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The Terror of Possibility: A Re-evaluation and Reconception of the Sublime Aesthetic

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The Terror of Possibility:
A Re-evaluation and Reconception of the Sublime Aesthetic

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
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ABSTRACT

While the sublime aesthetic has a long and complex critical history, it is nonetheless a schizophrenic concept. Indeed, in the over two thousand years since the sublime became a subject of learned inquiry, it has not been resolved into any one concrete idea, but has become, rather, an expansive tapestry of disparate if interconnected theoretical threads from which aestheticians may pick and choose to define what they mean by the term “sublime.” Kant postulates one sort of sublime, Burke another, and Lyotard, Zizek, and the Romantics still others. In this way, the contemporary sublime aesthetic is, in essence, an ever-extending discourse of recombinatory effort. The goal of this dissertation is to stitch together the competing conceptual threads that constitute the contemporary definition of the sublime aesthetic and to uncover the foundational core from which all those ideas spring.

Through analysis and deconstruction of several major theories on the sublime as well as through critical evaluation of a host of literary and cinematic texts (for example Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* and Don Delillo’s *White Noise*), this dissertation contends that the deepest substratum of the sublime aesthetic lies in dynamism and possibility. Indeed, both art objects and philosophical rationale show that the sublime aesthetic is, at
base, the recognition of the entire sphere of the possible and its necessarily constitutive threatening dynamism in a physically or ideologically destructive object or act of vast size, power, or mystery.

This dissertation argues that a theory of the sublime as possibility that entails uncontrollable dynamism helps to further clarify – if not fully explicate – the aesthetic and resolves the tension and incompatibility between preexisting ideas on the subject. Therefore, as a new theory of the sublime aesthetic, this dissertation is, at very least, a novel formulation of an ancient and undervalued concept in art and critical theory and, at best, a work that unearths the deepest, heretofore unrecognized, layers of an aesthetic experience central to human perception.
INTRODUCTION: TO DEFINE THE INDEFINABLE

What is the sublime aesthetic? An illusion constructed of grammar and verbiage. A mixed feeling of terror and awe. The imagination's inability to keep pace with rationality. The stretching of perception to its outermost limits. An irresolvable aporia at the very heart of the act of representation.

All these explanations have, at one time or another, functioned as the sublime's axiomatic core. Indeed, for centuries, art and literary critics, philosophers, rhetoricians, and theologians have defined (and redefined) the aesthetic variously in an attempt to formulate a more exact and more descriptive conception of sublimity. As such, the aforementioned laundry list of suppositions is certainly not a comprehensive collection of the many foundations suggested for the sublime, but, rather, a mere perfunctory grouping of the most widely held and influential ideas on the subject. And yet, even this list, this superficial glance at some of the seminal thoughts on the aesthetic, reveals significant instability and disconnection within the discourse on the sublime.

How, for instance, can the triumph of rationality – seemingly the antithesis of emotion – be compatible with feelings of terror and awe? Why does the inability to perceive necessarily denote a lack within representation's power rather than an incomprehensible plenitude? How do
simple vocabulary choices lead to \textit{cosmic} feelings of wonder and dread? These are just a few of the questions that scholars have wrestled with and elaborated upon in the wake of a perpetually shifting core conception of the sublime, a core that, on perfunctory inspection, appears to have only the most tenuous tethering between its many forms.

In the over two-thousand years since the sublime aesthetic became a subject of learned inquiry, it has not been resolved into any one concrete idea, but has, instead, been weaved into an expansive tapestry of theoretical notions from which aestheticians may pick and choose to define what they mean by the term “sublime.” In this way, the contemporary sublime aesthetic is, in essence, an ever-extending discourse of recombinatory effort. One scholar may utilize a blend of Kantian sublime (stressing rationality's supremacy) and Longinian sublime (exploring the power of rhetoric) to discuss the works of Virginia Woolf while another might slake off bits of the Burkean sublime (involving the feeling of terror and wonderment) and incorporate them into the Lyotardian sublime (which considers the sublime as an attempted representation of the unrepresentable) in order to more fully illuminate the psychological state one enters when viewing the art of, say, Jackson Pollock. The sheer fact that, in this superficial example, one must qualify what type of sublime aesthetic is being merged with another only further illuminates the conundrum – namely, that there is no \textit{one} sublime aesthetic within contemporary (or even historic) parlance.

While such variable usage is all good and well for practical matters of critical application or expansion into multidisciplinary fields (psychology, for
instance), it provides little answer the original question: what is the sublime aesthetic? Given the wealth of definitions concerning its fundamental nature, perhaps this is ultimately a loaded question. After all, one may argue that without exploring the long history of the sublime and charting the various cultural concerns of every era in which it gained a new permutation, any answer is necessarily incomplete, as aesthetic notions – including that of the sublime – are accretions of their time and place, philosophical zeitgeists of a sort. While this assertion is true in large part (as cultural variations do alter the perception of aesthetic objects), it seems that some aspect of an aesthetic must remain unalterable and – though it is heresy to suggest such an idea in a poststructural, postmodern, post-everything world – objective in order for it to be linked to its predecessors. One of the primary difficulties here, then, in asking “what is the sublime aesthetic?” revolves around the assessment of what specific aspects of sublimity remain stable throughout its critical history. What commonalities exist within the various propounded shades of the sublime aesthetic and, moreover, what do those commonalities imply or mean?

There is no consensus opinion on this matter beyond the vague agreement that the sublime, in all its formulations, involves some sort of overwhelming vastness or power. This connective fiber is tenuous at best, as it lacks a reasonable explanation for the linkage between disparate ideas of vastness and power. After all, an individual's overall reaction (including both cognitive response and emotional response) to standing on the precipice of the Grand Canyon or staring into a particularly starry night sky is, without
doubt, markedly different than that same person's overall reaction to video footage of the September 11th terrorist attacks or images of a nuclear explosion, yet all have been argued for as similar objects of sublime evocation. That prevailing aesthetic theory equates something as terrifying as an atomic detonation to an object as relatively benign as the Grand Canyon seems somehow dissonant. Clearly, a mushroom cloud and a giant ravine – while both symbolically (and literally) imbued with their own power and vastness – do not seem to generate exactly the same set of emotions and psychological states in individuals perceiving them. One is a man-made force of unimaginable destruction and death; the other, a pastoral and complacent object of nature. Though similar in their abilities to represent power and vastness, an underlying ontological difference permeates the relationship between supposedly analogous sublime objects such as the Grand Canyon and an atomic bomb – a difference only apparent through rigid evaluation of the sublime feeling, an aspect of the sublime aesthetic just as important as the phenomenological ordering and analysis of objects as sublime, though largely discarded by aesthetic theory since the late nineteenth century.¹

What follows, therefore, is an attempt to unearth the sublime's basest foundations in representation, feeling, and phenomenal objectivity. Through closer examination of the sublime feeling in conjunction with the commonalities of sublime objects, the edges of sublime objectification (in my usage, the process by which an object is determined to be “sublime”) can be brought into clearer resolution and, as a result, the nature of the sublime
aesthetic can be more fully defined and understood, if not wholly reoriented.

Indeed, it is my contention that the nucleus of what it is to be “sublime” has remained, until now, undiscovered and unmined, with all the supposedly resolved discourses surrounding it – those discourses the academic community currently accepts as the pillars of the sublime aesthetic – acting as mere manifestations of a deeper, irreducible truth. This truth: that the sublime aesthetic is, at its core, the realized force of dynamism and change, a thing that unsettles ideologies and ensconces the human experience of the universe within a state of flux and unfettered possibility.

The reason that many competing and complementary variations of the sublime exist is due to the fact that scholars have, for thousands of years, been propping up their theories of sublimity upon disparate outgrowths from a single core without entirely recognizing (and certainly not vociferating) that core's true underlying basis in reality. Such lack of recognition has led many an excellent thinker to deduce that his or her insightful pronunciation on the matter is the originating seed for all sublimity when, in fact, it is actually closer to a thick, supportive branch that has sprouted from that seed.\textsuperscript{2} Thus, we are now, in our contemporary age, tangled within a veritable thicket of aesthetic theory that obscures the true underpinnings of sublimity by virtue of their own considerable proliferation of discourse.

But the problem of excavating the foundation of the sublime aesthetic is even more convoluted than that. As the branches of theory have grown ever more enmeshed with one another and as they have grown further from the base, the sublime has become intertwined with intellectual subjects that
may be only tangential to the aesthetic but have ascended to positions of centrality within its study. Worse yet, the sublime has, over centuries, been so diluted in its own right that within our contemporary era objects as banal as footwear and pieces of cake are occasionally referred to as “sublime.” That a superbly fitting shoe or a hair coloring product and a raging hurricane or cosmic monstrosity might produce the same aesthetic effect only serves to showcase the absurd dichotomy that has become manifest within discourse on the subject. The sublime is, in its currently accepted constructions, schizophrenic, vacillating between two conflicting (though not necessarily mutually exclusive) poles – cosmic terror and near-mystical transcendence.

Of course, one might counter that this bifurcation of terror and transcendence is precisely how the sublime aesthetic has always been experienced and has always been formulated. In his *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, Edmund Burke, for instance, claims a direct connection between these two ideas, saying that transcendental ideals, such as infinity, have “a tendency to fill the mind with that sort of delightful terror, which is the most genuine effect, and truest test of the sublime” (Burke 67). Other philosophers and writers – perhaps most notably the Romantics (such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge) – incorporated this dichotomy as a central tenet of their aesthetic thought on the sublime.

I believe, as many have in the past, that the simultaneity of this dualism is central to determining what lies at the heart of the sublime. However, I do take issue with the notion that the aesthetic can exist as an extremity of either pole, divorced from its opposite. In other words, I
disagree with the movement of much modern and contemporary discussion of the sublime away from a melded terror-transcendental state to a more simplified, singular transcendentalism untouched by terror and amplified in its overtly positive and affirmatory status. It is this shift that most clearly evidences a discontinuity within current formulations of the sublime aesthetic, an unintended and unacknowledged merger of two aesthetic notions – one sublime and one divine, one inherently destructive and the other naturally constructive, both aiming toward the same constitutive idea, the same function as basest representational forces of change, possibility, and dynamism.

As a whole, then, what the proceeding pages and chapters will seek to do is twofold. First, they will aggregate various theories and representations of the sublime in an effort to show that a distinct common trait – the opening up of unlimited possibility through uncontrollable change (that is, what I may later refer to as cosmic mutability) – underlies all sublime objects and feelings of the sublime. Second, through analysis of selected literary and cinematic works of art, they will provide evidence for a dualism within the sublime aesthetic and account for this dualism by further elucidating upon the nature of “cosmic possibility” and the threatening dynamism that is inherent within such a concept. Through these inquiries and theoretical assertions, the basest foundations of the sublime aesthetic will be revealed and the sublime's considerably protean, amorphous nature will be brought into a more well-defined shape.

So, one more time, what is the sublime?
Well, to say the very least, it is complicated.
CHAPTER ONE: AN INCOMPLETE HISTORY

Before sifting through the sediment of sublime theory in an attempt to locate its bedrock principles, a perfunctory foregrounding in the evolution of the aesthetic may be useful both as a common reference point for later discussion and as an exercise in establishing the various forms and seemingly disparate notions of sublime experience as they have been postulated throughout history. After all, it is only by collecting past discourses on the sublime and comparing their forms that any meaningful progress away from them and toward a newfound, syncretic originating point can be made.

The sublime aesthetic (encompassing both sublime feeling and the rational recognition as objects as sublime) is certainly nothing new. One might argue that it has been a staple of human perception for as long as conscious experience has been possible. Indeed, traceries of the sublime cling to ancient texts and oral narratives. Many creation myths, conceptions of gods (both monotheistic and polytheistic), and justifications for the actions of gods hinge – implicitly if not explicitly – upon the power of the sublime. As correlative creations devised to explain the unknown and potentially unknowable, it is natural that such myths, legends, and religious tales partake in the sublime aesthetic, as the sublime's very existence is at least partially predicated on that which is not (or cannot) be known. Thus, long
before art became an organized sphere of its own distinction, it was through theological and philosophical speculation, which often merged the fictive and symbolic with the phenomenal, that the sublime found intelligible expression.

While the sublime aesthetic may have been in evidence in human history for time immemorial, the earliest surviving records of critical, academic interest in the sublime date from two thousand years ago. Its first significant treatment as a subject qua subject (and not merely an incidental byproduct of some greater religious or philosophical theory) came in the form of *Peri Hypsous* or *On Sublimity*, usually attributed to the Greek scholar Dionysius Longinus (though the authorship is far from definitively known). This work, a relatively brief treatise which appeared sometime around the first century C.E., deals exclusively with rhetorical technique. Longinus' overriding concerns within *On Sublimity* perpetually orbit the use of forceful language and, more specifically, the means by which an orator or writer might be able to imbue his or her words with power and gravity. For Longinus, this power had no higher order than the sublime. Sublimity, which, in Longinus' view, can primarily be recognized by its effects, involves a “combination of wonder and astonishment... [that] exerts invincible power and force and gets the better of every hearer” (Longinus 2). While more common oratory devices – that is methodical, carefully structured arguments – may produce persuasion and a “pleasant feeling” in a listener, the sublime's “grandeur produces ecstasy” while, simultaneously, “tear[ing] everything up like a whirlwind” (Longinus 2). By “everything,” Longinus means the faculties (and perhaps even general concepts) of reason and logic. The destruction or
bypassing of logic and reason is not, however, a negative characteristic of advanced writing/oratory, despite the fact that it may appear counterintuitive to conventional means of communication. Longinus claims that in eschewing logic and reason, sublimity somehow evokes an element that is “higher than human,” an almost intangible quality that “raises us towards the spiritual greatness of god” (Longinus 42-3). Indeed, the sublime aesthetic (at least so far as its linguistic component is concerned) seems to transcend the boundaries of human thought, with certain literary devices evincing the ability to transport their reader/listener to a place of “pure” ideas and emotions – a pseudo-Platonic world of ideals, in a sense. When a writer or an orator is able to tap into these “pure” ideas, all lower thought, of which reason and logic are a part, is washed away or torn asunder. Thus, explains Longinus, sublimity allows humans to break free from the constrictions of their limited mental matrices and touch, if ever so briefly, a realm of transcendental absolutism; this is the reason, in essence, that an artwork which evokes the sublime is so undeniably captivating. The wonder and awe (the pleasures) of sublimity are, therefore, an effect of experiencing this divine state, while the pain of the sublime (and, in Longinus, the “pain” aspect of the sublime is, certainly, minimized) is a direct result of the collapse of conventional human thought if only because the ability to “think” is, temporarily, lost.

For Longinus, the evocation of this transcendental reality is the ultimate goal of both orators and writers and, thus, the highest form of literary art. When one speaks or writes to an audience, one should always
attempt to pull that audience into the revelry of sublimity, as, believes Longinus, the speaker/writer's overarching themes and messages will be more readily received and accepted (if not necessarily understood). After all, it is nearly impossible to disagree with (and thus counter) an idea that has entirely filled or consumed one's mind. However, very few orators and writers have the ability to evoke the sublime, as the sublime manifests itself through “the echo of a noble mind” (Longinus 9). Longinus proposes that only select geniuses – those who have some sort of innately higher or more developed sensibility concerning word choice, symbolism, and metaphor – can effectively tap into the power of sublimity. These individuals utilize a process of speaking and writing that obfuscates the linguistic materiality of their art. As Longinus suggests, “a figure is generally thought to be best when the fact that it is a figure is concealed” (Longinus 26.). Through the use of elaborate metaphors and symbols as well as poetical devices (repetition, delayed verb usage) and careful vocabulary selection, these “genius” wordsmiths are able to distract readers/listeners away from the fact that they are reading/listening, and focus their attention entirely upon the ideas which lie behind the mere words. Thus, readers/listeners are forced, against their own will, into a rough-hewn communion with the abstract concepts the writer/orator is engaging – again, an instance of potential pain, as a reader/listener may want to calmly and rationally examine those concepts but will be utterly unable to do so due to the “intensity... living emotions... [and] vehemence and power” of the sublime aesthetic evoked by the writing/speech (Longinus 43). Ultimately, then, what Longinus suggests
as the sublime aesthetic is, simply, linguistic genius that compels an audience toward an abstract field of pure, totalizing ideas (a transcendental otherness) while, concomitantly, erasing individuated rationality (and the material world) in the process.

Following Longinus, critical discussion of the sublime fell by the wayside for centuries, becoming a relatively forgotten and ignored presence within the world of aesthetic discourse. The parsing of beauty and its foundations became paramount to philosophers of art, with most other aesthetic feelings and forms largely devalued beneath the supreme radiance of “the beautiful.”6 As such, sublimity did not again rise to the level of serious scholarly inquiry until the late 17th and early 18th centuries.7 During this resurrection, a series of minor academics (and a few major poets, including John Milton) attempted to articulate the sublime aesthetic in a more nuanced and less esoteric manner, turning much of their attention to the natural world around them.8 A few of the most notable of these aesthetic scholars were Thomas Burnet, Joseph Addison, and John Baillie.

Burnet was perhaps the first critic to point out that there exist at least two distinct strains of sublimity: one which operates as an effect of language and the written word and another that arises from visual objects (either artistic or, as is Burnet's concern, naturally occurring). While Burnet has little interest in the former variation of sublime aesthetic, he is very much concerned with the latter, explaining that “the greatest Objects of Nature are... the most pleasing to behold” (Burnet’s Sacred Theory, as quoted in Hope Nicholson 214). The key for Burnet is that nature includes objects of
immense vastness such as the “boundless Regions where the Stars inhabit... the wide Sea, and Mountains,” all of which, in his view, have “the Shadow and Appearance of the INFINITE, as all Things have that are too big for our Comprehension” (Burnet quoted in Nicholson 214). This evocation of the “infinite,” Burnet suggests, entirely fills the mind to excess and causes the viewer of a vast natural object to enter into a state of simultaneous “Stupor and Admiration” (Burnet in Nicholson 210). Although Burnet tethers his aesthetic theory to beauty (as he seems to imply that there is only, ultimately, pleasurable experience in viewing nature), he is clearly connecting to Longinus in that both see an aesthetic value in that which suggests something beyond human mental comprehension. Burnet's particular postulation introduces the idea that even outside the world of language, in the natural, object-filled world, examples of this sort of “beyondness” can be readily found.

Joseph Addison, writing a few decades after Burnet, directly addresses the sublime as a true aesthetic concern and, even further, attempts to trace its origin. He focuses, like Burnet, on the idea that what is “sublime” is that which “is Great or Unlimited” and leads one into “the highest pitch of Astonishment and Devotion” (Spectator 543). Addison attributes this astonishment and devotion to God – or, more precisely, to a sublime object's ability to bring its spectator into a closer relationship with the nature of God. Were this conjecture to be the end of Addison's contemplation on sublimity, his contributions would not be noteworthy; they would merely be meditations on theological beauty. However, Addison also reasons that some of these
divinely-inspired sublime objects are not entirely “objects of Delight,” but, rather, have “hideous” or “Terrible” qualities (*Spectator* 568). Natural phenomena such as thunderstorms, tornadoes, and earthquakes are all sublime objects according to Addison. They are vast and seemingly unlimited, thus invoking astonishment and devotion (that Addison still attributes to God), but they also fill their perceivers with a sense of horror. Addison claims that one still delights in this horror because “we think we are in no danger of Them [the horrifying objects]” and, thus, receive pleasure from a “Sense of Security” in the face of the otherwise terrifying (*Spectator* 568). Here, then, in Addison, is the first complete recognition of the sublime aesthetic as a potentially bifurcated feeling of both pleasure/wonder and pain/terror, a dualistic aesthetic that may not be entirely indebted to positivistic or “pleasant” experiences, but, rather, partially revels in terror or horror.

Another of the 18th century resurrectors of the sublime aesthetic, John Baillie, takes up the idea that aspects of the natural world may very well be imbued with the sublime aesthetic in his *An Essay on the Sublime*. Unlike Burnet and Addison, however, Baillie does not adhere to the notion that sublimity entirely stems from a divine source or some grand metaphysic. Rather, Baillie contends that the sublime is evoked when one makes “connections” between “Objects” and “Imagination” (Baillie 35). For Baillie, the crux of sublimity lies in the fact that a perceiver of a sublime object (whether natural or artistic) turns the object into an idea through association, as though the sublime object were metaphoric. He claims that when one
encounters a sublime thing (whether artistic or naturalistic), one begins to connect that thing with a set of ideas that hint toward sublimity. For instance, if one enters an enormous Gothic cathedral, one begins to associate its immense, ornate spaces with abstract concepts that involve immensity and the ornate – that is, divinity, infinity, omnipotence, etc. The cathedral, itself, says Baillie, is not sublime; rather, the collection of ideas that the cathedral is bound up in (a very rough-hewn sphere of discourse, perhaps) “form a code” which evokes the sublime feeling (Baillie 36). Essentially, then, Baillie's sublime aesthetic is notable for two reasons: one, it is located entirely within the mind of the perceiver, and two, it is based not in objects, but in the correlation of objects to ideas.

On the heels of Burnet, Addison, and Baillie came Edmund Burke, a philosopher as renowned for his political musings as for his major treatise on aesthetics, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (hereafter, simply, *A Philosophical Enquiry*). Burke's ideas concerning the sublime have (along with those of Kant) become one of the primary foundations for all modern and contemporary discussion of the aesthetic. Not as concerned with the division between art and nature as his 18th century predecessors, Burke primarily focuses upon the effects of sublimity and the potential reasons for the generation of such effects.

Burke begins his *Philosophical Enquiry* with the supposition that the sublime aesthetic is, in essence, a cognitive effect and not a metaphysical quality that is imbued within certain objects (or any semblance of divinity). As such, Burke's work deals with the possible ways in which the sublime
feeling might emerge through human consciousness, given that sublimity cannot be directly imparted unto a perceiver by an object or a divine presence. Central to Burke's exploration of the sublime is the idea that (as other philosophers have alluded to) the aesthetic produces a complex feeling that includes pain. Indeed, Burke uses this painful sublime almost as a foundational definition for the overall aesthetic, saying that “whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror” is sublime (Burke 36). Thus, for example, a rough, foreboding ocean that causes an individual to feel anxiety or dread – to be terrified in some way – would be sublime. A strict empiricist, Burke believes that the terror one feels at witnessing such an ocean must have its roots in the human sensorium or mind. He conjectures that supremely vast and supremely powerful objects (whether in reality or within artistic representation) cause a physiological reaction within their observers; as Burke writes, the human eye “struck by a vast number of distinct points” will be unable to take them all in and will, therefore, “vibrate” rapidly, “near to the nature of what causes pain” (Burke 124-5). The sublime becomes, in essence, the terror that arises from the inability to fully see – or perhaps even understand – what is presented to oneself. In this way, then, as a failure of the human senses and/or mind, the feeling of the sublime is produced.

Burke, however, realizes that the sublime feeling is not merely a sensation of pain. He concedes that a measure of pleasure is also involved in sublimity and, due to this concession, is forced to expand upon his initial
definition of sublimity. He reasons that the pleasurable aspect of the sublime feeling is a product of distance, saying that “when danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances... they may be, and they are delightful” (Burke 36-7). Pleasure arises within the sublime, then, in the alleviation of the physical or mental strain that the “terribleness” of the sublime initially entails. Only when an individual is able to somehow distance him or herself from the terrible sublime (either by physically turning away/stepping back or by psychologically creating distance – that is, through the viewing of sublimity in artifice) will he or she feel safe, and it is by virtue of feeling this safety, of knowing that one has stared something tremendous and powerful in the face and survived, that a certain recuperative pleasure becomes manifest. Thus, Burke deals with the pleasure-pain dichotomy of sublimity as a purely physiological and psychological function of humanity's deepest seated survival instincts. Indeed, without the knowledge or security that is concomitant in being able to discretely separate oneself from a vast and/or powerful thing, Burke's conception of the sublime aesthetic would be merely unfiltered fear.

At several points in A Philosophical Enquiry, Burke joins the sublime aesthetic to identity, believing sublimity to affect individuality in a particularly interesting manner. He claims that “the 'I' shrinks into 'the minuteness of its own nature' in the encounter with terror” that is sublimity (Burke in Shaw 54). When one encounters a sublime thing, its immense magnitude (of either size or power) overwhelms that individual and, momentarily, suspends
his or her self. In fact, hypothesizes Burke, the individual mind is so utterly filled by the sublime object that “its motions are suspended” and all thought processes dissipate – including those that make the self recognizable as “self” (Burke 53). Therefore, the “I,” the individual self, is temporarily lost under the crushing weight of the sublime.

Burke also compares and contrasts the sublime with the beautiful in an attempt to locate the critical differences between the two aesthetics. He writes that the sublime “dwells on large objects, and terrible” while the beautiful focuses on “small ones, and pleasing” (Burke 103). The sublime instills in its perceiver the sense of terror and awe while the beautiful “inspire[s] us with sentiments of tenderness and affection” (Burke 39). Thus, explains Burke, in the sublime “we submit to what we admire” while in the beautiful “we love what submits to us” (Burke 103). Beauty is that which is customary, ordinary – it is, in Burke’s view, the default state to which all aesthetic objects fall when subjected to too much “knowledge and acquaintance” (Burke 105). In other words, when one contemplates the sublime frequently enough or is engaged with it often enough, the sublime will fail to be sublime; it will degenerate into a state of beauty, in which the sublime thing now submits in some way to its perceiver. Thus, for Burke, beauty is the warm, fuzzy commonplace and sublime is the electric, dynamic extraordinary.10

Writing just a few years after Burke, the eminent philosopher Immanuel Kant formulated his own particular variation of the sublime aesthetic. Indeed, Kant visited the subject twice in his long and storied
career, once as a young man in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* and again, more famously and holistically, in his complex *Critique of Judgment*. Though *Observations* contains a tidy comparison between sublimity and beauty, it covers very little new ground beyond that already tread by Burke and his forerunners. *Critique of Judgment*, however, breathes new life into the study of the sublime, as Kant merges aesthetics with theories of cognition and epistemology. Thus, quite rightfully, most scholars consider *Critique* as Kant's definitive statement on the sublime while glossing over *Observations*.

