

The Pathetic Sublime and Landscape Painting

Hallie LeBlanc

Professor Diane Zeeuw

Post Structuralism

6 November 2012

James Elkins wrote *Against the Sublime* in 2009 in response to what he saw as the excessive and inappropriate use of the “sublime” concept in critical writing and discourse. Using Elkin’s theories and the writings of other theorists and artists, this paper will demonstrate the position of contemporary landscape theory where the word sublime and its iterations fail to grasp.

Elkin’s three specific ideas to this discussion are that the sublime does not translate well out of context of nineteenth-century Western art, that the sublime is a way to insert covert religious meaning into secular texts, and finally that all Post-Modern art needs extensive qualification that the sublime simply fails to encapsulate. I will make an overview and contextualize the Kantian sublime with the Romantic painters of the 19th century that Elkins derives his sublime from and how iterations of that idea have affected critical writing and art theory. I will continue to demonstrate throughout the paper how in contemporary times the sublime cannot have the same strength in meaning as its original intention because of these critical theory writings; therefore, it has been outgrown in contemporary vocabulary. Lastly, I will make the case that despite Elkin’s ideas, landscape artist April Gornik demonstrates a clear and mature use of the sublime in a very contemporary way, thoughtfully bringing the sublime out of its pathetic state, giving it sustainability and critical meaning in her artwork.

Define Sublime

Kant’s solution is that, in fact, the storm or the building is not the real object of the sublime at all. Instead, what is properly sublime are ideas of reason: namely, the ideas of absolute totality or absolute freedom. However huge the building, we know it is puny compared to absolute totality; however powerful the storm, it is nothing compared to absolute freedom. The sublime feeling is therefore a kind of ‘rapid alternation’ between the fear of the overwhelming and the peculiar pleasure of seeing that overwhelming overwhelmed. Thus, it turns out that the sublime experience is purposive after all—that we can, in some way, ‘get our head around it’. (<http://www.iep.utm.edu/kantaest/#SH2c>)

Romantic painting of the 19th century has two faces—that of the sublime, and that of the pastoral. Pastoral scenes grew out of the Dutch and Italian schools of the 17th century—inhabited scenes of landscape, usually Sheppard's and peasants in a comfortable and beautiful setting (think Claude Lorraine). It was the general appreciation of the Picturesque. The sublime Romantic, however, dealt with a radically different attitude of nature- danger. The Romantics used a version of the Kantian sublime in the justification of their artwork. Caspar David Friedrich is of course the most well-known for his exploration in paint of the sublime, but also John Ruskin, J.M.W. Turner, and Americans Cole, Bierstadt, and Durand. (Metropolitan Museum of Art). The Romantic sublime landscape makes the most complete illustration of what Kant meant in his sublime. From his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant says, "We call that sublime which is absolutely great... Reason shows a faculty of the mind surpassing every standard of Sense."

Today we have a much larger and expansive vocabulary of philosophical thought to base art theory on, and thus Elkins states:

...the Kantian sublime... run(s) against the current of poststructuralist thinking, in that (they) posit a sense of presence and a non-verbal immediacy that short-circuits the principal interests of theorizing on art in the last thirty years, which are nearly all concerned with mediation, translation, deferral of meaning, miscommunication, and the social conditions of understanding. References to the sublime bypass all that literature... in favor of a direct access to pure, immediate presence.

And so sublime is to be contained within talk about the nineteenth century Romantic movement and the art that descended from it. Poststructuralist thought is primarily focused on mediated access and theory, directly opposed to the immediacy of the Romantic sublime. The most immediate way that Elkins describes the downfall of the sublime is that it is simply outdated. Elkins says, "In scientific terms, it would be as if a group of artists were advocating a re-description of physics using only Newtonian models" (Elkins 5).

Not Trans-Historically Friendly Term

There are very real and impactful technological advances that affect the way we interpret our relationship with the land (and further, reinterpret in landscape painting). In the book *Landscape Theory* by Elkins and Racheal Ziady DeLue, the authors touch on some very important advances that the Romantics would have died to experience. Imagine Edwin Church in an airplane. It would be the bird's eye view that many Hudson River School artists were painting without ever having that actual experience. Our ability to see a vast and expansive vista is taken for granted today. Skydivers jump out of airplanes simply for the adrenaline rush without knowing the ways that specific view was searched for by romantic painters of the land. Another technological advance is the Autobahn, a road specifically built for a novel experience of the German landscape based on speed, excitement, and experience (DeLue, Elkins 99). We are torn away from an intimate experience with the land which would have included a very real fear for any 19th century person. That real fear of the dark and unknown woods, the danger of wild animals, the lack of safety belts and rails between you and your experience of Niagara Falls, all of those overwhelming fears are necessary to put in perspective the pleasure of knowing that absolute totality or absolute freedom are even more overwhelming; as the author says, the sublime is knowing that we can “get our heads around it” (<http://www.iep.utm.edu/>). In conquering those fears, we have deleted the direct experience with the land in favor of mediated access, and in art, this is interpreted in theory. Therefore, Romantic painting which is based in immediate presence is a different experience all together than what we have today.

