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THE CONTEMPORARY SUBLIME AND THE AMERICAN LANDSCAPE

by

BERNADETTE MILLER

THESIS

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

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Advisor

Date

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Illustrations	iii
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: American Romantic Landscapes and Kant	8
Chapter 2: Sublimity of American Progress Over Nature	18
Chapter 3: Newman and the Sublimity of the Self in Nature	30
Chapter 4: Postmodern Sublimity over Nature.....	37
Chapter 5: Terror of American Progress in the Landscape.....	47
Chapter 6: The Contemporary Sublime Experience in New Spaces	53
Bibliography	66
Abstract	69
Autobiographical Statement.....	70

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1: Thomas Cole, <i>The Tempest</i> , 1826	8
Figure 2: Thomas Cole, <i>The Mountain Ford</i> , 1846	11
Figure 3: Frederic Edwin Church, <i>Niagara Falls, from the American Side</i> , 1867	13
Figure 4: Thomas Cole, <i>Distant View of Niagara Falls</i> , 1830	16
Figure 5: Albert Bierstadt, <i>Looking Down Yosemite Valley</i> , 1865	19
Figure 6: John Gast, <i>Progress</i> , 1872	19
Figure 7 and 8: Thomas Cole, <i>The Oxbow</i> , 1836	20
Figure 9: George Inness, <i>The Lackawanna Valley</i> , 1855	24
Figure 10: Thomas Cole, <i>An American Lake Scene</i> , 1844	26
Figure 11: Albert Bierstadt, <i>Rainbow in the Sierra Nevada</i> , c. 1830	27
Figure 12: Thomas Moran, <i>Grand Canyon of Arizona on the Santa Fe</i> , c. 1880	27
Figure 13: Barnett Newman, <i>Vir Heroicus Sublimis</i> , 1951	30
Figure 14: Walter de Maria, <i>The Lightning Field</i> , Catron County, New Mexico, 1977	37
Figure 15: Nancy Holt, <i>Sun Tunnels</i> , Great Basin Desert, Utah, 1973–1976	41
Figure 16: View inside one of Holt’s <i>Sun Tunnels</i>	41
Figure 17: James Turrell, <i>Meeting</i> , MoMA PS1, c. 1979	43
Figure 18: View of <i>Meeting</i> ceiling opening	44
Figure 19: Photo of mushroom cloud, Hiroshima, Japan, 1945	47
Figure 20: Still from <i>Twin Peaks: The Return</i> , episode 8	49
Figures 21 and 22: Stills from <i>Twin Peaks: The Return</i> atomic bomb sequence	51
Figure 23 and 24: Jon Rafman, <i>Nine Eyes of Google Street View</i> , c. 2008	53
Figure 25. Doug Wheeler, <i>PSAD: Synthetic Desert III</i> , 1971/2017	54
Figure 26. Andreas Gursky, <i>Niagara Falls</i> , 1989	63

INTRODUCTION

The sublime is understood to be an overwhelming, unmeasurable, pleasurable and painful, and sometimes terrible force. The sublime is a near constant element throughout the tradition of American landscape art and the purpose of this paper is to trace its depiction in the American landscape from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first century. Ultimately, the examination of key moments in American art, such as the Hudson River School, Barnett Newman's paintings, Land Art, Light and Space art movement, and contemporary works by Doug Wheeler and Jon Rafman, reveal gradual changes in the experience and appearance of the sublime in the American landscape. The works cited above serve as demonstrations of how the American sublime experience changes according to technological revolutions; during the time of Manifest Destiny and the Industrial Revolution the power of technology had a dependency on the landscape (i.e. the locomotive) so artists placed the sublime event in nature, then when approaching the postmodern and Internet era digitalized technological force creates a sublime experience that although similar to natural sublime transcends nature. force is exhibited by technology in the service of global capitalism and digitalized information.

The American sublime artistic expression is essentially the celebration of the mastery over a vast chaotic space. Pre-modern artists, such as Romantic landscape and Hudson River School painters, place the overwhelmingly powerful event in nature itself, which reflects the nation's thirst for power attainable through territorial and industrial progress. As we approach the modern and postmodern era the sublime experience transitions to an increasingly abstracted force occurring in an artificial space which reflects the new reality of digital information's dominance in our politics, economy, and all other social structures. Essentially, as the vehicles of power evolve over the course of a century so does the artistic portrayal of the sublime experience. However, the

expression of the sublime event remains dependent upon the individual's experience of an overwhelming space, an experience that is ultimately the performance of power in which the individual masters the seemingly threatening space. This power struggle first plays out in the uncharted lands of the North American continent and later in the boundless spaces formed by the internet. Thus, the examination of key moments in the American landscape tradition reveals that the artistic trope of the sublime experience in nature is ultimately the expression of the societal and economic powers that control the American space.

I will begin my exploration of the progression of the American sublime with an examination of several nineteenth-century Romantic landscape paintings which portray a type of sublime force defined by the philosophical thoughts of Immanuel Kant and Thomas Burke. The eighteenth-century German philosopher, Kant, states that "the Beautiful in nature is connected with the form of the object, which consists in having boundaries, the Sublime is to be found in a formless object, so far as in it, or by occasion of it, boundlessness is represented."¹ In other words, the sublime is an intangible and limitless entity, which then according to Edmund Burke is revealed by nature's terrible beauty.² The powerful falling water in Frederic Church's *Niagara Falls, from the American Side* (see fig. 3) offers just one example of the Romantic depiction of an overwhelming, powerful, majestic sublime event manifested in nature; however, the human conception of such an overpowering event grants its existence sublime. For instance, in Church's *Niagara Falls* we see the figure of a pondering individual whose presence is small yet notable amidst the tremendous landscape. Human presence in the face of a sublime natural scene reoccurs throughout the history of Romantic nineteenth-century paintings. The emphasis on the individual's perception of the sublime derives from Kant's theory that the sublime lies not in nature itself but in the individual's ability to acknowledge and resist nature's overwhelming force through the use

of reason.

The emphasized importance on the individual in the midst of the sublime American landscape continues into the mid-century in which the artistic attention moves from the Eastern lying mountains and coast to the Western landscape. Here I will examine the artistic practice of using the sublimity of the Western landscape as a backdrop to the phenomena of westward progress, the ultimate demonstration of the individual's importance over nature. For example, the spirit of the slogan "Westward Ho!" is evident in Thomas Moran's landscape paintings such as *Rainbow over the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone* (see fig. 11) painted in 1900 in which the biblical symbol of God's covenant to his chosen people dominates the wild Western landscape. Paintings such as Moran's offers a distinctly American combination of the mythic idealism and material desire of the white male individual.³

Then, the concept of the individual as the center of the sublime as manifested by nature is reiterated in the works and writings of the American abstract expressionist painter Barnett Newman. The sublime is the subject of Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (see fig. 13) painted in 1951 in which the viewer is meant to conceptually enter the abyss presented by the white vertical "zip" set in the midst of the all-embracing expanse field of bright red. I share Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe's view that Newman's depiction of the sublime is inherently American due to his abstracted representation of the limitless and infinite force located in the American landscape space.⁴

One purpose of examining Newman is to demonstrate how artistic motifs from the old understanding of the sublime continue into modern times. For instance, two elements arise upon examination of Newman's visual conception of the sublime: first, the abstraction of the limitlessness and boundlessness of the American natural sublime and the emphasis on the sublimity of the individual's use of reason to master such a void. Newman's depiction of the

American sublime experience, although based on natural landscape forms, reveals the beginnings of the abstraction of the sublime space that reflects modern American society and culture. Ultimately, Newman's conception and depiction of the American sublime stands in a unique position, at the cusp of the transition from the traditional (Romantic/Kantian) idea of the American sublime to the more abstracted post-modern understanding of the sublime.

The themes of limitlessness and boundlessness portrayed in nineteenth-century landscape paintings and Newman's paintings play well in the Western American landscape, particularly in desert topography. Some artistic moments in twentieth-century contain important elements of the sublime western landscape; vastness, emptiness, and pleasurable and painful terror. The earthworks and land art by Walter De Maria, Michael Heizer, Robert Smithson, and Nancy Holt utilize the previous elements while they also retain the tradition of emphasizing the importance of the individual in the face of nature's sublime force and the rationalization of the chaotic space. For example, I will examine the sublime Romantic rhetoric visible in Walter De Maria's *The Lightning Field* (see fig. 15) located in a New Mexico desert. The expansive grid arrangement of stainless steel poles arranged to attract and conduct lightning serves as a manifestation of Kant's concept of the dynamic sublime, the individual's recognition of their imaginative lack and their ultimate rational mastery of the overwhelming event. Then, the awesome power of the lightning coupled with its potentiality for danger references Burke's idea of the terrible pleasure of the sublime.

Then, I will examine Nancy Holt's landscape installation *Sun Tunnels* (1973–1976) (see fig. 16) so to break up the rhetoric of the purely masculine artistic celebration of sublime in American nature. Her large-scale installation in Utah's Great Basin Desert presents a way for the rational mind to grasp the chaos of the universe. I will argue that this piece is also human-centric; the installation's arrangement emphasizes the individual's perception of the cosmos.

In conjunction with the discussion of American Land Art, I will examine James Turrell's Light and Sound installation, *Meeting* (see fig. 18), created during the seventies. *Meeting*, while under the guise of abstracted minimalism, acts as a reinterpretation of the American Romantic sublime. The installation creates a space in which the viewer is encouraged to contemplate the ever-changing sublime effects of the framed sky above. This artistic focus on the individual's contemplation of a naturally occurring great event is comparable to Cole, Church, or Moran's representations of atmospheric phenomena. *Meeting* also continues the artistic tradition of assisting the individual to master a natural vastness through the controlled act of contemplation. Ultimately, my examination of the modern works of Newman, De Maria, Holt, and Turrell will establish that these artists retained a Romantic conception of the sublime qualities of the American landscape, a sublimity that derives from the individual's rationalization of the sublime force of nature.

The birth of technology and global capitalism then leads us to the issue of the sublime experience in the American landscape during the post-modern and contemporary reality. First, I will focus on the imagery of the nuclear bomb as a means of demonstrating the change in the American sublime from being founded in nature to a creation of technology. Episode eight of David Lynch's television series "Twin Peaks: The Return," (see fig. 20) which features the detonation of the atom bomb in the New Mexico desert, effectively shows how the American landscape is no longer the ultimate source of the expression of the sublime's natural power and magnitude. The atom bomb serves as a symbol of the force created at the height of human technological power, which eventually overwhelms and replaces nature with the creation of a new and more abstract chaotic space.

Eventually, when we reach the post-modern era the idea of American progress enters a type

of standstill; revolutionary change becomes synonymous with global capitalism and digital technology. In my discussion of the contemporary sublime I will frequently mention the Internet or Information age, a time in which American culture, society, and economy is no longer shaped by industrialism but by the proliferation of digitally constructed technology and information. The Information age in turn serves our late capitalistic society. Fredric Jameson in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) argues that economic and cultural factions merge to create an era of capitalism that expands beyond any national border. Then the information era conjoins with global capitalism to create a digitally informed conception of reality filled predominantly with capitalist values. Advances in computer automation have allowed for an unprecedented level of mass production and proliferation of digital information which form new unnatural spaces and artificially simulated reality. Thus, I argue that in the post-modern/Information era an individual's sublime experience is no longer derived from nature because the vast qualities of the American landscape have been surpassed by a greater artificial force: overwhelming digital technology.

The work of Doug Wheeler and Jon Rafman reveal the ways in which humans have succeeded in mastering the chaotic natural space and are now confronted with a new sublime space. Wheeler's *PSAD: Synthetic Desert III* (see fig. 28), although conceived before the internet era as we know it today, contains elements that foreshadow the changing state and essence of the sublime in the contemporary age. In *Synthetic Desert* the simulated reality of the sublime landscape reflects the growing phenomena of technical imitations becoming experienced realities. Thus, I will explore how Wheeler's *Synthetic Desert* reveals how the contemporary sublime is formed by the late-capitalist technological condition in which the constantly intersecting and repetitious streams of digital information form a new type of overwhelming force. Then, I will focus on Rafman's

web-based project entitled *Nine Eyes of Google Street View* (see fig. 24) which demonstrates how in our present internet reality the individual's experience of an overwhelming event now occurs in new artificial realms. The internet and inhuman technological eyes have replaced the individual as the mediating perceiver of overwhelming natural phenomena.

Ultimately, by observing the progression and evolution of the artistic portrayal of the sublime in the American landscape we find that digital technological spaces have replaced natural spaces as the instigator of sublime experiences. The works of Wheeler and Rafman use elements borrowed from the old Romantic sublime to reveal that the sublime in the contemporary American landscape can no longer be attributed to nature because technology and capitalism have far surpassed the bounds of nature. Nature in the American landscape has been overwhelmed by technology in the relentless pursuit of economic progress. The naturally occurring sublime experience seen in nineteenth-century landscapes is no longer sublime because it no longer threatens our imagination. Now the power of global capitalism and the growing prospects of technological progress in our internet age presents the rational mind with a new force and space to be reconciled with.

¹ Emmanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, Book 2, translated by J.H. Bernard, 2nd ed. Revised (London: Macmillan, 1914), 23.

² Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, Part 2, Section IV, (1757).

³ The focus and emphasis on the progress and divinely granted destiny of the white male presents a problem, which will be expounded upon later in the paper.

⁴ Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime* (New York: Allworth Press, 1999), 51.