Kant begins the *Critique of Judgment* with the proclamation that beauty and sublimity are not concepts “of an object” and one would be wrong in presupposing that one could find “in all people the same subjective conditions... that we find in ourselves” – that is, aesthetic qualities do not inherently exist within any given thing; rather, these aesthetics are solely the product of individual judgment and may vary from person to person (Kant 156). The reasoning Kant uses to reach this point is simple: not every person who engages with the same object will have the same reaction to it. As there exists no universally recognized beautiful or sublime thing, there can be no universally beautiful or sublime thing. For Kant, then, the sublime and the beautiful are products of the human mind and must be, therefore, entirely subjective constructions that exist only within the purview of every individual perceiving an object. With one fell swoop, Kant turns sublimity (and aesthetics, in general) into a function of mental and emotional processes.
Based upon the idea that the sublime must be entirely internal to its perceiver and does not “depend upon a sensation” from the external world, Kant concludes that the aesthetic must be located in the imagination, as it has no direct relationship to the senses or to the reasoning mind (Kant 97). Thus, sublimity is merely an abstraction that resides within a realm of the unreal. Kant further explains that sublimity necessarily adheres to imagination because “the sublime is to be found in... formless object[s]” and in things which evince a certain “unboundedness” (Kant 88). In essence, Kant claims that when a thing (again, artistic or naturally occurring) has no form, the human imagination clings to that thing desperately in an attempt to fully realize the thing. The starry night sky, for instance, has no real form; it is simply a boundless field of stars and celestial bodies. When one looks at the night sky, one cannot imagine it in its wholeness. It is too enormous, too unrestricted, for the human imagination to comprehend as a singular object. The imagination cannot stretch itself to the lengths of the phenomenal world in this case and, therefore, frustrates and enthralls the individual's mind. Indeed, Kant writes that the entirety of the sublime feeling "is produced by the feeling of a momentary inhibition of the vital forces followed immediately by an outpouring of them that is all the stronger" (Kant 98). The inhibition of an individual’s imagination – that is, its failure to conceive of a particular thing – causes displeasure, perhaps even outright pain, to that individual. Equally, however, one cannot help but be enamored of the vast or powerful thing, as the imagination will perpetually and obsessively seek to fill out its details and parameters in a futile effort to make it whole. In this way, a
sense of undeniable fixation is mixed with the anxiety or frustration that the sublime produces.

If the pain of sublimity arises through the failure (and obsession) of imagination, then its pleasure, Kant believes, lies in the ability of rationality and logic to overcome unbounded and formless abstractions. As he writes, “the feeling of the sublime is a feeling of displeasure that arises from the imagination’s inadequacy... but it is at the same time also a pleasure, aroused by the fact that this very judgment of the inadequacy... is in harmony with rational ideas” (Kant 114-5). While Kant’s phraseology may be vague and muddled, the idea hidden within his syntactical maze is considerably intriguing – namely, that the pleasure of the sublime is evoked by realizing imagination has failed. For Kant, the logical, rational aspect of mind triumphs over the sublime idea/object because it can reasonably understand that idea/object even if imagination cannot conceive of it. For instance, one cannot possibly imagine “infinity.” It is too vast, too multiplicitous; the human mind simply cannot picture a thing that has no boundaries or shape or end. There is no mental picture, no imaginary substance, that can adequately convey “infinity.” Yet, one can understand “infinity” as endlessness, as a thing that extends forever. Rationally (especially within, say, the field of mathematics), one can easily comprehend “infinity” as a thing with a particular meaning and a particular set of characteristics. Therefore, one can understand what “infinity” is even if one can never imagine it. It is due to this fact, says Kant, that the sublime brings pleasure; once imagination has failed, rationality and reason step in to make
the sublime idea/object understandable, thus preserving the mind's
superiority to the idea/object and allowing a certain degree of mastery over
that sublime thing. It is this sense of mastery and superiority that, Kant
claims, engenders pleasure.

Kant does not stop at parsing the sublime as a function of imagination
and reason. He explores the subject ever further within the *Critique of
Judgment*, dividing the sublime aesthetic into two distinct strains: the
mathematical sublime and the dynamical sublime. The mathematical
sublime is that which overwhelms the imagination “by spatial or temporal
magnitude,” while the dynamical sublime evinces “a sense of overbearing
power [that] blocks our will” (Shaw 80-1). The mathematical sublime is
potentially best described by the universe – a seemingly (if not actually)
infinite mass that spreads out in every direction as far as can possibly be
known. Here, with the universe, the sublime arises because there is simply
too much universe to account for within the imagination. Thus, it is due to a
matter of *quantity* that the universe cannot be imagined. The dynamical
sublime, on the other hand, might be felt within a tremendous lightning
storm or a particularly large tornado. In either of these cases, the sublime
thing has discrete borders and is certainly not multiplicitous; it is, rather,
immensely powerful in ways that, perhaps, cannot be imagined. The physical
destruction and devastation that such natural phenomena can wreak –
hundreds of miles of crippled or outright leveled towns and cities – is
evidence of this power. One cannot completely imagine how so much power
can be invested in one, singular object/event/idea. Here, then, it is due to a
matter of quality that such dynamically sublime objects defeat imagination. While Kant does not explain why this distinction is important or even what utility there is in dividing the sublime, such bifurcation will come into play in the writing of later scholars.\textsuperscript{11}

Following the publication of \textit{Critique of Judgment}, the field of sublimity studies was largely quiet, as few scholars could muster the temerity to assault or even extend the work of a philosopher as intimidating as Kant. However, a small number of German Idealists, most notably G.W.F. Hegel, Arthur Schopenhauer, F.W.J. von Schelling, and Friedrich Schiller, did touch on the sublime in their studies of aesthetics. The generalized German Idealist argument concerning sublimity is that the failure of imagination is final.\textsuperscript{12} Reason, in the Idealist school of thought, does not supersede imagination; rather, there exists in the sublime only discontent at the rational never being able to “give sensual representation to this [imaginary] foundation” (Shaw 90). In other words, though reason may allow one to “know” infinity, one can never, through imagination, “feel” infinity and, therefore, reach a point of magnificent transcendence that (according to Idealists) must be concomitant with truly experiencing the infinite. In this way, the German Idealists argue, a perpetual yearning exists with regard to the sublime aesthetic, as what can be reasoned cannot possibly be realized. Yet, while tragically unattainable, the sublime still represents for these philosophers the \textit{potentiality} for transcendence. Indeed, Schilling suggests that the sublime has the ability to foster within “the whole man... a knowledge of the highest of all” – that is, some sort of ultimate,
transcendental consciousness (Schilling in Origins 229). What is of note here is that Schilling does not imply that the sublime will bear down upon the individual with this transcendence, but will, rather, nurture it within the individual, such that the locus of the transcendental is internal rather than external. In fact, Schilling proposes that “Nature... is merely the imperfect reflection of a world that exists not outside but within [an individual]” (Schilling in Origins 228). Thus, any physical manifestations of sublimity are simply bad copies of a greater internal drive toward the transcendental.

Such German Idealist thought on sublimity would be of passing interest if not for the fact that these philosophers heavily influenced the artists and thinkers of the Romantic era. While lacking in the scholarly and academic treatises on the sublime that previous decades had produced, the Romantic era – for the purposes of this summary, roughly the first forty years of the 19th century – was rife with postulation on the sublime aesthetic from poets, painters, and musicians. Of particular interest are the thoughts of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, as expressed through his poetry, correspondence, and essays on literature. Coleridge, as one of the foremost scholars and poets of the Romantic period, voices much of the Romantic sentiment concerning the sublime when he writes that, when encountering the aesthetic, “…I am filled with devotion and awe; I am lost to the actualities that surround me, and my whole being expands into the infinite; earth and air, nature and art, all swell up into eternity, and the only sensible expression left is, 'that I am nothing!'” (Coleridge 87). Here, Coleridge introduces two key concepts: one, that the sublime – borrowing from the
German Idealist strain of thought – causes something within the individual to strain at its boundaries and pull toward an external “everythingness” that is embodied in the sublime and, two, that the sublime causes the erasure of some sense of individual being. For Coleridge (and many other Romantic artists), what lay at the core of the sublime aesthetic was this simultaneous “being all” while “being nothing” – that is, a communion with transcendental reality that is, in a Kantian sense, beyond the ken of human imagination or sensation. Through interaction with sublime objects, especially those of artistic origin (and, echoing Longinus, especially those that deal heavily in metaphor), Romantic artists and thinkers such as Coleridge believed that an individual's being might escape space and time by reaching the limits of sense, imagination, and reason – in other words, by dissolving the boundaries that quantify the human experience (Coleridge 2003). Therefore, for the Romantics, the sublime pain of identity erasure was, in actuality, a pleasure, as the sublime's destruction of individual “self” meant union with the greater, transcendent, “all-ness” of reality.

During the latter half of the 19th century and the early 20th century, the field of the sublime again went untended, as scholars and artists of the Victorian and Modernist eras largely viewed sublimity as a tired remnant of the Romantics. For most Victorian writers, reacting to (and in some cases against) the Romantics, social concerns were far more pressing than the semi-metaphysical and often esoteric issues that sublimity presented; equally, many Modernist artists and scholars were actively engaged in a project of breaking away from all traditional modes of representation, of
which the sublime aesthetic was, naturally, included. Thus, it was not until postmodern philosophy began to take shape within scholarly discourse that the sublime again became a topic of significant critical interest. One of the first scholars of postmodernity to breach the sublime was Jacques Derrida. While Derrida does not launch into a full-scale inquiry of sublimity, he does utilize the aesthetic as an example of his greater deconstructionist project. Focusing on an idea that Kant briefly mentions in the *Critique of Judgment* – the *parergon*, or, essentially, framing of an art object – Derrida claims that most art requires a border or frame so that the inside, the actual thing that one might call the “art object,” can be understood as such. Without the frame, the contents within have no meaning as art; rather, they would simply be meaningless objects. However, says Derrida, this framing does not necessarily apply to sublime objects. He claims that, since Kant defines the sublime as that which is boundless and formless, “there cannot, it seems, be a *parergon* for the sublime” (Derrida 127). For a thing to truly be sublime, it should have no frame, no border. Yet, clearly, sublime objects do not, literally, extend forever. Derrida resolves this internal tension by suggesting that (tracing Kantian argument here) the sublime “is not contained in a finite natural or artificial object,” but, rather, in that which has no boundaries and must be purely imaginary (Derrida 131). Of course, as Kant pointed out, the human imagination always fails to truly conceive of such a thing and, thus, concludes Derrida, the sublime is, in fact, framed and bordered by reason and rationality. Therefore, for Derrida, “the experience and pleasure of the sublime do not stem from the promise of something noumenal... but rather
from the perpetual, yet always provisional, act of framing itself” (Cheetham 107). In this way, then, the infinite, boundless sublime is pleasurable only because it can be, paradoxically, delimited and made discrete by the forces of reason.

Following Derrida (though, of course, not necessarily stemming from his work), the mid-to-late 20th century saw a relative boom in the study of the sublime. One monograph from this period which is of particular importance is Thomas Weiskel's *The Romantic Sublime*. In *The Romantic Sublime*, Weiskel undertakes a two-pronged analysis of sublimity. In one path of inquiry, he applies Freudian psychoanalysis to the sublime aesthetic, ultimately concluding that the sublime involves an Oedipal power struggle which perpetually re-entrenches and re-establishes the Oedipus complex. Weiskel's other avenue of discourse – and one which is much more germane to the purposes of this summary – involves semiotics and, to a point, deconstructionist thought. Examining Kant’s division of the sublime into two categories (mathematical and dynamical), Weiskel concludes that the mathematical sublime is the excessive proliferation of signifiers while the dynamical sublime is, alternatively, the excessive proliferation of signifieds. Indeed, with the mathematical sublime, Weiskel claims that “the feeling is one of on and on” in which signifiers “overwhelm the possibility of meaning in a massive underdetermination,” (Weiskel 26). In the dynamical sublime, Weiskel contends that “we may imagine the discourse to be ruptured by an excess of signified... [such that] meaning is overwhelmed by an overdetermination” (Weiskel 26). In other words, when one encounters the
mathematical sublime, infinity, for example, one is inundated by a perpetual stream of representations of that sublime idea – an excess of signifiers – that hold no further “meaning” than “infinity.” It is possible to represent the concept of “infinity” in innumerable ways, but they all point back to the same signified idea – that is, “infinity.” When one encounters the dynamical sublime, the opposite occurs, as one is inundated with a perpetual stream of “meanings” – signifieds – pertaining to one signifier. Consider the signifier “God.” There exist boundless and far-reaching ways to describe and quantify “God,” yet the pervading signifier, “God,” is unchanging; there are simply innumerable “meanings” for that signifier. Weiskel’s conjoining of semiotics and the sublime, then, is important because it shows that sublimity may, in fact, include a symbolic component, an idea largely unexplored within previously studies on the subject.

Besides Weiskel, several other scholars writing in the latter 20th century have contributed, arguably even more influentially, to the study of the sublime. Foremost among them is Jean-Francois Lyotard. Lyotard examines sublimity first, briefly, in his most renowned work, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, and then, again, more fully, in Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime. Within both texts, Lyotard approaches the sublime in a similar manner – namely, by analyzing the aesthetic as a medium of representation. Underlying the entirety of Lyotard’s discussion of sublimity is also the idea that the aesthetic perfectly encapsulates the postmodern project which is, specifically, to “put forward the unpresentable in presentation itself” (Postmodern Condition 81).
Lyotard's theories of the sublime tend to stem from his evaluation of works of art such as Barnett Newman's vast monochrome paintings, which are bifurcated by one tiny “zip” (or line) of differing color. Within such works of art, there is “the absence of any form of distinction, [as] the experience of a pure color field overwhelms the viewer to the point of paralysis” (Shaw 121). In Lyotard's view this overwhelming field of color denotes the ever-encroaching, ever-present threat of death and complete annihilation, making its viewer believe “that it is possible that soon nothing more will take place” (Lyotard Reader 245). The only point of difference amongst the seemingly endless wash of singular color is the alternately colored “zip” that streaks through the painting. Its appearance denotes a life and energy rising up to meet the challenge of the vastness of death. Indeed, this tiny line leaves a viewer “with a profound sense of its fragility... of being teetering on the edge of nothingness,” and, thus, exemplifies “the boundary separating something from nothing, the pleasure of creation from the terror of privation” (Lyotard in Shaw 122). Therefore, for Lyotard, the sublime is a dualistic structure; it necessarily involves (spinning full-circle to the grandfather of sublimity, Longinus) the opposition of an event “like lightning” that “short-circuits thinking with itself” with a seemingly boundless zone of death and, in a more general sense, closure (Lessons 54).

Lyotard argues that, ultimately, the sublime event or moment (as represented in the “zip”) is a brief blast of resistance to closure through rules, categories, or even conventional signification. When one witnesses a sublime “event” (Lyotard's word), one is left to wonder “what happened?” In
the case of the Newman painting, the one, tiny streak of color is a flash of the sublime, a thing that cannot be reconciled to the vast, determinate blankness about it. The viewer does not really “understand” the sublime event except as an oppositional force to the monolithic totality that is everything around it. It has no set meaning beyond its difference to the totalizing powers that surround it. Thus, the sublime object or event is perpetually open to interpretation and to the play of signification; to hold the sublime in any other light would be to make it a part of the field of death and closure that encroaches from all sides, as saying that the sublime object/event “means” a given thing naturally marks that object/event with a proscribed set of definitions, boundaries, and rules – precisely those things to which the sublime event is initially opposed. Therefore, as the sublime can never truly be understood, an observer of a sublime object/event can never know “what happened,” only that “something happened,” and this, for Lyotard, is an extremely positive value, as it allows for freedom of interpretation and expression (Shaw 122). All this rationale leads Lyotard to suggest that the sublime aesthetic, is, in actuality, a form of expression that presents the unpresentable – that is, that points to the boundaries of rational thought and knowledge by giving its observer a thing that cannot possibly be (and, moreover, should not be) fully understood.

Although, after Lyotard and his many forerunners, it may seem that there is little new ground to be broken within the discourse of sublimity, a few contemporary scholars have continued expounding upon its definitions and further complicating the intricacies of the aesthetic. Slavoj Zizek is,
arguably, the most significant writer engaged in such projects. Zizek's primary work on the subject, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, attempts to tie Jacques Lacan's concept of the Real to the sublime and, moreover, to political and ideological discourse. Zizek follows Lacan in the belief that totalizing ideas such as "God" or "the Nation" or "the People" are part of an order of thought known as "the Real" – that is, a set of "master signifiers" that exceed conventional signification and can never truly be brought into realization (and, thus, are indicative of a general lack at the heart of the symbolic order). The "Real," Zizek argues, is naturally bound up with the sublime, as both purport to be vast, transcendent "Things-in-themselves" that are beyond representation (*Sublime Object* 205). Yet, if what stands at the heart of the "Real" is a void of existence and meaning, then so too must a void reside at the center of the sublime. Indeed, for Zizek, the sublime embodies this lack, as any object which is supposedly "sublime" can never be truly correlative with the greater idea it stands for; thus, saying the "the State is the Monarch" or "God is Christ" – that is, attempting to locate the Real in a specific object – only points out the discrepancy that the object is not truly the Real thing it purports to represent and, therefore, reinforces the lack at the heart of all Symbolic orders (*Sublime Object* 207). Hence, in Zizek's view, the sublime exists partially as a yawning blankness behind all symbolic representation (thus its terrifying aspect), but also as a force of fascination (from which pleasure arises) when it is represented within an object in the symbolic order (such as in a religious figure or national hero – that is, the Christ and the monarch).
While the above listed scholars and their work stand as the pillars of knowledge concerning the sublime, many contemporary writers continue to churn out scores of essays that simply apply the sublime aesthetic to various authors and/or genres. It is arguable that the majority of contemporary writing on sublimity is quite disposable, as it is little more than rote application of theory rather than generation of theory in and of itself. I do not mention any of these essays here, as they do not advance the study of the sublime in any real sense. However, a tiny fraction of contemporary scholarship (apart from Zizek’s) does engage with the sublime in new and interesting ways. The postulation of a feminine sublime, as attempted by writers such as Patricia Yaeger and Joanna Zylinska, is, for example, a potentially fruitful area of future discourse on the sublime, as, historically, the sublime has been connected with ideas of domination and power inequality (both potentially indicative of masculinity). As well, some writers – David Nye and Joseph Tabbi for instance – have begun to examine the growing impact of technology and its relationship to the sublime. Indeed, Nye, Tabbi, and other scholars concerned with the “technological sublime” see vast networks of production (such as cities and architectural structures) and information (such as the internet) as indicative of sublimity.

Even in contemporary critical theory and philosophy, it is quite apparent that the theory of the sublime is marked with many distinct, individuated conceptions of sublimity. Though this individual holds true for the concept’s entire extensive history, I will only be exploring in significant depth or breadth those theories that have propelled the scholarly
development of the aesthetic in wildly or uniquely varied directions. Of the writers mentioned above, I will focus on Longinus, Burke, Kant, Coleridge (as stand-in for the Romantics), Lyotard, and Zizek – arguably the most ironclad pillars in a forest of solid intellectual supports. It is through a critique and re-evaluation of these eminent theorists' ideas that the discontinuity of the glut of sublime theory begins to show itself and the necessity of a heretofore missing substructure for the aesthetic becomes most apparent. Thus, although I will make occasional and casual reference to other theories of the sublime, it is those of above-mentioned six scholars with which I must primarily engage.
CHAPTER TWO: RIPPLES IN THE LAKE

Before moving forward, I want to make one point clear: it is not my intention to erase or nullify the work on the sublime that has preceded my own, but, rather, to challenge its claim as a unified, complete body and to focus the power of its various theoretical lenses upon one base definition of the sublime that can encompass all the particularities and features of those individual theories that constitute its corpus. Certainly, I am a proponent of ever-expanding discourse and diversity of thought, but the intent of my analysis here is to reach a point of contraction, a locus of definition that encapsulates all previous concepts of sublimity and, thus, might be marked as the general principle upon which all instances of sublime feeling and sublime objectification rest. As a preliminary step toward reaching this point of contraction, I propose that none of the above-mentioned keystone theories of the sublime are entirely incorrect in their assumptions, but neither are they entirely correct. Rather, they are all accurate to varying degrees, as they have, indeed, discovered and mapped individuated facets of the sublime, albeit without delving to the heart of the aesthetic.

I reach this conclusion largely due to the fact that, given the long evolution of the sublime, a relatively clear, concise definition of the aesthetic should be possible. Yet, if, based upon current notions of the aesthetic, one
were to attempt to scribble forth such a definition, one would necessarily need to begin with a laundry list of qualifying adjectives and modifying participles. There is not merely “the sublime,” but, rather, “the Kantian sublime,” “the Longinian sublime,” or “the sublime of Lyotard.” As each luminary in the history of sublime aesthetic theory has attempted to cast his or her ideas further from his or her predecessors in an effort to glean deeper truths and more encompassing schemata, all that he or she has accomplished is the creation of a different set of ripples in the same sprawling lake. The problem is that, despite the intricacy of those ripples and the interest they might bring to bear upon the lake, they still do not address the fact that the lake – the underlying body they stir – exists.

Currently accepted critical theory on the sublime accentuates various points of a much larger mass without defining the mass itself. Such oversight would be equivalent to meteorologists defining the sky by explaining that it was blue, often filled with clouds, sometimes a source of precipitation, and seemingly infinite in its panoramic expanse. Of course, this is but a list of qualities the sky possesses; it may aid in conveying a sense of what the sky is, but it does not truly reveal any deeper nature or significant ontological truth. In much the same way, the sublime is only understood in light of its underlying discourse as the sense of that which is “unrepresentable” or “beyond intellectual comprehension” or “ultimately awe-inspiring;” the foundational reality of the thing, the definitive nature of the sublime, will not (and cannot) be revealed by describing its surface features alone. Yet this naming of parts is exactly what has occurred with regard to
critical theory and aesthetic philosophy in their explorations of the sublime. From Longinus through Zizek and beyond, dynamic thinkers of every age have thoroughly elucidated upon various characteristics of the aesthetic but have, as of yet, been unable to fully integrate competing interpretations of its basic nature with their own; in this way, we now have the Kantian sublime of failed imagination, which is slightly different from the Burkean sublime of commingled terror and wonder, which is slightly different from the Lyotardian sublime of irrepresentation, which is slightly different from the Zizekian sublime of symbolic aporia, and so on, and so on, *ad infinitum*. While the major theories of the sublime clearly include overlap, they are still largely exclusive unto one another, with each positing a distinct strain of sublimity that arises from subtly different “core” elements. What this implies is that, at present, the “theory of the sublime” is actually a set of competing (and, indeed, oftentimes complementary) subordinate ideas that circle about – but never touch – an even deeper substratum of ontology.

Longinus began inquiry into the aesthetic by suggesting that it “tears everything up like a whirlwind” – “everything” meaning, more specifically, reason and rationality (Longinus 2). Burke tends to agree with this assessment, saying that “the mind is so filled with [the sublime object] that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it,” and Lyotard takes up an even more forceful position in claiming the sublime as a force utterly irreconcilable with reason (Burke 53). Yet, in stark contrast to all these theories, Kant contends that not only are the sublime and rationality interrelated, but the power of the sublime is
predicated upon rationality's triumph. Kant essentially transfers the
transcendental quality of the sublime unto the empirical realm of human
reason and, in doing so, breaks from his philosophical forerunners (as well as
sets himself far apart from many of his progenitors). Given that Kant's
treatise on the sublime is still studied as a landmark work on the aesthetic
and that neither Lyotard nor any other subsequent writer has made Kant's
theory of sublimity obsolete, the glaring discrepancy between Kant's
insistence upon rationality's mastery and these other theorists' oppositional
belief that rationality is actually defeated by (or impotent in the face of) the
sublime can best be explained by assuming that Kant's theory of the sublime
is not one link in an "evolutionary chain" of works on sublimity but, rather, a
separate entity unto itself, a theory divorced from those preceding it and
those following it. If it were not a discrete position, a singular observation of
the sublime, then the linkage of rationality and sublimity would necessarily
inform and support many (if not most) subsequent studies of the sublime as
well as shed illumination upon previous ideas concerning the aesthetic.
However, it does neither of these things.

While Kant's supposition of a "failure of imagination" that leads to the
"triumph of reason" might explain Longinus' implication that the sublime
"annuls the possibility of representation" (if one concedes that a thing can
only be represented if it can be imagined), such a supposition is virtually a
dialectical inversion of Longinus' insistence that sublime rhetoric also
annihilates rational thought (Shaw 26). Neither does Kant's theory succinctly
interconnect with Burke's preoccupation with feeling, as Kant's ideas on
sublimity bypass the emotional aspects of the sublime and slice directly to philosophical matters – that is, matters of logic and deduction – whether transcendental or empirical. In doing so, Kant disregards the entire notion of a terror-inducing sublime that is furthered by Burke and merely concedes that a certain “displeasure” may accompany the “imagination’s inadequacy” – outright terror and “displeasure” clearly being two distinctly different states of being (Kant 114).

Further, in the intervening centuries since Kant's exploration of the sublime, only one extended, groundbreaking analysis of the subject – Lyotard's *Lessons on the Analytic* – has significantly adhered to and extended Kant's model of the aesthetic; others, such as Zizek's *Sublime Object of Ideology*, have either based their extrapolations upon independent theoretical foundations (in Zizek's case, for instance, Lacan's work on the Symbolic) or actively challenged Kant's conclusions (as even Lyotard eventually breaks from Kant in his assertion that the empirical and the ideal can never be reconciled under the power of reason and rationality).22 If Kant's work was truly scratching on aesthetic bedrock, these subsequent theorists should not have needed to seek out other ideological mines but, instead, should have simply shoveled deeper within his intellectual breach. But they did not. And, as in Lyotard's situation, some modern and contemporary writers have, occasionally, even collapsed the shaft of Kant's inquiry (Lyotard, for example, claiming that reason can never bridge the gap between the ideal or transcendental and the practical or empirical). What we are left with, then, is a purely *Kantian* sublime that – while intensely
insightful and arguably valid in its own right – neither explains the ideas on sublimity that come before it nor marks a crucial stepping-off point from which later ideas must spring. It is its own discrete system of aesthetic thought, its own series of ripples on a pond, divorced from – though sometimes overlapping with – all those other ripples created by the skipping stones of other minds.

If it seems as though this discussion has become myopic, with its purpose to exclude only Kant from the elite intelligentsia who have written on the sublime, that is a misconception, for none of the philosophers or literary and art critics mentioned throughout this chapter have managed to cast a wide enough net to encompass the whole of the sublime. Burke or Zizek or Coleridge or Burnet or Weiskel or any of the names listed beforehand could have just as easily been substituted for Kant and the result would have been the same. Kant is simply the luminary among luminaries and, thus, works as the most apt example of sublime theory's fractured state. Under even the most rudimentary scrutiny, the partitioned nature of sublime theory – that is, the individuation of each landmark study as an exploration of diverse but interrelated surface features and not a holistic system that can account for the diversity of its brethren – reveals itself time and again.

