

FROM GOTHIC FACET TO SCIENCE FICTION FIXTURE, THE SUBLIME

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Abstract

A direct correlation exists between the creation of art and the development of wealthy, sustainable human societies. Determining the monetary value of such artistic works has always been an innately subjective task based upon individual perceptions of beauty. Offering a new lens for the aesthetically consonant beauty, the sublime is that which reflects the presence of immeasurable forces in the world, a natural power whose destruction inspires awe. Although the worth of traditional beauty has always been noted within the arts and studies of aesthetics, works centered around the sublime became a focus of 18th century Gothic literature and landscape paintings, often receiving more recognition than more typical depictions of beauty. In the 21st century, film has overtaken literature as the most popular medium for artistic expression and the merit of the sublime has prevailed across this more visual art. Through a comparison of 18th century Gothic literature depicting the sublime and 21st century science fiction films, it's evident that many similar themes have remained prominent. As a result of this connection, the sublime has held its place as an indicator of artistic value and as a tool for introducing an array of artist-driven messages despite existing as seemingly counterculture in nature.

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Chapter 1: An Introduction to the Sublime

In 1757, philosopher Edmund Burke published *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* which offered up what would become one of the most popular definitions of the sublime. With the first scholarly recognized mention of the sublime located within the piece *On the Sublime* by Longinus, a pseudonym for an unknown Greek thinker who enumerated the five principles upon which he believed the sublime to be built,¹ the origins of the sublime can be found as early as the 1st century C.E. Although philosophical use of the term traces all the way back to ancient Greece, Burke's work provides one of the most commonly accepted definitions of the word that is also representative of the goals many artists have since looked to achieve through the creation of sublime-centered works. While other European writers such as John Dennis (*The Invader of His Country*) and Joseph Addison (*Cato, a Tragedy*) published their notes on the sublime in essays during the 17th century, Burke stands as arguably the first theorist to see his ideas placed into conversation with the masses, partially as a result of his intent to present a comprehensive view of what the sublime entailed.²

An Irish born philosopher and politician, Burke spent a few influential years studying the sublime before he became a member of Parliament for nearly 30 years. During this span, Burke wrote about religion and aesthetics, the sublime arising as his most noteworthy area of interest. Describing the concept as “the strongest emotion the mind is capable of feeling” (35), Burke saw the sublime as that which has an ability to captivate viewers through the confusion and uncertainty it creates within. From extraordinary art to obscure places and poisonous animals, Burke found that sublime-inducing items could come in a variety of shapes and sizes praising

¹ Longinus. *Longinus on the Sublime; the Greek Text Edited after the Paris Manuscript, with Introduction, Translation, Facsimiles and Appendices*. Edited by W. Rhys Roberts and Arthur S. Way, University Press, 1899, Pp. 14.

² Fitzgerald, Matthew. “The Sublime: An Aesthetic Concept in Change.” *TheCollector*, The Collector, 15 Sept. 2021, <https://www.thecollector.com/the-sublime-concept-in-change-philosophy/>.

writer John Milton, author of *Paradise Lost*, for his depiction of “Death in the second book...it is astonishing with what a gloomy pomp, with what a significant and expressive uncertainty of strokes and colouring, he has finished the portrait of the king of terrors” (100).³

As can be seen through Burke’s admiration of Milton, terrifying a viewer who has encountered a sublime moment or depiction is what evokes the sensation that he found to be the most powerful one’s mind could endure, one significantly stronger than a perfectly proportioned item of beauty. At the same time, that which terrifies does not cause any physical harm to the observer, focusing its stress on an individual’s mind. Although Longinus’ influence can be seen within Burke’s opinions, the former citing the profoundness of something as an indicator of the item’s sublimity, for example powerful thoughts and noble diction,⁴ Burke differentiated himself from Longinus and other predecessors by focusing on the feeling resulting from sublime experiences. One aspect of Burke’s views that made them particularly unique amongst his peers was that the personal astonishment that is triggered by an interaction with the sublime must be mutually exclusive from a beautiful experience. Using Burke’s point of view as a base, it can be seen that differentiating the sublime and the beautiful illuminates how they can be similar in effect but are different in nature. Typically, the beautiful is that which is pure and straightforward due to its aesthetically appealing style, with delicate flowers, soft music, and calm bodies of water serving as a few common examples. Laying out the qualities that make up beauty Burke claims the aesthetic to be:

“First, to be comparatively small. Secondly, to be smooth. Thirdly, to have a variety in the direction of the parts; but fourthly, to have those parts not angular,

³ Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful: With an Introductory Discourse Concerning Taste*. 1757. Harper, 1873, Pp. 100.