CHAPTER 1 AMERICAN ROMANTIC LANDSCAPES AND KANT

The vast majority of American landscape paintings produced during the nineteenth-century feature the magnificence and overwhelming force of natural phenomena; however, natural events only truly become sublime through the act of rational judgment. The emphasis on the individual's perception of the sublime derives from Kant's theory that the sublime lies not in Nature itself but in an individual's ability to acknowledge and resist its overwhelming force through the use of reason. Specific elements of the sublime are established during this era of American landscape art; namely the intensity and limitlessness of the natural space, the individual's confrontation and perception of this force, the necessity for mental and spatial distance from the terrible event, the concept of "the other," and divinely ordained human progress. These components of the sublime experience ultimately serve to celebrate the rational and enlightened



Figure 1. Cole, *The Tempest*, 1826, High Museum of Art.

individual, while also serving as a means of professing the sublimity of the American dream.

To understand the nineteenth-century idea and visualization of the sublime one must first understand the underlying philosophy. Several elements of the American sublime, such as largeness and infinite space, owe their conception to Kant's philosophy of the sublime and theory of the judgment of aesthetics. His essay "Critique of Judgement" distinguishes between what is beautiful and what is sublime; aesthetic judgment based on one's subjective taste founds the former while the latter emerges from objective rationalization. Thus, not everything found in nature is sublime. One can be appreciative of a flower's beauty or receive a pleasurable feeling of being close to nature; yet, this response is different from the mixed sense of terror and pleasurable

wonder caused by one's reaction to a manifestation of nature's raw power and might. Ultimately, the mind cannot conceptualize such magnitude; yet, Kant theorizes a means by which the rational mind can compensate and eventually triumph in the face of the sublime. Kant discusses two different types of the sublime experience; the "mathematical sublime" and the "dynamic sublime."¹ The former is the physical aesthetic expression of an entity that inherently possesses some great power. It objectively has a measurable magnitude, for instance, the (violent) power of overhanging cliffs, thunderclouds and lightning, volcanoes, hurricanes, tossing ocean, high waterfalls. Thomas Cole's *The Tempest* (Fig. 1), painted around the year 1826, is a typical portrayal of the mathematical sublime. A group of three are caught in the midst of a terrible storm; they tremble or faint in the center of the composition while the strong winds bend trees, rain lashes, and menacing storm clouds roll above.

The Tempest, while it portrays the mathematical sublime, also shows what Kant describes as the *negative sublime*. The occurrence of the negative sublime initiates the individual's experience of the sublime phenomena, which then leads to the vital concept of the failure of imagination. The philosopher mentions the effect of the devastating 1755 Lisbon earthquake in his "Analytics of the Sublime."² He uses the Lisbon earthquake and its effects on the individual as a metaphor for the negative sublime. The quake created a feeling of pleasure in the individual experiencing the mighty beauty of the event; however, the magnitude of the power and destruction also presents a limit in the mind's ability to fully grasp the phenomena. The mixture of pleasure and pain is negative sublime feeling that arises when the mind produces to compensate itself for the pain caused when the imagination reaches its limit:

"The imagination... acquires an expansion and a power that surpasses the one it sacrifices, but the basis of this power is concealed from it: instead, the imagination feels the sacrifice or deprivation and at the same time the cause to which it is being subjugated. Thus any spectator who beholds massive mountains climbing skyward, deep gorges with raging

streams in them, wastelands lying in deep shadow and inviting melancholy meditation, and so on is indeed seized by amazement bordering on terror, by horror and a sacred thrill; but, since he knows he is safe, this is not actual fear.”³

The sublime feeling is the result of some exchange: human mind “sacrifices” its ability to fully comprehend an overwhelming thing and in return it receives an ultimately more powerful capability: the use of reason in the face of an overwhelming might.

Any sublime experience elicited by the storm in *The Tempest* occurs in the mind of the viewer, it does not assign a terrible pleasurable feeling to those in the painting. This difference of position emerges from one’s distance from the terrible natural phenomena. The people in the painting are caught in the midst of the storm and so they feel pain and fear. However, we, the separated viewer, can safely view the harmful event through the painting, from outside the frame. The viewer can feel pleasure while the figures in *The Tempest* cannot. Distance creates pleasure and from there the individual can safely assign aesthetic qualities, or judge, the event. Thus, there is a difference between pure fear and mere “agitation” in the face of a powerful event. If one feels “restful”⁴ then the experience is merely pleasurable because of a beautiful sight.

While Cole’s *The Tempest* demonstrates nature’s mathematical sublime *The Mountain Ford* (Fig. 2), painted two years before his death in 1846, portrays an individual’s experience with the dynamic sublime in the American landscape. In *The Mountain Ford* we see the same compositional elements at play in *The Tempest*, such as craggy rocks and towering trees surrounding a body of water. Also, both paintings place small human figures into the wild scene; however, the presence of these seemingly insignificant figures creates the primary difference between the *Tempest*’s sublime and the *Ford*’s sublime. In *The Mountain Ford* a small figure dressed in red and astride a white horse attempts to cross the river before him. Across the river’s shore is a green forest that stretches to the foot of a lofty mountain and beyond which rise more

mountain ranges culminating in a vast open sky. Far spreading land, steep mountain bluffs, distant mountain ranges, and a clear horizon leading to a big sky are repeated again and again in depictions of the sublime American landscape from the nineteenth century to the late twentieth. These motifs signify a



Fig. 2. Cole, *The Mountain Ford*, 1846, The Met.

wild landscape with a beyond, which is only granted significance by the presence and contemplation of the individual.

The individual in the face of an overwhelming limitlessness, such as the red rider on his white horse, may appear diminutive and powerless in the face of terrible nature; however, these figures are expressions of the persistence of human rational thought in the face of wild and ungoverned nature. The figure is placed in a position of judgment, of mentally processing the phenomena and ultimately exerting power over what they see. Thus, Kant's category of the "dynamically sublime in nature" describes less the character of nature but the sublime act of judging the power of nature. Then, because the act of judging is required to formulate the sublime, power emerges through the judgment of nature. "Power is an ability that is superior to grant obstacles. It is called dominance if it is superior even to the resistance of something that itself possesses power. When in an aesthetic judgment we consider nature as a power that has no dominance over us, then it is dynamically sublime."⁵ The small yet heroic male figure on his noble steed fearlessly confronts the wild uncertainty before him; he is confident in the promised destiny to conquer the landscape. (We will explore later the many ways the theme of human progress in conjunction with the depiction of an ungoverned, wild landscape is expressed throughout the history of American landscape art.) Ultimately, the "dynamic sublime" while displaying natural

power, marks the rational individual as distinct from and ultimately superior to crude/ wild nature. A separation is created between the rational person and the overwhelming force and this spatial and metaphysical distinction creates "the other" or a thing contrary to the enlightened person.

Kant's conception of the sublime emphasizes the individual and celebrates the human use of reason, which is used to compensate for the inability to comprehend/ grasp/ imagine the magnitude and might of nature's power. Almost ironically, the search for the transcendental experience and the eventual contemplation of the overwhelming redirects the focus from the sublime event back to the self. Sublimity rebounds in the individual. Kant's concept of the sublime is a proclamation of Man's importance over Nature. Thus, Kant bases his notion of the sublime on our (human) capacity for sublime experience. Our ability to make a judgment of the sublime supposedly allows us to leave the realm of nature and enter that of freedom. The mastery of nature through the sublime experience reverberates throughout the tradition of American landscape art, which in turn reflects the national desire and pursuit for territorial and technological gains.

The promise of the human mastery over nature is evident in Frederic Church's *Niagara Falls, from the American Side* (Fig. 3) painted in 1867 two years after the end of the Civil War.⁶ Church, a pupil of Thomas Cole, painted Niagara Falls multiple times, a subject that became very popular amongst landscape painters of the time and a standard theme for artists seeking to convey the physical power, magnitude and remarkable beauty of the American continent.⁷

Church paints a fanciful and highly romanticized view of the Falls by eliminating all signs of the tourist industry, which was just as active then as it is now. There are no walkways, fences, boats. Instead, he focuses on two elements of the natural phenomena; the overwhelming power of the cascades and the individual's perception of the fearful event. The viewer is placed at the edge of the torrent of water; we see the rushing waters and the landscape far beyond. The falls come

rushing down creating a dense mist that rises even above the falls itself. The falls, the river, and the spray fill almost 90 percent of the composition forming a vast expanse of a white, blue, grey, purple color plane. Then at the viewer's left one can just make out a minuscule couple standing on a rickety wooden outlook dangerously perched on the edge of the precipice. The man rests his hands on the platform's railing as he gazes out to the vista before him; his companion is placed at a safer distance from the edge, almost hidden in the cliff's overhanging tree branches.

What is the purpose of including these seemingly insignificant figures into a painting proclaiming the majesty of the American landscape? First, the small figures serve to emphasize the overwhelming power of the cascading water, the mathematical sublime. Secondly, the human presence helps the viewer to place the self into the scene by provoking a bodily response. The



Figure 3. Church, *Niagara Falls, from the American Side*, 1867, National Galleries Scotland.

scary tilt of the viewing pier threatens to plunge itself and its occupants to the jagged rocks waiting below, glistening from the fall's mist. There is an overall sense of the wildness and danger of nature.

Lastly and most importantly the presence of the figures, despite their apparent physical insignificance, creates an act of confrontation in the wild vista. They are gazing out at natural phenomenon event before them. They are viewing

it, not necessarily native to it or living in it. This distinction is essential because it marks a state of distance and independence from the natural event occurring before them. Then, the element of danger suggested by the unsteadiness of the platform perched on the edge of the shockingly steep drop creates a type of clash between the individual and the overwhelming natural elements. There is a type of struggle or opposition in the individual's relationship with nature. We stand in awe of

the majestic vista; however, we are separate from nature. Thus, this painting demonstrates the concept of “the other,” an entity that is dissimilar to and the opposite of the collective or individual Self.

The Self may be any rational human individual; however, it is mostly the case that “the self” advanced by and portrayed in nineteenth-century depictions of the sublime is the white European male individual. Furthermore, it should be noted that the sublime experience is limited to social hierarchy. The sublime did not emerge as a singular artistic concept; it developed along with the rationalist Enlightenment movement and the historical phenomenon of the *Grand Tour*.⁸ Wealthy (usually English aristocratic) men kept journals of their travels abroad and recount their sublime experiences with mountains and other dramatic natural forms and events. For instance, climbing the Alps was seen as one of the ultimate sublime experiences. The excursion promised towering pleasure coupled with danger: “we walked upon the very brink, in the literal sense, of Destruction (John Dennis)”⁹ “Delightful horror” or a similarly put phrase was frequently used to describe an individual young man's sublime experiences in nature. Hence, the sublime romantic experience reveals itself as distinctly European bourgeois and male, those with the freedom, wealth, and leisure time to travel the European continent, climb mountains and find pleasure in avalanches and broken glacier fields. They were privileged enough to enjoy their danger without it negatively affecting their everyday life, unlike say the Swiss working class whose relationship with the sublime landscape of the Alps was decidedly more pragmatic.

The experience of the sublime is then associated with a state of privilege, which so often corresponds with the exercise of power. Power is at play in the concept of the “other” versus the “self” in the sublime experience in the American landscape, which leads to the issue of power and dominance. Dominance is a common element in Kantian sublime; it is first attributed to the

powerful force of nature and then is transferred to the pondering individual through their use of reason to master it. There is an inherent connection between the sublime and the person, yet this relationship is not necessarily equal or united. The individual and Nature have a confrontational relationship which involves a power dynamic. Thomas Huhn in “The Kantian Sublime and the Nostalgia for Sublime” argues that the “dynamically sublime is a type of power struggle between the subject and nature. Thus, something that possesses no power cannot play a part in the dynamically sublime. He also defines *power* as an ability “superior to great obstacles,” while “*dominance* is the term for superior power, a power capable of overpowering that which has power.”¹⁰ Thus, in the dynamically sublime, through our act of judgment we profess/ exert our power over nature, we dominate nature. We are both independent and ultimately more powerful than nature:

“though the irresistibility of nature’s power makes us, considered as natural beings, recognize our physical impotence, it reveals in us at the same time an ability to judge ourselves independent of nature, and reveals in us a superiority over nature that is the basis of a self-preservation quite different in kind from the one that can be assailed and endangered by nature outside of us. This keeps the humanity in our person from being degraded, even though a human being would have to succumb to the dominance of nature.”¹¹

Ultimately, the dynamically sublime presents a paradox: we perceive the power of nature and so we grant nature its overwhelming sublime qualities. For example, we recognize a terrible natural event, yet are not afraid of it, which is different from those who experience a destructive force and are fearful of it and so cannot have a divine experience. The difference between the two experiences seems to be determined by the viewer’s state of privilege. It is important to note that only when the figure possesses an independent, separate power over nature is the relationship between the individual and the force of nature considered sublime.

Thus, nature in the American landscape tradition is presented as a thing to overcome, to

dominate and so any culture or persons associated with or intrinsically tied to this landscape would also be subjected to domination. Herein lies the central issue with the sublime experience in the American landscape. It pits the cultured ordered mind against the "primitive" wild mind. Thomas Cole's *Distant View of Niagara Falls* (Fig. 4) places the "noble savage" in the fresh and wild, uncivilized landscape. Similar to Church's depiction of the Falls the painting bears little resemblance to the landscape surrounding the falls at the time, which was marked by a bustling tourist industry. Instead of realistically representing this scene Cole presented a romanticized view of Niagara Falls nostalgic for the quickly vanishing American wilderness. The composition is nearly the same as Church's rendering of the landscape; the only difference between the two is the autumn coloring and the presence of two Native Americans on a rocky outlook facing the site before them. Cole is connecting the native people to the wild, untouched landscape which due to the progress of Manifest Destiny will soon be a thing of the past.

The Romantic sublime visible in Cole's *The Mountain Ford* and Church's *Niagara Falls, from the American Side* is used to indirectly justify the myth of white man's progress across the



Figure 4. Thomas Cole, *Distant View of Niagara Falls*, 1830, The Art Institute of Chicago.

