

**Permanent Light Green, the Stumblebum and the Show-Off:
The Historical Sublime, Philip Guston and Sophie Calle**

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Abstract

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This thesis examines historical and philosophical enquiries into the notion of the Sublime. It looks at works such as Edmund Burke's 'A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful' and Jean François Lyotard's 'Analytic of the Sublime' to understand its role in the historical discourse. By later applying their theories to the practice and analysis of works by American artist Philip Guston and French artist Sophie Calle, the research demonstrates the relevance of the sublime in contemporary art.

At a certain point in history we see a division between what we call experiences of the sublime and the discourse of the sublime. The identification of this divide means that we can categorise the experience and identify its signifiers. Where it was previously associated with the natural world and God, it now comes to represent the ability of mankind to comprehend totality and the infinite. It also becomes twinned with ideas of social empathy and civic/political agency. This research demonstrates the importance of that realisation and proposes that without it, an evolution of the sublime would not have been possible.

The thesis also discusses the emergence of a contemporary discourse on sublimity. Having looked at the philosophical and historical treatises, it examines its resurgence in 1950s Abstract Expressionism. It argues for its place in contemporary art, away from the Romantic empathetic, awe-inspired ideals of the eighteenth century or the 'transcendent,' shapeless forms of the abstract. It also looks at the role of the 'ready-made techno sciences' and their impact on the sublime. Finally it deals with the idea of the 'Other' and the notion of the 'Void' – definitions commonly prescribed when dealing with twentieth century ideas of sublimity and asks if the philosophy of the modern sublime can only be defined through paradox and conflict.

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Chapter One: Introduction to the Sublime

The notion of 'the Sublime' has been discussed throughout history with scholars such as Longinus contemplating it from the first century. We see it come back into popular culture in the eighteenth century where it becomes what is known as a 'discourse' on the sublime. Inspired by the Romantic poetry of Milton and Keats, the literature of Shelley and the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich it also becomes twinned with notions of political and civil agency. We are introduced to it in terms of violence and terror as well as lofty aspirations and divinity. Philip Shaw writes:

*'The lofty mountain peak or the swelling ocean, as depicted in the poems of Akenside and Thomson, and in the writings of the Romantics, thus became the scene for darker meditations on the nature of the self and its relations with the external world.'*¹

At this point the idea of an ethical sublime comes to the fore. Inspired by the Irish politician Edmund Burke we are asked to consider it in terms of morality and social empathy. We see a separation occur – there are now not only sublime experiences but also a sublime discourse. The revelation inspires much of the investigation into the topic for the remainder of the century. The differentiation between experience and discourse means that we can categorically identify its signifiers and can now begin to examine their effects. Rather than asking what it is that is sublime, we begin to ask what it is that sublimity evokes and why we are capable of this type of thought. It is here that Immanuel Kant defines sublimity in terms of our consciousness rather than in empirical or natural terms with Shaw explaining that the sublime becomes a struggle in the supersensible or noumenal world rather than the physical domain: 'the sublime affirms ultimately the ascendancy of the rational over the real: the mind of man, that is, is greater than anything that might be discovered in nature.'²

The prerequisites for sublime feeling have always been discussed in terms of the vast natural world. With this now moving into the realm of the conscious self there is a renaissance in sublime theory. We now begin to place *ourselves* within the context of the sublime and this is reflected in our cultural sphere – in our literary descriptions of the all-encompassing mountain range or our painted depiction of man's diminution against the overwhelming, crashing sea. In 1818 Mary Shelley describes Dr. Frankenstein's voyage through the Alps:

'I passed the bridge of Pélissier, where the ravine, which the river forms, opened before me, and I began to ascend the mountain that overhangs it. Soon after I entered the valley of Chaminoux. This valley is most wonderful and sublime...The high and snowy mountains were its immediate

¹ Shaw, Philip, *The Sublime*, Routledge, 2006, p.5

² Ibid. p.6

*boundaries...Immense glaciers approached the road; I heard the rumbling thunder of the falling avalanche, and marked the smoke of its passage. Mont Blanc, raised itself from the surrounding aiguilles, and its tremendous dôme overlooked the valley.*³

In 1809 Caspar David Friedrich positions 'The Monk by the Sea' (Fig. 1) – a portrayal of our insignificance in the face of the natural world but also a testimony to that existence, despite our weakness and frailty. We can quote Blaise Pascal to illustrate these demonstrations – hearkening testaments to God's will/creation but also tiny protests of human existence and indeed, endurance:

*'Man is only a reed, the weakest thing in nature, but he is a thinking reed ... if the universe were to crush him, man would still be nobler than his destroyer, because he knows that he dies, and also the advantage that the universe has over him; but the universe knows nothing of this.'*⁴

As the discourse of the sublime develops, we see a new type of investigation – one that is examined within the aesthetical treatments of form and space. In the 1950s, Barnett Newman and the American Abstract Expressionists discuss sublime theory almost exclusively in terms of the painted canvas. We see 'a yearning for transcendence is pitted against an open acknowledgment of the impossibility of this desire.'⁵ The sublime now becomes defined in terms of artistic practice and technique. Newman craves independence from European Classical influence and thought, attempting to categorise the sublime in the new era of a burgeoning American cultural rebirth. 'The Sublime is Now' he proclaims, writing:

*'The failure of European art to achieve the sublime is due to this blind desire to exist inside the reality of sensation (the objective world, whether distorted and pure) and to build an art inside a framework of pure plasticity (the Greek idea of beauty, whether that plasticity be a romantic active surface or a classic stable one). In other words, modern art caught without a sublime content was incapable of creating a new sublime image ... the question that now arises is, how if we are living in a time without a legend or mythos that can be called sublime ... if we refuse to live in the abstract, how can we be creating a sublime art?'*⁶

The sublime becomes something concerned with portraying the impossible – the transcendent thoughts of man and experiences of the 'absolute.' The new technological industrial age of the late

³ Shelley, Mary, *Frankenstein*, Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1993, p.74

⁴ Pascal, Blaise, *Pensées*, trans. J. Warrington (Dent, London, 1973) p.110

⁵ Shaw, Philip, *The Sublime*, p.7

⁶ Newman, Barnett, 'The Sublime is Now,' *The Contemporary Sublime*, Ed. Morely, Simon, Whitechapel Art Gallery/MIT Press, 2009, p.32

twentieth century demands that we find a new discourse by which to define or discuss the sublime with any relevance beyond the 1950s. Based as it is now, on an experiential idea of reason without the need for religious authority or overwhelming natural expanse to authenticate the experience we must come to look at it in terms of what Jean-François Lyotard called the 'ready-made techno sciences.'⁷ Shaw writes:

*'In the case of Lyotard...the goal of the sublime is to sustain a sense of shock, to prevent the reader/viewer/interpreter from coming to terms with the meaning of that which exceeds the norm. If the aim of Romanticism is somehow to incorporate the "sense sublime", postmodernism, by way of contrast, seeks to retain a sense of the sublime as other, a "something" that can never be interfused through the use of metaphors, symbols, or verbal connectives.'*⁸

With this in mind, we can ask how this theoretically qualified sublime is applicable to modern art/culture. Can we, by examining new artistic practice and content identify signifiers for the sublime away from the notion of abstraction? Where does the status of the image and figuration lie in this relationship? It is also important to consider the portrayal of events like the holocaust and 9/11 and their continued link to modern notions of sublimity. By examining prior philosophical enquiry we can hope to ascertain the importance of their contribution – are these still relevant to modern discourse? What did they say about the era in which they were written and are any of these reflections apparent in the cultural production of the time? There are sublime objects and sublime discourse and it is important to make distinction between the two. By looking at a chronological enquiry into sublimity in history we can ascertain when this differentiation occurred and its importance to the evolution of the discussion. Is the sublime something that only occurs through dissolution and conflict or is there something to be said for syntheses of thought and practice to encourage enlightenment? By examining notions such as Burke's 'triumph of sympathy,' Kant's 'Noumena' or 'thing-in-itself' and Lyotard's 'Paralogy' or 'false reasoning' we can hope to construct new metaphysical ideas of the self, toward an evolution of the sublime for the modern era. Is it a categorical thing in and of itself or is it rather a state of mind, a demonstration of the limitation of the mind to explain occurrences beyond explanation – a type of natural safety clause to protect from the inexplicable? We are reminded of Hopkins 'No Worst, There is None:'

'O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall

Frightful, sheer, no-man fathomed. Hold them cheap

⁷ Crowther, Paul, *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993, p.154

⁸ Shaw, Philip, *The Sublime*, p.9

*May who ne'er hung there. Nor does long our small
Durance deal with that steep or deep. Here! creep,
Wretch, under a comfort serves in a whirlwind: all
Life death does end and each day dies with sleep.*⁹

Could it be that sublimity, in all its forms, simply denotes the *lack* of human ability or is it a demonstration of *all* that we are capable of?

There is one constant within the notion of the sublime and that is the idea of spectatorship. We often refer to the idea of 'seeing' – or an engagement with an object, central to the self and the physical act of looking. I feel that by examining the work of Philip Guston and Sophie Calle we can round out a theory on the sublime in the context of contemporary art, placing it in the hands of creator *and* spectator. This is crucial to furthering discussion on the subject. We have become spoilt in our engagement with visual media. For a long time, it has been understood that everyone has an opinion and that that opinion is worthy and valid. This is fuelled by social media platforms and the development of the technology supporting them. The universal right to opinion may well have validity. However I feel that a concept of the sublime must now also consider the right of conception. To me, Guston and Calle are two artists who emulate this ideal. Barnett Newman is continually twinned with the notion of the sublime because he returned to the act of inception rather than dwelling on spectator-driven opinion. Despite very little physical evidence to support his categorisation as a painter of the sublime, his name is used to argue for the idea as one which is *theoretically qualified*. I feel this is so because his writing on the matter returned to the act of creation and re-categorised the artist as thinker/visionary rather than 'painter-smith.' The recognition of the validity of artistic concept becomes as important as the needs and wishes of the spectator. We see a contemporary renaissance of the artist as visionary.

I also utilise the work of Guston and Calle to explore these theories as there was something intensely personal in their art that spoke to me. The desire to listen to a certain band or read the poetry of a certain writer occurs because something about that work resonates with our being. The processing of these artists' intentions was what was sublime to me. Their way of working and the artworks produced were at once familiar and new. The accessibility of the pieces drew me in but also made me suspicious. They confirmed something that I already knew but also something I had yet to learn, particularly as an artist. At a very basic level, in all of the deep revelations and proposals, they made

⁹ Manley-Hopkins, Gerard, 'No Worst, There Is None,' *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, DigiReads Publishing, 2010, p.49

the sublime seem like something very simple and matter-of-fact. I have never fainted or become short of breath when encountering their work or their process. I have however, become very still and finally understood something about art and the importance of looking that I hadn't understood or even realised before. This thesis examines why that is.

Chapter Two: Enquiries on the Discourse of the Sublime – From Longinus to Žižek

By examining works or enquiries into the sublime in a philosophical or historical sense we can define it both in terms of its discourse and in its periodic movements. There is a tradition of these enquiries dating back to the first century with the Greek philosopher Longinus writing 'Peri Hupsos' or 'On Sublimity.' We see a renewal of interest in this treatise in the eighteenth century with writers such as Thomas Burnet, Joseph Addison and John Baillie each developing and proposing new theories. Of the period, Edmund Burke's 'A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas on the Sublime and Beautiful' was the most passionate and fully realised. It was published anonymously in 1757 and attempted to address the new crises of sublime discourse. Shaw writes:

*'Having determined that the sublime is a function of the combinatory power of language, and not merely a quality inherent in certain words or objects, or for that matter in the divine, the stress begins to fall on ways of accounting for this phenomenon.'*¹⁰

Having stood for the 'effect of grandeur in speech and poetry' in the Longinian tradition, it comes to stand for something at the heart of human nature. Burke's enquiry links sublimity to terror as well as reverence and constructs a parameter by which to measure it in terms of cultural psyche. Critically, it places the sublime in the minds of men. It is as much a scientific investigation as a philosophical one, with Shaw explaining: 'The argument of the treatise, in contrast to that of his predecessors, is thus entirely secular; God is no longer required to guarantee the authenticity of our experience.'¹¹

In his 'Critique of Judgment' Immanuel Kant moves the sublime away from what Terry Eagleton calls the aestheticisation of the sublime. Defined as it has been in terms of morality and the sympathy of mankind, Kant argues for a sublime based in the totality of our reasoning and thoughts. Eagleton writes, that in Kantian sublime discourse:

*'We know that the sublime presentation is simply an echo of the sublimity of Reason within ourselves, and thus testimony to our absolute freedom. In this sense, the sublime is a kind of anti-aesthetic which presses the imagination to extreme crisis, to the point of failure and breakdown, in order that it may negatively figure forth the Reason that transcends it.'*¹²

His analysis of the sublime undertakes theories of reason, boundlessness and transcendentalism and links them to notions of beauty and ethics. It moves the discourse forward in that it can now be discussed in a poststructuralist sense. It is, as Shaw reveals, a 'structural necessity' in sublime theory:

¹⁰ Shaw, Philip, *The Sublime*, Routledge, 2006, p.48

¹¹ *Ibid.* p.49

¹² Eagleton, Terry, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Blackwell Publishers, 1990, p.91

*'Sublimity for Kant is the feeling that arises whenever we as subjects, become aware of the transcendental dimensions of experience. The sublime occurs, that is, whenever ideas exceed the application of a concept; at such moments the mind comes alive to the existence of a faculty of reason transcending the limits of our sensual existence.'*¹³

The examination of the sublime moves forward into the twentieth and twenty-first century with thinkers Jean-François Lyotard and Slavoj Žižek coming to represent contemporary theory. Postmodern engagement with the sublime takes Barnett Newman as its cultural predecessor with his seminal essay 'The Sublime is Now' reworking and developing American abstract thought for the modern era. Having investigated the sublime in purely aesthetical formal/spatial treatments, postmodern thought once more attempts to categorise it in terms of the supersensible self. Shaw writes 'the difference between Romanticism, modernism, and postmodernism can therefore be measured in their contrasting attitudes to the unrepresentable.'¹⁴ Lyotard's 'Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime' and 'The Sublime and the Avant-Garde' focus on the idea of presenting the unrepresentable. He places sublimity in a political and consumer-driven society, redefining notions of realism, the modern and the postmodern. He proposes a theory of the 'differend' – analysing phrase and language in their inability to represent conflict and terror. The sublime becomes a demonstration of 'lack' and is explained: 'For Lyotard, the sublime is conceived as a disruptive event, forcing thought to a crisis...the resistance of the sublime is ultimately political.'¹⁵

Slavoj Žižek's 'The Sublime Object of Ideology' looks to Jacques Lacan's theory of the 'Real' and the 'Symbolic' to attempt to 'account for the failure of language in its attempts at reference.'¹⁶ He constitutes contemporary sublimity by analysing and reworking preceding philosophical works – Hegelian and Lacanian thoughts are discussed in terms of advertising and cinema. He attempts to construct a new theory of the 'other' – comparable to Lyotard's 'unrepresentable' and the notion of the 'Void' – echoing Lyotard's ideology of 'lack.' He discusses philosophy itself, re-categorising the sublime for contemporary visual culture. Speaking to us of things that are at once familiar and made strange, he proposes a 'reification' of the sublime for a burgeoning mass-cultural postmodern and post-structural era.

¹³ Shaw, Philip, *The Sublime*, p.88-89

¹⁴ Ibid. p.115-116

¹⁵ Ibid. p.129-130

¹⁶ Wright, Edmund, Wright, Elizabeth, 'Introduction,' *The Žižek Reader*, Ed. Wright, Edmund, Wright, Elizabeth, Blackwell Publishing, 1999, p.7

'On Sublimity' or 'Peri Hupsos' by Longinus is a first century Greek treatise categorising and assimilating that which produces sublime feeling or thought. Its author is believed to be either the Augustan critic Dionysius of Halicarnassus or Cassius Longinus. He introduces sublimity as a type of eminence or excellence of discourse. It should be noted at the outset however that there is a distinction between grandeur and sublimity. Where grandeur produces amazement and wonder, the true sublime encompasses a combination of wonder and astonishment:

*'Sublimity, produced at the right moment, tears everything up like a whirlwind, and exhibits the orator's whole power as a single blow.'*¹⁷

The treatise puts forward various theories for sublimity – whilst it is something that should and does occur naturally/organically, as with all modes of experience there are various factors to take into consideration. There is the idea of interpellation – of using one's own ideology to convince or sway opinion. The notion of 'loftiness' – an element of authority and of being 'primed' for sublimity is also apparent. He regards our engagement with the sublime as a type of power relationship and says that in order for this to take place we must embrace the sublime and ascribe a lofty purpose to the mind. He proposes that the sublime takes us on a kind of journey. There is a movement from one point to another with this journey involving subscription to an authority - crucial to the sublime experience. In doing so, one improves one's character and becomes a better type of person. The idea of experience – of gaining knowledge in order to develop the self is a loaded concept for Longinus. Experience is necessary in order to engage with sublimity and is possessed by a certain type of individual – one that is receptive to noble emotions and authority. While this is generally only achievable through wealth and education it is his view that morality is a more important aspect of our character. Philip Shaw explains:

*'As the echo of a noble mind, the sublime elevates man above the tawdry concern with wealth and status...The parity between this notion of wealth and the nature of the sublime is, however, merely formal. For, unlike the sublime, grandeur of wealth is superficial and does not work to elevate the soul but rather to wither and ruin it. The implication of Longinus' observation is, therefore, that the true sublime is on the side of morality.'*¹⁸

He writes that although possession of great wealth and power may well be associated with magnificence; they are not prerequisites for encountering sublimity. He feels that a wise man is prudent in his disdain for these and should be admired. We should ascribe to achieve a genuine understanding of the sublime in order to appreciate it. This will come only with experience and we

¹⁷ Longinus, Dionysius, *On Sublimity*, Translated by Russell, D.A., Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1965 p.2

¹⁸ Shaw, Philip, *The Sublime*, p.18

must always be suspicious of the 'trappings' of wealth, reputation and absolute power. He feels that wisdom rather than wealth is crucial to our development and it is here that we see the notion of being primed for sublimity. He says that we must 'develop our minds in the direction of greatness and make them always pregnant with noble thoughts'¹⁹ and it is through our experiences that we will encounter the truly sublime. Longinus stresses the importance of repeated exposure to lofty thoughts and purposes saying:

*'Nature judged man to be no lowly or ignoble creature when she brought us into this life and into the whole universe as to a great celebration, to be spectators of her whole performance and most ambitious actors. She implanted at once into our souls an invincible love for all that is great and more divine than ourselves. That is why the universe gives insufficient scope to man's power of contemplation and reflection, but his thoughts often pass beyond the boundaries of the surrounding world.'*²⁰

Longinus' treatise defines the sublime as something that manifests certain characteristics and produces certain effects in the reader or listener²¹. These effects are achievable through the employment of certain devices and he lists these as the 'five sources of sublimity'²² – great thoughts, strong emotions, use of figures (thought and speech), diction and elevated word arrangements. Of these, 'great thoughts' are the most important as sublime effect cannot occur if the orator has a trivial or servile mind. Strong emotions are key to producing sublime feeling as they inform the listener/reader as to the speaker's passions: 'There is nothing so productive of grandeur as noble emotion in the right place. It inspires and possesses our words with a kind of madness and divine spirit.'²³ Longinus goes on to explain that figures are the 'natural allies' of sublimity – hyperbaton, polysyndeton and anaphora allow the writer to dismantle and refigure speech in such a way to inspire sublime thoughts. He often returns to the notion that we should consider the sublime in the creation of great thoughts and words and says that while this can involve a certain form of trickery the secret is not to reveal the nature of the trick: "Art is perfect when it looks like nature, nature is felicitous when it embraces concealed art."²⁴ Defining the sublime as a rhetorical effect and categorising it in terms of language places it, as an experience, in the hands of the creator and the minds of the reader-listener. It is something that shows our ability to comprehend and rationalise in

¹⁹ Longinus, Dionysius, *On Sublimity*, p.7

²⁰ Sircello, Guy, 'How is a Theory of the Sublime Possible?' *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, p.541-50, Fall, 1993

²¹ Op.Cit

²² Longinus, Dionysius, *On Sublimity*, p.8

²³ Longinus, 'On Sublimity,' *Greek and Roman Aesthetics*, Ed. Bychkov, V. Oleg, Sheppard, Ann, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p.151

²⁴ Longinus, 'On Sublimity,' *Classical Literary Criticism*, Ed. Russell, D.A., Oxford University Press, 1972, p.167

order to educate and elevate the mind. Interestingly, this is not always a comfortable experience with Shaw writing:

*'For Longinus, the discourse of the sublime, whether in political oratory or in epic verse, works to overcome the rational powers of its audience, persuading them to the efficacy of an idea by means of sheer rhetorical force. In Longinus' view...listeners and readers are ravished or, more disturbingly, raped by the power of words.'*²⁵

He says of Longinus that his sublime is the 'discourse of domination'²⁶ and says that while it shows the sublime might originally have arisen in our contemplation of the natural world, art is required to give these feelings shape and coherence. It places the sublime in the context of our artistic development and cultural enquiries rather than the omnipotent majestic mountain-top or valley.

Terry Eagleton in his 'Ideology of the Aesthetic' says that within life, certain objects stand out in perfection. The ideality of these items informs the viewer of a 'sensuous experience'²⁷ from within. These objects are known to us as inherently beautiful and enforce a logic that is felt rather than understood: 'a rigorous logic is here revealed to us in matter itself, felt instantly on the pulses.'²⁸ While there are many definitions of the aesthetic and enquiries into matters of taste, observation and perception, the logic of the sublime is at heart a sensate experience. True sublimity in art links the viewer irrevocably with the work they encounter. The sublime speaks to us in terms of power, terror and awe. There are descriptions of it a 'simple, grand sensation'²⁹ contrasted with the Longinian notion of the viewer being struck with 'the boiling furnaces of Etna, pouring out whole rivers of liquid flame.'³⁰ Paul de Man has said that 'sublimity is a certain distinction and excellence in expression.'³¹ A worthwhile creation should act upon the audience as a method of transport rather than a mere persuasion. According to Longinus this is because 'persuasion is on the whole something we can control, whereas amazement and wonder exert invincible power and force and get the better of every hearer.'³² When learning about the art of creation, one must learn the correct tools and methodology of expression. It is through the repeated utilisation of these tools that a piece of art may become a breakthrough piece. A nonchalant mark on canvas may require many years of

²⁵ Shaw, Philip, *The Sublime*, p.4

²⁶ Ibid. p.14

²⁷ Eagleton, Terry, *Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Blackwell Publishers, 1990, p.15

²⁸ Eagleton, Terry, *Ideology of the Aesthetic*, p.17

²⁹ Baillie, John, 'An Essay on the Sublime,' *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory*, Ed. Ashfield, Andrew, de Bolla, Peter, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p.97

³⁰ Longinus, *On the Sublime*

³¹ DeBolla, Peter, *The Discourse of the Sublime, Readings in History, Aesthetics and the Subject*, John Wiley and Sons, 1989

³² Longinus, 'On Sublimity,' *Classical Literary Criticism*, p.143

dedicated practice. These utilitarian marks and lines, when finally executed correctly, could be said to be our first encounter with sublimity. Whilst these are not the true sublime, they become a scaffold upon which it could hang. The point has also been made by William Duff that 'the genius must himself be enraptured if the audience be similarly moved.'³³ Gazing on authentic sublimity should therefore evoke a type of epiphany. There is a feeling of conquest and comprehension throughout and while this may seem an unusual notion to connect with the sublime it is as Longinus said: 'the mind is elevated by it, and so sensibly affected as to swell in transport and inward pride, as if what is heard or read were its own invention.'³⁴

Longinus' 'Peri Hupsos' comes into popular culture once more in the eighteenth century where its appraisal influences countless works and treatises on the matter. Shaw writes that its influence is as far reaching and key to our understanding of the topic because for the first time in written history we have a tangible questioning and understanding of some aspects of the sublime experience. It stands for:

*'the effect of grandeur in speech and poetry; for a sense of the divine; for the contrast between the limitations of human perception and the over-whelming majesty of nature; as proof of the triumph of reason over nature and imagination; and, most recently, as a signifier for that which exceeds the grasp of reason.'*³⁵

We get the impression that Longinus is rather shyly trying to evoke the sublime in our reading of his text but it is as he says himself: 'What can we say of all of this but that it really is "the dreaming of a Zeus"?'³⁶

Edmund Burke's 'A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful' was published in London in 1757. The first edition sees Burke propose what he calls a 'theory of our passions.'³⁷ He feels it is vital to investigate the topic as prior reasoning has been 'extremely inaccurate and inconclusive.'³⁸ It is the view of the author that the term 'beauty' has been subjected to much abuse and that the idea of the sublime is incorrectly used to explain *all* instances of passionate expression. Referring to the first major treatise on sublimity he says: 'Even Longinus, in his incomparable discourse upon a part of this subject, has comprehended things extremely

³³ Duff, William, *An Essay on Original Genius; And its Various Modes of Exertion in Philosophy and the Fine Arts, Particularly in Poetry*, BiblioLife, 2010

³⁴ Henry Home, Lord Kames, from *Elements of Criticism*, Routledge, 1993

³⁵ Shaw, *On the Sublime*, p.4

³⁶ Longinus, Dionysius, *On Sublimity*, p.14

³⁷ Burke, Edmund, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Oxford University Press, 1998, p.1

³⁸ Op.Cit

repugnant to each other, under the common name of the *Sublime*.³⁹ He feels that this type of consideration has led to a confusion of our ideas and attempts to rectify this under the various headings of terror, passion, pain and beauty. In the preface to the second edition, we see an expansion of the Enquiry and an added definition of 'taste.' He says that we must acknowledge that the sublime and the beautiful are very different things and any further contemplation or study should separate the two:

*'They are indeed ideas of a very different nature, one being founded on pain, the other on pleasure; and however they may vary afterwards from the direct nature of their causes, yet these causes keep up an eternal distinction never to be forgotten by any whose business it is to affect the passions.'*⁴⁰

Burke's treatise comes at a point in history where the traditional Longinian proposals are being discussed and challenged. The topic has become popular once more with new theories attempting to expand on the importance of the sublime. It begins to move away from mountain-top appraisal and religious omnipotence and comes to reside in objects much closer to home. Shaw explains:

*'The association between the vast in nature and the vast in mind is itself therefore a product of a system of thought, linking such disparate authors as Burnet, Dennis, Addison, and Shaftesbury ... systematicity itself may work blindly, without origin or tendency, and perhaps even without an author, for once animated by the combinatory or associative power of language, a power undetermined by God, mind, or nature, a mouse as much as a mountain may become a source of the sublime.'*⁴¹

At this point in history the sublime becomes something that resides in the discourse by which it is discussed as well as in the physical object or the mind of the viewer.