Burke's *Enquiry*, for instance, focuses on the psychological effect of the aesthetic significantly more than any other notable treatise on the subject and, in doing so, concludes that the sublime feeling is a heterogeneous emotional state, including equal parts terror and astonishment. Many later philosophers, however, minimize the impact of terror as an integral
characteristic of the sublime and a few, such as Kant – who believes that the
state of satisfaction inherent in rationality's superseding of imagination
ultimately blots out any displeasure – and Zizek – who, in suggesting the
sublime is a horrific but reified lack and, thus, the locus of ultimate futility,
allows little explicit room for a “positive” or pleasurable accompanying feeling
– largely disregard this potential dualistic aspect and incorporate into their
arguments either awe/pleasure or terror/displeasure to the near exclusion of
the other.

As another example of sublime theory's splintered nature, Zizek, in his
*Sublime Object of Ideology* and *The Fragile Absolute*, concludes that it is all
but impossible to determine whether the symbolic vacuum of a sublime
object/event precedes the object/event or whether the object/event only
becomes imbued with the symbolic void after it comes into existence (*Fragile
Absolute* 92). In other words, Zizek cannot decide whether sublime
objects/events arise in a futile attempt to patch over a symbolic lack or the
symbolic lack forces into existence sublime objects/events. Such recursion in
the chain of sublime causality is unlike any of the other major theories on the
aesthetic. Indeed, the confusion seems to be in general opposition to many
of its predecessors, as it all but nullifies the sublime feeling as a key variable
in determining the aesthetic's order of causation. After all, Longinus is quite
clear that words – the sublime object – always prefigure sublime evocation,
Burke has no doubt that sublime objects cause sublime feeling, and even
Kant has a very clear order of succession that begins not with an ideal or the
conceptual, but with a real object that, when it interacts with a percipient,
causes an ideal to be recognized in some fashion. In all of these cases, the sublime aesthetic is predicated upon an object's evocation of a psychological or cognitive state, not vice versa. Yet, with Zizek, sublime feeling is tertiary to sublime objectification and the attempt to suture the symbolic order. Zizek's theory becomes so expansive in its metacognitive and metaphysical complexity that it forgets the basic interaction between the sublime object and individual percipients of that object and, in doing so, breaks from the main branches of sublime theory, all but forgetting the basic human feelings that are inherent in the aesthetic experience.

Certainly, a list of juxtaposition between conceptions of the sublime could extend much further, with points of departure made sharper and incongruities between differing theories drawn ever clearer. The goal of this work, though, is not to tear away at the individual threads that constitute sublime theory but to knit them together – to unite, not divide. In light of this goal, the sole purpose of pointing out the conflict and only partial complementarity between various ideas on the sublime is to provide evidence (and a minimal but firm support) for suggesting that an overarching theory – a master theory of the sublime – is still needed to connect the theories of the sublime that stand as current foundational pillars. What we have in the discourse on the sublime is a loose conglomerate of competing ideas, not an organized structure. The evolution of the aesthetic is linked not with the progressive conjunction “then,” but with the expansionist “and.” We cannot define the sublime because there is no singular end product of thought concerning it, no presumed pinnacle of its evolution – only mutations which
have sprung from the same basic conceptual ooze of “that which is vast beyond comprehension.”

But perhaps all this circuitous locution only points out the obvious. Perhaps my objection to the completeness of sublime theory only serves to underline the nature of aesthetic study in general, of never truly reaching any consensus opinion concerning matters of presentation, representation, perception, and reception. One might argue that an aesthetic can never be fully defined, as it is a subjective effect only known through individualized experience and, therefore, entirely removed from the totalizing force of objective knowledge. 23 One might even further argue that the very nature of the sublime lends itself to this sort of indecipherability, that all we can ever “know” about the foundational element of the sublime is that we cannot know it and, thus, we enter into an epistemological voidspace in which the truest nature of the aesthetic is either unknowable or, perhaps, even missing. In such a case, the only possible definition of the sublime would be the entirety of its surrounding discourse – the position critical and philosophical theory currently holds to be most veracious. This objection is especially concerning if Lyotard is correct in his assertion that the sublime “is presence as unpresentable to the mind, always withdrawn from its grasp,” or if Zizek is correct in positing that the sublime is “an indicator of the traumatic emptiness, the primordial lack, residing at the heart of all forms of symbolization” (The Inhuman 142; Shaw 138). In either of these instances, the sublime aesthetic would seem to have no deeper definition than as that of the ultimately indivisible “unrepresentable” or “lack.” My retort to this line
of criticism is simple: it may be correct. If the sublime is truly a cipher of all meaning and meaningful representation then it cannot, in any significant sense, ever be defined as anything other than the facets by which it represents itself (or attempts to represent itself) in the world. However, under this post-structural notion, it then becomes true that any learned, extensive inquiry into sublime aesthetic theory is a further definition of the subject, given that the coronal discourse surrounding the sublime aporia is the sole means by which it is – albeit fragmentarily and incompletely – “known.” Thus, even in a Lyotardian or Zizekian framework, the subsequent theory that I will intend to postulate in the proceeding pages becomes – whether the true groundwork for the sublime or merely another shard of intellectual flotsam eternally circling the vacuum of meaning – further definition of the aesthetic insomuch as we can ever define it (which is to say, from Lyotard’s and Zizek’s perspective, in no substantial manner at all).

Another preliminary argument launched against my critique of contemporary thought on the sublime might contend that any given aesthetic cannot be constricted to one complete and eternal definition, as all aesthetics are predicated upon cultural mores and, hence, in constant states of flux, mutating and being reshaped as the culture that recognizes them changes.24 In this case, there would be no one sublime to speak of, but, rather, many individual sublimes of various historiographical locations and definitions. To this contention I say, yes, aesthetics are reflective of the societies and cultures from which they arise, but only insomuch as the objects of perception are constructions of their time and place. Certainly, a sublime object in one
culture may not be considered sublime to another culture (a fact that is equally true for individuals). While one culture (or person) may view, for instance, H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* as a sublime work of art, what with the wonder of discovering alien life and advanced technology intertwining with the terror at the earth's potential destruction at those forces' hands, another culture (or person) may read the novel and glean nothing but laughable escapism or piquant conjecture as to the nature of extraterrestrial life. Such differentiation in reception may very well be indicative of alternative cultural lenses – one which takes seriously the idea that extraterrestrial life may be far more technologically adept than humanity but ultimately indifferent (or even hostile) toward the human race and another which either dismisses the idea of alien existence wholesale or includes no anxiety concerning such beings' existence. It is very likely that a sizable quantity of any individual's perception and evaluation does, indeed, emanate from an internalized socio-cultural matrix, as many formidable minds – in contemporary discourse, George Dickie and Stuart Hall, for example – have suggested. Hence, the sublime object of perception, the art or natural object that sparks the sublime feeling, is, admittedly, a social or cultural construction that necessarily conforms to a specific time, place, and people. And yet the subjective feeling, the internal substance of the sublime, the thing that is evoked or incited by the sublime object, seems to be unchanging over any cultural or social milieu. An individual in mid-eighteenth century Europe presumably experienced the same (or a very close approximate) set of feelings upon reading about the Lisbon earthquake that
an individual in the twentieth century experienced when reading the cosmic horror of H.P. Lovecraft or when viewing the art of Barnett Newman. As the Lisbon earthquake presented to mid-eighteenth century scholars a “vibrating, gushing, and shaking... natural object that defeat[ed] the imagination and open[ed] up like an abyss,” so, too, did (and still does) Lovecraft’s fiction “brutally show that man is not the center of the universe, that the 'gods' care nothing for him, and that the earth and all its inhabitants are but a momentary incident in the unending cyclical chaos of the universe” (Ray 29; Joshi xvii). Equally, Newman’s paintings “usher in a universe of death” in which, as mentioned before, “the pleasure of creation” is simultaneous with the “terror of privation” (Shaw 122) (Figure 1: Barnett Newman’s Jericho).

![Figure 1: Barnett Newman's Jericho](image)

In all three cases, the percipients of divergent sublime objects – respectively, nonfiction expositions concerning natural phenomena, horror
and science fiction short stories, and vast monochrome canvases bisected by single strips of differing color – experience similar if not identical responses to those objects. Each of these objects, despite their potential irrelevance to any other society or culture, evoke (or have evoked) in many of their percipients a feeling of commingled awe and terror, wonder and dread – the basest sublime feeling, according to Burke. The emotional and psychological states of the percipients, while observing three distinctly different objects that may have no relevance or significant aesthetic quality for any other individual or cultural group, all seem equitable to one another.

It stands to reason, therefore, that a fundamental, axial core might underlie the sublime aesthetic, that there might be something which lashes all sublime experience together and is commonplace to all sublime experiences in all times and all places. While the objects that evoke the sublime may change over cultures writ large and individualized idiocultures (that is, the distinct and personal amalgam of culture that every individual carries within him or herself), the sublime feeling, when evoked by whatever object is culturally bound up with sublimity, remains the same psychological state, the same basic experience. A sublime thunderstorm in one culture, for example, may be a thing of beauty or a thing entirely devoid of aesthetic qualities to another culture, while, conversely, those cultures that experience no sublime feeling from a thunderstorm may perceive a film about a nuclear war-fueled apocalypse to be sublime, even if that film has no impact on the culture that perceives the thunderstorm as sublime. However, regardless of its source of ignition, both cultures (as groups and as individuals) are
affected in the same manner – that is, with a compound of awe and terror. Although the recognition of an object as sublime may owe its debt to a percipient’s socio-cultural and historical background, the sublime feeling seems to arise independent of such human constructions and take the same form in every instance of its evocation. This commonly held thread of experience is how we, over various discrepancies of time and place, can know that the sublime aesthetic is near-universal and that the thing Longinus wrote about almost two-thousand years ago is the same thing Kant discussed in the mid-eighteenth century and the thing that Zizek is still reworking in our contemporary age. Thus, in other words, what evokes the sublime is dependent upon a society, culture, or time; but what is evoked by a sublime object – regardless of its socio-cultural and temporal baggage – is constant.

It is this constant that I hope to reveal in more substantial identity. It is also this constant that I claim discourse on the sublime does not currently recognize. Therefore, although the sublime aesthetic appears to be either ultimately unknowable or perpetually non-syncretic, in actuality, a fundamental feeling girds all true sublime experience. Further, as I will show, this feeling is fueled by a common concept that lies even deeper beneath the surface of the aesthetic and which, when applied as the underpinning source of the sublime, can explain and perfectly interlace the major competing sublimes that exist within critical theory and philosophy.
CHAPTER THREE: DIVING INTO THE LAKE

Up to this point, I have included almost exclusively proemial material so that it is amply evident that my predominant goal is neither to critique any one position on the sublime aesthetic nor to expand any one of its current formulations, but, instead, to synthesize all visions of the sublime into one. In that regard, hopefully my discussion has, thus far, provided some basic semblance of reasoning for why I believe such synthesis is necessary and how such synthesis might begin to occur. With preliminary matters addressed and a perfunctory position constructed, it is time to breathe deep and sink beneath all those ripples other scholars have created. It is time to espouse a holistic theory and bind the sublime.

If one accepts the idea that contemporary theory on the sublime does, in fact, supply a multiplicity of sublimes rather than one unified theory, the question becomes, “how can these disparate parts ever be united?” The answer lies in that one aforementioned commonality of sublime experience: sublime feeling.

Sublime feeling – defined here as the internalized experience of the sublime aesthetic as provoked by a sublime object – has, historically, two primary components: a state of suspension, often formulated as awe or wonder, and a state of fear, often characterized as terror or some form of
destruction. In Longinus, the melding is of “divine spirit” or “ecstasy” and an annihilating “thunderbolt” (Longinus 2, 9). Burke describes the feeling as a mind “entirely filled with its object” and under some “degree of horror” (Burke 53). Kant refers to it as an “inhibition” and subsequent “outpouring of vital sources” (Critique 98). Schiller calls it “a composition of melancholy... and joyousness” (Schiller 42). And Lyotard, as mentioned before, suggests it is the convergence of “the pleasure of creation” and the “terror of privation” (Lyotard Reader 205). Even those scholars of the sublime who do not overtly address its impact upon its percipients or focus on only one of the two prongs of its effect imply that the aesthetic somehow involves a vaguely dualistic blend of pleasure and pain, as is evidenced in Zizek’s assertion that, despite the terrifying and all-consuming “lack” inherent in his conception of the sublime, people tend to “desperately try to save it [the sublime],” as it is all that prevents the symbolic order from falling apart (Fragile Absolute 32).

In every instance of study concerning the sublime, its human effect – whether overtly explored or implicitly circumnavigated – resolves as a hybrid of cognitive suspension and fear. But why? Why do some objects and events – both artificial and natural – elicit this particular set of feelings? What is it about “sublime” objects that triggers the sublime feeling and, moreover, what does the sublime feeling entail as concerns human cognition?

The answer to all these questions lies in that most enervating of all abstractions: possibility.

Possibility is an intriguing concept in that it encompasses everything
unknown. It has no substance, no ontological reality in and of itself, because it resides at the peripheral of being, at the interstices of that which is and that which might be or is yet to be. As such, it lies outside clear perception, outside the definite, and outside what is empirically verifiable. It is, arguably, a marker for the borderlands of the transcendental, and, in this regard, is germane to the sublime aesthetic.

In any formulation of the sublime, a vague notion of “something beyond” or “something unfathomably overwhelming” is central the aesthetic's existence. In general, this “something” has been distilled to a more exacting “that which is unimaginable” (in Kantian and pre-Kantian thought) or “that which is beyond representation” (in Lyotardian, Zizekian, and postmodernist terms). In either case, the idea can be reconceived as that which is unknown or unknowable as anything more than a pure abstraction or concept. We may, for example, be able to “know” that infinity exists, that it is a thing that extends interminably, but we do not (and potentially cannot) know what lies within infinity nor do we know any of its more immanent or specific qualities; therefore, all we “know” of infinity is its base rationalization as an abstract idea. The concept cannot be fully represented because we know nothing concrete, nothing ontologically substantial about it, and, hence, can form no clear and certain perception of it. Thus, the major theorists of the sublime are, in effect, explaining the aesthetic as the unknowable, even if that unknowability is obscured by the desire to laud human rationality's merits or compounded within arguments on the nature of symbolic representation. This definition of the sublime as ultimately unknowable abstraction, however,
accomplishes only the naming of the overriding characteristic of the sublime; it does not reach the true heart of the aesthetic as, above all else, it fails to determine why that particular characteristic is capable of evoking the experience (the sublime feeling) that it does.

Here, the analogy of meteorologists defining the sky by its qualities is again applicable, as basing of the sublime in “beyondness” or the “unknown and unknowable” is akin to scientists concluding that the sky is exclusively “that which is above” – its predominant and most overriding trait. But as “that which is above,” alone, these scientists would be missing the reasons for the sky’s “aboveness” and would be, therefore, unable to offer any further deconstruction of the notion (say, to explain why rain fell from that “aboveness”), as the sky would be elevated to a position beyond any epistemological verification and would, in practice, become transcendental. This is precisely what has happened to the sublime aesthetic. Theorists and philosophers have determined that the heart of the sublime beats in the arena of the unknown or unknowable, but they have, by and large, not attempted to further inquire as to what, precisely, is the “unknown or unknowable” nor have they succinctly connected that metaphysical “unknowability” to the human experience of the sublime. In their usage as definitions for the sublime, the “unknown or unknowable,” the “lack of the Real” and the “irrepresentable” have become transcendental concepts themselves and are, thus, mired in the same thick cloud of ontological and epistemological uncertainty that the sublime has always inhabited.\(^{27}\) They have implicitly broken from (and even devalued or ignored) the experience of
the sublime – the very real feeling of awe and terror – so that theory can be
more fully engorged through its flights of ever-increasing complexity and
esotericism. The concept of possibility, however, both provides a clarification
of this murky “unknown” and bridges the gap between the ontologically
sublime and the phenomenologically sublime – in other words, it explains,
through connection with the sublime feeling, why that “unknown or
unknowable” and its concomitant objects (its irrepresentations, perhaps?)
produce the experience they do.

Possibility, as that which might be or that which is yet to be, resides in
an arena of conceptuality similar to but not completely equitable with the
transcendental. If one cannot truly represent a thing (as in the case of
Kantian and post-Kantian conceptions of the sublime such as Lyotard’s
unrepresentable and Zizek’s symbolic lack), then that thing must forever
remain in the realm of the abstract unknown and will never be part of our
ontological reality; it will be, eternally, nothing more than a vague concept,
phenomenologically remote and, on a certain “real” level, epistemologically
inaccessible. This unrepresentable sublime is only ever a transcendental
notion, removed from our immanent reality. In comparison, what lies within
possibility, although abstract and unknown in part (and, therefore, with a
foothold planted in the transcendental), has the potentiality to manifest
within phenomenological reality and to be rationalized and, thus, be at least
partially knowable. What is possible can, in reality, occur; in an election of
presidential candidates, for instance, the ontological and phenomenological
outcome is entirely unknown and yet one candidate must win and make
manifest an event that had only previously existed as possibility. Equally, we can imagine selected possibilities (for example, those that spring from our rational field of inference – such as the superficially limited potential outcomes of a presidential race) and thus trap them as epistemologically knowable concepts, while others, far removed from our base of knowledge and cognition (and therefore bizarre, absurd, or fantastic), will remain out of our grasp and in a state synonymous with the dense “unknowable” of so many theorists of the sublime (as if, for instance, during the aforementioned presidential race, extraterrestrial life forms abducted all candidates and thus the outcome of the election was of a nature no one could have ever rationally anticipated or even imagined).

It is due to such straddling of the transcendental and the immanent that possibility can serve as a stepping stone to the core of the sublime aesthetic. If we accede that the sublime is only partially unknowable and not entirely unknowable as many contemporary ideas on the sublime conjecture, then the aesthetic begins to both more fully cohere as one unified idea and open itself to further inquiry as to the nature of the “possibility” that might be potentially capable of evoking the sublime feeling.

Kant’s theory of the sublime, for instance, rests on the breakdown of imaginative power – a lack or void space that cannot be filled (a conceptually “unknowable”) – and the superseding of imagination by rationality – that is, the triumph of the cognizable (and, therefore, the knowable). What Kant seems to be describing is not a state of sublimity wherein the unknown and unknowable forever remain so, but, rather, a sublime that is simultaneously

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knowable and unknowable – knowable to logic and rationality, hence a source of pleasure, and unknowable to the imagination, hence a source of trepidation. Without a bifurcation of epistemology, the aesthetic could not evoke a bifurcation of experience. When Burke writes that, in the face of the sublime “the mind is so entirely filled with its object that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object,” he seems to imply an unknown quality of the sublime, a positioning of its qualities as beyond cognition; yet, he also claims that the negative experience of the sublime – in his view, outright fear – is caused by an “apprehension of pain or death” (my emphasis), which implies that something of the sublime is also able to be rationalized as a harbinger of pain and death and must be knowable (Burke 53). Even Longinus admits to a simultaneous epistemological lack and satiation in his suggestion that the sublime, despite being “a kind of madness and divine spirit” (and hence transcendental and rhetorically unteachable), is, in fact, capable of being utilized by “genius” and must, therefore, be capable of being known in at least some perfunctory way (Longinus 9). Based on these flashes of duality, it is well within reason to suggest that, rather than a stonewalling idea of “lack” or “unknowability” or “irrepresentability,” a base characteristic of the sublime might be better supplied as possibility – a concept that encompasses both facets of the unknown/unknowable and a knowability that operates on rational probability and logical extrapolation.

This argument is not to suggest that the propagators of the sublime as a truly unknowable thing are wrong in their assumption. I would parse them
as being merely less *accurate* in their conclusions than they could be. Lyotard and Zizek, for example, have described in full detail the unknowable facet of the sublime. They are both quite accurate in diagnosing that certain things at the heart of the sublime – even certain *possible* things, as is my assertion – can never be known and are beyond the ken of cognition. But they stop at this point and rely on the nihilism of their postmodern frameworks (*a la* Lacan’s never-realized Real and the collapse of “meta-narratives”) to carry them through to their conclusions that aporia is the sole condition of sublimity’s core. 28 Where Lyotard, Zizek, and their disciples see a blank space that yawns before a percipient, I see an appalling plenitude, an everything-ness that includes all that might ever be. Because such contemporary, postmodernity-indebted writers base their theories of the sublime on ideas that lead inexorably in one direction – toward ontological and epistemological vacancy – the structure of their arguments cannot support a sublime that might be, in some very real sense, knowable. Thus, they are bound and entrapped by the very train of thought that has led them to astutely reduce the sublime to *one of* its key components.

Simply, then, what I suggest as an alternative to pure “unknowability” or “unknown-ness” is that the sublime requires cognitive dissonance of a sort. It is both unknown and – to a degree – unknowable in its eventual phenomenological and ontological resolution but, simultaneously, it is knowable in its conceptual state as a field of reasonable and logical probabilities. The future, for instance, is unknowable in any exactitude or absolute certainty, as *anything* could happen in any given second that comes
to pass; however, at the same time, the future is, while being unknowable in a grand sense, knowable in that we can rationally understand sequences of events and causation that might lead to future certainties and we can imagine and conceptualize futures that are only probabilistic. Similarly, possibility (of which the future is a part), stands between two worlds – the transcendental and the immanent – and therefore includes this same dualistic metaphysic. Under such a system, the seemingly paradoxical “unknown-knownness” of many sublime theories can be better explained and even the evaporation of the “knownness” from contemporary variations of the sublime can be understood as merely symptomatic of their philosophical and temporal contexts.

If we replace “the unknown and unknowable” with “the possible” as a deep substratum of the sublime aesthetic, then we can also begin to interrogate the nature of possibility, as it is epistemologically penetrable and thus open to further inquiry, whereas the unknown or unknowable is a Kantian thing-in-itself, a conceptual end point which can lead to no further revelation given that there is nothing more at its center than itself – and, hence, no more knowable base nature – to reveal. Indeed, the dissection of “the possible” as a principal foundation of the sublime reveals a more acute correlation with both sublime objectification and the sublime feeling than does any generalized conception of the sublime as the “unknown” or “that which is greater.”

For centuries it has been a problem for philosophers that a thing supposedly beyond human thought and conception – the unknown, the
ultimately grandiose – can be made phenomenologically perceptible to humans. Longinus writes of the sublime as a thing ultimately indeterminate and without form but filled with grandeur, but somehow able to be contained and transmitted in language – a paradox he cannot fully explain (Longinus 2,9). We see the same reckoning in Kant, when he explains the disconnection between imagination and reason. Coleridge parses the incongruity as a the necessary existence of a “symbolic language for something... that already and forever exists” (Coleridge 2546). And the issue is clearly central to Lyotard when he claims that the irrepresentable is put forth in sublime objects' representation. In the bulk of sublime theory, the tension is resolved by suggesting, as Lyotard does most clearly, that the sublime object can only ever point toward the unknown and unknowable – that “beyondness” which is recognized as the vague central notion of the sublime. However, there exists a further problem here and it involves sublime feeling. If sublime objects can only represent the fact that they cannot represent the thing they hope to represent, then they, in actuality, represent nothingness (which is precisely what Lyotard and, more forcefully, Zizek contend). But if these sublime objects represent nothingness (or even the ever-unknowable, which is tantamount to nothing in particular), how can they evoke feelings of awe and terror? Would the representation of nothingness not be more likely to produce apathy or disinterest than wonder and dread since nothingness cannot harm oneself? And if the irrepresented sublime is unknowable, doesn’t the feeling of terror arise entirely superfluously, as what is unknowable will remain forever so and, thus,
outside the realm of ontological reality from which fear tends to spring? In other words, if, as most theories on the sublime suggest, the sublime object merely points toward a thing that can never be brought into any real, meaningful existence, then why would anyone be terrified of it? As psychological studies – most famously Watson and Rayner's “Little Albert” experiment – have borne out, fear is a “conditioned emotional reaction either of the direct or the transferred type,” and, therefore, requires a source of knowable distress (Watson and Rayner 14). Hence, as the sublime is supposedly a vacuum of knowledge, a disconnect should exist between sublime object and sublime experience. We should not experience dread or anxiety over the sublime if, as conventional theories on the aesthetic contend, it remains forever remote and transcendental, forever out of reach of our imaginations, or forever unknowable. And yet we do.

However, when one replaces the sublime aesthetic’s base of “unknowable” or “unrepresentable” with “the possible,” this conflict is expeditiously resolved and the core of possibility begins to be revealed. If what a sublime object attempts to represent is “the possible,” then it logically follows that the object might be a source of terror and awe while still not representing any one ontologically real thing. Again, as possibility includes all those things which will be, which might be, and which will never be but could be, it enfolds both purely conceptual or transcendental realities and objects as well as those realities and objects that will have concrete or immanent substance within our world. Thus, a sublime object evokes for its peripient an infinite panoply of futures and states of being – an
everythingness yet to come or be realized. Within this range of possibility exist both positive and negative subsequentialities, futures and states of being both beneficial and harmful. In the sublime object, these potentialities are all evoked simultaneously. This multitudinous explosion of potentiality explains the feeling of being overwhelmed by the sublime (the suspension of mind), as, for all intents and purposes, the total awe and wonder of existence yet-to-come is facing the percipient – far too much for human cognition to apprehend at once. Where the sublime turns and becomes a source of terror is when, borrowing from Kant but inverting his order of emotional response (which was always just a product of his socio-temporal indebtedness to the triumph of empiricism, anyway), reason begins to sift through those infinite possibilities and connects the object with a negative or potentially harmful future or state of being.

When I say “negative” or “potentially harmful” I do not mean in the superficial sense that the object could cause physical, emotional, or psychological harm. Certainly, it is possible that a sublime object could do so – a massive tornado or the infernal mushroom cloud released by a nuclear blast are potentially sublime objects that pose these harms. But the sublime involves more than damage to mind and body; it involves damage to ideology, to those things held closest to the soul, to the core of one's identity and conception of existence. After all, what is the true fear that lies behind abstract physical, emotional, or psychological harm? What is it that lurks in possibility – in utterly abstract and remote chance – that instills terror? Change. And not just change, but change that leads to the unsettling of
preconception and belief.

