantly she seems to be *made strange* by it. Similarly, Caitlin and Stephanie seem likewise altered by the paintings they encounter. This "altered state" appears, not in the least, in the coincidence of delight and horror the images evoke. And yet, how might we understand such change?

Being Caught by an Image and then Realizing what has Caught you

Let us consider the experience of another participant, Kayla, who recounts her response to a photograph:

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[45] It is said that Cassandra agreed to lie with Apollo in exchange for teaching her prophecy. Once she had obtained the knowledge of prophecy, she refused Apollo his payment. He convinced her to give him a kiss and, upon receipt of it, Apollo spat into Cassandra's mouth, thereby ensuring she would never be believed (Graves, 1955/1998).

I am sitting there in the audience and, at first, I don't really know what the photograph is. When I finally realize what I am seeing, it is as if I have looked too long.

Kayla initially encounters this image as just another image appearing within her taken-for-granted, backgrounded world, one image among thousands. But it is not quite like the others. Something about this image gives her pause. The image shows itself to Kayla but it is not fully comprehensible, so Kayla gives it more consideration than usual.

When we encounter an image that evokes the sublime, there may be something that we intuit but do not fully perceive. And yet, with all images, there is always more to understand. Each can form an "endless hermeneutic" (Marion, 2001/2002) if we can approach it from a position of "originary attention" (Waldenfels, 2011). How, then, is our experience of looking upon an image that evokes the sublime unique?

Kayla notices the photograph, but does not grasp it fully—she *does not really know what it is*. When we experience the sublime, there may be a fundamental confusion about the image before us. Facing it, we may flounder "to catch hold of" something that seems to be given to us (comprehend,d, v. *Online Etymological Dictionary*, 2014) but which we do not fully understand. Perhaps it is the failure to grasp the image at first glance that makes the sublime so powerful when we finally do.

When Kayla finally realizes what she is looking at, the moment the image finally completely gives itself to her: *it is as if I have looked too long.* The significance of the image reveals itself to Kayla and what she sees is a woman standing amid a crowd of people as a group of men remove the flesh from her body. It is one of photographs of the infamous *Lingchi* sequence*,* four photographs that document the practice of putting someone to death "by a thousand cuts."

In the act of fully "seeing" or comprehending an image, we, like Kayla, may feel we have seen something we should not have seen. Just as our eyes may be drawn to the image that evokes the sublime, so too may our seeing be troubling and terrible. We may wish we could "unsee" the image. Marion (2001/2002) writes, "the saturation of the visible becomes, to the

one who knows how to look at it as it gives itself, really unbearable" (p. 67). To look when one knows how to see may be painful. We may find the image to be overwhelming, like the brilliant light that is the very root of the word glimpse (glimpse, *Online Etymological Dictionary*, 2014). As seems the case in Kayla's experience, an image may reveal the sublime in the blinding light of understanding, leaving us raw and sensitive to our world, hurt by the very act of perception.

But what pains us? Kayla continues:

To see such images is to feel the pain of the other. To be drawn to their suffering.

In seeing the image of *Lingchi,* Kayla is overwhelmed by the suffering of another. But even as she responds, Kayla recognizes that the photograph is a *"depiction, a representation of another's suffering,*" not the presence of a suffering other, and this is a horrible realization. While the image may be revelatory, this knowledge may be unpleasant or dreadful. We may be forced to know without recourse. We may be impotent, denied our innate desire to respond. To know is to "admit one's knowledge" (know, v., *Oxford English Dictionary,* 2014). In seeing an image of torture, famine, or death, we not only become acquainted with their brutal forms but also may be forced to admit our knowledge of and complicity with them through our shared humanity. We may be confronted with difficult knowledge, knowledge we would prefer not to have been given.

To endure the power of such images is for Schelling (1859/1989) an attestation of moral character in the face of one's nothingness. He writes, "Moral and intellectual flaccidity, weakness, and cowardice of disposition invariably shy away from these great [sublime] perspectives that hold up to them a terrible image of their own nothingness and contemptibility" (p. 87). And yet, such philosophical reassurance offers little solace. Facing these kinds of images, we may feel we are being asked too much, because "to know" is also to "recognize [a person] in relation." (know, v., *Oxford English Dictionary,* 2014). In our moment of recognition, we may be denied that fundamental relation that demands we alleviate the other's pain (Sobrino, 1992). To invoke Levinas (2006), we may be called by the face of the other but unable to act upon its ethical demand to which we have already responded and accepted. We witness the violence but cannot stand as witness to it, prevent it, or alleviate it. And this may torture us in

turn (Leier, 2012). It is for this reason that some scholars argue that "there is a nearly unbearable immorality to these [the *Lingchi*] images" (Elkins, 1997, p. 110). Kayla admits: *It bothers me even now.*

The power of the *Lingchi* photographs is undeniable. According to Elkins (1997), the photographs are "one of the most powerful sequences of images… in any genre and from any period, and the reason… comes from the way that they hold the idea of death" (p. 115). Death happens *in* the sequence. Between the first and the fourth image, the victim dies—although we do not know exactly where. Death is "trapped between the frames" and we encounter it each time we move through the sequence (p. 115). Elkins describes it as "permanently unsettling" and concludes that, "as long as I look at these images, they cause me some pain; … they are painfully close to something I know I cannot or must not see" (p. 115).

Because of their power, the *Lingchi* photographs are uniquely some of the few images that routinely evoke very strong responses from viewers. Unlike the other images considered thus far, whose sublimity seems highly personal and individual, the *Lingchi* photographs' power is readily recognized. And yet, do we experience them only as images of torture and human debasement to which we can only respond with terror at our own impotence? If so, this experience is not the sublime but merely pure horror. Just as not everything that attracts us is sublime, neither is everything that repels. This image may be that which the sublime becomes without the simultaneous presence of pleasure, beauty, or delight. Therefore, there must be something more to the experience of the *Lingchi* photographs as sublime than simple horror, terror, and repulsion. And perhaps there is something else in the experience of this singular image; something that might be just as unsettling.

The Sublime as the Infinite Capacity for Reversal

In *The Tears of Eros*, Bataille[46] (1989) writes of his relationship to one *Lingchi* photograph:

[46] George Bataille is not normally associated with the sublime. However, his work offers a unique exploration of an aesthetic experience that appears sublime. There is not the space here to provide even a cursory overview of the

> Since 1925, I have owned one of these pictures. It was given to me by Dr. Borel, one of the first French psychoanalysts. This photograph had a decisive role in my life. I have never stopped being obsessed by this image of pain, at once ecstatic (?) and intolerable. (pp. 205–206)

This image obsesses Bataille for many years. It puzzles him with a possibility it suggests but does not fully reveal. He intuits that possibility, returns to the photograph again and again in an attempt to discover it, to understand it, but he fails. One day years later, however, something happens:

> Much later, in 1938, a friend initiated me into the practice of yoga. It was on this occasion that I discerned, in the violence of this, an infinite capacity for reversal. Through this violence—even today I cannot imagine a more insane, more shocking form—I was so stunned that I reached the point of ecstasy….
>
> What I suddenly saw, and what imprisoned me in anguish—but which at the same time delivered me from it—was the identity of these perfect contraries, divine ecstasy and its opposite, extreme horror. (pp. 206–207)

Bataille lives with this image for years and yet one day, when it is not even in front of him, his relation to it changes. He finds he is unexpectedly, violently moved in a moment of revelation. The image becomes sublime.

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expansive scholarship concerning Bataille's work; however, it must be noted that, to date, contemporary Bataille scholarship has never directly connected Bataille's dual-natured aesthetic to the concept of the sublime, despite their apparent similarities and the usefulness of situating his aesthetic within a larger philosophical history of aesthetics. Rather, contemporary scholars connect Bataille to the sublime indirectly through exploration of Bataille's notion of "inner experience" (see: Sircello, 1993) or the work of Deleuze and Guattari, specifically their description of late capitalism and its relation to Bataille's condemnation of the sacrifice required by capitalism (see: Maynard, 2006; Urpeth, 2003). In each case, scholars connect the concepts of *sacrifice* and *transcendence* to the Kantian sublime, which involves a sacrifice of the self and one's certainty to the experience. And while this is an interesting connection to make, I wonder at their failure to notice the similarities between the Bataille's aesthetic experience and the sublime.

When we experience the sublime, a horrible image may suddenly unveil its inverse, an ecstatically beautiful facet, and with it the source of its strange power. Like Bataille, we may perceive in full light what had always been faintly, shadowly suggested.

Strangely, in this moment, we may find ourselves both caught and delivered by the image. To be caught or captured derives from the Latin *captura*, which means "taking, seizing," while deliver means "to set free" (capture, n. & deliver, v., *Oxford English Dictionary,* 2014). In being taken and seized by the image in its sublime revelation, we may be paradoxically freed. Like Bataille, we may discover the fundamental secret of the image: that in our experience of the sublime, horror and delight seemingly becomes the other, not through over-exposure—not a sliding from horror to neutrality to delight, or vice versa—but directly and immediately to its inverse through its immediate excess. Here clear divisions of experience may fall away and show themselves in their fullness. We may experience the sublime as the "infinite capacity for reversal," as the image hovers on the fine line between the horrifying and the ecstatic, being both simultaneously. This knowledge, in turn, may suggest the secret of all things and, ultimately, we may free us from ourselves.

The Lived Sublime as the Numinous Appearing

While we may accept that Bataille experienced simultaneous horror and ecstasy when he meditated upon the photograph of *Lingchi*, his response may still confound us and even upset us. But before we relegate Bataille to the status of being a mere sadist, we should ask: what is the ecstatic facet that he saw? What could possibly delight in such an awful image? Bataille's and Kayla's descriptions both point to it. However, it is through the experience of another participant, Evan, that we may understand it more fully.

Evan tells how:

In the middle of the presentation, the picture appears on screen. It is startlingly violent but something about it catches me.

> *Sitting there, I know I should be horrified. But the face, it is lifted towards the sky. It is drawn upward. The person is uplifted. And the look on the face is almost… ecstatic. The face is beautiful. I look down. I know this is a picture of violence and that I should be horrified. But I'm not. I momentarily wonder at my own response: why do I not find it horrific, but rather beautiful?*

Evan's account is simple in the extreme. He sees the *startlingly violent* photograph of *Lingchi*, yet does not respond to its horror but conversely finds it ecstatically beautiful. Those of us looking at the same photograph might have as much difficulty understanding Evan's experience as we do Bataille's. It is an image of supreme corporeal violence. For some, even, the image may even evoke physical revulsion. And Evan does not deny the fact of the photograph's extreme violence. The evidence of its heinous barbarity is projected there before him and everyone else in the room. The terribleness of the photograph's subject is without dispute, and yet, it does not draw horror from Evan. Rather, he is surprised and entranced by the beauty of that which appears to him.

Evan's account eloquently captures the complexity and mystery of the experience of the sublime. What should be horrible may appear beautiful or, conversely, what we would expect to be beautiful may seem awful. Evan describes the image as *almost ecstatic.* "Ecstasy" originates in the Greek, *ἔκστασις* (*ekstasis*) (*ἐκστα-* stem of *ἐξιστάναι [existanai]), meaning* "to put out of place" and used in the phrase "to drive a person out of his wits" (ecstasy, n., *Oxford English Dictionary,* 2014). Our experience of the sublime may "put [us] out of place." We may find ourselves, like Evan, acting so unusually that our responses do not seem to belong to us. We may act like strangers, our actions bewildering and confounding us. And they may even cause us to stop and wonder at ourselves.

And yet, what could be so powerful that it negates the expected response of revulsion and horror? For Evan, the answer is found in the face itself, in its upliftedness. *The face is beautiful.* But even as we may follow his eyes, we may be unable to see and experience the face as he does. Those who experience the sublime may perceive that which eludes another's gaze.

Perhaps, however, we can try to follow Evan's gaze and see as he does. If we consider *how* we look at this image, we might notice something that many of us might rather not want to see. Like Elkins (1997), we may feel that it is "painfully close to something I know I cannot or must not see" (p. 115), and yet see it we may if we so choose. As we gaze upon the terribly violent death that the image documents, we may find, like Evan, that our eyes are drawn to the face of its victim. In gazing upon her visage, we may perceive, like Kayla, her humanity. And, in her humanity, we may apprehend something of the mystery of existence. Looking at the woman's countenance, despite—or perhaps because of—being at the moment of death, her face seems uplifted, almost joyous.[47] She appears to stand in absolute defiance of the violence being perpetrated upon her physical body. It is as if she has risen above the violence to which she is the closest witness. Her face seems to reveal her sublime grace as a human being and attests to the fact that no matter what we might endure, something of us always remains beyond human touch and destruction.

Fifty years ago, Otto (1958) connected the sublime to the idea of the numinous, that mysteriousness of existence, the awareness and wonder of which he argues underlies all religious belief. In looking at the woman's face, might we not perceive in some strange way the mysteriousness of her existence? And of our own? Might we not also perceive in her countenance the fact that, of all of the millions of possibilities and all the things that could have gone wrong, it is miraculous that we came into existence? Is it not possible that, through her, we might see a trace of the numinous?

As difficult as such an admission may be to make, it may suggest what may be experienced as uplifting, exalted, and beautiful within this undeniably horrifying photograph. Herein may lie the impossible but fundamentally important transformation from horror to ecstasy. We might even call it a *sublimation.* In both realms where the term is used, psychoanalysis and the physical sciences, "sublimation" involves an unusual change of states of being. In chemistry, sublimation is the shift from solids to vapour without liquefaction

[47]This observation was similarly made by Sontag (2003). Bataille (1989), however, points out that the expression might also be due to the effect of opium that he believes was administered prior to the torture.

(sublimation, n., *Oxford English Dictionary,* 2014). In psychoanalysis,[48] it involves the transformation of instinctive but unacceptable or impossible impulses into socially acceptable forms that may be entirely unrelated to the original (Shaw, 2006). In a similarly unusual change of states, a sublime experience of a *Lingchi* photograph seemingly suggests a move from the photograph being an image of horror and debasement to one of exaltedness and grace, from physical death to spiritual elevation. Indeed, one might even feel that one is witnessing transcendence.

Looking at the *Lingchi* photograph in this way, one may see evidence of both the worst of humanity, the worst of what people can do to one another, and the most glorious, mystifying fact of human existence. But this realization can be difficult and, in some ways, this picture may be considered doubly horrifying because it so explicitly, evidently, and eloquently shows us more than the mere simultaneity of two extreme opposites. In it, we may recognize the coexisting duality of horror and ecstasy that echoes Bataille's (1949/2003) realization of the image's significance, its fundamental paradox, and his subsequent claim about the origins of art and religion: they simultaneously contain horror and ecstasy, sacrifice and transcendence, for each *is* the other. But we may also see and, as a result, want to abhor this photograph because of the tormenting truth it reveals about us as human beings.

[48] Lacan was the first to connect the sublime and sublimation in psychoanalysis.

Chapter 7: The Sublime as the Experience of Clarity & Mystery

The Challenge of *Doubting Thomas*

My story with Caravaggio goes back many years.

One night in the mid-1990s, a friend of mine—an art student—and I were studying together at his apartment. It was rather late and we had given up our books and were talking. I can't remember what prompted him to pull the little black booklet from his shelf—I wasn't and am still not into art—but he wanted to show it to me.

Laying the booklet before me, he opened it to the most beautiful painting I had ever seen: Caravaggio's Doubting Thomas*. I was utterly captured by it, by how the light entered into the darkness and illuminated in detail the apostles' response to Christ. The composition was beautiful: its symmetry, colour, and how the light hit the four heads coming together in an eager search for the truth. But at the same time, there was something quite disturbing and sickening—even nauseating—about how Christ takes a firm grip of Thomas' forearm and pulls his finger into the open wound.*

This story had always been meaningful for me—but in this painting, I saw something I had never seen before. It was near, alive, and different.

I fell in love with Caravaggio that night. Later, I would learn about his short but extreme life, his temper, and talent—all of which has added to my fascination. I have got to know more about his technique, his use of intertextuality, his choice of models from the bottom layers of society, his use of the self-portrait, and the context of the Counter-Reformation. However, none of this ever compared to that first night.

I have also been to Rome several times, and looked up every church and museum with a Caravaggio painting in it. I have visited the grand Caravaggio exhibitions that have been put together in Oslo, London, and Rome over the last

decade, all of which have been wonderful. But nothing—no painting found in the grandest of churches—has ever recaptured the sensation I felt that night in the simplest of student apartments.

> *My favourite painting remains, of course, <u>Doubting Thomas</u>. It is the most beautiful painting I know.*
>
> *And it is the one Caravaggio I have never seen.*
>
> *I have the poster, and I have used it as screensaver on my Mac and as an illustration in numerous sermons in my work as a youth pastor. But I have never seen the actual painting live. Once, I came incredibly close—I was in Berlin during the few weeks that the small gallery of Sloss Sancoussi, Potsdam (which owns the painting) was open and I intended to see it. But for some reason the day I went the gallery was closed. I was extremely disappointed but also strangely relieved. To be honest, I'm not sure if I ever want to see it. Maybe I am afraid of being disappointed. Or maybe, it is just that closeness and holiness are mutually excluding.*

Chad, a participant in this study, tells of his long-standing and unusual relationship with Caravaggio's *Doubting Thomas.* It begins one night while studying when a friend shows him an art book. In it, he finds a reproduction of a painting that recounts a story that Chad, a devout Christian, knows well. However, what Chad sees in this version is something he has *never seen before.* Although it tells of the same familiar event, the pivotal moment of the story seems somehow *different*. There is something about it that all of the other versions—no matter how faithful they have been to the biblical text—have somehow lacked. It seems so evident to Chad and yet he cannot really say what it is. All he can say is that it there and it makes the story new and alive. It seems to speak to Chad whereas the other versions have merely been mute allegories.

And yet, the painting that so moves Chad is just that: a visual depiction of a biblical story with a particular message. Neither physically alive nor even containing the photographic trace of something that had once been living (Barthes, 1980/1981), this painting is like all paintings:

it is a representation. It is Caravaggio's visual interpretation of a story that has been told and re-told innumerable times down through generations of Christians. Moreover, what Chad encounters is not even the painting itself, but a printed reproduction of the original that has been miniaturized to fit onto the page of a small booklet. Quite simply, it is a highly distorted reproduction of a representation of a mythic story.

Somehow, despite these mediations and modifications, *this* painting seems to contain a particular appeal, an intensity that Chad has never before—and never since—experienced. *This* particular painting is *near, alive, and different.* It seems to bring the story closer to Chad and Chad closer to the story. We might even say that Chad is brought into a personal relationship with it; not just a pretty picture, this painting "pertains to [him]self" (personal, adj. *Online Etymology Dictionary,* 2014). There is an animating force to it that addresses him uniquely.

Indeed, this painting so engages Chad that, despite "not being into art," it seems to evoke not just deep affection for a favoured story but a kind of *love*. Chad tells how his encounter with the painting caused him to *fall in love with Caravaggio that night.* But it seems a strange kind of love. It leads Chad, by his own admission, to find out more about Caravaggio and to search out his other paintings, but nothing he finds *ever compares to that first* encounter. Rather than a fulfilling love, it seems to be a love that leaves him ever unsatisfied with what he finds despite his efforts. It appears as an unfulfilled love—promised but not yet found—or a love lost—something briefly encountered and then torn from his grasp; sweetly remembered but never reproduced.

Over the course of our life, we enjoy many images, including some that we may even "love." We may look upon them with fondness, pleasure, or sadness. We may, like Chad, keep them close to us, using them as desktop backgrounds, or hang them on our walls. In some ways, they may become our companions. They are images in our lives and of our lives. They might be photographs of friends, camping trips, or favourite artworks. When we look upon them, they may call forth certain memories, known individuals, or particular feelings. In containing these evocations, the images we love seem to have a "completeness." When we look upon them, we may remember and feel. They may even seem like old friends. But through their very evocation of memories, emotions, or people, these images also contain a distance. In looking upon a print

of our favourite artwork, we may think, "It is as lovely today as the first time I saw it," but in that moment we also remember when we saw "the original." Or, if we have not seen the original, we might think that "this is it, and yet it is not it." Similarly, looking at a favourite old photograph of our partner, it may be the case that he is called to mind. But we may also simultaneously notice how he has changed in the intervening years. It seems that even as images can call something near to us, they may also remind us that, by being images, they are always removed, distinct, and separate from the person, place, or event that they represent.

Occasionally, however, an image may surpass the limitation of its form and seem to contain—despite how strange or miraculous it may seem—the essence of its subject. For Chad, despite looking upon a reproduction, the picture in his friend's booklet seems to have the power of something original. The image becomes the thing itself. In his phenomenology of photography, Barthes (1980/1981) describes sorting through his mother's photographs after her death, "looking for the truth of the face that [he] had loved" (p. 76). Even though he recognizes aspects of her in each image, "none seemed to [him] to be really 'right'" (p. 64). And then he finds "it," a photograph of his mother that he calls the Winter Garden Photograph. Surprisingly, this photograph is of his mother at age five, an age at which Barthes never knew her. Yet, within the face of that child, Barthes perceives something that allows him to say "*this* is my mother." Somehow, *this single* photograph shows him the essence, the "truth," of his mother. He writes that it "contained more than what the technical being of photography can reasonably offer" (p. 70). "It achieved for [him], utopically, *the impossible science of the unique being*" (p. 71). But, Barthes concedes, this perception is likely unique and individual. He suspects that anyone else examining the Winter Garden Photograph would not see it as he does and, therefore, it is the one photograph that Barthes refuses to include in his text. Because of its specialness to him, it remains reserved from the sight of his audience.