⁴ Longinus. *Longinus on the Sublime; the Greek Text Edited after the Paris Manuscript, with Introduction, Translation, Facsimiles and Appendices*. Edited by W. Rhys Roberts and Arthur S. Way, University Press, 1899, Pp. 14-17.

but melted as it were into each other. Fifthly, to be of a delicate frame, without any remarkable appearance of strength. Sixthly, to have its colors clear and bright; but not very strong and glaring. Seventhly, or if it should have any glaring color, to have it diversified with others” (222).⁵

Certainly, both the beautiful and the sublime can interact with each of the senses and draw out a strong feeling of appreciation from their viewers, but for the beautiful, this occurs because of the sensory pleasure associated with items of beauty, while the vastness of the sublime may leave spectators with a newfound perspective that acknowledges the small size of their individual presence in a significantly larger world. whereas the sublime involves a sort of taboo attraction to fear and danger “at certain distances, and with certain modifications, (so) they may be, and they are delightful” (60),⁶ as detailed by Burke. Ultimately, what becomes evident is that Burke finds the power of the sublime to be so petrifying that it forces its beholder to engage with their own astonishment as they experience this sensation throughout the entirety of their body and being. Without negating the importance of Burke’s beliefs, some would go on to challenge how exactly he positioned the two aesthetics in comparison to one another, one such thinker being Immanuel Kant. Discussed frequently in the years after his initial ideas were published, Burke’s view of the sublime has often been put into conversation with the beliefs of Immanuel Kant who released his own thoughts in 1764’s *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*. Similarly to his contemporary, the German Kant spent the majority of his life researching his interests in the fields of religion and philosophy, though he lacked the political calling of Burke.

According to Kant, what constitutes the sublime is much more distinctive from individual

⁵ Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful: With an Introductory Discourse Concerning Taste*. 1757. Harper, 1873, Pp. 222.

⁶ Ibid. Pp. 16-17.

to individual than had been stated by Burke. Additionally, Kant comes to detail his own interpretation of beauty primarily as something distinguished by that which is “dependent beauty,” versus what he calls “free beauty” (81).⁷ Dependent beauty is based on personal taste and may vary from person to person, examples including the differing opinions one might have on a sunset or mountain range. Conversely, free beauty describes something that is objectively beautiful, examples identified by Kant including flowers, birds, and seashells, because it is harmonious or proportionally created, which ultimately serves to cement free beauty as the higher form of the two.⁸ Noting a larger overlap between the two aesthetics, Kant finds that those who encounter both are “more powerfully moved by the sublime than by the beautiful, but that without variation or accompaniment by the latter the former is tiring and cannot be enjoyed as long” (18),⁹ highlighting his view that the introspective nature of experiencing the sublime can leave one feeling as though they are aimless.

According to Kant, observing elements that made one feel insignificant, such as extreme weather or giant mountains, would lead to growth of the mind by forcing one to cast aside ego and intolerance. Shared with the views of Burke, Kant declared that these threatening elements must not ever pose an actual risk of harm to the viewer, otherwise that which is terrifyingly stimulating becomes horrifyingly savage. While this appears distressing on its face, Kant even goes on to indicate that by recognizing the insignificance of one’s personal desires, a person can in turn be prompted to better appreciate the world by following a high moral code that respects all life. Due to this effect, Kant states that the strain a sublime experience puts on the mind can lead one to go beyond their worldly knowledge and embrace innovation through their

⁷ Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. 1790, Pp. 81

⁸ Ibid. Pp. 82-84.