American continent. It does so by suggesting a violent, or at the very least a confrontational, relationship between wilderness and the individual who enjoys a state of privilege rendered through the use of rational thought. The individual precariously yet peacefully stands on the edge of a steep precipice or bravely forges across a river to confront the wilderness beyond. They are superior to nature thus it

is their destiny to overcome it. Violence and confrontation then emerge through the repeated need

to master nature that threatens to hinder human progress. The reoccurring presence of an agitating overwhelming occurrence demands that the individual must in turn repeatedly overcome it. Thus, the sublime in the American landscape is used to achieve two things: to situate the myth of progress as grounded in natural law while also serving to establish human nature as superior to nature.¹² And, as the remainder of this paper will show, the divine grandeur of the American landscape has been continually depicted in art because the myth of progress has never ceased.

¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.

² The Lisbon earthquake killed around 250,000 and spread a path of destruction from France to Morocco, its tremors were reported to be felt across Europe. The natural disaster "excited and preoccupied the entire world like few other events in that century (Benjamin radio talk, 1931.)" (Ray Gene, *Terror and the Sublime in Art and Critical Theory, From Auschwitz to Hiroshima to September 11* (Palgrave Macmillan US, 2005), 28.

³ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 129.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 28, 119.

⁶ Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture, American Landscape and Paintings 1825-1875* (Oxford University Press, 1980), 40.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ray, *Terror and the Sublime in Art and Critical Theory*, 24.

⁹ Ibid, 25.

¹⁰ Thomas Huhn, "The Kantian Sublime and the Nostalgia for Violence," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (Summer 1995): 271.

¹¹ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 28, 120-121.

¹² Huhn, 275.

CHAPTER 2 THE SUBLIMITY OF AMERICAN PROGRESS IN NATURE

Manifest Destiny and the American Landscape

The march of progress is synonymous with the march westward. The importance of the individual in the midst of the sublime American landscape also continues into the mid-century in which the artistic attention moves from the mountains and the coast to the Western landscape. I will examine how American landscape painters used the sublimity of the Western landscape as a backdrop to the phenomena of westward progress, a demonstration of the individual's importance. During the nineteenth-century American landscape painting was frequently linked to the exploration of new fresh territory as stated in the *Cosmopolitan Art Journal* in 1859: "If explorations are the spirit and persistence of American art, we may well promise ourselves good things for the future."¹ Art, exploration, new territory, nature, the future, and progress are all linked in the American sublime experience. Thus, the artistic pursuit of the sublime in America during the late-eighteenth and into the nineteenth century was not without underlying nationalistic purposes.

Exploration across the continent was one expression of nationalism and the link between art and exploration was so close that American landscape artists were often involved in national surveys conducted during the 1870s. The continent's vast, uncharted, wild landscape had to be explored and documented and its riches discovered and used. These expeditions were acts of dominating the land and when an accompanying artist renders the discovered landscape, it is an act of further possession.² The concept of exploration, seeking new lands, and ultimately possessing them is best exemplified by the "artist-explorer."³ Landscape artists explored the American continent from the South American tropics to the Arctic and everything in between. The artist had to play several roles, such as the explorer, scientist, minister, frontiersman, a combination



Figure 5. Bierstadt, *Looking Down Yosemite Valley*, 1865, Birmingham Museum of Art.

of traits that certified him a "heroic" status.⁴ The American painter, Albert Bierstadt, is one example of the heroic artist-explorer. In 1859, Bierstadt traveled westward in the company of Frederick W. Lander, a land surveyor for the U.S. government. In 1863 he traveled west again, this time in the company of the author Fitz

Hugh Ludlow. Throughout the 1860s Bierstadt used studies from his trips as the source for large-scale paintings. He continued to visit the American West throughout his career; his presence frequently requested by explorers considering a westward expedition⁵ and after each journey, he returned to create finalized images that glorified the American West as a land of promise. These paintings served to both proclaim the grand American vistas and to celebrate the great potential of the individual's achievement in these "wild" landscapes.

Bierstadt's paintings were known for their "fresh" landscapes, landscapes of un-spoilt, pure nature. The American Romantic landscape artists, Frederic Church, Bierstadt and Thomas Moran were also known for these types of landscapes. Bierstadt's *Looking Down Yosemite Valley* (Fig. 5) painted in 1865 presents the viewer with a wide panorama of the tranquil Eden-like landscape. A small glass-like lake nestles in the valley green with grass and vegetation. The sky streaked with pastel colored clouds glows with what is either a rising or setting sun. There is a notable absence of life; there are no grazing deer, not a single bird in the sky and no tiny pondering human figure.

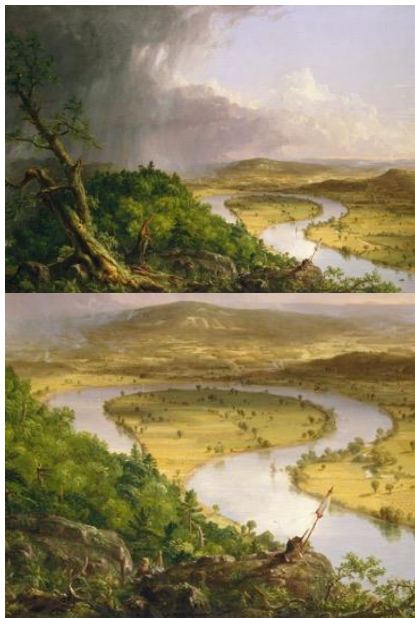
It is a scene of stillness, silence and light. However, the landscape is not completely secluded undiscovered; the presence of both the artist, and by



Figure 6. John Gast, *Progress*, 1872.

extension the viewer, is implied by the title which contains the present tense phrase “looking down.” The viewer, the individual, and the artist have discovered, intruded and ultimately taken possession of the new empty landscape.

Nationalism, manifest destiny, and religion play key roles in the artistic pursuit of fresh landscapes. First, America is a relatively new country; it lacked an established historical and cultural narrative, which is one reason for the emphasis on America's fresh wild land. Its nature was different from Europe's antiquity and wilderness; America had an alternate past because they could relate to antiquity still unspoiled by Man, thus also purer and closer to God. The landscape of the Northern American continent ultimately was viewed and used by as a source of pride for



Figures 7 &8. Thomas Cole, *The Oxbow*, 1836, The Met.

the growing new nation.

Some nineteenth-century artists boldly proclaimed Manifest Destiny ideology as is the case in John Gast’s very unsubtle *Progress* (Fig. 6) painted in 1872. Here we see a fanciful American frontier landscape: flat land, open sky with dramatic clouds, mountain ranges in the far distance and on either side of the composition are two coasts. The female personification of progress leads the march westward while leaving a trail of power lines in her wake. She (progress) is in the process of advancing technology westward while various

symbols and means of progress follow her: the hunters and explorers of the western frontier, farmers tilling flat crop fields, a train, a stagecoach, a covered wagon. Then Native Americans, bears, and buffalo, all symbolic of the wildness of nature flee westward before Progress. The landscape in the West is also wild; the mountain range is steeper and more jagged, and the sky is

dark with clouds. Yet, light, prosperity, and progress chase away the wild and chaotic nature as they march west. Thus, the empty fresh landscape and its native inhabitants are presented as the other, the opposite of white advancement and civilization and so the natives must be dispelled and the land filled.

Of course, A wonder caused by one's reaction to a manifestation of nature's raw power and might. Ultimately, America was not unmarked by humanity or lacking a historical and cultural narrative; Native Americans had established civilizations across the continent long before the arrival of white Europeans. Alexis de Tocqueville, the French diplomat, political scientist, and author of *Democracy in America*, gives the general Eurocentric view of the fate of Native Americans; he reports that "honest civilians" commented the following to him: "God, in refusing the first inhabitants the capacity to become civilized, has destined them in advance to inevitable destructions. The true owners of this continent are those who know how to take advantage of its riches."⁶ In other words, Native American use of the land was not progressive enough, thus they are not deserving of it.

Thomas Cole's *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow* (Fig. 7) painted in 1836 offers a more subtle reiteration of the sublimity of American progress than does Gast's *Progress. The Oxbow* serves as a visualization of the confrontation between the American wilderness and its inevitable civilization. Advancements both geographically and technologically have created a marked distinction between the older wild nature and the increasingly pastoral domesticated American landscape. This contrast between the wild and tamed American landscape splits the composition.

The white puffy clouds and dark heavy clouds split the scene into two sections. To the left of the canvas the storm clouds harbor streams of rainfall over the wild landscape directly below, a

hilltop covered in a tangle of dark green leafed treetops and boulders. Closer to the viewer is a group of trees made distinct by their twisted and broken forms; in this portion of the scene nature is wild, chaotic, dangerous, destructive, and powerful. Then viewed from a lofty height and to our right stretches a serene pastoral landscape. The familiar semi-aerial view of a vast landscape is similar to numerous Romantic American landscape paintings. We see a calm river gently curving around the oxbow that is cleared of trees and marked by a pattern of crop fields and roads. This patchwork pattern continues over land on the other side of the river where there are rows of fruit trees, and fields of crops while a mountain range lies in the far distance. Again we (the individual) can see far into the distance, tinted by the atmosphere. Not only is the landscape vast but our view of the land is far-reaching. Occasionally, tiny trails of smoke rise from the land, indicating some sort of human activity. Small trees sparsely dot the landscape serving as reminders of what was most likely a densely forested land. This open and flat landscape changes shades of yellow-green, light brown, darker green, as shadows roll across made by the giant clouds rolling in after the heavy dark rain clouds in the left section of the sky.

Then perched in the foreground, almost center to the canvas, is a minuscule self-portrait of the painter seated at the edge of Mount Holyoke as he paints the scene below. The figure of Cole, although physically present in the midst of the untamed scenery, is conceptually and mentally removed from it. The artist's back is to the tangle of trees and threatening sky; he is studying the vast pastoral land stretching beneath him under a peaceful blue sky (Fig. 8). The artist is unconcerned by the chaotic wilderness behind him, rather his focus is on the ordered domesticated stretch of land before him. Meanwhile, the viewer sees both sections of the composition and the clash between the wild romantic landscape of the past and the domesticated tamed land of the future.

The Oxbow shows that progress is not achievable in an ungoverned, chaotic, wild nature. American development is associated with habitable and tamed nature; bright blue open skies and wide clear land. The view of the landscape is “after a thunderstorm.” Nature in Cole’s painting is no longer a threat because human progress and technology has mastered the wild chaos of the American landscape represented by the remaining portion of untamed land behind the figure’s back. Ultimately, *The Oxbow* seems to be a proclamation of the sublime qualities of the American land; however, the artist demonstrates how this sublimity is changing and shifting. Again, we see a Kantian focus on the individual in the natural sublime, yet, the progress of the individual is advancing closer to complete dominion over nature. What is sublime now is the potentiality of human endeavors and growth, which is manifested by the vast and open American landscape.

Under the siren call of “Westward Ho!” American technological progress marches across the nation, from the east coast to west coast. Landscape paintings in correspondence with this move westward begin to depict a different type of landscape that is reflective of the varying topography yet also shows the marks of progress on the land. In the mid-nineteenth century, the American ideology of westward expansion was understood as the ultimate demonstration of the hopeful promise for American prosperity. National optimism was especially vital after the Civil War. In 1862 President Lincoln signed the Homestead Act, which gave away at a low price vast tract of western land to anyone willing to settle and cultivate it.⁷ This bill, while providing a means for lower class Americans and European immigrants to start over after the devastating Civil War, also defined the topography of western America by parceling up the “empty” landscape. The landscape is then marked further by the development of the railroad. The Railroad Act was signed a mere six months after the passing of the Homestead Act, and by May 1869, a transcontinental railroad stretched across the frontier further marking the landscape. The new railroad system brought in

droves of settlers and eased the homesteading life by providing easy transportation and access to vital goods.⁸ However, homesteading and the railroad while it offered promise to some, denied it to others. Ultimately, the rights and freedom of numerous Native American tribes living on this “empty” land were sacrificed for the betterment of white settlements. The practice of Native American governments, language, religion, and culture was thought to be illegitimate thus undeserving of the land they had held for so many generations before the arrival of white people. Thus, Native Americans despite their best efforts had very little chance in the face of the mighty tide of white settlers, the United States military, and the railroad.

The political and societal control of the western landscape is reflected by motifs, such as train imagery and trees stumps, which further reveal nature's gradual submission to American growth. A new kind of landscape, one of flatness and vastness, appears as sublime, a promise of progress and prosperity. Although cliffs, rushing waterfalls, and dense forests are mighty and allow for the individual to experience a sublime event, they are not conducive to human prosperity and progress. For example, *The Lackawanna Valley* (Fig. 9) painted by George Inness in 1855 presents a topographical view of the railway chugging through Scranton, Pennsylvania.⁹ The focus is no longer the might and violence of the American wild; there are no plunging cliffs, rushing



Figure 9. Inness, *The Lackawanna Valley*, 1855, National Museum of Art, Washington,

waterfalls, angry storm clouds; instead the scene is peaceful and idyllic. The viewer is placed on top of a hill and gazes down to the town below in the valley with a low-lying mountain range and a clear rosy tinted sky beyond. The valley is bustling with industry; the smoke rising from smokestacks is mimicked by the

steam issuing from the locomotive as it passes through cleared fields marked with cut trees. To the

left of the scene, at the top of the hill under a tall tree is a small male figure sitting and gazing at the vista below. One can read *Lackawanna Valley* in two different ways: either the lamentation of the inevitable destruction of America's natural wilderness or the celebration of the developing technology, here in the formation of the railroad and locomotive. Perhaps the painting is meant to portray both feelings; maybe it can be seen as a reflection of the reality of America quick industrial and agricultural growth and territorial gain while the nation simultaneously loses its wild unspoiled nature, long a symbol of American greatness.