Images that achieve this kind of unique being are startling, powerful, and may easily be fallen in love with. Might this be what Chad experienced that night long ago? Might he have encountered the painting's unique being? Or was there, within the painting, the unique being of something captured there? (And can we differentiate the two?) Like Barthes, might Chad have perceived in Caravaggio's painting some "truth" or "essence"? And if so, what? While Barthes

recognizes in the Winter Garden his mother as who she was in life, what might Chad have perceived? The story of Doubting Thomas is a famous account of failing to stay faithful when challenged and facing a situation without proof. In it, the Apostle Thomas refuses to believe in the resurrection of Christ until he has seen Christ, touched the nail wounds, and put his hand into Christ's fatal side wound. On the 8th day, Christ appears to the Apostles and invites Thomas to verify his existence in order that Thomas may believe. The story concludes with Jesus saying, "Thomas, because thou hast seen me, though hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed" (John 20:29). It is a simple story that is oft repeated in Sunday school and sermons; it is a message that is to be taken to heart by those who claim to be "believers." But Chad already knows this lesson. He learned it growing up. He has seen it in all of the other pictures and paintings of "Doubting Thomas." What new essence, then, does Caravaggio's painting reveal? What might be essential to the story, and yet is rarely captured by those recounting it?

Let me first consider the appearance of this essential aspect. Like Barthes, Chad seems to literally see in the painting something he recognizes as fundamental and key to the story: the something *different,* some aspect or quality, that brings it *near*. Indeed, we might even imagine both Barthes and Chad pointing and saying, "*This* is it!" even as they may have difficulty saying exactly what the *this* is. Zwicky (2008) writes,

> The *this* strikes into us like a shaft of light. We are focused by it, and experience it as focused: what is *this* is unique, it has an utterly distinct… flavour or fragrance. The phenomenal experience often includes an awareness of not being able to give an account of the *this*—we can point, but not say." (p. 52)

When we experience *this-ness,* we may most evidently see what is so striking and yet be unable to articulate it. Is the *this,* for Chad, the *human responses* that so captured his attention, or might it be the apostles' faces *searching for truth*? Or perhaps it is the effect of the chiaroscuro, the *light entering the darkness* and *illuminating* the scene? The essential aspect of the sublime, its *this-ness,* seems to reside in an image, but one may not be able to give it words or even point to it as being "there" in that particular line or "there" in that form. This seems evident from Chad's account both immediately during the encounter as well as later, after he has learned about

Caravaggio and his technique and has searched out his other painting. *Nothing has ever recaptured the sensation I felt that night in the simplest of student apartments.* The *this*-ness of Caravaggio's *Doubting Thomas* seems to be an enigma, a deep and abiding mystery, that cannot be solved through study.

And yet, the painting also appears incredibly clear and powerful. This is an image about the frailty of human faith and the accepting love of God. It is about the difficulty of being faithful and the mystery of the divine. Its message is readily recognizable to all Christians and, especially, to Chad. But its clarity, for Chad, seems to lie beyond its representation of the story and its message; it seems to lie within the painting's very construction, its very existence. In it, Caravaggio has not just revealed a divine mystery with perfect clarity; he has clearly captured the mystery of being human. In every brushstroke, it both mysteriously abides and is clearly evident. It is sublime.

Clarity and Mystery: Basic Understandings

Mystery and clarity: two qualities that appear bound up in the experience of the sublime. Little seems more obvious and yet more enigmatic than to encounter an image that evokes the sublime. From the beginning of our exploration of this topic, I have wondered what, exactly, is the sublime? Is it the image that is sublime? Is its sublimity bound to some aspect of its content? Or is it our response to the image? Or is it something in between? I have also wondered why the sublime (whatever it might be) appears only to select individuals at select moments in time? And why is it evoked by these particular images? In my explorations, I have discovered that those who experience it seem to know clearly that something unexpected and out of the ordinary is happening, and yet they are unable to fully articulate *what* that something is. I have also discovered how the sublime, when encountered, seems to exist in the world—as being *there*, it is *this*—and yet it can be entirely invisible to all but the person experiencing it.

The sublime, it seems, is an experience that is both intuitively recognizable and yet not at all understandable. We seem to know it (because it happens to us) and yet we do not know it. But how can something be both evident and elusive? Obvious yet obscure? Clear and mysterious

at the same time? To understand this strange confluence, I must first consider the experiences of clarity and mystery separately.

Clarity. What is clarity? Clarity is often associated with the quality of clearness: that which enables us to see through something. Consider a relatively simple example. I look out my office window to the street below. I can see through the window to the world beyond it because the window's glass is clear. Indeed, I can say that my vision of the street below is enabled by the glass' clarity. The cleaner the window and the more perfect the glass, the clearer my view and the better I can see outside. At its "clearest," I may not even notice the presence of the glass. Looking through the window, I might feel as if I have unencumbered access to the outside world. The window's clarity, then, paradoxically allows the world below to clearly reveal itself to me but only because the glass' clarity—the means by which I can see that world—falls from notice and may even be invisible. Clarity, it seems, both enables sight and evades it.

But is this all there is to clarity? Consider how we use the word in everyday language. We speak of "clearness of sight" and "clarity of mind." "To see clearly" suggests that we see something as it is fully, as opposed to in a limited fashion (whether in a physically limited or psychologically limited sense). Clarity of mind, likewise, implies that we understand the situation with, if not objectivity, then a full awareness of its complexities. Clarity, in this sense, is connected to knowing and understanding. Someone making a clear argument convinces his listener of his assertion. As the recipient of the argument, I may even say "I understand the situation clearly now." What I mean is that I understand how things are: I understand their facticity or truth.

What is clear and known, then, relates to what is recognizable. The knowable is explainable. I know and can explain that my window, in its clarity, becomes invisible even as it may continuously slip from my perception. The clarity of my window is understandable but, because I do not perceive it, it also exists at certain level of conception. I do not directly perceive my window to be clear; I only know it to be.

When we see clearly, then, we see what is (or what apparently is) in a direct but simplified manner. With clarity, questions we might have had become answered with facts.

Should we be out for lunch and you greet a stranger, I may query, "How do you know that person?"[49] Your reply, "I take yoga with her," answers my question. The relationship, although highly abstract, becomes "clear" to me. I understand you two as existing in a particular relation. Likewise, when a co-worker explains the intricate politics of the office to me, I may say that "I see" as the network of the invisible social hierarchy becomes evident. It might even offer an explanation to formerly confusing encounters, such as when one staff defers to another.

Yet, like the glass of the window, what becomes clearly evident simultaneously requires something else to be lost or to disappear from notice. Knowing the stranger to be a yoga classmate denies the possibility of the strange being someone else. It also glosses over and covers up the complexity of your specific, unique relationship. Perhaps you and the stranger compete in class for the greatest flexibility. Or, perhaps, you have never spoken before. The subtleties of your lived relation disappear with the abstract understanding that "they are yoga classmates." Likewise, knowing the structure of office relations in terms of an informal network of power can overshadow my former confused understanding of it as a set of observed interactions between individuals. Where before I had seen a complex set of interactions, with the clear explanation as to "who is who," those individuals and their actions become slotted into clearly defined but abstract roles.

It seems that the better—or rather the more clearly—something is explained to us, the less we may see it as something else. In their ability to abstract and simply complexities, clear explanations can fix our experience of our world. Clarity, in this way, may root our perception to a particular position or perspective. This may be why theories that offer overly simplistic explanations of phenomena are both highly appealing and incredibly difficult to overcome once they are popularly accepted, even when they are scientifically disproven.[50] Clarity, we might say, is that which allows our particular orientation to the world to have certainty because it makes invisible the tentativeness of our specific positioning within it.

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[49] My question may not even be asked overtly but implied in my look.

[50] For instance, consider the popular notion that a person should drink eight glasses of water a day. Another, more recent, example is the theory, made popular by Malcolm Gladwell (2008), that it takes 10,000 hours of practice to become an expert in any given thing.

While offering us certainty, clarity—whether physical or metaphoric—can be disrupted through close observation of our world. Having the clearness of my window called to my attention, I may decide to look more closely. Upon inspection, the window may not appear clear at all. I might notice minute bubbles in the glass or the tinted layer that dulls the sun. Likewise, if I begin to watch the day-to-day interactions in the office, I may notice how they exceed the described hierarchy. What initially appeared to be clear may, in fact, be far more complicated. It seems that when we begin to look closely at clear things, their clarity becomes opaque. Clarity, itself, recedes.

Clarity's "disappearance upon examination" seems to hold true for both "clarity" in a physical sense and in a metaphoric sense. While clarity's lack of clarity may seem paradoxical, the meaning of the word itself reflects the simultaneous aspects of seeing yet not-seeing. Although clearness is now largely associated with "purity" and "transparency," the states required to make something appear distinctly, or sharply, it originally meant something that "express[ed] the vividness or intensity of light: Brightly shining, bright, brilliant" (clear, adj., adv., and n., *Oxford English Dictionary,* 2014). While a bright light can make the world more evident (i.e., clear), it can also be blinding when too bright.

Clarity's ability to both reveal and conceal, to allow us to see and yet to blind us, has implications for understanding how we know our world. I may think "I see" and understand something that has been explained to me, but upon closer examination, my clear understanding may be revealed as limited and even cursory. Let us consider a "simple" example. Crystals contain relatively simple structures. They are chemical structures that, once determined, can be explained, drawn, and expressed mathematically. They contain a mental, as well as visual, clarity. Looking more closely should only make them more transparent and understandable. And yet, although we may "know" the structure of the crystal, when we look within that structure, what appears is something amazing and mysterious. The structure infinitely repeats, from its largest unit to its smallest, until we reach the level of atoms. A "simple crystal" is anything but. Clarity, it seems, once challenged, has the capacity to become infinitely complex and mysterious. The minute we begin to delve into the clearly known and look closely at it, it reveals itself as not fully known, as not quite what it seems, as full of mystery.

Mystery. Clarity, it seems, leads us to mystery, its apparent inverse. Where clearness allows sight, recognition, and understanding—that is, where clarity allows *in*sight—mystery seems to deny them. Mystery has an opacity and obscurity that the eye and mind cannot penetrate. We encounter a mystery and it seems to refuse definition and categorization. And yet, mysteries do not form a hard wall at which we stop. They are not the entirely unknowable. Rather, they appear as questions that urge onward our efforts at inquiry. Mysteries beckon us with the promise that they may be solved with enough effort. The detective, as any fan of murder mystery novels knows, is compelled to search out the evidence, no matter how difficult to find, that will reveal the killer and give motive to the seemingly incomprehensible.

But are murder mysteries genuine mysteries or are they merely puzzles with a clear and identifiable answer should one look at them from the right perspective? With murders, there is always a killer. Genuine mysteries, while promising the possibility of answer, do not seem to offer this same certainty. We speak of the "mysteries of the universe"; questions of existence that elude even the brightest of scientists. Genuine mysteries are not just unanswered questions; they may be unanswerable questions. They are enigmas.

Mysteries, moreover, have an indefinable, transcendent quality that puzzles often lack. Mysteries seems to contain both a secret human truth and a divine or mythical dimension (mystery, n.. *Oxford English Dictionary,* 2014). Mysteries appeal to us because they promise, if solved, to answer fundamental questions about existence and being human: Why are we here? What is the purpose of our lives? While these are basic human questions, their answers do not seem to be fully within the human domain. Invariably, the promised answers appeal to a higher, divine power for authority, whether "God" or "science" or "human nature." Their truth is predicated on their being beyond the realm of everyday human life and understanding; otherwise, they may merely seem contingent and flawed.

But while mysteries contain this strange, mythical element, past experience has shown that mysteries can also be uncovered or "solved." However, solving a mystery often only results from a great deal of effort. We need only think of the extra-human effort that went into determining the existence of mysterious Higgs boson (a.k.a., the Higgs particle), proposed for years but never found until 2012. Like the discovery of the supposed "God particle," solving a

mystery can only occur with a simultaneous loss of its mythical quality. Finding the Higgs boson confirmed the Standard Model of particle physics, and yet it did not provide the expected explanation of why the universe exists. Although the Higgs boson does hold other particles together (i.e., gives mass), scientists discovered that it does not account for why our universe remains together (RT.com, 24 June 2014). Despite all of the effort that went into its discovery, the Higgs boson is now merely one more particle. It seems that the mysterious, once seen into, ceases to be mysterious at all.

Some mysteries, however, refuse proffered explanations, even when the explanations are the best and most scientific of their time. The human mind, once the greatest of scientific mysteries, is claimed to have been solved with the advent of neuro-imaging. Human consciousness, our sense of self, our emotions and preferences, and even our love of certain images have all been explained as merely the product of neurons firing. This discovery, however, is so simple that it is banal. As an "explanation" for central aspects of what it means to be human, the explanation is so lacking in any mythic, aesthetic, pathic dimension, that it can be difficult to accept. Indeed, we may refuse this very simple solution because to accept it is to destroy what made the mystery compelling and worth considering in the first place. While I may enjoy a particular painting because of specific pathways or deep structures in my brain, as Ramachandran's work suggest (see: Ramachandran & Hirstein, 1999), this explanation gives no weight or value to my *experience* of the artwork. Ramachandran's works explains the mechanism of my brain but not the mystery of enjoying art. Solutions that supposedly "cut to the heart" of the mystery, like the solutions offered by neuroscience, seem to miss the heart of mystery altogether.

To solve a mystery, it seems that more than an explanation must be provided. The answer must be compelling, as compelling as the original mystery itself. But what happens when an answer is finally offered? The mystery might simply disappear, no longer appearing as fundamentally important or interesting as it once did. In this case, the mystery is destroyed as our understanding comes to light. Or, perhaps, the mystery may change shape. Let us consider the loss of God with the rise of modernism. With the removal of God from the question of human existence, the pressing concerns of "Who am I? Why am I here? How am I to be? What are we

to do?" were not answered. While a few philosophers, like Sartre, declared absolute freedom, freedom was not generally experienced. Indeed, the questions became even more desperate as moral moorings were lost. With the loss of God, our questions of existence only changed form. Moreover, with each iteration of a possible answer, their mystery becomes only more complex. It seems that the secret truth (mystery, *Oxford English Dictionary,* 2014) a genuine mystery tantalizingly dangles before us can never be revealed. Whenever we begin to explain a mystery—begin to approach it—there is always more to be uncovered.

And yet, a mystery is not entirely mysterious. Mysteries require a certain degree of recognizability in order to exist. In the moment that that which is mysterious ceases to be recognizable, it disappears entirely from view. Indeed, there is a clarity to mystery that clarity itself seems to lack. Whereas clarity disappears with its achievement, mystery only becomes more evident. When we encounter a mystery, we know it even though we may not be able to approach it. In this way, a mystery requires some "evidence." This seems true, whether it is in our seeing the mystery of God in the perfection of life or in perceiving the mystery of human existence in the laugh of a child. Our encounter with the mysterious must involve something that we may point to and say, "That is a mystery." We must be able to recognize it as being mysterious even as, as the same time, we do not and cannot fathom what that mystery is.

Where clarity is invisible but penetrable, mystery seems visible but impenetrable. And where clarity paradoxically disappears from scrutiny, mystery can unexpectedly arise from it. Through close attention to our world, we may begin to see mysterious, wondrous aspects opening up in the simplest of things. Indeed, we may even begin to notice that which is beyond—and will always remain beyond—our limited human understanding: the basic mystery of existence. And we may be brought to "'wonder' in the face of the world" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962/2006, p. xv).[51]

Mystery and clarity seem closely connected phenomena that often operate in an opposing tandem. When studied, mystery can begin to dissipate and clarity arises. Clarity, in turn, may

[51] In using this turn of phrase, Merleau-Ponty is directly invoking Eugene Fink's understanding of the phenomenological reduction.

reveal itself as a mystery when what we think is clear is scrutinized. But while clarity and mystery may fold one into the other, they do not seem capable of existing simultaneously. How, then, do mystery and clarity coincide in our experience of the sublime when it is evoked by an image?

Wondering What has Just Happened

Let me, again, begin simply: consider the phenomenon of the lived sublime as an occurrence. When we encounter an image that evokes the sublime, our experience is temporally bound. We see an image and, at some point, we must cease to look at it. Our eyes will move away from it. Likewise, the sublime will arise and, at some point, it will disappear from our experience if not from our memory. Why the sublime appears—its cause—however, seems unknown. And yet, happen it does, in an "absolutely unique," unrepeatable, and unforeseeable manner (Marion, 2001/2002, pp. 32–33). We might even say, "I enter it less than it happens by itself to me, takes me in and imposes itself on me" (p. 32). The sublime is, by definition, an event (Marion, 2001/2002).

How, then, are clarity and mystery simultaneously manifest in the sublime as event? Caitlin (whose account I explored in detail in the last chapter) tells how she is

> *amazed, entranced, in awe. I do not understand…. I'm conscious only of the power of the image, my sensory connections to this painting—smell, sight, touch—and of my breathing as I try to take it in, swallow it whole, understand "how."*

Caitlin's response to the painting seems profoundly mysterious. Marion (2001/2002) writes of events, that "what appears in this given moment before our eyes in this way escapes all constitution" (p. 33). This seems particularly true of experiences of the sublime. It may be unlike anything we have ever experienced—truly incomparable. And yet, like all things mysterious, it is not entirely unknowable; there is something that we understand within our experience. Even though we may not understand what is happening, we may be clearly aware that *what* is

happening is due to the image we are looking at. This particular image seems to have a power. It has "an ability to do something" to us that other images may not (power, n., *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2014).

Then, when the image withdraws from sight:

Without warning, the image flashes briefly white as the professor changes the slide—the sudden brightness interrupting my thoughts, now confused, as my consciousness returns into the present. Like surfacing after diving, I am momentarily disoriented.

I glance down at my blank page. A glowing afterimage of the painting stares back at me.

From one moment to the next, thoughts that had been so clear and certain moments before—so given by the image before us—can become *confused* and slip from our understanding. For a brief instant, the sublime may provide a clarity, a certainty, yet vulnerability in the face of the world that we do not normally experience. When it ends, we may awaken *disoriented,* no longer uncertain of our bearings. We may even wonder, "What has just happened?" Retrospectively, there may be a mysteriousness to our experience, even as its viscerality and the force of the image remains in our memory. Again, Marion (2001/2002) describes this quality as being inherent to the event: "no witness, however educated, attentive, and informed he or she is, could, even as the fact, describe what is happening in the present instant" (p. 33). What is given in our experience of the sublime may be clear, but what that momentarily perceived clarity is may remain beyond speech and even understanding. It may remain a mystery.

Yet, for some, the question of "what has happened" may be less of a mystery. Certain individuals may be familiar with the concept of sublimity or have experienced it before and may recognize the event they are experiencing. Arina (whose story was initially recounted in Chapter 4) tells how:

As it is happening, I am surprised at my own response. I can almost physically feel what is happening in the image. It is strange, but at the same time, a small

> *part of me keeps thinking: holy smokes! The sublime is happening to me! This is what they* [the philosophers] *have been talking about!*

Arina, an artist, is well versed in the theoretical and philosophical understanding of the sublime and she can readily identify her experience. Yet, until now, it seems she has not truly known what the sublime was. To know of the sublime and to experience it may be worlds apart.

Arina is not just surprised by her experience, but is surprised when she recognizes what it is. *This is happening to me! This is what they have been talking about.* The sublime, that mysterious, near-mythic experience that has appeared throughout Western philosophical discourses since Longinus and has been alluded to by artists and writers (but never quite replicated) for centuries, may suddenly be clearly revealed to us.[52] In the midst of our experience, clarity may be momentarily gained: *this* is what the sublime actually is! When compared with its experience, our formal knowledge of the sublime, like that of other profound human experiences—falling in love, witnessing death, having a child, etc.—can seem narrow and limited. Written descriptions may seem somehow lacking. And yet, what is lacking may not be able to be put into words. It may be that genuine understanding of the sublime's complexity and profundity can only arise from direct experience itself.

Just as firsthand experience may illuminate our understanding of the sublime, our experience of the sublime may reshape all that we thought we knew and previously thought about images. Elithea Whittaker writes of one such moment.

> I had written exams on Pollock with what I thought was some confidence, but without ever having seen a real one, and then I walked into that big room, through the back door, I guess, as the painting was hung to confront the viewer head-on and I didn't even see it until I got across the room and turned around and POW! I had to sit down on the floor, pow. Everything I had ever written, that I had been taught, etc. was wrongheaded, and that painting was absolute

[52] Theoretically and philosophically, the sublime has something of a mythic quality (particularly in its Romantic articulation). This may explain, in part, the ongoing debate over the sublime's existence and status.

evidence of it—all I had to do was look at it to see that. I was overwhelmed. (letter, published in Elkins, 2001, p. 244)

While we cannot be certain that what Whittaker experienced was the sublime, her account illustrates how an image with which we are intimately familiar can suddenly show itself as something else entirely. Like Whittaker, we often feel confident in our seeing; that one simply sees what is. We may assume that a good reproduction of a Pollock painting will show us exactly the same as the original. And yet, the image that evokes the sublime may appear so unique that everything we have thought about it before (whether from reproductions, reading about it, or even having seen it before) now appears completely *wrong.* We have been in error and our error is evinced by what is before us now. As Whittaker writes, *the painting* is *absolute evidence of it.* Our error may be as plain as the nose on our face and we may wonder how we ever saw it otherwise. This realization may be so stark that, like Whittaker, we may need to sit down in order not to collapse under the weight of our misunderstanding in the face of the overwhelming truth now before us.

Yet, how is it possible to see an image repeatedly in one way and then, in person, to see it "correctly"? Might it be in how the original image gives itself (Marion, 2001/2002)?

In our everyday experience, we often approach images as representations and cultural artifacts. Depending on what kind of images they are, we accord them a particular status, context, and purpose that cue both our expectation of the images and our expectation of our experience of them. In this way, our experience of images—like our experience of most named things—is structured. We may find a certain image informative or merely pretty (even beautiful) or we may find it boring, dull, or ugly. It might scandalize, make us feel awkward or uneasy, or simply be a banal selfie. It could be a famous photograph or merely be the latest snapshot taken and immediately forgotten. But the image is almost always recognized as a particular kind of image and, as such, is likewise almost always preconceived by its audience before it is encountered. In this way, the experience of the image can become obscured by our ideas and expectations of it.