Further, we cannot return to the Romantic state. Elkins says, “the sublime is a historically bounded term—even if you say you’re accepting paragraph 23 and 24 of Kant’s Critique of Judgement, you cannot remain ahistorical” (Elkins 7). All of those luxurious technological advances and theories are part of our lives today and will remain a driving force for our thoughts

and paintings. The Kantian sublime has passed its expiration date, and applying the sublime to any movement outside of the specific conditions the ideas were created in is taking irresponsible liberties with historical sources (Elkins 9).

Covert Religious Conversation

The second of Elkins' ideas supporting the poor state of the sublime in critical theory is that it exists really as a way to speak of the subjective, and that is to say beginning in the late eighteenth century and continuing today, any mystery or unnamable thing of science, the rest of our subjective feelings and intuitions. The sublime addresses what was known as religious truth: the possibility of a truth beyond the world of experience.

Elkins says, "It is important not to assume that the sublime, presence, or transcendence, are philosophical masks that can be removed, revealing a hidden religious discourse. They *are* that discourse... the only remaining way in which truths that used to be called religious can find voice within much of contemporary thought." The sublime lends weight to words like *presence* and *transcendence* when critiquing contemporary work, and still, there is no real depth without the acceptance of religious ideas.

One definition of landscape by contemporary theorist John Wiley centers on *presence*: "A series of tensions between watcher and watched, interior and exterior, the invisible and the visible, are set in motion" (Wylie 278). Emphasizing presence— "...a performative binding up of various inclinations, sensations, and responses into particular imaginations of presence, they (landscapes) signal a literal operative connection imbricating self and the world... They constitute the work that marks our being as an always-already being-in and attached-to-the world". (Mitch Rose 2006). In other words, the landscape and the self can coincide simultaneously. In looking at a landscape painting, the viewer is looking at the painter's vision of the represented world, engaged simultaneously present in as much looking *at* as looking *with*.

The *presence* felt is wholly a romanticized account of being-in-the-world based in acceptance of a priori intertwining, an acceptance of truth beyond the world of physical experience, and therefore, coated with religious implications that are more easily blanketed by the word *sublime* in contemporary theory. (Wiley 282).

Post-Structuralist Thinking

“The critic Suzanne Guerlac has argued that the sublime is the unnamed theory that framed theory itself during the inception of deconstruction and French semiotics between 1970 and 1974. The sublime, she says, enabled the constitution of theory as a subject.” Elkins states this to emphasize his third point—that the sublime is a poor form to hold up the complexities of contemporary art theory. While the sublime was necessary in the 19th century to begin the search for truth outside of strictly religious limitations, Elkins firmly supports that it remain in that century, and to reinterpret it into theories and ideas today is to force the word to fail. Touching on ideas such of semiotics, Other, and mediated ways of exploring the world around us, Elkins demonstrates the strong beginnings of the sublime that ends in the pathetic attempt to secure its place today.

Semiotics studies the signs and processes of communication and language, and has been a transformative factor in philosopher’s interpretation of our relation to both language, land, and each other. Jean-Francois Lyotard was a thinker immersed in these studies who was also fascinated by the sublime. For him, the sublime was an attempt of the Modernists to deal with the end of a singular, linear and continuous epistemology, accepting this newly discovered limit of the human condition with aporia—the end of the ability to reason outside of ourselves, always pointing back to solipsism. Later Julia Kristeva would pick up on this line, and Michele Foucault, too, along with many post-structuralist thinkers. Kristeva shifts further away from humanist (human-centered) model to that of the displaced subject. Here sublime is opened up to

interpretation in the limits of identity, social practices and signifying systems, slippage of meaning and miscommunication, all of which dismiss the immediate presence of the Romantic tradition. This thinking is open to the idea that the subject is not only wholly displaced from the center, but that it was only an ideological mirage to begin with, again, a full opposition to the Romantic coincidence of the subject and the object becoming known in a so-called “presence” within the painting.

April Gornik

April Gornik deals with landscape using uncomplicated language, visual symbols that are often only present in their absence. The large canvases, often up to ten feet in length, depict scenes of an unpopulated paradise. They are worlds where fields, rocks, trees, and clouds are the only solid characters and witnesses to the most grand and ephemeral presence—the light. As in *Mirror Lake, China*, the light is disbursed through the thin, low hanging stratus clouds, creating a mystical setting for the inlet of the lake. As there are no man-made structures or humans to give us a sense of proportion, Gornik creates a sublime scene. Where Romantic sublime is dependent on scale being established by the presence of a figure, Gornik depends on the viewer being the *rukensfigure* who surveys the scene. In an interview with Dede Young, Gornik says, “The grandeur, I hope, is more open-ended, more about the size of human spirit as it inhabits a place” (Kuspit and Young, 40). She furthers the idea of sublime by pushing awareness of presence/absence in her use of doubling by using a mirror of the landscape in the lake. Her repeated use of the doubled presence of mountains and trees creates an unerring symbol of the search for identity. Iconical doubling always possesses a certain resemblance, but is never exactly identical—a close mirroring. Donald Kuspit says of this doubling, “Is Gornik illustrating, wittingly or unwittingly, Jacques Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage, condensing the mirrored and unmirrored self—the represented and unrepresented self—in a single style? She also puts the

natural paradise and the emptiness it contradicts in one picture” (Kuspit and Young, 19).¹

Through the artistic representation of both the mountains and tree and their mirrored images in the lake, Gornik recognizes a *mis en abyme*—the problem in all mimetic art.