⁹ Kant, Immanuel. *Kant: Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings*. 1764. Edited by Patrick R. Frierson and Paul Guyer, Cambridge University Press, 2011, Pp. 15-20.

imagination. A little over 25 years later, Kant would revisit the topic of the sublime through his text *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, where he proceeded to denote two groups of the sublime one being the mathematical and its counterpart, the dynamical, an idea that some who have studied Kant have drawn out to as many as four categorizations of the sublime.¹⁰ Focusing on the categorizations illuminated directly by Kant, academics can note that the mathematical sublime is that which appears infinite or endless while the dynamical sublime reaches intimidating levels of might with examples from his text including “threatening rocks, thunderclouds piled up the vault of heaven, borne along with flashes and peals, volcanoes in all their violence of destruction, hurricanes leaving desolation in their track” (125).¹¹ As the mathematical sublime is focused on vastness, lacking the aspect of terror more consistently linked with the destructive element of the dynamical sublime, it would appear that the dynamical sublime is most similar to Burkan thought while the mathematical sublime exists as a broader and more inclusive view of what constitutes a sublime happening. Where the dynamical sublime differs from Burke’s view is the fact that Kant does not believe that an object alone can create the sublime effect and that one’s brain must be impacted by the object it is observing.

Although Burke’s philosophical beliefs would shape his later political work in the British Parliament, his body of work relating to the sublime would be significantly smaller than that of the German Kant who dedicated multiple publications and observations to the topic.¹² A direct comparison of Burke and Kant’s view can be simplified as the former claiming that a sublime experience creates tension throughout the human body in response to an object or event whereas the latter indicates that sublime experiences occur when one’s reasoning reflects on an item or

¹⁰ Goodyear, Dwight. “An Overview of the Kantian Sublime.” Philosophical Eggs, 22 Feb. 2019, <https://philosophicaleggs.com/159-an-overview-of-the-kantian-sublime-2/>.

¹¹ Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. 1790, Pp. 125.

¹² Harris, Ian. “Edmund Burke.” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Edited by Uri Nodelman and Edward N. Zalta, Spring , no. 2023, 21 Mar. 2023, <https://plato.stanford.edu/cgi-bin/encyclopedia/archinfo.cgi?entry=burke>.

action that is witnessed, creating a tension within the mind. However, the importance of each thinker's philosophical work cannot be understated as both their similarities and their differences have gone on to inspire many to consider the value of the sublime while providing their own commentary on the subject.

In the 20th century, Thomas Weiskel chose to expand upon both Burkian and Kantian views on the sublime, discussing the subject in a more contemporary form by utilizing the modern lens of psychology. Early in Weiskel's book *The Romantic Sublime*, he details how Burke surmised that viewings of beauty are of simpler form than those in the sublime category. In contrast, Weiskel interprets interactions with the sublime as having an inherent complexity due to the unfamiliar nature of these experiences. By reviewing Burke's thoughts on the sublime 200 years after they were produced, Weiskel is able to explore how "the sublime was an antidote to the boredom that increased so astonishingly throughout the eighteenth century" (18),¹³ which philosophical thought in this period was not necessarily conscious of. Considering the sublime through this light, it becomes evident that citizens of modern society may see themselves necessitating a stronger degree of terror to achieve the sublime sensations proclaimed by Burke as they live in a world that constantly stimulates many of the senses that were less frequently realized in Burke's own time.

In regard to Kant, Weiskel chooses to dive into the link between Kant's sublime and nature, which Weiskel finds to be a "conventional view that the sublime of art is "always restricted by the conditions of an agreement with nature"" (23).¹⁴ Here, Weiskel's work to further develop Kant's perspective serves as the basis for the three phases of the sublime moment that is the model for Weiskel's personal view of the sublime. According to Weiskel, phase one is when

¹³ Weiskel, Thomas. *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976, Pp. 18

¹⁴ *Ibid.* Pp. 23.

the objects or setting, which will induce the sublime moment, appears familiar and without alteration to the individual. Phase two is where the shift towards the sublime occurs as the observer undergoes a disconnect with the item or location they are viewing as something unfamiliar begins to take place. The aforementioned separation from what is known leads to the feelings of astonishment and awe that often characterize a sublime moment. Finally, for phase three, Weiskel asserts that there are two possible outcomes dependent on what relationship the spectator gains from the occurrence. In the more Kantian-grounded outcome, the viewer finds themselves unable to fully comprehend that, often components of nature, which is taking place as their senses can understand what lies before them. For affairs of the opposing style, a more harmonious resolution is reached as the mind rises above any sort of distrust and goes on to embrace its own positive growth. In the first instance the negative and metaphorical sublime is witnessed while the second scenario is indicative of the more positive and metonymic sublime.¹⁵ From here, both sublime experiences reach their end when there is “a reversion to habitual perception, the sublime moment subsides or collapses” (Weiskel 24).¹⁶ Once the event has reached its closure, a purely subjective feeling, understanding, or growth will be attained.