When we experience an image that evokes the sublime, the expected may not be encountered. Whether previously known or never before seen, what stands in place of the expected image is something different, often entirely unexpected. To see it as such may be unsettling or just strange. It may even be upsetting or overwhelming and, in the extreme, it can inspire both fear and awe, but it is most assuredly different from what it was, what we expected, or what we thought it should have been.

For Whittaker, the painting she encounters is both the same painting she has always known and yet entirely different. In one way, it is the painting she has seen on classroom slides and in art history textbooks, for she recognizes it. Objectively, the image contains the same lines, colours, and shapes that existed before. In fact, it would likely be identical to an indifferent eye. And yet, it is not the same painting for her. It is entirely new. In our lived now of the sublime, the image may take on a radical new quality. Although we may not be able to fully articulate *what* specifically about the image is different from what we had previously know it to be, that *it is different* seems unmistakably evident. Looking upon it, we may be disconcerted and taken aback by what appears before us.

The Incomparability of the Image that Evokes the Sublime

The appearance and manifestation of the sublime seems to differ fundamentally from our encounters with all other images. Specifically, the image's presence is most acutely noticed because it is something that cannot be ignored. It is as if the image has a heightened visibility or heightened reality. It is *sur-real.* Perhaps the experience of the sublime is an experience of the surreal, as in being beyond realism or of a dream-like quality, the more-than-real. Certainly, some of the most famous surrealist paintings are resonant of the sublime and Dali named one of his paintings *The Sublime Moment.* Dali's strange forms both appeal and disturb. In them, we may see a world we recognize but suddenly made wholly strange: dreams bordering on becoming nightmares. They may be uncanny in the extreme—an experience (as we explored in Chapter 6) that may coincide with the sublime.

But to focus on the image's surreal quality may be to ignore an important feature of our experience of the sublime. Unlike the images of surrealism that come from our unconscious, our dreams, or our inner life, the images under consideration here—the images that are the source of our experience of the sublime—are images *in the world.* They physically exist. Others can see them, even if they do not experience them as sublime.

In this way, the sublime is a strange phenomenon. Not everyone experiences it. Moreover, it is rarely found when deliberately sought out. Rather, the sublime seems to come upon us unexpectedly in our everyday world, from our everyday world. And although the image that evokes the sublime is undoubtedly part of our world—for it sits on the magazine shelf or attached to the gallery wall or appears on our computer screen—it occupies a strange place in our lived world: it appears to be hyper-present and hyper-real. It stands forth amid the haze of our world. It clearly calls our attention in a way that other images may not or cannot. The image that evokes the sublime is unique. It may not simply be unlike other images, it may be incomparable.

Scarlet (another participant whose account will be addressed in detail in Chapter 8) tells of a special picture that she has in her house. It is a print of a painting that, when she saw it in person, evoked the sublime. Although framed and ready to be hung, Scarlet is unable to find the right location, so she places it in an upstairs bedroom. But she admits:

> *I have all these other paintings and stuff in my basement. I have a storage place for all the prints that I have purchased over the years and all the stuff that the kids have done that have been framed. It is all downstairs in this one place. But I would never consider putting this picture there. It would never be able to go there. It is horrible just thinking about putting it there. It just couldn't be! To do that would be to dishonour it somehow. It would be to make it ordinary, and it's not ordinary. This one isn't ordinary. A lot of those other works, my kids painted them. They got awards for them. This is awful to say because they're not ordinary either, but this picture is different. This just doesn't go there. It's not ordinary like that.*

The image that evokes the sublime can hold a special place in our homes and in our lives. For Scarlet, if it cannot be hung on a wall, it must be carefully packed away in an upstairs bedroom. Like a visiting guest, it is given temporary lodging in a safe location all of its own until a permanent home is found. And, as if it were a guest, she would never consider relegating it to a basement storage cupboard amid the collected clutter of her daily life.

After we have experienced the sublime, we may treat the evoking image differently from other images. We may take unusual care of it. It may become an object of affection and concern. And, like Scarlet, we might find that this treatment is simply necessitated by the image's inherent specialness. To treat it like any other image would be to suggest that the image did not have an innate right to be treated with dignity and respect because of its singularity. The very thought of such treatment can evoke upset or revulsion. To do so would be to make it *ordinary.* "Ordinary" means to "conform to the normal order of things" (ordinary, adj. and adv., *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2014.*).* The image that evokes the sublime has done anything but conformed to the normal order of being an image.

And yet, Scarlet has several un-ordinary images in her basement. Why does this image differ from those? Technically, it is a poster of a painting. It can be replaced, unlike the original artwork made by her children. But despite being a reproduction, this particular image seems to have an inherent specialness. Although Scarlet views the creations of her children as *not ordinary,* they are not-ordinary in a different way than this one singular, incomparable picture. This image exists in an entirely different order.

Like Scarlet, we may find that the image that evokes the sublime does not seem to belong to *any* order of our lives. It may, in fact, seem alien to all we know. Bernhard Waldenfels (2011) writes:

> The resistance of the alien results from the absence of any equivalent, including a moral equivalent, which escapes from the order. For every order, the alien remains an alien intruder. (p. 20)

An image that evokes the sublime may be recognizably an image but, in its evocation of sublimity, it may be also entirely unfamiliar or even alien to us. It has intruded upon our world

and may appear to have no equivalent. It may be outside of the normal order of images in our lives and, therefore, may cease to appear as an image proper. It may become something else entirely, something special, singular, and irreplaceable. By its very nature of being uniquely sublime, we may refuse any thought of treating the image like other images. Not only might that seem inappropriate and disrespectful, it may potentially somehow "damage" or "harm" this unique thing before us.

The Sublime as an Impossibility made Manifest

At times, the sublime image may seem so unique, so special that its appearance may almost seem like a miracle. Wendy D. tells of a profound encounter she had with Goya's *May 1808*:

> Though I had seen and admired reproductions of this work many times, no reproduction had prepared me for my overwhelming experience of the original. I stood before it for ten minutes or more, feeling rooted to the spot, as if mesmerized, unable to move, or even to see the other paintings in the exhibit.
>
> … my repressed tears had little to do with the horrific nature of the scene. Rather, what moved me was simply being in the presence of a creative act so close to pure perfection as to seem an impossible achievement—and yet there it is: someone has actually *done* it: a human being can do *that!* (letter, published in Elkins, 2001, p. 240).

What Wendy D. sees astounds her, and yet she has seen this image many times before as reproductions and even admired it. But then again, in a way, she has not seen this image before for she has only seen reproductions, copies of the original, never the progenitor. When she finally does see the original, she finds it to be exactly that: that from which all else proceeds and is derived (origin, adj. and n., *Oxford English Dictionary,* 2014).

In the midst of the sublime, an image's originality may appear to be an impossibility made manifest. It may appear wholly new, the first, the source, the beginning (origin, adj. and n., *Oxford English Dictionary,* 2014). And like all sources and beginnings, it may be a moment

of pure creation; clarity mysteriously arising out of nothingness. We may feels as if we are standing as witnesses to its inception. And yet, it is not merely the case of our experiencing an image as new—that happens routinely each time we see an image we have never before seen. Rather, what appears seems to be something entirely new. Or said more simply: It is not just experienced as new to us; the image may be experienced as new to the world. It is as if, at the very moment of perception, the image and the sublimity its draws forth appear out of nowhere. And, in a way, is this not true? Our seeing fulfills the existence of images and especially artworks (Dufrennes, 1973). But more than merely enabling its full constitution, when we experience the sublime it may be as if the very act of our seeing has called the image into existence.

But again, I must ask: what, really, has been called into existence? What is new about this new appearance that startles and shakes us up? I accept that it is not the physical image object, for many have likely encountered it before us, sometimes mere moments before our eyes happen fall on it. Nor is it the experience of the sublime for, although perhaps new to me, it too is not new to the world. And yet, it still seems that our seeing an image and experiencing it as sublime may cause something new to arise in the moment of perception. What might this be?

The Simultaneous Power and Fragility of our Encounter

Let us now return to Chad's account. How might we understand his experience of the simultaneity of clarity and mystery in his sublime encounter with Caravaggio's *Doubting Thomas*? Chad seems to capture it in the simplest phrase:

> *In this painting, I saw something I had never seen before. It was near, alive, and different.*

In our experience of images that evoke the sublime, like Chad, we may experience a revelation of some profound mystery with a clarity, simplicity, and force that we have never before experienced, even when told directly. And like this painting's very subject, they may make us deeply, truly believe.

But what has Chad seen? As we have already noted, what we see when we experience the sublime can be difficult to put into words. And yet, for Chad, there seems to be something religious to his encounter. Virilio (1994) notes how in the Middle Ages, religious paintings had a uniform clarity. All figures, including the background, were uniformly in focus where "everything is seen in the same light, in a transparent atmosphere" (p. 15). While many art historians have proposed that this model existed because the paintings were created prior to the invention of perspective, Virilio claims that these holy pictures "establish[ed] a theology parallel between vision and knowledge, for which there [were] no blurred areas" (p. 15). Although Caravaggio painted during the century after the end of the Middle Ages, might anything be gained from considering Chad's experience in light of Virilio's observation?

Caravaggio's painting, unlike the paintings typical of the Middle Ages, contains perspective and yet it is a perspective with no background, nothing hazy, nothing out of focus, nothing blurred. The four figures stand out clearly against a black-brown background. Illuminated from above, they share the same light—a light that Chad finds so appealing. Might Chad be experiencing the vision of the painting as a form of knowledge? And yet, what might that knowledge be? Might it be the very subject of the painting? Might that knowledge be found in how Caravaggio captures the human response to an encounter with the divine? If we consider the painting, we may see how the apostles' response is marked by their being flawed and fragile human beings—imperfect creatures when compared with the perfection of God. They are creatures who have failed to have faith when they come closest to encountering the divine. And yet, in their imperfection, Caravaggio also seemingly reveals them to be God's perfect creatures. The apostles appear like Jesus. Indeed, from the painting, one would not know a difference between them unless one knew the story to which it refers. There does appear to be "the unicity of divine creation, the absolute intimacy between the universe and the God-man of Augustinian Christianity, a material world which loved itself and contemplated itself in its one God" of which Virilio writes (1994, pp. 16–17). This image seems to reflect the crux of a particular understanding of Christianity, and Chad admits that the painting has become an important touchstone for him throughout his life.

In the years since that encounter, Chad tells of keeping the image close to him. He owns a poster of it, downloads a digital copy, and uses the image regularly in his work as a youth pastor. An image experienced as sublime may come to occupy an intimate place in our lives, both physically and metaphorically. In the instant of our seeing it, the image may move from being unknown and strange to us to being an important—even integral—part of our world. Like Scarlet, we may find ourselves keeping it near, its physical proximity and our treatment of it reflecting how deeply it has moved us. Or, like Chad, we may return to it again and again over the course of lives. Indeed, our encounter with the image may be so important that we may choose to share the image with others, as if through revealing it to another we might share something of the image's sublime secret. Or we may find ourselves searching for other images that move us as profoundly. Once the sublime is experienced, we may find any other experience of images less than satisfying. The sublime can become a craving.

Chad travels Europe, visiting the greatest of cathedrals and best art galleries, but "*Nothing… has ever recaptured the sensation I felt that night in the simplest of student apartments.*" Despite Chad's extensive study and wandering, *Doubting Thomas* and his initial experience of it seems incomparable to all other images. Images that evoke the sublime can be powerful, even when remembered years later. And yet, they can also seem incredibly fragile. Although Chad has searched out Caravaggio's other paintings, he has not seen the original *Doubting Thomas.* He tells how:

> *Once, I came incredibly close—I was in Berlin during the few weeks that the small gallery of Sloss Sancoussi, Potsdam (which owns the painting) was open and I intended to see it. But for some reason the day I went the gallery was closed. I was extremely disappointed but also strangely relieved.*

He admits now: *I'm not sure if I ever want to see it.*

Like Chad, we may both cherish the memory of an image that evoked such a strong response so long ago and be reluctant to look upon it in its "original" form. The prospect of seeing it again may both thrill and terrify us. The image may beckon, but the possibility of losing or diminishing its memory by seeing it "in the flesh," so to speak, can be terrifying. The sublime,

like the divine, is not easily found when deliberately sought. In facing an image that moved us so profoundly, we might wonder: would we, like Thomas, doubt the veracity of what we see? Would the image's aura have been lost through its endless mechanical reproduction (Benjamin, 1968)? And if we saw the image, would we need, once again, to experience the sublime, like Thomas' finger entering the wound of Christ, in order to believe? Would we need to be pierced by it again? And what if the image did not, like Jesus, offer the demanded proof? What if it was no longer sublime? What if it simply stood before us, mute, refusing to yield its truth once more? Would we then believe that our initial perception had been wrong and ourselves misguided? Are we, like Thomas, doubters? Or would we remain true to the memory of our experience? to the meaning it imparted? To see the image again seems to risk all of this. Chad concludes:

> *I'm afraid I will be disappointed. Or maybe it is just that closeness and holiness are mutually excluding.*

Like Chad, the clarity and mystery of the sublime image may hold us in a paralyzing grip. The mystery of our first experience may call to us to seek it out, but closeness creates familiarity, which can destroy the mysterious. Likewise, we may fear losing the momentary clarity that the sublime has provided, that which cannot be understood. Inchoate meaning may be lost to common knowledge, and with it we may lose the image's sublime revelation that has been become so important in our lives. The meaning of our initial sublime encounter may be too precious to risk losing, even for the promise of its return.

The Sublime as the Revelation of Truth

If, as Chad's account suggests, the sublime may be experienced as a revelation (and a revelation of some import), what does it reveal? Consider Deirdre's account:

> *I stroll across the Schlossbrücke (Palace Bridge) on my way to Humboldt University. The classic sculptures that decorate each side of the bridge portray the heroic life of a warrior from youth to after death. In each phase of life, he is accompanied by a Greek goddess. When his hero's journey is over, he is*

carried to Mount Olympus in the arms of Isis. On this morning I paused to look more closely at the sculptures. Rather than admiring the graceful form of each statue as I had on other mornings, I respond to them as a piece. They suddenly appear to me as terrible propaganda. A deep anger rises in me. Here, of all places, glorifying war is absolutely obscene. My heart pounds as I hurry off the bridge.

Past the bridge and a short distance along, I see a small, gated building that I have never previously noticed. Curious, I peer inside. Within I can see, in some shafts of early morning light, a sculpture. It is a mother holding her dead son. I gasp at the sight. Literally awesome, there it is—in stone—my reaction to the warrior's story on the Palace Bridge. Though hidden away behind the locked bars of a gate and in semi-darkness, there is the real truth of war: dead sons and grieving mothers. It is so genuinely human in its portrayal of love and grief that I respond with tears. There is an intimacy to it that the grandeur of the bridge sculptures could not achieve. I look around at the other people who are passing by without a glance in my direction. Their indifference is a relief; the moment with the image is my own. Minutes later, I compose myself and continue directly to the university classroom. I have no energy for further sightseeing.

Deirdre, like Chad, sees something in the Berlin Pieta that she has never seen before—even in the great artworks she has passed mere moments before. Although found only a short distance from the bridge, the Pieta seems to stand in stark, sublime contrast to those other sculptures. Indeed, it seems entirely their opposite. Where the bridge's grand depictions are official and public, what Deirdre encounters in the small building is small, private, and intimate. It is hidden away. Where the bridge shows the glory of war and the warrior receiving the blessing of the gods, the pieta quietly reveals *the real truth of war: dead sons and grieving mothers.* It is a truth that the bridge's sculptures seem to elide, a truth so powerfully expressed in the sculpture's quiet sorrow that Deirdre is moved to tears.

When we encounter an image that evokes the sublime, we may, like Deirdre, be literally taken aback and have our breath taken away by what we see. That which lies before us may not

seem fully possible. It may seem as if our inner thoughts or intuition have become physically manifest. What we know as true may strangely appear as being *there,* being physically evidenced, in the world.

But Deirdre encounters more than just an artwork, the message of which she agrees with; she encounters a basic truth that echoes in her very core. In this way, the sublime image may seem like a mirror. Looking upon it, we may find ourselves faced with something the likeness of which we readily recognize. Yet unlike the portrait that reflects only the surface of its subject, the sublime image may reflect back a more true likeness than we have ever encountered before, even when the image we look upon bears no physical similarity to anything known.

It seems that the image's truth may extend beyond being our truth or even the artwork's truth to being a fundamental truth, something true to all. Indeed, the image may appear as truth incarnate; as irrefutable proof. In looking upon it, this truth may seem evident and undeniable. Moreover, it may seem a truth that both belongs to us and extends beyond us.

In being more than simply my truth and reflecting more than simply my opinion or belief, the truth offered up by a sublime image may be experienced as a revelation of some truth of the mystery of being human. Paradoxically, this knowledge, appearing as a universal fact, may be gained through an encounter with a man-made object. Limited in form and made by human hand, the image is clearly a created object. And yet, in its creation, something mysterious, something beyond the human, may be revealed. Is it not paradoxical that a representation can more accurately present something than the thing it is representing? In the midst of the sublime, an image may more accurately show the world or the truth of the world than the world itself. In its man-made lines and curves, we may see that which is beyond our shaping and malleation. Indeed, the object may capture and render the world's truth so accurately that we, like Deirdre, may be overwhelmed by the emotions it calls forth.

Deirdre describes the sculpture.

> *Within* [the building] *I can see, in some shafts of early morning light, a sculpture. It is a mother holding her dead son… Though hidden away behind*

the locked bars of a gate and in semi-darkness, there is the real truth of war: dead sons and grieving mothers.

Like the Pieta that Deirdre stumbles upon, the truth that the sublime may reveal to us may be largely hidden away from the world. It may be a truth that is revealed through accident and in shadows. Indeed, it may well be that the sublime is not always be accessible, nor readily understandable. Or, it may be that in full light, its mystery disappears. Perhaps this is why we may hesitate to look at the image again. Even still, some of us somehow find the sublime. And when we do, it can be deeply personal—perhaps even more personal than the presence of another human being.

Deirdre describes the sculpture as being *genuinely human in its portrayal of love and grief.* Somehow, a piece of stone object seems to have transcended its formal limitations to become the human embodiment of love and grief. And we may find ourselves responding as we would to another human being. We may even enter into an intimate relation with the image. Unlike the grandeur of the bridge's sculptures that shout the lies of men to the world, images that evoke the sublime may quietly whisper their universal truth to the select few who look, pause, see, and listen.

In the intimacy of our brief encounter with the image we may, like Deirdre, notice how others do not react as we do. They may pass by the image without even a glance. Or, if they do look, where we respond with deep emotion, others may seem indifferent and even callous in their disregard. While this may be confusing, it can also be a relief. The sublime may so intense an experience that we, like Deirdre, may wish *the moment with the image* to be our own, a private, intimate moment. When others do not see or do not see as we do, we need not share either the image or our experience. In the blindness of others, we may have the chance to see. We may dwell privately for as long as we need or the moment allows.

Deirdre tells how, after a few minutes, she *composes* herself and continues with her day, although she has *no energy for further sightseeing*. The sublime can unsettle us. It can shake our certainty, leaving us feeling exposed, vulnerable, and exhausted. We may find that, before we can continue on, we must compose ourselves, bring ourselves back together, as if we had been

strewn apart by the experience. But what has been scattered by our encounter? What do we find we must reconstruct? When we experience the sublime, the certainty of ourselves as independent, isolated beings in the world may be challenged. The image may reveal itself to be more human than the human beings who pass us by. Likewise, the truth that it reveals may transcend its created form, transcend its creator, and, even us, its viewer. It may show us the truth of the world.

Is Sublimity a Religious Experience?

If the experience of sublimity involves an experience of revelation, a revelation of truth, that is incredibly close, personal, and clear yet also distant, universal, and mysterious, is it a form of religious experience? Chad's experience, as well as Bataille's and Evan's from the last chapter, suggest it might somehow be connected to our experience of the divine. Bataille's and Evan's experiences (as explored in Chapter 6) suggest that, in the midst of the sublime, we might perceive something of the numinous or transcendent. But the numinous is not necessarily a religious experience, even though they are often related in studies of religion (see: Otto, 1958, and Campbell, 1991). How is the sublime similar to or different from overtly religious experiences? For instance, how does it differ from religious ecstasy?

The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa by Bernini (1647-1652) is a beautiful statue and one that may evoke an experience of the sublime. Yet the account from which the statue derives is one of religious ecstasy, an experience St. Teresa of Avila (1911) describes in her autobiography:

> I saw an angel close to me, on my left side, in bodily form… He was not large, but small of stature, and most beautiful—his face burning, as if he were one of the highest angels, who seem to be all of fire…
>
> I saw in his hand a long spear of gold, and at the iron's point there seemed to be a little fire. He appeared to me to be thrusting it at times into my heart, and to pierce my very entrails; when he drew it out, he seemed to draw them out also, and to leave me all on fire with a great love of God. The pain was so great,

> that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain, that I could not wish to be rid of it. The soul is satisfied now with nothing less than God. The pain is not bodily, but spiritual; though the body has its share in it. It is a caressing of love so sweet which now takes place between the soul and God, that I pray God of His goodness to make him experience it who may think that I am lying.
>
> During the days that this lasted, I went about as if beside myself. I wished to see, or speak with, no one, but only to cherish my pain, which was to me a greater bliss than all created things could give me. (pp. 215–216)

St. Teresa's experience is unusual. It is bodily and all encompassing. It encompasses both pain and pleasure. It remains beyond words and can be re-evoked in memory. It is also cherished after it has passed. At its core, like the sublime, the encounter seems to encompass dual, almost opposing feelings.