There has always been the mentality that the land is in service to human progress. Alexis de Tocqueville described America civilization as a tribute to "that power God granted us over nature."¹⁰ As discussed earlier the depiction of the American landscape during the Romantic and Hudson River school periods was a means of confronting and ultimately dominating the powerful natural forces. Charles Traub in his essay "Thoughts on Photo in Conquest of the American Landscape" argues that "art is man's refuge from the primeval forces around him and a means of controlling them."¹¹ Thus, the artistic depiction of the sublime experience in nature plays a part in the power struggle between ungoverned nature versus rational humanity. The wild, dangerous, uncivilized landscape evident in Bierstadt's *Looking Down Yosemite Valley*, although mighty and beautiful, will not be untamed and unmarked by humanity for much longer; it will eventually be sacrificed for man's progress.

American Nationalism and Christianized Sublime

American nineteenth-century landscape paintings present a nationalism that identifies America's identity with its landscape. Barbara Novak argues that nature for Americans became "an effective substitute for a missing national tradition."¹² There is a lack of political or historical grandeur so Americans emphasized what glory existed: the natural sublimity of their landscape.

This explains the focus on the American continent's more impressive physical features, such as wild and threatening tempests, craggy precipices, thundering waterfalls, and lofty mountains. The emphasis on these types of elements was then only bolstered by the Romantic sublime featured in Kant's *Critique of Judgement* and Burke's *Inquiry*. Ultimately, the dramatic and sublime qualities of the American landscape were beneficial to American nationalists "in supporting their claims to the superiority of American character."¹³ The ideal American character being the pursuit of individual happiness and prosperity founded on the technological and economical means of the American land.

Eventually, God is linked to the sublime experience in the American landscape to legitimize even further white progress and Manifest Destiny. Novak has argued that God in the



Figure 10. Thomas Cole, *An American Lake Scene*, 1844, Detroit Institute of Arts.

American landscape becomes the iconography of the country's nationalism. In correlation, a different depiction of the sublime in the American landscape emerges- the Christianized sublime. Christianized sublime is quieter, still, peaceful, which was thought to be more reflective of God's benevolence and peace than the terror and drama of Gothic sublime. Silence and stillness are evident in Thomas Cole's *An American Lake Scene* (Fig. 10) painted in 1844. The scene is set at either dusk or dawn; the still lake reflects the sky's pastel palette of soft grey, purple, pink, and blue. Small islands and twisted tree limbs are silhouettes against the water. On the largest island, one can spot a small figure supposedly contemplating the peaceful scene before him. Essentially, the artistic association between God and the American landscape serves to positively connect the nation itself to God. This connection creates a nationalism in which "God Bless America" and "America the Beautiful"

and similar hymns full of imagery of America's powerful natural beauty are sung in church.

The Christianized sublime applies nicely to the western landscape, which features several themes of the Christian faith; the newness of the land, its virginity, its freshness, which all mark land as sanctified, sinless, a type of Eden. Here boundlessness and limitlessness are attributed to a new pure landscape, which offers infinite opportunities for the individual to succeed. The elements of silence, vast space, and unmarked land signifies a promised land for the promised people. Albert Bierstadt's paintings *Rainbow in the Sierra Nevada* and *After the Shower* (c. 1830) (Fig. 11) both depict a majestic rainbow stretching over the landscape. The



Figure 11. Bierstadt, *Rainbow in the Sierra Nevada*, c. 1830, Private collection.



Figure 12. Moran, *Grand Canyon of Arizona*, c. 1880, Private Collection.

rainbow in Christian symbolism indicates God's covenant with his promised people. Novak mentions that there was a concept of the West as a type of church in the wild¹⁴ and artists viewed themselves as on a sacred mission to seek a virgin land.

However, a contradiction arises through the search for pure Creation. Tocqueville remarks that the silence and stillness of the American wilderness will give way to production and noise: "Thoughts of the savage, natural grandeur that is going to come to an end become mingled with splendid anticipation of the triumphant march of civilization."¹⁵ Artist-explorers search for an unmarked space that offers the potential for a new beginning yet their discovery of such a landscape alludes to the inevitable loss of that pure space when human progress begins to fill it in.

Silence and the Individual in the Empty Western Landscape

The uncontrolled Western wilderness, empty of the deeds of humanity, is connected to

silence, which serves to emphasize the individual's presence in a vast space. The theme of silence and solitude is rampant in accounts and depictions of the American West.¹⁶ Washington Irving proclaimed: “there is something inexpressibly lonely in the solitude of a prairie.”¹⁷ Loneliness accompanies silence; again, there is emphasis placed on the individual and the confrontation of a type of landscape that contains the necessary affective conditions to raise a sublime response. This imagery is central to the artistic depiction of the sublime feeling in the American landscape; for instance, the individual confronting silence in a vast space reappears in the coming discussion on *Doug Wheeler's PSAD: Synthetic Desert III*, conceived in the late twentieth century.

Silence is evident in Thomas Moran's landscapes of the American West, such as *Grand Canyon of Arizona on the Santa Fe, Near Fort Wingate New Mexico*, *Green River of Wyoming* (Figs. 12), in which infinite repetitions of natural forms, such as mountains and cliffs, in a vast space are primarily silent. There are no storms, the sky is blue and open, and there are no other indicators of noise or activity. Silence is used to emphasize the vast openness of the landscape and to place further stress on the connection between the individual viewer and the open land. The vastness of the uninterrupted landscape suggests a type of void, an emptiness symbolic of eternity, or a space waiting for the arrival of human activity. Stillness and quiet and space are intrinsically linked in nature, yet a type of space unique to the American western landscape; vast, open, and (for a time) empty.¹⁸

Yet, what about Moran and other nineteenth-century landscape artists' depiction of uninhabitable western American landscapes such as the Grand Canyon? First, it is of note that Moran's western landscapes lack the usual tiny human figure, perhaps because this type of landscape cannot offer the individual the promise of prosperity due to its uninhabitable nature. Humanity is absent in Moran's depictions of the Grand Canyon because the individual cannot

master the wild landscape through the means of industry and agriculture. We do not attribute the sublime experience to a painting's protagonist but rather to the viewer who is meant to respond to the empty natural space with a sublime feeling. The viewer feels pleasure gazing at the wild harsh landscape from a safe distance from beyond the frame. However, it is important to remember that this type of landscape is eventually possessed (or protected) by the national park system which controls it through bureaucracy and the commercial tourist industry.

¹ *Cosmopolitan Art Journal* (September 1859): 183.

² Novak, 126.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Novak, 119.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, trans. George Lawrence and ed. J. P. Mayer (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1971), 354.

⁷ Blake Bell, "Homestead National Monument of America and the 150th Anniversary of the Homestead Act," *Western Historical Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (2012): 72-78.

⁸ Lee Ann Potter and Wynell Schamel, "The Homestead Act of 1862," *Social Education* 61, 6 (October 1997): 359-364.

⁹ Adrienne Baxter Bell, *George Inness and the Visionary Landscape* (New York: George Braziller, 2003), 23.

¹⁰ Alexis de Tocqueville, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield, and Delba Winthrop, *Democracy in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

¹¹ Charles Traub, "Thoughts on photography in conquest of the American landscape," Sonfist, Alan. Edited. *Art in the Land: A Critical Anthology of Environmental Art* (E.P. Dutton, 1983), 217.

¹² Novak, 110.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹⁴ Novak, 129.

¹⁵ Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, trans. George Lawrence and ed. J. P. Mayer (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1971), 354.

¹⁶ The nineteenth-century author of *The Oregon Trail: Sketches of Prairie and Rocky-Mountain Life*, Francis Parkman's memory of the plains: "a sublime waste, a wilderness of mountains and pine-forests, over which the spirit of loneliness and silence seemed brooding."

¹⁷ Washington Irving, "A Tour on the Prairies," 1835 (New York: Pantheon, 1967), 188.

¹⁸ Clarence King, the American mountaineer, and author; "there is round these summits the soundlessness of a vacuum... the desert, of death, this silence is like the waveless calm of space (Henry D. Thoreau, *Walden*, 1854 (New York: Mentor, 1942), 15.

CHAPTER 3 NEWMAN AND THE SUBLIMITY OF THE SELF IN NATURE

The concept of the individual as the distant and rational perceiver of an overwhelming natural event continues into the twentieth-century, most especially in the work of the American abstract painter, Barnett Newman. Newman offers an abstracted depiction of the American landscape, whose largeness and suggestion of infinite space, is placed in juxtaposition to the pondering rational mind, similar to the Romantic Kantian sublime explored earlier. While the artist's abstractions reflect the modern criticism with the stale sublime aesthetic and language his non-figurative spaces are still based on natural forms and continue the theme of the rational individual confronting the chaotic space from a safe distance. Thus, Newman's abstraction of sublime experience in the American landscape can be seen as standing at the cusp between figurative nineteenth-century Romantic and abstracted postmodern sublime. One specific work, *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, painted circa 1950, continues of the celebration of the individual and the human capacity for creating and ordering a chaotic space as previously illustrated in the artistic depiction of the American West.

In Newman's essay "The Sublime is Now, written in 1948, he takes issue with the concept of Beauty; the problem with the artistic pursuit or preoccupation with beauty is that it ultimately distracts from what he believes is "man's desire for the exalted" or the sublime. Like Kant, the artist distinguishes between mere beauty and the sublime. Newman's abstraction of the sublime

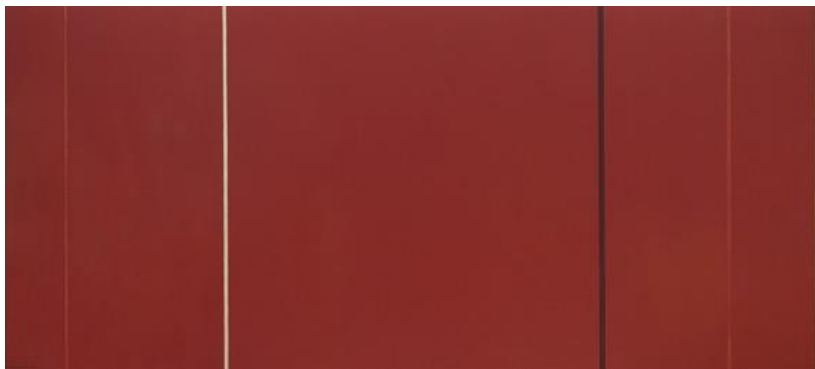


Figure 13. Newman, *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, 1951, MoMA, New York City.

inducing space can be in part due to his desire to visually surpass the constraints of a beautiful site, which ultimately distracts from the

sublime experience. The preoccupation with the beautiful and perfect figurative form and the obsession with "reality" ultimately dulls the perception of "the absolute."¹ For instance, nineteenth-century paintings of Niagara Falls initially present a beautiful panorama that one has to conceptually move past to experience any sort of transcendental feeling. Essentially, Newman's sublime is abstract because it better serves the overwhelming idea of the spiritual, a figurative image is inadequate. One could also argue that figurative forms of overwhelming power, such as a waterfall, are no longer capable of containing or inspiring a sublime feeling in the modern audience which views traditional landscapes as tired and stagnant. The Kantian focus on the individual rational ego or the "Self" is further emphasized in Newman's American modern abstract compositions that demonstrate the modern movement's desire to create true art that reflected the modern world. To achieve this purpose, abstract modernism stressed the break from established traditional art values and forms; yet, in doing so it established new rigid and hierarchical art values with particular thanks to their emphasis on the individual male. However, despite the apparent modern abstraction of Newman's portrayal of the sublime event, he still places the powerful event in a space that mimics the boundlessness and vastness of the Romantic sublime. Furthermore, Newman retains the spatial distance between the overwhelming event and the individual, which is required for a sublime feeling.

The abstract style of *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (Fig. 13) is in apparent accordance with Kant who argues that the sublime, unlike the beautiful, "cannot be contained in any sensible form but concerns only ideas of reason. The sublime is on the side of the mind rather than nature, and since the extent of the mind is unbounded, it cannot be adequately represented by an object with determinate bounds."² There is an issue with the representation of the sublime, thus the use of abstraction and simplified forms. Art critic Arthur Danto, argues that Newman's painting is about

something that can be said but not shown, at least not pictorially.³ However, Newman's art retains a connection with familiar natural forms and to the natural expression of the sublime. The massive canvas, large color fields, and striking (even violent) vertical “zips” all conjure the vastness and overwhelming drama of a sublime event in the American landscape. Thus, Newman’s abstractions are not without content; they are representations of the sublimity that emerges when the individual faces a spatial void.

Part of the retained traditional American sublime is the artistic emphasis on the individual and their confrontation with an overwhelming intimidating space. The sublime and “man” is quite clearly the subject of *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, Latin for "Man, heroic and sublime." The large approximately seven by seventeen-foot canvas is an all-embracing expanse of bright red interrupted by vertical “zips” of white, black, and varying shades of red. There is a notable absence of figurative beauty or objective reality; however, the abstracted composition is by no means minimal or absent in symbolism and subject. It is in fact quite subjective in that it creates a space that derives its significance from the individual’s gaze and act of judgment.