According to Weiskel, this growth can be so profound that it acts as a “transcendent order” (23), at its fullest, making it an almost spiritual experience. Unfortunately, Weiskel lived a tragically short life, passing away in an accident at the age of 29, but his work continues to inspire a resurgence in the study of the sublime and the aesthetics related to this area of

¹⁵ Fischer, Michael. Review of Thomas Weiskel. *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, Review of The Romantic Sublime Blake, vol. 10, no. 3, 1976, pp. 93–95, <https://bq.blakearchive.org/10.3.fischer>.

¹⁶ Weiskel, Thomas. *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976. Pp. 24.

research.¹⁷ While Weiskel is not considered the authoritative voice on the sublime, his ponderings regarding the subject are extremely valuable when considering elements of the sublime found in 20th and 21st centuries depictions of art. Not only has Weiskel's work aided in ushering in a new era of sublime creations, but it also has added to the conversation of what constitutes the sublime while further exploring and enhancing both Burkian and Kantian thought.

Although the thoughts of Burke and Kant exist as two of the primary voices on the topic

of the sublime, creators of both literary and visual arts

began to explore the concept within their productions

during this same period. As the Romantic art movement

had begun to arise at the tail end of the 18th century, the

new style's idealization of nature and focus on

individualism appeared to be directly influenced by the

newfound popularity of the sublime. Casper David

Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* is often cited

as one of the most prominent examples of this, a popular

image of the Romanticism movement that depicts a man



standing at the peak of a mountain, considering the clouds below him.¹⁸ Burke would be likely to

home in on how the figure is removed just enough from the clouded abyss to be safe, but is

surely still experiencing the chill of fear. For Kant, the sublimity would lie in the pondering

stance of the 'wanderer' who considers the expanse in front of him. As the perspective of those

viewing the painting is so similar to that of the protagonist, analysts are asked to consider their

own feelings as they presume what thoughts protrude from the wanderer. Observers may imagine

¹⁷ "Thomas F. Weiskel '67." Amherst Magazine, Spring, 1974,

https://www.amherst.edu/news/magazine/in_memory/1967/thomas-f.-weiskel-67.

¹⁸ Friedrich, Caspar David. *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*. 1818, Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg, Germany.

his awe or excitement at the boundlessness of the scene before him, noting the air of confidence in his stance. Others could wonder if the man is filled with fear or anxiety due to the feeling of insignificance that such a scene might produce. Here, Friedrich's painting serves as an immensely valuable representative of the sublime as it connects both the Burkian and Kantian schools of thought through body language and the point-of-view style placement of the man. While not met with popular acclaim upon its completion in 1818, Friedrich's piece went on to inspire an array of works centered on the place of humanity and individuality in the larger world.¹⁹

Another painting that has a similar impact on viewers is *An Eruption of Vesuvius* by Johan Christian Dahl, an image from 1824 that juxtaposes the fiery destruction of the volcanic eruption in its foreground with the sparkling blue bay



that is its backdrop while a handful of undersized people look on.²⁰ Kant surely would have noticed the manner in which the two figures closest to the eruption appear to be studying the destruction, leaving this pair more enlightened than the other onlookers who seem less concerned with such an occurrence. To Burke, Dahl's painting would be apt to detail how easily both the men and their animals could be erased by nature, bonding them with the force in front of them.

¹⁹ “‘Wanderer above the Sea of Fog’ by Caspar David Friedrich - an Analysis.” Artincontext.org, Art In Context, 24 June 2022, <https://artincontext.org/wanderer-above-the-sea-of-fog-by-caspar-david-friedrich/>.

²⁰ Dahl, Johan Christian. *An Eruption of Vesuvius*. 1824, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York.