There seem to be many similarities between St. Teresa's experience and the experience of the sublime, and yet there also appear to be some fundamental differences. St. Teresa has faith in her experience (indeed, it is the origin of her faith), in contrast to Chad who seems more doubting. When we experience religious ecstasy, there seems to be a certainty that *this thing,* the divine, exists and we eagerly await (even expect) its return. The sublime, however, has no such reassurance. While, in the moment of sublimity, we may be certain that the image has evoked something powerful and out of the ordinary, afterwards we may be less certain as to its return. The sublime may disappear with our return to the image.

There is a further difference in our relation to this "thing" that has briefly presented itself. St. Teresa experiences an all-encompassing joy in the presence of something larger than and beyond herself. The divine, once encountered, seems to exist as a being in the world; it is a being with which St. Teresa seems now to stand in relation. Indeed, it is the basic relation that shapes the remainder of her life. The sublime, however, seems less protective, less relational. While we stand in relation to the image that evoked our response, a certain "God" does not appear to us, only something far more ephemeral. At best, the existence of the divine may be pointed to

through a momentary perception of the numinous though the sublime. After the sublime withdraws, we may be left alone facing a vast void.

Experiencing the Reverberations of the Image

If the sublime is not a religious experience (although it may inform one's religiosity), how might we understand its revelation? Let us consider again Caitlin's experience. She tells of being stopped by a painting projected in her art history class.

> *The image, huge and looming in front of me is wet with it; the gore translated perfectly through projected light. …The image of blood and meat and figure—all of them emerging from the darkness of the canvas—is beautiful, horrible. I feel the skin across my scalp crawl and tighten as my body reacts. There is a taste to this type of image; I swallow with a mouth that is suddenly dry. It is too much to take in…. The ominous room, the figure of the man, the glistening sides of meat hovering like wings above him are painted with incredible detail and beauty. They are raw, demanding…*
>
> *… His* [the man's] *face is in torment, empty sockets staring blindly forward, the anguish augmented by the juxtaposition of dripping meat. … The man's hands are clutched in pain or anger, his mouth slightly agape. Smiling? Screaming? The entire painting writhes with emotion. Lines of paint—tears or blood—pour down his face, through the meat, across the canvas. Distantly, it seems, a part of me wonders at the strength of the artist. I want to paint like this. Raw. …I'm conscious only of the power of the image, my sensory connections to this painting—smell, sight, touch—and of my breathing as I try to take it in, swallow it whole, understand "how." The power of the artist's intention and message overwhelms me. I am amazed, entranced, in awe. I do not understand.*

As I explored in Chapter 6, this painting physically calls to Caitlin. It draws from her a near-primal response. But in this response, there appears the calling of another, more distant but

as equally as powerful and primal desire. In the midst of the encounter, Caitlin recognizes: *I want to paint like this. Raw.* The painting not only speaks to her body, it seems to speak to her soul.

In his discussion of the effect of the poetic image, Bachelard (1964) notes how "the speaking subject exists in his entirety in a poetic image, because unless he abandons himself to it without reservations, he does not enter into the poetic space of the image" (p. xxiv). Might Caitlin be experiencing the "abandon[ment] of herself without reservations," fully entering into the poetic space of the image, of which Bachelard (1964) writes? Abandoning oneself to the image—as Caitlin does—may bring one to a sudden attention, a point of focused consciousness and awareness never previously experienced. And, like Caitlin, one may be held by the image completely and left helpless in the face of it. The image may resonate, yet "it is not an echo of the past. On the contrary: through the brilliance of [this] image, the distant past resounds with echoes" (Bachelard, 1964, p. xii). Bachelard (1964) notes, "it is hard to know at what depth these echoes will reverberate and die away" (p. xii). The effect of images has the power to silently run deep. Might the experience of the sublime may be understood as reverberations of the image?

In our everyday experience of images, we see an image and try to make sense of it. We see it, look into it, and consider its context. We experience it and think about it, read it through our knowledge and expectations. We understand it as the kind of image it is—painting or photograph—as opposed to other forms of life and it has style, a grammar, that enables us to understand it (McHugh et al., 1974). When our experience is mediated by a prior representation or commentary, it is validated (Duro, 2007).

The image that evokes the sublime, however, may be too immense to be experienced in this fashion. It may be too incomprehensible to be mediated. The sublime, invisible, may be felt through the image. We may try to take it into ourselves and fail, finding it is too much. In the immensity and incomprehensibility of the sublime, an image may manage to remain distinct from our attempts to "know it." By remaining other, it may prevent the ease of our looking at it, accepting it, and moving on, as we often do with the other paintings, other images. According to Duro (2007), a "sense of separateness, a gap" can open up between the viewer and their

“longed-for encounter,” causing anxiety (p. 95). And yet, this anxiety-ridden experience can be a revelatory moment. Merleau-Ponty (1948/2004/2009) writes:

> We encounter objects… that do not pass quickly before our eyes in the guise of objects we “know well” but, on the contrary, hold our gaze, ask questions of it, convey to it in a bizarre fashion the very secret of their substance, the very mode of their material existence and which, so to speak, stand “bleeding” before us. (p. 93)

The image through which we encounter the sublime may present itself, through the sublime, in a way we never previously experienced. For Caitlin, it stands (literally) bleeding before her. Does, then, the image “reveal the very secret of [its] substance” through the sublime? Not a secret, not a knowledge that can be spoken. But possibly one that may be felt, recognized, and known bodily, possibly as an understanding—a strange but human truth—that artistic cognition enables; a truth that Hegel recognized as being immediate, intuitive, and inarticulable (Hahn, 1994).

Caitlin describes the painting as *raw.* We call something raw when it is uncooked, unprocessed, or not yet prepared for consumption (raw, adj. and n., *Oxford English Dictionary,* 2014). Such an object has not yet been altered to appeal to the palate. It is not yet fit to be consumed, assimilated into the body. In the moment of the sublime, the image may slip beyond our expectation and presents itself fully, clearly, not only as a painting or photograph, but also as its mysterious self, unaltered by human consciousness, by our practices of naming and identifying. It may present itself as it is, in all of its possibilities.

But rawness not only occurs in an image’s clarity and mystery of presence, it may be raw in another way as well. We call something raw when it is still fresh, tender, and subject to possible pain or damage if disturbed, as in the case of a wound being raw or of having rubbed one’s hands raw through labour (raw, adj. and n., *Oxford English Dictionary,* 2014). When something is raw, the flesh beneath the outer surface is exposed. Experiencing the sublime may make us feel raw and exposed. It may wound us, but it can also reveal our inner selves, our faith and fears, our singular beauty and collective monstrosity, our perfection and our faults. When

we encounter such images, we may come to realize, like Caitlin, that we *want to paint like this*—we desire to live such truth—and yet we may wonder if we have the strength to be so *raw* and *revealing.* In the experience of the sublime, the image can "take root" in us (Bachelard, 1964 p. xix), making the necessity of its existence our own necessity. Bachelard writes:

> It becomes a new being in our language, expressing us by making us what it expresses; in other words, it is at once a becoming of expression, and a becoming of our being. Here expression creates being. (p. xix)

In the face of the sublime, we may be called into being. Caitlin seems called to create, Chad to his faith, Deirdre to the hard truth of war. In our experience of the sublime, we may find the reverberations of the image drawing up from the depths of our being the very matter of who we are. Like Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological "fisherman's net draw[ing] up from the depths of the ocean quivering fish and seaweed" of "all the living relationships of experience" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962/2006, p. xvii), the reverberations of the sublime may draw forth and reveal the essence of who we are. In this way, the experience of the sublime may be a revelation of our self, in our singularity and uniqueness.

Encountering the Singular and the Infinite

The sublimity of an image seemingly has the power to create, to draw forth, to renew, to reveal. It speaks uniquely to he or she who experiences it and yet, by being unique, it appears singular, unrepeatable, and unspeakable. Our words seemingly fail us. At best, we may point to the image and say, "*This* is it. This is what is sublime." And yet, we convey so little through our pointing. How, then, do we get at the singularity of that unique experience in words that are normally given to the demands of practicality, of communicating shared experience? In his novel, *Invisible Cities,* Italo Calvino (1974) writes of such a difficulty when Marco Polo tells Kublai Khan of the city of Aglaura:

> So if I wished to describe Aglaura to you, sticking to what I personally saw and experienced, I should have to tell you that it is a colorless city, without

> character, planted there at random. But this would not be true, either: at certain hours, in certain places along the street, you see opening before you the hint of something unmistakable, rare, perhaps magnificent, you would like to say what it is, but everything previously said of Aglaura imprisons your words and obliges you to repeat rather than say. (p. 67)

In the unmistakable and magnificent, yet unspeakable glimpses of Aglaura, there resides a moment of perception that appears similar to our experience of the sublime. Amid someone's everyday movement within it, the city suddenly appears as it truly is, in its singularity. In that instant, we see, admire, and may even be astonished, but we cannot give words to the vision we have beheld. All attempts are futile; they are bound by the limits of what has already been said of Aglaura. Rather than sharing a common experience, the visitor to Aglaura becomes a prisoner of the incommensurability between language and vision.

When we encounter an image as sublime, we may likewise find ourselves unable to speak of that which we have seen and experienced. But why are we so bound? What is that escapes being put into words? While all experience evades being fully put into language, the sublime seems remarkably difficult to express. Might it be how the image is transformed in the sublime encounter? Marion (2001/2002) writes of what occurs when a painting becomes an idol.

> The abrupt metamorphosis from the unseen into the idol, which the painting in its frame accomplishes in its own right, reproduces nothing already seen and resembles nothing visible in the world. It adds to the visible of the world a visible that no longer belongs to it, transcending it and annulling it. (p. 69)

While not all images that evoke the sublime are idols, there may be something of value in Marion's description. Marion describes a visible dimension that appears beyond the given visibility of the painting itself. The painting becomes more than a mere painting. Might an image similarly be transformed in a sublime encounter? Might we, like the visitor to Aglaura, fleetingly perceive the image's essence? Are we unable to put our vision into language because what we see is before language? That is, might our experience of the sublime reveal to us the image in

its irreducibility (the irreducibility of which Wollheim [1972] writes)? How might we understand experiencing an image in its uninterpreted presence?

The journalist Robert Krulwich (7 March 2014) attempts to describe an encounter he had as a boy of eight while walking through the Museum of Modern Art.

> I was walking behind my dad, trying to keep up, when something on the wall kind of flung itself at me, stopped me short, and (for lack of a better term) grabbed my eyes. I came to a full stop.
>
> It was a woodland scene, a blur of greens, blues and purples, a tumble of rocks in the foreground, tall pines, branching into a blue sky, breaking up into arabesques. It had no people in it, no girls, nothing I recognized. But with a force that felt like a fist, it jerked my head to it—almost as if it were calling out, "You!"—like it knew me. Like it wanted to pull me to it and tell me something—something personal. But what? I had no idea. Nothing like this had ever happened to me. Furniture, pictures, carpets had always stayed in their place, being, after all, things. But not this thing. It had power.
>
> As I moved closer, it tightened its grip. The boulders in the foreground were dark at the edges, light where the sun peeped through. The upper branches broke free and became little dabs of paint, applied in rhythmic strokes. Paint became tree; tree became paint. I knew nothing about painting, zilch about art history, but the crazy energy coming off that canvas felt like it was addressing some puzzle I already had in my head. I couldn't stop looking. I barely moved. My dad, who had turned around wondering where I'd gone, found me standing a few feet from the image, and when he came up behind me, without turning around, I asked him, "What is this?" And he, without looking for a label, answered, "This ... (and it was the first time I ever heard the name) ... is a Cezanne." (¶2-4)

Krulwich's encounter with the Cezanne painting reveals the limits of our ability to speak about the sublime. While he can easily describe what the painting looked like, like Marco Polo's

objective description of Aglaura, Krulwich cannot describe his experience of the image. His analogies—of the painting *flinging* itself at him, of *grabbing* his *eyes* and *jerking his head* like a *fist* and *tightening its grip*, of it *calling* and *telling him something personal* (*but what?* he has *no* idea), of its *crazy energy*—attempt to give words to an experience that seems to escape language. At face value they make little sense, but metaphorically they seem to "speak around" and near the edges of a very special encounter.

Krulwich describes his encounter as "one of the mysteries of my life" (¶6) and admits that "when I left the museum I was a different boy" (¶7). Sixty years later, the encounter remains beyond his vocabulary. Yet we must ask, what in an experience of an image can strike a journalist silent? Only something truly singular and unique; only something that appears so unfamiliar, so uncommon, that our language cannot contain it.

To be common is to be held or known by many. To be common is to be shared, to belong to all people, and to be of equal use or value to all (common, n., *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2014). When something is uncommon, it is rare, limited, and sometimes deemed special. The uncommon can give distinction. Uncommon things may be sought after, wanted, desired. The uncommon is different from the everyday. And just as the uncommon can be valued for that difference, so too can it be feared.

The sublime is truly an uncommon experience, with the object inducing the experience seeming to move beyond our comprehension. "The intuition of the sublime enters only when the sensual, concrete intuition is found to be inadequate for the greatness of the concrete object, and then the truly infinite appears for which the merely concretely infinite is the symbol" (Schelling, 1859/1989, p. 86). The sublime may be so singular that a particular experience of it is incomparable with anything else. In the story "The Aleph," Jorge Luis Borges (1999) attempts to write of his sublime encounter with the mysterious Aleph, but he laments:

> I come now to the ineffable center of my tale; it is here that a writer's hopelessness begins. Every language is an alphabet of symbols the employment of which assumes a past shared by its interlocutors. How can one transmit to

> others the infinite Aleph, which my timorous memory can scarcely contain? (p. 282).

When the sublime is encountered, whether through the Aleph or through a Cezanne painting, sharing the encounter may seem impossible, whether it is immediately during the experience or later through words.

The sublime seems to have no likeness to some existent to which we can relate. Although it is in the very nature of art "to be seen or heard and no attempt to define or analyse it, however valuable that may be afterwards as a way of taking stock of this experience, can ever stand in place of the direct perceptual experience" (Merleau-Ponty, 1948/2004/2009, p. 95), this is not necessarily the case with all images. Images come in many forms. But it seems that whenever we encounter an image that evokes an experience of the sublime, some strange transformation can take place. We do not seem able to even *take stock* of the sublime image. No common, shared language seems to exist to enable an understanding of it, despite ongoing attempts by philosophers, trained journalists like Krulwich, and great authors like Borges. In such cases, naming identifies but does not reveal: the sublime remains unspeakable.

And yet the experience of the sublime may linger, the feeling remaining with someone long after the experience has ended. Jasper (another participant) explains: *I can feel that feeling now, as I try to give verbal shape to my memories of the encounter, to inform my sense of what it means.* This inability to express, to comprehend the sublime may so press at the confines of our rational abilities, even our *timorous memories*, that we may doubt whether we can contain it.

It might be possible to say that the sublime is as unfathomable as it is unspeakable and incomparable. Even so, there may be some sort of recognizable totality to it. In his description of the Aleph, Borges (1999) touches upon this:

> I… saw the Aleph from everywhere at once, saw the earth in the Aleph, and the Aleph once more in the earth and the earth in the Aleph, saw my face and my viscera, saw your face, and I felt dizzy, and I wept, because my eyes had seen

> that secret, hypothetical object whose name has been usurped by men but which no man has ever truly looked upon; the inconceivable universe. (pp. 283-4)

Dienske (2002) says that "the inexpressible exists in the timelessness which is directly experienced in an atmosphere of infinity." And within the experience of the sublime seems to lie the timeless, *inconceivable universe.* Schelling (1859/1989) believes that "wherever we encounter the infinite being taken up into the finite as such—whenever we distinguish the infinite within the finite—we judge that the object in which this takes place is sublime" (p. 85–86). In the sublime's totality and infinity, in our ability to recognize this experience, our physical bodies, the world, and the infinite universe appear bound to and through the sublime. In our perception of the sublime and our inability to articulate it, we may perceive ourselves in it and it within ourselves. And this can indeed be dizzying. Though we are unable to comprehend it or to articulate it, in the midst of experiencing the sublime, we be may momentarily "grasping at infinity" (Payne Knight, 1805, p. 329).

Chapter 8: The Lived Sublime as Existence & Inexistence

On a Starry Night like this, I would like to die

> *My husband and I were visiting the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York. Midway through our visit, my husband wanders off to look at the works of some impressionist artists and I find myself standing alone in front of van Gogh's "Starry Night." I have seen reproductions of it, of course, but the proximity of the actual canvas creates an unexpected thrill. A shiver of goose bumps spreads like waves over my skin. My breathing becomes deep gasps. The painting seems to crawl into me and roots me to the spot. For how long, I cannot say. My surroundings fade away as I imagine being perched on a hill, looking down at the sleepy town, thinking about the sublime beauty that nature has produced just for my eyes: the dark shadow of the church and its spire shooting toward the burning haloes of the stars, the broad wavy texture of the sky, the swirling clouds, the faint presence of the night breeze. A perfect moment captured in the stillness of this two dimensional frame. I count the 11 stars but my eyes keep going back to the tree: the most striking feature of the painting. It is a disturbing image: dark wavy wisps floating in the sky; a sense of helplessness and quiet resignation; the tree surrendering to the stillness of the summer night. The all-embracing silence, boiling with the movement of the stars and sky, powerfully juxtaposing the blackness of the tree. The effect is calming and reassuring, yet also troubling. The tranquility of the landscape, the absence of humans, the all-round peaceful solitude. I think, possibly together with van Gogh, that I would like to die on a night like this.*

In the MOMA, Esther (a participant in this study) finds herself entranced by Vincent van Gogh's *Starry Night.* Its scenic depiction draws her in, calms yet excites her, pleases yet disturbs, reassures yet troubles. Although entirely absent of human beings, the painting teams with emotion. Gazing upon its strange beauty, Esther is seduced. More than simply being pulled in by the painting, she is "led away" (seduce, v., *Online Etymology Dictionary,* 2014) by it, led away from being the image's mere observer to being its very subject. Like the unseen observer

of the painting, Esther finds herself standing on the hill, looking out at the landscape, contemplating life and meditating upon death.

Visual images have long served as objects of mediation on life and death. Images—first painting and now photography—have been used to document both the most life-affirming moments and the greatest instances of pain and destruction. It seems that for every image of a young child or a happy marriage there exists an equal number of images of war and death. Beyond merely documenting the moments of human life, visual images have also been used to link life to death and death to life. Photographs are used on government issued identification and in official medical files to document who we are (and who we are not). Likewise, photographs have become an essential part of documenting major incidents and events, whether for posterity or legal proceedings. Personally, we often keep photographs of lost loved ones and long dead relatives as reminders that they once lived and as a connection to them (for instance, see: Barthes 1980/1981). In art, most especially, the visual image engages the relation between life and death. The *memento mori* has been used since antiquity to encourage its viewers to consider the course of their lives by thinking about their eventual death.

Within the context of these long-standing practices, van Gogh's *Starry Night* appears an ideal object for thinking about life and death. The dark and mysterious painting was created by an artist who would eventually commit suicide. Painted while van Gogh was hospitalized at the Saint-Rémy asylum, *Starry Night* marks the beginning of his final and the most existential stage of his practice. The painting is particularly famous for being the first image that van Gogh painted directly from memory and imagination. It would, therefore, seem natural that this particular image would lead any viewer to consider van Gogh's life and death and, by extension, his or her own.

This association, however, does not seem to be the case for Esther. Although she does think about van Gogh's death, her encounter with the painting seems less abstract and far more personal than that of most viewers. While she recognizes the painting's fame and artistic importance, these facts seem to be secondary to her experience. Instead, what the painting suggests to her—what it evokes in her—appears to be of a highly personal nature. Esther describes thinking of how the image's *sublime beauty* has been created solely for her. She ceases

to perceive the painting as an object and instead experiences it as a view of a landscape, a unique and singular moment of perception in a dark and strangely illuminated world. Although surrounded by other gallery visitors, in this instance, this painting becomes hers alone.

Yet, what, exactly, is happening? Quite simply, the image seems to be speaking to Esther in deep and passionate way. It seems to address itself to Esther, not as a famous work of art, but as a simple, stunning image. And in this moment, the highly recognized picture seems to transcend its infamy and return to its most intimate, original state: as a personal encounter—almost a conversation—between an image and its viewer. In this moment of transcendence, the image has become its converse, the opposite of its common mode of being. The word "converse," the root of conversation, originates from the Latin *conversare,* meaning *"*to turn oneself about, to move to and fro, pass one's life, dwell, abide, live somewhere, keep company with" (converse, n., *Oxford English Dictionary,* 2014). The image does not merely speak to Esther, showing her something of the world; something seems to pass in between them that changes her. No longer a matter of viewer and viewed, the image infuses her, *crawls into* her. The painting becomes part of her as she becomes part of it. Esther dwells with the image and it dwells in her. It becomes intimately bound up with her and her life. And in that moment of dwelling, the image reveals its darkness and its light, its harshness and its subtlety, its tranquility and its torment, and it makes them hers. It shows her life and its shows her death. And it makes Esther realize that, *on a night like this,* she *would like to die.*

Rather than the grand, universal gestures toward human finitude that artworks commonly provoke, the painting seems to draw forth an intimate awareness of Esther's own existence. But while many of us have acknowledged the possibility of our death at one point or another in the course of our lives, Esther's realization is unlike most. It is not the case that she realizes that "I would die if [this or this] happened." It is not a recognition of what would kill her or be too much to bear. In these cases, our recognition is marked by a *giving up* on life because of its terrible conditions; life beats us. Instead, Esther's realization seems much quieter, kinder, gentler, and more profound. On this night, she would *like* to die. Dying seems to become a wish. The ideal conditions of death seem met because life has been fully realized. Rather than a giving up on life, this type of recognition appears more as a *giving over* of oneself. As Esther

dwells with and within the painting, she encounters a perfect realization of life and death. She encounters the sublime.