Vir Heroicus Sublimis encompasses several motifs of the Romantic sublime; vastness, depth, the void, space, and confrontation, and mastery. Its size and overwhelming composition may make one want to step back to better take it all in; however, Newman's intention was for the viewer to confront the piece up close. Newman believed in the spiritual potential of abstract art and believed that one best achieves a transformative personal experience at close range to the canvas. When the painting was first exhibited, in 1951 at the Betty Parsons Gallery in New York, Newman tacked to the wall a notice that read, “There is a tendency to look at large pictures from a distance. The large pictures in this exhibition are intended to be seen from a short distance.”⁴ Newman stressed the importance of being close to his painting to increase the feeling of

overwhelming space; however, the elements of distance and separation, demonstrated earlier in the landscapes of Cole, Church and the like, are still at play here. The viewing experience of *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* involves a blurring between a state of being overwhelmed by and a state of separation from the event. The positioning of the individual versus the event mimics the imagery of the small overwhelmed yet distinct individual in Romantic American landscape paintings. The individual is not in the vast space but stands at the edge, suggested by the edge of the canvas, similar to the figures in Cole's *Niagara* who stand at the edge of a precipice in a dual position of closeness and distance.

The very title of *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* —in English, "Man, heroic and sublime"—points to aspirations of personal transcendence; however, this goal is limited to the male individual as implied by Newman's use of the word *man*. True, "man" has long been used to refer to generalized "mankind," as in all human persons; however, given that Newman was a part of the highly macho American Abstract Expressionism movement one can assume that the artist is primarily thinking of the male sex. Furthermore, the singular use of "man" references the individual man. Again, we see a continuation of the artistic association between the sublime and the heroic lone male comparable to the red clad male figure on his trusty steed in Cole's *The Mountain Ford*. Again, imagery of an individual (male) person in the face of an empty vastness indicates the sublime destiny of the rational mind to conquer and order the chaotic space and *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* is about space, very large space. Large enough so that when the viewer stands close to it (as Newman intended) it creates an engulfing environment—a vast red field, broken by five thin vertical stripes forming an arrangement of asymmetrical balance and movement. Spatial depth is formed by the straight vertical "zips" which vary in color, width, and linear quality; the white zip at center left, for example, looks almost like the gap between separate planes, while the maroon zip to its right

seems to recede slightly into the red.⁵ Critics have suggested that Newman's "zips" reference, or create, a spatial void. They create an illusion of an edge and a deep space beyond. The viewer can visually stand on the edge of the color field and look down or in to the abyss created by the vertical gaps. The individual is pitted against a frightening expanse which is similar to the nineteenth century artistic trope of placing a minuscule figure confronting some type of overpowering landscape. This confrontational positioning then establishes the sublime experience.

Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe in his book *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime* argues that Newman's paintings display a post-Kantian sublime that is not applicable to the postmodern/contemporary reality "because it's a sublime which still finds itself in nature."⁶ Rolfe further claims that Newman's sublime is both distinctly American and based on nature because of the presence of "largeness" and the focus on the individual. The largeness of *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* connects the painting to the manifestation of the "mathematical" sublime that transitions into the "dynamic" sublime through the individual's rationalization of the event. Newman stated that "to paint a small picture is to place yourself outside your experience. However, you paint the larger picture; you are in it."⁷ His canvases are about the individual's personal experience with the space, a space that they are destined to conquer. The individual's heroic encounter with the space creates a sublime experience. Thus, Newman's emphasis on largeness versus the individual continues the American nationalistic ideology of the sublime qualities of manifest destiny. The sizeable abstract composition mimics the nineteenth-century landscape painting trope of "large canvases containing honest settlers dwarfed by the vistas they are about to conquer."⁸ The individual may be dwarfed in stature, yet the rational mind will ultimately master and repurpose the overwhelming landscape in the pursuit of progress.

Yet, how exactly does the individual master the overwhelming space of Newman's

paintings? In the instance of Newman's abstractions mastery is dependent on the individual's action in the present or the "now" (as expressed in the essay "The Sublime is Now") as opposed to there, or beyond, or in the future. Thus, the approaching inevitable future of the era of individual human progress portrayed in Cole's *The Oxbow* has reached its now. Francois Lyotard argues that Newman's sublime resides not "in an over there, in another world, or another time, but in this: in that something happens... the 'it happens' is the paint, the picture... The sublime in other words is the 'event' of the picture or what we might call its material occurrence."⁹ It is happening now because of the present tense arrival of the individual and the individual's active mastery of the overwhelming composition. The sublime is "now" and "man, heroic and sublime" reveals a modern artistic version of the ideology of manifest destiny seen earlier in Romantic landscape paintings. Newman's sublime is a proclamation of the individual's ability to create and thrive by the ordering of the chaotic space.

The concept of the individual's action is central to modern American painting, namely the Abstract Expressionist movement. While Newman's painting style is different from his peers' (like Jackson Pollock's "action paintings") his compositions do involve a type of active participation. Ultimately, the sublime rendered in his paintings comes to fruition through the creative act of the individual viewer. The artist's manifestation of the individual's creative act is reminiscent of the nineteenth-century linking of the American landscape to God's design, a connection that helped establish man's lawful possession and ultimate ordering of the "wild" "uncivilized" "new" territory. The individual's control of the wild space is comparative to the divine act of God's ordering of nothing, or blank space, in Genesis. Thomas B. Hess notes that "Newman claimed that the artist, like God, begins with chaos, the void. The artist's first move is to re-enact God's primal gesture by informing the void with a downward stroke or zip." Thus, looking back to *Vir Heroicus*

Sublimus the three straight vertical zips, which are ordered by the golden rule, organize and control the expansive field of red nothingness. The artist's organization of the space connects to the American Protestant understanding of the sublime experience: "purposive creation, with law as logic, with the plain and simple."¹⁰ Newman's ordering of the chaos also connects to the idea of the Self possessing and ultimately defeating the "other," imagery seen earlier in the romantic landscapes of Cole and Church. In *Vir Heroicus Sublimus* the individual conquers the "other" here in the form of what Newman calls the "terror of the blank area."¹¹

Ultimately, Newman presents an abstracted version of the American nineteenth-century conception of placing the individual at a distance before a chaotic entity a confrontation which ultimately results in the individual imposing order onto the space and so creating a sublime experience. The image of the rational individual encountering chaotic space is perfectly suited to the American landscape. For example, Newman recounts his visit to Indian mounds in Ohio: "looking at the site you feel, here I am, here ... and out beyond there-there is chaos ... but here you have a sense of your own presence ... I became involved with making the viewer present; the idea that 'man is present.'"¹² "Beyond there-there" is a limitlessness with a fixed center and the fixed center is the individual who rationalizes the chaos, a creative act that inhibits the space and utilizes it for human purpose, thus rendering it sublime.

In the end, despite Newman's rejection of any literal visual renditions of the American sublime he still preaches the Romantic/ Kantian understanding that the sublime emerges from the rational individual's divinely ordained governing of a vast and empty natural space, the wild American landscape. However, Newman's abstraction of the overwhelming natural space prefigures the changing reality in the forthcoming postmodern and internet age, a different type of reality and perception of reality that calls for an alternate occasion and appearance of the sublime

experience. Essentially, different spaces require a new sublime.

¹ Barnett Newman, 'The Sublime is Now,' in *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John P. O'Neill (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 170–3.

² Kant, "Analytic of the Sublime," *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.

³ Philip Shaw, 'Sublime Destruction: Barnett Newman's Adam and Eve,' in Nigel Llewellyn and Christine Riding (eds.), *The Art of the Sublime* (Tate Research Publication, January 2013).

⁴ Gallery label from *Abstract Expressionist New York Exhibition*, Tate, October 3, 2010- April 25, 2011.

⁵ Publication excerpt from *The Museum of Modern Art, MoMA Highlights*, The Museum of Modern Art: New York, revised 2004, originally published 1999 cited in Philip Shaw, "Sublime Destruction: Barnett Newman's Adam and Eve," *The Art of the Sublime*, (Tate Research Publication, January 2013).

⁶ Jeremy, Gilbert-Rolfe, *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime*, 51.

⁷ Newman quoted in Shaw, *Modern and the Sublime*.

⁸ *Uncontrollable Beauty: Toward a New Aesthetics*, edited by Bill Beckley and David Shapiro (New York: Allworth Press, 1998) 154.

⁹ Francois Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-garde," *Paragraph*, Volume 6 Issue 1 (1884): 18.

¹⁰ Philip Shaw, 'Sublime Destruction: Barnett Newman's Adam and Eve.'

¹¹ Barnett Newman, 'The Sublime is Now', in *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John P. O'Neill (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 170.

¹² Newman quoted in Shaw, "Modernism and the Sublime."

CHAPTER 4 POSTMODERN SUBLIMITY OVER NATURE

Before embarking on the discussion of the new sublime experience in the postmodern/internet space, I will examine a few moments in the Land art and Light and Space art movements that, although technically active during the postmodern age, continue the artistic practice of placing the individual's sublime experience in a real natural space: the American landscape. Similar to Newman, artists such as James Turrell, Walter De Maria, and Nancy Holt use abstracted forms and untraditional means to stimulate a sublime experience in the American landscape. Turrell's *Meeting* installation, De Maria's *The Lightning Field* and Holt's *Sun Tunnels* create an experience in which the individual simultaneously separates him or herself from and masters the vast wild space.

In 1977 De Maria continued the American artistic desire to express and proclaim the individual in a new uncharted unclaimed space- the wild and barren Western American landscape- by installing *The Lightning Field* (Fig. 15) in a remote high desert in western New Mexico.¹ *The Lightning Field* achieves mastery over the removed American panorama via the placement of an expansive grid of stainless steel poles arranged to attract and conduct lightning. Initially the installation can be seen as a function of Kant's concept of the mathematical sublime, the rational mind's ability to judge the vast quantity of a divine force. Then, the awesome power of the lightning coupled with its potentiality for danger references Burke's idea of the terrible pleasurable experience. Ultimately, the *Lightning Field*, similar to Newman's avant-garde compositions, retains the traditional focus on the individual and their direct yet distant experience



Figure 14. *The Lightning Field*, New Mexico, 1977, © Estate of De Maria.

with a demonstration of nature's power, which grants the event its sublimity. The ordered pattern of poles stretching out across the wide-open space is the individual's attempt to mark and reclaim the wilderness.

Of course, De Maria's artistic use of the landscape was a part of the land art movement's general rejection of the gallery space which they denounced for its institutional, political, and financial control. In correlation, the modern conception of the sublime is also taken out of the gallery and out of the frame and placed out of doors.² It makes perfect sense to conjure or capture a naturally manifested sublime experience in nature itself. It is also during this time that we see the sublime Romantic themes of limitlessness and vastness being conjured or played upon in the land itself rather than referenced and imitated on the canvas.

One primary element of *The Lightning Field* is largeness in both scale and number. The four-hundred twenty-foot polished stainless-steel poles are placed precisely two-hundred and twenty feet apart and cover a total of one mile by one-kilometer of the desert plain. One interesting detail is that the height of each pole varies with the undulating ground—from about fifteen feet to nearly twenty-seven feet—so that the tops of all the poles are level forming a definitive horizontal line.³ The installation's precision and mathematical-based arrangement reflects the individual's desire to master nature for his/her own purposes, whether it be for pleasure or business. Ultimately, the grid serves to control a space similar to the Romantic portrayal of the American wilderness.

De Maria combines the theme of nature's terrible power to the boundless space of the American desert landscape; however, the artist ultimately masters the wild force in the vast desert space by equating and countering it with his own constructed largescale demonstration of governance. As the installation's title connotes, the poles are meant to attract and conduct lightning; however, the DIA's website states that the *Lighting Field* can be viewed at any time and in any

weather conditions.¹ De Maria intended for the piece to be experienced over an extended period of time, long enough to see the changes and play of light on the poles especially at dusk and dawn. Thus, the installation plays upon two aspects of the American sublime experience; the Romantic and the Christianized. When the site does see a storm, the lightning has a powerful even fearful effect on the viewer reminiscent of Albert Bierstadt's *Storm in the Mountains*. Then at more peaceful times, such as dawn on a clear day, the site would have a calm, contemplative effect on the individual similar to Cole's *American Lake Scene*.

Yet, most importantly, the *Lightning Field* shares or rather continues on the tradition of emphasizing the individual; again, the sublimity of nature proclaiming the importance of the self. The emphasis on the individual is achieved by the artistic dematerialization in favor of heightening the mental/ psychological effect² on the audience which strengthens the individual's sense of self in the space. For example, the poles directly respond to the environment and their minimalism reflects the desire to be removed from distracting materiality. The installation's unfussy visceral elements directly affect the individual's senses and mind. For instance, there is a sense of anxiety and danger in anticipation of something coming (lightning). The field's isolation and its play on sensory simulation creates an experience that highlights the confrontational relationship between the viewer and the mathematical sublime event. Again, we see the romantic desire to seek isolated sublime locations and confront Nature. However, if the individual was meant to merely experience the vastness and might of the American desert, they can perhaps more effectively do so in a location unmarked by the artist. Thus, *The Lightning Field* is not about being one with nature; instead the installation creates a confrontational experience between the viewer and nature in which the separation between the two entities is highlighted. The grid's largeness and preciseness

places itself on equal terms with the overwhelming qualities of its natural surroundings. The individual created the grid, placed in a geographical location with sublime qualities of its own, and uses it as a means of conquering the space. The feeling of danger (elicited by the threat of lightning) is checked by the individual's calculated (the grid) perception and control of the natural elements; a pleasurable pain. Thus, vast space, loneliness, remoteness, harsh elements, danger, drama, all ingredients of the mathematical sublime are witnessed and harnessed through the apparatus of the metal poles.

