The Sublime

Course IDSEM-UG 1788, Spring 2017, 25 W4 Rm: C-12, Friday 12:30-3:15
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Office: 1 Washington Place #609, Hours (please schedule in advance):
   Tues (2:00 to 3:30) and Thursday (2:00 to 5:30)

Course Overview

Aesthetics of the sublime is a delicate topic for cultural study as it can evoke both powerful passions and intellectual controversy. Often labeled “indescribable,” the sublime has been a topic amongst writers, poets, artists, and philosophers since ancient times. The concept goes back to classical Greece, but it became particularly important in the eighteenth-century Europe. In dynamic tension between the Enlightenment and Religion, the sublime was applied to creative or natural phenomena that instilled awe and wonder such as mountains, avalanches, waterfalls, stormy seas, or the infinite vault of the starry sky.

In the wake of the French Revolution, the romantic sublime became a route to spiritual transcendence through secular contact with the unbounded and the supersensible (Fig 1). In our contemporary world, where cultural diversity, postmodern theory, and technological and neoliberal spectacle seem to eclipse former concepts of nature and transcendent experience, the characteristics of the sublime are perhaps more fuzzy than ever (Fig 2).
Yet, the term and the debates remain very much alive and relevant to contemporary aesthetic, philosophic, spiritual, and environmental concerns. This course examine theories and representations of the sublime in writers and artists from ancient to postmodern, including Aristotle, Longinus, Sappho, Burke, Kant, Schiller, Wordsworth, Whitman, Poe, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Newman, Rosenblum, Derrida, Lyotard, Chopin, Freeman, Oliver, and Viola. Our task, should we decide to accept it, is to explore the possibility of an everyday sublime.

**Required Texts:**
Chopin: *Awakening*
Tolstoy: *Death of Ivan Illych*
Bachelor: *Verses from the Center: A Buddhist Vision of the Sublime*

**Suggested Texts:**
Morley: *The Sublime*
Roseblum: *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko*

**Schedule:**

1. (1/27) Introduction

   de Botton: *Art as Therapy*
   Tate: The Art of the Sublime

   Website: [http://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime](http://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime)
   Video: Wagner: *Tristan and Isolde* (37 mins/day, 7 days) (4 h 20 m total)
   Met Opera Summary (handout)

2. (2/3) Ancient Resonances

   Plato and Aristotle: *Republic* and *Poetics*
   Longinus: *On the Sublime*
   Plotinus: *Enneads, 1.6*
   Burke: *The Sublime and the Beautiful*

   Video: Wagner: *Tristan and Isolde*

3. (2/10) Kant and Schiller

   Kant: *Critique of Judgment* (p. 246-286, especially p. 265-273)
   Schiller: *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*
   Schiller: On the Sublime
   Klinger: The Sublime, a Discourse of Crisis and of Power

   Video: Wagner: *Tristan and Isolde*

4. (2/17) Wordsworth and Poe
Wordsworth: *Tintern Abbey* and *Prelude*: Book 1, 2, 6, 14
Wleck: *Wordsworth and the Sublime*
Poe: *The Fall of the House of Usher*
Hobby: The Sublime in Edgar Allan Poe

Video: Wagner: *Tristan and Isolde*

5. (2/24) Painting in the Romantic Tradition

ArtNews Retrospective: Beyond the Infinite: Rosenblum on the Sublime in 1961
Rosenblum: *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko*
Part I and II p. 10-46, 65-100 (Friedrich, Blake, Van Gogh)

Video: Wagner: *Tristan and Isolde*

6. (3/3) Schopenhauer

Schopenhauer: *World as Will and Representation*
Hardy: *Return of the Native* Intro
Cooper: Schopenhauer and Indian Philosophy

Video: Wagner: *Tristan and Isolde*

7. (3/10) Nietzsche and Wagner

Nietzsche: *The Birth of Tragedy* from *Nietzsche Reader*
Wagner: *Tristan and Isolde*

Video: Wagner: *Tristan and Isolde*

**First Paper (Due in my office Monday 3/20, 5 PM):**

Please develop a thesis surrounding the Tate’s description of the sublime in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. To inform your thesis, please compare and contrast the Tate description with our readings up to and including 3/10. Papers are due in my box Monday night (3/20). See syllabus for more specifics on the paper.