Life and Death: Basic Understandings

Life and death: the only two certainties of existence. Yet, because of this certainty, they are often the most overlooked and unseen aspects of being human. For this same reason, they may be also the hardest to understand.

Here, I do not intend to engage in a comprehensive exploration of the life and death. That would take more than a lifetime and several phenomenologists have already lived (and died) trying. Rather, I propose to outline some preliminary experiential boundaries around each notion. And "notions" they are, so general and incomplete—half reality, half imagination—are our ideas and understanding of them (notion, n., *Oxford English Dictionary,* 2014). The ways in which we commonly understand life and death may be "useful" but ultimately "small and cheap" (notion, n., *Oxford English Dictionary,* 2014) when compared to their full phenomenality, which may be, at best, only briefly intuited. Indeed, life and death present a unique incomprehensibility because each exists at the far extremities of experience. Life is so prevalent that it must go unseen, while death is so elusive that it cannot be seen.

Life as Existence. Life infuses us every moment of every second of every day. Paradoxically, our aliveness is the most given to us, the most present part of our existence, and yet the least attended to aspect of it. In our everyday, we appear both the closest to this aliveness and yet the furthest from it. Our being alive is so pervasive in ourselves that we cannot conceive of its absence. Without life, we would not exist and to imagine our inexistence is nearly impossible because it requires we give up the very means by which we know and imagine our world. Understanding life, then, may pose a unique difficulty for this study because it cannot be explored through identifying what stands in its absence.

At best, we may begin to trace the general outlines of life through what we see and intuitively know of our world. For instance, we know that living human beings are alive because

we know that, if we are not alive, we are dead (even though we may debate the exact boundary between life and death). We also know that we are alive when we go to the store, when we type on our computers, when we tuck our children into bed at night, or when we talk to colleagues. And we know that all of these instances combined are what we commonly call "living" and which make up that which we refer to as "life."

And yet, is this life? Isn't life far more than the accumulation of these instances? What of the individual in a vegetative state who has no conscious experiences? Although we may say that "their life does not seem to be worth living," it is difficult to deny that with a breathing body and beating heart, they not alive.

Life, then, seem to be not only that to which we refer when we ask our friends, "How is life?" or the series of choices we make that leads to that question or the ability to act in and of itself. It also seems more than the "life" that we exuberantly feel surge through us when we have succeeded or that stops us short when we have failed. It is more than even the life that we see when we see a group of children joyfully playing at the playground or the life I feel ebb deep within my chest as I drift away into sleep. Rather, life seems to be the basis of all these things and much more.

When we begin to look at it, life seems ever present to us. It infuses every moment, every choice, every action, every thought, from birth to death. It appears to be that which makes possible everything we do and experience, including that which we could do and can imagine. Life forms our existence and it is there whether we are aware of it or not. We live in and through it. Life, it appears, is everywhere. It is all things. And yet, we cannot truly see it because of how close it is to us, how enmeshed it is in us, because it is us. According to Henry (1990/2008), "life is the experience of itself" (p. 120) and, while all-pervasive, each instance of it is absolutely unique.

> Once this experience occurs, it is singular in the radical sense. It is necessarily this experience, irreducible to any other experience. For example, each anxiety is this anxiety. By touching each point of its being in the immediacy of its auto-affection, it fills everything. (p. 120)

The phenomenon of life, while appearing, cannot be known directly because there is nothing else. Life "leaves no room to escape where there would be license to get rid of oneself and where there would be something else besides oneself" (p. 120). How, then, might we grasp something of life's nature?

For Henry (2008/2009), life may be only indirectly perceived through the affective dimensions of its self-givenness. We encounter evidence of life in how it is experienced by us as it happens to us.

> Life feels and experiences itself immediately such that it coincides with itself at each point of its being. Wholly immersed in itself and drawn from this feeling of itself, it is carried out as a pathos. Prior to and independently from every regard, affectivity is the "way" in which the Internal gives itself, in which life lives itself, in which the impression immediately imprints itself and in which feeling affects itself. (p. 7)

While embedded in every moment of our existence, we may become aware of life through the impressions its gives us—within our subjective feeling of life—as it occurs to us. Our only point of access to life, then, becomes how it moves us—in those joyful moments of play, the peaceful ebb of sleep, the painful stab of regret, or the sublime grip of an image. Indeed, for Henry, art (particularly abstract art) comes closest to revealing life to us because of its capacity to make us feel as we experience it. "We experience its [art's] certainty as something that must be, much like one experiences love. This certainty is absolutely identical to our life" (p. 20).

Death as Inexistence. In direct contrast to life's continuous presence, death appears as a constant absence in our lives. Most of us will only experience dying once and, even then, will not know death. The moment we die we will cease to be. The experiencing, knowing self is gone and, therefore, will not know its own death. Death marks our inexistence, the ultimate foreclosing of possibilities, actions, and experience. When death appears, we disappear.

While we cannot know our own death, we may, however, be able to see death in another. From one moment to the next, we can see another person exist and then cease to exist. In the process of moving from living to not-living, they have died. Death has appeared. Many people

know someone who has died, someone who was here one day and gone the next, and the strangeness their absence creates in our lives. Through another's death, we may no longer have the elderly neighbour to talk to, the family member to call at Christmas, or our dog to walk. Their deaths are known through their absence, through how they interrupt and create gaps in the rhythm of our own living.

And yet, is this death? Is the death of my neighbour different from the experience of my neighbour moving away? In both, I am denied her presence. And yet, my neighbour who has moved away is not simply absent, she seems to take on something of a "possible presence." My neighbour might return to visit and, when she does, I might think, "Oh, this is just like old times." Or, if she doesn't return, I may simply wish for this reunion. The return of my neighbour who has died, however, is impossible. And yet, do I not similarly call forth her presence through my missing her and wishing she was here? Perhaps this is not death, then, but simply life re-ordered by another's absence. Can we move closer to death than our experience of the mere absence of another?

What of those rare instances when we are privileged to witness the moment of death in another? Although attending a person's death was common practice in the past, it is becoming increasingly rare in Western society. Frequently, the person is hospitalized and, as a result, his or her death becomes medicalized, ritualized by the healthcare system's practices. Sometimes someone's death becomes so bound up in "life saving procedures," organ donation, artificial resuscitation and the like, that the only people around the dying person are medical professionals. However, there are still some instances where someone dies in hospital with family members and close friends standing in attendance. Let us consider one of these instances.

I have only been present at the moment of death once. It was that of my father:

> *My sister, brother, mother and I hover around the edge of the hospital bed that holds my father's inert, near comatose form. The rumble of the machines that are keeping him alive sound in the background. The long drawn rasps of the respirator, the rhythmic beeping of the heart monitor, and the periodic clicks of the IV pumps provide much-needed breaks in the silence. We know what is*

coming. We watch as the IV bag slowly empties. It will be his last. With a beep of the machine, it is empty. The nurse arrives, turns off the pump, and politely withdraws. My family and I draw in closer around my father. I reach out and place my hand on his chest. I feel his life deep within his large, warm chest. Touching that life, I silently offer him a blessing. I pull back my hand and settle in to wait holding his hand. After a few minutes, the heart monitor slows… slows… and finally becomes one long beep. He has died. The nurse arrives and silently turns off the monitor and the respirator before, once again, retreating. I reach out once more to touch my father's chest and offer him another blessing. Still warm and large, his body is now empty. I realize that I have offered my blessing to nothing.

Like so many other people dying in hospital, my father's death was marked by the long drawn out beep of the heart monitor. We knew that he had died because the machine told us; it changed its sound. And yet, the long beep was not my father's death; the beep merely occurred in response to it. Like the person who finds out his neighbour has died, I too felt a sense of my father having been there one moment and gone the next. Even though I stood by his side, held his hand, and watched everything that transpired between his living and his being dead, the moment of his death somehow eluded me.

How is it that, standing beside someone who is dying, we can still miss the instance of death? One moment the person is alive and the next he is not. It seems the death of another appears and withdraws so quickly that even it cannot be seen, even by the most scrutinizing of eyes. While medical researchers would argue with this statement and say that death is, in fact, a long drawn out process of the body's systems shutting down, that is not how it is experienced by those witnessing the death of another. Life was present when I offered my first blessing to my father; it was gone when I offered my second.

Marion (2001/2002) describes death as a "pure event," too pure to be seen whether in others or ourselves (p. 40). "The death of the other person only shows *itself* in a flash and only gives *itself* in being withdrawn—in withdrawing from us the living other" (pp. 39–40). Our death, in turn, is likewise unseeable. Although it "appears in happening … as I die with it, I can

never see the event in it" (p. 40). To witness another die, then, seems to be as close as one can get to death. And yet, there remains an incredible gulf between this experience and death itself.

But if death ever escapes us until the moment it appears and we cannot know it, what of other, perhaps less common, instances when we are brought face to face with death? If the death of another is invisible and our death unknowable, what might be known of dying or nearly dying?

Consider a serious multi-vehicle car accident. Here, we may have a "close encounter" with death in a very unique way. When the other car crashes into ours and ours starts to spin out of control, we may feel as if our life is passing before our eyes. In that moment, all that we have done (our life to date) seems as if it is on a collision course with what is about to happen (our death). As yet another car veers towards ours, we may even recognize that which is going to kill us. We see death approaching. As we watch all this transpire, we recognize that *we are going to die*. But then, through some strange fluke of fate, the car other flies by and, with it, death also retreats.

With the serious car accident, we may face our death in a way that we do not when another person dies. In the moment of the accident, death moves from being a theoretical possibility, a suggestion evidenced by another's absence or by a sudden change in another's being, to being a real possibility, our possibility. Life and being dead—that which was before and that which comes after our death—seem to begin to close together. Our death seems impending. Staring at its imminent arrival, we await death and yet, no matter how close we get, we still we do not encounter it. We may sense it. We may even say that "we saw it" but it is still avoided. Even in a serious car accident, death somehow slips by without being seen. Given how close we can be to dying in a serious car accident and yet how removed the event of death remains, we may wonder if it is ever possible to know death at all. Marion (2001/2002) concludes that it is not possible:

> What death gives, we do not know. In effect, the human condition is not characterized first by mortality (animals and civilizations die too) or even of the consciousness of having to end by dying, but in effect by the ignorance of the

knowledge nevertheless owed and required of what happens for me at the instant when my death passes in me. (p. 40)

Life and Death. In both thought and experience, life and death are intimately intertwined, even as they stand in opposition to one another. Invariably, we cannot help but think about death when we contemplate life and those moments when we become most aware of being alive are often those when we face the possibility of our death. The choking person who cannot breathe feels the pain and struggle of being alive, while the new diagnosed cancer patient contemplates the possibility of his death. However, to think of death is not to experience it, nor is to painfully struggle for life not to remain within its firm grip.

Life and death, therefore, are distinct, even though they appear mutually dependent. Death cannot occur without something having been alive. A rock is not born, nor does it die. It only exists. If there is no life, there is no death, only inertia. Similarly, life requires death because life is a temporally bound experience. If one were to remove the beginning and the end of life, the meaning of what is between—being alive—disappears, as does life itself. We do not say an atom is alive, even though it changes form, for it has not known a beginning or an end. The grace of life is granted only upon those beings—plant, animal, and human—that must die. As Meghan O'Rourke (2011) writes, "Without death our lives would lose their shape."

As this brief exploration has suggested, life and death are simultaneously the most and least known aspects of human existence. One is all pervasive, the other entirely absent except for a single instant, and yet both are certainties. Each happens to everyone. But while we may count on both life and death (and possibly taxes), both life and death share an inconceivability and invisibility. Life is too prevalent to be noticeable at all—it is more present to us than our breath or pulse—while death escapes our sight no matter how closely we look for it. Just as we remain distanced from the moment of death even when we stand right beside it, so too do we remain distanced from the moment of life as it is repeated endless within us.

How, then, might we understand Esther's unique experience of *Starry Night*? How may we understand the simultaneous evocation of life and death within our experience of a sublime

image? And how might we understand our experience of the sublime in terms of existence and inexistence?

Recognizing an Absence in the Image's Presence

Leslie tells of walking into a gallery and seeing a large black and white canvas showing farmers harvesting a field of wheat:

> *The piece is beautiful, ghostly. Almost like a whisper. At first, I think it must be made from charcoal, but it is unlike any charcoal drawing I have seen. It's not a drawing at all, more like a painting. I lean in to check the medium.*
>
> *Ashes.*
>
> *I step back as a hollow fills my chest and stomach. I stare at the picture, at the silent ghostly bodies. Scorched.*
>
> *Ashes.*
>
> *A hollow fills me, fills the space around me. It is echoed in the silence of the gallery. It becomes so consuming, so present that I feel it press in upon me, as if screaming in my ears. It is a dreadful, horrible realization that I cannot bear to voice.*
>
> *It is ashes.*

Leslie is wandering through a gallery when she notices a beautiful and striking image. Intrigued, she stops and looks and, like many gallery-goers, she turns to the placard to find out more about the painting. When she discovers what the image is made of, the image seems to change. It becomes sublime.

When the sublime appears in an encounter with an image, the image may suddenly transform. What had initially appeared beautiful may reveal itself as also terrible, and what had

been visually striking may become existentially charged. For Leslie, this change seems the result of discovering the painting's medium. From the moment she recognizes that the painting is made of ash instead of charcoal, the image seems to fundamentally change and seemingly ignites a change in her.

Yet, what is the cause of this change? Why would discovering that the painting's medium is ash provoke such a response? Charcoal, as all schoolchildren know, is burnt wood. By all accounts, it is ash. And yet there seems to be a qualitative difference between the two.

Charcoal is a creative substance. It has many uses: as fuel to burn, as an antidote for certain ingested poisons, as an additive to gardens, and as a medium for drawing. Creative in all these respects, when used in art the charcoal sticks hold much promise. With the simple tool grasped in the artist's hand and a piece of paper, something arises out of nothing. As the charcoal transfers from stick to paper, the stick literally disappears into the appearing image. It becomes something new. To make a charcoal drawing is to bring something into existence.

Ash, however, seems to be a far more complicated substance. Ashes, like charcoal, are the burned remnants of something else. But whereas charcoal is burned wood, ashes can refer to the burned remains of any living thing: wood, paper, grass, even people. Moreover, in turning something into ash, one does not change the burned into a new substance one merely alters the old. Whereas burned wood becomes charcoal, ash, in all cases, refers to the thing that once lived and has been obliterated by fire. We rarely encounter mere "ash"—we have the "ashes of a fire," the "ashes of my home," and "the ashes of my mother." Ashes are always ashes of something. However they are present—as an artistic medium or in an urn on a mantle—they retain a direct connection to what they once were. We might even say that ashes are a kind of image of life. Similar to the relation an image has to its referent, ashes point to something formerly alive but no longer present. As substance, the essence of ash is as a trace, a sooty and imperfect memory of a vitality and force that once existed.

And yet, while ash retains a trace of its former self, it may also be considered the ultimate destruction of any living thing. When something is reduced to ash, it is not just burned but loses all physical form. Unlike the charcoal stick that retains its stick-like shape, ash is soft and dusty.

It slips from the fingers and is picked up by the wind. Unless contained in a closed vessel, ash spreads and dissipates, serving as the final obliteration of that which it once was. In both carrying the trace of its former life and always disappearing, ash seems to uniquely embody existence and inexistence.

We might, then, understand something of Leslie's response to discovering the painting made of ash. As an artistic medium, ashes are an odd, unexpected choice. Unlike charcoal, ashes are not neutral. They do not become transparent to our attention when the image is created. Even when spread upon a linen canvas by the most skilled hand, ashes retain a reference to their original form. That reference—of something having lived that is now destroyed—imbues the painting. For Leslie, this knowledge is first suggested as a *whisper*, something present although intangible, but become apparent as a ghost when she recognizes the image's true medium—*it is ashes.*

In that moment, the painting changes. It ceases to be a picture depicting a landscape and becomes a tangible trace of something long gone, something destroyed and become ash. Out of the ash, a new form has been created, but this form is not entirely new (unlike with charcoal), it is life made out of death. And while we cannot know definitively what ashes were used to create the image, for Leslie, in depicting the farmers the ashes become the farmers' ashes. *I stare at the picture, at the silent ghostly bodies. Scorched.* It is as if the bodies drawn out of the ash somehow reflect, even embody, their original form.[53] Like life itself, which requires the spectre of death to exist, the life of the painting seems dependent on the death inherent in its ashy medium.

In recognizing the medium, the initially *beautiful, ghostly* painting becomes a painting of violent destruction that has been used to create. And although all art must destroy to create the new—the clean canvas is destroyed by the application of paint, the rock cut away by the chisel to reveal the form, and the charcoal stick giving way to the paper—our awareness of this destruction tends to be effaced by the image's new form. For Leslie, however, the ash only

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[53] After some research, I discovered that the ashes used in the painting were incense ashes. This fact, however, does not change Leslie's experience of the image.

seems a reminder of what was destroyed to create the new. As this account suggests, the sublimity of an image may be revealed not only through seeing a new aspect of an image or seeing an image in a new way, but also through a perceived absence in the image. To experience the sublime may be to encounter an image that is pointedly marked by what cannot be seen.

The relation between the visible and the invisible and unseen is central to many phenomenologies of seeing and art. In his study of seeing objects, Elkins (1997) notes that "the world is filled with things that we do not see, even though they are right in front of us" (p. 54). There are simply too many things to see to see them all. Elkins' also observes that much of what exists *can* be seen but remains unseen due to the physical and psychic limitations of the human being. Taking a slightly different focus—that of creating and seeing two-dimensional artworks—Marion (2004) suggests that the very existence of the visible is dependent upon that which is invisible. What we create, see, and understand is only possible because of what we do not and cannot see in the artwork.

Both Elkins' and Marion's formulations, however, approach the visible as what is immediately given, seen, and understood as the image. What we see is what is before us, even if that is only a small segment of what can be seen (Elkins, 1997) and its appearance relies on that which cannot be seen (Marion, 2004). Yet how might one understand those instances where, like Leslie, what one perceives is not visibly present in the image and yet seems undeniably there? What of the image that is an image of absence? And how does this relate to our experience of the sublime?

If we consider Leslie's experience closely, we may see that in such an instance the image's presence is revealed as being an overwhelming absolute absence. Its existence is dependent upon an inexistence. Rather than attending to what is represented (as both Elkins and Marion do, i.e., what is depicted upon the picture's surface), when we experience the sublime we may find ourselves acutely attending to what is missing, what is no longer or has never been. The image proper may become the image absent. In the case of the ash painting, it may be an absence in extreme. The ash-painting that Leslie gazes upon is an image of life destroyed—*scorched*—by the fact of its own existence. It is a living image of death. Indeed, it is death

doubled, for it is an ash rendering of farmers scything a field. It is death beautifully depicting death.

Yet, the image also retains a trace of life. We cannot forget that the image, itself, is a new creation. And this life is also doubled; for just as scything a field brings death, burning a field—reducing it to ash—brings new life. Burning the remaining stalks—a common farming practice—mixes ash into the earth, fertilizing the field, and life is renewed. It is not merely a painting of death, but also of life. In this duality, perhaps, one may find its sublimity. Here, life and death may intimately intermingle and become almost indistinguishable.

One's Self Exposed and Revealed by the Image

Many images, including many famous artworks, depict the entwinement of life and death, and many depict the appearance of death amid life. Yet few have the power to make us feel, as Leslie seems, as if we are looking directly upon death. To come unexpectedly upon such an image in an art gallery may be upsetting, terrifying, awe-inspiring, or even unspeakable. Art galleries are not common ground for death—or life, for that matter. For the most part, art galleries tend to be approached as places where rare "cultural objects" are stored for posterity and security (de Botton & Armstrong, 2013). What exists within its walls is of social and cultural value, but through its very placement may become separate and distinct from everyday life.[54] To encounter life and death (and not their mere representation) within an art gallery is as uncommon as encountering a goat grazing in a grocery store—not impossible, but unexpected and highly surprising when we see it.

Yet, Leslie's account suggests that something more has happened than her merely encountering something out of place. We might imagine that if the same image were seen in a bookstore, her response would be no less powerful. Her reaction to the image—or rather what the image reveals to her—seems to be what is truly unexpected and out of the ordinary. It seems

[54] This is one consequence of the modern art's mantra, "art for art's sake." When art exists only for itself, it ceases to be bound up in the more everyday concerns of its viewers.

to reside outside of everyday existence and yet seemingly implicates existence. When we experience the sublime, like Leslie, we may find an image revealing an existential truth, one bound to the phenomena of fire and ruin.

Ruins occupy a special place in the human imagination (Harbison, 1991/2001), whether they be architectural (Harbison, 1991/2001) or of artworks (Jager, 2004). "Ruins are a way of seeing" (Harbison, 1991/2001, p. 99) that can lead us out of our everyday attitude. The greatest and most mythic creator of ruin is fire. In fire, we see something transformed from its complete, living state to absolute ruin, to near nothingness. To watch the fire is to witness one state of being transformed into another. Bachelard (1961/2012) asserts, for that someone before a fire:

> He thinks of life. He thinks of death. The flame is precarious and courageous. This light is destroyed by a breath, relit with a spark, easy birth and easy death…
>
> But when one dreams more deeply, this lovely equilibrium of life and death in our thoughts is no more. In the candle dreamer's heart the word *extinguish* has such echoes! (pp. 16–17)

When we encounter an image of ash—whether it is made of actual ash or is a metaphoric remnant of a flame *extinguished*—we may dream deeply and hear the echo of our own eventual extinguishment. According to Harbison (1991/2001), to respond existentially to ruin is only natural. "Practically any human thing slipping into dereliction… engages our feelings about where we see ourselves in history, early or late, and (in poignant cases) our feelings about how the world will end" (Harbison, 1991/2001, p. 99). Ruins may lead us to meditate on existence, to become aware of it.