If one fears harm, one fears what the harm leaves behind, not the harm itself. No one fears slings or arrows in and of themselves, but, rather, what slings and arrows carry with them in that moment of intrusion into one’s existence – a different state of being and a forcible change of phenomenology. We fear needles pricking our arms not for the needle, but for the transition from a state of non-pain to a state of pain, from static, contented perception to disrupted perception. We fear house fires not for the fire, but for the transition of home to rubble, for the forced change in physicality from building to ash and for the forced change in our perception of the house from “safe haven” to “exposed nothingness.” Objects of fear are not fearful in their own right, but fearful for what they can do – for example, usher in that realm of negative potentialities that lies dormant in all possibility. As such, sublime objects – as grandiose objects of fear – are mediums for change, for the exercise of dynamism. If we feel awe and terror in the face of an object and experience the sublime, we experience the ultimate threat of a cosmic mutability that can erase anything beneath its tread. However, this threat of change is not just of our minds or our bodies, but of our core beliefs and preconceptions – our ideological foundations. A needle or a house fire may incite fear, but most likely not the sublime feeling. Why? Because they do not include that additional and preliminary evocation of awe or wonder, that transcendental beyondness which characterizes the basic sublime experience. A painful injection or a house fire might be aesthetically grotesque or perhaps even, on some level, tragic. But they will
not, almost assuredly, be aesthetically sublime. The sublime, as cosmic mutability, requires the conjunction of awe and terror. Localized, singular, fleeting events are rarely capable of producing such awe; they are, quite simply, not imbued with the cosmic, with that “divine spirit” of Longinus or that “unboundedness” of Kant (Longinus 9; Critique 98).

Sublime objects, in being of a vaster, more powerful nature than most objects of fear, are able to evoke an additional level of anxiety – the anxiety of ideological destruction. For where lesser objects of fear only threaten a temporary, reversible, or purely physical change, the sublime object threatens a permanent, metaphysical deconstruction. As Burke casually notes, “things that cause terror generally affect the bodily organs by the operation of the mind suggesting the danger” – a concession that terror, and hence the sublime feeling, is generated in the abstract, in ways of thinking about existence rather than in actual experience (Burke 120). Kant, Lyotard, and Zizek are also acutely aware of this brand of terror. Kant and Lyotard cling to the notion that “the dizziness of the thought that presents [in sublimity] is transformed into mortal anguish” – that is, that the anxiety of the sublime is molded anew from the pieces of a shattered imagination (Lessons 114). Such a notion is a pronounced reference to the insinuation of ideological change, given that, within Kantian and Lyotardian thought, the stability of imagination and reliance upon its machinations collapse into an illegible if not wholly useless trench. Zizek also frequently writes about terror in terms of ideological deconstruction, as, for instance, in his “Robespierre or the 'Divine Violence' of Terror,” which is an examination of the French
Revolution and its mastermind of organized Terror, Maximilien Robespierre, he concludes that Robespierre is a sublime figure because he “is not afraid to die” in service of the Revolution – that is, Robespierre becomes sublime because he was not afraid of altering every aspect of his being and being thrown into a state of ultimate cosmic mutability (what could be a greater harbinger of change than that transition from life to death?) so that another, more grounded and immanent, change in ideology (France becoming a democracy and overthrowing monarchy) might be made manifest.

In the most widely-accepted deliberations of sublime theory, then, what frightens is not the sublime object itself or even the physical danger it presents, but an abstract state of potential threats and dangers – the negative side of possibility. So, although perhaps an obvious hermeneutic reduction, the terror of the sublime is an acknowledgment not only of the fact of impending or potential ontological change, but of phenomenological and epistemological change already occurring in the very act of perception of the sublime object. In witnessing an object that points toward the field of the possible, a percipient begins to recognize the inevitable force of cosmic mutability and, in doing so, is threatened not on a physical level but in terms of his or her belief structure and particular lens for apprehending existence. Once a percipient has encountered a sublime object and been affected by it, he or she cannot believe the world is as stable, as certain, and as static as before; rather, his or her perception of reality is forcibly altered – an act which implies that, in turn, his or her ideological keystones have also been pulverized, as they are the building blocks upon which perception rests.
If, for instance, a passage of a poem stirs the sublime feeling, the awe and fear it inspires are clearly not directed at any remotely physical threat or danger, but toward a potentiality to which the passage points. Consider the following lines from W.B. Yeats' “The Second Coming:”

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned; (1-6) (Yeats 80).

The passage contains an amalgam of apocalyptic references and imagery: a chaos washing across all existence, sanguinary oceans, dead and defeated innocence, a world breaking apart from its core. Such imagery may very well evoke a sublime feeling in that it is, after all, explicitly positing the end of the world – a concept rife with both awe and terror, with both the all-encompassing power of the cosmic and something further, something that causes acute anxiety. Of course, one does not fear an immanent apocalypse upon reading these lines, but ones does fear what an apocalypse as evoked might entail: death, destruction, lawlessness, entropy. These collected concepts are simply more specific variations on one basic idea that can be saddled with the moniker “dynamism,” “change,” or, as I prefer, “cosmic mutability.” The death and destruction and lawlessness and entropy that the poesy symbolizes are threatening due to their uncertainty, their ability to sweep individuals into the vast field of possibility, in which lie both futures.
that maintain the ideological status quo as well as futures disruptive of preconceived ideology. For an apocalypse – indeed, any sublime object – is precisely what Yeats describes: a widening of a gyre, an all-encompassing expansion into areas of existence and thought yet unknown, areas of existence and thought which may thrust new ontological, phenomenological, and epistemological perspectives (if not outright truths) upon those experiencing it.

Therefore, the passage of poetry itself, the sublime object, is not terrifying in the least, but what it directs perception toward – the field of possibility and all its potentiality for cosmic mutability – is. Through its evocation of dynamism, of change, it threatens to collapse old, safe, static belief structures and ways of being, doing, perceiving, and knowing. Again, this change stems from the nature of possibility, as a vast percentage of all potential states of being and futures are not those in which existence – either of reality or of an individual – remains static. In invoking apocalypse, Yeats invokes a panoply of potentialities that inhabit that concept's eventual fruition – many of which may lead to unwelcomed or forced (and, hence, threatening and fear-inducing) alterations in states of being, perceiving, and knowing. It is not merely the fact that we do not know what all these alterations may be, but that they might occur at all, tearing asunder our comfortable, hard-woven ideological matrices. The fact that there is something out there in the seething expanses of possibility that could, at any moment and in any manner, change anything and everything – all subjective and objective existence – is a terrifying and awe-inspiring notion, and it is
this notion that pulses through the soul of the sublime aesthetic.

With cosmic mutability as the base foundation of the sublime, new light is shed upon the conventionally lauded pillars of sublime theory. The multiplicitous nature of the sublime aesthetic, for instance, is easily explained. What thinkers on the subject have, for centuries, focused upon is the “unknowable” aspect of the sublime. From Longinus to Zizek, the superseding of human understanding and thought has been the overriding charge for sublimity. Longinus speaks of figures “thought best when... concealed” (Longinus 26). Burke relates his sublime to that which “cannot be presented to the mind in the form of a clear and distinct idea” (Burke 158). Kant, of course, has his “formless object” that, through its “unboundedness” defeats the power of imagination (Critique 98). The ideas of Lyotard and Zizek are, even on their surface, entirely consumed with the unknowable in the form of the unrepresentable. What causes fragmentation here, within the collected body of study, is that the unknowable is precisely that – unknowable. As such, any rational and reasonable conclusion concerning its ultimate nature can be reached, as absolutely no ontological or epistemological verification of this fundamental quality is possible; it is forever beyond. Thus, philosophers and art critics have been able to mold that “unknowableness” into whatever shape their particular intellectual agendas require or allow. For Longinus, the sublime becomes a powerful tool of rhetoric; for Burke, it is a means of parsing the terror of war and the natural world; for Kant, it is a triumph of rationality and empiricism; for the Romantics, it is a glorious elevation and dissolution of self; for Lyotard, it is a
political tool for accepting and exploring ever more lines of discourse; and for
Zizek, it is the absurd and horrifying nothingness upon which our symbolic
values are built. All these interpretations are fine as evaluations of that pure
“unknowable,” but the sublime is not merely that which exceeds the
representative powers of cognition or the breadth of human knowledge. It is
not synonymous with “unknowable,” but, rather, includes more specificities,
more tangible traits than simply “the unknown” – the most pointed of these
being, as mentioned before, a very definite knowability that produces and
promotes the fear of the unknowable.

Cosmic mutability allows these two ideas – unknowability (or the
transcendental) and knowability (or the immanent) – to coalesce. In cosmic
mutability, that long-heralded “unknowable” is certainly a characteristic (that
is, the possible that can never be rationalized), but its alternate, the
“unknown which is knowable,” informs just as much of the concept. It is this
“knowable unknown” – the vast multitudes of potentiality that can be either
imagined or rationalized – that evoke the terror of the sublime, as they
simultaneously throw a darkening light upon the unknowable (for what might
lurk in the unknowable but more fearful potentialities, more implosions of
ideology?) while providing threatening changes to being and belief, in and of
themselves. Through the merging of “the unknowable” with the “unknown
but potentially knowable,” the field of the possible (and thus the cosmic
mutability that is part and parcel of its constitution) lashes together the
disparate strands of sublime theory.

When Longinus describes the sublime as a “mode of speech that is
indeterminate or without form,” he is, in actuality, making note of the indeterminability and formlessness of possibility which lies dormant in language (Shaw 12). His *Peri hypsous* makes apparent the sprawling multiplicity of signified meanings inherent in the symbolic. Indeed, ostensibly, his work points to Derridean deconstruction and the terminally ambiguous nature of symbolic communication long before Derrida codified the theory; however, more germane to this discussion, it raises a flag that signals the extreme overdetermination of figures of speech – an overdetermination that is equatable to the infinite panorama of the possible. Equally, Longinus’ insistence that the sublime “tears everything up like a whirlwind” is a direct reference to the cosmic mutability that inhabits possibility. When he refers to certain words, turns of phrase, and ideas as being capable of destruction, he is making note of the possible’s incitement to change, to break apart pre-held ideologies. In tearing apart these ideologies, the sublime is capable of substituting in their place any number of new beliefs and truths which are conceived within the teeming womb of the of the possible and hoisted upon a percipient through the dynamism of cosmic mutability. Thus, while Longinus’ theory of the sublime is directed toward precisely the correct avenues of discourse (overwhelming multiplicity and the power of change), he simply does not quite make the abstract connections necessary to move through those avenues beyond mere rhetoric and linguistic concerns.

In Burke’s *Enquiry*, he illuminates the basic functions of the sublime feeling quite adroitly, saying that its components are “astonishment” and
“terror” and that the “motions of the soul” (read, consciousness) are “suspended” when perceiving the sublime (Burke 53). Here, he recognizes – albeit in more generalized terms – the wonder and awe of the vastness of the possible and, simultaneously, the terrifying aspect of possibility's aptitude for cosmic mutability. The consciousness is suspended in a state of rapture due to the plenitude of all the possibilities that a sublime object points toward, but, when the mind finally begins to draw in the connections of those possibilities' fruition, it comes to realize, both through rationality and imagination, that there are many potentialities (both knowable and unknowable) for alteration of being, perception, and knowledge – a frightening prospect for many. Burke even goes as far as to write that, because we cannot “perceive the bounds of many things, they seem to be infinite, and they produce the same effect as if they were really so” (Burke 67). While this may seem an innocuous enough statement, it provides the connection central to determining the underpinnings of the sublime – expressly, that the attempted representation of a thing which is beyond our power of imagination is capable of producing the same effect upon a percipient that the actual object might.

Burke realizes that the path to understanding the sublime aesthetic is to analyze the perception of the sublime feeling, as the sublime feeling may arise in both the face of an actual transcendental thing and a mere irrepresentation of that thing. What is important to Burke is not the ontological existence or non-existence of the sublime object, but what the sublime object “means” to its percipients. Such a position dovetails with the
idea of the sublime as cosmic mutability, since the perception of such mutability is a subjective construction that leads to its object of provocation being classified as “sublime.” As mentioned previously, one might not perceive the sublime in the same object another individual does, but when the sublime feeling *is* apprehended, it is the same amongst all peoples, and its substratum is always the same – an imagined and rationalized field of possibility that includes dynamism which threatens to break apart preconceived ideology. Burke's theory of the sublime also begins to interrogate the sublime not from its ontological point of origin, but from its phenomenological status – providing support that working from the sublime feeling toward sublime objectification is a valid means of analyzing the subject. Therefore, Burke insightfully – and correctly – shifts the study of the sublime to the phenomenological. However, he becomes wrapped up in the immanent, material world as the sole source of the subjective perception of the aesthetic and, hence, delves no further in his examination than to a surface layer of that perception by naming not just awe as a sublime feeling, but the intermingling of awe *and* terror (which is, nevertheless, a contribution to sublime theory that cannot be overstated).

Kant's relationship to the sublime-as-dynamism is similarly interconnected. His notion that the sublime exceeds the power of imaginative representation extends easily into the structure of the argument, as no person can envision all the potentialities that lie seething within the possible and, thus, imagination is, indeed, at a loss. However, we are able to imagine *some* of those potentialities – if we were not, then there would be no
fear or terror generated by the sublime, since terror arises as a learned response to a stimulus and a purely unimaginable idea could never be represented well enough to instill such a learned response. For example, people fear death – what Burke claims is the ultimate sublime – not for an unknowable or unimaginable quality of the state, but because of the possible manifested states – such as hell or non-being – that they can imagine arising from within the unknown and which might destroy basic ontological, phenomenological, or epistemological foundations and, hence, ideological frameworks. For this reason, although the sublime does exceed imagination, as Kant suggests, it is not entirely defeated nor does rationality take a complete upper hand in the sublime experience.

Kant's breakdown of the sublime into the categories of mathematical and dynamical is also correlative to the sublime-as-possibility. As Weiskel demonstrates in his deconstruction of Kantian sublimity, the mathematical sublime is an unlimited and overwhelming proliferation of signifiers. The idea of such proliferation is equitable with the excess of the possible and its infinite number of generative future events and states of being. A percipient of a sublime object cannot help but imagine the myriad potentialities that the object either contains or is capable of bringing about and is, thus, entirely overwhelmed by too much possibility. According to Weiskel, the dynamical sublime, is, functionally, an excess of signified meaning (Weiskel 26). As regards the sublime-as-possibility, it is in this overdetermination of meaning that the terror-inducing aspect of cosmic mutability can be found. Indeed, all the possible futures that one can imagine “mean” nothing until they are
subjected to a modicum of rationality and reason. It is only upon the application of rationality to individuated possibilities that meaning is grafted onto them. For instance, upon perceiving the previously mentioned passage from Yeats' “The Second Coming,” one is immediately drawn into the field of the possible and begins to imagine the many eschatological futures that may lie in store. One is bowled over by the sheer number of potentialities that the end of the world entails; the various “hows” and “whats” of global apocalypse – all those ways destruction may take place – rise up in Yeats' imagery and metaphor. However, those futures have no meaning, no value, until one begins to consider the consequences of those “hows,” those “whats.” When the percipient reasons through the glut of imagery that the poem foists upon him or her, he or she will quickly realize that these futures, these world-consuming events and states of being, are capable of altering not only the landscape of the planet, but the landscape of mind and soul and, therefore, belief and ideology. It is only upon rational consideration – even fleeting rational consideration – that the imagined takes on the tremendous power of cosmic mutability and becomes a source of terror. Once this occurs, however, that acknowledgment of mutability is all-encompassing, infiltrating every aspect of all those imagined potentialities and leading to its absolute perceived state as nothing more than threatening change. Thus, the variegation of possibility wrought about by Yeats' poem – the infinite imagining of apocalypse – becomes overdetermined in meaning and, in all its instances, is reduced to a singular force of terror and mutability.

Beyond Kant, the generalized Romantic sublime, too, fits naturally into
a framework of sublime-as-possibility. The Romantics, following Schelling's proclamation that the sublime had the power “to manifest the transcendental in a sensuous form,” viewed the aesthetic as a tearing away of the veil between transcendental and immanent; it was, for them, a means by which a percipient might commune, however briefly, with a state beyond ontological constraint (Shaw 92). Equally, the veil that is torn away in the sublime-as-possibility is a barrier between the transcendental (the infinite mass of potentialities) and the immanent (our very temporally imprisoned existence in which we often acknowledge only the mundane force of mechanistic causality). On a day-to-day basis, we perceive the procession of existence as an ordered scheme with easily rationalized and discernible causal effects, thus leading us to believe we can predict – and even rely upon – the certainty of future events and state of being. The sublime disrupts this perception and introduces a measure of variability and disjuncture into our lives, thwarting the stasis of a mechanistic universe (and the continuity of the self, which the Romantics note) by allowing us a glimpse at the full range of possibility – a transcendental “everythingness.”

Through this transcendental “everythingness” that is equatable to the totality of all potential states of being, perception, and knowledge, the idea of sublime-as-possibility also connects with the postmodern sublimes of Lyotard and Zizek. Lyotard recognizes the sublime as an ambiguous “event” which its percipients are unable to saddle with any concrete meaning. If knowledge and perception can be conceived of as a psychical tapestry, then this “event,” being a disruption of the general stasis of a percipient's phenomenological
and epistemological foundations, results in a shredding of those threads of knowability and understanding that compose that tapestry and allow percipients to rationally determine what the “event” might represent or signify. Indeed, in Lyotard's sublime, “time and sensibility” tend to have a “domesticating effect,” such that, with sufficiently applied reason and lapsed temporality, a pericipient of the sublime will, eventually, stitch together his or her torn phenomenological and epistemological fabric and make a meaning for that sublime “event” (Shaw 122). Lyotard objects to this process, insisting that the sublime needs to remain undetermined and free to interpretation, as those who patch over its abrogation are doing so to gain political or cultural power by preserving or creating an ideological framework into which the “event“ fits. We have precisely the same situation in the sublime-as-possibility. When a sublime object – like, for instance, video footage from the September 11th, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center – is perceived, it rends asunder the phenomenological and epistemological matrix that allows one to understand and know the object. What occurs is that the doors to possibility are thrown wide; a slew of potential futures, of potential consequences and potential resultant states of being that cascade outward from this sublime object (or “event“) are thrust upon a pericipient. He or she cannot help but wonder “why?” and “how?” and “what?” The future at the moment of perception, at the moment of viewing such a wide-reaching, devastating, and nearly inconceivable object, is fragmented into an incalculable array of potentialities that branch out from that object; of these potentialities, the pericipient cannot but help grasp,
among them, certain terrifying manifestations (a new world war, the end of America, his or her own death, etc.). Eventually, however, the sublime object and the field of possibility it reveals are narrowed and constricted. As with the case of the WTC attacks, governmental entities and various research bodies have explained the causes of the event and thereby patched over the phenomenological and epistemological cracks – and thereby preserved the ideological structures built upon those ways of perceiving and knowing – that the event caused. With the progression of time, the possibilities that may have arisen from the event have been winnowed down to very singular, very knowable, and very concrete streams of events that, retrospectively, one can perceive as having causally sprung from the attacks. And thus, as Lyotard says, the sublime object – that terrifying footage from a dark and chaotic day in history – begins to lose its power to be anything other than a narrative constructed by political bodies and ideologues. Because the field of possibility closes down, because it shrinks as possibility gradually becomes manifest and, therefore, can be laced with meaning, the ability of that sublime object to enact change (by shaking perception and knowledge and, thus, belief and ideology) dissipates over time. The “everythingness” of the sublime, of possibility, dwindles to a “oneness” – our ontological reality, which will always be interpreted by individuals and institutions with their own particular agendas and mediated accordingly.

Lyotard all but overtly acknowledges that his true source of the sublime is, in fact, possibility (and not the irrepresentable that he ultimately latches upon) when he says that the evaluation of a sublime “event” is
“always one of what 'will have been,' future-perfect, never one which provides a rule for the present” (Postmodern Condition 81). Here, he admits that what makes the sublime “sublime” is its ability to remain in a state of potentiality or indeterminate suspension between many varying interpretations. In order to be “sublime,” the perception of a thing must maintain the tense of the yet to be – that is, the manifest possible. Such perception encompasses an entire field of competing interpretations, meanings, and potential states of being while, almost paradoxically, focusing upon a handful – if not a singular – interpretation, meaning, or state of being from within that field. Ostensibly, what Lyotard describes is the notion that the sublime forces a percipient of a sublime object to recognize an infinitude of possibility (thus the openness of the “future” tense) while that percipient simultaneously and naturally chooses individuated strands of that possibility that he or she reasons to be most likely to become manifest (thus the certainty of the “perfect” tense). He is, in calling the sublime a perpetual resident of the “future-perfect,” compressing into a single grammatical term the experience of the aesthetic as both a suspension of sensibility in the vastness of possibility (and hence a source of awe and wonder) and an exercise of reason to select certain, usually ideologically threatening, individual possibilities from the multitude (and hence a source of fear or anxiety).

What we see in Lyotard is, then, a very pointed sense that what constitutes the sublime is an “everythingness” from which singular strands of meaning and interpretation are wrought. That Lyotard connects this the
irrepresentable makes sense, certainly, as the irrepresentable entails an openness and “everythingness” of interpretation and meaning; however, if the sublime were merely the irrepresentable, the endlessly remote, then, again, its percipients would be forever caught in the state of existential suspension – of awe and wonder – that is part and parcel of the aesthetic. Terror would not be part of the sublime equation, as no meaning, interpretation, or future possibility would be concrete or clear enough in its potential fruition to merit such reaction. Therefore, Lyotard, while extremely close to the core of the sublime, just misses the bulls-eye by folding into his idea of the unpresentable – essentially the possible – the terror of the sublime, which arises not from the perception of the whole of the unrepresentable or the possible, but from the recognition of single fibers that constitute that whole.

Zizek's sublime is equally interrelated with the “everythingness” of possibility, though in an inverse manner. While Zizek similarly argues that the sublime is “the key to undoing ideology” and that its primary function lies in destroying preconception and the stability of the symbolic order, he finds the locus of this destructive power in absolute lack, in emptiness (Shaw 138). His idea of the sublime is predicated upon the notion that a sublime object is not a transcendental thing (a Kantian “Thing-in-itself”), but, rather, a failed correspondence between the transcendental and the immanent (or, in Lacan and Zizek's terms, the “Other” – for example, a master signifier – and its supposed embodiment). Thus, for Zizek, ideas such as “God” and “the State” have no true basis in ontological reality; they are merely gaudy,
overblown signifiers that have no objective signified meaning or representation. There exists behind these master signifiers only a vacuum, a nothingness that is covered over by the sublime objects which purport to represent them in our ontological reality.

In successfully unpacking the sublime as a means for ideological implosion or mutation, Zizek swings his analytical lens toward the sublime object rather than the sublime feeling and, in doing so, becomes wrapped up in the content of the object – the subjective and ever-shifting aspect of the sublime – instead of exploring the sublime feeling, which is the stable and recurring prong of the aesthetic's dual nature. After all, if Zizek is correct, then all sublime objects, once recognized as sublime, should be either provocateurs of either mere anxiety (on the basis that they show that all our symbolic communication is founded on nothingness) or absurdity and humor (on the basis that our grand, awe-inspiring notions of the transcendental are ridiculous marionettes suspended from and set into motion by our own very pedestrian strings). In either case, the sublime, in a Zizekian framework, should ultimately preclude awe and wonder from the sublime feeling, as there is no transcendental, no master signified meaning, lying in wait beneath the feeling and its object of evocation. Yet this feeling of awe, of wonder, of suspension and astonishment, has been the overriding phenomenological characteristic of the aesthetic since it was first represented in art and discussed in scholarly work. It seems difficult to reconcile the notion that the sublime can break free from awe and wonder and still remain the sublime. Indeed, it is my contention that it cannot.
In implying that awe and wonder cannot be part of the sublime experience, Zizek has altered the fundamental nature of the sublime to the point where it can no longer be recognized as “the sublime.” What he has constructed in his theory of the sublime seems to be a theory of some sort of alternate aesthetic that seeks only to show the futility and meaninglessness of the symbol – an aesthetic of the void, perhaps. But in this futility, it seems Zizek has merely followed a forking path away from possibility. He reasons that sublime objects connect with a lack, but how is this lack made sensible to its percipients? Why do we not perceive a “sublime” object as precisely that, an avatar of nothingness? The reason is that we, the percipients of a sublime object, naturally fill in the blank space. The “everythingness” of possibility that I claim sublime objects point toward could just as easily be a nothingness if a percipient gleans no specific potentialities from that massed chaos. The whole of possibility is, truly, a both an “everythingness” and a “nothingness” – it is everything in that all potential states of being and eventualities lie dormant within it, but it is also nothing in that it does not yet have any ontological existence outside the mind of its percipient. A master signifier such as “God” has no objective ontological reality, yes, but “God” – regardless of its object-nature – is also a source of infinite possibility as a thing that, within some individuals' perceptions (namely, those who will find the symbol of “God” to be sublime), can do, know, and be anything. Those individuals who perceive a “God” object to be sublime will experience the sublime feeling and will go through all the motions concomitant with that feeling – awe and wonder, terror or anxiety –
as they perceive in “God” an infinitude of possibilities and begin to focus on specific manifestations of that endless magnitude. As an object of provocation of the sublime feeling, the concept of “God,” wherever it is found, has the capacity to point toward the realm of possibility and, in doing so, can instill the sublime feeling, regardless of whether that concept is ultimately hollow and devoid of objective meaning or not. Even if the sublime object is an empty vessel, even if “God” has no real basis in ontological reality and is an objective nothingness, the signifier of “God” still instills in some of its percipients the sublime feeling and, therefore, points toward the “everythingness” of possibility through that feeling and the natural interaction of those percipients with the object of its provocation. In this way, the “everythingness” of possibility and the “nothingness” implicit in Zizek’s theory are entirely compatible as opposite sides of the same coin. As Terry Eagleton posits in a brief examination of the sublime in his *Holy Terror*, the aesthetic is like a “fertile rather than barren void” in which “all and nothing are closely allied” (Eagleton 45).32 And, indeed, where Zizek spies ultimate lack through the sublime object, I suggest ultimate plenitude through the sublime feeling. If a sublime object denotes an emptiness, it is only emptiness in so much as the infinitude of potentialities the object points toward reside in a state of ontological ambiguity – a position of being not yet come to fruition. Zizek simply becomes enamored of this “not” in the “not yet-ness” of the sublime and, by connecting it to Lacan’s theories of the symbolic order (and, to a lesser extent, Derrida’s deconstructionist theories of language), solidifies it into a more final “never.”
What we have in the major pillars of sublime theory, then, are a series of puzzle pieces, incomplete on their own or incompatible when taken together but all clearly connecting to the same unexplored ideas of “the possible,” cosmic mutability, and ideological destruction. Some of the edges of these puzzle pieces line up perfectly with their linking center while others seem to face outward, straining away from the populous and threatening mutability inherent in possibility and snaking into other tangential circles of inquiry and discourse. Regardless, all these major theorists and their theories have, since the dawn of learned inquiry into the aesthetic, been circling the same concept, thrusting and parrying in the same general direction while never quite striking straight and true. The possible and its underlying cosmic mutability provide contours and a shape to that centrifugal force, that binding element. These foundational concepts bridge the gaps between disparate conceptions of the sublime and aid in understanding how all sublime theories fit together and complement one another, even if, ultimately, they lead toward divergent – but tangential – conclusions to the basic nature of the aesthetic.