It is also during this time, especially during the beginnings of land art in works by Walter De Maria, Michael Heizer, and Robert Smithson that we see a continuation of characteristic Abstract Expressionism artistic ideas, mainly the proclamation of the male ego through the use of grand/emotional gestures of their individuality. Their artistic gestures on the land are reminiscent of rape; the penetration of the soil is an act of aggressive possession. The vast open New Mexico desert-scape is no longer "pure" because the artist has pierced it. The poles also resemble the tree stumps or rows of cultivated fruit trees dotting the landscape in Cole's *The Ox-Bow* and Inness' *Lackawanna Valley*. They serve as indicators of the rational, ordered use of the land. Works on the land are not so much a tribute to nature but reflect the individual's desire to fill the blank space. Mark Rosenthal makes the argument that their use and view of the land is not transcendental, but progressive; they perceived the land based on how they could use it for their purpose.⁴ This thought is nothing more than the continuation of the American attitude towards nature; the land is valued according to its potential to serve the individual and their progress. For example, there is the argument that the artistic venture into the environment (the Land Art Movement) was due to the necessity for a large space, more than what a mere gallery space can provide.⁵

Furthermore, one can argue that the artistic venture into the wild does not place art outside

of institutional control but extends its influence out into the landscape. Thus, the creative search for a new space is reflective of the growth of the commercialized art institution. For instance, the Dia Art Foundation commissioned and currently maintains *The Lightning Field*, therefore, it owns and controls the work and the land it sits on.⁶ Ultimately, the institution profits from the possession of the field through visitation fees, literature, print reproductions and so on. The *Lightning Field* could be read as the mark of commercial ownership on the land as proclaimed by the precise arrangement of poles marking the vast landscape.



Figure 15. Holt, *Sun Tunnels*, Great Basin Desert, Utah, 1973–1976, as reproduced in *Art & Place: Site-specific Art of the Americas*, Phaidon: New York, 2013.

The calculating individual confronting a limitless and overwhelming space is again visible in Nancy Holt's *Sun Tunnels* (1973–1976) (Fig. 16). The large-scale installation in Utah's Great



Figure 16. View inside of *Sun Tunnel*, as reproduced in *Art & Place*.

Basin Desert comprises of four large concrete cylinders, arranged on the desert floor in a cross pattern, that align with the sunrise and sunset on the summer and winter solstices. I argue that this piece is human-centric because its arrangement emphasizes the individual's perception of the cosmos. The tunnels, pierced with alternating eye-level holes (Fig. 17), act as viewfinders framing precise images which, in Holt's words, "bring the vast space of the desert back to human scale."⁷

The eye holes also conjure up the imagery of the Romantic notion of the transparent eyeball; Ralph Waldo Emerson's concept that the human mind does not reflect but absorbs all that it sees. Thus, the individual gazes at a natural event and judges it to be sublime and that sublimity proclaims the

individual. Diana Shaffer suggests that “the panoramic view of the landscape is too overwhelming to take in without visual reference points... through the Tunnels, parts of the landscape are framed and come into focus.”⁸ The space is both physically and conceptually overwhelming and the individual recognizes their imaginative limit, yet it is through this recognition of their limitation that they master the powerful object/ experience. Thus, *Sun Tunnels* acts as a tool for the individual to assert order onto the surrounding overwhelming chaos, similar to the *Lightning Field* poles, which mark the rational mind’s possession of the space.

De Maria’s *The Lightning Field* and Holt’s *Sun Tunnels* are artistic artificial means of facilitating a sensory experience that emphasizes the presence of the individual in the vast landscape. They then also serve as tools for the individual to dominate the surrounding natural chaos. James Turrell’s indoor installation, *Meeting*, also presents the viewer with a natural phenomenon by encouraging the individual to contemplate the ever-changing phenomena playing in the vast American sky above. Ultimately, the controlled act of framing the sky in *Meeting* is a further demonstration of the individual’s attempt to impose order onto an overwhelming immensity.

Constructed in 1986 at MOMA’s PS 1 in Queens, New York City, *Meeting*’s primary and only medium is light (Fig. 18). Turrell manipulates light and space to conjure a tactile means of experiencing a spiritual reality. The artistic focus on the impact of light can be likened to American Luminist paintings and the nineteenth-century romantic artists, such Turner and Friedrich, who attempted to use their art as portals into “a world of metaphysical light.”⁹ Turrell goes a step further by releasing light and color from the two dimensional form to the third, which creates a physical space for the viewer to enter into a transcendental realm. The artist calls these spaces “Skyspaces.”¹⁰ However, it should be noted that in the case of *Meeting* the viewer is not inside the

skyspace, rather one ponders the event from a space that allows for the separate and controlled contemplation of the vastness above.

Meeting is a simple rectangular room with a square hole in the ceiling open to the sky (Fig. 19). The white walls are lined with wooden benches and because of the room's simplicity the

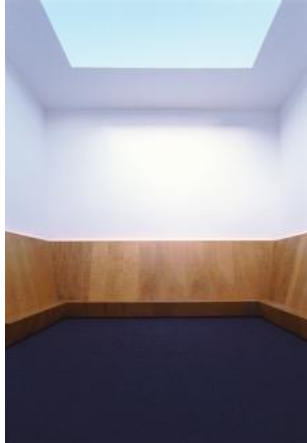


Figure 17. Turrell, *Meeting*, MoMA PS1, c. 1979.

framed sky above has a profound visual impact. The gaze is immediately drawn to the open square hole in the ceiling and one is forced to look up into the direction of infinite space. The viewer is presented with the infinite scope and continuation of the heavens, through the sky's atmospheres and beyond. The "skyspace" frames the phenomena of the sky in a manner which accentuates its endlessness while it also potentially threatens the individual's imaginative

capabilities. However, the pain of one's imaginative lack in the face of such vastness allows for the experience to be sublime. *Meeting* is essentially a highly simplified and abstracted version of the Romantic sublime.

While De Maria plays on nature's more terrible aspects, the *Meeting* installation focuses on a silent space more in keeping with Christianized sublime landscapes and Luminist art. However, although more peaceful than say tempests and lightning strikes, *Meeting* emphasizes the sky's limitlessness which ultimately overwhelms and threatens the individual. Yet the threat to the individual is checked by the sky's presentation, which is similar to the manner in which a picture is displayed in a frame. Thus, one's experience of the subject is felt at a removed distance. Similar to the figures on the pier in Cole's *Niagara Falls* and to Holt's eye holes in *Sun Tunnels* the individual's experience of an overwhelming event is mediated by distance and this distant mastery of a natural phenomenon makes the experience pleasurable and therefore sublime.

Again, similar to Holt's *Sun Tunnels* and to De Maria's *Lighting Field*, Turrell's installation presents the viewer with an optical means of grasping the vastness of the sky. As the art critic Robert Hughes said, "Turrell's art is not in front of your eyes. It is behind them," meaning that the essence of Turrell's work lies in the viewer's mind. The viewer makes the square piece of sky their own by imposing order upon the overwhelming visual phenomena above them. The sky above is boundless and immaterial, yet the architectural square skyspace presents a means to conceptually grasp the visual vastness.¹¹ Critics have classified the space as sublime, yet I would argue that the visual experience only becomes sublime through the viewer's attempt to control the heavenly phenomena above. Turrell is creating works that are only fully completed into their sublimity when the viewer reasons and translates the experience as a sublime thing. Thus, the installation pairs inquisitive rationalism with subliminal feelings and sights, a repetition of the Kantian sublime. The sublime sight or idea is too overwhelming for the imagination; thus, the rational mind attempts to preserve itself by making the event smaller through the act of framing it.

Lastly, the ordered simplicity of *Meeting* can be compared to a very specific type of sublime experience; the American Protestant religious or spiritual experience which emphasizes the individual's rationalization of the divine. First, the title "*Meeting*," the stark simplicity of the room, and the wood pew-like benches reference Quaker Meeting Houses. Then, *Meeting* reveals a very Protestant American (or Western) approach to spirituality. Turrell once stated that westerners seek the spiritual through physical means or a very literal path because Western Christianity cannot use the imagination when seeking the spiritual.¹² The dependency on experiencing the divine through a rational concrete method is essentially another reiteration of



Figure 18. View of *Meeting* ceiling opening, Author's photo.

Kant's idea that the sublime is only felt of the sublime that acknowledges the mind's imaginative limits. In *Meeting* the viewer sits on church-like benches in a stark room reminiscent of Protestant church architecture as they ponder the overwhelming phenomena above. Although they can clearly see it, the individual sits at a distance from the event and the immense natural event above can be computed by the mind because it has been neatly captured and presented through the means of the precise square frame. Furthermore, the installation's focus on the viewer's perception of the sublime reflects the Protestant emphasis on the importance of the sole individual's unmediated experience with the divine.

In the end, Turrell's *Meeting* demonstrates the artist's "desire to create an experience rather than an object."¹³ De Maria and Holt's land art also reflect this desire which can in part be attributed to the American modern artistic goal to reduce forms and materials in favor of serving the individual's experience with or conception of another thing. The previously viewed artworks present this "other" thing as an unfathomable vastness of nature, whether it be in the guise of the sky, the desert, or weather. Turrell, De Maria, and Holt essentially attempt to harness nature's power and claim it for the individual through a distant, safe, and controlled manner that is similar to Newman's zips and the nineteenth-century landscape trope of a figure's pondering of a vast beyond.

¹ "Walter De Maria, The Lightning Field," DIA, <https://www.diaart.org/visit/visit/walter-de-maria-the-lightning-field>, accessed December 2017.

² There are also conditional similarities to nineteenth-century landscape paintings. Land art works like the *Lightning Field* are not easily accessible; one must travel far to a remote location and are expected to spend time at the site. The focus on the journey to a sublime site is reminiscent of the early European/American idea of expeditions to uninhabited scenic locations.

³ The Lighting Field measurements cited from DIA website, accessed December 2017, <https://www.diaart.org/visit/visit/walter-de-maria-the-lightning-field>.

³ Elizabeth Baker, "Artworks on the Land," Sonfist, Alan, Ed., *Art in the Land: A Critical Anthology of Environmental Art* (E.P. Dutton: 1983), 83.

⁴ Mark Rosenthal, "Some Attitudes of Earth Art: from Completion to Adoration," *Art in the Land: A Critical Anthology of Environmental Art*.

⁵ Harold Rosenberg, "Time and Space Concepts in Environmental Art," Conversation with Rosenberg, Mr. Christo, Les Levine, Alan Sonfist and Dennis Oppenheim transcribed in *Art in the Land*.

⁶ Access to the installation is highly controlled; a visitor must arrange their visit through the Dia. It offers overnight stays for a fee and the institution states that it will not accommodate day visits or visitors without reservations. Essentially, one cannot visit the site on their own.

⁷ Nancy Holt quoted in Diana Shaffer, "Nancy Holt: Spaces for Reflections or Projections," in Alan Sonfist, ed., *Art in the Land: A Critical Anthology of Environmental Art*, 169.

⁸ *Ibid*, 171.

⁹ Gregory Volk, "Transparent Eyeball: Towards a Contemporary Sublime," Ed. Denise Markonish, *Badlands: New Horizons in Landscape*, MASS MoCA (MIT Press: North Adams, MA, 2008), 67.

¹⁰ Jan Butterfield, *The Art of Light and Space* (University of Michigan: Abbeville Press, 1993), 34.

¹¹ Robert Hughes quoted in John Russell, "An Earthwork Looks to the Sky," *New York Times* (January 5, 1986).

¹² *Ibid*, 72.

¹³ Volk, *Badlands*, 68.

CHAPTER 5 TERROR OF AMERICAN PROGRESS IN THE LANDSCAPE

Thus far, we have explored how the sublime experience in the American landscape climaxes in the individual's mastery over nature and ultimately serves as the underlying rationalization for human technological progress. American Romantic landscape paintings, Newman's abstract compositions, Turrell's

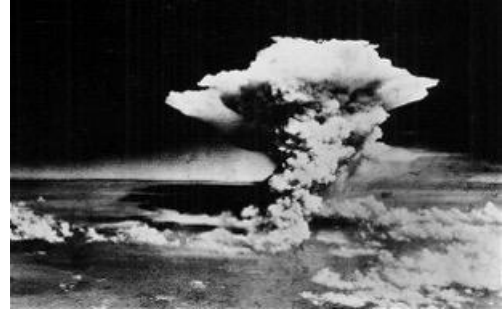


Figure 19. Atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, Japan, 1945, US Army via Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum.

skyspace, and land artworks by De Maria and Holt, although different is style and formulation, all contain imagery of the rational mind confronting nature's overwhelming might in the American landscape. The openness and expansiveness of the American topology serve the individual's subliminal pursuit of progress in the natural space by offering the individual open space to fill. Thus, American vastness serves as a force to be reckoned with while also a site of opportunity. This idea has been effectively applied to the desert landscape of Western America. However, in this section I will examine one example of desert imagery that does not express a sublime experience centered on the confrontational relationship between the individual and nature. David Lynch's "Twin Peaks: The Return," specifically the testing of the atom bomb in the New Mexican desert in episode eight reveals a slightly different manifestation of the sublime event in the natural space. The atom bomb scene demonstrates the postmodern sublime, which can also be understood as sublime experience provoked by an unnatural or artificial force created by human progress itself.

The imagery of the massive terrible destructive force of the atom bomb in the midst of the vast American desert-scape contains a new type of confrontation between the individual and the event. In the postmodern (and the Internet/Information age) technology has reached a point in which it has completely overwhelmed nature, thus, in the new reality formed by the contemporary

age the individual's pleasurable and painful sublime experience is caused by a confrontation with their own technological progress. The bomb in the desert demonstrates the emergence of an American sublime that has completely dominated the wild empty landscape through the persistent pursuit of technological progress. The sublime experience is still based on the individual's judgment of an event; however, the mind must rationalize an even more conceptually overwhelmingly abstract force due to its increasing lack of tactile spatial form.