Burke's treatise is made up of five sections and an introduction on the idea of taste. Like Longinus he makes a link between experience and knowledge. He informs us that although he may continually educate himself, a novice's 'knowledge is improved, his Taste is not altered.'⁴² Mankind should instead consider that 'taste does not depend upon a superior principle in men, but on superior knowledge.'⁴³ What we consider to be good taste is in fact 'in reality is no more than a refined judgment.'⁴⁴ These judgments are improved by attention and reasoning rather than social position:

³⁹ Op.Cit

⁴⁰ Burke, Edmund, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, p.113

⁴¹ Shaw, Philip, *The Sublime*, p.45

⁴² Burke, Edmund, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, p.19

⁴³ Op.Cit

⁴⁴ Burke, Edmund, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, p.22

*'A rectitude of judgment in the arts which may be called a good Taste, does in a great measure depend upon sensibility; because if the mind has no bent to the pleasures of the imagination, it will never apply itself sufficiently to the works of that species to acquire competent knowledge of them.'*⁴⁵

Burke says that taste therefore is not a separate faculty of the mind. We are each in receipt of the ability to judge and to imagine. He proposes a theory of a *cultivation* of knowledge to inform that taste in order to make the correct judgement: 'It is known that the Taste (whatever it is) is improved exactly as we improve our judgment, by extending our knowledge, by a steady attention to our object, and by a frequent exercise.'⁴⁶

Burke now attempts to develop a set of criteria by which we can formulate our comprehension of sublimity. He is concerned 'with the task of providing a new way of understanding the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime, one grounded in a sensationist account of the human mind.'⁴⁷ He formulates his theory of terror and the sublime stating:

*'No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear. For fear being an apprehension of pain and death, if operates in a manner that resembles actual pain. Whatever therefore is terrible, with regards to sight, is sublime too.'*⁴⁸

The notion of threat and its capacity to influence the mind is examined in order to propose an 'alternative vision for social change.'⁴⁹ Luke Gibbons writes that the linking of terror and sublimity in Burke's treatise allows for a shift in our cultural sensibilities – where the sublime in the Longinian tradition discusses a type of mental movement – a journeying that subscribes to a higher authority in order to elevate and develop the mind, in the Burkean tradition, this movement is expanded upon. It becomes a cultural rather than personal shift and leads to what he calls a 'restorative process.'⁵⁰ Gibbons explains:

'For the Enlightenment, the injured body was incapable of looking beyond itself, and hence attaining the universal or cosmopolitan stance required to operate in the civic sphere. By contrast, Burke's aesthetics outline an alternative, radical form of sensibility – the "sympathetic sublime" – in which

⁴⁵ Burke, Edmund, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, p.23-24

⁴⁶ Burke, Edmund, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, p.25

⁴⁷ White, Stephen K., *Edmund Burke: Modernity, Politics and Aesthetics*, Sage Publications, 1994, p.25

⁴⁸ Burke, Edmund, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, p.53

⁴⁹ Gibbons, Luke, *Edmund Burke and Ireland*, Cambridge, 2003, p.xii

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* p.29

*the acknowledgment of oppression need not lead to self-absorption, but may actually enhance the capacity to identify with the plight of others.*⁵¹

It is through our capacity to empathise with our fellow man that we are capable of producing sublime feeling. Kant writes that:

*'Beauty is not a concept of an object, and a judgment of taste is not a cognitive judgment. All it assumes is that we are justified in presupposing universally in all people the same subjective conditions of the power of judgment that we find in ourselves.'*⁵²

The same can be said of Burke's supposition – sublimity lies in our ability to presuppose and to judge sympathetically; our natural affinities and recognition. He writes:

*'as our creator has designed us, we should be united by the bond of sympathy, he has strengthened that bond by a proportional delight; and there most, where our sympathy is most wanted, in the distresses of others.'*⁵³

Burke's Enquiry also discusses the idea of beauty. This has been described as the 'engenderment' of the sublime and we see for the first time the concept of 'feminine beauty' versus the 'masculine sublime.' The sensation or effect of beauty is described at length throughout Burke's text and he avers that it is most commonly seen that beauty 'is experienced most fully in men's sexual perception of women.'⁵⁴ Beauty lies in the feminine realm of seduction and is associated with love and desire. It is through admiring and being enchanted by beauty that men's base feelings of lust turn to love. We are raised therefore to a higher level of consciousness and 'above the level of brutes.'⁵⁵ We see that the application of beauty and its feminine 'deceit' raises a dilemma for Burke. His Enquiry suggests that the dominant masculine is 'engaged in a perpetual war with female lassitude.'⁵⁶ The previous anointment of the sublime as the ultimate force and power in our consciousness is now undermined by the subtlety of the beautiful. Shaw points out:

⁵¹ Ibid. p.xii

⁵² Shaw, Philip, *The Sublime*, p.77

⁵³ Burke, Edmund, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, p.42

⁵⁴ Furniss, Tom, *Edmund Burke's Aesthetic Ideology: Language, Gender, and Political Economy in Revolution* Cambridge University Press, 2003, p.35

⁵⁵ Ibid. p.36

⁵⁶ Shaw, Philip, *The Sublime*, p.62

'Where the sublime "dwells on large objects, and terrible," and is linked to the intense sensations of terror, pain, and awe, the focus of the beautiful, by contrast, is on "small ones, and pleasing" and appeals mainly to the domestic affections, to love, tenderness and pity⁵⁷.'

This leads to a conflict for Burkean scholars. If it is that the truly sublime is all-encompassing and terrible – something to be fearful of, how is it that female lassitude can have such a destabilizing effect without harbouring some magnificent power of its own. If it connotes small, domestic pleasures how can this be enough to influence the brutality of the sublime in its masculine potency and domination? This is a shaky foundation upon which to build sublime theory with Shaw explaining: 'it seems therefore that Burke's privileging of the sublime is prompted by a number of fears: the lapse of the extraordinary into custom; the collapse of masculinity in the face of female languor.⁵⁸'

Burke's Enquiry closes with an investigation into the effect of words on our passions. He begins:

'They seem to me to affect us in a manner very different from that in which we are affected by natural objects, or by painting or architecture: yet words have as considerable a share in exciting ideas of beauty and of the sublime as any of those, and sometimes a much greater than any of them.⁵⁹'

Like Longinus, Burke makes a connection between words and the aesthetic of the sublime. The origins of these feelings lie in our contemplation of the spoken word with Shaw concluding that

'the Burkean sublime, with its emphasis on the psychological effects of terror, proved decisive in shifting the discourse of the sublime away from the study of natural objects and towards the mind of the spectator.⁶⁰'

The Enquiry proposes that, while ultimately the sublime is something that happens within us, it is a relationship into which we enter. We understand that a genuine feeling of the sublime should be all-encompassing but know that this sensation works on a number of different levels, with the viewer or hearer's stance being taken into account. We enter into a relationship with sublimity and, while external objects affect our internal output, the sublime is not something that simply happens to us. Shaw surmises 'The argument of the Treatise...is thus almost entirely secular; God is no longer

⁵⁷ Ibid. p.57

⁵⁸ Ibid. p.63

⁵⁹ Burke, Edmund, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, p.149

⁶⁰ Shaw, Philip, *The Sublime*, p.71

required to guarantee the authenticity of our experience.⁶¹ Rather it lies in *our* capacity to engage with the sublime on a cognitive and considered level. In his Enquiry he has proposed a 'theory of our passions⁶²' and the 'common nature⁶³' of man means we use three standard tools of evaluation: the Senses; the Imagination; and the Judgment. This has led to an 'agreement of mankind⁶⁴' regarding notions of taste and a sublime that evokes the 'triumph of real sympathy.⁶⁵' He has written a theory of a cultivation of knowledge and we see that mankind can now consider that 'taste does not depend upon a superior principle in men, but on superior knowledge.⁶⁶' Finally, as Crowther writes:

*'by showing that the sublime is intrinsically connected with them, (Self Preservation/ Morality) Burke is able to invest the sublime passion with an intensity and, as it were, existential magnitude that more than compensates for its lack of positivity.'*⁶⁷

The 'Analytic of the Sublime' by Immanuel Kant was first published in 1790 and is the conclusion to his 'Critique of Judgment.' This Critique is part of the Kantian trilogy with the rest compiled from his 'Critique of Pure Reason' and 'Critique of Practical Reason.' The analysis emphasises our ability to comprehend the unimaginable and the 'shift from spectacle to spectator.⁶⁸' He wrote admiringly:

*'The fundamental laws of the motions of the heavenly bodies ... would have remained for ever undiscovered if Copernicus had not dared, in a manner contradictory to the senses, but yet true, to seek the observed movements, not in the heavenly bodies, but in the spectator.'*⁶⁹

If we are to consider the notion of the 'Kantian Sublime' we must first examine, as Edmund Burke has done at the outset of his Enquiry, the notion of 'taste.' Immanuel Kant's theory says that:

*'(for) beauty is not a concept of an object, and a judgement of taste is not a cognitive judgement. All it assumes is that we are justified in presupposing universally in all people the same subjective conditions of the power of judgement that we find in ourselves.'*⁷⁰

Kant gives as his definition of the sublime 'the name given to what is absolutely great.⁷¹' He makes an important distinction between sublimity and magnitude at this junction. Paul Crowther explains

⁶¹ Shaw, Philip, *The Sublime*, p.49

⁶² Burke, Edmund, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, p.1

⁶³ Ibid. p.1

⁶⁴ Ibid. p.15

⁶⁵ Ibid. p.43

⁶⁶ Ibid. p.19

⁶⁷ Crowther, Paul, *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism*, p.117

⁶⁸ Shaw, Philip, *The Sublime*, p. 73

⁶⁹ Op.Cit

⁷⁰ Kant, Immanuel, 'Critique of Judgment,' <http://philosophy.eserver.org/kant/critique-of-judgment.txt>, 20th November, 2010

that because magnitude depends on relativity, and because there will always be an object in the world that is 'greater' than its predecessor, in order to find the 'absolutely great' (sublime) 'we must look beyond the phenomenal world to that which sustains it, namely the noumenal or supersensible realm.⁷²' We are told that while our concept of the sublime lies beyond the *perception* of our senses, it does ultimately stem from within the self, as is the case with our judgements of taste and beauty. Crowther writes: 'It is the seat of that which is most fundamental to human beings, namely that aspect of the self which is free, and able to act on rational principles. This supersensible self is what is ultimately sublime.'⁷³

As with any encounter of the sublime previously investigated (Longinus, Burke), Kant speaks of a kind of cerebral dialogue taking place – what he calls a 'mental movement.'⁷⁴ The shifting of thought *beyond* the mind's dependence on the physical senses, leads to a 'double mode' of the representation of an object. The first of these can be described as the mathematical sublime with the second defined as the dynamical sublime. In terms of the mathematical sublime we experience what Crowther calls 'an *experiential* ideal of reason.'⁷⁵ He writes that:

*'Vast natural objects defeat our powers of perceptual and imaginative comprehension, thus occasioning a feeling of pain. Since however, this striving for comprehension is instigated by the rational self, the failure of our cognitive faculties at the sensible level serves to present or exemplify the superiority of our supersensible being. Hence, our feeling of pain gives way to one of pleasure. In the experience of the mathematical sublime...the limits imposed on sensibility reinforce our awareness of what is ultimate and infinite in humans.'*⁷⁶

In our quest to comprehend the incomprehensible, the imagination rushes in to fill the void left by our sensory handicap when examining 'spatial or temporal magnitude.'⁷⁷ The parallel nature of our comprehension and its subsequent failure, where a perceived object cannot be 'grasped in sensible intuition',⁷⁸ shows that we can facilitate 'ideas of reason' in the face of the infinite. We can therefore, apply the idea of 'totality' to boundlessness, with this action also forming the basis of the dynamical sublime. Shaw illustrates this saying:

⁷¹ Op.Cit

⁷² Crowther, Paul, *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993, p.77

⁷³ Ibid. p.135

⁷⁴ Kant, Immanuel, 'Critique of Judgment,' <http://philosophy.eserver.org/kant/critique-of-judgment.txt>., 20th November, 2010

⁷⁵ Crowther, Paul, *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism*, p.136

⁷⁶ Ibid. p.137

⁷⁷ Shaw, Philip, *The Sublime*, p.80

⁷⁸ Ibid. p.81

*'Through the encounter with the vast in nature the mind discovers within itself a faculty that transcends the realm of sensible intuition...what is uncovered is the rational a priori ground of cognition, a pure "idea" of totality or freedom, which is not subject to the empirical, contingent conditions of nature.'*⁷⁹

To explain his theory of the dynamical sublime, Kant introduces the notion of the vast natural world. He concisely says 'nature, considered in an aesthetic judgment as might that has no dominion over us, is dynamically sublime.'⁸⁰ Again, we see that a sense of helplessness is intrinsic in all of our sublime encounters. We are aware of our weakness in the face of natural phenomena and are reminded of Burke espousing the pleasure found in fear when contemplating the 'terrible.' Like Burke, Kant says that when we remove ourselves from the physical source of 'mighty nature,' we can contemplate our situation, not in terms of our corporeal weakness, but in terms of our mental strength. To explain Kant's theory, Crowther quotes from Blaise Pascal's *Pensées* who says:

*'Man is only a reed, the weakest thing in nature, but he is a thinking reed ... if the universe were to crush him, man would still be nobler than his destroyer, because he knows that he dies, and also the advantage that the universe has over him; but the universe knows nothing of this.'*⁸¹

Kant finishes by saying 'sublimity, therefore, does not reside in any of the things of nature, but only in our own mind, in so far as we may become conscious of our superiority over nature within, and thus also over nature without us.'⁸²

Further concepts of the Kantian sublime are those of reason and morality. Where magnitude is relative to its surroundings and the senses are applied at an individual's will and in the face of certain events, Kant says that reason is 'a principle that remains true in all circumstances, irrespective of sensible interests.'⁸³ In the second half of his 'Critique of Practical Reason,' he analyses this faculty saying that it allows our thought to 'transcend the natural realm.'⁸⁴ Man's desire to be ethically moral dictates that, unlike the sublime which works by demonstrating the failure of our sensible intuition, 'it must be guided by a principle that has nothing to do with basic human

⁷⁹ Ibid. p.82

⁸⁰ Kant, Immanuel, 'Critique of Judgment,' <http://philosophy.eserver.org/kant/critique-of-judgment.txt>, 20th November, 2010

⁸¹ Pascal, Blaise, *Pensées*, trans. J. Warrington (Dent, London, 1973) p.110

⁸² <http://philosophy.eserver.org/kant/critique-of-judgment.txt> 20th November, 2010

⁸³ Shaw, Philip, *The Sublime*, p.84

⁸⁴ Ibid.p.75

wants and desires.⁸⁵ It is, as Shaw writes, the ‘obligation to think beyond the given.’⁸⁶ However, it is *like* the sublime in that reason ‘exposes the limits of understanding’⁸⁷ and in doing so, writes a frame-work for morality, ethics and goodness. It could be said that our capacity to endure or engage with sublime thoughts and feelings also allows us the capacity to judge the substance of our experience. Like Burke who craved a sublimity of ‘fellow-feeling,’ Kant wishes for a ‘philosophy of the Good.’⁸⁸

Reason lies at the heart of Kant’s sublime. It gives us the facility to not only comprehend vast objects in their totality but also demonstrates man’s ability of judgement. It is something that lies in our own capabilities with Shaw saying:

*‘Sublimity for Kant is the feeling that arises whenever we, as subjects, become aware of the transcendental dimensions of experience. The sublime occurs, that is, whenever ideas exceed the application of a concept; at such moments the mind comes alive to the existence of a faculty of reason transcending the limits of our sensual existence.’*⁸⁹

Kant’s theories of transcendence and synthesis allows for a mind that functions to engage *with* the world around it. Again, we see that the sublime is not just something that happens to us. The mirroring of the sublime object with the transcendence of thought tells us that the sublime also lies within. It is as much in our own capacity to view, to process and to understand, as it is in the objects we invest with sublimity. It becomes the basis of our moral compass and, by understanding what is absolutely ‘great’ we come to an understanding of what it is to be human.

‘Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime’ was originally published as a ‘collection of lessons’⁹⁰ rather than a book in its own right. It is a compilation of thoughts written as preparation for an oral lecture on Immanuel Kant’s ‘Critique of Judgement.’ Its author, Jean-François Lyotard, explains that it has not been written as merely instruction or accompaniment to Kant’s philosophy but rather requires that one reads his Critique in order to understand the text. He acknowledges that it has been written as a series of lecture notes and surmises that:

⁸⁵ Op.Cit

⁸⁶ Op.Cit

⁸⁷ Kant, Immanuel, ‘Critique of Judgment,’ <http://philosophy.eserver.org/kant/critique-of-judgment.txt>, 20th November, 2010

⁸⁸ Op.Cit

⁸⁹ Shaw, Philip, *The Sublime*, p.88

⁹⁰ Lyotard, Jean-François, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, Stanford University Press, 1994, p.ix

*'One could say that these lessons try to isolate the analysis of a differend of feeling in Kant's text, which is also the analysis of a feeling of differend, and to connect this feeling with the transport that leads all thought (critical thought included) to its limits.'*⁹¹

First published in 1991, the book is made up of a series of chapters analysing and discussing Kantian sublime philosophy – from aesthetic reflection and subjectivity to comparisons between the sublime and notions of taste. It considers the idea of aesthetic and ethics in the realm of sublimity and concludes that the communication of sublime feeling lies with violent interactions between the idea of the absolute and the differend. By 'differend' he means 'a difference which exists in a blatant manner but which is structured such that the victim cannot find a means by which to address it.'⁹² Rather than existing in a litigious sense, he categorises it under the terms of language -

*'A phrase that comes along is put into play within a conflict between genres of discourse. This conflict is a differend, since the success (or validation) proper to one genre is not the one proper to others.'*⁹³

Once more we see a sublime mired in conflict and violent thoughts. He concludes his Lessons with the theory that:

*'The Idea of the finality without concept of a form of pure pleasure cannot be suggested by the violent contra-finality of the object. The sublime feeling in neither moral universality nor aesthetic universalization, but is, rather, the destruction of one by the other in the violence of the differend. This differend cannot demand, even subjectively, to be communicated by all thought.'*⁹⁴

Lyotard offers an alternative discourse on the sublime. He wishes us to consider a 'parology' or 'false reasoning' with regards to works of art. He feels that by creating the unrecognisable or 'presenting the unrepresentable' we can destabilise the rules governing the materialistic and thence culturally vapid society in which we live. Where Kant strives for a comprehension of totality, Lyotard says that the postmodern should instead 'wage a war against it.'⁹⁵ Shaw writes: '(Lyotard) regards the artistic avant-garde as a vital tool in exposing the logic of late capitalism ... driven by a desire to disrupt the means by which capitalist economies determine realism.'⁹⁶ The idea of the aesthetic therefore becomes a loaded political concept – beauty is the method by which a materialistic society is enslaved and controlled. Lyotard sees the sublime as an experience of 'the happening' and 'the not

⁹¹ Ibid. p.x

⁹² Rapaport Herman, 'Lyotard, Jean-François: Le Différend,' SubStance 15, no.1, 1986, p.82-86

⁹³ Bobo, D., Michael, 'Missional Implications of The Differend by J.F. Lyotard,' www.patheos.com, October 11th 2012

⁹⁴ Lyotard, Jean-François, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, p.239

⁹⁵ Malpas, Simon, *Jean-François Lyotard*, Routledge, 2003,p.49

⁹⁶ Shaw, Philip, *The Sublime*, p.125

happening.’ The paradoxical nature of eventhood means that the experience testifies only to the event itself and therefore cannot be appropriated by an aesthetical political regime. In terms of art, a ‘beautiful’ painting is something that can be ‘grasped by sensibility⁹⁷’ and is ‘intelligible to understanding.⁹⁸’ The sublime must take on a different role with Lyotard writing in his essay ‘The Sublime and the Avant-garde:’

‘The inexpressible does not reside in an over there, in another words, or another time, but in this: in that (something) happens. In the determination of pictorial art, the indeterminate, the ‘it happens’ is the paint, the picture. The paint, the picture as occurrence or event, is not expressible, and it is this that it has to witness... Here and now there is this painting, rather than nothing, and that’s what is sublime... It’s still the sublime in the sense that Burke and Kant described and yet it isn’t their sublime any more.⁹⁹

In terms of artistic practice therefore, we see that Lyotard’s theory is best applied to Modernist works which are formless/abstract. These works appear in a Postmodern state which is defined as an era/movement that is constant and flowing rather than definable by its demise or the demise of a predecessor. Rather than signifying the end of the modern, it should instead signify a type of symbiotic discourse. He writes ‘Postmodernism is not modernism at its end, but in the nascent state, and this state is constant.¹⁰⁰’ We are reminded of Jean-Luc Nancy who wrote: ‘The sublime is not so much what we’re going back to as where we’re coming from.¹⁰¹

It is through his definition of realism in these postmodern terms that Lyotard makes his most defining claims on the sublime, particularly in relation to Kant and the avant-garde. Since photography now exists to document and categorise imagery we move away from a dependence on paint or the artist to accurately render a scene in order to make it recognisable or familiar to us. Instead, what he calls the ‘ready-made techno sciences¹⁰²’ undertake the role of documenter of our age and the capacity for ‘infinite production’ allows for a new set of rules governing aesthetics and culture. Crowther writes:

⁹⁷ Ibid. p.124

⁹⁸ Op.Cit

⁹⁹ Lyotard, Jean-François, ‘The Sublime and the Avant-Garde,’ *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, Ed. Cazeux, Clive, Routledge, 2000, p.455

¹⁰⁰ Lyotard, Jean-François, *The Post-Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, University of Minnesota, 1984, p.79

¹⁰¹ Shaw, Philip, *The Sublime*, p.1

¹⁰² Crowther, Paul, *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993, p.154

*'It is with the impact of photography and techno scientific culture, then, that we find the historical beginnings of a postmodern sensibility – wherein our conceptions of art and the aesthetic are transformed.'*¹⁰³

He can now define art in two separate and distinct categories – that of fine art and mechanical art which, due to the nature of its production lies outside the traditional parameters of 'taste' and aesthetic appreciation. The application of forms and imagery in painting likewise adopt a new role. 'Realism' becomes something that is instantly understandable and recognisable. Photography lies within this category, representing as it does the infinite production of a communication based media and culture. Painting in the Postmodern era defined by Lyotard must therefore undertake a new function. Crowther explains: 'Lyotard's reasoning here is based on the fact that because Modernist works can be "formless" or "abstract" (in comparison with conventional representation), this enables them to allude to the "unpresentable" or "invisible."¹⁰⁴ On the notion of photography Lyotard writes:

*'It allows the unpresentable to be put forward only as the missing contents; but the form, because of its recognisable consistency, continues to offer to the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure. Yet these sentiments do not constitute the real sublime sentiment which is an intrinsic combination of pleasure and pain.'*¹⁰⁵

With regards to painting therefore, the sublime must reside in what he calls the 'melancholic' or 'novatio' – a nostalgia for presence which lies somewhere, undefined, between the 'happening' and the 'not happening' and in the painted forms themselves. He says that ultimately:

*'The sublime feeling is an emotion, a violent emotion, close to unreason, which forces thought to the extremes of pleasure and displeasure, from joyous exaltation to terror; the sublime feeling is as tightly strung between ultra-violet and infrared as respect is white.'*¹⁰⁶

Slavoj Žižek's 'The Sublime Object of Ideology' is one of four investigations into themes varying from Hegelian philosophy and Marxism to Christian theology. The focus of 'The Sublime Object' is his reading of Lacanian psychoanalysis where, as Shaw explains: 'the sublime is identified, via Hegel, as the "reified" effect of the inconsistency of the symbolic order.'¹⁰⁷ Again, we see a sublime theory based in conflict and disorder. Having read Hegel, who quests for a totality of thought and the

¹⁰³ Ibid. p.155

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. p.156

¹⁰⁵ Lyotard, Jean-François, *The Post-Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, p.79

¹⁰⁶ Lyotard, Jean-François, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, p.228

¹⁰⁷ Shaw, Philip, *The Sublime*, p.147

absolute in contradicting parenthesis, and Lacan's notion of the 'void at the heart of symbolisation,¹⁰⁸ - that is to say - a theory of lacking, Žižek proposes that dialectical thought will not produce synthesized viewpoints. Rather, he acknowledges that 'contradiction (is) an internal condition of every identity.¹⁰⁹ He feels that the truth of our existence and identities is found in contradiction and it is this 'oxymoronic style¹¹⁰ of thought that forms the basis of his sublime discourse. Tony Myers writes:

*'One of Žižek's main contributions to critical theory is his detailed elaboration of the subject ... If you take away all your distinctive characteristics, all your particular needs, interests, beliefs, what you are left with is a subject. The subject is the form of your consciousness, as opposed to the contents of that form which are individual and specific to you.'*¹¹¹

Žižek writes that the aim of his 'Sublime Object' is therefore, to introduce the key concepts of Lacan in terms of what he calls 'post-structuralism,¹¹² to encourage a 'return to Hegel¹¹³ – a new reading of Hegelian thought post-Lacan and to attempt to contribute to the discourse of the sublime via new readings of 'well-known classical motifs,¹¹⁴ – amongst them, commodity and fetishism.