Traditional understandings of the sublime have long associated its experience with the development of a particular perspective on existence. This is summarized succinctly by de Botton and Armstrong (2013):

> Art can offer a grant and serious vantage point from which to survey the travails of our condition. This is particularly true of artworks that are sublime in the Romantic sense, which depict the stars or the oceans, the great mountains chains

> or continental rifts. These works make us aware of our insignificance, exciting a pleasing terror and a sense of how petty man's disasters are in comparison with the ways of eternity, leaving us a little readier to bow to the incomprehensible tragedies that everyday life entails. From here, ordinary irritations and worries are neutralized. Rather than try to redress our humiliations by insisting on our slighted importance, we can, through the help of an artwork, endeavour to apprehend, and come to appreciate, our essential nothingness. (p. 30)

From this perspective, in the face of that which will long outlast us, we may realize our own "petty" "insignificance" and "essential nothingness" in the grand scheme of things. But is this the *lived experience* of the sublime? Or merely what theorists imagine we might take away from such an encounter?

Consider Scarlet's experience:

> *My husband, some friends, and I were at the Getty Museum—we went to see the van Goghs there. As we started walking through the gallery, I see this other painting and—it's me!*
>
> *I am gobsmacked and thunderstruck, like the air has been knocked out of me. I'm looking into my face as a child.*
>
> *I see a cute little girl in a little coat all dressed up fancy like a dress-up doll, posing for her family. But she's so sad standing there pretending, waiting for the door to open. That's exactly me: I had a little jacket that was exactly the same; I had a little hat like hers; and I remember being all dressed up like that all the time as a child. Even where she is standing is the porch on my grandparents' farm. It's me as a scared little girl trying desperately to be perfect—perfect coat, perfect hat, perfect standing—yet standing on the outside.*

Magnetized, I can't take my eyes off it. Even though I can't breathe—my chest is so tight, and it hurts me to look at that picture—I love this painting. I just want to sit and stare at it forever—I know immediately that I'm going to buy it.

My husband notices my interest and walks over to look. Awkwardly, I try to hide my response. I don't want to make a big deal of it in front of our friends or even in front of my husband because I would have to explain and I don't think I can. They will think I'm crazy. So I put on my best "Scarlet smile" and say off-handedly, "I really like this picture, I think I will buy a print." But something has given me away, because my husband only looks at me strangely, then walks away.

In the Getty Museum, Scarlet sees an image that is like holding a mirror up to herself as a child. She recognizes herself in the painting. Its familiarity is not merely uncanny, but so utterly astonishing that she feel struck dumb by it. It is not just that the little girl in the painting looks like Scarlet did as a child or that the setting looks like her grandparents' farm, but the mood that the painting evokes seems to reflect Scarlet's inner life as a child. The image before her is a deeply meaningful revelation, one that she wishes to keep with her in the form of the image's copy.

In contrast to de Botton and Armstrong's claim, our experience of the sublime may be anything other than a realization of our own petty insignificance and essential nothingness. We may not be led to reflect on "the ways of eternity." Although the sublime may take us out of our everyday concerns (if only momentarily) and may even reveal a profound truth, it may not be the one that de Botton and Armstrong (and others like them) claim. Rather than being a distant, universal truth (e.g., that "the incomprehensible tragedies that every day life entails" are "ordinary" ultimately meaningless "worries" [de Botton & Armstrong, 2013]), our experience of the sublime may reveal something profoundly personal: it may show us who we are at heart. For Scarlet, it is her as a little girl trying to be perfect, who sadly waits to be let in.

The evocation of the sublime may lie in an image's capacity to show us to ourselves in our most vulnerable, most essential state. This revelation has the capacity to both deeply hurt

and heal us. We may see ourselves as we truly are: virtues and flaws—perfectly imperfectly human. Indeed, the image may seem so revelatory that we may even feel exposed and, like Scarlet, want to hide our response from others, even those closest to us for fear of their not understanding the inexplicability of what we see. But is the coming to light of our "most essential self" all that is experienced when we encounter an image that evokes the sublime? What might that existential exposure mean for us? And, when we are so exposed, what does the sublime demand of us?

An Invitation to Contemplate the Threshold of Life and Death

Both poets and philosophers have addressed the experience of existential exposure and scrutiny through encounters with artwork. In his reading of Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo," Jager (2004) suggests that, when we encounter an artwork, we are invited to leave off our everyday "practical attitude" and enter "the festive world," the poetic sphere of life, wherein our being may be illuminated and fundamentally called into question. According to Jager, the possibility of transformation occurs in the moment we choose to cross the threshold of the two different worlds: the everyday and the festive. Jager describes this transition:

> As he steps across the threshold from an anonymous functional world into the full light of Apollo's presence, he is at first overwhelmed when he finds himself becoming the subject of an ardent inquiry. He is momentarily blinded by the light streaming towards him and at that point that he must decide whether to hide and leave the scene or step forward and present himself at the threshold. His own being is questioned as he is asked where he comes from, where he is going and what he seeks. He cannot avoid these questions so long as he stands in the revealing presence of the god. The poet stands his ground. He refuses to flee, even though he feels overwhelmed by the light that comes flooding in from all directions. It is at this point that the last line of the poem resounds like a clarion call:
>
> "You must alter your life." (p. 16)

Although Jager (2004) does not mention the sublime, we may see similarities between his description and experiences like Scarlet's, Esther's, and Leslie's. When we experience the sublime, we may feel intense emotion, exposure, and scrutiny. We may even feel that we are facing something that speaks back to and questions us. But if that is the case, what makes our experience of the sublime unique when compared with other encounters with art? Might it be a matter of volition? Jager presents the crossing of the threshold as a choice the poet makes, but the sublime seems to be an experience that occurs without our conscious intention. It seems to simply happen out of the blue—although we may allow that one might need to be "open to it" for it to occur. Might the sublime be the unintended, unexpected crossing of the threshold? Instead of the image "beckon[ing] [us] like a host to cross the threshold and to step into the revealing light of a festive encounter" (p. 7), might the sublime be our experience of being unwittingly—perhaps even unwillingly—dragged across the threshold, out of this world and into that one? Perhaps this is why the experience of the sublime can be disorienting and so terrifying.

When taken in the context of Leslie's experience of the ash-painting or Esther's of *Starry Night*, we may see how this experience may be bound up in the existential questions of life and death. We may be dragged out of our everyday experience of the gallery and into a space wherein life is shown intimately bound to death.

To face the sublimity of an image, then, may be to face the fact of existence unbidden. Rather than faintly or theoretically aware that all things will die, our experience of the sublime may draw forth an acute awareness of this fact. It may even involve a realization that we will surely die, our candle will go out, and our vitality—no matter how precious to ourselves or others—when *extinguished,* will leave nothing behind but ash and the *silent ghosts* that Leslie encounters. To experience the sublime, then, may be to contemplate the threshold where life becomes death. It may be to fully realize the severe temporality of our lives. As Marion (2001/2002) writes, it may place before me "a simple possibility—the possibility of impossibility" (p. 40).

But how does this kind of contemplating death, differ from the relatively common practice of thinking about death? (for we have already established that death cannot be

encountered or known, only thought about). Although we may rarely speak directly of death, an awareness of our own eventual demise drives many contemporary actions. Indeed, thinking about our death seems to mark an important step in becoming an adult. For instance, as we age, we no longer imagine ourselves to be invincible, so we drive a little more carefully than we did as teenagers. We also think of our death when we make a will, or buy insurance, or even when we decide that it is time we stop eating junk food and begin to exercise regularly. These activities, however, rarely evoke a response akin to the sublime. What, therefore, makes what we experience when we encounter the sublime image a different kind of realization from the thoughts about death that routinely accompany us throughout life?

Let me consider for a moment these other instances when we think about death. Imagine a woman who sits down to draft a will. Perhaps she has decided it is time to do so because she has recently given birth. Faced with a new, fragile life for which she is wholly responsible, the woman cannot help but become aware of her own mortality. As she looks at her baby's face, the woman might wonder, "What if I were to die?" While her first reaction might be to vehemently insist, "No, I *cannot* die; leaving my child alone is unthinkable," the woman also acknowledges that her death is a genuine possibility. It is a possibility she must face and for which she must plan. Who will look after her child if she dies? How will her child be raised? Her will, the woman may believe, can serve to stand in for her upon her death. When it is finally read, although she will not be physically present, her wishes will be there in the form of the written text, recognized, and (she hopes) respected.

Now let us consider the specific act of making the will. After much thought, the woman creates a list of bequeaths and requests. She notes who should become her child's guardian and lists any explicit requests she has for her child's upbringing. Perhaps the child is to live in the woman's house, be kept in contact with extended family, or be raised in a certain faith. The will gives the guardian directions from the woman. The woman may also write a letter to her child to be given to her child at a certain age. The will, then, also becomes a direct means of communication between the mother and her child in the future. While writing the will, the woman may also decide to plan for other aspects of her life. She may decide who in her family should inherit the family ring and what should be done with her books. She may even detail the

care she wishes to receive (or not receive) as her death nears (a living will). Whether or not she fears death itself, the woman makes this list and these decisions because she wants to ensure that her family knows her wishes after she is gone. Her will is designed to establish her position after death to avoid disputes that might harm her remaining family and affect their memory of her.

We may similarly think of the woman buying insurance. Speaking with the insurance agent, the woman may be calculating the costs associated with her possible death (e.g., the cost of paying off the house, covering her funeral, and leaving behind an appropriately sized nest egg for her family's future). She does so because she does not want her death to financially harm her survivors. Again, her actions are taken to ensure a particular future based on her present wishes.

Whether writing a will or buying insurance, in both cases the woman sees herself as an absent but active agent following her death. Much like when we go on vacation but ensure our homes are secure and someone is stopping by to check on the house, when we write a will or buy insurance we see ourselves as an absent presence in an imagined future. Although physically absent, we imagine ourselves as influencing and thereby being present in that future through what we have left behind: objects, explicit instructions, insurance policies, and even the memories retained by those remaining.

The choice to live a healthy lifestyle, conversely, acts to guard against the fulfillment of death. A man recently diagnosed with high blood pressure may imagine that daily exercise and reduced sodium intake will extend his life or, at least, make the arrival of his death easier, less painful, and less prolonged. Unlike the will or the insurance policy, which imagines the life of others after our death, our healthy lifestyle plans are imagined to off-set death. Death remains a future to be avoided at all cost.

While in each of these instances the possibility of death is taken very seriously, these everyday considerations treat death as largely theoretically. Our actions and thoughts around death are pragmatic and technical, rather than existential. Indeed, with each, the very moment that we die and cease to exist is avoided. We consider that which comes before and that which

follows, but never the event itself and what it may mean for us. While we seem able to readily imagine life (specifically the lives of others) after our death—the void that our absence will create and how we want to be remembered in that void—contemplating the moment when we will cease to exist, when our flame is *extinguished,* appears much more difficult. We cannot bring ourselves to teeter on that threshold.

When we experience the sublime, however, we may enter into an entirely different order of contemplating death. The sublime may, in fact, bring us to contemplate the specific moment where we cease to be. The realization of this possibility—this certainty—may physically reverberate within the depths our body and all around us. Like Leslie, it may *fill* us, *fill the space around* us, and refract back on us, *press[ing] in…* and *screaming in* [our] *ears.* We are finite beings—this is *a realization* that we face but may not be able to *bear to voice,* even as the silence of the gallery screams it. In the sublimity of an image, we may intuit the terrifying and inconceivable realization of our finitude, a realization that can only be deeply personal and individual. Perhaps this is why, like Esther, the sublime image becomes ours alone, even when we are surrounded by other in a public place. And perhaps this is also why we may find an image sublime while others do not. Leslie is alone in the gallery, so we cannot know if others would have shared her feelings. Even so, we may recognize in her account something of our own experiences of perceiving our temporality and mortality. We may too remember a moment where we were overwhelmed by such a realization, where we teetered on the edge.

Paradoxically, it may be an image—an object created, deliberately brought into existence—that may allow us to try to begin to imagine non-existence. Like Esther, that which exists before us and which will exist long beyond us may facilitate this consideration. Or, like Leslie, it may arise from the tension of absent presence. In our experience of the sublime, the image may allow us to momentarily glimpse existence and the possibility of our inexistence.

And yet, what do we see as we reach for that threshold? Can an image bring us to the threshold of life and death? As our earlier exploration suggested, death cannot be seen. It closes itself to all except those whom it swallows. Death, at root, cannot be known. Nor, then, can life. Therefore, what do we experience with the sublime?

The image that Leslie considers seemingly overflows with both life and death in multiplicity. Esther, in turn, describes a roiling with movement beyond her control to which she peacefully resigns herself, gives herself over to. For Scarlet, the image perfectly crystalizes that which she was and remains. For each, movement is revealed as simultaneously being stasis, existences as inexistence. Calvino (1988/2009) writes that "what is terrifying and inconceivable is not the infinite void but existence" (p. 68). In revealing the intertwinement of life and death, the enfoldment of existence and inexistence, the sublime may silence us and draw us to awareness that *we* are standing before *this object now.* In that moment, we may become acutely aware of being alive. Like Jager's (2004) poet and Scarlet, we may find ourselves fully revealed, possibly for the first time in our lives.

The Sublime as Being Called to Account

According to Jager (2004), in being exposed, our being may be called into question. He writes, the poet's "own being is questioned as he is asked where he comes from, where he is going and what he seeks. He cannot avoid these questions so long as he stands in the revealing presence of the god" (p. 16). The questions one is asked—where one comes from, where one is going, and what we seek—are more than practical questions, they are existential questions. And, according to Jager, they are questions that cannot be ignored while one fully stands in the presence of the artwork. But how are these questions experienced?

Let me explore the nature of these questions by examining, by way of example, one image famous for drawing forth strong, and often sublime, responses.[55] Kevin Carter's 1993 Pulitzer Prize winning photograph of a Sudanese child and a vulture is a haunting testimony to the effects of famine and has become iconic of human misery (Purcell, 2010). The highly striking photograph is flush with the yellows and browns of a drought-ridden land. It shows a

[55] Carter's photograph is commonly listed among the "most memorable photographs of all time." For examples, see: http://www.pxleyes.com/blog/2011/07/25-of-the-most-influential-news-images-of-all-time/ and http://www.slideshare.net/peiman/50-most-notable-photos-of-all-time

young Sudanese child, starved and collapsed, behind whom sits a vulture apparently waiting for her imminent death.

Even without knowing the context in which the photo was taken, the close proximity of the child to the vulture immediately suggests that the image be read as symbolic of life and death: the child representing life; the vulture, a carrion bird, death. Such a reading draws on the centuries-old common trope found in art of life balanced with death. And yet, this traditional reading may seem slightly off when we begin to look more closely at Carter's photograph, specifically at the child.

Although children are normally seen as symbols of life and our hope for the future, the child in this photograph seems to hold no such promise. The child appears so starved that she cannot even hold herself upright. It is as if she has collapsed under the weight of the struggle of her brief existence. With head bowed and arms resting on the ground, there is no evidence of the vitality and vigour that we normally associated with children. Rather than embodying hope, this child appears as a promise thwarted. Looking upon her crumpled body, we may have difficulty imagining her brief life continuing. Indeed, it is not hard to imagine this child dead.

The vulture, in turn, with its body tensed, seems to watch and wait—much like the viewer, him- or herself. We may wait in horror anticipating what we cannot doubt will happen (that the child will die). And yet this realization never comes about for this is a still photograph. The image is forever frozen in the anticipated moment of death—the moment where life and death will simultaneously coexist and commingle.

The power of Carter's image is so strong and apparent that the photograph is highly recognizable. Most people are familiar with it, although few today can recall the exact situation that led to the child starving or the context in which the image was taken. According to Purcell (2010), the feelings that this photograph routinely evokes "attests to the phenomenological warrant" (p. 16) to consider it in light of a revised phenomenology of the photograph. For Purcell, Carter's image is an exemplar of the "amplitive" nature of certain photographs. Purcell writes, the girl "introduces an affective and meaningful dimension to the photograph that qualitatively transforms it into a different kind [of] image" (p. 17). What Purcell's statement

astutely captures is the fact that it is not the bird, but the child that makes all the difference in our experience of looking at this image. The photograph is not merely a symbolic image of life and death, it may show us life up-close and death immediately pending in one and the same child. And in that child, it may reveal to us the basic paradox of human existence: misery exists amid beauty and death is bound to life, even in the youngest of children. Amplified through this "affective and meaningful dimension," the very appeal of the photograph's presentation—it is an undeniably stunning photograph—and the dreadfulness of its subject, may evoke the sublime.

Given its subject matter and its amplitive affective qualities, neither the photograph's fame, nor the public response to it is surprising. We may be attracted to its striking form, compelled to look at its poignant subject matter, and simultaneously be deeply troubled by what we see. Not easily forgotten, the image may haunt and disturb. Indeed, some have responded so strongly to the image that their upset at the photograph has extended to the man behind the camera. From the moment the photograph was first published, Carter was vilified for having taken it;[56] viewers' abhorrence of the photograph's subject often became an abhorrence of and anger towards the man who could take it.

But what does this have to do with the existential questions that Jager (2004) claims artworks (and I contend, sublime images) ask of us? Carter's photograph creates and permanently fixes a beautiful image of a helpless, hopeless, starving child. It also creates and fixes Carter's complicity as the image's creator. But it may also create and fix our own involvement and complicity as its viewers. Through the mere act of looking at this photograph, we may feel as if we are "vultures." In the simple act of seeing it, we may even feel that we are perpetuating the violence of the image. To look may seem akin to perpetuating, and even promoting, the photograph's existence. We might even feel that this image is one best forgotten, no longer mass circulated on the Internet or included in "famous image" compilations.

And yet, there may be more to the embodied reaction to and rejection of this photograph than merely the urge not to be "vultures" of pain and suffering. As I discussed in Chapter 6 with

[56] One need only look at the comments section of websites that post the photograph to see that, even 10 years after the image's first publication, public responses of outrage towards Carter for taking the photograph persist.

the famous *Lingchi* photographs, looking involves a recognition—to look is to see, to know, to recognize, and acknowledge—and in Carter's photograph we see a famished child. The photograph was taken during the 1993 Sudan famine,[57] a humanitarian crisis that was largely ignored by the world. At the time, "no one want[ed] to hear of more people starving in Africa," despite the death toll in the Sudan surpassing both the number of dead in the Balkans and Somalia (Struck, 21 April 1993).

Unlike the *Lingchi* photographs, which were taken before most of us were alive, Carter's image documents the lived reality of an event that many of us knew about, but which was largely ignored. In some ways, this photograph is evidence of a collective turning away from the Sudanese famine. In looking upon it, we may find ourselves facing our complicity in this child's fate. It may appear as evidence holding us to account for our action and inaction.

The photograph, therefore, may not only poignantly show us a child on the brink of death and the paradox of all human existence, it may force us to consider in a direct and personal manner our own values and actions—in short, the meaning our existence: where have we come from (what did we do or fail to do in the past)? Where are we going (who do we want to become)? And what are we seeking (what world do we want to create?). By showing us what has recently past, it may ask us to consider the part we played or failed to play in it. And it makes us consider our future.

The world remembers Carter's photograph over two decades after it was taken. For a few, it simply represents the issue of international disasters and the need for ongoing foreign aid. For many others, however, it asks deeper, harder questions about our obligations to our fellow human beings and of what we want our world to be. It may even force a few of us to question who we are, at root: Do I want to allow such pain and suffering to continue? for continue it does in our modern world. How shall I respond in future to the child whose situation is similarly documented? Who am I, if I choose not to respond?

[57] The Sudanese famine began with a civil war.

Uniquely, beautifully, terrifyingly, sublimely, images like Carter's photograph may draw forth questions of existence and call our existence into question. In contrast to the physical security that may enable our experience of the sublime, the questions the image poses to us in the moment of sublimity may generate deep existential insecurity. The questions may become *my* questions, questions *I* must answer, even if I may be uncomfortable with my answers. They are questions of origin, direction, and purpose—simple questions that may be profoundly challenging.

When we experience images like Carter's photograph, we may find we take the images up within ourselves and they come to shape us. Dufrennes (1973) wrote, "The aesthetic object does not really belong to me unless I belong to it" (p. 404). Rather than our possessing the images that evokes the sublime, they may come to possess us. We may begin to belong to them, to the questions they demand we answer. Even when we may not want this possession, sublime images can become deeply rooted in us. And this may be no less true of the image's creators than of those who feel addressed by their creations. Even though Carter won the highest prize for his work, he was haunted by many of the images he had taken over his career, including that of the young girl. What they revealed to him of his past, of his practice as a photographer, of himself as a human being, and of human beings in general may have been too much to bear. Ultimately, Carter could no longer live with it and ended his own life.[58]

The Rupture of the New

Kevin Carter's story suggests a caution when we consider the experience of powerful and sublime images. For some, the experience may be too difficult to live with. Paradoxically, however, others may discover that they cannot imagine living without the image and the hard questions brought forth by it in a moment of sublimity.

[58] Carter's images cannot be held solely responsible for his suicide, however the horror of having to live with what he had seen and photographed was listed amongst other extenuating factors in his suicide note.

Han (a participant in this study) tells of taking a trip outside mainland China where he attends a candlelight vigil with some friends. Walking past a display, he sees an old photograph, faded and yellowed, showing a lone man facing military tanks. It is an image with which many of us are familiar, but which for Han is entirely new.