Although the new abstracted sublime force differs from the Romantic figurative sublime in appearance it carries similar nationalistic and political ideologies. As discussed earlier, America emphasized the grandeur of its landscape to make up for the lack of an established national narrative. The artistic praise of its mighty mountains and sweeping plains was an inadvertent acclamation of the nation itself and its glorious future. However, America's technological progress is not always so purely optimistic. Technological terror is also formed out of the American pursuit of nationalistic and global power as best expressed by the creation of the atomic bomb and the eventual annihilation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Essentially the bomb was a means of demonstrating America's political, scientific, and military prowess during the time of World War II. The nation's thirst for domination is further supported by the fact that there were alternatives to the actions at Hiroshima, yet they were all rejected because they would have presented a weaker representation of American power.¹ Ultimately, the bomb was not necessary; historians have revealed that Japan would have surrendered even without the dropping of the bomb.²

The experience of the atom bomb is sublime to the removed unaffected viewer, such as the America public, because any felt terror is rationalized by the mental and physical distance to the event. As Edmund Burke phrases it: "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."³ Human's cower

in the midst of the storm in Cole's *The Tempest* and De Maria's *The Lightning Field* instills fearful anticipation of the lightning strike. However, in both instances fear is checked by the individual's self-preserving distance from the terror. The rational mind's judgment of the felt mixture of pain



Figure 20. Still from *Twin Peaks: The Return*, episode 8.

and pleasure then acts to reverberate the sublime back onto the perceiver. Artistic tradition has long cited nature as the ultimate expression of the sublime; however, as history approaches the postmodern era the argument can be made that in the twentieth-century human made catastrophes have replaced natural events as a source of sublime feeling.⁴

The French philosopher, Jean-François Lyotard describes the sublime as a feeling that accompanies elicitation of the “unpresentable,”⁵ which causes terror in the viewer. Cole and Church, Newman, De Maria, Turrell all sought the void, an unfathomable darkness or lightness, in nature that elicits a profound psychological and sensorial response. However, the technological terror produced by the atom bomb approaches a new dimension that goes beyond the natural sublime to something that is perhaps even more unfathomable: the human capacity for destruction. Even the creators of the atom bomb were aware that most people would be negatively affected by the horrible imagery of bombed Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Fig. 20). Ray mentions in his *Terror and the Sublime* that “the American public was carefully shielded from images and narratives that might have invited empathy with the victims and thus initiated a self-critical process.”⁶ Essentially, attempts were made to ensure that the public remained distant to the true negative effects of the bomb, which would also safeguard the constructed narrative of American technological

and pleasure then acts to reverberate the sublime back onto the perceiver. Artistic tradition has long cited nature as the ultimate expression of the sublime; however, as history

dominance.

The imagery of the hydrogen bomb in the American landscape is useful for demonstrating Kant's idea of the sublime which both emphasizes and celebrates "Man's" reason to compensate for "Man's" inability to grasp the power and scope of nature fully. Except now in the time of increasingly powerful and violent technological progress the mind must reconcile an even greater magnitude, which ironically is the product of human endeavors. The Kantian ideology of human superiority over nature plants the seed for the new American sublime in which manmade technological massive violence (see the aftermath of Hiroshima and Auschwitz) and global capitalism have overpowered nature's power. Adorno argues that we can no longer have confidence or pride in humanity's use of reason and destiny because the rational mind has created such an unfathomably terrible thing.⁷ Thus, in the postmodern sublime experience there is a new or additional type of pain based on the fact that our technological gains have caused mass destruction. The author of *Terror and the Sublime* presents the primary issue with Western advancement and enlightenment thought: "the brute fact that centuries of Enlightenment culture failed to prevent Auschwitz or Hiroshima, remains a severe and implacable indictment of that culture and the capitalist social forms that produced it."⁸ The pursuit of the sublime and the development of human progress in and across the American landscape has reached a point in which humankind's very own quest for growth and advancement has surpassed the natural sublime to a technological sublime.

In the end, the imagery of the bomb in the desert demonstrates the transfer of the American sublime experience from nature to technology, from natural figurative to synthetic abstract. The creation and detonation of the bomb ushers in a new age of pleasurable terror and episode eight of Lynch's "Twin Peaks: The Return" offers one of the best contemporary visualizations of the

sublime force of technological power in the American landscape.

The atom bomb scene starts with the date, location, and time of the first successful test of the Manhattan Project's brainchild. The text, "July 16, 1945, White Sands, New Mexico, 5:29 am (MWT)," is imposed over a desert vista in which the viewer is placed almost in the same position as in Cole's *The Oxbow*; in the lower left corner, elevated above the desert valley stretching below to the distant mountains ranges (Fig. 21). The scene commences with a mechanical male voice reciting a countdown to "ONE" then all explodes in a blinding white flash and in the blast's wake emerges a small bright mushroom growing larger while steadily spreading its destructive force across the desert landscape. Ultimately, the weapon engulfs the same landscape treated with such optimistic sublimity by Thomas Moran and Walter De Maria.

The viewer eventually enters the mushroom head itself and is confronted with a new space, a new reality. Thus, begins a discordant, abstract, chaotic, and disorienting montage of morphing ink spots, quivering phosphenes, fuzzy static, swarming white peaks in a black void, red-hot



Figures 21 and 22. Stills from *Twin Peaks: The Return*, Episode Eight.

billowing smoke, rolling storm clouds, and so on (Figs. 22 and 23); all set to the wailing strings of Krzysztof Penderecki's "Threnody for the victims of Hiroshima." This montage expressively reflects the destructive chaos unleashed by the pursuit of technological power; it is the antithesis of creative order. In our pursuit of progress and power, synonymous with technological power, we have created an entirely new space and a new horrible reality. The rational human desire to create

ironically destroys nature and creates a new chaotic space, which the mind must now confront.

Now our inability to grasp the unfathomable power of our technology (here demonstrated

by massive weaponry) is checked by both the pleasurable comprehension of our ability to entirely master nature and by the distance from true destruction. Natural sublimity no longer defeats our imagination because of the new caliber set by human-made technological terror and dominance. The myth of progress seems to be ironically killed off by technologically advanced catastrophes. However, as the atom bomb imagery demonstrates, we can still receive a sublime experience from such terror because of our distance from the real effects. Lynch places the viewer so far above the bomb's detonation and when the camera does bring us into the destructive chaos itself we are never completely overpowered because we are experiencing it through a screen.

¹ Ray, *Terror and the Sublime*, 53.

² Ibid.

³ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, Part 2. Section IV, 1757.

⁴ Ray, 5.

⁵ Jean-François Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-garde."

⁶ Ray, 54.

⁷ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory and Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), 15.

⁸ Ray, 21.

CHAPTER 6 THE CONTEMPORARY SUBLIME EXPERIENCE IN NEW SPACES

When progressive change becomes synonymous with global capitalism and the spread of digital information the symbol of the open frontier changes from a natural space, long associated with the American topography, to an artificially rendered space. Lynch's atom bomb scene serves as a violent illustration of how the new American sublime now occurs in a new space and a new reality, which contains a more abstracted and less comprehensible vastness. This new sublime space also questions the rational mind's perception of reality and its moral superiority in the face of the overwhelming event. The questioning of reality is frequent in the Internet age in which the distinction between tactile versus virtual truth merge.

Two works, Jon Rafman's *Nine Eyes of Google Street View* and Doug Wheeler's *PSAD: Synthetic Desert III*, illustrate the artistic removal of the sublime



Figure 23 & 24. Rafman, *Nine Eyes of Google Street View*, <http://9-eyes.com/>, c. 2008.

Synthetic Desert III, illustrate the artistic removal of the sublime experience from “in real life” to an artificially constructed reality. The former work places the overwhelming event in the repetition of digital information circulated throughout infinite new spaces. Then in the latter the individual confronts a new vast expanse that borrows natural forms, yet its essence is artificial and ultimately much more abstract. The abstraction of forms and experience in these two works also place more stress on the mind's imagination creating more

confusion between what is IRL (in real life) and what is constructed. Together these two works present the issue of reality and questions the individual's sublime experience in the abstract spaces formed by the advancements of the postmodern age and our contemporary internet age.¹

Jon Rafman's *Nine Eyes of Google Street View* started in 2008 explores the world via the Google Street View program taking screenshots of what he finds along the way.² Google Street

View, launched in 2007, allows users to leave the original satellite view of the world and enter an immersive and navigable three-dimensional environment meticulously pieced together with photos taken by self-automated vehicles. Rafman's project can be labeled as Net Art for its entire format (source, medium, and final viewing platform on Tumblr) are internet based. However, Rafman's project continues the nineteenth-century artistic pursuit of the sublime experience in the landscape. He translates romantic sublime tropes such as boundlessness, vastness, and distance into a new digitally informed reality and space.

One specific *Nine Eyes* scene repeats the romantic visual element of the lone individual in the face of a limitlessness and infinite space. In an untitled screenshot a sole naked androgynous figure with their back to the viewer stands at the edge of a beach while gazing into the waves (Fig.

24). This type of imagery is equivalent to a Cole or Church painting yet despite the traditional composition and subject matter Rafman retains signs of the image's highly digital nature; the



Figure 25. Exhibition View, Wheeler, *PSAD: Synthetic Desert III*, 2017, Guggenheim Museum.

image is pixelated, the program's navigational tools are visible in the upper right corner, and the Google logo is in the lower left corner. Rafman's image continues the nineteenth-century romantic trope of a solitary figure standing at the brink of vast open space, contemplating the natural phenomena; however, now the individual's search for and rationalization of the sublime in the landscape occurs solely in the virtual realm.

Other images from the *Nine Eyes* series depict seemingly ordinary everyday scenes of human activities (some violent, some banal, many strange): a car crash, two twin figures strolling down a beach, a man running towards the viewer on a bridge flooded with muddy water (figs. 25,

26, 27). What is significant about these scenes is that they obtain sublime characteristics through the lens of the mechanical gaze of the automated street view program which renders these common moments as something alien to the viewer, or as a type of "other."³ These scenes filtered through unhuman eyes create an unsettling and almost unrecognizable distance between the viewer and the depicted space. The unfamiliar digitally experienced real spaces coupled with the heightened spatial distance from these real spaces forms a sublime experience that could potentially be more overwhelming and threatening than ever before. Yet despite the distant alien quality of these digital copies of real landscapes the means by which they have been digitally taken and rendered are actions of technological control. Almost all of the globe has been captured by us and our technologically aided gaze because of advances such as satellite imagery and automated cars.

Thus, in the new sublime the individual confronts "the other," yet "the other" of our contemporary culture is no longer naturally occurring because it is encountered in a constructed space of our own making. In addition, the means of witnessing an overwhelming power is aided by digital technology because it offers some privileged and superior means for understanding an unfathomable power system: the whole new decentered global network of capitalism, digital information and technology.

The individual experiencing the sublime in an alien space is also the subject of Doug Wheeler's *PSAD: Synthetic Desert III* (see fig. 28). The installation was conceived during the seventies when the artist was a part of the California based Light and Space art movement and, like his peer James Turrell, Wheeler bases his work on minimal lines, geographic forms, and the manipulation of light in an architectural space. *Synthetic Desert* creates an environment in which light and material are utilized to create a spatial experience that resembles the vastness and openness of the American landscape; however, the depicted vista is not natural. The individual

confronts a simulated artificial space. Thus, Wheeler's *Desert* is similar to Rafman's *Nine Eyes* in that both utilized artificial means in the representation of a space, yet *Nine Eyes* is a digital copy of a real space while Wheeler's artificial landscape mimics natural forms.

Although conceived during the seventies *Synthetic Desert* could not be actualized until 2017 due to highly technical requirements. Temporarily housed in The Guggenheim Museum the installation alters the structure and configuration of a gallery room with sound reducing foam and highly controlled lighting to create an optical and acoustic experience. The room acts as a "semi-anechoic chamber" designed to minimize noise and induce a sensory illusion of infinite space.⁴ The installation's strictly abstract form mimics the experience of the natural and is deeply grounded in the artist's knowledge of the natural world, yet it creates a space distinct and far removed from nature.

The installation's overall effect is stillness accentuated by soft cool lighting with soothing grayish- purple colors. The room is entirely covered (excluding the viewing platform) with pointed triangular foam cones. The cones spike horizontally out of the surrounding walls and continue vertically to the floor forming a plain of repeated peaks and valleys beneath the viewing platform. The image the Guggenheim choose for the installation's catalog, web page, and other literature is a computer-animated depiction of the installation setup with two figures seated on the viewing pier. Then beneath the pier extends a plain of sharply pointed mountains and deep valleys that recedes to what should be the wall of the gallery room but appears as another plain of color, a soft purple-grey, which mimics atmospheric distance. Thus, the animated figures (and the actual viewer of the installation) are gazing at what amounts to a blank space. The viewer is unable to discern the room's angles, where the wall and ceiling begins and ends, and so creates an optical effect that suggests infinite space. The overall result conjures imagery of desert plains, mountain ranges, the

horizon, and atmosphere – natural elements long associated with the sublime in the American landscape.

The Kantian emphasis on the individual's confrontation with the overwhelming infinite "other" established in American romantic landscapes is also visible in Wheeler's desert installation. Essentially, the stillness serves to heighten the viewer's sense of self. Yes, the room is hushed especially when compared to the tumultuous noise outside in the museum and the city, yet it is not completely silent. First, there was a subtle undulating sound reminiscent of wind sweeping across an open space, a sound so low and discreet that one has trouble discerning whether it was caused by unrelated building mechanics or is an intentional part of the installation. Then, any sound the viewer makes in the space is amplified making one hyper-aware of any noise and movement, even a throat shallow or shifting of one's weight. Ultimately, the still environment makes the viewer highly conscious of one's own being and so the *Synthetic Desert* creates an experience that projects the viewer's focus/ "gaze" back onto themselves. This reverberation emphasizes the individual's presence, which is further marked by their spatial separation from the overwhelming vastness before them. The viewer is not *in* the landscape but witnesses it from a platform that is above and distinct from the spread of peaks and valleys and rise of color and light. The focus on the individual's act of gazing out to the vast space before them recalls nineteenth-century landscapes in which "honest settlers are dwarfed by the vistas they are about to conquer."⁵ Thus, Wheeler's *Synthetic Desert* can be compared to Romantic landscapes such as Cole's *The Oxbow* because of its emphasis on the individual confronting a vast, empty, and infinite space; however, in each instance, the viewer's means of perception and the nature of the perceived space are different. The space in *The Oxbow* is naturally occurring while the *Synthetic Desert* is technologically artificial.