Jacques Lacan contributes to the discourse of the sublime through what Shaw calls a 'materialistic tradition.¹¹⁵ He feels that nonsensical things such as religion are explainable in terms of the sublime and through the process of what Freud called 'sublimation.' Shaw writes: 'As advanced by Freud, sublimation refers to the process by which the libido is transferred from a material object towards an object that has no obvious connection with this need.¹¹⁶ Lacan reworks this theory, reversing the process so that we see the libido shifting instead to a Thing or object, away from the 'void of the unserviceable¹¹⁷ to something tangible or concrete. Žižek states that this object now 'assumes a sublime quality the moment it occupies the place of the Thing.¹¹⁸ This transfer comes to identify the 'void' in our symbolization of the object – what Lacan calls 'the-beyond of the signified.¹¹⁹ Shaw writes that 'the Thing for Lacan is a kind of non-thing; we become aware of it as a kind of void or

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. p.135

¹⁰⁹ Myers, Tony, *Slavoj Žižek: Routledge Critical Thinkers*, Routledge, 2003, p.16

¹¹⁰ Ibid. p.17

¹¹¹ Ibid. p.11

¹¹² Žižek, Slavoj, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Verso, 1989, p.xxx

¹¹³ Op.Cit

¹¹⁴ Op.Cit

¹¹⁵ Shaw, Philip, *The Sublime*, p.132

¹¹⁶ Ibid. p.135

¹¹⁷ Žižek, Slavoj, 'Courtly Love, or Woman as Thing,' *The Žižek Reader*, Ed. Wright, Edmund, Wright, Elizabeth, Blackwell Publishing, 1999, p.157

¹¹⁸ Op.Cit

¹¹⁹ Shaw, Philip, *The Sublime*, p.135

absence residing at the heart of signification.¹²⁰ We see a theory of lacking – the emptiness of the unthinkable becomes sublime to allow us to categorise the non-thing. Žižek writes:

*'Now we can understand why the signifier as such has the status of the Vorstellungsrepräsentanz¹²¹ in Lacan. It is no longer the simple Saussurean material representative of the signified, of the mental representation-idea, but the substitute filling out the void of some originally missing representation: it does not bring to mind any representation, it represents its lack.'*¹²²

Through defining an object with a title and supplying it with representation in the form of *language*, however, the signifier of the missing representation now serves to function as what he calls a 'metalanguage designation.'¹²³ This effect of titling limits/totalizes the object in terms of its sublimation and we have a philosophical impossibility or a 'theory of lack' to now consider. Shaw explains:

*'The sublime, therefore, as presented by Žižek, ought not to be conceived as a transcendent "Thing-in-itself" beyond the field of representation, but rather as an indicator of the traumatic emptiness, the primordial lack, residing at the heart of all forms of symbolization.'*¹²⁴

Žižek asks to consider instead the notion of a *sensus communis* – whereby the coherence of reality depends on our engagement with a sublime Idea that can never fully occur *in* that reality. He says:

*'The Thing-in-itself is found in its truth through the loss of its immediacy. In other words, what appears, to "external reflection", as an Impediment is in fact a positive condition of our access to the Truth: the Truth of a thing emerges because the thing is not accessible to us in its immediate self-identity.'*¹²⁵

It is, as Anthony Elliot writes: 'the subject of lack exists prior to any mode of subjectivization. It is the "empty place" of individuality¹²⁶' and it is within this space that the Zizekean sublime exists.

Žižek's account of the sublime is also based on his reading of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel who advocated the use of dialectical thinking in order to understand the world around us. He felt that by

¹²⁰ Op.Cit

¹²¹ By 'Vorstellungsrepräsentanz' Žižek is referring to the idea of the 'representative' or the substitute of representation as proposed by Freud. It is the 'signifying element filling out the vacant place of the missing representation.'

¹²² Žižek, Slavoj, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p.179

¹²³ Ibid. p.158

¹²⁴ Shaw, Philip, *The Sublime*, p.138

¹²⁵ Žižek, Slavoj, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p.243

¹²⁶ Elliot, Anthony, 'Žižek, Slavoj,' *Key Contemporary Social Theorists*, Ed. Elliot, Anthony, Ray, Larry, Blackwell Publishing, 2003, p.275

combining individual thoughts we could form an 'Absolute Idea' and said that it was only through using this dialectical device that we could form an idea of totality. Shaw writes:

'In Hegelian dialectics, thought begins with a thesis, or idea, which is countered by an antithesis, an opposing idea. The conflict is resolved by combining thesis and antithesis in a synthesis, which compromises a greater, more encompassing idea.'^{127,}

Žižek explains Hegel's theory as, once more a testimony to the notion of lacking. If this type of dialectical thought is applied, for example, to the notion of the object or Kant's 'thing-in-itself,' in Hegelian terms the sublime is an object 'whose positive body is just an embodiment of Nothing.'^{128,} Where Kant's contemplation of the infinite signifies man's ability to comprehend totality or boundlessness, in Hegel our comprehension instead emphasises the inadequacy of our vision/contemplation. Shaw explains:

'(It) does not point to the existence of a supersensible realm, beyond appearance, but rather to the inadequacy of appearance to itself, to the sense in which appearance, or phenomena, is oriented around a determinate lack. Again, Žižek stresses, with a glance to Lacan, that the sublime object is merely the embodiment of this lack.'^{129,}

However, Žižek notes that despite his opposing view of Kant's sublime, Hegel does not stand in opposition to Kant and that we as reader should be aware of this fact. He feels, rather, that his notion of the sublime takes itself even more *literally* than Kant's writing:

'Hegel's position is, in contrast, that there is nothing beyond the phenomenality, beyond the field of representation...The experience of the Sublime thus remains the same: all we have to do is to subtract its transcendent presupposition – the presupposition that this experience indicates, in a negative way, some transcendent Thing-in-itself persisting in its positivity beyond it...We must limit ourselves to what is strictly immanent to this experience, to pure negativity, to the negative self-relationship of the representation.'^{130,}

Žižek's 'Sublime Object' serves to further discourse on the sublime for the twenty-first century. His theory expands on Lacan's notion of transcendence and sublimation which, it could be said, was never fully realised in terms of the sublime. He also proposes a theory for Hegel which differs from previous reasoning that he stands in *opposition* to Immanuel Kant, regarding it instead as standing *as*

¹²⁷ Shaw, Philip, *The Sublime*, p.153

¹²⁸ Žižek, Slavoj, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p.206

¹²⁹ Shaw, Philip, *The Sublime*, p.139

¹³⁰ Žižek, Slavoj, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p.233

well as it. Crucially the appeal of Žižek is his contemplation of philosophy in easily recognisable and familiar articles. In 'The Sublime Object' alone he discusses fourteen different Hitchcock films as well as popular sci-fi cinematic culture – 'The Invasion of the Body Snatchers' and 'Alien.' In this regard he is similar to Longinus who used Homer's *Odyssey* to expand upon his theory of the sublime, or indeed Edmund Burke who discussed Milton's 'Paradise Lost' at length in his *Enquiry*. Žižek puts the sublime in the age of Lyotard's 'techno-sciences' as well as regarding it in terms of social structures and human agency. He has become known as a 'philosopher of the real,'¹³¹ where, in terms of discussion he can explain his thoughts using 'real objects – e.g. European toilet design rather than abstract ideas with no immediate reference to us.'¹³² His position on the sublime, when centred on his reading of prior philosophy, encourages a reconstruction of thought, rather than a tearing apart of ideas to create new theories. Elliot writes that where he is:

*'critical of philosophical traditions that see social and political identities as deriving from objective interests, needs or desires ... (he) locates the emergence of identity as a contingent process of linguistic articulation. A discursive process of political hegemony at once creates social and cultural identities and, in so doing, covers over that insufficiency which is understood to lie at the heart of subjectivity.'*¹³³

He writes in his preface to 'The Sublime Object' that what critics of Hegel's voracity need is 'a dose of an effective laxative'¹³⁴ and it is with a voracity of his own that he attempts to rectify our notions on the reification of language, of the idealisation of a society which cannot exist and a proposition that the subversion of this 'social fantasy' should be the ultimate task of any critique of ideology.¹³⁵

The examination and dissection of these texts show a type of evolution of thought regarding the sublime. It is treated as a philosophical subject but also, as a condition of the mind and self. They represent the concerns of mankind at each point in their history and show an ever-increasing appetite to understand what it is to feel and be human. We differentiate ourselves through our engagement with the sublime, not only through our ability to contemplate grandeur and wonder but in the contemplation of infinity itself. Rather grandly, the enquiries show a movement away from the regard of the natural world toward an appraisal of the self and our capacity for definition and thought. The sublime can be found in all things it would seem – vast landscapes, oratorical devices, infinity and the notion of the 'other' – the nothingness of the unrepresentable, the apparent 'void' at

¹³¹ Myers, Tony, *Slavoj Žižek: Routledge Critical Thinkers*, p.29

¹³² Op.Cit

¹³³ Elliot, Anthony, 'Žižek, Slavoj,' *Key Contemporary Social Theorists*, p.274

¹³⁴ Žižek, Slavoj, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p.xxii

¹³⁵ Elliot, Anthony, 'Slavoj Žižek,' *Key Contemporary Social Theorists*, p.274

the heart of contemplation. Regardless of the role of the sublime, what each review testifies to most is the subject *of* our engagement. They represent our ability to contemplate, raising the self above the 'level of brutes.'¹³⁶ The power of language and the reification of thought to synthesise new thoughts have become as important as the boundless landscapes we inhabit. Just as we think we have 'figured out' the sublime, a new appraisal or consideration arrives to represent the thoughts of that age. There is no sublime object without our engagement with that object. Our application to the subject of the sublime, as represented by Longinus and his peers, is sublimity itself and it is found within these enquiries.

¹³⁶ Burke, Edmund, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, p.148

Chapter Three: Mandarin to Stumblebum – Philip Guston and the Right of Figuration

Speaking on the idea of the image in isolation in 1960 Philip Guston makes clear his thoughts on the disingenuousness of abstract art. He says that abstraction is a fallacy and one that distracts us from the questions that art should ask. He also says that we should be image makers and it is only by doing so that we will discover the truth about painting. This is only possible through the depiction of forms and images and it is by their application that we will experience genuine feelings of freedom and sublimity:

*'There is something ridiculous and miserly in the myth that we inherit from abstract art: That painting is autonomous, pure and for itself, and therefore we habitually analyze its ingredients and define its limits. But painting is "impure." It is the adjustment of impurities which forces painting's continuity. We are image makers and image-ridden. There are no "wiggly lines or straight lines" or any other elements. You work until they vanish. The picture isn't finished if they are seen.'*¹³⁷

Guston's dramatic move away from abstraction came after a very successful career in it. In doing so, he asks questions about the authenticity of the sublime experience in relation to non-figurative art. He asks us to consider notions of 'truth' in an artwork and says that if we are to gaze upon paintings which contain predominantly unrecognisable forms then a genuine transcendence of thought cannot take place. We see him building up a bank of recognisable domestic images, returning to them repeatedly in his later career and we ask, how can the depiction of primarily household objects challenge something as widely acclaimed as Barnett Newman's 'theoretically qualified' notion of the sublime? Gilbert-Rolfe writes for example that:

*'Others have seen the New York painters of the 1950s, Newman among them, as an American version of the German romantic sublime, an art concerned with the overwhelming and with the idea of density as an idea of acting out, a sublime severe but atmospheric and engulfing rather than hard and resistant.'*¹³⁸

We must ask, how can Guston provoke sublime reaction by painting shoes and clocks compared with the all-consuming impact of his contemporaries' paintings, and indeed, his own among them?

By adopting a position away from the metropolitan gallery driven art scene, Guston placed himself at the periphery of the art world. It is widely considered that the evolution of the sublime lay in the

¹³⁷ Coolidge, Clark, *Philip Guston, Collected Writings, Lectures, Conversations*, University of California Press, 2011, p.31

¹³⁸ Gilbert-Rolfe, Jeremy, 'Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime,' *The Sublime*, Ed. Morely, Simon, Whitechapel Gallery, MIT Press, 2010, p.138

phenomena of artists such as Rothko, Pollock and Newman. The struggle to 'break through' the ambiguousness of abstract art with a return to figuration was seen by many as a step back in this evolution but this struggle mimics the idea of breaking through to achieve transcendence. The status of the image is one that we now take for granted but, during the era of the powerhouse all-American macho intelligentsia, it became a thing of artistic ridicule. Pop art could only raise its status once more by adopting it as kitsch – rashes of in-jokes via plastic repetitions and concepts. Guston fell between the two camps – the intellectual abstract loftiness of the high sublime and the ironic image fuelled cynicism of Pop art. He decides instead to cling to the familiar and everyday and, in doing so, raised more questions about the idea of the sublime than we had thought possible:

*'So that I felt that maybe there's an ambiguity that I haven't even dreamt of. In other words, what would happen if I did paint a simple object like a book or a hand or a shoe? That finally became to me the most enigmatic of all. It seemed to me like an even greater enigma. Or, rather, a deeper ambiguity. It's a different kind of ambiguity I wanted. I was weary of that whole thing that had gotten so accepted, which made it repulsive to me and thrown back to my face again and all that. An ambiguity that became so different and generalized that there was nothing left of it anymore.'*¹³⁹

Ashton writes of Philip Guston's desire to feel what he called a feeling of 'freedom' in his early career:

*'The experience he longed for – recorded so often by Pasternek's "world's best creators" – was to feel a reality in the work more vital than any known emotion, and more seductive.'*¹⁴⁰

At a time when Guston was painting 'close-up' visions of whispering abstract delicacy and primitive ink drawings, his cultural sphere was made up of people who created works full of imagery and people from the everyday world – drawn entirely from real life. From an early age he admired the work of V.I. Pudovkin whose processes echo that of the artist in his later career. He spoke of *building* a film, rather than shooting it and said that the 'structuring' of an event to capture its happening on screen was central to the art of film making: 'Pudovkin recognised that an artist, using materials drawn from life (objects and people), was nonetheless functioning as a creator, that the composition of forms was central to his art.'¹⁴¹ Guston's primitive ink scratching and whisperings were a far cry from the instantly recognisable, heavy 'common objects' of his later work but in creating them he began to ask questions regarding picture plane, dimensionality and the figurative image. (Fig.2) He

¹³⁹ Coolidge, Clark, *Philip Guston, Collected Writings, Lectures, Conversations*, p.193

¹⁴⁰ Ashton, Dore, *A Critical Study of Philip Guston*, University of California Press, 1990, p.90-91

¹⁴¹ Ashton, Dore, *A Critical Study of Philip Guston*, p.96

called the process employed at this time 'dissolving form' but in doing so, wished to 'locate the traces of form in space.'¹⁴² (Fig.3) Ashton writes:

*'In Piero he had understood that composition was based on extreme attention to the location of forms in space. In painting nothing is more difficult than that. What he sought to do in this long series of drawings, in which forms are released from specific context and yet are made to subsist in a small universe created by the artist all at once on the pages, was to "locate" an image.'*¹⁴³

For almost three years Guston limits his palette to black and white – forcing boundary and structure in order to find continuity and recognition in the work. He speaks of wishing to find release – a double-experience whereby one has created a *new* image and yet innately recognizes something of the self in that image. This quest for self-recognition in form shapes the basis for Guston's desire to experience the above-mentioned feeling of 'freedom' – an intense feeling of understanding and epiphany in one's own painting. In 1965 he expands on the process to Harold Rosenberg, saying:

*'In the last years there's been, obviously, no colour. Simply black and white or gray and white, gray and black. I did this very deliberately, and I'll tell you why. Painting became more crucial to me. By crucial I mean that the only measure now was precisely to see whether it was really possible to achieve – to make this voyage, this adventure, and to arrive at this release that we have been talking about without any seductive aids like colour, for example. Now I've become involved in images and the location of those images, usually a single form, or a few forms. It becomes more important to me simply to locate the form.'*¹⁴⁴

This deliberate and protracted process leads to what some critics call a 'moral choice' for the artist. He rejects abstraction and begins to narrow down shapes and lines into Klan hoods and mountainous bulbous heads. Roland Barthes in his essay 'The Rhetoric of the Image' states that if our reading of an image is satisfactory then our analysis offers us three messages - 'A linguistic message; a coded iconic message and a non-coded iconic message.'¹⁴⁵ While the first linguistic message is independently read, the viewer receives the other two simultaneously – both the perceptual and the cultural readings come together. There is a relation between the sign and the signified which prompts the viewer to draw upon a reservoir of cultural knowledge. The emergence of symbols and imagery in Guston's work now allow this to happen. He explains the importance of this, putting himself firmly in the figurative camp in 1958:

¹⁴² Ibid. p.97

¹⁴³ Op.Cit

¹⁴⁴ Coolidge, Clark, *Philip Guston, Collected Writings, Lectures, Conversations*,p.47

¹⁴⁵ Barthes, Roland, *The Rhetoric of the Image, The Photography Reader*, Ed. Wells, Liz, 2003, p. 120-124

*'I do not see why the loss of faith in the known image and symbol in our time should be celebrated as a freedom. It is a loss from which we suffer, and this pathos motivates modern painting and poetry at its heart.'*¹⁴⁶

Doreet LeVitte Harten, like many authors, places the sublime firmly at the feet of Guston's Abstract contemporaries. She describes it in terms of 'etiquette and court manners.' In order for a sublime experience to occur there are a number of criteria necessary and rules to follow. In terms of American art she says that Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko, rather than Guston, are the founding fathers of sublimity:

*'The sublime was to be abstract, devoid of all signifiers, so that which is signified will appear in all its decorum: that is, by stating its not being there it will have the appropriate Parousia, the manifestation of the hidden experience.'*¹⁴⁷

We are reminded of Kant, who spoke of a cerebral dialogue taking place within the mind – a 'mental movement' where, the shifting of thought *beyond* the mind's dependence on the physical senses leads to double-mode of experience. This mode of mathematical sublime allows for an experiential idea of reason and we again see the sublime shift away from our engagement with the physical world to an internalised response – from the phenomenal world to the noumenal or supersensible realm. This echoes Burke's treatise which places the sublime firmly in our capacity for thought – a secular argument where a God complex is no longer required to authenticate our response to greatness. If it is to be found in the self where does this put the status of the image? If the sublime previously lay in the appraisal of the lofty mountain and mighty seascapes in the natural world, and if it has shifted in terms of philosophical evolution to be exclusively an 'experience of the mind' – one that requires no recognisable form or image to authenticate/verify its existence, does this mean that the question of the sublime has been fully answered? Many seem to think that it is with LeVitte expanding:

*'The application of a negative theory in the arts, a theology which is based on the idea of aphaeresis (the coming to the essence by way of abstraction), haunts us still. It is therefore difficult for the catechist to see the sublime in a popular or figurative form ... an endless theoretical field sustains the weakness of the image, chased out of pictorial paradise.'*¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ Hughes, Robert, *The Shock of the New*, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1991, p.397

¹⁴⁷ LeVitte Harten, Doreet, 'Creating Heaven,' *The Sublime*, Ed. Morley, Simon, Whitechapel Gallery and MIT Press, 2010, p.73

¹⁴⁸ Op.Cit.

Originally at least, it would seem that Guston agreed. In the 1940s he was preoccupied with ambiguousness and metaphor, putting as much importance on the idea of space and scale, which became 'as charged with meaning' and were as inevitable to the compositions as the figures themselves. However, writing on a scrap of paper found in the artist's studio after his death by his daughter disputes this. Guston, it would seem, was always uncomfortable with his career as an Abstract Expressionist and went so far as to denounce abstraction and its role in the cultural demise of the American people:

*'American Abstract art is a lie, a sham, a cover-up for a poverty of spirit. A mask to mask the fear of revealing oneself. A lie to cover up how bad one can be ... What a sham! Abstract art hides it, hides the lie, a fake! Don't! Let it show! It is an escape from the true feelings we have, from the "raw," primitive feelings about the world — and us in it. In America. Where are the wooden floors — the light bulbs — the cigarette smoke? Where are the brick walls? Where is what we feel — without notions — ideas — good intentions? No, just conform to the banks — the plazas — monuments to the people who own this country — give everyone the soothing lullaby of "art."*¹⁴⁹

Guston's great friend Ross Feld was convinced that he had only ever *seemed* to be an abstractionist throughout the fifties and sixties and in retrospect, the artist himself knew of this fact. He confirms it to Feld in a letter in 1979 – a shy revelation that in all the 'playing along' perhaps it was only in later life that he realized it was more important to be understood than to be liked. It is at this time that we see that Guston painted the things he understood. He said of the images hung together in the gallery for his final retrospective that they showed a 'life lived.' To move away from the tentative abstraction of his early career to the intensely personal artifacts of his everyday habits and life gave his work the integrity and gravitas he so greatly desired.

By painting easily recognizable images, Guston allows for an evolution of the sublime away from the art of the Abstract Expressionists. It would be unfair at this point to discard the image – to denounce it as the sublime of the iconoclast and misplaced devotee. The idea of the image having no use or power in our visual advancement falls aside when we look to Barthes' theory on the 'imagination of the sign.' The relationship between sign and signifier, as we have said, imply 'the existence for each sign, of a reservoir or organized "memory" of forms from which it is distinguished by the smallest difference necessary and sufficient to effect a change of meaning.'¹⁵⁰ In terms of the evolution of the sublime, after the success of Abstract Expressionism, with its all embracing voids and verticality, there is nowhere for it to go. Robert Rosenblum writes in 1961 that, including the three other

¹⁴⁹ Mayer, Musa, *Night Studio: A Memoir of Philip Guston*, Knopf, 1998, p.170

¹⁵⁰ Barthes, Roland, 'The Imagination of the Sign,' *Barthes: Selected Writings*, Ed. Sontag, Susan, p.221

'masters' of the sublime (Rothko, Still, Pollock), Newman 'produces awesomely simple mysteries that evoke the primeval moment of creation. Indeed, a quartet of the large canvases...might well be interpreted as a post-World-War II myth of Genesis.¹⁵¹ He goes on:

'During the Romantic era, the sublimities of nature gave proof of the divine; today, such supernatural experiences are conveyed through the abstract medium of paint alone. What used to be pantheism has now become a kind of "paint-theism."¹⁵²

It is hard to imagine however, where the sublime, in terms of painting at least, will go – should we just keep making the canvases bigger?

Jean-Francois Lyotard has said that realism is the 'mainstream art of any culture' – something that upon viewing we can instantly recognize and understand. Malpas explains Lyotard's theory saying that realism "makes" the world appear real...reality is not something we know naturally but rather that a sense of reality is generated through the beliefs and ideals of particular culture, and that realist art or literature is one of the things that helps a culture create a sense of its reality.¹⁵³ If it is that we use signs and signifiers to draw upon a reservoir of meaning/understanding to make a judgment, and if it is that judgments such as these form the basis of our cultural reality then Lyotard places the action of the sublime back into the hands of the artist rather than the spectator. The capacity for the evolution of the sublime lies here with Nicholas Mirzoeff writing:

'Because the sublime is generated by an attempt to present ideas that have no correlative in the natural world – for example, peace, equality, or freedom – "the experience of the sublime feeling demands a sensitivity to Ideas that is not natural but acquired through culture." (Lyotard) Unlike the beautiful, which can be experienced in nature or culture, the sublime is the creature of culture and is therefore central to visual culture.¹⁵⁴

Between 1970 and 1978 Guston kept a series of studio notes on which he sketched ideas for later works and wrote down ideas and stories – as much letters to himself as anything else. One of these notes entitled 'Reminders' was published in Sky Magazine in 1973. It reads:

¹⁵¹ Rosenblum, Robert, 'The Abstract Sublime,' 1961, *The Sublime*, Ed. Morley, Simon, Whitechapel Gallery and MIT Press, 2010, p.111

¹⁵² Ibid.p.113

¹⁵³ Malpas, Simon, *Jean-François Lyotard*, Routledge, 2003, p.44

¹⁵⁴ Mirzoeff, Nicholas, 'The Subject of Visual Culture,' *The Visual Culture Reader*, Ed. Mirzoeff, Nicholas, Routledge 1998, p.9

The thickness of things.
The object painted on a store window. A shoe –
a book – to be seen instantly from a distance.
The worst thing in the world
Is to look at another painting.
Make your mind blank and try
To duplicate the object.
The images I've painted out.

One morning, disconsolate, I started to paint,
not watching myself.
A sense that I am painting in reverse.
I continue the mistake. In the end,
there is the image I have been wanting to see.

Thank God for yellow ochre, cadmium red medium
and permanent light green¹⁵⁵.