All the theory and dense rationalizing and abstracting and postulating that lies above only bears fruit, however, if it stems from verifiable exemplars of the sublime aesthetic and has some inductive relationship with those exemplars (otherwise the discussion and analysis runs the risk of being overly abstruse or, worse, pure intellectual onanism). Therefore, it is imperative that support for the theory of the sublime as “the cosmic mutability that lies within possibility” – or, perhaps more simply, “dynamism
which threatens” – be found in those forms most commonly accepted as objects of sublimity: works of art and violent or massive natural phenomena. Indeed, only the careful analysis of these sublime objects’ content and the aesthetic feeling they produce can provide sufficient evidence to prove that the idea of the sublime as “dynamism which threatens” is not an arbitrarily chosen foundation but, rather, the idea that presents itself most forcefully upon close examination of art and natural phenomena that are subject to sublime objectification.

With that caveat in mind, I will now turn to the world of art and the realm of nature, so that the anxiety of change, the axial point of the sublime, might be verified at its source.
CHAPTER FOUR: THE ANXIETY OF CHANGE IN THE LITERARY ARTS

The conception of a sublime aesthetic that has its basis in possibility and cosmic mutability, in the remodeling or destruction of entrenched ideology, is supported by – and, indeed, arises from – its appearance in both artifice and the natural world. Though I have focused on the sublime feeling as a means of explaining why certain objects are labeled “sublime,” it is, of course, objects which incite the feeling and, without such objects, the sublime feeling and, thus, the sublime aesthetic overall, would not exist.

While the natural world may provide more universal examples of the sublime, the kingdom of art succeeds in delivering more vivid and complex objects of sublimity. Indeed, it was through the machinations of artifice and language – the “divine” rhetorical flourishes Longinus was enamored of – that the sublime was first recognized. Therefore, it behooves any examination of the subject to explore the arts before the natural world.

The existence of the sublime aesthetic stretches backward in time to some of the earliest artifacts of literary endeavor. Myths and legends are populated with semi-sublime moments and instances of the transcendental made imminent. Indeed, tales surrounding divine, religious, and spiritual forces have always been a source of the aesthetic, as is noted by practically every scholar of the subject when he or she invariably cites the
One could very easily argue that ancient texts such as the *Epic of Gilgamesh* or the *Ramayana* – both of which include interaction and epic confrontation between humans, gods, demons, and demigods – are the progenitors of the sublime in literature. However, few literary antiquities – even those as seminal as *Gilgamesh* or the *Ramayana* – are quite as obvious in their use of the aesthetic as the Christian Bible (and, thereby, to a lesser extent, the Jewish Torah). In nearly equal measure, the Bible includes sublime moments in both its Old Testament and its New Testament. Whether in the form of the unknowable God of the Old Testament or the intentionally ambiguous Christ of the New, the entire text is littered with instances of the aesthetic's potential evocation.

As regards the Old Testament, the book of Genesis is rife with morality tales (and their ancillary characterizations of God) that easily double as evocations of the aesthetic. Foremost among these tales is the Flood story, which is, of course, quite apocalyptic. In the Flood story, God decides that humanity has become too wicked and needs to be purged from the world. The means of this expurgation is the flood – a deluge of forty days and forty nights that encompasses the whole of the planet. The description of the flood's consequences tell of devastation, saying that:

"The waters swelled so mightily on the earth that all the high mountains under the whole heaven were covered... [and] all flesh died that moved on the earth, birds, domestic animals, wild animals, all swarming creatures that swarm on the earth,
and all human beings; everything on dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life died. He [God] blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the ground, human beings and animals... and the waters swelled on the earth for one hundred and fifty days” (*New Oxford Annotated Bible, Genesis* 7:19-24).

This passage includes the earmarks of potential sublime evocation; it describes an all-powerful force that incites wonder and awe – God's vengeful flood that subsumes the entire earth – and makes certain that this force entails considerably terrifying ramifications – for example, the end of virtually all life on the planet. God's power here, in the Flood story, is all-consuming, unrelenting, and filled with a death-dealing wrath. It partakes of Kant's mathematical sublime (flooding the *entire* world, a nearly unimaginable feat) and dynamical sublime (as one is led to suspect that killing everything on earth was hardly a chore for God) while also playing on Burke's notion of a thing that inspires fear in its violence. Yet this conjunction of awe and terror is not the end of aesthetic analysis, as we can query into the reasons that these particular images – a divine, disembodied force covering the world in oceans of water – might incite that particular feeling.

God, as an entity that is implied to hold infinite power, would, upon first glance, appear to be the true object of sublime evocation here. However, God is an entirely abstract force in the Flood story, a thing both unknowable in its motivations and unknowable in its ultimate goals. When one reads the passage above, one tends not to picture God as anything; indeed, God is a blank space, less a character than a narrative device. If one
were to attempt to explain God's motivations, one could only hold recourse to earlier passages in the Flood story which tell of God's anger at humans for their being "wicked" and having "evil thoughts" (Genesis 6:5-6). At no point is the reader made privy to the details of this "evil" or "wickedness" other than when the story mentions that "the earth is filled with violence because of them" (Genesis 6:13). Clearly, though, violence cannot be a serious moral failing as God uses violence to cleanse violence and would, therefore, be a poor exemplar for any moral code that denounces the concept. Thus, the anger of God is made understandable only as, self-referentially, the anger of God – that is, if God is angry, there must be a reason for such anger and one should not question its legitimacy or provocation. What we have of God's motivation for the Flood, hence, is simply "anger" at "evils" – an incredibly nondescript set of ambiguous terms. As readers of the story, we truly do not know what humans have done to be considered "evil," we do not know what sort of "violence" they have perpetrated, nor do we know why God sees their violence as "evil" but uses another form of violence to correct that wrong. Hence, as a character in the Flood story, God is, simply, a cosmic question mark, an unknowable quantity. This is important because, if God is unknowable, then the reader forms no real image of God from the Flood story. While Lyotard or Zizek might assume this lack of substance is what incites the sublime feeling (as one is suspended in the void of God), I contend that this lack only prods the reader onward, to something substantial, something he or she can react against in more ways than mere suspension. Indeed, in the Flood story, God is like an infinitely spread sheet
of unused paper: awe-inspiring, perhaps, but only in the magnitude of its being and in its endless capability to transform. One would not stand in terror of an infinitely stretching sheet of paper and, here, in the Flood story, it is not God, as a character in and of himself, that provokes terror, either. Rather, the full incitement of sublime feeling stems from the results of the actions of God which can be visualized as images, even if only piecemeal.

In particular, the true object of sublime evocation in the Flood story, the thing that a reader truly reacts to and against, is the image of the planet engulfed beneath oceans of water. For the same reasons God might evoke awe and wonder, so, too, does the flood, itself, evoke those feelings; it is both extremely wide-reaching, covering the entire world, and unstoppable in its destructive power. It differs from God, however, in that we, as readers, can quite clearly imagine a global flood, as we have previously been exposed to images of (or firsthand experience of) flooding writ smaller. Knowing the terrifying destruction of such ontologically real floods spurs in readers a more acute variation of the same terror, the same anxiety, over a flood that might occur worldwide. Without that previous image of flooding, without the knowledge of a flood’s power, the concept of a global flood has little connection to a reader and is, thus, most likely shrugged off as an abstraction that has no real bearing upon him or her because it cannot be imagined in any tangible sense. In this scenario, the Flood story cannot, therefore, provoke any meaningful psychological response – that is, the sublime feeling – because it is too phenomenologically and epistemologically remote from its percipient. It is only by witnessing the immanent
substance of floods (either firsthand or through mediated images) that one can psychologically perceive them – not just intellectually understand them – as a force of both awe and terror. In this regard, it would not be wrong to contend that sublime objects are, essentially, previously understood or known objects of terror or anxiety greatly (or even infinitely) expanded in size or power.

The true sublime object of the Flood story, then, is the flood itself and what lies within the image of the flood is what is most germane to this discussion. After all, the Flood is not just an avatar of wonder and terror; it is, above all, as the story tells, a cleansing measure that rids the world of all life not existing in the sea. While the weight of its violence tends to instill anxiety, its purpose is to erase the past and allow God to construct new futures from its rubble. Through wholesale destruction of humanity, the old “wicked” and “violent” symptoms of its being can be replaced by alternative new ways of being and of perceiving. By saving Noah and his family – the lone Flood survivors – God intends to wash away humanity’s old, entrenched ideologies (which have led to systemic violence) and substitute for them the belief systems of Noah and his kin (which should be more equitable or just, since Noah “found favor in the sight of the Lord”) (Genesis 6:8). Indeed, Noah is saved because he believes differently than the rest of humanity; his family is righteous because they do not participate in the violent systems of belief and being that have infected humankind. Thus, the Flood is, at its core, less the drowning of bodies and lives than the subsumption of ideas and beliefs. God spreads the Flood across the globe in order to make a full
range of possibilities available to the future of Noah’s ancestors, rather than forcing them to live within the constriction of a monolithic world of pure violence. With the Flood, God presents to the future of all humankind a vast panoply of potential ontological, phenomenological, epistemological, and ideological schemata; God, ostensibly, drowns the world in possibility so that a few chosen survivors can freely choose from amongst the infinity of belief and ways of thinking about the world and being in the world. When Noah and his family – the lone Flood survivors – exit their ark, God commands them to “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth” – an implicit exhortation to make manifest these new strands of possibility, these new ontologies, phenomenologies, epistemologies, and, subsequently, ideologies (Genesis 9:1).

That a reader may find the Flood wondrous is, therefore, not surprising. It ushers in an entirely new world of being, thought, knowledge, perception, and belief. Through the Flood, through the annihilation of entrenched systems of being and doing, God has swung wide the doors of potentiality, allowing the future of the world and humanity to be entirely free and open for fulfillment. Noah and his family can build cities, they can worship God, they can war on one another, they can turn back to “wickedness,” they can create new gods or found new nations or construct wholesale new metaphysical and existential philosophies, etc., etc. – the whole of possibility is available to them. So, in other words, the Flood impels its readers to recognize that there are forces in the universe which can make possible any (or perhaps even all) future states of being, perception,
knowledge, or belief – that is, that a cosmic mutability is forever waiting to destroy and reshape everything humanity is, knows, and believes. This is an overwhelming amount of potentiality to be reckoned with, so much so that, as Kant suggests, no one is capable of imagining it all.

However, such proliferation of futures is not necessarily what causes the “negative” aspects of the sublime: anxiety, fear, or terror. After all, the result of the Flood – a world swept clean of its own past so that a brighter future may be constructed from the rubble – is framed as positive, given that it stems from God, the object of worship in the Old Testament, and allows the righteous Noah to remake civilization. Rather, what provokes the feeling of terror in the Flood story are the injurious potentialities inherent in the “everythingness” the Flood spills upon world. If what the Flood does is usher in all possibility, then, necessarily, some possibilities will be harmful, threatening, or outright torturous. When a reader imagines the entire planet under crushing oceans of water, it is natural to conceive of terrifying outcomes arising from that mass drowning, among them death (which is quite terrifying unless one is devoutly adherent to a system of spirituality that teaches of an all-beneficent afterlife) and the end of civilization (and thus the cessation of all human-constructed edifices of power and meaning). Readers who are instilled with some measure of fear recognize, through reason (however transitory) a number of potentialities that are certain to cause foundational social, cultural, and personal change and, thus, lead to ideological collapse. Those individuals who read the Flood story and feel both the awe and the terror of the sublime's impact understand that (as a learned
response on more a microcosmic level) flooding and drowning are events that should feared. Those events lead to inevitable, inexorable change, which may not always be beneficial or beneficent. When extended to the extreme of *global* flooding and *global* drowning, those events usher in even greater change – cosmic mutability – which, just as with flooding and drowning on a smaller scale, may entail harms and detriments, but on a far greater magnitude of order.

Thus, what the Flood story presents is an event – the eponymous Flood – that has all the qualities necessary to evoke the full sublime feeling. As a sublime object, it can be both a source of awe, as it opens wide the gates to all possibility, and a source of terror, in that it involves coterminous events linked with destruction and forcible change and, therefore, previously learned by its percipients as loci of fear.

The New Testament of the Bible, not about to be aesthetically overshadowed by its more wizened counterpart, contains a plethora of sublime moments as well. While one could easily argue that the entirety of the *Book of Revelation* is one extended sublime moment, it is not the hallucinatory *Revelation* that most succinctly encapsulates the sublime of the New Testament, but, rather, the strange and abrupt ending to the *Book of Mark*.

Despite the prevailing characterization of the New Testament's central figure – Jesus of Nazareth – as a being of pure love, the final verses of Mark provide a much different perspective on the man. When Mary, Mary Magdalene, and Salome venture to Jesus' tomb after he has been crucified
and died, they find that, rather than being the tomb being sealed with an enormous rock as it was supposed to be, “the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back” (Mark 16:4). Inside, they find:

“... a young man, dressed in a white robe... and they were alarmed. But he [the young man] said to them 'Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples...' So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (Mark 16:5-8).

And this is the end of the book. The final sentiment expressed in Mark is one of “terror and amazement” – those two hallmarks of the sublime aesthetic.

Here, the absence of an object – the body of Jesus – rather than its presence has become a sublime event (or object). Mary, Salome, and Mary Magdalene know full well that the dead body of Jesus should inhabit the tomb. The fact that it does not, coupled with the appearance of the young man in white who proclaims that Jesus has been reanimated, defies conventional explanation. Death is oft considered the supreme immutable force in the universe; all things that exist must one day pass away, out of their current states of being. As such, death would seem to be, as Burke suggests, the master sublime event, given that it ushers in cosmic mutability that is total and irrepressible. Yet here, in the resurrection story that Mark provides, even death – an event that may be the conventional summation of
the sublime – is thwarted and cast into a state of alteration and mutability. The great unstoppable, Death, is turned aside and a new realm of possibilities and potentialities apart from the inevitability of death make themselves manifest.

The three women in the story stand in awe of the empty tomb due to the fact that, through the apparent defeat of death by Jesus, the realm of possibility has been opened to them. No longer is death an inevitability, no longer is it the concrete and stolid end everyone must face; rather, alternatives to death, whatever those alternatives may be (after all, the women have no idea where Jesus is, what he's doing, or how he came back to life), are now plainly viable in the event of a missing and resurrected Jesus. The sublime event of resurrection destroys the immutability of death and sets free the whole of possibility, of new and different forms of being, knowing, perceiving (and, thus, the belief structures that stem from that triad). Salome and the two Marys feel amazement because they are overwhelmed with the expanse of potential meanings, potential futures, and potential new systems of being and belief that could arise from the event of death's demise and immortality's rise. The conclusion to Mark begs the question: If a man can rise from the dead, what is not possible?

Equally, though, the women in the story feel terror. This seems counter-intuitive. Why would the women fear Jesus' coming back to life, if life is what these women know, are content with, and value? If life is the dynamo at the center of their ideological systems (which is the undoubtedly the case, given that earlier in the book Jesus promises as the reward to all
who follow him that they shall have “in the age to come eternal life”), then shouldn't these women be amazed and overjoyed, not fear-stricken (*Mark 10:30)*? The answer to this conundrum lies in change. Consider: if even death – omnipresent and insatiable – can be overthrown, then what cannot be changed? What cannot be subject to alteration? Terror creeps in as the women must realize all things are subject to cosmic mutability – no absolute constants exist. Not only does this mutability cause anxiety because it shreds the ideological core of the women, who, so certain in the power of death that they “bought spices, so that they might go and anoint” Jesus' putrefying corpse, but it also holds ramifications for reality beyond individual belief (*Mark 16:1*). Indeed, anything that can alter the rules of life and death is a pregnant source of fright due to the fact that a universe without constants – such as death – means a universe without the certainty of safety, of peace, and of order. Without the constancy and control which death represents, existence becomes a plain upon which vast horrors may arise just as easily as vast wonders. Thus, in the strange resurrection story of Jesus that Mark provides, the sublime feeling can be explained as Mary, Mary Magdalene, and Salome's forced transition from a state of stable ideology and myopic understanding of reality to a shattered state of belief which requires a broader, more expansive perception and understanding of existence.

I offer these two Biblical examples as evidence that the sublime feeling has remained (ironically enough, given my overarching thesis) relatively stable throughout recorded human history. As I will show momentarily,
literature roughly two-thousand years old exhibits the same evocative qualities of awe and terror (and contains similar descriptions thereof) that abide within the verse of a Modernist poet, the horror stories of a twentieth-century pulp fiction writer, or the Postmodern lunacy of a contemporary novelist. In this way, by pointing to the underlying commonality of the sublime aesthetic in literature from strikingly different periods of history and different genres, the contours of its firm, axial center will become ever more readily apparent.

Although instances of the sublime aesthetic that can serve as substantial objects of analysis and discussion can be found in the art of virtually any era, many of the most pronounced and effective of these examples lie within the purview of twentieth and twenty-first century literature. As writers of modern and contemporary ages have witnessed not only natural destruction and change writ large (as had authors from previous centuries), but also vast destruction and change brought about by human means and methods (certainly more so than in any other time in history), it is these writers who most acutely acknowledge the totality of the sublime and understand it as a dualistic aesthetic that includes feelings both uplifting and daunting.37

One of the most prominent and critically lauded of these twentieth-century scribes is William Butler Yeats. Much of Yeats' poetry focuses on the dialectical relationship between destruction and creation, an interplay primed for the generation of the sublime aesthetic. And, indeed, the sublime within his verse has not gone unnoticed, as critics have asserted, without
substantial complication, that Yeats’ “prophetic and apocalyptic lyrics of tragic joy descend from the Romantic sublime of [William] Blake and [Percy] Shelley and... the vocabulary of writers on the sublime from Longinus to Schopenhauer” (Ramazani 163). A key word here is “apocalyptic” – that is, a thing that, in its most fundamental form, uncovers a hidden truth and, in doing so, changes reality. Yeats' work obsesses over the eternal cycle – or as he terms it, “gyre” – of disintegration and reconstitution. It is this concern for endless mutability, this bent toward viewing existence as a perpetual series of apocalypses both microcosmic and macrocosmic, that lends itself to the germination of the sublime.

As is evident from the example of his apocalyptic poetry from the preceding chapter, “The Second Coming,” Yeats is oftentimes concerned with events that restructure and reorient the whole of existence and/or reality through destructive means. In “The Second Coming,” this destructive reorientation occurs through the Biblical allusion to the violent, hellish end of the world and Christ's divine “second coming” – relatively vast, cosmic events. However, the dualistic destructive/creative event need not be quite as grandiose or universal. Rather, within Yeats' poetry the locus of sublime evocation can also be, paradoxically, rather subtle – still resulting in the same sublime feeling that an Armageddon can produce but spawning from more relatively understated phenomena.

Thus it is that we have poems such as “Leda and the Swan,” a meditation on the Greek myth of Zeus' bestial rape of Leda. In “Leda,” the rape is described as:
A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast. (1-4) (Yeats 102).

At first glance, this stanza appears to offer nothing more than a series of images indicative of violation, as Zeus, in the form of a swan, holds Leda “helpless” under the force of sexual assault. By itself, the only aesthetic this passage seems to evince is horror or the grotesque, as “dark webs” caressing a woman's thighs can be viewed as an abrogation of normalcy or decency. The cosmosism necessary to evoke the sublime is missing here; the rape is characterized as but a singular, visceral, violent action. However, when considered in tandem with the next stanza,

How can those terrified vague fingers push
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
And how can body, laid in that white rush,
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies? (5-8),

a more complex interpretation of the poem begins to develop as the swan gradually takes on qualities of godliness, becoming a “feathered glory” that contains a “strange heart” – extremely hyperbolic and esoteric descriptors for a vicious animal. The swan, it seems, is no longer merely a beast, carnal and mindless, but an otherworldly force that, in its terrifying “glory,” causes Leda to loosen her thighs so that it may penetrate her; as Zeus incarnate it is an agent of forcible compulsion and violence yet also a source of wonder (hence its characterization as glorious) and the unknown (hence its
characterization as strange). That an act as brutally physical and immediate as a rape might be the station for the sublime has precedent within the aesthetic's discourse, as theorists of the feminine sublime such as Suzanne Guerlac and Barbara Freeman have long contended that the sublime “engenders itself through 'impregnating' the soul of the listener” and that it involves “the question of how to theorize ravishment” (Guerlac 3, Freeman 17). The violation has, therefore, the components of a sublime event: it inspires terror in Leda while simultaneously “holding her helpless” in a state of awe over Zeus' omnipotence (and perhaps omniscience).

Stepping away from the visceral nature of the rape and entering a space wherein its wide-reaching metaphysical and sublime properties are explored, the poem goes on to explain that:

A shudder in the loins engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead. (9-11).

Here lies an allusion to the Trojan War, which is partially a result of Paris eloping with Helen of Troy – the child who is conceived out of Zeus and Leda's copulation. The importance of this stanza is that it points to events yet to be. Zeus' seed contains the power to "engender" the future and, in effect, a sprawling panoply of events that are nearly synonymous with possibility and potentiality. From this one act of violent lust ripples outward futures of vast import, as the Trojan War was not only a bloody, terrifying affair (as the stanza details), but also one of the founding events for ancient Greek culture. Thus, the rape is the crucial point of conception for future
events both horrific and enlightening. Despite this duality, the potentialities that are most prevalent to the poetic speaker's mind are uniformly negative – for example, the burning of Troy and the death of Agamemnon. Even though an entire future filled with beneficent, positive eventualities seethes within Zeus' seed, it is those futures allied with death, destruction, and upheaval upon which the poetic speaker focuses. In this way, the rape is not only physically terrifying for Leda, but psychologically terrifying to its percipients, as the futures it (or events like it) ushers into existence will cause some measure of chaos and destruction to existence in general, and, therefore, lead to significant change for individuals who are entirely removed from the rape itself.

Yeats' poem does not end on a note of anxiety toward possibility and the future, though. Rather, it doubles back to the "glory" of Zeus and the awe-inspiring aspects of the event, asking:

Being so caught up,
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
Did she put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop? (12-15)

In this passage, the poetic speaker reveals that Leda was, in fact, "caught up" and "mastered" during the experience – that is, both physically and psychologically she was suspended by Zeus' all-consuming "brute" power. The "brute blood" that permeates the air – the overwhelming compelling force of Zeus – is rife with more than omnipotence, however; it is also brimming with "knowledge" – Zeus' omniscience and all the facts and futures
that constitute such a state of being. The speaker wonders whether, despite her terror, despite the fact that she naturally understood the rape to have negative and destructive consequences, Leda was able to “put on” that knowledge – that is, grasp some of its many facets for herself and her own more limited sphere of knowledge. Ostensibly, the poem implies that Zeus contains aspects of the transcendental that Leda, as a mortal quarantined in the immanent world, would want to possess or be a part of. Even though the god is “indifferent” to her (and humanity, in general) and generates terror both in his actions and in some of his actions' consequences, there is a positive beyondness, a totality of all knowledge, that is also part and parcel of his existence.

Therefore, what we have in “Leda and the Swan” is an event that involves a cosmic force that contains a transcendental “everythingness,” a boundless field of power and knowledge, especially knowledge of the future (as the lines pertaining to Troy and Agamemnon reveal). It is not too unfounded a proclamation to call this “everythingness” possibility, given that the two particulars of the “everything” of which we are made aware are not facts or abilities, but discrete events that stem from the interaction of the cosmic force and the mundane, local, and, most importantly, static world. The poetic speaker's revelation of the sublime is a revelation of change, of future potentialities cohering into existence and, consequently, shaking the foundations of peace and security (again, through the destruction of Troy, the war, and King Agamemnon's death), which leads to terror and anxiety.

Leda's exposure to Zeus' force is, thus, more a symbolic clash of static
beauty and chaotic sublime than a real physical act. Through this collision, Leda's body is ravished and upended, yes, but it is equally, if not more, important that her body of beliefs and perceptions and knowledge is ravished and upended as well. She is violated by a god, a god that knows all, can do all and, in being imbued with such qualities, is an avatar of possibility and mutability in the same way that Leda, a mere mortal of unremarkable existence yet unparalleled beauty, is an avatar of immanence and stability.

In his critical work A Vision, Yeats expounds on his use of such dichotomous (often cyclical) symbols and their meaning, asserting that the principle imagery within much of his work is the conflict between “Discord” and “Concord.” Concord, in Yeats' philosophy, equates to “the image of that which is changeless” while Discord is approximate to “that which separates the elements” – that is, that which causes things to be different (Yeats 413). As the antithesis to the changeless, Discord must necessarily act as the reification of dynamism and change or, more pointedly, cosmic mutability. In this way, Yeats' conceptualization of Concord/Discord can be viewed as the intrusion of cosmic mutability – the sublime – into a static world or system. In “Leda and the Swan,” the interplay between Concord and Discord is the struggle between Leda and Zeus; through the proliferation of and subsumption by Zeus' limitless potentiality, Leda – and the stable universe surrounding her – is impelled to change, to be differently, to perceive reality differently, and to know and believe a host of different ideas and precepts than she would have known and believed before Zeus' intrusion. And this is where the truest terror lies: in dynamism altering what we (Leda, percipients
of the rape, readers of the poem) hold to be concrete, true, and absolute.
Yeats' “Leda and the Swan” introduces a “glorious” and awe-inspiring object
of limitless possibility into a realm where possibility may, and in this case
certainly does, entail physical, psychological, and ideological devastation and
restructuring. Thus “Leda,” through its blatant use of conflict between
changeless beauty and dynamic omnipotence/omniscience, exemplifies the
sublime experience by corporealizing the violence and ravishment that
forcible cosmic alteration on an incorporeal, purely aesthetic level, inherently
imposes.