The technological artificiality of *Synthetic Desert*, although seemingly the antithesis of the older Romantic sublime, reveals the old American romantic concept that "the sublime is a state of mind."⁶ The installation's minimal forms, compositionally abstracted space, and artificial construction make the spatial experience more conceptual than figurative. Wheeler in an interview with the Guggenheim Museum stated that he did not want to "duplicate nature."⁷ He wanted to create an experience distinct from the reality of nature, a type of artificially simulated reality only achievable in the postmodern age and especially now in the days of the internet. Much of our interaction with reality or with truth occurs in a digitally rendered space. Ultimately, the abstracted forms of *Synthetic Desert* continue the concept that true transcendence does not reside in anything found in nature but in our minds, a Kantian idea long established by earlier depictions of the sublime in the American landscape. Romantic paintings place the sublime experience in real mountains and valleys, yet now through the means of technology and synthetic materials one's experience of the sublime happens solely in a human made artificial realm.

The installation's focus on human-made constructed spaces is reminiscent of Newman's emphasis on "Man's" act of creation, which orders and dominates chaotic naturally occurring space. Computer technology serves the individual in the construction of space and this creative process has changed the reality in which we experience the sublime event, so long established in the natural vastness of the American landscape. Frederic Church and Thomas Cole's romantic landscapes show a sublime associated with overwhelming natural energies; yet, now Wheeler's *Synthetic Desert* and Rafman's *Nine Eyes* place the sublime event in artificially derived phenomena still based on recognizable romantic tropes, such as the individual versus the other, vastness, and emptiness. So far, we have seen how the artistic use of these elements demonstrate that the sublime is dependent on the viewer's experience and perception of some type of

overwhelming event which is also true for the sublime experience in the contemporary space. Now, the consumer's perception of an overwhelming event is based on an experience disconnected from a nature-based reality. The sublimity of technology shown in Wheeler and Rafman's work emerges from a manipulation of a type of virtual reality. However, the individual in these postmodern works still gazes at recognizable landscape forms; the perception of virtual reality is still dependent on the concepts and imagery of nature despite different modes of viewing experiencing.

The reality in which a contemporary sublime event occurs causes even more distance between the viewer and the event because the experience takes place outside of nature or "in real life." The confrontation between the viewer and the powerful event is now mediated by an additional entity. The nineteenth-century sublime elements of a "beyond" usually indicated by an open or dramatic sky, a march of mountain peaks and valleys, or a steep precipice are all visible in the *Synthetic Desert*. However, a type of screen or barrier mediates the contemporary internet sublime experience; the *Nine Eyes* landscapes are viewed on a computer screen and in the *Synthetic Desert* installation the individual is faced with the blankness of the frontal wall space. Screens present a spatial barrier yet, almost contradictory, they transcend the spatial constraints of concrete nature by the utilization of digital information and artificial simulation.

It can be argued that the greater distance in the internet viewing experience causes a more overwhelming feeling and causes a greater lack of understanding and thus a greater need for the individual to harness this new artificial vastness. Vastness, or blank space, in the internet experience is indicated by the elements of silence, flatness and nothingness. Earlier we have seen that romantic landscape painters viewed the American wilderness as empty and full of promise. Manifest Destiny and westward expansion coupled with the Industrial Revolution filled up fresh and barren landscapes. These empty landscapes also portrayed a landscape that was rugged and

grand, which was reflective of the noble desire to defeat such lands. The peaked mountains, steep valleys, and flat open field receding into a limitless "horizon" in *Synthetic Desert* mimic the wild and vast landscapes of Romantic art. However, the traditional concept of empty land, a void waiting to be filled, is not pertinent to the contemporary "American" sublime because human technological progress has subjugated all empty ungoverned space. Lofty mountains, steep cliffs, vast lands and skies are reduced in size and form and arranged in a controlled manner; they no longer loom over the individual physically dominating them.

Then the element of silence in *Synthetic Desert* presents a type of irony based on the idea of emptiness in the American landscape as a sign for inevitable future progress.⁸ Tocqueville predicted that the silence and stillness of American wilderness would give way to production and noise. This prediction came true with the advent of the Industrial Revolution yet now the rapid calculations of a computer and the unseen functions of the internet are very silent. The internet almost seems to have reverted to the quiet of the pre-industrialized and habituated American landscape. The silence of the *Synthetic Desert* is then conjoined with other aesthetic elements; smoothness, blankness, and repetition, which are all characteristics of the internet technological sublime space. The artist and art critic Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe argues that the "techno" space is "a space that is filled with blank and smooth surfaces,"⁹ He further describes the postmodern sublime as an "unbroken continuity," constantly regenerated by the invisible movement of infinitely present digital info.¹⁰ Flatness is in the smooth texture of the foam triangular "mountains" and nothingness in the visually unbroken space of the grey-purple wall. Then, repetition is in the ordered plain of foam peaks and valleys. Flatness and repetition convey the space-less infinite realm of digital information and the silent sleekness of contemporary technology (i.e., Apple products).

The American sublime now approaches an unknown frontier. The figure at the edge of a

precipice can serve as a metaphor for approaching this new experience of simulated reality and abstracted space. Similar to the small figure on his horse in Cole's *The Ford* the contemporary individual rational mind still confronts a distant and overwhelming beyond. Cole's hero confronted a vast wild natural force while the *Synthetic Desert* viewer faces an unnatural space formed by the postmodern/ internet age reality and space. The image of vast land and endless sky play well in the era of increasingly more overreaching global consumerism, sophisticated and dominating technology, and profusion of information. Similar to the old sublime the Self reaches a point of its limitations in the face of an overwhelming entity. The imagination approaches a threshold that it cannot pass and so it meets something beyond the self. Rob Wilson argues that the experience of the postmodern sublime is no longer a personal subjective experience, it has become "a non-humanist experience of limits beyond which you get dissolved."¹¹ However, I would adjust Wilson's idea of the self being dissolved; the self in the postmodern/internet sublime experience is not lost in the overwhelming space but rather their own experience of the event is fragmented or abstracted due to the increasingly digitalization and globalization of our reality. The sublime space has lost its spatial physicality and so the person experiences an abstract formless sublime experience.

Conclusion

The primary difference between the traditional Romantic sublime experience in the American landscape and the contemporary sublime experience lies in the individual's distance from the overwhelming event and the changing reality of the event. The old American sublime experience placed the viewer before a naturally occurring phenomena while the new American sublime encounter occurs in an artificial and abstract space in which the individual's spatial relation to the event is mediated by a third entity, technology. In Frederic Church's *Niagara Falls*,

from the American Side, the miniscule individuals stand at the brink just out reach of the fall's destructive force. Their removed distance from the naturally occurring chaos allows them to master it. As a last demonstration of the change from the old to the new American sublime experience I will briefly examine Andreas Gursky's 1989 color print entitled *Niagara Falls*, which offers an affective visual of the change from the individual's direct experience with an overwhelming event to an experience mediated by some artificial means in service to human domination over nature.

Niagara depicts that same sublime landscape phenomena seen in Church's *Niagara Falls, from the American Side*. Like Church's rendition Gursky's photograph captures the beautiful power of the North American natural force; the falls thunder down in a bright white sheet into the dark turmoil of water below and its mist raises high. Then a large recreational boat full of tiny tourists floats below the thundering falls. The tiny people on the boat's deck are comparable to the small couple on the viewing platform in Church's painting. However, Church describes the unblemished, uninterrupted natural force of the falls witnessed by the individual while Gursky interrupts the natural spectacle with an artificial body representative of the commodification of the landscape. Yet, despite this difference, Gursky continues the romantic sublime visual narrative of the confrontation between the individual and nature by showing how "the natural world has been commodified for tourists and recreational experience;"¹² the ultimate means of controlling natural chaos. Thus, *Niagara Falls* demonstrates how the contemporary sublime "originates in knowledge and production rather than nature."¹³ Nature is mastered through the mediating means of consumerism and technological control; the people are encompassed by the dominating tourist boat not the falls. It further shows how new modes, such as tourism, are necessary in order for the individual to achieve a sublime feeling in face of North American natural grandeur. In the end, *Niagara Falls* continues the Kantian formula; the pursuit of progress over chaotic nature results in

a sublime experience in the individual. Depictions of the overwhelming vastness of the American landscape change in appearance from Romanticism to postmodernism; yet, the manifestation of an overwhelming entity always remains in service to human progress.

This leads to the final question of for whom is the sublime experience in the American landscape intended for? As we have seen thus far the sublime experience is dependent on the



Figure 26. Gursky, *Niagara Falls*, 1989, Rights of artist.

individual's pursuit of progress. In nineteenth-century landscapes we see the heroic figure facing the vastness of the land before him, an empty space waiting to submit to human endeavors. Then towards the postmodern and internet age we see that the natural emptiness has been almost entirely subjugated to human progress; digital technology and global capitalism have taken over nature and so create new spaces. The element of distance is key to the individual's sublime experience in both naturally occurring and artificially constructed spaces. Safe distance and spatial separation from an overwhelming vastness is needed so that the pain of the mind's imaginative lack is checked and ultimately quenched by the individual's rational judgment of the event. However, distance is a privileged state, and when coupled with safe accessibility to an overwhelming event, it allows for a sublime experience. Only those who possess the required leisure time and monetary means can climb the alps for pleasure, understand Newman's abstraction of the American landscape, spend a night at *The Lighting Field*, visit the *Synthetic Desert* installation at the Guggenheim, or vacation at Niagara. American nineteenth-century landscape paintings proclaim the sublimity of Manifest Destiny while denying those considered less civilized their rights to the land and similarly the economic and social benefits of the late-capitalistic American life is reserved for the privileged few.

¹ The Internet age is defined in the introduction, page 6.

² Alec Recinos, "Towards a Postmodern Sublime: Jon Rafman's Street View Romanticism," *Rhizome*, 2018, Accessed January 2018, <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2018/jan/04/towards-a-post-internet-sublime/>

³ Alec Recinos, "Towards a Postmodern Sublime."

⁴ "Doug Wheeler, PSAD: Synthetic Desert III," Guggenheim, October 17, 2017, Accessed August 08, 2017, <https://www.guggenheim.org/exhibition/doug-wheeler-psad-synthetic-desert-iii-1971>.

⁵ Thomas Cole, "Essay on American Scenery" (1835).

⁶ Kant, "Analytic of the Sublime," *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.

⁷ "Doug Wheeler Speaks about The Total Experience of PSAD: Synthetic Desert III," interview, Guggenheim, August 2017, accessed November 2017, <https://soundcloud.com/guggenheimmuseum/>.

⁸ Wheeler's desert seems to reflect a more "Christianized" concept of the sublime, a sublime associated with tranquility, peace, and contemplation.

⁹ Gilbert-Rolfe, 64.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Rob Wilson, "The Post-modern Sublime: Local Definitions, Global Deformations of the US National Imaginary," *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 43, no. 3 (1998): 517.

¹² Alix Ohlin, "Andreas Gursky and the Contemporary Sublime," *Art Journal*, 61:4 (2014): 31.

¹³ Gilbert-Rolfe, 140.

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ABSTRACT**THE CONTEMPORARY SUBLIME AND THE AMERICAN LANDSCAPE**

by

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This paper examines the reutterances of the sublime experience in the American landscape throughout nineteenth-century paintings and into the twenty-first century. Ultimately, the examination of key moments in American art, such as the Hudson River School, Barnett Newman's paintings, Land Art, Light and Space art movement, and contemporary works by Doug Wheeler and Jon Rafman, reveal a changing perception and definition of the subliminal experience in the American landscape. In nineteenth century landscape paintings, more specifically in romantic art, what appears to be the depiction of nature's mighty and terrible force in essence is the celebration of human reason and the proclamation of manifest destiny. Linked to the American advancement and pursuit of technology in the landscape itself or in new spaces. Although, vastly different in style and form, specific works in the twenty-first century, whether in-avertedly or not, continue the American dogma of Manifest Destiny. Through a careful and detailed examination of specific works of the American landscape I will demonstrate that the sublime experience in the American space is reserved for a select few: those privileged enough to gain access to the direct benefits of technology, whether mechanical or digital, industrial or informational.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

The sublime is a concept that reappears again and again throughout the history of western art and culture so much so that the meaning and the implications of its use has been lost. The word "sublime" even emerges in our everyday speech: "the view was sublime," "this cake is sublime." Essentially, we equate the word "sublime" to everyday things and experiences similar to how we instinctually label things as "heavenly," or "beautiful." Even the Detroit Institute of Arts casually uses the word "sublime" to describe Frederic Church's *Cotopaxi*: the painting is "the quintessential nineteenth-century vision of nature's sublime and terrifying power." Although *Cotopaxi* is not a depiction of an American landscape, it was painted by an American and is hung in the DIA's American collection amongst various other artistic representations of the sublimity of American nature. I decided to focus on the artistic expression of the sublime in the American landscape because I wanted to better understand the artistic obsession with depicting a terrible yet transcendent event and experience. Through my explorations and musings on the topic, I have discovered that the sublime American experience is contingent on the viewer's social and economic status. The only way to receive a sublime feeling is if one has the privileged capability to be simultaneously affected yet spatially distant from the divine event. In the end, the concept of the sublime experience serves as just one example of the elitism so prevalent in western art history and the art world in general.