Ross Feld speaks of a type of camouflage Guston used in the 1950s to classify himself as an Abstract Expressionist. He says however, that he failed in its use speaking of the 'permanent light green' as an indicator of the truth within the painting. Guston was always an artist much more concerned with representation rather than abstraction. A talented draughtsman, he was in effect denying his talent in the painting of convex patterns and swirling chunks of vertical and horizontal shelves. Feld explains:

*'There remained stubborn hints and shreds of representation as well as personal psychology: a green hood shape here, tendrils that might have been legs, a form suggesting a recoiling head.'*¹⁵⁶

He was dubbed an Abstract Impressionist – the works had more in common with the translucent sky and light of the Impressionist painters with visible forms emerging and retreating, than he had with the Newman zips or Pollock drips. As he works through this period he becomes stronger and more forceful in his approach to the canvas. He decides it is not a feeling of freedom he has been searching for in the work but rather 'a state of "un-freedom" where only certain things can happen,

¹⁵⁵ Coolidge, Clark, *Philip Guston, Collected Writings, Lectures, Conversations*, p.315

¹⁵⁶ Feld, Ross, *Guston in Time, Remembering Philip Guston*, Counterpoint, 2003, p.85

unaccountable the unknown and free must appear¹⁵⁷. It is at this point that Guston creates an iconography of abstract forms – ones which begin to appear repeatedly in the work. Ashton dubs them a ‘readable vocabulary of his dialectic’ and says that by 1955 he had ‘evolved a distinctive manner of suggesting vital forms within the still-amorphous atmosphere.’¹⁵⁸

The idea of an iconography of images then becomes associated with Guston’s later painting. The objects to hand, the foibles and bad habits of cigarette smoking – the clock, jars and brushes of the studio, the brick walls and piled-up shoes of the concentration camps become his new dialectic. Guston left his family in Los Angeles after the death of his brother from gangrene as the result of a car accident. The shock of his brother’s death combined with the unresolved issues of his father’s suicide led to his severing all contact with his family – he even changed his name from Goldstein to the less Jewish sounding Guston in an attempt to separate himself from his upbringing and impress his non-Jewish wife’s family. The trauma led to periods of black depression and alcoholism –self-loathing and lethargy and at other times periods of intense fevered activity. The impetus to create a catalogue of imagery may have been one founded by his career in abstraction but it now encouraged the artist to paint the motifs and symbols of his life and youth to come to terms with such. The chaos and terror of finding a dead parent becomes symbolized in the hanging lightbulbs of his boyhood closet retreat – a place in which he drew for hours on end in an attempt to deal with his grief and the place his father hung himself. The distended severed limbs – legs and feet, shoes and grasping mauling hands echo gangrenous desire – death and disease. All of these are overseen by an all-pervading, glaring bloodshot eye. Irritated by cigarette smoke – straining and unsleeping it tirelessly examines and watches, perhaps representing Guston’s exhausting desire to know and to ‘see’ things exactly as they were after the ambiguous disappointment of abstraction. In 1968 he says:

*‘I started working with just common objects. Books, things on the table, my shoes on the floor. Just the most everyday objects. And it seemed to me that by just restricting myself to a single object a great deal opened up ... I had a lot of stuff in that picture [Untitled, 1969], then I just covered it up with a brick wall. It felt good ... And the other thing is I never saw a painting of a brick wall. That’s important too, that I wanted to paint what hadn’t been seen.’*¹⁵⁹

We get a sense that Guston is working *through* something with what now have become symbols of destruction. There is a sense of normalcy and an almost cartoon-like naivety to them in some instances – child-like paintings of the kitchen clock in rounded vibrating loops, roller-blinds and big

¹⁵⁷ Ashton, Dore, *A Critical Study of Philip Guston*, p. 106

¹⁵⁸ Op.Cit

¹⁵⁹ Coolidge, Clark, *Philip Guston, Collected Writings, Lectures, Conversation*, p.221-223

doodled eyes peering over horizons. They are things of domesticity in but removed and made 'other,' abused and menaced in this perverse world. In Guston himself we see what Lyotard calls the 'nostalgia for presence felt by the human subject ... the obscure and futile will which inhabits him in spite of everything.'¹⁶⁰ It is almost as if he has no choice but to continue producing these works until he reaches reconciliation. In the iconography of the abstract as Ashton writes, he had:

*'commenced the long peregrination to another place where symbol is all but eliminated, and where the act of painting is itself symbolical; but he had not yet succeeded in purging himself of the past, his own, and the past of painting.'*¹⁶¹

However, we see it is in representing the detritus of life that Guston comes to terms with both his life and the role of painting in it. Describing one of these later works 'The Street' 1977,(Fig.4) with its 'cluster of stamping knobbly legs in their boots opposed by the phalanx of arms, with their trash-can lids,¹⁶² Robert Hughes writes that Guston appealed to a culture of commonality 'whose preservation was one of the deeper focuses of his anxiety.'¹⁶³ To sum it up we can return to the artist's scribbled studio notes entitled simply 'Images' – a vitally important reminder of what not to forget in the process of creating great painting:

Afternoon.

Mended Rags.

Clock-face.

Sticks of wood behind

a brick wall. Graining.

Back Yards.

screen doors.

porches

old cars being dismantled

Venice, Calif¹⁶⁴.

In 1969 speaking on the idea of the image Guston uses a story about Barnett Newman to explain his thoughts on sublimity. He says:

¹⁶⁰ Lyotard, Jean-Francois, 'What is Postmodernism?' *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, Ed. Lodge, David, Wood, Nigel, Pearson Education Limited, Third Edition, 2008, p.419

¹⁶¹ Ashton, Dore, *A Critical Study of Philip Guston*, p.83

¹⁶² Hughes, Robert, *The Shock of the New*, p.398

¹⁶³ Op.Cit

¹⁶⁴ Coolidge, Clark, *Philip Guston, Collected Writings, Lectures, Conversations*,p.315

'And Barney is a very scrupulous guy, I think. He controls every bit. So, this blurb goes on about Barney Newman: "Mr. Barnett Newman paints the sublime." He's always been involved in the sublime. So Musa and I burst out in hilarity in the snow. And I wanted to telephone Knoedler's and give them some other name. I'd say "Mr. Knoedler, I'm interested in getting a sublime painting of Mr. Newman." "Well," he says, "a ten-foot sublime is forty-five thousand." So I say, "Have you got a ten thousand sublime?" Well, this is the world we live in. This is the way it is, see?'¹⁶⁵

Guston places this anecdote 'in the snow' – at his home, with his wife. The normal everyday background of the scene juxtaposed with the large cosmopolitan New York gallery spouting sublime sentiment becomes comical – we understand the irony and Guston's desire to poke fun. His figurative paintings were never discussed in terms of the sublime as they were in the days of the Abstract painting and certainly never twinned with notions of transcendence and revelation as Barnett Newman's so often were. Newman is discussed almost solely in terms of the sublime because it could be said that this was the ultimate goal of his art – to create that transcendence of feeling and thought, to enlighten, to destroy and to make new. Newman, like Guston, testifies to a bombastic terrible sublime. The sublime should be no quiet utterance but a declaration of the self; recognition of all that man has to offer and the potential to become. To him, it should encompass our entire being. The title of Newman's paintings tells us of an artist who is concerned with defining the self in terms of the here and now but also, in terms of the infinite. He attempts to express the holy, sacrificial side of man in terms of simple painted blocks and contrasting zips of colour. Lyotard writes 'art does not imitate nature, it creates a world apart'¹⁶⁶ and Newman with his bold declarations - 'Now,' 'Here,' 'Covenant,' 'Onement I,' create a sense of the *now* within a moment – a world within a world. There is a shifting of occurrence beyond what is actually happening – a present within a present. The temporal shift in a static object – the unreal plasticity of the painted surface and flat plains, sometimes literally 'Tundra' of colour, visually offer no depth or vision *through* the work but rather an expression of the 'here and now.' It is as Žižek said:

'We achieve the "determinate reflection" when we become aware that this delay is immanent, internal to the "Thing-in-itself:" the Thing-in-itself is found in its truth through the loss of its immediacy. In other words, what appears, to "external reflection," as an Impediment is in fact a

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.p.109

¹⁶⁶ Lyotard, Jean-François, 'The Sublime and the Avant-Garde,' *The Contemporary Sublime*, Ed. Morely, Simon, Whitechapel Art Gallery/MIT Press, 2009, p.33

*positive condition of our access to the Truth: the Truth of a thing emerges because the thing is not accessible to us in its immediate self-identity.*¹⁶⁷

According to Newman, it was only by moving away from weighted imagery, by distorting and denying it entirely, that modern art could now seek to assert itself. This led to the creation of a 'pure rhetoric of abstract mathematical relationships,¹⁶⁸ forming the only possible basis for an investigation into the contemporary sublime. Newman's art buys into a modern idea of 'minimalist restraint' and his intention is to 'resassert...man's natural desire for the exalted, for a concern with our relationship to the absolute emotions.'¹⁶⁹

Perhaps, however, it would be easier to give to Newman more credibility were we not aware of the extreme calculation on the artist's part when it came to exhibiting the works. Lyotard compares the painterly effects of Newman to that of Cezanne – the 'rendering of perception at its birth.'¹⁷⁰ However, we know that Newman designed his exhibitions of work with help from Tony Smith. This architect and sculpture is heralded as 'a leader in the evolution of the austere, white-walled spaces that continue to prevail in the world's museums and galleries.'¹⁷¹ The importance of the calculation becomes apparent when we look at the idea of artistic inception and the physical creation of Newman's work. The appraisal of the paintings evokes a sense of 'the happening' and the sublime dread of the 'not happening.' This reaction is felt by the artist however at a much earlier stage – in the creation of the piece. The gallery space is crucial to the artist's communication of devices and none more so than in the case of Barnett Newman. We know that the zips in Newman's paintings are constructed by placing masking tape on the bare canvas and painting a solid ground over, to reveal a too-thin, severe contrast upon its removal. In some cases the tape is left on to construct its own ground – creating a different sense of depth. There is a sense that something is being uncovered and revealed to us in chinks and drips of information. We are being invited to share in some secret knowledge known only to the artist. The bold design of these paintings declare *there is nothing, there is only this – happening, here and now*. The energy and vivification of Jackson Pollock's drip paintings are helped in no small part to photographs released depicting the 'virile, hard-drinking macho man'¹⁷² hard at work creating them. Perhaps, the viewer could argue more readily for a Newman sublime had they been *there* at the artistic inception. Only Newman has seen

¹⁶⁷ Kay, Sarah, Žižek, *A Critical Introduction*, Polity Press in association with Blackwell Publishing, 2003, p.35

¹⁶⁸ Newman, Barnett, 'The Sublime is Now,' *The Contemporary Sublime*, Ed. Morely, Simon, Whitechapel Art Gallery/MIT Press, 2009, p.26

¹⁶⁹ Shaw, Philip, *The Sublime*, Routledge, 2006, p.121

¹⁷⁰ Morely, Simon, *The Contemporary Sublime*, p.37

¹⁷¹ Schjeldahl, Peter, *Let's See: Writings on Art from the New Yorker*, Thames and Hudson, 2008, p.117

¹⁷² Chilvers, Ian, *The Oxford Dictionary of Art*, Third Edition, Oxford University Press, 2004

the birth of the zip – the viewer is left with the afterglow of revelation. Gilbert-Rolfe comments that ‘Newman’s sublime, then, is one of limitless visualized within the terms of an activity which leaves no trace of what was there before it but returns to what began it.’¹⁷³ This makes it sound as if major sacrifices were made by the artist but the reality is a calculated presentation of paintings with no notebook or diary entries, no sketchbooks or scraps of paper to add weight to their articulation – these were destroyed by Newman before exhibiting his first solo show at the age of forty-five. The consideration of *how* the work was to be viewed was his most important decision. It was a sublime geared towards the profundity of the gallery space and its inhabitants. We are reminded of Longinus and the notion of being ‘primed’ for sublimity and this is the Newmanic sublime - a calculated consideration of our cultural taste, directed at the ‘echoes of a noble mind.’¹⁷⁴ Ann Tempkin writes that:

*‘The choice of paintings was always his. None of his ensuing shows merely unveiled the latest work; they presented calculated clusters in which paintings cross-referenced informed one another in specific ways.’*¹⁷⁵

Upon viewing his painting ‘Vir Heroicus Sublimus,’ (‘Man, Heroic and Sublime’) (Fig.5) one critic wrote that if he had been informed that the painting’s name was ‘God’ he would have believed it. Peter Schjeldahl’s praise turns to ‘faint embarrassment’ however when he closely examines the sketchy content of Newman’s work. There is no denying his ambition and talent as an artist but the reality of Newman’s sublime is something else:

*‘Newman made things difficult for himself by insisting on transcendent meaning. No wonder his body of work is so small. God created the world only once we’re told. Newman put himself in a position of repeatedly saying, “Let there be light,” and having it be so... But when a Newman is less than supremely powerful one feels a bit embarrassed for him.’*¹⁷⁶

Perhaps Newman’s intentions were honourable. Like Burke’s Enquiry, his art sought to authenticate the sublime experience away from the idea of a higher power or God. He believed in a reality that was self-evident. Like Derrida and Kant he saw sublime feeling occurring in the revelation of

¹⁷³ Gilbert-Rolfe, Jeremy, ‘Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime,’ *The Sublime*, Ed. Morely, Simon, Whitechapel Gallery, MIT Press, 2010, p.139

¹⁷⁴ Longinus, *On the Sublime*, p.6

¹⁷⁵ Tempkin, Ann, *Barnett Newman*, Philadelphia Museum of Art in Association with Yale University Press, 2002, p.21

¹⁷⁶ Schjeldahl, Peter, *Let’s See: Writings on Art from the New Yorker*, p.118

consciousness, away from a 'religious or noumenal "other" of human conception.¹⁷⁷ His rhetoric and content are almost entirely the opposite of Guston's 'common objects' and he felt his purpose was to 'prevent the sublime succumbing to the domesticating effects of time and sensibility.¹⁷⁸ The works offer booming declarations of genesis, creation and the hereafter. In 1948 he says:

*'We are creating images whose reality is self-evident and which are devoid of the props and crutches that evoke associations with outmoded images, both sublime and beautiful. We are freeing ourselves from the impediments of memory, association, nostalgia, legend, myth, or what have you, that have been the devices of Western European painting. Instead of making cathedrals out of Christ, man or "life," we are making it out of ourselves, out of our own feelings. The image we produce is the self-evident one of revelation, real and concrete, that can be understood by anyone who will look at it without the nostalgic glasses of history.'*¹⁷⁹

Newman strives for a theoretically qualified sublime – the more abstract and distorted the better. In his essay 'The Sublime is Now' he says that 'the European artist has been continually involved in the moral struggle between notions of beauty and the desire for sublimity.¹⁸⁰ He sees American art as being free from this moral struggle. The shiny new bravado of post WWII Americana allows its art to move away from such conflict. Free from the bond of European classicism, art and indeed the artist have a new role. We see the artist as anarchist and the idea of a heroic, purposeful sublime comes to the fore. Max Kozloff writes:

*'To be sure, the question for sublimity invariably emerged as a call against institutional authoritarianism and was always considered to be a meaningful gesture of defiance against repression.'*¹⁸¹

The geographical shift of 'great art,' now governed by a new set of rules meant that the sublime now becomes purposeful – it is not just the sublime *as it is*, but to achieve an end.

David Craven also speaks of the artist being engagé through their work as well as with it. He makes a critical point, however, about the value claims of these artists and the ideals behind this 'new world' art, warning of the danger of being overly caught up in their bravado. However much they may deny

¹⁷⁷ ¹⁷⁷ Shaw, Philip, *The Sublime*, p.119

¹⁷⁸ ¹⁷⁸ Shaw, Philip, *The Sublime*, p.122

¹⁷⁹ Harrison, Charles, 'Abstract art: Reading Barnett Newman's *Eve*,' *Frameworks for Modern Art*, Ed. Gaiger, Jason, Yale University Press, 2003, p.130

¹⁸⁰ Morely, Simon, *The Contemporary Sublime*, p.26

¹⁸¹ Frascina, Frascina, *Pollock and After, The Critical Debate: Second Edition*, Routledge, 2000, p.35

their European culture and its imagery, he says that its roots lie firmly in nineteenth-century European painting:

'It was hardly plausible, for example, when Newman contended that many of the Abstract Expressionists had transcended all conventional artistic rhetoric as well as traditional visual imagery to arrive at "spontaneous", hence, "self-evident" and "natural" revelations of the sublime. Just as few if any viewers have experienced the sublime before these paintings without first knowing what the concept means historically, so Newman, Rothko, Motherwell, Still and Gottlieb all drew substantially if also very subtly on the formal values associated with nineteenth-century European paintings that dealt with the sublime.'^{182,}

This is a tricky statement to consider as we have previously seen the sublimity of Newman's painting avowed in the immediacy of perception and the realisation that we are being called upon to 'respond without knowing in advance ...[how] to respond.'^{183,} Craven says that in fact, yes – we do and should know how to respond. The myth that we cannot is being propagated by artists who themselves could not respond or create a new order without first intrinsically understanding the rules from which they have to break free. Suspicion now lies in Newman's credentials as midwife for a modern sublime – we know that he destroyed all of his early paintings and produced his first surviving work at the age of forty. Could it be that the earlier works highlight the truth of artistic practice – that there can be no revelatory moments without some initial planning and forethought, as well as many mistakes made along the road to the sublime. These rules of creation have at their heart the notions of Renaissance and European classical construct. Craven goes on to explain:

'Since the visual language of the Abstract Expressionists was culturally mediated by earlier visual languages and the ideological values that emerged with them, the art of the sublime painters hardly originated in "natural" utterances outside history or society. Consequently, we cannot stop with Newman's explanation of how this anti-capitalist, socially alienated and humanly affirmative art arose as the "spontaneous" outpouring of "autonomous individuals."'^{184,}

It is for this reason that we must return to Philip Guston and his fight for the rights of figuration. One of Newman's closest contemporaries, we see the two names constantly linked under the banner of American Abstract Expressionism or the 'New York school.' Their motive and their subject matter could not have been more different yet it is Newman who wins out the battle of the sublime – held

¹⁸² Frascina, Frascina, *Pollock and After...*p.255

¹⁸³ Shaw, Philip, *The Sublime*, p.123

¹⁸⁴ Frascina, Frascina, *Pollock and After...*p.225

up as a poster-boy of the new-world heroic art of the modern age. Robert Hughes contests this title writing:

*'there is nothing in the paintings to justify the depths attributed to them; but so fixed has the belief in Newman's profundity become that in some quarters the merest doubt is taken almost for anti-Semitism...So, in the midst of an all-too-willing suspension of art-world disbelief a major reputation sprouted from a miniscule base... At one point Newman said with a straight face "I thought our quarrel here was with Michelangelo." It was not a quarrel anyone could win with a stripe.'*¹⁸⁵

We can imagine Guston laughing in the snow, and later, surrounded by his broken shoes, crumpled up pieces of paper, cigarette butts and clocks, thinking of Newman orchestrating sublimity in the pristine and surgically white-cubed gallery room. The contaminants and detritus of the things that make up the everyday of our life become more of a proponent for the sublime than the quasi-religious sentiment of a Newman's Abstract Expressionism. It is in these things that we recognise the self; our ideas of existence and being have more to do with the sublime anxieties of smoking and transcendence of deprecation than they do with the primed hallowed galleried zips and stripes of Newman's calculated sublimity. To explain, Guston often quoted Kafka who said 'the true way is along a rope that is not spanned high in the air, but only just above the ground. It seems intended more to cause stumbling than to be walked along.'¹⁸⁶

Speaking at the University of Minnesota in 1978 Guston describes the solid figurative imagery found in the majority of his later work. He says:

*'I knew I wanted to go on and deal with concrete objects. I got stuck on shoes, shoes on the floor. I must have done hundreds of paintings of shoes, books, hands, buildings, and cars, just everyday objects. And the more I did the more mysterious these objects became. The visible world, I think, is abstract and mysterious enough; I don't think one needs to depart from it in order to make art.'*¹⁸⁷

If any painting could be said to typify one of these later paintings it is 'Painting, Smoking, Eating,' (Fig.6) a work in oil measuring approximately seventy by one hundred inches. The protagonist of the piece (often said to be Guston himself), is a butter-bean shaped head, lying in bed, smoking. Its Cyclops eye stares, unblinking into space. A lit cigarette is poked into the space a mouth should occupy – like a chimney emitting fumes. There is a vulnerability to the curved pink prostrated bean-head jabbed through with this smoking funnel – letting acrid air out, as much as into, the face. It

¹⁸⁵ Hughes, Robert, *American Visions, The Epic History of Art in America*, Knopf, 2009, p.493-493

¹⁸⁶ Kafka, Franz, *Reflections on Sin, Suffering, Hope and the True Way*, in 'Dearest father: Stories and Other Writings,' New York: Schocken Books, 1954

¹⁸⁷ Coolidge, Clark, *Philip Guston, Collected Writings, Lectures, Conversations*, p.281

looks disconsolately into the distance. 'Occupy,' is perhaps the word best suited to describe the work – its subject is occupancy, the occupation of an enclosed room, filled with a tableaux of ordinary things. The things are made sinister by their lumped, heaped togetherness. They lose their purpose in the real world and are now rubbish and things of scrutiny rather than use, displayed as they are on the artist's table – ready for examination or dissection. Of the smoker, Ashton writes:

'Into this arrangement, so striking in its summary of all Guston's idiosyncratic compositional habits, the unnerving head of the painter thrusts itself...The painter, then, is there to disrupt a world of esthetically arranged forms, is, in fact, the unwelcome prophet dedicated to disturbing the status quo.'^{188,}

A plate of American French-fries lies on a plate on the bed. They are sharp jutting shards of yellow fat against the soft curved head and blanket – cake-sliced representations of a New-America fast-food culture. They are grease filled chunks of bad nutrition designed to fill a hole rather than nourish the body. Time honoured anxieties reside here, of smoking and eating too much, procrastination in a bed of filth surrounded by the physical manifestations of a worrisome life – the light-bulb pull-cord come hangman's rope and the mounds of shoes – a father's disappointment. Guston described the process of representing this figure akin to creating a golem – a duplicate of the self that lives in a parallel or different world. He said 'I like the feeling that I don't have a painting in there, I've got a being in there'^{189,} and explains the importance of creating, not only a painting concerned with the legitimacy of forms and objects but also with creating a space – the importance of occupancy:

'But when you have something to deal with, a character or a person, well, then, he's got to have an environment. He sleeps, he eats, he paints, he does things...And again I'm very interested in Max Beckmann...He's made a place, and it's very important to make a place.'^{190,}

Many of Guston's paintings feature ubiquitous Ku Klux Klan hooded figures, infiltrating common scenes and familiar habitats. If before Guston sought to express the importance of occupancy and space, with these hoods he portrays the degeneration of place. Most often, the hooded characters are described as 'cartoon-like' – their inspiration drawn as much from Guston's favourite 'Mutt and Jeff' and 'Krazy Kat' comic strips as from his abhorrence for the organised ritual violence and cruelty of the K.K.K. They feature throughout Guston's figurative painting from the dramatic 1930s work 'The Conspirators' (Fig.7) to 'The Studio,' (Fig.8) painted in 1969. The cartoonish quality of the paintings stems not only from the characters in them but also in the brash colours of the scenes.

¹⁸⁸ Ashton, Dore, *A Critical Study of Philip Guston*, p.178

¹⁸⁹ Coolidge, Clark, *Philip Guston, Collected Writings, Lectures, Conversations*, p.226

¹⁹⁰ Op.Cit

They echo the lurid palette of early technicolour cartoons. In 'The Studio,' the oversized caricatured hand of the hooded figure holds a paintbrush which traces the outline of another hooded figure onto canvas – a hood painting a hood. The obligatory cigarette once more juts out from the space the mouth should occupy, smoke rising as if from a child's drawing of a house and chimney. He holds a palette and is surrounded by the artist's accoutrement of jars, brushes and paint-cans. Lit from above by the ever present hanging bare bulb, the hood itself is stitched together in large patchwork squares. There is an amateurish quality to the gown – it is homemade and unprofessional. The violence originated in the home and was stitched together in domesticity. It now returns to that space to ponder and paint. This stitching detail is reflected in the hood's own portrait and we see a nightmarish cartoon-like quality to the slits that he peers through, contemplating his own image. Of these slits, echoing the bald simplistic eyes of the cartoon figure, Guston said:

*'And its amazing how this formula, the slits for eyes, became so expressive ... And the range of expressions you can get with those two slits is incredible. They can look tender, they can look angry, surprised. Its stylized like in a Noh play, the stylization has a range.'*¹⁹¹

They humanise what we have ascribed to be a monster. The normalization of the hooded figure is what makes it more menacing than the figure himself. What we realise is that the hood is simply that – a hood covering a figure that resides, eats and sleeps within a home, the same as ourselves. Where Guston first desired to know what it would be like to be evil, to 'plan and to plot,' with *these* hooded figures he asks about the reality of evil and its place in the surrounding normal world. To plan and to plot but to return home to everyday things and carry on with the minutiae of everyday living – the smoking and eating; the decision making, the painting. Of this he explains:

*'There's a whole series where I made artists out of them. Like, did they paint? If they do all these other things, why can't they paint? Be artists? And, actually, what would they paint? They'd paint themselves. And I have some where they're going to art exhibitions and they're arguing about art and talking about art ... Well, it could be all of us. We're all hoods.'*¹⁹²

Let us compare these works to Newman's celebrated 'Vir Heroicus Sublimus.' Painted in 1950, it measures a colossal seven foot, eleven inches by seventeen foot, nine inches. It hangs horizontally inviting the eye to read it from left to right rather than vertically which one would perhaps expect from a painting declarative of sublimity and transcendence. It boldly testifies to the idea of 'Man, Heroic and Sublime' engulfing the viewer in heaving blocks of red, divided by five strips or 'zips' of various colours. Solidity and weight are juxtaposed with light and dark slashes of striped

¹⁹¹ Ibid. p.159

¹⁹² Ibid. p. 224-225

consideration which, traversing the painting from top to bottom, recede and push forward in the red glare. They dip in and out of our vision almost harmonising the painting like a series of musical notes on a hymn sheet. Looking upon it the main theme becomes one of confrontation. To be accosted by such an expanse of red is an unnatural sensation as it does not appear with such ferocity and expanse anywhere in the natural world. Charles Harrison explains this sensation writing:

*'In the natural order of things, bright red is usually seen as the colour of some tangible object. It is the very opposite of a "field colour" – a colour that denotes space ... The experience of looking into a field of red is thus somehow disturbing, particularly in a painting taller than a person. Red is – as it were – the conventional colour of "no entry."'*¹⁹³

By not allowing the viewer to look through the painting and by denying any tangible recognisable imagery for the eye to latch onto, Newman calls for a different type of consideration with regards to the artwork. We must ask, when confronted with *not even* a void in the pictorial device, how can a sensate reaction such as the sublime occur? Lyotard feels that it is in our encounter with the impossible stating:

*'Thus, when he seeks sublimity in the here-and-now he breaks with the eloquence of Romantic art but he does not reject its fundamental task, that of bearing pictorial or otherwise expressive witness to the inexpressible. The inexpressible does not reside in an over there, in another world, or another time, but in this: in that (something) happens. In the determination of pictorial art, the indeterminate, the "it happens" is the paint, the picture. The paint, the picture as occurrence or event, is not expressible, and it is this it has to witness.'*¹⁹⁴

The figurative bouncing cartooned imagery of Philip Guston could not be more different to the omni-aspirational blasts of Newman's *Vir*. Guston simply asks that we do what comes naturally to us – we look upon and recognise an image, draw from a bank of related signifiers and come to conclusions about that image; by then placing it apart from our denoted signifiers we draw new conclusions and inform ourselves as to the meaning of the painting. The progress of man's cultural evolution is highlighted by this ability to reckon with the familiar and recognisable and to put it in another 'place,' – creating new sets of identifiers and so on. By painting something and by painting nothing, Newman asks for not only a different type of reaction to painting but that new criteria governing the rules of appraisal are drawn up. When a failure to comprehend is the conclusion we draw from these

¹⁹³ Harrison, Charles, 'Abstract art: reading Barnett Newman's *Eve*,' *Frameworks for Modern Art*, ed. Gaiger, Jason, Yale University Press, 2003, p.134

¹⁹⁴ Lyotard, Jean-François, 'The Unpresentable: The Sublime and the Avant-Garde,' *The Contemporary Sublime*, ed. Morely, Simon, Whitechapel Art Gallery/MIT Press, 2009, p.30

abstract works, he dresses it up as a sublime transcendence of thought for the new age. Lyotard defines his actions as such:

*'The possibility of nothing happening is often associated with a feeling of anxiety, a term with strong connotations in modern philosophies of existence and of the unconscious. It gives to waiting...but suspense can also be accompanied by pleasure...the joy obtained by the intensification of being that the event brings with it. It is at the very least a sign, the question mark itself, the way in which it happens is withheld and is announced: Is it happening? The mark of the question is 'now,' now like the feeling that nothing might happen, the nothingness is now.'*¹⁹⁵

When we compare Guston's 'common objects' to Newman's 'colouristic sensations' we are reminded of the difference in their artistic intention as well as in their opposing styles. Guston was not concerned as to whether the sublime was 'now' or whether the idea of 'the happening' or 'not happening' could be appropriated and represented by painting. The *world* was happening and through depicting the very ordinary and sometimes brutal things of his surroundings, he managed to categorise his place in it. Through the action of painting, one could set oneself free and this came from appropriating the humble objects of the everyday and the domestic. Artworks such as 'Vir Heroicus' led to the categorisation of painting in terms of philosophy and theory rather than practice.