> *It is 2007—June 4th to be exact—and I have never seen this picture before. It is shocking. I stand there and stare at it as my friends mill about. I think about how I have been so proud of my country and how this is evidence of a dark aspect to it that I have never before known. I wonder about everything I have been taught, everything I have believed about our ruling party. And I ask myself: Is this the China that I know? Is this the China I want to live in?*

Like so many others, Han accidentally stumbles across the sublime. He suddenly, unexpectedly encounters an image that profoundly unsettles his world. Like the very root of the word "unsettle," encountering an image that evokes the sublime can "undo [us] from a fixed position" (unsettle, v., *Online Etymological Dictionary*, 2014), dislodging us from our given, preconceived understanding of things. It may even force us to confront our most deeply held beliefs and assumptions. As we gaze upon the image, we may be encountering something we have never before realized existed. It may even be something that appears entirely opposite to what we have always thought true. It is as if the sublime has suddenly illuminated a previously unknown aspect of our world.

Yet do we not find out new things—both good and bad—about those parts of our lives that we dearly cherish? I may find out that my mother had a long lost love before she married my father. While perhaps surprising, this aspect does not necessarily threaten my relationship with my mother. Nor does it cause me to question her as my mother, although it may cause me to reconsider my understanding of her. I may wonder about her early life and how things might have been different for her had she not lost her first love. Or it may bring to light certain dimensions of my upbringing or my parents' relationship that had been given but were relatively inexplicable until now. In fact, it may reveal my mother and our relationship in a more nuanced way. But while the illumination of this aspect of my mother's life may show me something I had not known before, it is to a large degree only the revelation of what has always been

possible, conceivable, or even directly suggested but never overtly acknowledged. Such instances are not the revelation of the wholly new but, rather, confirmations of existent possibilities.

What our experience of the sublime illuminates, however, may not have its grounding in what is known or has been previously suggested as possible. Rather, it may be the genuinely new. The aspect revealed may not merely show our world in a new light, its appearance may have the potential to change everything we have ever known, ever thought we knew, or ever thought possible. In this way, our experience of the sublime may open the space for a fundamental questioning of our existence. For Han, it opens a questioning of his entire world: his country, his ethos, and his life—past, present, and future. Like Han, the sublime may cause us to question the basis of our life. Morgan (2010) writes how, in the face of the sublime "my world crumbles before the looming prospect of a reality that threatens to replace the foundations of the familiar" (p. 82). When we experience the sublime, what comes into question is something that may have grounded our lives, beliefs, and actions. We may find ourselves unexpectedly uprooted and our world turned topsy-turvy by what is revealed, the potential truth uncovered, and it can terrify us.

In this way, the sublimity of an image can threaten to drastically alter our world. And yet, aside from the image we have now noticed, nothing has changed from one moment to the next except our perception. Those around us may carry on, not noticing our response. Indeed, the sublime may be invisible to those who do not share in it (like Han's friends) or be merely confusing and strange to them (like Scarlet's husband). But for the person who finds him or herself experiencing the sublime, not only is our everyday attitude shattered, so too may be our world. Although nothing in our world may appear out of the ordinary, suddenly everything seems to be. Our experience of the sublime may change our experience of our world. As van den Berg (1972) writes, "That which touches us shows itself in the appearance of objects" (p. 80).

The world revealed by the sublime image can be both new and terrifying. We may find ourselves forced to confront all that has suddenly become possible with the sublime's simple appearance. In opening up possibilities, the new of the sublime may not be the appearance of

the previously unseen but the emergence of the unimagined. Indeed, it may be only in its genuine newness that the image can be sublime, for the new implies that which has "not previously existed" and what has been "brought into existence for the first time" (new, adj., *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2014). But what has the sublime brought into existence?

The Sublime as Possibility, not Certainty

For Han, the answer lies in the questions the image evokes:

> *I wonder about everything I have been taught, everything I have believed about our ruling party. And I ask myself: Is this the China that I know? Is this the China I want to live in?*

Faced with the wholly new, we may be confronted with the possibilities of our world, for the new that the sublime can offer us is not a certain one. As Morgan (2010) suggests, what the sublime shows us through the image is the possibility, "the prospect," of something different. It threatens but does not necessarily force a fundamental change. We may sense that things are shifting and lose the conviction of certain knowledge. We may be challenged by the possibilities that open up before us in the face of the sublime. They may startle and intrigue, but they can also scare and even terrify us. They may inspire both awe and terror, for the new always contains both promise and risk. We may simultaneously feel the urge to seek them out and to abandon them in fear.

Just as the alien intrudes into the existing order and creates the possibility of a new order (Waldenfels, 2011), the sublime may challenge us to reconsider the order of our lives. However, this new order may be only a suggestion, an uncertain possibility. It is as if our experience of the sublime has called the potentiality of something new into being, something with which we must contend, and which—if accepted and realized—may profoundly change ourselves and our world. And to this world, so different from what we have always known, we may conceive of ourselves as children, needing to learn anew all that we thought we had known.

With the prospect offered by the new, however, we may gain more than merely insight. We may experience a "distant view, [a] look out," (prospect n., *Online Etymology Dictionary,* 2014) on existence. The sublime may allow us to momentarily see beyond what has always been self-evident or even suggested to what may be possible in the future. For Han, he tells of continuing to stare at the picture:

> *As I stare at tank-man, the image seems to change. I see tank-man's courage to confront authority despite his comparative weakness. He could be easily crushed by the tanks. But the driver of the tank does not move and so prevents the other three tanks from moving forward as well. It is mercy that the first tank uniquely displays. And it gives me hope.*

Like those prospecting for gold, that which is revealed by the sublime may not necessarily be a certainty of what is but rather a possibility—perhaps one among many—of something that might be. The sublime can be an opening for exploration and understanding, but it may also be an opening that can be foreclosed or rejected. Arising from our experience of an image, it seems to retain some of its image-like quality. What it reveals is not a certainty, but the telltale shadow of something that may exist (Derrida & Steigler, 2002). To accept or denounce what we see may be a choice, including a choice of interpretation.

And yet, some, like Han, may take hold of the possibility opened within their experience of the sublime. While the image we behold as sublime can threaten to destroy our familiar, comfortable world, we do not seem left simply shattered by its threat. As we continue to look at the image, what at first appears upsetting and horrifying may begin to reveal within itself its inverse. For Han, the dark aspect of the image gives way to evidence of mercy and hope. Therefore, while the sublime may be experienced as a tearing away of the familiar, it may also become an offering. Although Han does not see the image again for years, the hope it has engendered in him remains, firmly attached to this one image.

> *In my mind, numerous Chinese fighters, such as Liu Xiaobo and Ai Weiwei have come to stand in the place of that unknown young man.*

To encounter the sublime through an image, then, can threaten to shatter our world; but it may also open our vision to a new and better one, one we had never before considered or thought possible, one in which we are a part.

The Phoenix Rising From the Ashes

> Human life is but a series of footnotes to a vast obscure unfinished masterpiece.
>
> – Vladimir Nabokov (1962/1992), *Pale Fire*, p. 272

Standing before *Starry Night*, Esther realizes the possibility of a peaceful, kind, even sweet death. More than merely appealing to her aesthetic sensibility, the painting seems to move her. She is changed by it… as is Leslie… and Scarlet… and Han... as seem all whose accounts have been explored here. It is as if, in encountering a sublime image, an inner flame is sparked that may begin a profound transformation. It can cause a change of being, similar to the effect of the poetic image that Bachelard (1964) describes as "possess[ing] us entirely" and "through its exuberance, awaken[s] new depths..." (pp. xviii-xix). Like the mythical phoenix, the sublime may be a fundamentally creative experience that requires destruction before a new life can arise. The power of our encounter with the image may destroy all that we knew of ourselves and our world and, out of the ashes, we may find ourselves reborn: into a new way of seeing, into a new way of being, into a world of new possibilities. And like the eternal bird, which both lived off and died within rare fragrances, the sublime as an experience seems to emerge less from the image as representation than from within the embodied, sensuous effect of the image as an entity, encompassing both form and content, in a moment of a pure presentation. Within our fiery response to it, we and our world may be brought to ashy ruin and, out of it, emerge anew.

Chapter 9: Sublimity & the Image

> Do I contradict myself?
>
> Very well then I contradict myself,
>
> (I am large, I contain multitudes.)
>
> – Walt Whitman (1892), *Song of Myself*, 51

The Paradox of Sublimity

The sublime is a truly strange and curious thing. It is so individual and personal that it seems only ever experienced by one's self alone, yet it is recognizable when it occurs (even if we do not have a name for it) and common enough not to be dismissed out of hand as insanity. So what, exactly, is it?

I have explored how the sublime is a phenomenon of paradoxes; how it may arise in the simultaneity of awe and terror, exquisiteness and monstrosity, horror and delight, clarity and mystery, existence and inexistence. Indeed, the paradox seems an invariant aspect of the experience of sublimity. The sublime is not just an experience of awe, nor is it only the experience of terror, but rather a combination of both. Likewise, it does not evoke mere horror, but also delight. It appears as both something exquisite and monstrous, and its experience has a profound clarity and a deep mystery to it. Further, it draws forth a deeply personal awareness of both life and death. The sublime, it seems, must contain the elements of each aspect of the paradox in order to be sublime, even as these elements are contradictory. Unless its appearance is paradoxical, the sublime is not.

And yet, the sublime is more than mere paradox. It is paradox in multiplicity. The sublime arises out of confounding tensions that only proliferate in number when examined. In awe and terror, there are the contrary movements of attraction and repulsion. Out of the exquisite and the monstrous arise questions of the visible and invisible. From horror and delight, the knowable and unknowable, as well as capture and escape. Clarity and mystery refract into

closeness and distance, familiarity and strangeness, possibility and impossibility. Life and death becomes questions of creation and destruction, existence and inexistence, being and nothingness. Examined further still, the sublime shows itself in the simultaneity of the singular and the infinite, of subject and object, of it and me. It is both seeing and feeling, feeling and knowing, knowing and not knowing, security and insecurity, phantom and flesh, intimacy and strangeness, truth and fiction. And in each, what initially appear to be opposites become revealed as mere moments of one another.

Paradoxically, however, the paradoxes of the sublime are not paradoxes at all. When examined within the contours of sublimity as lived, the apparent opposites emerge as: that which can be named but cannot be explained (awe and terror); that which is visible but cannot be truly seen (the exquisite and the monstrous); that which can be anticipated but cannot be foreseen or forethought (delight and horror); that which can be given but cannot be truly spoken of or described (clarity and obscurity); and that which is experienced but which cannot be known (existence and inexistence). In each case, possibility and impossibility collide and are held together by a unique experiential tension that is our experience of the sublime.

The Sublime Image as a Revealer of the World

The experiential, tensional qualities of being named but not explained, visible but not seeable, anticipated but not foreseen, given but incommunicable, and experienced but unknown seem to mark our sublime experience of images. And yet, could this not be said of *all* experiences if we look closely enough? If we consider any single phenomenon as it lived (rather than as it is theorized), we are likely to find aspects that are unexplainable, unseeable, unknowable, incommunicable, and inexistent, while simultaneously being nameable, seeable, knowable, communicable, and experienced. Is this not what Marion (2001/2002) was alluding to when he argues that all phenomena are saturated? That, no matter how much we reflect upon a phenomenon, something of its meaning will always elude us?

A necessarily invariant feature of the sublime as lived, it seems, exemplarily reflects a feature of our world entire that often passes unnoticed. Yet, once brought to our attention

through a personal experience of sublimity, we may develop a sensitivity to its existence in other realms of life. Sofia tells me of how the experience of the sublime has changed her photographic practice:

> *Recently I have been trying to create an experience like the one I had by taking pictures of the edges of things. I've not been very successful but I like the idea of pushing what we see and how we are positioned. For instance, on Sunday I was out and it was that gorgeous day and I had my camera and the lilac bushes were just knocking the socks off me. I have never seen such colours. And the smell was just mind-numbing. So I was standing in front of this gorgeous lilac and I set up this picture in the traditional format, getting right the sky in there. But then I thought, "So this is the regular kind of experience with an image. Okay, what about the edges here?" I first went to what I am familiar with, but then I pushed myself to think about the edges. Very near my frame I could see this "Don't Walk" sign. So I reframed my picture so that I could get it into the picture. I was trying to get the "Don't Walk" and the lilacs and some blue sky all together. I was having such a glorious time there—the smell of these bushes was just extraordinary and the deep purple was amazing—and I thought, "People, don't walk here. Run here and have this experience, especially if you are having a hard day." A "Don't Walk" sign initially didn't seem to fit in this beautiful thing I was trying to create, but I thought, "You know what? Maybe it does."*

Sofia's experience of the sublime seems to have altered how she approaches her world. Although still *first going to what she is familiar with*, she now stops and asks *what are the edges here?* What if that which appears not to belong may, in fact, have a place?

Like Sofia's experience, following our experience of sublimity, the givenness of our world may not appear as set as it once did. It may cause us to question in large ways, like Han, or in small ways, like Sofia, what ought to be and what we ought to create out of it. And in so questioning, we may occasionally stumble across surprising answers.

Sofia admits, however, that while she has created some stunning images, her efforts to recreate her experience of the sublime have *not been very successful.* Sofia faces the challenge of anyone who has experienced the sublime: it is difficult, if not entirely impossible, to deliberately create or re-evoke the sublime. Even still, she seeks its possibility out in the unexpectedness edges that now appear to her throughout our world.

Bachelard (1961/2012) writes that "a simple image is a revealer of the World" (p. 200). This may be most true with an image that evokes the sublime. After our encounter, we may begin to notice that which was always present in our world but which we have never before seen. Perhaps, then, an unexpected consequence of experiencing the sublime is the development of an increased sensitivity towards and appreciation of the complexities of life as lived.

The Many Incarnations of the Sublime

What other conclusions may I draw from this inquiry, as tentative and seemingly inadequate as those conclusions may be? Aside from its paradoxality, the sublime appears given by the image but is not an identifiable feature of that image. Rather, it is experienced as momentarily *appearing* in the world due to the existence of the image. However, how the sublime appears may vary.

While I do not want to add to the absurd list of "sublimes" that populate contemporary writing on the subject (see: the discussion of the Post-Postmodern Sublime in Chapter 2), there is some value in articulating how differently the sublime may give itself. Just as it may manifest as different paradoxes, so too does the sublime seemingly have different modes of self-giveness.

The sublime that is identical with the image: the sublime image. In many of the accounts explore here, the sublime appears the instant the image is seen. Indeed, the sublime appears identical with the image and, therefore, it seems appropriate to call one's encounter "an encounter with a sublime image." Patricia, a participant, tells of walking through an exhibit. Although she finds many of the paintings "troublesome," in the middle of the exhibit she encounters one that stands out as unique.

I move onto the next gallery. As I enter in the room, a painting instantly catches my eyes even though I just glimpse it sideways. In an instant, I take in the sight of a man sitting alone in a mustard-yellow box against a bright blue background. The painting is simple, direct, and brutal. Half the man's face has been cursorily brushed in. There is no clear definition between his right eye, nose, and ear. Only his wide open mouth, dirty broken teeth, and suit and tie stand out distinctly. The remainder of his body struggles to take a shape.

The extreme aggressiveness of this painting forces me to stop like none of the other paintings have. I shiver as a cold wind blows up my back. Between the threatening darkness and the uncertain lines and shades, I know neither what I am actually looking at nor what it is saying to me. I carefully skirt around the painting, trying not to look directly at it, and head to the label next to it: Man in a Blue Box.

I am still chewing on the name when I step back a distance. For a second, I try to decipher what is going on, to figure out what this is about, but the moment that I face the painting head-on, my thoughts wash out of me. I am unable to think. I am simply taken over.

The space of the gallery shrinks to solely what lies between the painting and me. I can almost hear the man's heavy and muddy breath. His mouth, the greedy black hole that never shuts, is moaning, screaming, and swallowing. My breath becomes short and heavy. I feel dizzy and want to vomit up. My eyes burn and tears well up. Trapped in the box in his suit and tie, he is melting and scrabbling and so am I.

Confusion, suffering, death; nothing else is here. Grasping and invasive, the man's shouting becomes my shouting to myself. His face becomes my face.

Shivering now, I can no longer stand this and turn away. But even when after my back is to the painting and I try to look at the other pictures, I sense the man still threateningly sitting right there screaming at my back. I simply cannot

> *ignore him and am compelled to leave the room. I walk into the next room, where these paintings now simply seem plain.*

Patricia's experience of the painting is extreme, like many accounts already presented here. The painting appears sublime from the very first brief sideways glimpse that Patricia has of it, and the sublime remains strong throughout her encounter. She feels as if the painting is literally screaming at her. The painting's emotions are so strong that they seemingly become her emotions. It is as if the painting takes her over. It washes out her thoughts and cannot be ignored, even when she turns away. In its sublime difference, this painting seems to have a presence and a power unlike any other painting around her.

In sublime encounters like Patricia's, the sublime seems to infuse the very form and content of the image. It may seem an inseparable part of it, as evident as the blue sky, the half-formed man, or the mustard box the painting depicts. For those who experience the sublime in this way, the image does not evoke the sublime as it evokes dizziness or upset. No, in this case, *the image is sublime*. That seems as true to us as the fact that the painting is hung on the gallery wall. We can point to it and truthfully say, "That image is sublime," even if we are the only ones who see it there.

The sublime slowly appears from within the image: The emerging sublime. A second way in which the sublime may give itself is to arise slowly over the course of our encounter with the image. Mariel's experience of the blue painting made of butterflies exemplifies how the sublime can slowly emerge.

> *When I am standing directly in front of the canvas, the blue fades into the background and that is when I see them. Butterflies. It is like an entirely different work of art. The radiance of hundreds of beautiful butterflies that had once lived and fluttered consumes me. I am like a child again, looking through my kaleidoscope and being swallowed up by a new world full of colour and disorganization, a world where I can lose myself in the myriad colours and shapes.*

I am motionless, marvelling at the beauty before me … until the blue starts to re-emerge. Staring at it, I am confused. What is this blue stuff? Why is it there? I don't get it.

Then, I do get it. The butterflies have been fused with the blue.

I start to feel that something is not quite right with this painting. I tell myself that it is okay, that the butterflies must have died naturally and been fused on afterwards in some way. But even before my daughter reads me the accompanying text, I know they were not. The full horror of what is actually before me dawns on me…

Like Patricia, Mariel attributes the sublime to the painting, and yet, unlike Patricia, this painting was not sublime from the first moment Mariel saw it. Rather, its sublimity slowly emerges from within the painting as the painting reveals its secret to Mariel. It is as if, from one moment to the next, the painting appears to be an entirely different image. Something new has been revealed within its form, and it is sublime. The sublime, in this instance, may be an experience of unfolding, of revelation.

Much like Mariel's encounter, Han's experience is also one of revelation. And like Mariel, it is as if the sublimity of the image changes the photograph of tank-man before his very eyes. *As I stare at tank-man, the image seems to change.* Whereas before Han saw *evidence of a dark aspect* to a country he was so proud of, he now sees *tank-man's courage to confront authority despite his comparative weakness* and the *mercy that the first tank uniquely displays.* Han, however, experiences the change not to be one of physical form—he does not describe the experience as looking upon an entirely new image. Rather, the change seems to be one of content and interpretation. The image is the same but what it reveals to him from one instant to the next seems to be different truths.

The sublime that may slowly emerge from within an image may appear to be a quality of that image or it may be recognized as the effect of the image. The force of our experience, however, may be no less intense than that of those who find an image sublime from first glance. Indeed, the sublime that appears carries a movement that may carry over into other realms of

our lives. Mariel faces the dead butterflies that she now sees everywhere in her life; Han chooses to work to change his country and sees in the obscured face of tank-man each activist that likewise has challenged the regime.

The sublime that has always been present but unrecognized until one sees the image: the latent sublime. A third, less common appearance of the sublime is the sublime that seems to reveal a fundamental truth about oneself through the image. This truth, unlike Han's revelation, is not one that is new, but is something that has always been known but never acknowledged until it is clearly revealed by the image. Both Sheppard and Scarlet describe the power and force of this kind of sublime encounter. Scarlet describes the sublime moment of seeing the painting of the little girl:

> *I see this … painting and—it's me! I am gobsmacked and thunderstruck, like the air has been knocked out of me. I'm looking into my face as a child.*
>
> *I see a cute little girl in a little coat all dressed up fancy like a dress-up doll, posing for her family. But she's so sad standing there pretending, waiting for the door to open. That is exactly me: I had a little jacket that was exactly the same; I had a little hat like hers; and I remember being all dressed up like that all the time as a child. Even where she is standing is the porch on my grandparents' farm.*

Scarlet sees this painting and feels as if she is looking at herself as a child. And yet, objectively speaking, the painting is not depicting Scarlet as a young child. While it may bear some resemblance to her, it is less the case of what the image depicts than what it reveals. The image seems to reveal Scarlet to herself: an aspect she has always known but never fully acknowledged. *It is me as a scared little girl trying desperately to be perfect—perfect coat, perfect hat, perfect standing—yet standing on the outside.* The painting, in revealing this truth, evokes the sublime.

Likewise, Sheppard describes seeing, years later, the painting from her childhood:

I turn a corner and there is this painting. It is an image from a book I had in childhood, except it is the real thing! The painting is Van Gogh's Sunflowers. And I'm seeing it!

Looking at it, I am transported back to the gold carpet and wood panelling of my parents' living room, back to Burl Ives playing on their large stereo, the wrought iron coffee table where the book sat, back to a body that was 12, lying on that carpet looking at the images in that book and thinking, "Who did these? Who thinks like this? What does this mean?" back to the time when the contrast in this picture was so stark to my own life. They were otherwise to the life as I knew it. And they made me want to find more. They became part of the future story I had of my life.

Like Scarlet, the painting draws forth a fundamental truth about Sheppard's early life. But unlike Scarlet, it is a reflection of Sheppard's young self, but of her entire life that revolved in part around this particular image. The power of the memories evoked by the painting is sublime.

When we experience the latent sublime, our experience of the image seems to acutely draw forth a pre-existing but hidden or unrecognized truth about our life. Rather than a revelation of a potential future, it seems to be a revelation of our past, a past that has made us who we are today.