Is Gornik using sublime in a proper way, recognizing the cannon of art history which follows it? Certainly she is aware of the multitude of postmodern ideas which deal directly with the subject-object problem, and thus she is acting intentionally contemporary, as opposed to just repeating tropes of romantic paintings. But like wastelands, without landmarks and without time, her landscapes threaten to engulf us with meaninglessness where all the subtle nuances can fade into a bog of the sublime. Gornik has very few symbols to tell her story with, and to this end, it is difficult to make too many clear meanings out of individual paintings beyond the repetition of them to underscore the meaning of the repetition of nothing. Is this the sublime of today? Elkins conspires that the closer any theory gets to the sublime, the more threatening the sublime is to overtake it. Without signifiers, without borders, without definition, the sublime is without structure to make it whole.

It is the pathetic sublime. To quote James Elkins one more time in his most elegant dismissal, “Poor anemic sublime. Poor elitist concept... poor sublime which can only express the most atrophied and delicate emotions of distance and nostalgia... found only in the most hermitic postmodern art or the most *recherché* romantic paintings...” Irresponsibly transferred across time and misused in context, it is kept afloat by our search for something greater than ourselves. It is an illusion as trite and artificial as using words like representational, realism, image, and other ill-defined terms. To venture into the land of sublime is to enter a world of luxury, where art does not have to answer to its own history, and has no future to look forward to.

¹ Please see Kuspit’s essay in *April Gornik, Paintings and Drawings*, for further exploration on her use of doubling.

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The Pathetic Sublime

James Elkins' critique on the use of the
sublime in poststructuralist art and art
critical writing

Hallie LeBlanc

The Sublime

Caspar David Friedrich,
Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog
1818

“Close your bodily eye, that you may see your picture first with the eye of the spirit. Then bring to light what you have seen in the darkness, that its effect may work back, from without to within.”



Kant's Sublime

- -Experience in aesthetics, not an experience in fine art.
- Separates thinking- “Mathematical” and “Dynamical” thinking
- **Mathematical**- Ability to understand by instinct is overwhelmed by sheer size (the huge building)
- **Dynamical**- Our ability to will or resist is overwhelmed by force (a huge storm).
- -The object does not possess the sublime at all, but rather the sublime is the effect on our reason and judgment. Always a tension of fear and pleasure between recognizing that which threatens freedom, but is never as fearful as absolute freedom or totality.

Gregory Euclide cover
art for Bon Iver,
35x35"

Featured in *New
American Paintings*.
"My work underscores
tension/confusion in
attempting a modern
lifestyle and
sustainable living.
Landscape painting
portrays our
understanding of
what is valuable in
nature and what our
relationship with the
environment should
be..."



1. Not a trans-historically friendly term

- How you apply it- Peter de Bolla-

Discourse *on* the sublime- 18th c. phenomenon

Discourse *of* the sublime- Romanticism

Applying the term to any other movement means taking increasing license with historical sources.

-A landscape painting points to any objects that cannot be fixed (clouds, trees, etc). Widen that to point to anything that is outside of itself (phenomenon), and suddenly representation itself in all application is sublime.



Gregory Euclide, detail for Bon Iver cover art. 35 x 35", acrylic, corn, hosta, found foam, buckthorn root, petg, sedum, pine cone, pencil, paper, fern, pine needles, moss, wood

“My objects intend to celebrate wonderment of being in land, but also reflect on the problematic ways we attempt to understand/define terms like “landscape”, “wilderness” and “natural”

2. Covert religious idea in a secular conversation

- Subjectivity, “unnamable” inner feelings
- Set conditions for theory- not *of* theory
- “Possibility of a truth beyond the world of experience... Words like sublimity, transcendence, and presence, shrouded in clouds of secular criticism, serve to suggest religious meanings without making them explicit.”
 - Suggests it is possible to go on living with religious ideas without ever naming them so openly, but experiencing them through formalist concerns

April Gornik- "Landscape is a natural Other, because there is nothing more Other than the world outside us..."



April Gornik, *Edge of the Lake*, 2003.
Charcoal on paper, 38x50".



April Gornik, *Lowering Sky*. 2010. Oil on
linen, 25x30".



April Gornik, *Mirror Lake, China*. 2004, oil on linen. 78 x 104"

3. Complicated relationship with Poststructuralism

- “One should see the quest for the sublime as one of the prettier unforced blue flowers of bourgeois culture... the sublime is wildly irrelevant to the attempt at communicative consensus which is the vital force of common culture”

– Richard Rorty