In 1969, Guston's abandonment of abstraction led him to paint what he called 'the brutality of the world.'¹⁹⁶ He describes it as a rebirth of both his methodology and subject matter, renewing his passion for painting. He strove for authenticity in the immediacy of forms rather than the impulsive gesturing of the Abstract Expressionists and became obsessed with the notion of what things actually were and how they fit into the telling of a story. He announced 'I want to see what it *looks* like,' emphasising the desire to capture the reality of objects in a space to express what had only before been possible through the creation of his abstract art. This abrupt shift was seen by many as juvenile and even heretic with one reviewer going so far as to denounce Guston as going from 'mandarin to stumblebum.'¹⁹⁷ Arthur Danto explains:

'The term "mandarin" was intended to diminish what had set Guston apart as an abstractionist. The paintings were too dainty, too light and airy by contrast with the heavy pigment of the true

¹⁹⁵ Op.Cit

¹⁹⁶ Storr, Robert, 'View from the Bridge,' *Frieze*, Issue 87, Nov – Dec, 2004

¹⁹⁷ Danto, Arthur C., *Unnatural Wonders: Essays From the Gap Between Art and Life*, Columbia University Press, 2005, p.134

*Expressionists to be considered authentic. The new paintings were then seen as an opportunistic bid for that missed authenticity. They were coarse, juvenile, and demotic.*¹⁹⁸

Guston chose to ignore these sentiments, focusing on the cathartic and purifying ritual of creating recognisable imagery. For him, there was clarity in the grotesquery of hooded figures pawing through the common objects of household living. They begin to inhabit familiar rooms and buildings, long abandoned by routine or normalcy. The hoods, ‘flogging each other, bloody hands and books’¹⁹⁹ take centre stage in Guston’s paintings. They infiltrate the banal habitats of the everyday and turn them into warped desecrated spaces. That Guston would choose such a subject matter following the success of his career in abstraction is notable in terms of art history. It was according to Guston however, a choice made through necessity. Dore Ashton writes:

*‘During the Chicago riots, Guston worked furiously. He painted shoes like buildings, clocks, stony books, buildings like primitive pueblos. Headlike shapes mashed after rioting. Owlsh heads and rapid, choreographed conversations between disembodied hands. Brick walls appeared, reminiscent of his old holocaust allusions to suffocating imprisonment, and with them the familiar hooded figures. He was off on an irreversible orgy of grotesquerie.’*²⁰⁰

The colour-field paintings of Guston’s peers are often linked to the sublime, said to inspire transcendence and enlightenment. Newman had theorised that this lay in the idea of ‘the happening’ and the ‘not happening.’ The suspense of looking, but of then seeing the unrecognisable, yet also familiar blocks of colour, leads to strong reactions – heart-sinking thrills of non-recognition. The disappointment and suspense of the encounter leads to a type of sudden unexpected realisation – an epiphany of thought and feeling. This sensation can categorise the work as sublime, but in terms of the paralogical assault rather than in the appraisal of well rendered recognisable imagery. Our ability to engage with the concept of an artwork created solely of and for itself promotes a new way of seeing and opens new avenues for thought and appreciation. If it is that we have evolved from wondering at the smooth polished perfection of Classical Greek sculpture and European Renaissance art to an engagement with the non-figurative heroic pictorial assaults of the American Abstract Expressionists, how does an artist like Guston hope to create the sublime from horrifying tangible painted forms in order to further this evolution?

¹⁹⁸ Ibid. p.135

¹⁹⁹ Ashton, Dore, *A Critical Study of Philip Guston*, p.159

²⁰⁰ Ibid. p.156

We can consider Edmund Burke's theory of terror and the sublime. The notion of threat and its capacity to influence the mind is explored in his treatise 'On the Sublime' with Burke suggesting that it is a necessary component of producing sublime feeling:

'Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion the mind is capable of feeling.'^{201,}

While it has been generally understood there is a sense of 'letting go' or losing control in the sublime experience, here Burke implies that control is *taken* away. Previous theories of the sublime indicate that the sublime is inspired by luxuriousness (Addison) or 'exalted sentiment' (Longinus) whereas Burke explains that 'when danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible.'^{202,} However, if we can distance the site of pain outside the sphere of our physical existence its influence changes:

'At certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be (pleasurable), and they are delightful, as we everyday experience.'^{203,}

Paul Crowther has termed this equation Burke's 'safety clause.'^{204,} He queries humanity's willing exposure to pain or shock in terms of Burke's theory and says it is at this point that we see the sublime becoming a 'culturally prevalent tendency.'^{205,} He claims that due to the monotony of existence it is part of human nature to wish to experience the intense effect of the sublime and the distancing of this pain allows us to do so. It is down to our recognition of the act that we subsequently develop a greater form of consciousness. As Luke Gibbons writes:

'what was unusual, and indeed unsettling, about the shift in cultural sensibility effected by the Enquiry was its identification of 'terror' and the figure of the body in pain as the basis of the most intense forms of aesthetic experience.'^{206,}

By painting masked figures Guston removes accountability for their actions. In their garish horror world they are free to wander and desecrate as they please, riding around 'in their black cars

²⁰¹ Burke, Edmund, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, Oxford University Press, 1998, p.36

²⁰² Op.Cit

²⁰³ Burke, Edmund, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, Oxford University Press, 1998, p.37

²⁰⁴ Crowther, Paul, *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993, p.123

²⁰⁵ Ibid p.128

²⁰⁶ Gibbons, Luke, *Edmund Burke and Ireland*, University Press, Cambridge, 2003, p.20

through deserted squares, hauling grainy hefts of wood for their eventual crosses.²⁰⁷ Hidden from view, they are blameless in their activity, blindly exploring, tearing down and even then assimilating into their environment. We become witness to a kind of cartoon genocide, with the familiarity of the recurring motifs and arrangements making them even more terrifying and repulsive. Guston shepherds their movements, becoming both watcher and director in the grotesque mummery. He felt he was 'like Babel with his Cossacks, I feel as if I have been living with the Klan, riding around empty streets, sitting in their rooms smoking, looking at light bulbs.'²⁰⁸ (Fig.9)

According to Burke, we understand that terror and astonishment when confronted with the sublime object form sublime feeling. We inherently *invest* in the object its sense of terror/sublimity which in turn informs the mind of its astonishment. He says that 'whatever therefore is terrible, with regards to sight, is sublime too, whether this cause of terror, be endued with greatness of dimensions or not.'²⁰⁹ As Crowther says:

*'What Burke is in fact doing, then...is not simply redescribing the phenomenology of the sublime passion, but ... showing that it arises from two different ways of being affected by the objects – namely through their direct overwhelming impact on the senses, or through the mediation of ideas of pain and danger.'*²¹⁰

Peter de Bolla also examines the notion of our internalization of the external object in his 'Discourse of the Sublime' saying that 'all internal states can be translated back into external effects in order to be retranslated into internal sensation.'²¹¹

Guston frequently refers to himself as the director of the images rather than the painter or creator of such. Like a movie reel, chopped up and exhibited in pieces, the figurative 1970s paintings show us a vernacular series of household scenes, appropriated and returned back to the viewer with an ugly, menacing polish. If there is humor in the work it belongs to the persecutors, idly fingering possessions and turning them into something else – tainted, defiled and contaminated by their presence. We now internalize the commonality of the scene and its objects, translating them into adulterated and polluted remnants of a life once lived. The fear of stigmatization stirs something deep within and we ask, where is the pure naivety of the abstract sublime transcendence? Danto also recognizes:

²⁰⁷ Ashton, Dore, *A Critical Study of Philip Guston*, p.162

²⁰⁸ Ashton, Dore, *A Critical Study...* p164

²⁰⁹ Burke, Edmund, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, Oxford University Press, 1998, p.36

²¹⁰ Crowther, Paul, *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism*, p.119

²¹¹ DeBolla, Peter, *The Discourse of the Sublime, Readings in History, Aesthetics and the Subject*, Blackwell, 1989

*'It is one thing to aspire to the sublime. It is another to bring into art the preoccupations of a man with ordinary appetites, who worries about love and eating too much, and how to give up smoking, and not just about being evil, but being bad.'*²¹²

We must also be suspicious of Guston's intentions throughout. There is a calculated attempt on his part to portray the thrill of debauchery. Were it that the figures seemed exclusively cruel we would accept his pleas as merely the reproducer of such activity. However, the humor and child-like consideration of the hooded figures in the canvases often infer the humane side of the horror. One cannot forget Guston's desire to understand 'what would it be like to be evil? To plan and to plot?' At one point he writes: 'Now, this week, in reverse, I made a huge and TOWERING vast rock – with platforms – ledges, for my forms to be on – and to play out their private drama. A Theater – maybe? A STAGE?'²¹³ This oft-referred to notion of 'plotting' the scenes suggests that Guston himself is the one in power – manipulating not only the figures in the paintings to his bidding, but also the viewer's responses and internalization.

Burke's Enquiry frequently deals with the notion of power. He says that 'besides those things which directly suggest the idea of danger, and those which produce a similar effect from a mechanical cause, I know of nothing sublime which is not some modification of power.'²¹⁴ Because the enjoyment of pleasure requires no 'great effort' on our part, Burke theorizes that pain and threat (death) are more readily associated with power. We can never be 'free from terror'²¹⁵ in the presence of such and it is this 'power' that is the driving force of our submission. The superior effects of 'strength, violence, pain and terror, are ideas that rush in upon the mind together.'²¹⁶ Again, our will or choice plays no role in these effects. Burke examines the potency of power's effect upon the mind concluding that terror is its constant companion. One cannot exist without the force of the other. The reader is left in no doubt as to the terrible and forceful nature of the sublime. The sublime object is defined as such by the viewer due to the horror we encounter upon its appraisal. The complexity of such an equation lies not with the object itself however, but in our own capacity to then realize the terror of the infinite. De Bolla sees the act as enabling:

'The process of analysis to produce further and further sublime objects, greater and greater astonishment, more and more terrifying power. It is not the sublime as such which presents the

²¹² Danto, Arthur C., *Unnatural Wonders: Essays From the Gap Between Art and Life*, p.134

²¹³ Feld, Ross, *Guston in Time, Remembering Philip Guston*, p.50

²¹⁴ Burke, Edmund, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, p.59

²¹⁵ Op.Cit

²¹⁶ Ibid. p.60

*danger of infinite excess, but the discourse which examines, describes and analyses its causes and effects.*²¹⁷

There is a goading quality to Guston's scenes – paintings such as 'A Day's Work,' 1970 (Fig.10) and 'Flatlands,' 1970 (Fig.11) are the work of an enabler. He deliberately wishes to construct images of anxiety and sorrow, discomforting the viewer. He repeatedly uses the same forms in his paintings to further our analyses of horror – seeing the same characters in different positions places them at different points in our comprehension – the kitchen, the workshop, the town hall. By inhabiting the different spaces, they occupy different roles in our witness of the infestation/occupation – the domestic hub of the house, the workplace, the town square. The threat of violence and persecution, the removal of dignities – the carnality of the ugly, mashed-together gangs of hoods and heads, articulate the Burkean sublime – that of terror and fear. Its proponent was fully cognizant of his involvement writing 'Somehow, I think I've always felt that creating was an evil thing – Satan's work – Maybe therein lies the shame.'²¹⁸ His willingness to engage with such subject matter was however, forgiven by many friends and critics who saw it as part of Guston's ferocious desire to 'see' exactly what was there in the world before him. Ashton writes:

*'Since matter and form assumed a life of their own as soon as they were deployed on his canvas, Guston's suspicion that he could create a parallel universe had a certain justness...The cultivation of anxiety as a method of artistic discourse was practiced by many in various arts.'*²¹⁹

On the uncomfortable subject matter, Guston himself surmised that the negativity and ruthlessness of the painting also showed the viewer something beyond the scenes themselves, writing 'what we see is the wonder of what it is that is being seen. Perhaps it is the anxiety of painting itself.'²²⁰

Returning to Burke's theory he says that sublime feelings occur in the self when we are in a state of threat or endangerment. It moves sublimity away from the confines of the natural world and picturesque imagery, and into a position concerned with the *experience* of the viewer. Since it is the grotesque and disorientating effect of Guston's paintings that are the most evocative we can now quantify our reaction in terms of the sublime. Separating the notion of beauty and the sublime are key to our identification of this point. Burke does this in order to invest in the sublime a type of integrity. The fervor of our passion is not felt due to a weakness or vulnerability of the mind but is bound to our sense of self-actualization. Crowther says:

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Feld, Ross, *Guston in Time, Remembering Philip Guston*, p.3

²¹⁹ Ashton, Dore, *A Critical Study...*p121-123

²²⁰ Ashton, Dore, *A Critical Study...*p123

'by showing that the sublime is intrinsically connected with them, Burke is able to invest the sublime passion with an intensity and, as it were, existential magnitude that more than compensates for its lack of positivity.'^{221,}

The separation of the sublime and the beautiful is not an example of sublimity's 'axiological inferiority'^{222,} – that is to say, an inferior philosophical value judgment of the sublime, but rather a critical conclusion drawn from our behavior that is identified by Burke before we can begin to understand the qualities that evoke these feelings. In 1978 Guston describes the action of looking at his work almost exclusively in terms of the experience of seeing and, in doing so, even proposes a new theory of what art actually is:

'I started to shake when I painted this picture. God there is no picture plane! It is just real, that's all there is – just real – no plane at all – What nonsense – the idea of a plane – No – all there finally is left is just the moment – the second – of life's gesture – fixed forever – in an image – there – to be seen... There is no order especially – if there is an order to it at all, I don't know it – don't comprehend it – it is like nothing I've done before – not one area in this mound stops to let you look at it. Ah, so that's what "art" is – lets you stop – isolate it – lets us "see" it – but here in this new picture there is "nothing" to see – except multitudes of masses, that go on forever – in the mind. You could mingle with this crowd, move into it – submerge yourself in it – be part of it. You would hear voices, murmurs, weeping.'^{223,}

According to Burke's theory, Guston's work at this time contains all the elements necessary to evoke the sublime experience – terror, passion, disorder and fear. Most of all, it robs the viewer of the standard expectations of looking at a painting and reduces it to a chaotic and vulnerable state of not knowing. It is in this condition that the sublime becomes a psychological enquiry and, in doing so, allows for new criteria essential to create the experience in the future. It has become something else. As John Baillie said:

'The Sublime dilates and elevates the Soul, Fear sinks and contracts it; yet both are felt upon viewing what is great and awful.'^{224,}

In his investigation Burke also considers sublimity in terms of our historical situation as well as in the aesthetic and philosophical sphere of Enlightenment thought. The enquiry is not only a study of

²²¹ Crowther, Paul, *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism*, p.117

²²² Op.Cit

²²³ Feld, Ross, *Guston in Time, Remembering Philip Guston*, p8

²²⁴ Shaw, Philip, *The Sublime*, Routledge, 2006, p.54

aesthetic theory but reads as a ‘critique of universal reason’²²⁵ in the industrial age. We are encouraged to advocate ‘aesthetics of intervention’ and to consider the ‘triumph of sympathy.’²²⁶ In what Luke Gibbons calls a ‘crucial departure from dominant Enlightenment thinking,’²²⁷ Burke’s theory of the sublime can be seen as ‘an attempt to prevent the aesthetic from becoming, in effect, an anaesthetic.’²²⁸ It is a consideration of not only our passions, tastes and beauty but the basis of an ethical rationale. A cornerstone of Burke’s theory of the sublime and the beautiful is the notion of terror. Astonishment, says Burke, is the sublime affecting the mind in its ‘highest degree.’²²⁹ This inspires in us a great passion but Burke proposes that we see its origins in all pervading fear. At the point where our minds are ‘robbed’ of comprehension and reason we see ‘its motions are suspended with some degree of horror’ and that ‘whatever is terrible, with regards to sight, is sublime too.’²³⁰ It is only what is ‘analogous to terror’²³¹ that produces the strongest human emotion and it is this that Burke considers the ultimate source of the sublime. Pain, therefore, is the ‘king of the terrors.’²³² Burke’s concept of love is married to ‘violent effects’ and madness; passion is linked to horror and it is darkness rather than light which is more productive of the sublime. In light of this, Crowther evaluates his theory of the ‘sympathetic sublime’ explaining its necessity:

‘If an individual did not have this capacity for aesthetic experience, but responded to the negation of life only with fear or aversion, then we might describe that individual as... lacking a form of existential courage.’²³³

Burke’s alternative vision for social empathy encourages us to look to a ‘sympathetic sublime’ propounding the importance of ‘fellow-feeling’ playing a major role in further Enlightenment thoughts and objectives. We can consider the role of empathy when looking upon Guston’s figurative painting. Like Burke, he worried about the idea of the *aesthetic becoming anaesthetic*, abandoning abstract expressionism for the constructed Klan hoods and imagery of later works. He describes the necessity of doing so at the New York Studio School in 1969 saying:

‘I was thinking on the way downtown, how the origin of art in the beginning, the origin of expression, was image making. Every time I see an abstract painting now I smell mink coats, you know what I

²²⁵ Gibbons, Luke, *Edmund Burke and Ireland: aesthetics, politics, and the colonial sublime*, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p.166

²²⁶ Gibbons, Luke, *Edmund Burke and Ireland*, p.110

²²⁷ Gibbons, Luke, *Edmund Burke and Ireland*, p.4

²²⁸ Op. Cit

²²⁹ Burke, Edmund, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, p.53

²³⁰ Op. Cit

²³¹ Burke, Edmund, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Oxford University Press, 1990, p.36

²³² Op. Cit

²³³ Crowther, Paul, *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism*, p.130

*mean? It's really terrible. Terrible brainwashing...it's a terrible thing. Image making is the most fascinating...it's the only thing. The rest is just a lot of shit, making colours and selling yourself a bill of goods.*²³⁴

To understand the connection between empathy and Guston we once more must consider the idea of the grotesque – the bizarre and unnatural shapes, mish-mash of forms and characters in his work. The word refers to a fifteenth century derivative of the word ‘grotto,’ coming from the decorative elements found in Italian excavated cave dwellings. We see the grotesque in art previously employed by Francisco de Goya. His macabre prints of witches pulling dead men’s teeth, hacked up limbs and asylums and his black paintings depicting such torments as the cannibalization of flesh, speak both of another world and our own. Created at a time of civil unrest and violence in his eighteenth century Spain, Goya’s grotesquery is ever more starkly illustrated when contrasted against his catalogue of tame and, at times, even lovable caricature/portraiture of the royal court. The work had a profound effect on Guston who saw in the artist a contemporary – somebody who saw the terror of the world and re-invented depiction to create a separate world, one that strongly confirmed the realities of our own. Like Goya, he empathized with the cruelty of life and sought to express it to cathartic effect. He wrote:

*‘Our whole lives (since I can remember) are made up of the most extreme cruelties of holocausts. We are the witnesses of hell. When I think of the victims it is unbearable. To paint, to write, to teach in the most dedicated sincere way is the most intimate affirmation of creative life we possess in these despairing years.*²³⁵

Baudelaire wrote of Goya that his merit lay in ‘having created a credible form of the monstrous.’ He goes on: ‘all those distortions, those bestial faces, those diabolic grimaces of his are impregnated with humanity.’²³⁶ Guston too works into his figures and scenes a type of monstrous humanity – a transmutation of human forms and common objects to subversive, warped yet recognizable scenes. We often associate the sublime with a transcendence of thought and notions of epiphany, with artworks revealing to us concepts that put our consciousness on a higher plane. In this omniscient setting we imagine we will learn the secrets of the universe – enlightenment and revelation. The work of Philip Guston does something rather different. By showing us things ‘as they are’ – by being concerned with the act of truly *seeing* and conveying this to us in the form of the grotesque, we, the viewer, are made to recognize our capacity for fear, degeneration, cruelty and

²³⁴ Coolidge, Clark, *Philip Guston, Collected Writings, Lectures, Conversations*, University of California Press, 2010, p.109

²³⁵ Ashton, Dore, *A Critical Study...*p177

²³⁶ Barasch, Moshe, *Theories of Art. 2. From Wincklemann to Baudelaire*, Routledge, 2000, p381

mockery. By depicting objects found in the kitchen sink of life, he gives us something familiar to engage *with*, rather than the ambiguousness of Abstract Expressionism. We empathize with our own pathetic reality and deterioration – we see sublimity in our realization of what Burke called the ‘triumph of sympathy.’ He writes:

‘As our creator has designed us, we should be united by the bond of sympathy, he has strengthened that bond by a proportional delight; and there most, where our sympathy is most wanted, in the distresses of others.’²³⁷

Philip Guston was an artist of integrity and mindfulness. He greatly felt the responsibility of his role, even to the point of defining art in a series of Laws, almost as a mantra to himself so that he would not forget:

‘The Laws of Art are generous laws. They are not definable because they are not fixed. These Laws are revealed to the Artist during creation and cannot be given to him. They are not knowable. A work cannot begin with these Laws as in a diagram. They can only be sensed as the work unfolds. When the forms and space move toward their destined positions, the artist is then permitted to become a victim of these Laws, the prepared and innocent accomplice for the completion of the work. His mind and spirit, his eyes, have matured and changed to a degree where knowing and not knowing become a single act.

It is as it these Governing Laws of Art manifest themselves through him.’²³⁸

By adopting the role of a conduit and by proposing a philosophy of art that was removed from the calculated urbanity of the New York School and galleries, Guston places the idea of sublimity back in the hands of the artist. He portrayed the brutality of the world in a series of common objects – clocks, cigarettes and hands with hooded figures echoing the Burkean sublime of terror and violence. It has been established that notions of violence and pain are analogous to terror - we are reminded of Burke who says that they have a superior effect on the mind and so become testifiers to the modern sublime; the sublime of the everyday and the abhorrent. Guston likened himself to a director of images. Like Goya, who painted the macabre and grotesque in scenes of civil war and monstrous dreams, Guston puts together a series of evil Klan hoods defiling the familiar domestic spaces of our everyday living. Through portraying images of evil and discarding the lofty sentiment of the high sublime, he propounds Edmund Burke’s triumph of sympathy. That we recognise degeneration and suffering shows a type of social empathy – the sublime of terror morphs into a

²³⁷ Burke, Edmund, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, p.42

²³⁸ Coolidge, Clark, *Philip Guston, Collected Writings, Lectures, Conversations*, p.310

sublime of 'fellow feeling.' We can now chart our cultural evolution in terms of compassionate thought – the epiphany of the sublime mirrors this epiphany of sympathy.