Transformed Visions: Abstraction and the Sublime (Tate Modern, 2014)

The sublime was a key term for many philosophers and aesthetic theorists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that persists into the twentieth century. While its precise meaning was much contested, it denoted an exalted state of mind, or an overwhelming response to art or nature that goes beyond everyday experience. The sublime was related to formlessness, immensity, intense light or darkness, terror, solitude and silence, yet it also offered the solace of transcendence, an art in which one could lose oneself.
3/17--SPRING BREAK

8. (3/24) Tolstoy

Tolstoy: *Death of Ivan Illych* and selected death scenes
Schonle: Sublime Vision: Aesthetics of Death in Tolstoy
Tolstoy: What is Art?
Lewis: Mindfulness and Mysticism

Video: *Tree of Life* (40 mins, 139 mins) and *Melancholia* (136 mins) 275 mins total


Video: *Tree of Life* (40 mins)

10. (4/7) Contemporary Sublime: The Unpresentable

Belsey: *Very Short Introduction to Poststructuralism*
Magritte: The Treachery of Images
Shaw: *The Sublime* (Ch 6, 7, afterword)
Lyotard: Newman: “The Instant”

Video: *Tree of Life* (40 mins)

11. (4/14) Contemporary Sublime: Feminist Revisioning

Chopin: *Awakening*
Freeman: The Awakening: Waking Up at the End of the Line

Video: *Tree of Life* (20 mins) and *Melancholia* (8 mins, prologue)

12. (4/21) Contemporary Sublime: Transcendence

Doty: *Heaven’s Coast* selections
Doty: *Theory of the Sublime* and Poet on the Poem
Arya: Bill Viola and the Sublime
Bernier: *Unspeakable Art of Bill Viola* (Introduction and Ch 2)
Jewett: Seeing the Mind, Stopping the Mind, the Art of Bill Viola

Video: Bill Viola and *Melancholia* (45 mins)

Bachelor: *Verses from the Center*
Garfield: Nagarjuna’s Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way (Ch 24, Four Noble Truths)

Video: *Melancholia* (45 mins)


Murphy: An Ecological Feminist Revisioning of the Masculine Sublime
Oliver: *New and Selected Poems*
Leddy: Everyday Aesthetics and the Sublime
French and Shacklock: The Affective Sublime in *Melancholia* and *The Tree of Life*

Video: *Melancholia* (40 mins)

Suggested: Ullyatt: Buddhist Mindfulness in Mary Oliver’s Poetry

**Second Paper (Due Wen May 10th, 5 PM)**

See handout for paper topic.

**Course Requirements**

Grades are based on three parts: attendance/participation (20%) and 2 papers (40% each). Late papers are graded down. There will be an opportunity to rewrite the first paper if you desire. The attendance/participation grade is composed of weekly class attendance and participation.

On most days, class will begin with a short lecture on the material for that week. We then move to class discussion initiated by student selections from the material. To prepare for this part of the class please select quotes which you have comments or questions from each week’s readings (include page numbers so we can find your quotes). We will initiate discussion from the quotes selected.

The papers are 8 pages type written, double spaced. Please use the material from the class to develop the thesis prompt I hand out. Back up your thesis with arguments and examples from the class readings (include internal citations with page numbers and a reference list at the end).

A good paper demonstrates that you have integrated the material from the class discussions and readings and can use it to analyze your topic. Use the bulk of your energy reading closely and thinking seriously about the materials you have (rather than doing outside research). Also, be sure and give your paper a title. Please see *Essential Writing Skills*, by Gill (NYU classes), for a review of basics for the academic essay which will guide my reading of your work.

The grading scale for the class will be as follows: 93-100% (A) 90-92 (A-), 87-89 (B+), 83-86 (B), 80-82 (B-), 77-79 (C+), 70-76 (C), 63-69 (D), and below (F).