While Yeats' metaphysical poetry certainly explores the sublime with
its own particular nuanced grace, it is not the brightest and best example of
the aesthetic from the tumultuous early 20th century. That honor belongs to
H.P. Lovecraft, a criminally underrated horror and science fiction writer whose
short stories exhibit the most acute sublime sensibilities of perhaps any texts
in the history of literature (a hyperbolic statement, maybe, but well worth
argument nonetheless).

Lovecraft’s fiction drips terror and awe; indeed, his body of work first
popularized the idea of cosmic horror, a form of the genre that S.T. Joshi
claims “transfer[s] the locus of fear from the mundane to... the 'Great
Outside’” – that is, from those things we know can be sources of anxiety to a
realm beyond anthropocentric knowledge (Modern Weird 2). Lovecraft’s “The
Call of Cthulhu,” for instance, revolves around the potential destruction of
humanity by a heretofore unknown alien presence that has existed on earth
for millions of years. This alien presence – an immortal, omniscience
creature named Cthulhu – lies ever in wait at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean, communicating with human followers – Cthulhu cults, essentially – via psychic channels. These cults endeavor to reanimate Cthulhu (he exists in a liminal state somewhere between life and death) and help him conquer the world. The story is, on its surface, a tripartite narrative that details a series of investigations into and chance encounters with Cthulhu’s parishioners and, in the end, Cthulhu himself. In these encounters, humanity is shown to be relatively powerless, insignificant, and, on the whole, hopelessly adrift in a hostile universe.

From this skeletal description of basic plot outline, “The Call of Cthulhu” may not seem much more than a fantastical tale meant to titillate readers who are seeking some form of dark escapism. But such reduction is faulty, for it misses the intricacy of metaphor and the depth of philosophical thought that girds the nature and purpose of Cthulhu. As with much speculative fiction (horror, fantasy, and science fiction), the true substance of the text resides in the multivalence of its symbols and its unconventional – and perhaps uncomfortable – implications concerning the place and nature of humankind. Thus it is that through metaphor and unorthodox conjecture the presence of the sublime within the story reveals itself.

The central symbol in “The Call of Cthulhu” is the enormous, immortal, alien Cthulhu. The creature is described, in second-hand reports, as, physically, some chimeric merger of a dragon, a man, and an octopus, but on the scale of a small mountain. Here we are faced with an imaginary being that may challenge traditional boundaries of wholeness or purity (in that it is
not any *one* thing, but rather a melding of several), but includes no real
cosmicism, nothing that would, besides the significant size of the being, stir
awe. However, one of the story's narrators gives a more intriguing first-
person perspective of Cthulhu's physicality, saying that “The Thing cannot be
described – there is no language for such abysms of shrieking and
immemorial lunacy, such eldritch contradictions of all matter, force, and
cosmic order” (167). Immediately, with the intimation of Cthulhu as a thing
that “cannot be described,” the being becomes an object of potential sublime
evocation as it partakes in Kant's and Lyotard's respective theories that the
sublime “checks the ability of the imagination to represent an object” and is
ultimately the unrepresentable put forth in a form all its own (Shaw 80).
What is even more interesting about the narrator's description, though, is
that it includes a hazy and seemingly oxymoronic detail of Cthulhu's being:
that he embodies both “abysms” – that is, vast void spaces – and
“contradictions of all matter, force, and cosmic order” – that is, a great
panoply of oppositional yet co-existent ways of being. In this contradictory
characterization of simultaneous vacuity and plenitude, Cthulhu exists as
something similar to Zizek's object of the sublime. The creature is, much like
the embodied symbolic order that Zizek argues constitutes the sublime, a
conglomerate of disparate parts behind which stands a gaping vacuity of
meaning and reason. That it attempts to mask this vacuity in an
overwhelming plenitude and aggrandizement of characteristics is precisely
what Zizek says that a ”Thing-in-itself“ – that is, in this case an object that
presupposes some empirically manifested transcendence – must do to
conceal its essence, its “radical negativity” – that is, the fact that such a formulation of being is an unsupported paradox (*Sublime Object* 205-6). For Zizek, the core of the sublime ends with this paradox, this irreconcilable tension between lack and grand facade which leads to no further meaning. Certainly, it is possible to interpret Cthulhu as a figure that, despite (or as part of) its multifarious physicality, engenders horror due to the totality of its base vacuousness. In this regard, the alien being is simply a false Thing-in-itself, a tremendous spectacle behind which lurks abyss, and, thus, a literary precursor to Zizek’s sublime.

However, the nature of the “abysms” that underlie Cthulhu's being must be called into question as vacancies, for if this hollowness is not truly hollow, then Cthulhu is sublime in a slightly altered manner from that which Zizek might posit. After all, not all abysms (or abysses) are absolute in their vacancy – space, for instance, an arguable “abysm,” teems with objects and phenomena, as do other possible “abysms” such as the wide-flung oceans of the earth. And, indeed, on several occasions in the story the narrators hint that the endlessness that lies within Cthulhu and, moreover, within all things infinite or beyond human comprehension, is brimming with potentiality. Near the conclusion of the tale, the primary narrator, a scholar who has run aground of the various records concerning Cthulhu, exclaims, in reference to his knowledge of Cthulhu’s nature and existence, that “I shall never sleep calmly again when I think of the horrors that lurk ceaselessly behind life in time and space, and of those unhallowed blasphemies from elder stars which dream beneath the sea,” thus referencing abysms as places of boundless,
albeit horrific, plenitude (164). Again, when describing Cthulhu's abode, the same narrator explains that “only a single mountain-top, the hideous monolith-crowned citadel whereon great Cthulhu was buried, actually emerged from the waters. When I think of the extent of all that may be brooding down there I almost wish to kill myself forthwith...” (165). Here again, the narrator implies that a multiplicitous and terrifying something lies unseen in the voids that humankind cannot pierce. In both instances of referral to abysmal or abyssal places, the overriding feature of the locale is not vacancy, as one might expect, but an ominous anxiety over what might take haven within such voluminous spaces. The vast space itself, the abysm, is not the source of terror in the story, as Zizek's theory of the sublime suggests, but, rather, the potentiality of what might reside within that abysm: tremendous destructive forces. It is, to reiterate what the narrator says, “the horrors that lurk ceaselessly behind life” which spear his soul with terror, not the vastness of the unknown they inhabit (164).

When one applies this same line of thought to Cthulhu, it is entirely plausible to interpret the gaping abysms that lie behind his monstrous visage as immense spaces in which teem innumerable, unknown dangers. The story's narrators do not know the full extent of Cthulhu's power, nor do they know what other terrible entities or forces may exist in the universe. Cthulhu is an object of sublimity because he shreds their stable comprehension of what is possible, what might exist. That an immense, omniscient, potentially omnipotent being might lie dormant and entirely undiscovered beneath the world's oceans forces the narrators to confront the lack of human knowledge.
that becomes readily apparent in the face of the totality of the cosmos. For, if humanity was ignorant to Cthulhu for all-time, what else might humanity be blissfully unaware of? Cthulhu’s appearance, his very presence in the world, compels the narrators to recognize that their states of being and knowledge and understanding – the very groundwork of all their ideological structures – are predicated upon incompleteness. Thus, the abysms in Cthulhu’s being are not aporias of meaning and phenomena writ large, denoting an objective lack, but aporias of humankind’s knowledge and understanding, denoting the non-anthropocentric foundation of existence. What this means is that, if the lack underlying Cthulhu is not absolute or objective but merely a subjective construction fashioned from humanity’s ignorance, then other things – other entities and events and forces and phenomena – that are just as dangerous and terrifying as Cthulhu may exist within that lack, and will one day become manifest and known in all their horrific glory. The terror of Cthulhu as a sublime object is, ultimately, that he annihilates the assurance that humankind places upon its own perspicacity and body of knowledge. As the story’s primary narrator succinctly explains in his general philosophical outlook following his encounter with Cthulhu, “The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far” (139). Indeed, Cthulhu tears open the eyes of his narrators to vistas of possibility – terrifying, horrifying possibility, perhaps, but possibility nonetheless – and forces these individuals to accept that there is much, so
much, left unknown to humanity and much within that unknown-ness that is of distinct danger to humanity's continuation.

That Cthulhu is a sublime object that evokes terror through the magnitude and depth of his being is only a partial explanation of his usage as aesthetic construct, for he is not a simplistic purveyor of mindless destruction and purposeless entropy. Instead, Cthulhu, as explained within the story, has plans and purposes that reach far beyond the bounds of myopic malevolence. As one of the narrators, a police detective who has investigated Cthulhu cults, remarks with regard to Cthulhu's emergence into the world:

“the secret priests [of the cults] would take great Cthulhu from His tomb to revive His subjects and resume His rule of earth. The time would be easy to know, for then mankind would have become as the Great Old Ones; free and wild and beyond good and evil, with laws and morals thrown aside and all men shouting and killing and reveling in joy. Then the liberated Old Ones would teach them new ways to shout and kill and revel and enjoy themselves, and all the earth would flame with a holocaust of ecstasy and freedom” (155).

Here, the “terrible” things that Cthulhu will make manifest are revealed as, ostensibly, nothing more than change. Humanity will be “free and wild” after Cthulhu conquers the world, certainly not a state of being that one associates with worry and trepidation. Indeed, the notion of freedom and wildness carries with it mostly positive orbits of discourse; these concepts lend
themselves to romanticized images of majestic wolves running through virgin forest and eagles soaring high above pristine mountain caps – metaphors for an unencumbered simplicity that many, if not most, individuals yearn for. That Cthulhu offers freedom and wildness is not, therefore, an inherently negativistic quality, but, rather, may take on a malign nature when such freedom and wildness are set against some sort of preferable state of being – presumably, in the narrator's view, stasis and restraint. If existence “free and wild” may not be ultimately harmful (and might even be a beneficial alternative to static, rigidly structured life, leading to “ecstasy”), then the narrator's fright seems generated by Cthulhu's capacity to change the world and his status as a catalyst of dynamism. Cthulhu can make everything different – not necessarily worse, and certainly not necessarily better, but distinctly different, as he casts asunder established “laws and morals” and “teaches [humans] new ways to shout and kill and revel and enjoy themselves.” It is this ability to effect wholesale change, an alteration of everything we know and do and are, that terrifies the narrator. People have shouted and killed and reveled and enjoyed themselves for all of recorded history, and it is likely that these primitive actions will march onward, into the future, in some form. The narrator's concern is not that people will kill each other or that they will revel or shout, but that they will do so under new ideological, ontological, phenomenological, and epistemological schemata – that is, in “new ways” and for new reasons (those instituted by the alien entity).

As a sublime figure, then, Cthulhu's impenetrable unknown abysms are
not populated by terrors alone, but by potentialities of all sort, all manner of
unorthodox states and manners of being, knowing, perceiving, and believing.
With his monstrous, variegated countenance and deep internal voids, Cthulhu
acts as a symbol of all that is truly alien, all that is out of reach or beyond
human conception. The magnitude of his physical form and the depths of his
unknowability conjoin to inspire a sense of awe while his utter alienness and
the potentiality for change that such alienness entails evokes terror. In this,
he is aligned with the many conventional sublimes of Burke, Kant, Lyotard,
and, as previously discussed, Zizek. Where Cthulhu exceeds these sublimes
and supports the idea that the aesthetic is founded upon something other
than the irrepresentable or unfathomable is in his introduction into the world
of not simply destruction, but change. Cthulhu's sublimity stems from
dynamism, from the threatening nature of his potentiality for creating new
laws, new moral codes, new ways of existing; within his abysms lie yet
undiscovered and unexplored systems of being, systems which loom out of
the darkness to replace conventionality. Fear for loss of the comfortable
stasis in all things that adherence to conventionality cultivates is precisely
the bedrock of the narrators' terror when confronting the alien entity. In
Cthulhu, as in many of his other extraterrestrial and preternatural creations,
Lovecraft constructed a sublime object that was of great magnitude and
power and involved levels of irrepresentability and the unknown, but, more
importantly, also exhibited the deepest, most foundational characteristic of
the sublime: the threatening dynamism of potentiality.⁴⁰

Moving away from Lovecraft, at least temporally, the late twentieth
and early twenty-first centuries have remained fertile ground for the growth of the sublime within literature. A host of writers from all genres and styles of literary endeavor have continued to utilize the sublime in their work, among them one of the venerable deacons of postmodernism, Don Delillo.

While much of Delillo’s body of work could be said to contain trace elements of the sublime aesthetic, it is evinced most clearly in what may be his masterwork, *White Noise*. The novel is a meditation on death, mass media, and consumerism in the late twentieth century, as filtered through the experiences of Jack Gladney, an overzealous (and somewhat farcical) college professor. The narrative centers on Jack’s attempts to find meaning in the world as he navigates grocery stores and domestic life, television shows and news broadcasts, academia (he’s the chair of the Hitler Studies department at his college) and, ultimately, his own mortality. Indeed, it is this intimate struggle with death – and, in turn, the sublime aesthetic that partners so well with death – that propels the majority of the narrative and finds its grandest stage in the middle chapters of the book, when Jack, his family, and his community are confronted by what is termed, quite ironically and banally, the “airborne toxic event.”

The “airborne toxic event” is, on its surface, physical level, a massive cloud of toxic gas released from a secure tank aboard a train that derailed. The cloud engulfs much of the small college town in which Jack and his family reside, forcing them to flee their home and wander into uncertainty as disaster refugees. Jack describes the “event” as something of an enigmatic and compelling presence, saying that:
“The enormous dark mass moved like some death ship in a Norse legend... We weren't sure how to react. It was a terrible thing to see, so close, so low, packed with chlorides, benzenes, phenols, hydrocarbons, or whatever... But it was also spectacular, part of the grandness of the sweeping event... Our fear was accompanied by a sense of awe that bordered on the religious. It is surely possible to be awed by the thing that threatens your life, to see it as a cosmic force, so much larger than yourself, more powerful, created by elemental and willful rhythms... But this was not history we were witnessing. It was some secret festering thing, some dreamed emotion that accompanies the dreamer out of sleep” (124).

At first glance, it appears that Jack characterizes the toxic event as a relatively conventional sublime experience, very much in line with Longinus' “divine contagion,” Burke's “terrible objects,” or Kant's “formless... unbounded” objects (Shaw 13, Burke 36, Kant 98). The event is “terrible” but “spectacular,” fear-inducing yet awe-inspiring, a “cosmic force” that Jack admits is much more expansive – in both size and power – than any individual. Given this, the toxic cloud and its impact upon Jack conforms perfectly to mainstream theory on the sublime; Jack is enraptured by the thing's power and vastness, feeling caught up in something greater than himself even in the face of its destructive, death-dealing nature, and this enraptured state seems a symptom of his inability to conceive of the cloud's very existence, hence its dream-like quality. Not only that, Jack recognizes
that his perception of the event is divorced from history, a potential allusion to its existence as a pure aesthetic object.

If the effect of the airborne toxic event were limited to the exploration of awe and terror felt by the novel's characters, it might be worth citing as a well-executed example of the sublime aesthetic, but would need little unpacking or analysis beyond such mention. However, just as sublime objects in the Bible's tales, Yeats' poetry, and Lovecraft's fiction are wont to do, the toxic event reveals the aesthetic's substrata. Immediately following the Gladney family's flight from the cloud, they are sequestered in a government-operated safe zone. There, Jack's eldest son, Heinrich, embarks upon a life as an information magnate, a priest of all knowledge scientific. Crowds of refugees gather to hear the boy's opinions on the toxic event and its impact, with his knowledge taking on an almost prophetic undertone. The sublime toxic event provoked a transformation in Heinrich, who, before the spill, was a nerdy, borderline-sociopath with a receding hairline and an “evasive and moody” attitude that leads his parents to worry that he will “end up in a barricaded room, spraying hundreds of rounds of automatic fire across an empty mall before the SWAT teams come for him” (22). The sublime toxic event caused an alteration in the boy, a change from social outcast to divine messenger, all of which Jack thinks is a positive progression, saying that he will “Let him [Heinrich] bloom, if that's what he was doing, in the name of mischance, dread and random disaster” (128). For Heinrich, the confrontation with the sublime effected change, and unleashed another potential version of himself – one that had, presumably,
lain dormant for years but was made manifest by the cosmic prod of the toxic cloud.

Heinrich is not the only character upon whom the sublime works change. Indeed, Jack, himself, claims that the event has made him reconsider his diet and his choice of fatty foods, to which his wife, Babette, remarks that “I think it’s interesting that you regard a possible disaster for yourself, your family and thousands of other people as an opportunity to cut down on fatty foods” (128). While obviously a satirical take on the cavalier, almost callous nature of contemporary culture with regard to the human tragedy involved in disasters, the idea that, for Jack, the event is a catalyst for transformation and the opening of new possibilities (however banal) also provides further evidence that what the toxic event is, in all its massive force and destruction, ultimately a source of regeneration and new potential ways of being.

Besides this ironical (yet pertinent) commentary, Jack is changed in a far more profound manner; during the escape from the toxic cloud, he inhales its fumes and, upon being examined by medical professionals at the safe zone, is told that the chemicals that make up the mass now inhabit his body. It is at this point in the novel that Jack becomes a far more introspective and serious character, musing to himself that:

“Death has entered. It is inside you. You are said to be dying and yet are separate from the dying, can ponder it at your leisure... It is when death is rendered graphically, is televised... that you sense an eerie separation between your condition and
yourself... A network of symbols has been introduced... It makes you feel a stranger to your own dying” (137).

Because he has confronted it and it has invaded his very essence, Jack now perceives the sublime toxic cloud – death incarnate – as well as his own eventual death in terms of “networks of symbols” (once again harkening back to Zizek). He realizes that the toxic event, death, and all things of a sublime nature can be perceived as simultaneously personal yet impersonal, containing the seeds of both individualized effect and wide-scale effect. One person's televised disaster is another's immediate death, and vice versa. Jack's realization implies that the sublime is both macrocosm – the vast, powerful, unfathomable disaster – and the microcosm – the alterations to the individuals involved in the disaster. Ultimately, the macrocosmic sublime is, as so many theorists have pointed out, hollow, a mere “network of symbols” upon which percipients can graft any meaning. However, the macrocosmic sublime is the catalyzing factor for the microcosmic sublime, the point of generation for the meaning and the changes wrought to the individual percipients who attribute new meanings to the event. In other words, the sublime is brimming with potentiality and possibility for change – the cosmic dynamism to which I constantly refer – but only as it affects individual percipients. Here, then, White Noise seems to posit that the sublime object itself contains no potentialities; rather, the field of infinite possibility resides in the object's percipients, who, upon interaction with the sublime object, are spurred to new ways of being, thinking, knowing, and perceiving. In such a way, we are all carriers of the sublime – of death – every day of our lives; we
merely need a shock of the macrocosmic to cause that internal world of potentiality to bubble to the surface of our existences and transform us. It is as Jack summarizes, quite antithetically to Kant's notion that the sublime defeats imagination: “The toxic event had released a spirit of imagination... We were no closer to believing or disbelieving a given story than we had been earlier. But there was a greater appreciation now. We began to marvel at our own ability to manufacture awe” (147).

The novel ends on a note of indeterminate possibility, as well. The toxic event's one known lingering physical effect is that it accentuates sunsets, making their hues more radiant, almost otherworldly. In one of the finals scenes of the text, Jack explains,

“Some people are scared by the sunsets, some are determined to be elated, but most of us don't know how to feel, are ready to go either way... What else do we feel? Certainly there is awe, it is all awe, it transcends previous categories of awe, but we don't know whether we are watching in wonder or dread, we don't know what we are watching or what it means, we don't know whether it is permanent, a level of experience to which we will gradually adjust, into which our uncertainty will eventually be absorbed, or just some atmospheric weirdness, soon to pass” (308).

The toxic event has wrought change to the very air in the town – a change that may be beautiful and wondrous or a change that may be lethal and dire. That either beauty and stasis or death and still further change may manifest
from this transformation exemplifies the power of the sublime to push the realm of possibility and its threat of dynamic alteration into the phenomenal world. The airborne toxic event opened up new vistas of reality to those who experienced it – in the case of the newly vivified sunsets, vistas quite literal. Jack, Heinrich, and the people of Jack’s in community who suffered through the event can never perceive the world (or perhaps even themselves) in the same manner again; their deaths will always be known to themselves, their sunsets will always be magnificent (maybe too magnificent?), and their belief that a disaster is nothing but a televised experience will forever be blurred with their own experience of the toxic event. Whether externally forced upon them or pulled out of their own beings by the sublime cloud, the characters in the novel have been assaulted by a wealth of potentiality, of undiscovered ontologies, phenomenologies, epistemologies, and ideologies, all embodied in the terrifying chemical mass and the splendorous sunsets it has left in its wake. The text furthers the proposition that the choice of perception – of whether to latch onto the destructive negative qualities of the sublime object or to embrace its regenerative properties – lies entirely in each of its percipients. Perhaps, as Jack says, in the face of the sublime, it is best to be “ready to go either way,” to accept that, as the totality of potentiality, avatars of the aesthetic are simultaneous destruction and creation, death and growth, and, thus, to remain in a state of wondrous ideological (if not fully existential) flux akin to the sublime itself.
CHAPTER FIVE: SPECTACLES OF SUBLIMITY IN FILM

Literature is, of course, far from the sole exhibitor of the sublime aesthetic. While the mind’s eye may be able to supply infinite contours and layers of complexity to the written word, literature lacks the immediate sensory impact that another artistic medium – film – can provide. It is only in film that we find a full battery of visual, auditory, linguistic and narrative apertures through which the sublime may course. The combination of these various levels of experience allow the sublime to both create its greatest impact and utilize the near-entirety of the human sensorium to achieve its fullest realization. In the literary arts, we have, largely, only narrative from which to derive sublime experience. But in cinema, the aesthetic can filter through narrative, ambient sound, music, mise en scene, visual effects such as camerawork and lighting, CGI, and a host of other pathways. Thus, the ease of conveying the sublime is far greater in film than in other art forms and the likelihood of creating an intricate, multi-layered sublime experience through the medium's many facets outstrips the same potentiality found in literature. And, yet, despite this, what we discover in the cinematic sublime is the same as we discover in the literary sublime: a feeling of terror and awe evoked by things that are of great power or size. Indeed, the sublime of film, although arguably more resonant than that of literature, still exhibits a
deep substrata of cosmic possibility and still receives its power from the threat of dynamism.

Among the diverse and numerous movies that utilize the sublime aesthetic, few rival the complexity and artistry of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, one of the most critically lauded works of science fiction from the twentieth century and an artwork that has been referred to as “the supreme expression of the mathematical sublime in sf cinema” and a film that “adheres so rigorously to this aesthetic that its sf content can be read as the pretext for the representation of the sublime, rather than the reverse” (Robu 29, Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. 163). The movie, in general, follows the discovery of a series of mysterious, otherworldly monoliths. These monoliths – one found on Earth by humanity’s evolutionary ancestors, one found by astronauts during exploration of the moon in the late twentieth century, and a third found floating above Jupiter during a secretive research mission – are the central aesthetic objects in a movie pulsating with an abundance of sublime imagery. Monochromatic and superficially featureless, the true nature of the monoliths is unknown to the film's characters and, even to the viewing audience, is wrapped in ambiguity. As one of the researchers studying the moon monolith, Dr. Floyd, explains: "Except for a single very powerful radio emission aimed at Jupiter, the four-million year old black monolith has remained completely inert. It's origin and purpose are still a total mystery.” Initially, then, the monoliths confront the movie's characters (and we, the audience) with a hammer blow of the unknown. The inexplicable objects stand tall and defiant of humanity's ability to penetrate
their secrets either through imagination or, despite scientific research, rationality.

Indeed, the monoliths’ physical appearance and their placement within various shots promotes their function as visual metonym for the realm of unknown. Consider one of the shots of the first monolith (*Figure 2: Earth’s monolith*).

![Figure 2: Earth’s monolith (2001: A Space Odyssey. Dir. Stanley Kubrick. MGM 1968.)(image)](image)

As the monolith is captured in a low-angle shot, it naturally gains prominence and a sense of power as it looms into view, rising toward the heavens and out of reach of the spectator. We are made to feel small and insignificant in its presence, mere ants who must crane our necks upward witness the towering spectacle it provides. Indeed, the monolith appears as a rich nothingness blotting away part of the sun and, potentially, expanding ever outward, to the ends of our vision and beyond (quite literally, as the bottom of the monolith ensconces the lower edges of the frame and bleeds into spaces out of view).
The shot's composition lends ever more strength to the notion that the monolith is “above” or “beyond” the viewer, as, stark black and seemingly a plane of void space or nothingness, it stretches upward to a sky filled with familiar reminders of the cosmic: the sun, the moon, and all manner of brightly hued clouds that evoke images of distant nebulae. Thus, in this shot exist a variety objects that, aesthetically, point toward the vastness of the universe and existence itself. That both the sun and moon are captured within the frame seems to juxtapose the obsidian aporia of the monolith with the fullness of the universe while, simultaneously, joining the two in meaningful convergence, as though the supposed emptiness of the monolith is part of the cosmic whole, a necessary or inevitable aspect of existence.

How or why the monolith fits into the scheme of the universe neither the characters in the film nor audience members truly know; therefore, in setting images of the known cosmos – sun, moon, etc. – in direct tension (or balance, depending on the viewer's interpretive proclivities) with an image of the unknown – the monolith – the shot entices a recognition of the entire universe and, perhaps, existence writ large as places that include vast, alien, and potentially frightening swaths of that which is absolutely unknown.

The musical accompaniment to the discovery of the Earth monolith aids in establishing the sublime aesthetic, as well. When a tribe of ape-like proto-humans – the first beings to find the great black rectangle – stumble upon the object, they scamper about it in a frenzy of fear and discontent, having no idea what it might be or how they should interact with it. These primitive creatures are confronted with the unknown, with a thing that is
utterly foreign to their experience and utterly alien to their daily existence. It shatters their way of being in the world, their sense of normalcy, and sends them rushing about it headlong in a state of confusion. Chaotic, somewhat dissonant music plays over the scene, assaulting the film audience with the same sense of unknowability and confusion. In the music, the listener attempts to find recognizable patterns and conventional chords, but the score refuses easy melody or harmony, instead becoming an aural whirlwind that clashes against orthodox musical composition. In this way, it aids in promulgating the evocation of the sublime, as the music is every bit as alien and unknown to a listener of conventional classical scores as the monolith is to the early humanoids. Further, as the movie progresses and the monolith begins to influence the evolution of the primates, the music shifts from chaotic and frenetic to vast and cosmic, with Richard Strauss’ Also sprach Zarathustra blasting heavy chunks of monotone sound at the audience. The ponderous but steady beat of the drums and the rising bursts of brass evoke stately grandeur and a sense of the wondrous – a direct audio parallel to the visual aura of mystery and universality that shrouds the monolith. As it captures the vastness and supreme power of the cosmic through aural channels, Strauss' dense, booming tone poem – monolithic in its own right – thus assists in drawing forth the sublime aesthetic and reinforcing the characterization of the Earth monolith as a sublime object.