Throughout his career, Guston sought a feeling of 'freedom' and 'unfreedom.' He constantly changed and developed his work and its content, often away from the popular modes of practice adopted by his peers. He shunned both abstraction and pop art to remain true to his own painting, making a 'moral choice' to retain his own integrity and in order to progress. He decided that the loss of faith in the idea of the image was a loss from which we would greatly suffer – artistically and culturally it was a 'step back' in our development and crucially, he felt that this denoted the abstract as a lie or 'cover up,' going so far as to link it to the downfall of all American culture. In his painting, we see an alternative vision for sublimity, away from the galleried transcendence of Newman or Rothko. In him, we see a reaffirmation of the artistic responsibility for sublime evolution – a sensitivity to ideas is required, one that is acquired through cultural accumulation. The sublime now becomes a 'creature of culture'²³⁹ – it no longer resides solely in the natural or religious world and we no longer need the towering mountain or religious deity to authenticate its existence. Shaw writes that 'In the discourse of the sublime, we thus become aware that all points of origin such as God, nature, or mind are merely effects of the combinatory power of language.'²⁴⁰ In Guston's adoption of a discourse that is familiar and recognisable he places the sublime squarely in the figurative:

*'The only thing I have is my radicalism against art. All that abstract shit – museums and art history aesthetics. What a lie – lie! The only true impulse is realism, Arty art screws you in the end; always be on guard against it!'*²⁴¹

He created an iconography of images, unique to himself. The cataloguing of motifs founded in the pain and suffering of his youth allowed Guston to deal with the grief of his father's suicide and brother's death. They are instantly recognisable as 'Guston' – hanging bulbs and staring Cyclopean eyes denoted not only the detritus of a 'life lived' but also allowed for a cathartic rebirth of imagery in his painting:

'Shoes. Rusted iron. Mended rags. Seams. Dried bloodstains. Pink paint. Bricks. Bent nails and pieces of wood. Brick walls. Cigarette butts. Smoking. Empty booze bottles. How would bricks look flying in the air – fixed in their gravity – falling? A brick fight. Pictures hanging on nails in walls. The hands of

²³⁹ Mirzoeff, Nicholas, 'The Subject of Visual Culture,' *The Visual Culture Reader*, Ed. Mirzoeff, Nicholas, Routledge 1998, p.9

²⁴⁰ Shaw, Philip, *The Sublime*, p.11

²⁴¹ Coolidge, Clark, *Philip Guston, Collected Writings, Lectures, Conversations*, p.311

clocks. Green window shades. Two – or three-story brick buildings. Endless black windows. Empty streets.^{242,}

It was as if he had to create a bank of images familiar and unique to himself in order for him to see the world in the way that others must see it. Having invested so heavily in the idea of the abstract, it only became possible for the artist to develop, to move forward and to 'see,' by painting these brick walls and cigarette butts. In abandoning the abstract, it is as if he were made blind and had to learn to *feel* an object in order to know what it was. Without this rebirth, Guston's art would have lingered and been made stale by a movement and style in which he no longer believed sustainable to the development of painting. He reminds us: 'If I speak of having a subject to paint, I mean these is a forgotten place of beings and things, which I need to remember. I want to see this place. I paint what I want to see.'^{243,}

By comparing Guston to Newman we see that the reality of living and working as an artist on the periphery of a New York School or gallery driven art scene allowed for an *organic* development of the sublime. It is one that occurs naturally in life, in the 'figuring out' and small epiphanies/wonders of the intensely personal and everyday routine. When we contrast this with the theoretically qualified abstract sublime of Guston's peers, which lies in the rigid formulised gallery art of the New York school what we have is a real quantifiable lifelong investigation versus a philosophical calculation. It is not enough to simply announce oneself as sublime or ones work as transcendent – hearkening genesis and creation. Instead, we must return to Guston, in the studio, writing reminders on scraps of paper; the screwing up and casting aside of abstract ideas, the return to and wonderment at the everyday. He writes to himself near the end of his life in 1978:

'No good to paint in the head – what happens is what happens when you put the paint down – you can only hope that you are alert – ready – to see. What joy it is for paint to become a thing – a being. Believe in this miracle – it is your only hope. To will this transformation is not possible. Only a slow maturation can prepare the hand and eye to become quicker than ever. Ideas about art don't matter. They collapse anyway in front of the painting.'^{244,}

²⁴² Ibid. p.308

²⁴³ Ibid. p.311

²⁴⁴ Ibid. p.314

Chapter Four: The Show-Off, Did You See Me? Sophie Calle as Auto-Narrator and Confessor

Sophie Calle is described as a 'first-person artist.'²⁴⁵ She acts as documenter and director of her life and its content to create narrative driven art, becoming 'auto-narrator' and artist combined. Alfred Pacquement writes:

*'In her works she directs herself, shamelessly, unreservedly, and even uproariously ... She turns onlookers into accomplices to her privacy, and leaves no way out ... She broadens the artist's traditional position within the social arena, for not being content with being one of France's most internationally recognised artists, a ranking based on her narrative and photographic body of work, she is also a writer, a film-maker and even a character in a novel.'*²⁴⁶

Pacquement's description shows Calle ability to commandeer various methods of documentation to create a distinct style. Through the utilisation and exhibition of different methods she manages to convey different facets of encounters and events – random happenings and planned occurrences. She unveils the importance of the everyday and the significance of chance but also testifies to the notion of the void or the absent in our lives. Pacquement explains that her inclusion of other's testimonials is as important as the artist's herself stating:

*'She is fond of getting people to do the talking, as is evident from her projects based on absent works, described from memory or imagined by people who cannot see them. Narrative and exposure thus become the narrative and exposure of the other, something that may well have an emotional effect on anyone becoming acquainted with the experience.'*²⁴⁷

Sophie Calle's 2003 collection of interviews, letters, photographs and texts is titled 'M'as-Tu-Vue?' Literally translated, it means 'did you see me?' The statement used in this context however alludes to vanity and self-absorption: 'Un m'as-tu-vu: A show-off, Ce qu'elle m'as-tu-vue! She's such a show-off! Ca fait m'as-tu-vu: It's too flashy!²⁴⁸ Like Guston, Calle is an artist attracted to the idea of the everyday – the detritus of life and the humdrum of routines. Guston depicts normalcy and habitude being invaded/desecrated by hooded imposters and the anxieties of everyday living – habits of excess; cigarette smoking, bad food. Calle too injects crises into routines. The formulaic doctrines for living are turned on their head – banality itself comes under the microscope. She examines hotel rooms, address-books and strip clubs and obsessively collates found materials, ticket-stubs and maps, to put forward and exhibit a very different take on modern living.

²⁴⁵ Pacquement, Alfred, 'Preface,' *M'as-Vue Tue*, Prestal, 2003, p.15

²⁴⁶ Op.Cit

²⁴⁷ Ibid p.16

²⁴⁸ Calle, Sophie, *M'as-Tu Vue*, Prestal, 2003, Inlay

Jean-François Lyotard's formula places the sublime in a contemporary setting with its role lying in 'presenting the unrepresentable.'²⁴⁹ To understand Lyotard's ideology we must first examine his foundation for this theory, based in his definitions of realism, the modern and the postmodern. In his book, 'The Postmodern Condition, A Report on Knowledge,' Lyotard proposes that capitalism has become the driving force behind human progress. He feels that this dynamic has destroyed what is known as the speculative grand narrative and the grand narrative of emancipation. As truth and freedom, rather than efficiency and profit, are the basis for these narratives, Lyotard says that their destruction will not allow for a 'unifying identity for the subject or society.'²⁵⁰ Simon Malpas explains this position saying 'the main threat facing postmodern society is the reduction of knowledge to a single system whose only criteria is efficiency.'²⁵¹ In order to combat our invalidation in society, Lyotard argues for a paralogy to destabilize the 'capacity for explanation.'²⁵² He sees this paralogy – a type of 'false reasoning,' as critical to having 'the potential to break the rules of an existing game in such a way that a new game needs to be developed.'²⁵³ Calle can therefore be described as a paralogical artist. Alfred Pacquement confirms this saying:

*'it is artists who have nonetheless capsized the rules and, by enlarging the scope of their praxis and activities, managed to turn quite distinct categories inside out ... Sophie Calle has taken things further, however, by stage-directing herself through words and photographic imagery. And, above all, by conveying actual facts in a no-frills, unfiltered way, to the point of somewhat upsetting that particular applecart known as the established order.'*²⁵⁴

Before we move to examine sublimity's role in this paralogical assault, we must first look at Lyotard's definition of realism. Rather than defining it in the traditional realm of art-historical style or period, he says instead that it is 'the mainstream art of any culture.'²⁵⁵ It is something instantly understandable and recognisable. Our understanding of the term realism thus far has been to categorise historical treatments of form or colour in painting and the subsequent rise of photographic depictions and documentation. Lyotard takes a very different view with Malpas explaining:

'Lyotard claims that realism "makes" the world appear to be real. What he is getting at here is that reality is not something that we know naturally, but rather that a sense of reality is generated

²⁴⁹ Malpas, Simon, *Jean-François Lyotard*, Routledge, 2003, p.47

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.29

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.30

²⁵² *Op.Cit*

²⁵³ *Ibid.* p.31

²⁵⁴ Pacquement, Alfred, 'Preface,' *M'as-Vue Tue*, Prestal, 2003, p.15

²⁵⁵ Malpas, Simon, *Jean-François Lyotard*, p.44

*through the beliefs and ideals of a particular culture, and that realist art or literature is one of the things that helps a culture create a sense of its reality.*²⁵⁶

We live in a world of transitory cultural immediacy. Lyotard's realism is the reality of dealing with a culture where capitalism invests in and controls this paradigm. Although Lyotard sees the instantaneous nature of modern artistic production as flighty, he also sees the capacity for our evolution in its technology saying 'the ready-made in the techno-sciences presents itself as a potential for infinite production, and so does the photograph.'²⁵⁷ This is the first instance of Lyotard's sublime. He places its action in the hands of the artist rather than the spectator. By defining realism in this way, he also proposes new theories for the terms 'modern' and 'postmodern.' Malpas declares that these alternatives will 'set out to disrupt realism by "questioning the rules that govern images and narratives."²⁵⁸

As with the term 'realism,' Lyotard makes distinctions from those commonly referred to when considering the 'modern' and the 'postmodern.' Where the former would generally be thought a periodic precursor to the latter, and with the postmodern always pronounced as signifying the *end* of the modern, Lyotard claims that this is not so. He says that they should not be expressions used solely to categorise periods of artistic development but rather should be considered as a symbiotic discourse necessary to heterogenic contemporary expression. Bill Readings writes that:

*'If classicism offers a description of the concept that would itself not be an event, whereas modernism offers to represent the concept of the event, postmodernism seeks to testify to the event without recourse to the concept that would reduce its eventhood to unity and fixity.'*²⁵⁹

The postmodern's testification *to* the event finds its vehicle in abstract expressionism and the avant-garde. The presentation of the unrepresentable allows artistic conception to become the sublime object, rather than the object itself. Lyotard said 'it will be white, like one of Malevich's squares; it will enable us to see only by making it impossible to see; it will please only by causing pain.'²⁶⁰ Unlike the Burkean association of pain/terror with the sublime, Lyotard puts pain in the category of melancholia (nostalgia) and the 'novatio.' These are two modes by which he defines our faculties of comprehension. Steurman explains:

²⁵⁶ Op.Cit

²⁵⁷ Crowther, Paul, *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993, p.154

²⁵⁸ Malpas, Simon, *Jean-François Lyotard*, p.45

²⁵⁹ Readings, Bill, *Introducing Lyotard: art and politics*, Routledge, 1991, p.74

²⁶⁰ Shaw, Philip, *The Sublime*, p.116

*'One, which Lyotard calls "melancholic," stresses the impotency of our faculty of presentation and dwells in the nostalgia of presence. The other mode, which Lyotard calls "novatio," stresses the potency of the faculty of conceiving which is not the faculty of understanding. This mode stresses the invention of new rules, of new forms in a pictorial, artistic, or philosophical game.'*²⁶¹

Kant's sublime lies in our failure to sensibly grasp the infinite and melancholia of our thoughts buoyed up by the comprehension of totality. Lyotard sees in the sublime 'nostalgia for presence.' Where the two both encounter the sublime in failure, in the case of Lyotard we see that:

*'an emphasis is placed on "the powerlessness of the faculty of presentation, on the nostalgia for presence felt by the human subject, on the obscure and futile will which inhabits him in spite of everything.'*²⁶²

Calle is very much concerned with the idea of presenting the unrepresentable. Her art is as much to do with the idea of 'eventhood' and 'the happening' as it is to do with its subject matter and content. In order to express this, a new set of rules concerning exhibition and presentation became necessary and it is in her work that we find Lyotard's 'modern' and 'post-modern' – the representation of concept and the testification to the event. Christine Macel writes:

*'Taken as a whole, Sophie Calle's oeuvre seems to be a rejection of the depressing and at times perverse assertions put forward by criticism hailing from structuralism – assertions that, in the late 1960s, announced the death of the author, an which are nowadays still being developed in the form of a glorification of non-production and a preference for the real (in relation to the work of art), demonstrating an attitude that is sometimes profoundly anti-humanist.'*²⁶³

The term 'novatio' refers to the abstract and avant-garde works which strive to demonstrate the 'infinite (and thence unrepresentable) experiment and development.' As with the 'ready-made technologies' these works offer the possibility of the infinite. In them we see the disruption Lyotard feels is key to our continued social development. They are the epitome of what it means to be postmodern – not merely a 'follow-on' of modernist thought but a reworking of the unrepresentable to offer something else. A work of nostalgia offers consolation to the viewer in its recognisable forms and content. The novatio offers no such solace, choosing instead to disrupt the comfortable realism of our lives. Lyotard says:

²⁶¹ Steuerman, Emilia, 'Habermas Vs Lyotard: Modernity Vs Postmodernity,' *New Formations*, Number 7, Spring 1, 1989, p.51-66

²⁶² Crome, Keith, Williams, James, *The Lyotard Reader and Guide*, Columbia University Press, 2006, p.130

²⁶³ Macel, Christine, 'The Author Issue in the Work of Sophie Calle. *Unfinished*,' *M'as-Tu Vue*, Prestal, 2003, p.17

*'The postmodern would be that which in the modern invokes the unrepresentable in presentation itself, that which refuses the consolation of correct forms, refuses the consensus of taste permitting a common experience of nostalgia for the impossible, and inquires into new presentations – not to take pleasure in them, but to better produce the feeling that there is something presentable.'*²⁶⁴

In Lyotard's sublime, art has found its role in offering a paralogy of the aesthetic. Kant striving for a comprehension of totality differs to Lyotard who says that the postmodern must instead 'wage a war'²⁶⁵ against it.

Where Jean-François Lyotard argues for a paralogy or 'false reasoning' to destabilize our invalidation in society, Slavoj Žižek also looks for the truth in disruption. Looking to German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, he seeks truth in the contradiction/antithesis of dialectical thought:

*'In Žižek's reading of Hegel, the dialectic does not produce a reconciliation or synthesized viewpoint but, instead, an acknowledgment that, as he puts it, "contradiction [is] an internal condition of every identity.'*²⁶⁶

Hegel proposes the use of *dialectical thinking* in order to understand the world around us. By presenting an idea/thesis, making an opposing argument/antithesis and synthesising a *new* hypothesis he gives us his theory regarding the totality of our thoughts. He says that by repeating this process continually, we as humans should form an idea of the Absolute and, in understanding the reconciliation, division and consequence of our ideas, come to understand the world and our place in it. Calle presents various artefacts and texts to enhance and illustrate different dimensions of single occurrences and happenings. She displays photographs with accompanying biographical texts or juxtaposes mundane video with wall mounted phrases - neon handwritten styled tubular lighting contrasting sharply with the recordings. Visually it is as if one single photographic scene is not enough to corroborate or explain her concepts. She produces debris as if it were evidence with an investigative-like mania to conciliate her ideas. (Fig.12) Speaking in 2009 she explains:

*'Any one version is never "true," it just works better than another. But I can say that it did happen. True? No. It happened... The difference with many of my works is the fact that they are also my life. They happened. This is what sets me apart and makes people strongly like or dislike what I do...I don't care about truth: I care about art and style and writing and occupying the wall.'*²⁶⁷

²⁶⁴ Malpas, Simon, *Jean-François Lyotard*, p.49

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p.50

²⁶⁶ Myers, Tony, *Slavoj Žižek*, Routledge, 2003, p.17

²⁶⁷ Neri, Louise, 'Sophie's Choice,' Iwona Blazwick, p.92 – 97, January 2009

Žižek's ideology is influenced by two other key thinkers – Karl Marx and Jacques Lacan. Where Hegelian theory encouraged him to looking for the meaning in disruption, Marx' political praxis gave him a scaffold upon which to hang his own ideas. He felt that where Marx had an understanding of how society as a whole should work, he had little insight into the idea of the individual with Tony Myers pointing out: 'As the instinctive and psychological processes of individuals are the very stuff on which ideology goes to work, it seemed essential to find a theory of these processes.'²⁶⁸

Jacques Lacan's concept of the sublime lies in the process Freud originally called Sublimation. This 'shifting of feeling' occurs when we invest an unnatural or disproportionate amount of feeling in a material object. A reversal of Freud's process, Lacan's sublimation 'indicates the void at the heart of symbolization.'²⁶⁹ Calle is an artist drawn to this type of sublimity. Alan Riding writes 'her raw material is often her own reality but she reorganises it to put the viewer in her place. And where reality falls short, she imagines it. Indeed, she is drawn by the mystery of absence or void.'²⁷⁰ In order to understand a theory of lacking, and Žižek's reaction to it, we must first examine Lacan's three orders; the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real. In the Imaginary, we see the formation of what is commonly referred to as the Ego. When we are born, the identification of the adult human figure gives us a sense of congruity. The anticipation of our development lies at this point with the ego being formed in infancy. However, a division lies between the reality of the infant body and it's identification of the adult working form:

*'As the ego is formed by this identification, an identification that assumes powers the child does not yet have the ego is constitutionally sundered, riven by the division between itself and the image of itself. It is thus left forever trying to reconcile the other to the same.'*²⁷¹

The Lacanian Symbolic refers to everything that we know rather than feel. It is the society in which we live and is governed by language. Again, division is the rule of this order because, while language is the thing that shapes and defines us, what gives us the power of rational thought; the process of definition is also what enslaves us. Shaw says that humanity is 'forced to exchange its sense of wholeness for a level of being that is, by virtue of its inscription in language and society, forever compromised by its relation with the desire of the Other.'²⁷² The deification of language means that while we can now articulate feelings and label the objects around us, the process also compromises our corporeality. The third order, the Order of the Real, refers to the immediacy of feeling associated

²⁶⁸ Ibid., p.20

²⁶⁹ Shaw, Philip, *The Sublime*, p.135

²⁷⁰ Riding, Alan, 'Keeping it Together by Living in Public,' *The New York Times*, 7 Dec. 2003, AR44. Academic OneFile. Web. 16 Oct. 2012

²⁷¹ Myers, Tony, *Slavoj Žižek*, p.22

²⁷² Shaw, Philip, *The Sublime*, p.133

with a thing *before* it has been defined by language. As discussed by Myers, the Real is what precedes the Symbolic – it is everything we feel rather than know. However, its existence is made impossible in a world ‘carved up by language.’²⁷³ Again, the disharmony of the process is what defines us and it is at this point that Hegelian and Žižekian discourse come into play. The habit of definition shows a lack or void of feeling for an object. This process becomes what Žižek calls ‘external reflection.’²⁷⁴ As we have seen, dialectical progression synthesizes thoughts to produce new ideas. There is also conflict in this process which leads to contradictions. It is the impediments of the Orders and their workings that Žižek thinks will enlighten us. Shaw writes:

‘In Žižek’s reading of Lacanian psychoanalysis, the sublime is identified via Hegel, as the ‘reified’ effect of the inconsistency of the symbolic order. The fascination of the sublime is thus derived from its status as an indicator of the Thing, the emptiness at the heart of the Real without which signification could not occur. Objects are not in themselves sublime, rather they become sublime when they are raised to the ‘dignity of the Thing.’ The terror of the sublime is brought about through its relationship with the Real. In Lacan’s theory, the Real is the ultimate contradiction in terms in so far as it both precedes and succeeds the symbolic. As such, the Real is impossible and appears on as the failure or void of the symbolic. Whenever an object is made to represent this void it becomes an object of fascination, provoking love or hatred in accordance with the extent to which the symbolic order is perceived to be in harmony or in crisis. Thus the crucifixion of Christ can be explained as a reaction formation to the perception of the extreme discord, the gap, between God and the lowest form of human existence. It follows that Christ’s apotheosis, his transformation into a sublime object of desire, marks the point at which the horror of the void is sublimated as the glory of the Thing.’²⁷⁵

In 1982 Lyotard writes at length on the idea of presenting the unrepresentable. He says that photography has made the profession of painting impossible as the industrial and scientific world have greater need for this new techno-science rather than the ‘optical geometry’²⁷⁶ of painting:

‘Photography achieves this programme of metopolitical visual and social ordering. It realises it in both senses of the world: it realises it, and it concludes it. The know-how and knowledge that were given substance and were transmitted in the school and the studio are now programmed inside the photographic machine. In a single click, an ordinary citizen, whether amateur or tourist, can organise his or her identifying spaces and make a picture that enriches the cultural memory-bank.’

²⁷³ Myers, Tony, *Slavoj Žižek*, p.25

²⁷⁴ Kay, Sarah, *Žižek: A Critical Introduction*, Polity Press in Association with Blackwell Publishing, 2003, p.35

²⁷⁵ Shaw, Philip, *The Sublime*, p.147

²⁷⁶ Lyotard, Jean-François, ‘Presenting the Unrepresentable,’ *The Sublime*, Ed. Morely, Simon, Whitechapel Gallery, MIT Press, 2010, p.131

He goes on to say that while painters have always sought to document, the laboriousness of the process meant that the time sacrificed was too great and the advent of photography allows for a new process by which to do this. Our new relationship with photography is therefore, akin to the modern idea of the death of the author – living as we do in a world desirous of journalism rather than literature. Christina Macel says that Calle has however rejected this death-of-the-author becoming instead a ‘fortiori’ – an egomaniacal artist more concerned with autobiography and the self at a time where the group or collective is more fashionably respected. She writes:

‘Calle has been developing her somewhat autobiographical factual/fictional narratives in an ongoing way since 1978, accompanying them with photographs, and thereby redefining the notion of the author, and even of fiction itself, by juggling with every possible kind of interweave and interface. Between words and pictures, it goes without saying but also between fiction and non-fiction. She has done so from different viewpoints, which cover this notion in a more or less comprehensive way.’²⁷⁷

Macel dubs this process of juxtaposition the ‘author-issue’²⁷⁸ at the centre of Calle’s work. By putting her art in the guise of the first person she becomes auto-narrator of the pieces, guiding the viewer through the work in much the same way as a writer or director. She puts together series of texts, photographs and videos in order to say something very specific about the situations in which she has found herself but we must remember that more often than not, Calle has placed *herself* in these positions. There are some who call this crass and self-absorbed; others recognise it as a precursor to our fascination with reality television. As with Guston, we must assume that behind the sometimes gauche and overtly sentimental presentations (asking a blind person to recount their idea of beauty and displaying on a wall next to their portrait) Calle’s work contains an element of calculation and suggestion. Macel categorises it into three headings – surveillance, exhibitionism and absence. At times the work projects a nonchalant, throw-away attitude, a French chic irony; comments printed on cards exhibited alongside intensely personal accounts of suffering – arguments won and loves lost:

‘If your story is really unusual/Please make yourself/ known to the/ security guard.’

‘The artist is/ in the ladies’ room/ She’ll be right back.’²⁷⁹

It is as if she treats the work with the same rules as a film director or writer – there can be no humour without irony, no sympathy without cruelty. The diligence in finding this balance suggests that while Calle has done her utmost to portray work that has evolved naturally and organically she

²⁷⁷ Macel, Christine, ‘The Author Issue in the Work of Sophie Calle. *Unfinished, M’as-Tu Vue*, p.18

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p.17

²⁷⁹ Excerpts from ‘Fin De Nuit Blanche,’ (‘End of Sleepless Night’) Sophie Calle, 2002

has ultimately made every decision regarding what is shown and what has been cast aside. She makes this clear in her showing of the 1998 piece 'Unfinished' (Fig.13) which depicts videos and photographs from a CCTV camera at an ATM machine in California. Riding writes 'she obtained a video from the bank of people using automatic tellers. But she saw no immediate way to transform it, so she filed it away until now.'²⁸⁰ Calle's intention in show the unsuccessful work she termed the 'anatomy of a failure.' For her, the voyeuristic element of the work could not be appropriated or used to make something more confessional or shocking and so she instead turns the mundane and routine into the depiction of failure and regret. It is interesting that almost as much has been written about this piece as much as any other and we must wonder how do the people being depicted feel about being called failures of art, having been used by Calle as pawns in her artistic game. She writes an accompanying series of texts about the images saying in 1994:

*'Help! I had come to a dead end. I suggested that Jean Baudrillard write captions for the photographs. He churned out four pages. He talked about the security of money, the world of automatic distribution. He compared the machine to a polling booth, a urinal, a confessional. Now I had images taken by a machine and a text written by someone else. What was my role in all this? I needed to act.'*²⁸¹

She thinks and ponders on the piece from 1998 to 2002 saying that she is overcome with doubt. She even seeks a hypnotist to help her to deal with the thoughts regarding the piece but this brings no solace apart from making her more relaxed. Eventually in 2003 she resigns herself to the eventual failure of the work and says it is akin to deliverance:

*'Just for once. Say nothing...Silent photos. SILENT. No. I am going to vampirize them, to interfere with them. That's the thing. This is the anatomy of a failure...Talk about failure because lack is all I can talk about. Show these outstretched hands, human targets, sad faces. Stop questioning them. Fifteen years it's been dragging on. Get rid of these people. Give them up, as they are, all on the wall, side by side. Get shot of them. MAKE THEM PAY.'*²⁸²

It is however, her failure to manage or stage-direct the imagery that she is referring to. She cannot will it to be something else, no matter how much she invests in the work. The anatomy of failure is a failure to manipulate or coerce the viewer into reading anything apart from what exactly is presented to them. By exhibiting this work alongside other famous and successful pieces Calle strips

²⁸⁰ Riding, Alan, 'Keeping it Together by Living in Public,' *The New York Times*, 7 Dec. 2003

²⁸¹ Calle, Sophie, Excerpt from 'Unfinished,' 1988 – 2003, *M'as-Tu Vue*, p.418

²⁸² Op.Cit

away the facet of honesty contrived by them and instead displays herself as narrator and author of fiction as much as biographer of her own life.

