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The Sublime, Terror, and the Mind

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The Sublime, Terror and the Mind

The Romantic Movement was a reaction against two aspects of public life in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: the rational, scientific Enlightenment worldview and urbanization brought on by the Industrial Revolution. Instead of the rational, Romantics stressed the importance of spontaneous emotion. As German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich put it “the artist’s feeling is his law.” Many Romantic artists, including Friedrich, turned to nature and depictions of nature as outlets for the expression of feeling. According to the famous Anglo-Irish philosopher Edmund Burke in his 1757 text *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, the most powerful feeling that nature could evoke was the sublime:

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 which the mind is capable of feeling... When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are, delightful.¹

Burke goes on to list a number of phenomena that may evoke the sublime including terror, obscurity, power, vastness, infinity, and dark colors or lighting. According to Burke’s description, the sublime is something so awe-inspiring that it evokes the desire for self-preservation. When experienced at a distance, this can be beautiful, but when experienced up-close, it is terrifying.

Using Burke’s definition of the sublime, this exhibition will examine depictions of the sublime in the Romantic paintings of Caspar David Friedrich and Francisco de Goya. Moving

from Friedrich’s gothic landscapes to Goya’s depictions of nightmares, the viewer will notice that the sublime motif can be ascribed not only to depictions of nature but also to constructs of the human imagination.

The exhibition’s first room will focus on the work of Caspar David Friedrich. In the center of the room, the viewer will notice *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818), perhaps his most famous painting.² Friedrich depicts a lone man, with his back towards the viewer, surveying a vast mountain landscape. In his painting, Friedrich creates three planes of altitude. In the foreground, the traveler, dressed in a dark green suit, stands atop a triangular rock formation with walking stick in hand. Clouds of mist separate him from the background. In the mid ground, a number of rock precipices shoot up from the depths below, on some of which a few lone trees blow in the wind. In the background a lone peak and a rock crag rise up above the entire scene, silhouetted against a hazy blue-grey sky.

There are multiple ways to interpret this painting. At first glance, Friedrich’s traveler seems to be a triumphant figure who, having summited the mountain peak, now surveys his conquest. Friedrich creates this appearance by linking the man through use of color and form to the peaks and hills in the background that dominate the landscape. The green-blue velvet tones Friedrich uses in rendering the man’s suit are nearly identical to the palette used for the foothills in the background. On a compositional level, Friedrich mirrors the man’s rectangular silhouette in the foreground with that of the crag in the background. The two shapes appear to tower above the scene, both part of the landscape and in control of it. Further, Friedrich relates the triangular shape created by the man standing atop the outcropping in the foreground with the pyramidal

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² See Figure 1
mountain peak in the background. With these similarities of form, Friedrich draws parallel between the dominant forms of nature and the triumphant hiker.

However, Friedrich also connects the man to aspects of the scene below him in the mid ground by rhyming his hair blowing in the wind with the lone trees whose branches and leaves sway in a similar manner. When we examine the figure in relation to the delicate trees, his stance reads less as that of a triumphant surveyor and more as that of a precarious observer. Friedrich paints clouds of mist swirling around the scene to add to this effect. At any moment, the man might be swept away by the fog beneath, above, and all around him. Further, while triangular form may initially link the man to the lone peak, Friedrich uses another triangle to add a new layer to this relationship. Friedrich creates an inverted triangle with vertices at the lone peak, the rock crag, and the man that seems to push down on him. Indeed, the man is not a conquering hiker at all, but a wanderer, who seems increasingly frail in the presence of the incredible mountain landscape.

Analysis of Friedrich’s *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* as a depiction of the sublime does not account for one important aspect of the painting. While the sublime is something that provokes terror and the desire for self-preservation, Friedrich does not depict terror on the wanderer’s face; he does not show the face at all. The motif of a back turned figure, what Elizabeth Prettejohn calls the *Rückenfigur*, appears throughout Friedrich’s oeuvre. According to Joseph Leo Koerner, Friedrich uses the *Rückenfigur* to portray the “act of experiencing.” Koerner actually names the *Wanderer* as Friedrich’s most significant *Rückenfigur*, stating that he “is so prominent in the composition that the world appears to be an emanation from his gaze, or

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more precisely, from his heart."\(^5\) This statement has significant implications. If the scene of the sublime radiates out from the human figure, this suggests that the sublime is inherently related to the human capacity to experience.

An important aspect of this experience in Friedrich’s *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* is the presence of verticality in his landscape. Although Burke does not specifically cite the vertical as a producer of the sublime, the physical and emotional sensations the viewer confronts in the face of verticality resonate with his definition. One experiences terror and the infinite when viewing an abyss and obscurity and vastness when considering towering summits. These emotions all inspire the desire for self-preservation. Friedrich depicts this desire by juxtaposing the rocks on which the figure precariously stands with the vast abyss below him. Further, he uses the impressive height of the peak in the background to show the landscape as dominating. Here too, Burke’s definition applies to a landscape whose mist-shrouded rocks and peaks can only be described as powerful, vast, infinite, and obscure. Friedrich depicts a man connected to the landscape, but also completely dominated by its awe-inspiring verticality.

The second room of this exhibition will further explore the ways in which the vertical and human projection connect to the sublime by examining the work of Francisco de Goya. The viewer will notice upon entering the second room that he has descended further below ground. The ceiling is higher (to create an appreciation of height in relation to the sublime) and the lighting is dimmer (both following Burke’s suggestion that dim lighting invokes terror and following the nightmare quality of Goya’s work). In the center of the room, the viewer will notice another depiction of a wanderer in Goya’s *Witches’ Flight* (1797-8), though this figure is

\(^5\) Koerner 181.
placed in a context entirely different from *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*. Goya’s traveler walks through a dark, barren landscape. He wears a cloak over his head and arms, shielding himself from the viewer and the nightmare scene around him. Directly above the man, Goya paints a group of three witches hovering in the air, dressed in colored cloths and pointed hats. The witches seem to be in the act of kidnapping a naked man, who reaches out in agony. Below the witches and on the traveler’s left, Goya paints another man, writhing on the ground with his head clasped in his hands. To the traveler’s right, Goya depicts the head, shoulders, and front legs of a donkey. The entire painting is enveloped in blackness, except for the patch of brown-grey sand on which the traveler walks.