The sublime that we experience and then leave behind: The sublime we escape. The sublime, while often a powerful experience, may be an isolated event. It may occur and, once past, have little ongoing impact in our lives aside from being a memory of a powerful picture. With experiences of the sublime that are like this, we have the capacity to "walk away" from the sublime. Patricia describes doing just this:

Shivering now, I can no longer stand this and turn away. But even when after my back is to the painting and I try to look at the other pictures, I sense the man still threateningly sitting right there screaming at my back. I simply cannot ignore him and am compelled to leave the room. I walk into the next room, where these paintings now simply seem plain.

Patricia first tries to escape the painting by physically turning away from it to look at others in the room. Unable to ignore it, she physically leaves the room and leaves the painting and its sublimity behind. Although shaken by her encounter, she seems to have safely escaped the painting's grasp.

Likewise, Emma escapes the sublimity of the mural in Florence by physically fleeing.

> *I press to the wall trying not to look but unable not to. Slowly, I move with the steady flow of the crowd across the ledge to the opposite door. Slipping back through the narrow doorway, the dark stairwell is a welcome relief.*

Like Patricia, Emma is released by the sublime by leaving the image's physical proximity. Away from the image, she feels *welcome relief*. For both, the power of the sublime seems to wane with increased distance.

The image that haunts us with its sublimity: The haunting sublime. Both Sheppard and Scarlet, as well as many others in the study, spoke of cherishing the image that evoked the sublime. Some, however, like Helen and Stephanie, find themselves haunted by their experiences. Helen tells how in the days after seeing Opie's artwork:

> *I find I am thinking about the photographs when I don't want to. When I am walking around or riding my bike, the images will just pop into my head and it is like seeing them again. The same feeling comes back.*

The sublime as an experience may haunt us. Its feelings and the image that evoked them may return unbidden at inopportune times. For those who cherished the experience, like Sheppard and Scarlet, the return of the memory may be pleasant. If unwanted, however, the sublime and its image may interrupt the course of our daily life. Like Helen, we may try to free ourselves from it—through distraction or shaking our head—but find only momentary reprieve. Some, like Stephanie, may not even be able to escape the image in sleep. Stephanie tells how:

> *The other morning I slept in. I had awoken but then fell back to sleep. Right before I awoke again, the painting came to me. I haven't seen it physically in*

ages and ages, but there it was. Then I woke up and it was in my head all day. I couldn't get away from it.

Sublime experience of images that haunt us may haunt us for years. Once encountered, the image cannot be left behind, even though we have walked away. The sublime can stay with us, and when it reappears, it may not be as a memory but may have the same vividness as the first time we saw the evoking image.

The sublime that disappears from the image upon second glance: The sublime now absent. Finally, we may experience the sublimity of an image that appears in one instant and is gone the next. Dierdre, moved by the Pieta in the early morning light, describes returning to look at it again.

Later in the day, I go to the small building again. The gates are open and the sculpture stands in full light with people posing for photographs beside it. It is still beautiful to see but the shock and awe it created in me earlier that day has passed.

Despite how present the sublime may be when we first experience it during an encounter with an image, it can disappear just as quickly upon return. Something that had seemed so essential to, so evident within, the image before may suddenly be absent. The image, without the sublimity of the moment, returns to its everyday form, whether beautiful, ugly, or unremarkable. It has become a mere image once more and we are left with only the memory of our brief, remarkable encounter with the sublime.

Sublime Illumination

> The first time I entered Chauvet Cave … it was so powerful. … It was more a feeling of powerful things and deep things, a way to understand things that is not a direct way.
>
> – Ciuffo, Nelson, & Herzog (2010), *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*

> We gaze petrified at the hieroglyphs of the invisible, as they too stand motionless or only slowly change against the background of a nocturnal sky. We watch forces that slumbered within us, waiting stubbornly and patiently for millennia, even from the beginning of time. These forces explode into violence and gleam of colours; they open spaces and engender the form of worlds. The forces of the cosmos are awakened within us. They lead us outside of time to join in their celebration dance and they do not let go of us.
>
> – Michel Henry (2008/2009), *Seeing the Invisible: On Kandinsky,* p. 142.

What, now, can I say of powerful encounters with images like those that have taken place in Chauvet Cave? Perhaps most simply, that we do not necessarily need to plunge into the depths of the earth in search of rare and ancient paintings in order to have them. While the sublime may be evoked by exquisite works of art, it is not exclusive to that realm. The sublime, it seems, can be found in most any kind of image, including the most accessible and prevalent: those of advertising and those found proliferating online. It seems that we need only to attend to the various images in our world and the sublime will, every once in a while, find us. And when it does, it has the potential to be a profound experience. Caught in a way that we may never before have experienced, we may be brought into an entirely new relation with the image and, by extension, our world.

So what can be finally concluded about this unusual, special relation with the image that occurs in moments of sublimity? First, that it appears to be more than merely a striking experience; it seems a fundamentally different one. Although the accounts explored here vary widely, there is a phenomenological thread that binds them together. It seems that, however someone might choose to explain their experience—be it as an aesthetic response, a personal narrative, or even an encounter with the divine—the sublimity of the image may disrupt the normal subject–object division and reveal us to be part of the larger picture, both physically and metaphorically.

In his study of saturated phenomenon, Marion (2001/2002) describes an encounter he had with a painting by Caravaggio:

> In front of *The Conversion of Saint Paul*,[59] knocked down, lowered from his warlike posture of a horseman, or rather, paralyzed in free fall, eyes closed by an anonymous light that seems to come from the exterior of the painting and is reflected on the flesh of his horse, I am not wondering about the largely hidden anatomy of the animal, or about the silhouette of the manservant, almost vanished, moreover in the shadow. I am not even inquiring about the identity of the light (or of the voice) that calls him: I am overwhelmed, the luminous lake flooding all at once the side opposed to the flash of lightning, which seems to have struck in front of the painting, thus behind my back. This is to the extent that I should even have the reflex to turn around, in order to understand what has happened in front of the painting. Here the visible does not only crush the painted spectacle but also encloses the spectator, seen by the light more than he or she sees it. (p. 64)

Marion's experience of Caravaggio's painting seems very unique and it may even have been sublime. His experience of looking at the painting is not one of looking at a beautiful man-made object. He specifically notes that he is not seeing the painting's chiaroscuro or exploring Caravaggio's spectacular use of perspective. Nor is Marion drawn into the story of the painting,

[59] The painting Marion refers to is properly titled *Conversion on the Way to Damascus.*

recognizing the source of light as God speaking to Saul who in that moment becomes St. Paul. Rather, Marion seems to experience the painting from within its frame, as if he, himself, were standing within the light.

While Marion (2001/2002) offers his description to demonstrate how our experience of the represented image does not involve appresentation, his account provides a useful analogy for the experience of sublimity. Like Marion's experience of the painting's light, we see evidence of the sublime in the image before us. And yet, like Marion, we may experience a strange sense that the image is not its true source, for it is not how we normally experience images. This image seems different. It neither gives itself as image-as-presentation nor appears as image-as-representation. It is not even a combination of both, but simply *otherwise.* It surpasses its picture plane, reaches out, touches us, and merges with the world around us. Indeed, our world may become suffuse with its sublimity as the sublime infuses our very being.

In an attempt to understand what we are experiencing, like Marion, we may want to look elsewhere, to something beyond our immediate experience of the image in order to find the source of this strange encounter. In Marion's case, he has the physical urge to look behind him for the light's source. With the sublime, it may be the desire to draw upon theory, psychology, or even the image's referent, to find a reason for why we respond as we do. To turn to look for the cause of the sublime seems our intuitive response—and that may be the very cause of our centuries of philosophizing about the subject. And yet, when we turn to look for an explanation—whether we seek it as an aesthetic judgment, human emotion, psychological state, or the image's content or visual qualities—we turn away from our experience of the image and the sublime can quickly disappear. And this can be confusing. For while we may argue rationally that the sublime *must be* within us, *must be* an aesthetic response to the image-object, *must be* a psychological state or *must be* a property of the image, our experience of sublimity seems to irrationally resists objectification and its allocation to a particular realm of life.

The sublime, it appears, is intimately tied to the totality of our experience of the image and, as such, may remain beyond the quick and easy grasp of reason. In many cases, it seems to borders on the edges of language: we can *speak of* our experience, but it refuses codification and the language we use often seems woefully inadequate. But even as the sublime may resist

clear interpretation, it can flood our senses. Like the light that draws Marion in, we may feel that we are enclosed, influenced, and illuminated by the sublime. As we stand in it brilliant and sometimes burning radiance, facing what it reveals, we may become caught between image and world. It may enfold us, become part of us, as we become part of it and realize we have always been part of it. We gaze upon it as it gazes back, touch it and are touched back. We may momentarily, clearly exemplify the "double narcissism" of Merleau-Ponty's (1968) notion of the *flesh.* As he writes, "he who sees cannot possess the visible unless he is possessed by it, unless he *is of it*" (pp. 134–135). In the grip of sublimity, we may experience the totality of the image as being of us and us of it.

And then? For some, nothing. But for others, the sublime's light and pull, its call and demand can become a deep-seated need. While we may encounter the sublime due to an image, what it opens may not remain there. It can take root in us. Although the sublime can unsettle, upset, terrify, and even horrify, so too can it inspire, foster, and even compel our reconsideration. In this way, to experience sublimity may be to be brought, like St. Paul, to our own conversion—not of a religious kind, but a more fundamental, existential one. Having encountered the image differently, so too are we different because it and so may be our world.

A Phenomenological Inquiry into the Sublimity of the Image: A Call for Understanding Images Beyond the Discourse of Visual Literacy

The power of sublime encounters with images points to the importance of recognizing that the place of images in our lives is complex, highly personal, and non-uniform. In recent years, the discourse around images has become focused on the concept of visual literacy. We are advised to be aware of the politics of images: how they can be used to manipulate our emotions, encourage us to irrational action, distort truth, and even lie. As informed citizens, we are expected to understand our role as political *visual subjects*, as both "agent[s] of sight" and "object[s] of discourses on visuality" (Mirzoeff, 2006, p. 54). Our personal encounters with images are expected to be met with a critical eye.

The focus on visual literacy, however, largely ignores the immediacy and profoundly personal impact of certain encounters with images, such as with those that are sublime. These experiences are ones that cannot be forced—or one that we may not want to force—to arms-length for objective, rational consideration. Some we would rather hold close, and others we may find ourselves held fast to, unable to extricate ourselves from their grip. In the face of a world that speaks only of visual literacy, these are experiences that do not fit with what we ought to feel, do, or think. So, we may secret them away, being shaped by them but not bringing them to light for fear of what they may reveal of us. They may be too precious or strange or upsetting to share with those who can only ask "Why? Why did you respond like that? How can you find that particular image sublime?" These experiences we may never mention, or, if we do, we may only share with others who likewise have experienced them. This, I discovered, was true for many of the people who shared their stories with me. The sublime, it seems, is often a solitary secret.

My phenomenological inquiry of the sublime image began with my interest in images and my strange encounter in the classroom so long ago. It was also driven, in part, by the urge to rehabilitate the sublime after years of philosophical abuse. It has become, however, a study seeking to return awareness to the aesthetic dimension of life: to understand how important, meaningful, and long-lasting apparently minor encounters—like seeing images—can be. Meaning, the sublime suggests, cannot be separated from the affective qualities of our lives.

If image-making is what made us human so many thousands of years ago, the value of understanding our experience of images must extend beyond critical thinking and the politics and economics of images. It needs to account for the place of images in human life, for our experience of the sublime suggests that what made us human may not have been the *act* of creating images but what followed: standing back and looking upon them, seeing and experiencing them, and discovering the world—our world—that they opened up.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview/Writing Guiding Questions and Prompts

[If possible, the interview should be conducted where access to the internet is available, so that when participants identify the images that evoked their response it can be found by the researcher, confirmed by the participant, and a digital copy saved, with appropriate credits (artist, data created, medium, current location of item, etc.) collected. The *collection* of digital images for my research is legal under the Fair Dealings clause of The Copyright Act of Canada, as is the use of these images in presentations reporting my findings to educational audiences. However, should I choose to reproduce the images in my dissertation or as part of any other publication resulting from my doctoral research, formal permission for the right to reproduce these images will be sought (and purchased, where necessary)].

Opening question:

- Please tell me about an encounter with an image that evoked the sublime.

Should an individual have difficulty identifying what a sublime experience may be, the following questions will prompt them to consider commonly attributed definitions of the sublime:

- When was the first/ most memorable time you saw an image that both attracted you and repulsed you? Can you tell me about it? [Schopenhauerean sublime]
- Have you ever seen an imaged that evoked a sense of both awe and terror? Can you tell me about it? [Burkean sublime]
- Have you ever found yourself captivated by an image to the point where you seemed to have lost yourself in it, or became someone else? Tell me about it? [Longinian sublime]
- Can you tell me about a time that an image seemed to overwhelm you? [Kantian sublime]
- Can you tell me about an image that haunts you? When did you first see it? [postmodern sublime]

Prompts for details:

- Where were you? How did you come to be there?
- How did you encounter the image?
    - Walk me through it...
- What do you remember about the image?
    - Did your sense of the image change while you were looking at it? If so, how?
    - What about afterwards, after you walked away or after the image disappeared?
- What did your body feel like going up to the image? [corporality]
    - Did your bodily awareness change when you saw the image? If so, how?

- Do you remember your experience of the room or the space you were in? [spatiality]
    - Did it change when you saw the image? If so, how?
- Do you remember if you were aware of other people around you? [relationality]
    - What was that like?
- Was your sense of time affected? [temporality]
    - If so, how?
- What happened afterwards?
    - Did you ever see that image again? Tell me about it.

Further questions:

- Do you recall any other time something similar has happened around an image?
- Do you know what image it was? Can you identify it for me?
- *(Once image is found on the internet)* Is it this one?

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by Research Ethics Board 1 at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Chair at (780) 492-2614.

Appendix B: Invitation to Participate in an Interview and/or Writing Activity

[DATE]

Dear: [Name]

I am writing to ask whether you be interested in participating in an interview and/or writing activity with me, Erika Goble, a PhD student at the University of Alberta, on the topic of seeing an image that evokes the sublime for my doctoral study entitled, *Sublimity & the Image: A Phenomenological Study*. The sublime can be many things. Perhaps you have seen an image that both attracted and repulsed you. Perhaps there was once an image that, when you saw it, you couldn't look away from it. Or perhaps there is an image that haunts you. All of these are experiences about which I am interested.

I am currently working to complete the requirements of a PhD in the Department of Secondary Education at the University of Alberta. I would like to conduct the interview and/or writing as part of my doctoral research project. This information I collect will be used in my doctoral dissertation, as well as for presentations (academic and public) and in publications of my work. My project is a phenomenological study of encountering the sublime through images. Phenomenology is the study of possible human experiences (phenomena) not factual experiences. It is concerned with experiences that may be (or may not be) recognizable by any human being. Collecting an account of your experience will help me learn what it is like to experience the sublime from the inside.

If you are interested in participating in my study, our interview or writing activity will explore the details of your specific experience of the sublime image. The interview or writing activity will be scheduled at your convenience and, if it is an interview, will take 1-2 hours. After I have studied the interview or written material, I may ask you to clarify some points. I will also ask you to identify what image evoked your response. I am collecting digital copies of all images that my participants identify as evoking the sublime in the hopes of exploring the connection between them. Therefore, the image you identify will be linked to the description of your experience. Should you feel uncomfortable indicating which image evoked your response, please let me know and you need not do so.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and confidential. If you agree to take part, you are free to withdraw at any time, you may choose not to answer any questions I ask, and you may decide to withdraw your participation up to 1 month after the interview. If you withdraw from the study, any data collected from you will be withdrawn from my research project and destroyed. Your anonymity will be maintained throughout the project. If you agree to be interviewed, a tape recorder and note pad will be used to record our conversation and, the recording will be transcribed by either me or someone who has signed a confidentiality agreement. When the interview is transcribed all identifying information will be removed and the recording will be destroyed. If your material appears in any presentations or written texts, I will use a pseudonym to represent you. To further ensure confidentiality, no one else will hear the audio tapes or see the notes or transcripts except me, my co-supervisors, and possibly a

transcriber who has signed a confidentiality agreement. I will keep the transcript of your interview, any notes I take, and any written material I have collected locked in a secure place for a maximum of five years following completion of this research project. After five years, all of this will be destroyed.

I do not foresee any harm resulting from this activity, but you may re-experience the emotions you first felt when seeing the image. Please let me know if this happens; we can always pause or stop the interview. Many people, however, find the opportunity to reflect on their experiences to be beneficial. Further, if you indicate on your consent form, I will share with you the first draft of my findings and I invite any feedback and comments you might have. I will also provide you with a report of my study's findings once it is complete, if you so request it.

If you have any further questions about the interview or written activity, please feel free to contact me at egoble@ualberta.ca or (780) 439-1017. If you have any concerns about my project, please contact either my supervisor Dr. Catherine Adams at (780) 492-3674 or caadams@ualberta.ca, or the Chair of the Department of Secondary Education. You can also contact us by mail: 347 Education South, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T6G 2G5. Please complete the attached consent form to indicate your decision. Thank you for considering this request.

Yours sincerely,

Erika Goble

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by Research Ethics Board 1 at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Chair at (780) 492-2614.

Appendix C: Consent Form

Sublimity & the Image: A Phenomenological Study
Consent Form

Principal Investigator: Erika Goble, Department of Secondary Education, University of Alberta, egoble@ualberta.ca, (780) 439-1017

Supervisors: Dr. Catherine Adams, Department of Secondary Education, University of Alberta, Cathy.adams@ualberta.ca, (780) 492-5769, Dr. Max van Manen, Professor Emeritus, Department of Secondary Education, University of Alberta, vanmanen@ualberta.ca

I, ________________________, have read and understand the attached information letter about the study, *Sublimity & the Image: A Phenomenological Study,* and give my consent to be interviewed and/or to write of my experiences regarding this topic:

	YES	NO
I understand that my participation is voluntary with no privilege for participating and no penalty for not participating.		
I understand that I can refuse to answer specific questions and/or withdraw from the study any time up to one month following the interview (date indicated below).		
I understand that I may recall the emotions I felt when I encountered with the sublime. If I feel distressed or upset, I will tell the interviewer.		
I understand that the information I provide will be kept confidential. I will not be referred to by name, but by a pseudonym.		
I understand that the information I provide may be used in the researcher's doctoral dissertation as well as in research presentations, reports, and manuscripts for publication.		
I understand that the researcher and her co-supervisors (Drs. Catherine Adams and Max van Manen) will have access to the recordings, transcripts, notes, and any other written material shared by me, as well as the images provided.		
I agree that the research procedures have been adequately described. Further, I agree that any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I also know that I may contact the Principal Investigator, Erika Goble, if I have further questions either now or in the future.		
I understand that if I choose to be interviewed, it will be audio-recorded and written notes taken.		
I understand that if I choose to give a written account, it may appear verbatim in the final work.		
I have been provided with two copies of this consent form, one copy to sign and return to the research and one copy for my files.		
I understand my rights as a participant and agree to take part in this study.		
The researcher may contact me again if she has any further questions.		
I would like to see and comment on the first draft of the research results.		

Please **sign and date** below.

______________________	______________________
(Date)	**(Signature of Participant)**
______________________	______________________
(Date)	**(Signature of Researcher)**

If you would like to receive a copy of the research results, please provide your e-mail or address below. This information will at no time be linked to your interview data.

Name: ____

E-mail/ Address: ____

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Appendix D: Written Description of Experience

Please describe your encounter with an image that evoked the sublime. Try to describe the experience as you lived through it, from this inside. It may help to write it in first person.

Here are some questions to think about as you write your account:

- Where were you? How did you come to be there?
- How did you encounter the image?
  - Walk me through it...
- What do you remember about the image?
  - Did your sense of the image change while you were looking at it? If so, how?
  - What about afterwards, after you walked away or after the image disappeared?
- What did your body feel like going up to the image? [corporality]
  - Did your bodily awareness change when you saw the image? If so, how?
- Do you remember your experience of the room or the space you were in? [spatiality]
  - Did it change when you saw the image? If so, how?
- Do you remember if you were aware of other people around you? [relationality]
  - What was that like?
- Was your sense of time affected? [temporality]
  - If so, how?
- What happened afterwards?
  - Did you ever see that image again? Tell me about it.

Further questions:

- Do you recall any other time something similar has happened around an image?
- Do you know what image it was? Can you identify it for me? If so, please e-mail me a copy, a link, or a reference for it.

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Appendix E: Permission to Use Participant's Work

I understand that a researcher, Erika Goble, from the University of Alberta is requesting to use a copy my work for the purpose of her doctoral research. Original samples will be photographed at the time of the interview. I understand that images of this work may be used in the researcher's dissertation, research reports, scholarly publications or in presentations at scholarly conferences.

_____ I understand that in discussions about the work, a pseudonym will be used.

OR

_____ I understand that at my request my name will be included in the caption.

FURTHER

_____ I understand that the researcher will contact me if my anonymity is endangered by the use of my work in any published or presented material. I understand that when she contacts me, we will decide the best course of action (withdrawal of consent to use the image, change of consent re: the adoption of a pseudonym, or agreement to risk the loss of anonymity in the project).

By signing below, I consent* for my work to be used as stipulated above.

______________________________	______________________________
Participant printed name	Participant signature
______________________________	______________________________
Researcher	Date

*I understand that I may withdraw this consent at any time prior to August 2012, the intended date of the completion of the research dissertation project, by contacting the researcher at egoble@ualberta.ca or (780) 439-1017 or her supervisor, Catherine Adams, at caadams@ualberta.ca or (780) 492-3674.

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by Research Ethics Board 1 at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Chair at (780) 492-2614.