A later scene involving the second monolith, the moon monolith, evokes the same sense of vastness and the unknown. In the scene, a group of research scientists tread out upon the moon's surface to examine a
recently discovered and excavated monolith. The object is located, quite purposefully and appropriately, on the fringes of the dark side of the moon—an shadowy, twilit place surrounded by encroaching hillocks and desolate plains. The entire *mise en scene* is designed to capture film's audience in an intractable state of astonishment or fear, as it seems as though the whole of the universe—or, at least, a Lyotardian representation of the irrepresentable holistic cosmos—is splayed out before the researchers (*Figure 3: The moon monolith*). A symbol of the insignificance of humanity in the face of the entirety of the universe, Earth hangs on the horizon in the background, dwarfed by the sable land features of the moon and roughly the same size as the monolith itself due to forced perspective. By quite literally diminishing the sphere of human being and influence, the scene, conversely, reinforces a sense of spacial vastness and the enormity of the universe. Here, then, is a window of opportunity for awe and wonder to enter; if Earth is but a tiny speck against a vastness, then, the film implicitly questions, what miracles

*Figure 3: The moon monolith (2001: A Space Odyssey. Dir. Stanley Kubrick. MGM 1968.*)
and overwhelmingly powerful forces might exist beyond humanity’s reach and ken? Simultaneously, however, the darkening hills of the moon slouch imposingly to every side of the monolith’s excavation site. These hills, bathed in shade and looming over the scientists who desperately try to illuminate them with their meager lights, invite a sense of the ominous and the foreboding, as they conceal what lies beneath their sight and, therefore, provide abode to the unknown. Their darkness contains a visual foil to Earth—a negative contrast in which a bright blue, knowable and known planet is set against the pitch of an alien landscape both unknown and unexplored. Thus, the scene juxtaposes the safety of the known—Earth—with the threatening nature of the unknown—the dark side of the moon. In this way, the scene might instill a feeling of anxiety, dread, or outright fear, as the moon is represented as a place divorced from the logic, order, and, most importantly, familiarity of Earth.

Even in scenes not directly involving the monoliths, *2001* evinces aesthetic choices that lend themselves to sublime evocation. For instance, shots of the cavernous airlock of the Discovery One, the film’s primary space vessel, hint at fathomless beyondness. The tunnel resembles nothing so much as a field of black lines infinitely stretching off into the void of outer space (when the airlock door is opened) or a field of blankness (when it is closed). The seemingly infinite repetition in the design of the panels in the tunnel enhances the effect, suggesting a pathway to endlessness and eternity (*Figure 4, Discovery One airlock*).
The processor core of *Discovery One*'s onboard and lethally malfunctioning computer, HAL 9000, is equally indicative of vastness and the overwhelmingly infinite, as it is constituted of thousands of tiny strips of light arranged in sprawling succession throughout a large room. Indeed, as Bowman, the film's ostensible protagonist, floats into the processor core in an effort to disconnect HAL after it has killed the *Discovery*'s other astronauts, he is struck by the wonder of technology that lies before him, the sheer complexity of HAL's being. His face, upon which the bars of HAL's vast neural network are superimposed, registers an expression that can only be called the experienced sublime: wide-eyed, mouth agape, somewhere between and including both wonder and fear, astonishment and anxiety (*Figure 5: Bowman in HAL's processor core*).
Certainly, then, the above-mentioned imagery is all extremely fertile ground for the cultivation of the sublime aesthetic, given that vastness, tremendous power, and a kinship with the unknown are all primary sources of evocation for both feelings of awe and fear. The monoliths (and other visual and auditory cues) may inspire either reaction – and probably both – given that they contain unimagined and unquantifiable potentialities. They may be natural formations or products manufactured by aliens; they may be part of a divine being's master plan for perfection or part of a malevolent force's scheme to rent asunder the universe. Whatever the monoliths' purpose and their ultimate goal, the characters of the film (just as its viewers) are left wondering what function these objects may truly serve, with only the vaguest possibilities to guide them. Hence, through the representation of the monoliths as both agents of cosmic import and eidolons of the unknown (in shots and scenes such as the ones above mentioned), the film and, more pointedly, the strange rectangles at its core might very well be perceived as provocateurs of the sublime aesthetic.
A few scenes or shots that link the monoliths with a vast, universal realm of the unknown are not, alone, enough to support the contention that the sublime aesthetic evinced within the film is founded upon possibility and threatening dynamism, however. For this extension, we must turn to the movie's hallucinatory narrative, indebted as it is to purposefully ambiguous plot points concerning evolution, technology, and the abstract concept of progress.

As the film opens, we are introduced to a band of ape-people – early, primitive ancestors of humankind. These ape-people are extremely animalistic, having no conception of even the most rudimentary tools, let alone any form of technology. They scamper about, trying to survive in a harsh universe, subject to leopard attacks and the brutal advances of other tribes of ape-people. However, shortly after discovering the first monolith, one of the ape-men realizes that bones can be used as tools for hunting wild game and as weapons to repel the attacks of other competing groups of ape-men. Upon the revelation of tool-use, the ape-men kill and drive off another, physically stronger but less technologically evolved, tribe of ape-people, claiming a prime watering hole as their own and thus proving the value and ascendancy of technology for human progress. The scene of the conquering of the water hole ends with the lead ape-man throwing his bone-club into the air, where it spins and, through a masterful match-cut, “becomes” an orbital nuclear weapons platform in the late twentieth century (Figure 6: Match cut from bone to nukes).
The implication of this opening act and its transitional match-cut ties directly to the sublime aesthetic. The ape-people have no facility with tool usage before they encounter the monolith. They are vacant of all knowledge of scientific inquiry and, perhaps, even devoid of what we may conceive of as rational thought. Before their exposure to the monolith, the ape-people are, truly, more animal than man. However, once they have experienced the monolith and it has affected them, they begin to evolve, learning, reasoning, conducting experimentation with the world around them and, in the end, utilizing that world – in the form of tools constructed from it – to more easily and effectively exist. That the monolith is, therefore, a catalyst of evolutionary progress, of a revolution of thought and ways of being, doing, knowing, and believing, is quite clear. By encountering the monolith – a vast, cosmic unknown thing – the ape-people were impelled to alter their
fundamental conception of existence. The monolith rends asunder their primeval notions of how the universe operates (namely, as a vicious, unconquerable place of struggle) and, from the bricks of those simplistic edifices of thought, constructs new perceptual matrices, new systems of experiencing and thinking about the world (which became a place that might be mastered through the use of learned inquiry and tool-use). Viewing the monolith as a sublime object, it is easy to see how what lies at the foundation of its aesthetic experience is, thus, uncontrollable and threatening dynamism. The monolith’s enlightenment ravaged the ape-people, forcing them to change from simple-minded monkeys into an intellectually more advanced form of life: humans. That the change was threatening is obvious; in the scene where the ape-people first encounter the monolith, they appear frenzied, frightened, confused, and unsure of the object’s place in their world. Though they cannot vociferate or logically qualify their fear, the manic behavior of the ape-people reveals that they are acutely aware that this thing, this powerful unknown, contains the potentiality to tear apart their lives, and, hence, is worthy of wariness in the face of its intrusion into their world. The monolith's affect, though left unclear by 2001's general plot line, contains all the markings of sweeping, existence-altering, species-altering, and history-altering change – cosmic mutability.

The cosmic mutability that the first monolith provokes (in the form of the evolution of the ape-people) is neither entirely positive or negative, but, rather, includes both constructive and destructive manifestations. The use of bone tools allows the ape-people to survive more expeditiously, yes, but it
also introduces armed warfare and the wholesale massacre of other “different” groups of beings, as is evidenced by the deadly battle for the watering hole. The match-cut to end the first act of the movie further solidifies this confluence of construction and destruction, as the bone – at once a symbol of both evolution and violence – is transformed into orbital nuclear armaments. Through this parallel, it becomes apparent that the monolith has offered up progress, certainly, but progress that includes an inevitable march from simple bone tools to complex atom-smashing weaponry. Whatever force the monolith exerted upon the ape-people contained both the seeds of creation, as new technologies sprang from its incitement, and the seeds of destruction, as the resultant tools constructed from scientific and intellectual discovery became the very hardware of death. Within the monolith's forced evolution lurked infinite potentialities, including both the potential for the expansion of the human race and its eventual exploration of the stars (as the movie provides evidence that humanity has begun to colonize the moon and explore other planets) and the potential to annihilate the entire Earth and all its inhabitants. To every creative or constructive use of intellect or scientific progress an antipodal destructive use also slouched in waiting. Thus, the catalyzed evolution that the monolith bestowed upon humankind reveals itself as a cosmic mutability that contains an infinite field of possibility for humanity, the Earth, and the universe as a whole (at least as far as humanity and its technologies may affect it).

To further underscore the idea of all-possibility residing within the evolutionary propulsion of the monolith, *2001* includes the subplot of HAL 203
9000's collapse into murderous self-preservation. HAL, a self-conscious artificial intelligence that operates and maintains most of Discovery One's core functions, malfunctions as the ship and its crew journey to Jupiter on a mission of exploration. Upon realizing that HAL may be incorrectly operating and may be endangering the mission, two of the mission crew – Bowman and Poole – decide to disconnect the A.I. if it continues to present problems. HAL hears their plan and, to assure its survival, systematically kills everyone aboard the ship save Bowman, who ultimately tears apart HAL's processor core to prevent his own demise.

In HAL's homicidal defense of itself, the film presents the wavering dichotomy of technology's – that is, progress's – existence and impact. On one hand, HAL is an incredible tool; it is a computer that is remarkably self-cognizant and so sophisticated that it can be trusted to guide humans to other planets. With HAL and technology of its ilk, humanity is capable of exploring the universe and, perhaps, given HAL's self-awareness, even creating life itself. Yet, by the same token, HAL is an imperfect machine, a murderous, malfunctioning computer intelligence that perceives itself as supreme to humanity and, ultimately, would kill to retain that supremacy. Here, then, 2001 reveals progress and technology – those direct manifestations of the monolith's influence – as mixed blessings, containing both positive repercussions as well as negative outcomes. Technologies such as the bones wielded by the ape-people and the HAL system as utilized by the astronauts are means to infinite ends; they open doors to further and increasingly complex manifestations of progress both constructive (for
example, increased survival for the ape-people and intragalactic exploration for the astronauts) and destructive (for example, the violent overthrow of other tribes of ape-people and HAL's massacre of the astronauts). In other words, intellectual evolution and technology have allowed humanity to breach a wider, conceivably limitless, realm of possibility that includes benefit and harm in equal measure. The alteration of humankind that the monolith provoked let loose a river of new, otherwise inaccessible possibilities that, over centuries and millennia, forked exponentially. The ape-people, for instance, could not have known that the use of a bone to fight other ape-people for water would lead, implacably, to a self-conscious machine; and yet within that evolution, the germinal point of mutability that the monolith forced upon the ape-people, the potentiality for HAL's eventual manifestation already existed. Thus, HAL serves to convey the full range of possibility – from grand space-travel to sterile, calculated murder – that the monolith's change has wrought and, in doing so, provides evidence that what pulsates at the heart of the sublime is unbridled potentiality.

Bowman's encounter with the third monolith, the Jupiter monolith, is equally subsumed in notions of uncontrollable change and endless possibility. Upon ejecting from the useless *Jupiter One* following HAL's dismantling, Bowman drifts into orbit around Jupiter. There, he discovers a monolith floating high above the planet. He has no time to study the object, however, as it pulls him into itself, the imposing onyx slab suddenly becoming permeable. Once inside the monolith, Bowman sees and experiences progressively older variations of himself. He is subject to an uncontrollable
force that pushes his body toward new states of decrepitude and increasing age until, finally, he has grown completely infirm and near death. As he reclines in his deathbed, the monolith appears in the room and he reaches out for it in appellation (Figure 7: Bowman and the monolith). But, of course, there is no reprieve from the monolith's power to alter and, ultimately, Bowman dies. Inside the monolith, Bowman is completely at the mercy of the insistence of change, the overwhelming onslaught of progress – even when that progress means breakdown, entropy, and death. Death, though, is also but a minor barrier to the cosmic mutability that resides within the monolith, as when Bowman dies, he is immediately reborn, evolved, as a cosmic being, himself; he is turned into some new form of life, some radical and bold evolutionary form – a “star child.” The film ends on this image: Bowman, the newly evolved and totally unknown being, floating freely in awe, mystery, and perhaps ominousness, above Earth (Figure 8: Bowman as the Star-Child).
What we find in Bowman’s experience inside the monolith is, hence, pure dynamism. Bowman is changed first from a young man to an old man, an alteration he cannot halt nor can he even impede; he can only stand idly by and watch the horror of his body’s collapse and failure. As is evidenced by his reaching out to the monolith in supplication, Bowman desires either an end to the incessant flow of change (for example, aging) or escape from the powerless state of being a frail, relatively insignificant human. He is terrified of the fragility of his own being in the face of the universal – that is, the cosmic mutability that washes over him and causes him to age and die. Within the monolith, the astronaut is ensconced in a reality in which stasis and stability are but fleeting wisps of a dream. The force of dynamism is so strong, in fact, that it even defeats death – what is often considered the ultimate stasis – and compels Bowman to take on another form after his demise. It is in this new form of being, this “star-child” that Bowman becomes, that the realm of all potentiality once again looms large. As the
star-child hangs over Earth, fetal and awaiting its full development, its full
manifestation, so, too, does all of possibility gestate within its image. After
all, there is no rationale given for Bowman's transformation, nor any
indication of what he, in his evolved state, may think or do. Just as with
technology's proclivity toward dualism, the Star-Child Bowman may destroy
the entire world with heretofore unknown powers or, equally likely, he may
lead it into a new dawn of enlightenment and prosperity. His entire being
has become sublime – awesome and wondrous in its epic, cosmic
implications and appearance yet simultaneously anxiety-producing or outright
terrifying, given that he may wield unknown forces and unknown agendas
against Earth and its peoples, forcing ever more destruction and,
consequently, change. Whatever the purpose of Bowman's metamorphosis,
only one idea remains clear by the end of the film: that the universal force of
dynamism, as represented in its readily traceable distillations of biological
evolution and technological progress, is, heedless of its destructive or
creative consequences, absolutely unrelenting.

Ultimately, then, 2001 presents a series of objects and events that are
fully capable of evincing the feeling of simultaneous awe and terror –
including, but not limited to, the monoliths, HAL, and Bowman's
transformation into the Star-Child. These objects and feelings are bound up
together with energies and elements far beyond human mastery – namely,
universal change in all its various formulations and manifestations (evolution
and technological advancement being the two most readily used examples in
the film). Indeed, change, as envisioned in 2001, is uncontrollable and all-
consuming – cosmic, for all purposes. Just as the ape-people cannot help but be impelled to evolve and develop the use of tools, so, too, is Bowman indelibly forced to age and evolve into a new form of life. Within this cosmic change, this dynamic alteration, lies an infinitude of potential future states of being and knowledge, both constructive and destructive. As is exemplified in the dichotomous nature of HAL as both wondrous tool of discovery and terrifying instrument of death, as well as in the contrast between technology’s use for space exploration and nuclear war, the field of possibility that pools dormant and waiting within the monoliths’ overwhelming dynamism is absolutely holistic, encompassing poles of creation and destruction. What may result from this forcible universal change has, truly, the capability to be beneficial or harmful in any degree. Thus, in virtually all its major narrative conjunctures, its use of vast and mysterious mise en scene, its brilliant score, and even its editing choices, 2001 presents an experience – both for its characters as well as its audience – that underscores the immense power of change and the multiplicitous (and not always “positive”) nature of the results of that change. In this regard, the film’s sublimity, its ability to evoke awe and terror, stems from cosmic mutability and the realm of potentiality that such mutability catalyzes.

Despite its near-perfect evocation of the aesthetic, 2001 is, obviously, not the only example of the sublime in cinema. Indeed, many other films exhibit aspects of the sublime, even if not in as full or complete a manner as Kubrick’s science fiction opus. Zombie movies, for instance, are rife with Kant’s “mathematical sublime” – that is, the sublime of multiplicity and
physical vastness. Kant claims that this variation of sublimity arises when one perceives “what is large beyond all comparison” and that thing’s “magnitude progresses without hindrance to infinity” (Critique 103, 111).

And so it is in many zombie films, where the sublime object, the thing stretching out toward infinity, is not a singular entity but, rather, oceans of mindless, putrefying undead consumers ever marching onward.

Consider George Romero's classic Dawn of the Dead and its 2004 remake by Zack Snyder. Both of these movies, though far different stylistically, rely on images of extreme, threatening plenitude to convey a sense of the apocalyptic nature of their narratives. In Romero's 1978 film, a small band of survivors of a zombie plague find refuge in a vacant shopping mall. There, they are perpetually confronted with an endless torrent of the undead, almost uniformly in groups. Whether inside or outside the mall, the survivors meet with hordes of attackers rather than singular monstrosities (Figure 9: Zombie shoppers, Figure 10: Zombies in parking lot).

![Figure 9: Zombie shoppers (Dawn of the Dead. Dir. George Romero. Laurel Group, Inc., 1978.)](image-url)
Individual zombies, while terrifying in their own respect as objects that simultaneously inhabit both the spheres of life and death and, thus, break down the binary opposition between the two, do not command any sense of the widespread or the cosmic and, therefore, simply cannot evoke awe or wonderment. These beings are, after all, little more than shuffling piles of angry meat. However, in zombie films like *Dawn of the Dead*, the epidemic that has reanimated the dead is, explicitly, apocalyptic in proportion, encompassing the entire globe. It is for this reason that Romero and his later imitators capture crowd scenes of the undead rather than scenes of single zombies. One zombie meandering in the mall parking lot would not convey any sense of the all-encompassing nature of the plague; dozens (and, in the 2004 remake, hundreds or thousands) of zombies wandering the parking lot, on the other hand, evoke an atmosphere of totality, of the nature and power of the epidemic as truly world-consuming. These scenes of multiplicity partake in precisely what Kant describes as the mathematical
sublime, as the sheer number of infected undead overwhelm a percipient's recognition and leave him or her feeling awestruck in the face of a force so massive, so nearly infinite. The more zombies, the more acute the sense of awe and wonder at the sheer scale of the apocalypse, as is evident in scenes from Snyder's 2004 *Dawn of the Dead* remake in which the undead stretch to the edges of the cinematic frame and beyond, into an unknown but threatening darkness (*Figure 11, Zombie horde*). As they combine the awe of magnitude with the terror of radical change, all these images of zombie mayhem are viably capable of evoking the sublime aesthetic.

What lies beneath this evocation is, as already intimated, change. For, what is a zombie but a radically altered human being, a post-human individual with, quite simply, different desires and thought patterns from those of the living? The undead are, for all rights and purposes, nothing more than humans subjected to dynamism and irrevocably changed in their underlying ontological, phenomenological, epistemological, and ideological foundations. Movie characters and audiences are horrified by the zombie
because it violates conventional norms of being (for example, it is both dead and alive), thinking (for example, it clearly has desires yet seems divorced from higher order thought), and perception/belief (for example, it values others like itself but seeks to destroy human life). But, in reality, these are alterations without objective value; they are neither “positive” or “negative” but, instead, merely different from conventional, known, and stable forms of being, thinking, perceiving, and believing. The characters in a zombie movie (and the audience watching) cannot possibly know what the eventual manifestations of the extreme change from living to undead, from humanity to zomb-anity, might entail. A society consisting solely of the undead, of only zombies, may, indeed, be a peaceful utopian world free from emotional or psychological turmoil, and, perhaps, characters and audiences should welcome a transition into a state of zombiehood (film zombies, as mentioned above, rarely fight amongst one another and seem to never be internally conflicted or suffer from ennui or existential angst). Nonetheless, characters and audiences fear fundamental changes – not for the sake of fearing death or undeath in and of itself, but for the sake of fearing forcible alteration of known, comfortable, static ways of being, thinking, perceiving, and believing. Thus, it is only as humans who view the change from human to zombie as a destruction of the known that characters and audiences find the zombie a figure of terror.

In the two Dawn of the Dead films and other zombie movies, the evinced sublime aesthetic can, therefore, be reduced to a threatening dynamism that swings wide the gates for all possibility. The alien nature of
the zombies, in acting as embodied forms of extreme change, precipitate terror or dread while their sheer number, which points toward endlessness and total consumption, tends to instill awe. Taken together as one perceived aesthetic feeling, then, the sublime of zombie movies becomes the fear of unstoppable change from known states to unknown states and the wonder at the magnitude of this change – that is, the scale of the dynamism and the infinite number of potential outcomes that dynamism may cultivate.

Another film that firmly evinces the sublime aesthetic is Frank Darabont's *The Mist*, an adaptation of a Stephen King novella of the same name. In *The Mist*, a strange, near-impenetrable haze descends over a small, rural Maine town and its surrounding environs (*Figure 12: The mist*). Within the haze lurk innumerable creatures previously unknown to any human taxonomical system ever devised (and many of which exhibit lethal intent). The town's inhabitants become, naturally, confused and distressed by the phenomenon, as it appears to have no end and has swept over the
town without notice or obvious reason; moreover, the fact that the mist brings with it (but conceals) a series of threatening monsters only heightens the paranoia it instills. The exceptionally ambiguous yet dangerous nature of the mist also forces the townspeople to contemplate its many meanings. Some characters believe the mist is the wrath of God, come to judge sinners; others contend that it’s a top secret military or government project gone awry; still more factions see it as nothing more than a mundane weather event that will, surely, blow away.

On its face, then, the mist is an all-consuming unknown. It provokes a sense of awe in that it is seemingly infinite and relentlessly pervasive and, equally, it provokes a sense of terror at the deadly creatures that lurk within it. Just as importantly, it draws its percipients into a state of reflexive discursive proliferation, as they try, desperately, to determine why the mist exists and how best it might be dealt with. In this, in its ability to excite both awe and terror while holding a magnetic attraction over its percipients due to its unknown nature, the mist can easily be assessed as a sublime object. Indeed, much like the Romantic idea of a sublime, in which the individual is “lost to the actualities that surround” himself or herself and, psychologically and emotionally, becomes one with the sublime object or event, so, too, are the characters in *The Mist* lost to the normalcy of their world, the commonplace actualities of their daily lives which are hidden beneath the mist (Coleridge 87). As well, these characters, like Romantic percipients of the sublime, become one with the mist when they enter into it, as they are psychologically and physically subsumed by its opacity and, almost without
fail, never return from its gray tendrils. The parallel to the Romantic sublime is especially pointed when one considers some of the advertising materials that were produced for the film. The primary movie poster from the United States, for instance, depicts an anonymous man and boy standing, backs to the viewer, gazing out upon the vast bulk of the mist (Figure 13: Mist poster). This is an interesting choice of image to encapsulate the film's overarching aesthetic, if for no other reason than that it almost perfectly doubles as a contemporary re-imagining of Caspar David Friedrich's Wanderer above the Sea of Fog, a famous Romantic painting that, in its depiction of a lone figure facing off against a vast chasm of fog, has been frequently cited as a quintessential visual example of the sublime. In both
poster and painting, the faceless wanderer, a figure dislocated from safe, conventional (and most importantly static) place and being, is forced to confront a tremendous, seething field of the unknown, as embodied in the mist/fog (Figure 14: Caspar David Friedrich’s Wanderer above the Sea of Fog). What lies before each figure is pure possibility – a space paradoxically blank yet filled with untold wonders and dangers, pleasures and pains. The one difference between the two is obvious, though: where the Romantics focused on the creative potentialities of the sublime and, thus, perceived it as a positive transcendental experience (as is evidenced by the wanderer’s elevated position above, or in mastery of, the fog), The Mist concentrates almost exclusively on the negative and destructive potentialities that lie
waiting in the sublime miasma (as is evidenced by the man and boy’s placement *below*, or in supplication to, the mist).

Indeed, the film provides an almost unbearably dark vision of the sublime. The divergence of opinion as to the nature of the mist, for instance, should be an exercise in the play of meaning, an opportunity to evolve numerous strains of discourse. However, beneficent or even impartial origins and purposes of the mist are quickly dispatched by the townspeople, who concentrate solely on the harmful or destructive possibilities that might spawn from the event. While a faction of the townspeople splinter into what is functionally a doomsday cult, welcoming the annihilation of the world by a vengeful God, other individuals decide to escape the mist, fleeing the town and its monsters. As these people attempt to extricate themselves from the mist's consumptive power, they find that it has, seemingly, no end. Rather, they encounter field after field of unknown grayness and more creatures both threatening and awe-inspiring, including one beast that towers over them in its docile tread (*Figure 15: Docile, awe-inspiring monster*). As time passes and the fleeing characters encounter no end to the mist, they become

*Figure 15: Docile, awe-inspiring monster (The Mist. Dir: Frank Darabont. Dimension Films, 2007.)*
distraught, perceiving no safe, static haven in its wild disorder. As a result, these characters, save one, commit suicide; they believe a world without a knowable order and a persistent, stable core is not a world worth living in. Despite the fact that these characters truly have no idea what may further lie within the mist (or even what the monsters’ appearance entails), they end their lives, being so enamored with the notion of stasis and certainty that its dissipation causes them to lose all hope in constructive, beneficial futures. Thus, what these characters perceive is only the negative potentialities of the sublime – that is, a world ever populated with dangerous predators and death – rather than the full totality of possibility that is concomitant with the mist. Indeed, the very appearance of a creature that causes them no harm but, instead, only looms enormous and wondrous out of the fog, provides evidence that non-destructive potentialities may also become manifest as a result of the changes wrought by the mist.