Considering the sublime as something powerful and terrifying that affects the desire for self-preservation, the viewer will notice Goya evokes such a feeling in this painting, also through use of verticality. However, in *Witches’ Flight* it is not the impressive height of a mountain landscape, but the fantastical levitation of a group of figures straight of a nightmare that creates terror. Like the peak in *Wanderer*, the witches tower above the central figure in Goya’s painting. Goya gives these figures a terrifying presence by showing the fear-stricken expression of the kidnapped man along with the figure lying on the ground. He suggests that at any moment, the traveler might succumb to the fate of the other men. However, Goya also clearly separates the traveling figure from the cluster of witches by veiling the man in a cloak. Through use of this device, Goya creates two different worlds on separate altitudes in his painting: the world of the witches, whose sublime power rises above and threatens the traveler, and the world of the human in which a man and his donkey walk across a desolate plane.

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6 See Figure 2
Goya connects these altitudes by placing them on the same vertical plane – the viewer can draw a line straight up from the traveler’s head to the head of the leftmost witch. Because of the separation of the two worlds, we can read the gaggle of witches as a sort of mental projection or thought bubble. This suggests that the traveler imagines the witches and all of their terror amidst the night landscape through which he travels. We can also read these witches as sublime because they excite the desire for self-preservation. Goya suggests this passion by depicting the man in a bent-over and shielded position. While not cowering, the traveler is clearly afflicted by the witches’ presence. As suggested above, their presence is a product of the man’s imagination, which connects Goya’s *Witches’ Flight* to the *Rückenfigur* in Friedrich’s *Wanderer* from whom “the world appears to be an emanation.” Analysis of these paintings indicates that the human mind is capable of producing the sublime. However, in both *Witches’ Flight* and *Wanderer* the sublime projections are just that – projections. Goya’s witches’ external presence leaves it ambiguous as to whether or not they are real or imagined.

This analysis has suggested that the human mind can create external projections of the sublime. As the viewer moves on to the third room, he will notice the last lines of Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Mont Blanc: Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni,” (1817), above the door to the final room: “And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea, / if to the human mind’s imaginings / Silence and solitude were vacancy?” (Lines 142-144) For the greater part of his poem, Shelley describes the vertical experience of the sublime invoked by the presence of the highest peak in the Alps. Shelley starts by describing the ravine bellow: “Dizzy Ravine! And when I gaze on thee / I seem as in a trance sublime and strange” (Lines 34-35). Shelley then

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moves on to express his awe for the mountain, “far, far above, piercing the infinite sky, / Mont Blanc appears-still, snowy, and serene” (Lines 59-60). But even in his discussion of the natural sublime, Shelley hints at the power of the human mind. In the first lines of his poem, he states that “The everlasting universe of things / flows through the mind” (Lines 1-2). Further, in the presence of the ravine, Shelley’s mind “renders and receives fast influencings, / Holding an unremitting interchange / With the clear universe of things around” (Lines 38-40). Here Shelley seems to suggest that even in the presence of such impressive natural forms, the human mind has an indispensable role as a processor. Thus, the viewer can read the final lines of Shelley’s poem as a suggestion that the human capacity to process has the power to render terrifying sublime landscapes insignificant in perceiving only “vacancy.” Therefore, the mind itself is the origin of the sublime, as it alone is able to assign feeling to the natural world. The sublime is thus not something perceived by the human imagination; it is a part of the imagination itself.

In the final room of the exhibition, the viewer will explore the collision of verticality and vacancy in the context of the human imagination’s importance in constituting the sublime. The viewer descends further from the second to third room and arrives at a small space with a lowered ceiling. In this small room entirely shrouded in darkness, a spotlight forces the viewer to confront one of Goya’s last paintings in an intimate setting: The Dog (1819). In this painting, Goya explores the implications of the mind as sublime through a device one might call vertical vacancy. In the long rectangular mural, Goya depicts a dog’s head looking up towards beige-brown emptiness. The dog’s body is covered by a large brown mass in the foreground, sloping downward from right to left. The painting’s verticality emphasizes empty space; an expression of what Burke would call the obscure. However, there is something incredibly moving about this

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8 See Figure 3
space and the way the dog looks up into an abyss – it is as if the dog is lost, hopeless, and terrified amidst the emptiness. In the obscurity of Goya’s *Witches*, the traveler’s mind fills in the black space with a projection of a horrifying group of witches, but in *The Dog*, there is no filling in. Goya creates a scene where there is no projection. The viewer empathizes with the lonely dog who searches for some meaning amidst vacancy. Thus, the blank space of the painting creates a sublime more powerful than mountain landscapes or nightmare witches because it allows space for the mind to operate. The sublime is the terror of the mind.
Figures:

1. *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818)
Caspar David Friedrich
Oil on canvas
95 x 75 cm
Kunsthalle, Hamburg
2. *Witches’ Flight* (1797-8)
Francisco de Goya
Oil on canvas
43.5 x 30.5 cm
Museo del Prado, Madrid
3. *The Dog* (1819-23)
Francisco de Goya
Oil mural on plaster transferred to canvas
131.5 x 79.3 cm
Museo del Prado, Madrid