Calle's presentation of what Lyotard calls 'the unrepresentable' say something that has previously been inexpressible about banality of life. She uses a series of techniques – photographs, videos, texts and recollections, to become a type of paralogical artist. The advent of photography has allowed Calle to document in a confessional style. It is a prelude to the onslaught of reality television – intimacies made public, a type of unrestricted flirtation with the viewer appealing to our appetite for scandal and secrets. This new type of presentation allows artistic conception to become a type of contemporary sublime. Like Newman who was concerned with the idea of the happening and the not happening, Calle is interested in the exhibition of 'the event' and a testification to absence and void. She disrupts the realism of life by offering consolation in nostalgia but discreetly leads the viewer through her works to reveal something else – an unsettling realisation at the instability of the everyday. This type of dialectical discussion produces new ideas and definitions – the conflict of these modes of representation lead to enlightenment and revelation according to Žižekian theory with this forming the basis for a contemporary sublime. Calle's manipulation of the viewer, with auto-narration and juxtaposition, also forges new relationships between fiction and non-fiction. By creating a new type of discourse her art lies distinct from the comfortable familiar appraisal of sublimity in religious sentiment and mountain top. It apparently creates something familiar and appealing, but in reality is uncomfortable to look at and is entirely in and of itself. Newman wrote 'an artist paints so that he will have something to look at; at times he will write so that he has something to read.'²⁸³ Calle creates montages of eventhood and confessions for the same reason and in doing so, represents the realities of our experiences with calculated ease.

Philip Shaw writes that the sublime is 'the means by which are suspends or disrupts itself in view of something other than art. (It) could be said to mark the point at which thought itself is brought into question.'²⁸⁴ From 1984 to 2003 Calle worked on a project called 'Exquisite Pain.' It refers to a medical term for a type of highly intense localised pain. A trip undertaken by Calle begins the countdown to the breakdown of her relationship climaxing in a New Delhi hotel room where she had arranged to meet her unfaithful and absent lover. He ends the affair via telephone completely shocking Calle who had been unaware of her lover's intention and new feeling. She says that this moment marks the 'unhappiest moment in her whole life' and that she holds the trip abroad accountable:

²⁸³ Schjeldahl, Peter, *Let's See: Writings on Art from the New Yorker*, p.116

²⁸⁴ Shaw, Philip, *The Sublime*, p.148

*'In 1984 I was awarded a French foreign ministry grant to go to Japan for three months. I left on October 25, not knowing that this date marked the beginning of a 92-day countdown to the end of a love affair – nothing unusual, but for me then the unhappiest moment of my whole life. I blamed the trip.'*²⁸⁵

Exhibited originally in a photographic installation the work now takes the form of a small grey missive type book with each of the first ninety-two pages marking a 'countdown to unhappiness.'²⁸⁶ (Fig.14) They depict photographs of her trip to Japan. Various images of artefacts and documents are branded with a methodical administrative red stamp, echoing the rigidity of governmental/clerical passport approval and travel. She photographs bedsheets and pillows, Japanese tea ceremony cups and garden statues and combines them with travel documentation, passport stamps, diary extracts, letters and photo negatives. (Fig.15) All are emblazoned with the official looking stamp in an unavoidable compulsory framed countdown. '68 days to unhappiness' is stamped on a man's masked face staring contemplatively at the camera, '67 days to unhappiness' on her hotel pillow in the next. The viewer/reader is left with a growing dread, a burgeoning peeling back of images and layers to reveal the climactic 'happening' of Calle's pain. There is a desire to stop and examine each photograph in detail, to read each extract fully, but the impulse to turn the page increases with every passing stamp – a type of almanac-tic countdown to heartbreak. Nancy Princenthal writes of the project:

*'Meticulously punctual as it is, "Exquisite Pain" runs on a very odd clock. In lived experience, unappeasable misery, as Calle's project itself demonstrates, is almost by definition unanticipated. Only hindsight permits a countdown to the kind of emotional disaster that throws the normal sense of time's passage into disarray. The structure of "Exquisite Pain," which rewrites history to place day one exactly at the narrative's midpoint, seems meant to reflect the temporal confusions generated by dejection.'*²⁸⁷

The second half of Calle's project proceeds with an account of the conversation she had with her now ex-lover. It intimates small private details; the inappropriate nature of a three-year affair with a man whose age matched her father's; his threat that he would forget her if she left coupled with her bravado and arrogance that he would not. She expresses the uncertainty and panics that he had been in an accident, combining the text with an atmospheric still shot of the red telephone on which she finally receives the call to tell her that the relationship is over. (Fig.16) The old-fashioned other worldly decor of the room alludes to her sense of displacement and loneliness. The surroundings are

²⁸⁵ Calle, Sophie, 'Exquisite Pain,' *M'as-Tu Vue*, p.352-377

²⁸⁶ Op.Cit

²⁸⁷ Princenthal, Nancy, 'The Measure of Heartbreak,' *Art in America*, vol. 93 no.8 September 2005, p.138-141

bleak and grimy yet bear the hallmarks of nameless hotel sterility. We are told that she has received harrowing personal news on an anonymous shiny hotel phone. Calle tells us that he has deliberately allowed her to expect his arrival, confirming flight and hotel arrangements. The security and certainty that she feels at his imminent arrival is brutally cut short by this realisation that in fact, he is not coming. She writes in the first account:

'As soon as he picked up the phone, I knew it was over: "Have you met someone else?" – "Yes." He hoped it was serious. I hung up. I sat on my bed for hours, staring at the phone and the moldy carpet of room 261 in the Imperial Hotel.'^{288,}

Each of the following left-hand pages of the book contains a retelling of this event. Calle repeats the story often but never exactly and offers new details as they come to mind. By day fifty she is becoming apathetic in her recount calling it a 'banal love affair with a pathetic ending.' By day ninety she is almost as effusive in her boredom with the incident as she was originally heartbroken. The sting of the event remains however:

'He broke it off over the phone. Four questions and four answers. Not even three minutes to tell me he was in love with someone else. That's all. As suffering goes, nothing special. Nothing worth harping on about.'^{289,}

As these left-sided accounts continue the image of the red bedside telephone remains intact, burning as clearly from the first retelling as in the last. In contrast the text now fades with each page turned, becoming fainter and shorter until only one account remains. We are reminded of the text accompanying her 'Unfinished' project – a type of giving up on useless emotions. There is a resolution through failure and a resignation to the event's occurrence rather than hatred or bewilderment. She concludes: 'Ninety-eight days ago the man I loved left me. January 25th, 1985. Room 261. Imperial Hotel. New Delhi. *Enough.*'^{290,}

However, it is not exclusively through her own repeated recollecting that Calle finds peace. Rather, it is through the juxtaposition of her story with accounts from friends and strangers whom she asked 'when did you suffer most?' She reveals their details verbatim and accompanies them with images highlighting the epitome of their pain. These fresh takes on personal suffering construct the remaining right-hand side of the subsequent pages, mirroring the layout of Calle's own painful event. (Fig.17) She explains her motive saying:

²⁸⁸ Calle, Sophie, 'Exquisite Pain,' *M'as-Tu Vue*, p.352-377

²⁸⁹ Op.Cit

²⁹⁰ Op.Cit

*'Back in France on January 28, 1985, I opted for exorcism and spoke about my suffering instead of my travels. In exchange, I started asking both friends and chance encounters: "When did you suffer most?" This exchange would stop when I had told my story to death, or when I had revitalized my pain in relation to other people's. The method was radically effective: three months later, I was cured. The exorcism had worked. Fearing a possible relapse, I dropped the project. By the time I returned to it, fifteen years had gone by.'*²⁹¹

To return to the idea of the sublime with regards to 'Exquisite Pain,' it is necessary to once more consult Edmund Burke's 'Philosophical Enquiry.' Having spoken of a sublime based in the triumph of sympathy for mankind's suffering, we realise that the recollections of the family and strangers in Calle's project result in an encounter with this type of empathetic fellow feeling. Their stories vary but each describes the pinnacle of their life's suffering – the tragedies which have most shaped their existence. They are told in a very matter-of-fact way and accompanied by one photograph, mimicking Calle's confessional layout on the opposite page:

*'It was an image of happiness that caused me the greatest suffering. It happened in 1964. It was Springtime.'*²⁹²

*'It was in Perpignan. In 1971. A Saturday in May. Early Afternoon. I was on my way home from boarding school.'*²⁹³

The accompanying photographs are Polaroid style snaps enhancing the telling of the story – an image of a blue American convertible drives home the loneliness of a broken marriage. A maternity hospital sign against a brick wall background is companion to a tragic account of a traumatic birth: 'It was November 8, 1954, 6 p.m. I had just given birth to a deformed child. A flat nose bent off to the side, with a hole for a mouth. A monster.'²⁹⁴ The baldness of the stories, page after page of them, produces feelings of revulsion and empathy from the viewer/reader. They encourage us to draw from a reservoir of sympathy verifying Burke's theory of a compassionate sublime. The inclusion of the photographs forces the viewer to refer to the cultural memory bank Lyotard speaks of, mirroring the drawing down of feeling and emotion. The combination results in a subtle manipulation. On Burke's treatise Shaw writes:

'In each case, the enquiry into the source of the sublime, be it as a property of mind, of objects or of language, becomes a meditation on its harrowing effects, so that, in de Bolla's words, the "full

²⁹¹ Op.Cit

²⁹² Op.Cit

²⁹³ Op.Cit

²⁹⁴ Op.Cit

*recognition of self-awareness, self-consciousness ... amounts to nothing less than a desire for self-annihilation.*²⁹⁵

However much we recognise the tragedy of each story-teller's circumstances neither we nor Calle can offer consolation. While the sublime might lie in the realm of our ability to empathise we are reminded that it also lies in terror and pain ('whatever is in any sort terrible or is conversant about terrible thoughts or operates in a manner analogous to terror'²⁹⁶). Consolation is offered only through the opportunity to tell their story. One gets the impression that Calle's experience was excruciating due to this lack of solace – bereft and alone she receives conciliation from staring at the red telephone, as if its existence offers the only verification that the event has indeed happened. By demonstrating an ability to 'sum up' the experiences of others in her collation of photographs and texts Calle offers the only consolation she herself received – a type of catharsis through aesthetic confession.

Considered as much an author as an artist it is important that we understand the value of the written word in Calle's work. While the collation and documenting of images and objects place her in the category of autobiographical artist it is through her writing and the writing of others that she gives herself the role of auto-narrator. Like Longinus, the first-century Greek authority on the sublime, Burke makes a connection between words and the aesthetic of the sublime. He writes:

*'It is by words we have it in our power to make ... combinations as we cannot possibly do otherwise. By this power of combining we are able, by the addition of well-chosen circumstances, to give a new life and force to the simple object.'*²⁹⁷

Longinus likens the use of various written and spoken devices to a bully 'hitting the jury in the mind with blow after blow.'²⁹⁸ Calle's repetition of imagery works to similar effect but it is through the use of texts and the texts of others that she persuades the viewer as to the gravitas of the events. A single image of a red bedside telephone suggests nostalgia and old-fashioned hotel charm. Combined with the additional text it turns into a signifier for heartbreak – a visual reminder never forgotten. As the years/pages pass and the text/heartache fades, the signifier remains the same. Shaw explains that 'it is language that enables us to select and combine ideas, so as to render even the most unprepossessing object sublime.'²⁹⁹ Macel expands this theory in relation to Calle saying:

²⁹⁵ Shaw, Philip, *The Sublime*, p.55-56

²⁹⁶ Burke, Edmund, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, Oxford University Press, 1998, p.36

²⁹⁷ Shaw, Philip, *The Sublime*, p.52

²⁹⁸ Clark, Timothy, *The Theory of Inspiration*, Manchester University Press, 1997, p.66

²⁹⁹ Op.Cit

‘What matters, for her, is knowing “who’s speaking”. Her work confirms that aesthetic thought cannot do without both subject and author, and that you cannot shrug off either quite so easily... “M’as tu vue”, asks Sophie Calle, in the title of her show. “Have you read me?”, she might well remark, to complement that question posed to the viewer, dealing with the acknowledgment of her identity as person and as author.’³⁰⁰

What of the others we might ask – the friends and strangers persuaded to share their deep anguish and private suffering? Calle repeatedly announces the benefits of retelling *her* story – a project which became a ‘very good way of getting rid³⁰¹’ of her pain. As to anyone else’s participation, it would be nice to think of Calle offering a service – a type of confessional absolution, storing away old hurts and tragedies to allow the participants to move forward in their lives. However, the line between absolver and manipulator now becomes blurred. She says, of her own participation, ‘the good thing about relativity is that every time they told me a very unhappy story, it was good for me, because I would think that their story was worse than mine.’³⁰² One critic goes so far as to question the authenticity of the anonymous accounts wondering if part or all of them have indeed been fabricated by Calle, so unlikely she feels that people would willingly surrender their tragedy for public dissection in this way. She writes: ‘Moreover as in all of Calle’s work, there is the nagging question of whether she is deliberately embroidering this story, or even ... making it up out of whole cloth.’³⁰³ Calle’s explanation for their consent lies apart from the critic’s questioning of ‘why?’ and answers instead with a casual account of why twenty-nine strangers also agreed to sleep in her bed:

‘I think generally people accept to speak when the question you ask them is not a question they have learned in their life to answer yes or no. So, if I ask you if you would please help me carry my suitcase and move my apartment you can say no because you have something else to do, you’d rather change your own apartment. But if I ask you if you would please sleep in my bed, instead of saying no, you say why not?’³⁰⁴

Liz Wells writes about the idea of the photograph as testament. She says:

³⁰⁰ Calle, Sophie, *M’as-Tu Vue*, p.28

³⁰¹ Bice, Curiger, ‘Sophie Calle,’ *Talking Art*, ed. Searle, Adrian, ICA, London, 1991, p.41

³⁰² Op.Cit

³⁰³ Princenthal, Nancy, ‘The Measure of Heartbreak,’ *Art in America*, p.138-141

³⁰⁴ Bice, Curiger, ‘Sophie Calle,’ *Talking Art*, p.41-42

*'Photographs are commonly used as evidence. They are among the material marshalled by the historian in order to investigate the past. They have become a major source of information by which we picture, understand or imagine the nineteenth century.'*³⁰⁵

In terms of Calle's art the photographs serve as testification to the events taking place – as witness to lend to them a sense of credibility that she, as narrator/instigator, cannot. They give to her a modicum of impartiality and add weight to any conceptual argument she might have. They work as the proof in her investigative mania confirming what she has done and seen but also to bear witness to new ideas and concepts as a result of their inception. In 1998 Calle was invited to exhibit at the house where Sigmund Freud spent his last year. She decided to place items of sentimental value in the space – objects that she had previously used in autobiographical stories. She displays them with obvious care, draped around the austere masculine furnishings of the house, adding feminine bursts of tantalising flirtation to the heavy environment. She photographs the resulting arrangements and, rather than inviting Freud to analyse her personality through the display of such items, does so herself in a text accompaniment. This results in an exhibition and photo-book - 'Appointment: With Sigmund Freud.' Of one item, 'The Bathrobe,' (Fig.18) she writes:

*'I was eighteen years old. I rang the bell. He opened the door. He was wearing the same bathrobe as my father. A long white terry cloth robe. He became my first love. For an entire year, he obeyed my request, and never let me see him naked from the front. Only from the back. And so, in the morning light, he would get up carefully, turning himself away, and gently hiding inside the white bathrobe. When it was all over he left the bathrobe behind with me.'*³⁰⁶

The robe becomes the symbol by which Calle remembers and discusses the event. Like the red telephone in 'Exquisite Pain' she imbues it with a sense of forlorn tragedy. It is evocative and provocative in its nostalgia and its placement, draped with an artful carelessness on the back of Freud's study chair, provoking new sentiment. We see this idea repeated in 'The Wedding Dress.' (Fig.19) Arranged as if sitting, stretched out across Freud's chaise longue, the garment echoes Romanticism and old fashioned other-worldly sentiment. It is a hopelessly feminine device – silk and frills with long buttoned sleeves, suggesting an illicit Victorian chaste thrill. It flutters at the viewer amid a sea of heavy brown carpeted plush. We get a sense that Calle is flirting with Freud – injecting blasts of feminine pique into the sombre decor with a girlish but deadly intent. She reveals the secrets of the dress with relish:

³⁰⁵ Wells, Liz, *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, Routledge, Fourth edition 2009, p.57

³⁰⁶ Calle, Sophie, 'Appointment with Sigmund Freud,' *M'as-Tu Vue*, p.185-197

*'I had always admired him. Silently since I was a child. One November 8th – I was thirty years old – he allowed me to pay him a visit. He lived several hundred kilometres from Paris. I had bought a wedding dress in my valise, white silk with a short train. I wore it on our first night together.'*³⁰⁷

We are reminded once more of Burke's 'Enquiry' – his engenderment of the 'masculine' sublime and 'feminine' beauty. He argues that beauty lies in the feminine realm of seduction and desire and it used to effect by women to enchant or entice men, raising humanity's level of consciousness 'above the level of brutes.' He says that the dominant masculine sublime is 'engaged in a perpetual war with female lassitude' and that, although we may anoint the sublime as the ultimate force, it can be undermined by the beautiful. Shaw writes:

*'For a book that invests so much in the awe-inspiring, implacable potency of the sublime it seems extraordinary that the real threat should come, not from the masculine realm of asocial (or even anti-social) self-aggrandisement, but from the feminine sphere of companionable dissolution.'*³⁰⁸

Calle's depictions of her sentimental items mirror Guston's appropriation of the very ordinary and banal, which allowed him to categorise and place himself amongst his surroundings. She distances them from their normal environment and in doing so recognises them anew. It is as though she can now place an emotional value or worth on them. Putting them in the surroundings of Freud, she can analyse their sentimentality and categorise what they represent to her. Often, with Calle's work, you get the impression that she would be doing this type of activity regardless of audience. Where Guston once more learned to 'see' the world around him by newly defining its imagery in paint, Calle's documentation and ceremonies allow her the same rite. Williamson writes:

*'A sign is quite simply a thing – whether object, word or thing – which has a particular meaning to a person or group of people. It is neither the thing nor the meaning alone, but the two together. The sign consists of the signifier, the material object, and the signified, which is its meaning. These are only divided for analytical purposes; in practice a sign is always thing-plus-meaning.'*³⁰⁹

For Calle, these 'things-plus-meaning' represent the entirety of her life's experiences. Documenting their strangeness in a foreign environment serves only to highlight their essential/defining qualities. They lie in contrast to Freud's sober furnishings – the frippery of female 'dressing-up' clothes, silk and lace, a single useless red patent high-heeled shoe, saying much more defined in this way than they could displayed in Calle's own home. In one of the images Calle stands outside Freud's front

³⁰⁷ Op.Cit

³⁰⁸ Shaw, Philip, *The Sublime*, p.63

³⁰⁹ Williamson, J., *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and meaning in Advertising*, Marion Boyans, New York, 1978, p.17

door, wearing his coat staring directly at the camera with a wry smile – ‘M’as tu vue?’ – ‘are you looking at me?’ She invites the viewer in to see what she has done – what nonsense women engage in. Calle’s systematic approach to sentimentality - the placement and description of items in such a manner allow her to don the mask of a curator as well as artist. She says for her that art is ‘a way of taking distance. The pathological or therapeutic aspects exist, but just as catalysts.’³¹⁰ She uses her photographs as evidence of a life lived – as tributes to events that shaped and moulded her. Like a botanist or archaeologist analysing matter, Calle dissects objects and emotions as a means of verification and testification.

We have seen that Calle demonstrates empathy through her offer of consolation through confession. This double-sided arrangement also allows her to heal from her own trauma. She accomplishes these acts through collation – not only of photographs and documents but through amassing stories and encounters. Her work echoes that of Guston – the sublime of sympathy, and leads to a double-mode experience. The drawing down of emotions upon encountering the work mirrors the drawing down of signifiers to understand it. This creates a new set of signifiers and meaning but, in Calle’s art would not be possible through the exhibition of photographs alone. Of the imagery used in ‘Exquisite Pain’ it is as Evans says:

*‘It is easier for us, most of the time, to recall an event or a person by summoning up a single image, in our mind’s eye we can concentrate on a single image more easily than a sequence of images. And the single image can be rich in meaning because it is a trigger image of all the emotions aroused by the subject.’*³¹¹

László Moholy-Nagy says that photography is a ‘new instrument of vision.’³¹² Calle combines these images with text to build up a body of evidence or proof categorising an event. They allow her to verify instances of time - encounters or even experiences. Calle’s femininity also shapes the work. Using recollections of insecurities, love letters and tokens, girlish amalgamations of ticket strips and holiday mementos she places these in the austere gallery light for our consummation. Exhibited in this way she places her art in the realm of the feminine, titillating and whispering on one hand, sincere and warmly demonstrative on the other. The associative quality of her art demonstrates her ability to create a new paralogy or set of rules by which we define art and its role. Susan Sontag writes of the camera that it:

³¹⁰ Neri, Louise, ‘Sophie’s Choice,’ Iwona Blazwick, p.97

³¹¹ Kember, Sarah, ‘The Shadow of the Object: Photography and Realism,’ *The Photography Reader*, Ed. Wells, Liz, Routledge, 2003, p.212

³¹² Moholy-Nagy, László, ‘A New Instrument of Vision,’ *The Photography Reader*, p.93

*'makes reality atomic, manageable, and opaque. It is a view of the world which denies interconnectedness, continuity, but which confers on each moment the character of a mystery. Any photograph has multiple meanings; indeed, to see something in the form of a photograph is to encounter a potential object of fascination.'*³¹³

Calle's work continually fascinates and is evocative for the reason that it investigates these mysteries. She uses rituals and observations to explore impossible theories of voyeurism and intimacy. She says 'I'm trying to find solutions for myself. It is my personal therapy. The fact that it is art affords me protection and gives me the right to do things of this sort.'³¹⁴ Where most would seek to cover up or hide their past indelicacies or secrets, Calle revels in them and uses their exhibition as a type of aesthetical catharsis. There are however limits to this type of art practice and we can examine these looking at the hypotheses of French philosophers Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray.