The conclusion of the movie serves to solidify this reading, as the lone remaining character witnesses platoons of army soldiers dispersing the mist and incinerating attacking monsters. The implication here, in this rescue, is that no force of dynamism is everlasting, otherwise it would become a default position and, hence, congeal into a static state of being in and of itself. Beyond this implication is also the notion that percipients of sublime events and objects should recognize that the sublime event – the period of dynamism and change – is not perpetual and will, in fact, always lead unto new forms of being, perceiving, knowing, and believing which will, in turn, eventually become concretized and act as new bastions of stasis. In other
words, no matter how terrifying the tide of mutability may be, it will always recede and leave in its wake new edifices of ontology, phenomenology, epistemology, and ideology in which percipients might take shelter and find peaceful stability.

As bleak as *The Mist* might be in presenting the “negative” or harmful potentialities of the sublime's dynamism, it has a forceful counter in a host of disaster films that seem to revel in the aesthetic and present its effects as, quite possibly, highways to some sort of “positive” or constructive change. Among these many movies are Val Guest's overlooked science fiction classic *The Day the Earth Caught Fire* and the “disaster porn” features of Roland Emmerich.

All of these aforementioned films operate upon the same general conceit – namely, that of apocalypse. In each, the earth is threatened by a disaster of massive proportions and power, a sublime event capable of evoking awe due to its global scale and terror due to its predilection for inciting extinction.

*The Day the Earth Caught Fire*, for instance, opens on an apocalyptic event already in progress. The title sequence is superimposed upon a London backdrop, but a London unlike anyone has ever seen (*Figure 16: London desert*). The entire city is empty and desiccated, a desert land in which the Thames is nothing more than a cracked gash in the land and London Bridge appears only a distant mirage. Immediately after the title sequence, the film cuts to a solitary man traversing the ghostly, vacant
streets of the city, the usual bustle of pedestrians and traffic as evaporated as the Thames (Figure 17, Alone in London). Both of these images serve to introduce the primary aesthetic sensibilities of the entire film: uncertainty and the unknown. We, the audience, have no idea why London has been turned to a barren wasteland, nor do we know where all its inhabitants have gone (are they dead? in hiding? moved to another place?). The film’s opening scenes set its perciipients adrift in the middle of a sublime event in which something of great power and magnitude has wreaked (or is in the process of wreaking) very clear alteration to the stasis of London as a vibrant, lively city. But what this “something” may be, however, is unknown.
and, equally, the ramifications of the “something” are entirely unclear. The film immediately evinces sublimity here in that an individual watching its action unfold is liable to feel both awe and terror at the idea that a metropolis as sprawling and important as London might be made uninhabitable – changed at its basest level from place of civilization, culture, and growth to a place of desolation, chaos, and decay. The scenes are, thus, emblematic of the dynamism that is the keystone of the sublime.

However, it is not merely the fact that London is in a state of flux that provokes wonder and anxiety; it is the fact that the safety and stasis of the known world might be replaced with an unknown, harmful potentiality. Such an idea is reinforced by the movie's narrative, in which Earth has been shifted out of its orbit by nuclear weapon tests and is, therefore, experiencing harsh meteorological shifts. The majority of the film dedicates its time to uncovering this fact and then, subsequently, determining a solution that may save the planet. The answer that scientists stumble upon is – ironically – more nuclear explosions to propel the earth back into its “proper” position.

In this central conundrum we find more positive valuation of stasis. If the sublime event – the impact of the drastic weather phenomena that have blighted the world – is equated with the earth's shift off its usual orbit, then the sublime is, simply, change. Objectively, it is no better for the earth's weather to be hotter or colder, more or less storm-laden; rather, these are merely dynamic alterations to the planet. The characters in the film are determined to push the globe back into its “natural” orbit because they fear
what change may bring: new, forced ways of being.

It is entirely possible that life may be able to adapt to the earth's new orbit, but such adaptation would require vast reformulations of conventional systems of existence, thought, perception, and belief. The potential manifestations these changes might entail subconsciously terrorize the characters so much that they would rather move the entire world than suffer any new and possibly harmful repercussions because of them. As individuals living within an extended sublime moment, the characters simply do not know what the earth's rent orbit may cause, what the dynamism of the sublime may, ultimately, make manifest. Nor do they care. They only want to revert back to the safety of the known world, the stability of an orbit in which they are comfortable, and the comfort of settled systems of ontology, phenomenology, epistemology, and ideology.

The film's conclusion is most indicative of the wealth of possibility that lies dormant in the dynamism of the sublime. After a slew of nuclear bombs have been detonated in an effort to push earth back to its original orbit, the main character, a newspaper reporter, dictates the story to be published in the next day's paper. However, the most pertinent detail – whether the bombs were successful or not – is absent from his editorializing. The audience is presented with a shot of two possible front page headlines, either ready to go to press. One reads "World Doomed" while the other declares "World Saved." Which headline eventually runs is entirely ambiguous and unknown, as the movie abruptly ends with a shot of a cross atop a cathedral and the ringing out of the church's bells.
In this conclusion lies an infinitude of possibilities. The earth may have been shifted back to its orbit and the bells could be celebratory (with the final shot of a cross symbolic of salvation); the explosions may have failed and the bells could be in memoriam of a dying planet (with the cross being a symbol of the need to repent or an appellation to a higher force); or some alternate option may have occurred and produced a situation where the earth was either saved or doomed, but in a way not expected (that is, the blast was too powerful and pushed the earth too far away from its original orbit, such that everything will now freeze). In any case, the ending leads out onto a vast field of unknown potentialities, both “positive” (World Saved) and “negative” (World Doomed). Regardless of whether Earth was saved or doomed, the sublime event of meteorological chaos will, necessarily, unleash an entire universe of new ontological, phenomenological, epistemological, and ideological perspectives. Beneficent or harmful, creative or destructive, the world and the people in it will not – indeed, cannot – be the same immediately following the sublime encounter, as their surety in the stability of the planet and the development of increasingly powerful forms of weaponry has been irrevocably shaken.

In much the same way, the ambiguity of the conclusion forces the film’s audience to recognize the multitude of potentialities that a sublime event catalyzes. The audience may want to know, desperately, whether the earth was saved or not, but it is impossible to come to any concrete conclusion. Just as the events of the narrative leave its characters in an state of uncertain change, the film leaves its percipients with nothing but
possibility, endless and eternal, ever waiting to manifest itself on the screen. Thus, as in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *The Day the Earth Caught Fire* not only depicts a sublime event/object within the confines of its fictional world, but it may also engender the sublime feeling as an effect of its own cinematic technique.

The “disaster porn” films of Roland Emmerich operate in an analogous, if far less complex or intellectual, fashion to *The Day the Earth Caught Fire*. In these movies, which include *Independence Day*, *The Day After Tomorrow*, *2012*, and even *Godzilla*, the world is faced with an all-consuming force of change, a potential apocalypse, which, by each film's conclusion, has either run its course or has been averted. While visually arresting, these movies are not worthy of much discussion in terms of narrative, as their plot pattern is simplistic and formulaic: families need healing, global crisis ensues, global crisis ends/is averted (often through a *deus ex machina*), and families are strengthened as a result of weathering the crisis. Truly, the plots of these films largely exist as vehicles for scenes of sublime evocation (for example, cities washed away into the sea or blown up by aliens). Interestingly enough, however, it is their somewhat trite narrative cycles that provide examples of positive or beneficial potentialities arising from sublime events. In *Independence Day*, for instance, enormous alien spacecraft descend upon earth and proceed to annihilate every major population center and its inhabitants. As they hover above the cities and release their fury against the human race, these spaceships are entirely capable of evoking the sublime aesthetic; they are inconceivably vast in size (blotting out the entire sky), of
an unknown but obviously great power (in that they are extremely technologically advanced), and, when they finally begin their rain of destruction, very much forces of widespread change (turning all the major cities in the world into a flaming piles of rubble is a fairly obvious push of mutability) (*Figure 18: Alien ship*).

One might assume that a fleet of behemoth alien craft bent on human extinction might only engender harmful manifestations and, thus, be nothing more than a source of pure terror. The aliens, after all, kill millions of people and destroyed all of humanity's cultural, governmental, and financial centers. These extraterrestrial invaders have introduced harsh, unwelcome dynamism to the safe, knowable world and thrust upon humankind a innumerable possibilities going forward. However, the film refuses to shroud itself in a bleak, full-on apocalyptic shadow.

The change the aliens forced upon the world could have swept an absolute chaos over the globe, returning humanity to a new Dark Age. Civilization could have scattered into the wind and people could have turned

*Figure 18: Alien ship (Independence Day. Dir. Roland Emmerich. 20th Century Fox, 1996.)*
ever more barbaric, more violent, more internally discordant. But this bleak potentiality is not what arises. The film, perhaps naively or perhaps hopefully, posits a new dawn of enlightenment and shared humanity for the world in the wake of the alien attack. Indeed, the film's President of the United States even gives a rousing speech in which he blatantly declares that the attack will lead to constructive future potentialities, saying “Mankind -- that word should have new meaning for all of us today. We can't be consumed by our petty differences anymore. We will be united in our common interests.” The implication here is that even from a force of destructive cosmic mutability beneficial, “positive” possibilities may arise. Strengthening this interpretation is the melodramatic narrative, in which the alien invasion heals and emotionally unites a slew of disparate and previously dysfunctional families (as, under threat of immanent death, they come to realize they love and respect each other more than they believed). Thus, although tremendous swaths of the earth are destroyed and millions have died, the potentialities that lie within the enormous change from a pre-alien invasion world to post-alien invasion world are not strictly deleterious. It is just as plausible (if more difficult) to imagine, as the President claims, a world closer to peace and interpersonal harmony arising from the ashes as it is to imagine a world descended into complete collapse. Therefore, Independence Day and other cozy apocalypses of its sort (for example, Emmerich's “disaster porn”) provide evidence that the sublime, as dynamism, does not usher in only “negative” potentialities, but also allows new “positive” potentialities an opportunity to become manifest.
I return to my introductory question: what is the sublime? Historically, it has many variants. In Longinus, it is a rhetorical device, a way of manipulating words and imagery to circumvent reason. In Burke, it is the terrible – all the things in existence that are grand and frightening and cause some combination of horror and awe in their percipients. Kant claims that it is the implosion of imagination and the ascendancy of reason, while Coleridge and the Romantics conceive of it as an outpouring of the self into something greater or more vast than oneself. Lyotard argues for it as the unrepresentable put forth in representation. And Zizek believes that it is, quite simply, the nothingness at the center of symbolic communication.

These theories form what we consider the unified discourse on the sublime. However, it seems that these various postulations on the aesthetic are not a truly complementary body and may even be at odds with one another. It would stand to reason, therefore, that a holistic theory of the sublime that can account for all the variations and more fully lace together this esteemed pantheon of sublimes has not been formulated. The implication of this lack is that the sublime aesthetic is, simply, not as roundly explicated as it could be. A deeper substratum of explanatory meaning lies beneath all these luminary scholars' feet, a stratum that, when laid bare, not
only grants new dimensions to the aesthetic but also helps knit together the
patchwork diversity of the theories that have been previously erected upon it.

If one were to judge from the preceding examples drawn out of literary
and cinematic sources, it seems that this sublime substratum is, as I
suggested might be true earlier, forcible change and dormant possibility.
Literature from all periods of human history points to this assertion, as does
a wealth of cinema involving speculative elements (for example, apocalypses,
space travel, nuclear disaster, monsters, etc.). In aesthetic objects as
diverse as the Bible and the film Independence Day, overwhelming forces
destroy the stasis of the world and, thereby, swing wide the cosmic doors for
all possibility to rush forth, creating a field of the unknown, of the not-yet-
been, which can be wondrous or terrifying depending on the potentialities
one reasons or imagines lie within it – potentialities which may irrevocably
alter, through their grand dynamism, every preconceived notion of being,
perception, knowledge, and belief.

A reduction of the sublime aesthetic to a foundational core of unbridled
possibility and cosmic mutability fits into all already-accepted major theories
of the subject. It explains why awe and terror have been roundly considered
the two hallmark feelings of the sublime (that is, because not only because a
sublime object/event is overwhelming and destructive, but because the field
of what it cultivates – the possible – is both infinite and includes further
harmful potentialities) and why the aesthetic has been thought to be
indicative of some sort of gulf in human perception or the ontological world
(that is, because it heralds possibility, a paradoxical combination of aporia
and profusion, an emptiness full of infinite “not-yet-been” manifestations). The idea even accounts for the diversity of discourse on the sublime, as all previous work has been explaining facets of the same concept without every truly sketching its body as a whole.

One last time, then, I ask what *is* the sublime aesthetic?

Were I to attempt a final, steadfast and true definition (an act I approach with no small amount of trepidation), it would read something as follows: the sublime aesthetic is the recognition of the entire sphere of the possible and its necessarily constitutive threatening dynamism in a physically or ideologically destructive object or act of vast size, power, or mystery. This recognition manifests itself as a combination of fear and awe – fear at the knowledge of destructive or harmful potentialities which the object or act may bring about, and awe at the sheer magnitude of all possible effects and results the object inherently carries with it.

The sublime aesthetic is humanity’s simultaneous shivering and jaw-dropping at the sheer enormity of all that might be, its realization that existence is destructive and creative in equal parts, and its implicit understanding that humankind is a small and relatively powerless droplet of water in an ever-churning sea of change.
Some scholars have realized this discrepancy exists (most notably Immanuel Kant) and have termed the terrifying sublime the “negative sublime” while calling the uplifting sublime the “positive sublime.” This is, I believe, somewhat misleading, as the two categories seem to be describing significantly different feelings. Though one could easily describe hate as “negative love,” it is far more accurate and concise to sequester the feeling from love and explore its particular facets as independent in their own right, rather than as, solely, extensions of love. In the same light, only one of the two sublimes, I argue, is truly the sublime; the other is, instead, an affective state divergent and, in some other future work, worth naming and categorizing with its own aesthetic concept.

The author would like to note here the obvious irony of simultaneously critiquing previous scholars for erecting definitive formulations of the sublime aesthetic when he, himself, purports to do precisely the same thing. In years to come another astute writer may very well enter the conversation and show that the theory of the sublime expounded upon within these pages is but an obfuscating branch in its own right. To that individual of the future, the author would like to extend his support and congratulations.

Under the guise of proto-religion. Mircea Eliade's ideas concerning the “sacred” and the “profane” as, respectively, ordered, meaningful reality and chaotic, undifferentiated space seem to mirror a division between aesthetic beauty and sublimity. See Eliade's *The Sacred and Profane: The Nature of Religion* for further reading.

One need only glance at the Jewish Torah or Christian Bible to begin to find dozens of sublime moments: the creation of the universe, the flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the appearance of God in the burning bush, and even the trials of Job, for instance.

This idea – that what the sublime attempts to do is represent that which cannot be represented in any meaningful material way – will eventually form the basis for Jean-Francois Lyotard's postmodern analysis of the sublime in his *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*.

One might argue that the writings of Augustine in his *Confessions* and *City of God* circle around ideas of sublimity as a characteristic of godliness or holiness, and this is a perfectly valid interpretation of Augustine's work. However, he believed that the nature of God and the divine were enmeshed in a variation on beauty – some ultimate, terrifying beauty, perhaps, but beauty, nonetheless. Thus, I will not discuss Augustine here, as it was his attempt to fit what may have been sublime conceptions of God within the framework of the aesthetic of the beautiful, not to outline an aesthetic separate from the beautiful.
In fact, *Peri Hypsous* was not even printed until 1554, after a rediscovery of a 10th century manuscript containing it.

During this era, poets such as Andrew Marvell and John Milton – especially in his *Paradise Lost* – began to readily explore the idea that there exists an aesthetic that incorporates the pleasure of beauty with a darker, unsettling feeling.

In fact, the way in which Burke approaches identity with regards to sublimity is, in part, how scholars of postmodernity such as Lyotard and Jacques Derrida will breach the entire effect of the aesthetic – as an endlessly subsuming force.

Quite unfortunately, Burke also genders these aesthetics – equating sublimity to masculinity and beauty to femininity. He, therefore, sees masculinity as threatened by femininity and the role of the woman solely as nurturer and caretaker. Such engendering of the aesthetics is, I believe, quite unnecessary unless pursuing them as historical artifact. Due to this reasoning, I will mark Burke's misogyny as a socio-historical problem and will maintain that the core of aesthetic theory which I am pursuing is beyond the scope of gender politics per se.

Most notably in Thomas Weiskel's *The Romantic Sublime*, in which Weiskel uses deconstructionist techniques to explain why a dualistic sublime may exist.

While the philosophies of Hegel, Schopenhauer, and Schiller are certainly not synonymous by any means, they do share many aesthetic commonalities that link them together under the same broad school of philosophy. Thus, given that their positions on the sublime are very similar, discussing them as one body of philosophy rather than three slightly different variations on the same theme is, I believe, possible.

Indeed, it is nearly impossible to locate any major monographs on the sublime from this era, especially during the Victorian age. Though some Modernist authors – W.B. Yeats, Virginia Woolf, and H.P. Lovecraft to name a few – did heavily employ sublimity within their work, such usage was (and, too often still is) considered incidental to their overriding thematic, narrative, and conceptual concerns.

There does exist one notable exception in the early 20th century – that being Max Dessoir and the aesthetic theories he posited within the journal *Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*. Dessoir, to his credit, ultimately likened the sublime to the tragic and proposed that it deals with an unavoidable suffering which is inherent in the human condition.

Infinity could be represented by, say, the night sky or an endless series of chairs or an ocean that seemingly has no end. All of these are representations – signifiers – of the infinite, but they all point back to only one signified idea, infinity.

Indeed, “God” has been defined by various cultures and individuals in many far-flung ways. “God” can represent power or love or justice or omniscience or any number of other signified ideas, yet still remains only one signifier – “God.”
17 Barnett Newman, it should be noted, was an artist and scholar of the sublime whose work was intended to give its audience the experience of sublimity through its presentation. His paintings were generally of the same nature – a field of some darker color separated by a very thin vertical strip of color that he referred to as a “zip.” For Newman, the experience of the sublime was something approaching spiritual transcendence, and his artistic desire was to instill in his audience a sense of absolute emotion that could occur within an immediate moment. For further reading, see Newman’s article “The Sublime is Now.”

18 Lyotard also links this freedom to political concerns, suggesting that the sublime might be a locus for questioning traditional values and ideologies, especially that of late capitalism (as proposed by Frederic Jameson). Indeed, Lyotard claims that by introducing “difficult forms of art” – those which are sublime – into contemporary culture, the consumer-driven and totalizing force of capitalism might be impinged (Shaw 125).

19 Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan’s conception of the Real being an ontological absolute – that is, something that is real unto itself and resists symbolic or imaginary orders. For more, see Lacan’s *Ecrits*.

20 Even a brief search of the MLA Bibliography will produce a sizable number of articles that deal solely with the examination of one particular author or genre and his/her/its treatment of the sublime. While these articles are certainly producing discourse concerning the author or genre they discuss, they do not extend discourse of the sublime toward any meaningful foundational truths.

21 And, as mentioned in chapter 1, even more specific formulations have begun to appear in late 20th and early 21st century scholarship, such that discussion of a “feminist sublime” and “technological sublime” is now possible.

22 One could easily include Derrida’s postulations on the sublime as an extension of Kantian thought. However, as Derrida did not write an extended analysis of the subject, I do not include it here. As well, Derrida’s deconstructionist ally, Paul de Man, in his “Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant,” essentially repositioned deconstructionist thought regarding Kant by asserting that Kant wasn’t making a philosophical argument so much as an argument concerning metaphor – thus turning the discourse away from aesthetics and placing it in the realm of language.

23 The subject-object problem is still being worked through in the philosophy of our contemporary age. One such recent article that attempts to bridge the gap through the sublime is Vladimir Koneci’s “Aesthetic Trinity Theory and the Sublime,” in which Koneci turns to an empirical, interdisciplinary position that includes psychological testing to merge the “dread” and “joy” of sublimity into a more nuanced tripartite psychological reaction that might be clinically examined and analyzed.

24 Theodore Adorno claimed this is essentially the ontological crux of aesthetics, as he states in his *Aesthetic Theory* “Blissfully soaring above the real world, art is still chained by each of its elements to the empirical other,” – that is, the society from which it has emerged (Adorno 246).
For further inquiry into this area of aesthetic thought, one might read Dickie's *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis*, Hall's *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, and even the collected works of Antonio Gramsci or Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Possibility as I will utilize it includes both subjunctive possibility and epistemic possibility – that is, respectively, possibility as it relates both to counterfactual or purely potential states of being and as it relates to an individual's state of knowledge concerning reality.

In her article "Is a Theory of the Sublime Possible?," Jane Forsey points out a very similar objection – namely that theorists either have to "explain the experience" of the sublime object if they imply it is transcendent or, if the experience itself is claimed transcendent, "tell us what what it is an experience of" (383). In either case, she argues, is that, somewhere along the line, the sublime must be grounded in something that is not a metaphysical or epistemological uncertainty – but that such grounding may be impossible.

In his *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard explains how totalizing theories do not fully encompass the world of experience as we currently recognize it; to claim any objective absolutes, he contends, is a clear false representation of the state of reality.

This is variously conceived within currently held theories of the sublime. Burke says the fear stems only from remote physical danger; Kant, from the failure of one's imaginative powers; Lyotard, from the very recognition of an unknowable; and Zizek from the recognition of the symbolic order. In every case, the theories swirl around an abstract fear, a terror of some disconnection from the immanent.

In his *Enquiry*, Burke claims pain terrifying is that it is a harbinger of death, the "king of terrors" (Burke 36).

Weiskel describes this in far more extensive and expansive terms in his *The Romantic Sublime* (26-27).

In his *Holy Terror*, Eagleton characterizes the sublime as an emptiness lying at the heart of not only symbolic representation, but also the individual. However, in this emptiness, he claims, is a fullness of of self, as well – an infinite extension of the individual into an everyingness or transcendent state. Eagleton goes on to apply this conception of a self-annihilistic (or perhaps more accurately a self-dispersing) sublime to political events and terroristic actions, thus overlacing a contemporary moral component upon the aesthetic.

Greek myths such as the substantiation of Zeus and subsequent rape of Leda (which is immortalized by W.B. Yeats in his "Leda and the Swan") and Norse myths such as the destruction involved in Ragnarok are examples of the sublime in religious legend.

Keep in mind that from Longinus up until Kant, the sublime was generally conceived of as a quality that "raises us to the spiritual greatness of God" (Longinus 42).
Ontology not mattering here, as it is a given that, ontologically, an object must be remote from its percipient to induce the sublime feeling. Following Burke on this strain of thought, it would seem that a terror-producing object that is too close in physical proximity to its viewer would incite only fear and terror; awe would be entire missing, as the object would be entire too immanent in its threatening possibilities.

That Jesus is synonymous with love is one of the hallmarks of the New Testament. After all, this is a character who taught that one should “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,” “love your neighbor as yourself,” and to “love one another as I have loved you” (Matthew 5:44, Mark 12:31, John 15:12).

Although previous writers may have witnessed the horrific power of humankind in microcosm, it is only in the twentieth century, with the advent of new warring and biological technologies, that humanity has elevated itself to a position in which it can destroy itself with virtually no effort. The development of the atomic bomb, the creation of genetically engineered diseases, and the very real threat of world wars all attest to this newfound human power.

The gyre – a concept Yeats loosely borrowed from theosophists – has been interpreted variously throughout the history of Yeats criticism. However, largely, they have been bound up in notions that involve cycles. Thus, it is not wild conjecture to understand that they have a direction relationship to the dualism of life/death and creation/destruction – both arguably cyclical systems. For further discussion of Yeats’ gyres, see, for instance, Ramazani’s “Yeats: Tragic Joy and the Sublime” or Jeffares’ “‘Gyres’ in the Poetry of WB Yeats.”

It is important to note here that, among the many concepts Leda may symbolize, one of the foremost is beauty (given that the reason Zeus became enamored of her was her astounding beauty).

Lovecraft’s entire oeuvre revolves about entities and objects that evince the sublime aesthetic in a similar manner to that which I theorize. In his “The Colour Out of Space,” for instance, an alien thing (it is ambiguous whether the “thing” in question is a conscious being, an inanimate force, or some other form of matter or life entirely) falls to earth and proceeds to destroy a portion of New England forestland, replacing it with vivid, awe-inspiring, prismatic wastelands – an alteration threatening to the way of lives of the people who live in and about the forest, but not one that is unequivocally negative. Equally, in “The Shadow Out of Time,” alien beings from the distant past psychically time travel and collect the consciousnesses of wise and intelligent individuals from throughout all epochs and all sentient species. Despite the fact that these alien beings only desire to share their knowledge with other creatures and other times, the mere idea of these beings’ existence frightens the narrator (who is one of the consciousnesses that is stolen away). The mere insinuation that something exists outside the bounds of conventionality, outside the realm of what is conceived of as “normalcy,” terrifies the narrator because it posits that there exists a vast universe of possibility that humankind, simply, cannot imagine. For more on Lovecraft’s fiction, see any of the authoritative collected volumes of his work released by Penguin Classics and introduced by Lovecraft scholar S.T. Joshi.
41 The parallel to the Bhopal disaster is, of course, quite unmistakable, given that the novel's release and the disaster occurred within weeks of one another. Many critics and commentators have remarked on Delillo's prognostication. However, this does not necessarily mean that the gas cloud in Bhopal was a sublime object when it occurred; in its temporally and phenomenologically immediate form, it was pure danger and tragedy. Only when removed from immediate danger (as Burke claims the percipient of the sublime must be), and thus able to contemplate and aestheticize the event, might one even begin to consider subsequent pictures or video footage of the Bhopal cloud as sublime objects.

42 It is also worth noting that the now-famous line uttered by Bowman as he enters the monolith, “My God, it's full of stars,” is not included in the film but is a part of Arthur C. Clarke's novelization of the movie (and it was Clarke who, of course, co-wrote the film script with Stanley Kubrick). This exclamation in its full form – “The thing's hollow – it goes on forever – and – oh my God – it's full of stars” – is particularly germane to my argument, as it provides further evidence that the monolith is, paradoxically, supremely vacant (that is, has absolutely no manifested phenomenal reality yet) and, simultaneously, ultimately full (that is, as an infinitude of possibility, here represented by stars, exists within its not-yet-manifested being) (Clarke 254).

43 Johannes Grave, for instance, in his analysis of Friedrich's life and work Caspar David Friedrich, examines the painting not only as closely aligned with Romantic notions of the sublime, but also Kantian ideas of the aesthetic.

44 It is intriguing to note that many of these disaster movies include the word “day” in their titles, implying that the sublime is, indeed, a discrete moment of dynamic transition and not a constant state.
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