In her essay 'The Bounded Text' Kristeva discusses notions of intertextuality and the 'agreement of deviations.'³¹⁵ The concept of intertextuality first introduced by Kristeva refers to what she calls a 'trans-linguistic apparatus.'³¹⁶ In terms of text or the idea of the novel this has little to do with influence of sources but rather the redistributive effect of language within a work. Intertextuality is in effect a type of productivity and she says 'in the space of the given text, several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralise one another.'³¹⁷ This transformative effect allows for a new positioning and articulation of the printed object – what Kristeva calls a 'novelistic utterance.'³¹⁸ She writes:

*'In order for this non-altering disjunction to give rise to the discursive trajectory of the novel, it must be embodied within a negative function: non-disjunction ... it introduces the figure of dissimulation, of ambivalence, of the double.'*³¹⁹

Kristeva also discusses the devalorization of writing, categorising it as 'pejorative, paralysing and deadly.'³²⁰ It has, she claims, been suppressed and used only to oppose 'objective reality' with this forming opposition rather than symbiosis – 'phonetic/scriptural, utterance/text.'³²¹

³¹³ Kember, Sarah, 'The Shadow of the Object: Photography and Realism,' *The Photography Reader*, p.212

³¹⁴ Hess, Barbara, 'Sophie Calle,' *Women Artists in the 20th and 21st Century*, ed. Grosenick, Uta, Taschen, 2001, p.74

³¹⁵ Kristeva, Julia, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1980, p.51

³¹⁶ *Ibid.* p.6

³¹⁷ *Ibid.* p.36

³¹⁸ *Ibid.* p.47

³¹⁹ *Op.Cit*

³²⁰ *Ibid.* p.58

In 'Pouvoirs de L'horreur' (Powers of Horror) Kristeva writes about the idea of the 'abject' – that 'pseudo-object'³²² that appears 'within the gaps of secondary repression' or 'primal repression.'³²³ It is the subconscious mind of the deject – a mind placed apart and nestled in division, the sublimation of thoughts are articulated by this individual's negation and denial of desires – on exclusions, 'transgression, denial and repudiation.'³²⁴ She defines the abject as one who 'strays' – 'a devisor of territories, languages, works, the deject never stops demarcating his universe whose fluid confines ... constantly question his solidity and impel him to start afresh.'³²⁵

We can draw some interesting conclusions about the work of Sophie Calle in our consideration of Kristeva's philosophy. She writes 'in times of dreary crisis, what is the point in of emphasizing the horror of being?'³²⁶ Calle appears to differ in her attitude, choosing instead to revel in the 'exquisite' aspect of the horror. By displaying 'Exquisite Pain' as a text-language photo exhibit and by collating these materials in a photo-book Calle recognises something about the primacy of suffering and indeed the deficiency of the written word. They are accounts of moments in torment but also a photographic calculation – Calle's intertextuality lies in the production of the negative function of others – the 'pseudo-objects' that come to represent the horror of everyday living. It is not a representation of the world in which we now live but a formulation to create a reality beyond the mere text – a projected echo. It would be crass to suggest that Calle's imagery provide catharsis for the victims of tragedy displayed in the second half of 'Exquisite Pain.' Instead, she has recognised the futility of the objective reality in which that tragedy occurred. Like Kristeva, she elects for a reality of non-disjunction, based in the primal fears and the abject terror of a reality too close but too horrific to ever completely *know*. Kristeva categorises it as such:

*'A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me, not that. But not nothing either ... which crushes me. Or the edge of non-existence, hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me.'*³²⁷

Let us categorise it in a different way. If one were to display a picture of the victim of a tragedy at the site of its occurrence that picture would serve as a tribute to that person or event. A wooden cross or headstone serves as testimony to a person's life and existence and once more is displayed

³²¹ Op.Cit

³²² Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Columbia University Press, 1982, p.8

³²³ Op.Cit

³²⁴ Ibid.p.7

³²⁵ Op.Cit

³²⁶ Ibid.p.208

³²⁷ Ibid.p.2

as a representation of the event – their life’s being/end. Calle’s printed juxtapositions function however as something else. They neither speak of tribute or testimony to the person but rather to the event by which they were defined. Perhaps they are not only testimonials to suffering. Nor are they tributes to their life. They are, in fact, recognition of the existence of annihilation – the fear of and the unsettling possibilities of the abject and the ‘Other.’ Kristeva explains:

‘Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be – maintaining that night in which the outline of the signified thing vanishes and where only the imponderable effect is carried out.’^{328,}

In her essay ‘How Can We Create Our Own Beauty?’ Luce Irigaray discusses the concept of beauty. She compares it to ‘distress, suffering, irritation and sometimes ugliness.’^{329,} In terms of art, she feels that the function of beauty has been to project a ‘divine or idealised woman.’^{330,} A superlative engagement with an artwork should impose a ‘moment of happiness and repose, of compensation for the fragmentary nature of daily life.’^{331,} The shortcomings of the work of Sophie Calle can be identified in this dissection. By utilizing art as a form of personal therapy she also engenders it as exclusively female and permits, as Irigaray terms it ‘the sublimation of women’s own death drive... (in) the creation of specifically feminine art.’^{332,} The action of using one’s sexuality and gender identifiers will, she feels, will entice women ‘to identify only with what they lack, their shortcomings.’^{333,} It could be said that the confessional and ugly truth of the narratives she drives and the imagery, chopped down and re-hung as testimony, can only contribute to the negative and therefore dishonest act of making art. Speaking on the notion of the ‘violated sexuality’ of Bellmer’s ‘The Games of the Doll’ – dismantled, headless torsos with eyes in place of vaginas and buttocks in place of breasts, Irigaray accuses the artist of falsity saying ‘have they not, out of the desire for truth, particularly psychic truth, created something ugly, and have they not led to believe ... that the psyche is ugly, terrifying and frightful?’^{334,} The same could perhaps be said of the spuriousness of Calle’s confessions. They are a retreat into the sexual idealised woman-hood of our time and a projection of a falsely feminine caricature. We think of Jessica Rabbit or Mae West’s large-breasted pouting physique and indeed, the physically enhanced plasticine celebrity of ‘page three’ girls and

³²⁸ Op.Cit

³²⁹ Miller, Elaine, ‘Beyond the Madonna, Revisiting Irigaray’s Aesthetics,’ *Thinking with Irigaray*, Ed. Hom, Sabina L., Khader, Serene J., Rawlinson, Mary C., State University of New York Press, Albany, 2011, p.42

³³⁰ Op.Cit

³³¹ Op.Cit

³³² Ibid.p.45

³³³ Op.Cit

³³⁴ Ibid.p.44

footballers wives. Irigaray's sublime lies in the art of truth writing 'truth in its entirety is beautiful and sublime.'³³⁵ The very obviousness and declarative effect of Calle's work does little to hold up Irigaray's theory who writes:

*'But already, when it speaks, thought no longer speaks what moves it. It no longer retains that emotion even as a fault in speech, as a dark night out of which it would expect to move forth. That which makes thought live is spoiled, set outside of it ... As long as thought does not touch upon that abyss thought can still breath. But it runs out of food and breath and takes no notice. And the sublime, which thought consumes, is transformed into utilities.'*³³⁶

³³⁵ Op.Cit

³³⁶ Irigaray, Luce, 'Belief Itself,' *The Religious*, Ed. Caputo, John D., Blackwell, Oxford, 2002, p.2

Chapter Five: Thoughts on the Contemporary Sublime

Having examined several major enquiries into the sublime and applied their theories to modern artistic practice we begin to see the emergence of a contemporary discourse on sublimity. We can argue for a place for the modern sublime - despite its conferred historical role it still has something very relevant to offer to our existing cultural development. We find it present in all facets of engagement, representing not only that which is breathtaking or awe-inspiring but also as that which informs the mind as to its ability. An encounter with the sublime can form from simple, small gestures or an appraisal of the vast natural world; from a reaction to terror and revulsion to the contemplation of the infinite. Our moral compass – that, which makes up our ethical character and our engenderment of the beautiful and transcendent, can all be defined by the notion of sublimity. It is a categorised state of mind. It is agreed that encounters lead to epiphany and a sense of absolutism or totality. It is also a description – a quality to admire and ascribe to. It both dominates and stimulates - analogous not only to terror but representative of desire/awe. If an object can be described as sublime, so too can our reaction to that object – what Kames calls a ‘double signification.’³³⁷ Peter de Bolla writes:

*‘It denotes both a quality found in objects as well as the affect experienced in the perceiving subject. The identification of this dual detonation is a crucial step forward and allows a far more supple analysis of the aesthetic realm: we need no longer worry about whether the cause of the elevated experience is out there in the world or in here, in our own internal responses to that world.’*³³⁸

One of the key identifiers of sublime experience is that of transformation. The effect of sublimity is apparent in the changed perception of the viewer/hearer/reader. What has come before, what we had expected is now transformed into something different. Throughout the course of the thesis this has been defined under many different headings; transcendence, sublimation. It is a ‘sinking down’ or ‘breaking through’ of previous thought and vision to create something new – be it an epiphany of entirely unconsidered thought, a complete change of engagement with a stimulus or indeed a synthesis of thought to create new perceptions. We imbibe objects with new, radical dimensions or drastically alter viewpoints based on a simple engagement with that object. There is a ‘rushing in’ of understanding or emotion. It offers solace in an epiphanical construction of new identity, changing comfortable signifiers into something fresh and unconsidered. For some, this is a ‘delightful

³³⁷ DeBolla, Peter, ‘Introduction,’ *Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory*, Ed. Ashfield, Andrew, de Bolla, Peter, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p.13

³³⁸ Ibid. p.14

longing,³³⁹ for others a dispassionate obliteration – a breaking down, rather than through, of preconceptions. It becomes a consideration of lacking, of the void at the centre of our contemplative existence. De Bolla writes that the aesthetic:

*'...is not primarily about art but about how we are formed as subjects, and how as subjects we go about making sense of our experience. "What is it that moves me?" is, therefore, a question centrally posed to human nature, which at its furthest extreme threatens to dissolve and dissipate the human in a technology that has the potential to overmaster all sense of being. This question, the problematic of the aesthetic ...is most fully explored under the rubric of the sublime.'*³⁴⁰

One of the key themes of sublime experience is the notion of being 'primed' or readied for that engagement. It has been defined as experiential – something that has and is influenced by previous modes of experience. Burke speaks of a cultivation of the mind to allow its growth. However, this type of experiential intertextuality is not applicable to the genuinely sublime. While it may be that we understand something to be sublime compared to previous encounters *which have not been*, the sublime depends on a forceful reckoning of the new. There is a type of paradoxical event, what Thomas McEvelley calls 'a negation of the boundaries of selfhood, a negation at once exalting and terrifying.'³⁴¹ Frances Reynolds writes in 1785:

*'It is a pinnacle of beatitude, bordering upon horror, deformity, madness! An eminence from whence the mind, that dares to look farther is lost! It seems to stand, or rather waver, between certainty and uncertainty, between security and destruction. It is the point of terror, of undetermined fear, of undetermined power!'*³⁴²

While it may be something that we have been primed or prepared for, the idea of the familiar and the sublime are rarely linked. Hughes writes of 'The Shock of the New,' Newman heralds 'The Sublime is Now.' It may call upon emotions that are known to us or promote recollections of times that were precious or fearful but the sublime will ultimately construct a *new* language of the mind to assimilate that which has, heretofore, been unknown.

The sublime is also a name, given to that which we cannot account for. The most extreme of adjectives are used to denote the experience – Burkean terror meets Kantian totality. It is however, always situated in the mind. The storm is sublime because we witness it. We may ascribe its power

³³⁹ Shaw, Philip, *The Sublime*, p.152

³⁴⁰ DeBolla, Peter, 'Introduction,' *Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory*, p.2

³⁴¹ McEvelley, Thomas, *The Exile's Return, Toward a Redefinition of Painting for the Post-Modern Era*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p.10

³⁴² Shaw, Philip, *The Sublime*, p.46

to a vengeful all-knowing creator but the situ of sublimity will lie, ultimately with the bearer of that experience. We are reminded of Hopkins once more - 'O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall/ Frightful, sheer, no-man fathomed. Hold them cheap/ May who ne'er hung there.'³⁴³ In contemporary discourse, the notion of sublimity is defined by missing content – our inability to place language adequately on experience. Our facilitation of reason in the face of sensory handicap becomes sublime in and of itself.

As discussed, the sublime has been continually twinned with 'terror' throughout history. Whilst in naturalistic terms this could be described as 'awesome' – man's ascent of said mountain-top defined as sublime in the treacherous ascent/struggle and subsequent appraisal of landscape, in the late eighteenth century it begins to represent that which is terrible to behold. It is something conversant of terror and there is a return to this notion in late twentieth and early twenty-first century discourse. The skyward-expanding Manhattan skyline is as likely to inspire awe/wonder as the mountain-scape. Man's strength, force and ingenuity are what dominate the urban sprawl – the Petronas Towers are lit by electricity rather than the divine will of an almighty deity. The nature of our aesthetical interaction changes considerably in the light of two world wars and the now twenty-four hour visual access to modern warfare, genocide and famine. This is coupled with an increasing apathy to visual stimulant – the next 'big thing' is culturally often defined as sublime only in terms of its fleeting cinematic visual/special effects. The most terrible/sublime imagery of the modern age depicts that which we only thought possible *with* the help of those special effects – the events of 9/11. In terms of art therefore, this has led to the return of the sublime as a quiet utterance, albeit on a generally grand scale. A consideration of the terror of the everyday, evocative of Burke's sublime 'triumph of sympathy'³⁴⁴, is depicted in works such as Peter Eisenman's 'Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe' in Berlin, or Ai Wei Wei's 'Remembering' installation of 9,000 backpacks representing the loss of children's lives in a Chinese earthquake. Slavoj Žižek sees this new type of sublime as lying in the *failure* of representation of any true thing – it gives us what he calls a 'presentiment' of its real dimensions writing:

'This is also why an object evoking in us the feeling of sublimity gives us simultaneous pleasure and displeasure: it gives us displeasure because of its inadequacy to thing Thing-Idea, but precisely

³⁴³ Manley-Hopkins, Gerard, 'No Worst, There Is None,' *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, DigiReads Publishing, 2010, p.49

³⁴⁴ Burke, Edmund, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Oxford University Press, 1998, p.43

*through this inadequacy it gives us pleasure by indicating the true, incomparable greatness of the Thing, surpassing every possible phenomenal, empirical experience.*³⁴⁵

Philip Shaw surmises that the sublime's link to the ridiculous is not coincidental writing that it:

*'encourages us to believe that we can scale the highest mountains, reach the stars and become infinite when all the time it is drawing us closer to our actual material limits: the desire to outstrip earthly bonds leads instead to our encounter with lack, an encounter that is painful, cruel, and some would say comic.*³⁴⁶

There are however, points in art history where an artist can draw the sublime away from the treacherousness of transcendentalism and false hope, back toward the domestic hub – the sincere desire for knowledge and epiphany based in an authentic engagement with the familiar and everyday. Appraisals of routine and engagements with the detritus of everyday living are made at once familiar and strange to us. Diego Velázquez' 'Las Meninas,' and Francisco de Goya's 'Charles IV of Spain and his Family' are notable for their true depiction of royalty as well as their considerable skill. The humanisation of the characters renders them at once familiar and their traits are recognisable – almost to the point of caricature. They have an unsettling quality in an art historical sense. While we understand and appreciate the composite skill of the artist, our inclination is to compare ourselves using the measure by which the patrons were inspected. With this consideration in mind, it is no wonder that Goya, incensed as what he saw as the desecration of Spain through civil war, retreated to a darker place - depicting murderous savagery and dreamlike terrors in his later black paintings rather than the frippery and indulgence of a royal court.

Philip Guston is another such artist. Weighed down by an engagement with a disingenuous abstract expressionism he retreated from the gallery-driven urban spaces of New York to the quiet solitude of his Woodstock studio. Struggling for many years at an impasse between what had been trumpeted as an astonishing career in abstraction and what he felt to be the epitome of 'true' painting, he made the difficult choice to discard with the 'mysterium tremendum.'³⁴⁷ He moved instead to depict what he called the 'common objects'³⁴⁸ of the everyday, painting them in a feverish cartooned manner, items in and of themselves, and also in the hands of ghoulish Ku Klux Klan hoods. Few artists understood the draw of the sublime as much as Guston. He was amongst those

³⁴⁵ Žižek, Slavoj, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Verso, 1989, p.229

³⁴⁶ Shaw, Philip, *The Sublime*, p.10

³⁴⁷ Keyes, Charles Don, *Brain Mystery Light and Dark, The Rhythm and Harmony of Consciousness*, Routledge, 1999, p.119

³⁴⁸ Coolidge, Clark, *Philip Guston, Collected Writings, Lectures, Conversations*, University of California Press, 2011, p221

announced as the avant-garde of American culture – the saviours of abstract thought and visionaries for the future. His peers and colleagues included Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman, the now darlings of the tourist-trap New York museums. Guston’s dramatic return to figuration until recently, was seen as a stop-gap between the heady aspirational advance of Abstract Expressionism and the tongue-in-cheek plastic heraldry of Pop-art consumer culture. However, in terms of a contemporary definition of the sublime, Guston’s quiet challenge subscribes to the notion of an authentic sublime through the technique and content of his work alone. Where, by Caspar David Friedrich’s methodology, man could encounter the sublime in the dynastical natural world, Guston places it at home, in man’s own environ – surrounded by the familiar objects of conventional living. Here too, we can encounter sublimity – ascribe to sublime thoughts and feelings and demonstrate our ability to contemplate totality. Žižek accounts for this by applying Hegelian rationale – the dialectical appraisal of the everyday:

‘What we must grasp is this intimate connection, even identity, between this logic of reflection (positing, external, determinate reflection) and the Hegelian notion of the “absolute” subject – of the subject which is no longer attached to some presupposed substantial contents but posits its own substantial presuppositions.’³⁴⁹

The work of French conceptual artist Sophie Calle also reveals something unique about the world in which we live. Her approach to her subject matter provides new theories on the notion of event-hood. Using photography, film, documentation, and various types of confessional curatorial devices, she makes observations about the trivial everyday events of life that we take for granted. The things that happen-to-us-all become things of great importance. Shaw writes however that ‘sublime matter is that which resists the impositions of forms and concepts³⁵⁰’ and quotes Lyotard:

‘For forms and concepts are constitutive of objects, they pro-duce data that can be grasped by sensibility and that are intelligible to understanding...the matter I’m talking about is “immaterial,” an-objectable, because it can only “take place” or find its occasion at the price of suspending these active powers of the mind.’³⁵¹

Calle however, despite rendering her ideas through the use of graspable, intelligible objects places them together in such a way as to create new syntheses of thought. We are indeed forced to suspend the ‘active powers of the mind’ when we consider what we thought to be a photograph of a telephone becoming signifier of the event-hood of heartbreak and the pain of others. A discarded

³⁴⁹ Žižek, Slavoj, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p.244

³⁵⁰ Shaw, Philip, *The Sublime*, p.124

³⁵¹ Op.Cit

wedding dress displayed draped across a man's chair becomes a signifier for female seduction rather than the wholesome virginal white of the pure bride. The term 'beauty' is almost always considered as a preface or afterthought to sublime enquiry with the vast majority of writers compelled to propose their theories and its relationship to sublimity before getting on with the matter at hand. Jean-Luc Nancy writes 'the sublime represents...nothing less than that without which the beautiful could be nothing but the beautiful (which paradoxically comes down to the same thing).'³⁵² Calle is an artist at the forefront of European conceptual art who capitalises and demonstrates this theory to her own advantage. Her work is almost exclusively based in feminine territory yet she has avoided being categorised solely in terms of a 'female' artist revelling instead as the provider/provocateur of the unrepresentable. The necessity of a relationship between the sublime and the beautiful are appropriated by Calle to her advantage and it is as Shaw admits:

*'In practice, sublimity cannot be separated from the appreciation of form. What attracts us to the sublime is not an abstract quality but the fact that the sense of the awe-inspiring or the overpowering is conveyed in this particular mountain, in this particular moment.'*³⁵³

It is through encountering this type of art that we are left on the edge of the precipice once more – what we thought to be true and matter-of-fact is instead a 'something else,' an 'other' and it is to this notion that the contemporary doctrine on the sublime continually returns. Lyotard writes that it is the paradoxical nature of art turning towards 'a thing which does not turn itself towards the mind'³⁵⁴ and it is here that Calle's unrepresentable resides – a sublime for the modern ethos.

By examining artists such as these we can look at key developments and shifts in theoretical discourse. A theory of the sublime can be applied directly to their practice and quantified in such a way as to synthesise new thoughts and appreciations on sublimity. Their artistic enquiry reflects our own investigation and desire to define the sublime in terms anew; propelling discourse forward. The artist Clyfford

Still wrote that art should be 'a modern power in the age of conformity.'³⁵⁵ Of his own painting he said:

'I held it imperative to evolve an instrument of thought which would aid in cutting through all cultural opiates, past and present, so that a direct, immediate, and truly free vision could be achieved, and an idea revealed with clarity. To acquire such an instrument however, - one that would transcend the

³⁵² Ibid. p.149

³⁵³ Ibid. p.151

³⁵⁴ Silverman, Hugh, J., *Jean-François Lyotard – Between Politics and Aesthetics*, Routledge, 2002, p.204

³⁵⁵ Gottlieb, Carla, *Beyond Modern Art*, Dutton, 1976, p.363

*powers of conventional techniques and symbols, yet be as an aid and instant critic of thought – demanded full resolution of the past, and present through it.*³⁵⁶

We see a continued desire for this type of clarity – for an amendment of vision and rhetoric so as to fuel further discourse on the sublime and, in so doing, attend to our insatiable appetite for cultural and philosophical evolution. Newman wrote in 1948 that the sublime is ‘now’ and yet we find that this is still the case. Shaw, rather embarrassed, writes that in all the questioning and labelling could it be that the sublime does indeed ‘affirm the unlimited nature of being...lead ultimately to the triumph of the mind over matter, or possibly towards an affirmation of the divine?’³⁵⁷ Whatever the case, it is universally agreed to be something at the heart of human nature. When we ask what it is that moves us, we are encountering that which is sublime with the answer to that question. Our innate sense of our own perceptions, one that transcends all else and belongs solely to that individual can be defined by the simple act of looking.

³⁵⁶ Op.Cit

³⁵⁷ Shaw, Philip, *The Sublime*, p.11

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Fig.1. 'The Monk by the Sea,' (*Der Mönch am Meer*) Caspar David Friedrich, 1809, Oil on Canvas



Fig.2. 'Leaving,' Philip Guston, 1951, Ink on Paper



Fig.3. 'White Painting II,' Philip Guston, 1951, Oil on Canvas



Fig.4. 'The Street,' Philip Guston, 1977, Oil on Canvas



Fig.5. 'Vir, Heroic, Sublimus,' (Man, Heroic and Sublime) Barnett Newman, 1950-51, Oil on Canvas



Fig.6. 'Painting, Smoking, Eating,' Philip Guston, 1972, Oil on Canvas



Fig.7. 'Drawing for Conspirators,' Philip Guston, 1930, Graphite, Coloured Pencil and Crayon on Paper

Fig.8. 'The Studio,' Philip Guston, 1969, Oil on Canvas



Fig.9. 'Central Avenue,' Philip Guston, 1969, Oil on Canvas



Fig.10. 'A Day's Work,' Philip Guston, 1970, Oil on Canvas



Fig.11. 'Flatlands,' Philip Guston, Oil on Canvas, 1970



Fig.12 Installation Shot 'Take Care of Yourself,' Sophie Calle, Whitechapel Gallery, London, 2009



Fig.13. 'Unfinished,' Sophie Calle, 1991-2003, Photography, Negatives, Video



Fig.14. Cover 'Exquisite Pain,' Sophie Calle, Hardbound Book, 1984-2003

Fig.15. '54 Days to Unhappiness,' Sophie Calle, Extract from 'Exquisite Pain,' Hardbound Book, Photography, 1984-2003

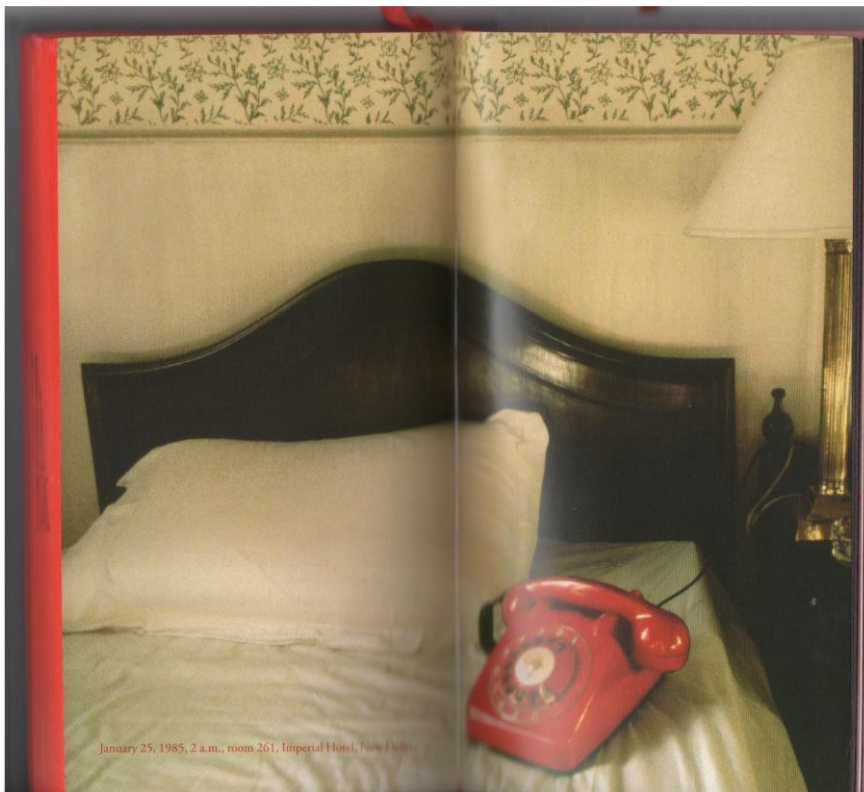


Fig.16. 'January 25, 2.am., room 261, Imperial Hotel, New Delhi,' Sophie Calle, Extract from 'Exquisite Pain,' Hardbound Book, Photography, 1984-2003



28 days ago, the man I love left me. For three months I'd been looking forward to that day. It was January 25, 1985. I was in room 261 of the Imperial Hotel in New Delhi. A spacious room with a gray mouth-carved carpet, bluish wallpaper and twin beds. I was sitting on the one to the right, holding the telegram telling me to call my father because M. had had an accident. I had left France ninety-two days earlier and we were supposed to be meeting up at New Delhi airport on January 24. He was coming from Paris and I was coming from Tokyo. Then this message. Hours of imagining the worst went by before I got through to my father. He hadn't heard anything. So I tried to call M. He was at home - stupid but true. And, the accident was an abscess. I realized that he was leaving me. He wanted to make it less painful. He said he wanted to take me in his arms and explain a few things. Except that he didn't. Egotism, cowardice or plain stringiness? And the best he could come up with was this childish excuse, this infected finger, using my own father as a medical alibi. I hang up. I sit there for hours on the bed, staring at that damned phone. That red phone.



It was on a Friday afternoon in July 1981, around the 20th. In the cemetery of a small village, forty kilometers from Limoges. Following a coffin in which there was nothing, nothing left of her. She had jumped from the sixth floor and was smashed to a pulp. There were four of us to bury her. Four people who hadn't spoken for years. On one side, her mother and I. On the other, her half-brother and her father. I was the only one who could communicate with them all. Totally distraught, not knowing what to do with myself. I went from one person to another. On the way home, I looked up as I walked - I couldn't stop looking at all the sixth floors. And then, I saw my name written in her handwriting on the mailbox. But the worst moment was when the coffin arrived. When I pictured my first real love, the person who for me was beauty incarnate, smashed to a pulp.

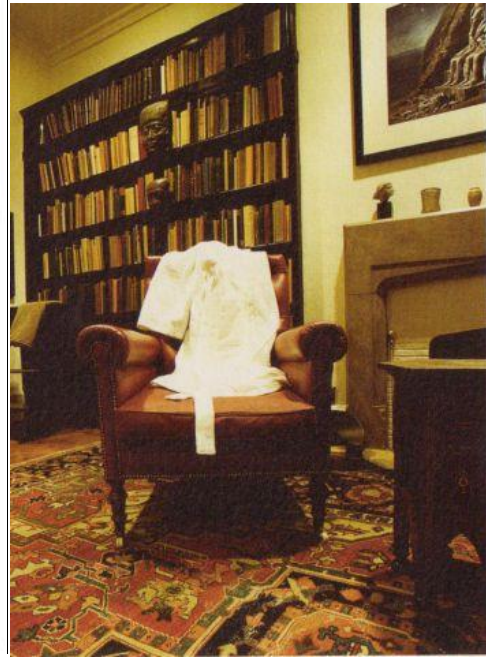


Fig.17. Extract from 'Exquisite Pain,' Sophie Calle, Hardbound Book, Photography, 1984-2003

Fig.18. 'The Bathrobe,' Sophie Calle, Extract from 'Appointment,' Hardbound Book, Photography, 1999



Fig.19. 'The Wedding Dress,' Sophie Calle, Extract from 'Appointment,' Hardbound Book, Photography, 1999