Even though significant differences exist between Kantian and Burkian interpretations of the sublime, the examples above reveal that the vast majority of sublime artworks allow a space for both types of thinking to be placed in conversation with one another. Through each piece, nature is seen by individuals as larger than both their physical bodies and their man-made creations, attesting to the greater powers at work. Some key elements consistently visible throughout sublime works of the Romantic period include the literal presence of humans, traditionally viewed as a requirement for the sublime to be an experienced occurrence, as well as nature's role as the catalyst for these happenings, though this position could be instead filled by a supernatural force.

Painted before the works of Freidrich and Dahl, 1781's *The Nightmare* by Henry Fuseli is



a representation of an unnatural form of the sublime.²¹ Known to be one of the most frightening paintings of its time, *The Nightmare* includes a woman lying asleep and a demon sitting atop her in its foreground while a horse observes the duo in the background. Despite the significant differences between this painting and the landscapes of *An Eruption of Vesuvius*

and *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*, Fuseli's piece manages to represent a sublime moment that the woman is introduced to without any of her own effort. Interpreting the demon as the physical manifestation of the titular nightmare, the painting exhibits a type of sublime in which supernatural forces, rather than natural occurrences, serve as mechanism by which the sublime

²¹ Fuseli, Henry. *The Nightmare*. 1781, Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, Michigan.

moment occurs. Visible in the Gothic and horror-driven works the illustration would inspire, *The Nightmare* conveys a more frightening view of the sublime than its contemporaries, one in which the unknown aspects of the supernatural are awe-inspiring for its characters as well as its audience. Approaching the sublime this way signifies a shift in conversation about what the sublime is to embody, while igniting discussion about whether the sublime is an asset or liability for man. Since the impetus for the sublime moment is a supernatural figure, viewers must consider if the creature is real or if it is instead representative of a sublime experience taking place in the woman's mind. In spite of the fact nature was typically the compelling figure behind the sublime in this form of art, literary works of the same period would demonstrate how the supernatural or preternatural could be equally capable of triggering encounters with the sublime.

In addition to the presence of the sublime in Romantic visual arts, references to this notion can be found frequently throughout Gothic literature produced during this time. Although Gothic concepts had existed for hundreds of years prior, they were more commonly a feature of architecture and sculpture until a renewed interest led to their inclusion in 18th century literature. Towering steeples and intricate designs perfectly linked works of Gothic architecture to



the sublime as their expansive nature demonstrated how man-made products could still affect human perspective in the same style as the powerful storms of nature. A famous example of Gothic architecture is Notre-Dame de Paris, a Catholic cathedral which began construction in

1163 and was primarily finished by 1250.²² Through examining the cathedral, its Gothic nature becomes apparent in its pointed arches, its pair of 200 foot towers, and the vaulted ceilings contained within, amongst a host of other Gothic standards.²³ Certain features of Notre-Dame are indicative of the characters most commonly designed by Gothic sculptors, such as its gargoyles and religious figures. Standing in the presence of such an impressive feat of humanity calls passersby to consider the size of the Christian god and their own insignificance, often responsible for opposing a godlier aim. To those who pass by and worship inside Notre-Dame, as well as an array of other cathedrals constructed in a similar style, an interaction with a sublime exists that is no different from that portrayed in landscape compositions of Friedrich and Dahl.

As the popularity of Gothic and medieval creations began to taper off near the close of the 15th century, a return to Greek and Roman influences was exemplified through the prominence of classical architecture and the art associated with the more world-oriented Renaissance. Functioning as a response to the concurrent interest in Neoclassicism, the Romantic movement strived to turn away from strict rules and regulations of art, instead allowing for individualism and imagination to flow abundantly, creating a larger space for the sublime. Over the course of this shift in culture, the sublime remained a relevant point of focus in art but was not as frequently viewed through the same terror-striking lens discussed by Burke. Regardless, the rise of the Romantic movement that contained the sublime landscape paintings mentioned previously would lead writers of the same moment to consider the sublime through a similar light. Inevitably, literature that contained the sublime within its pages would extend beyond purely philosophical works and reach the realm of fictional productions. With the support of the sublime's growing popularity in the 18th century, the brooding and dull nature of Gothic works

²² Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Notre-Dame de Paris". Encyclopedia Britannica, 6 Jan. 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Notre-Dame-de-Paris>.

²³ Ibid.

operated in tandem with some of the more terrifying aspects of sublime considerations, one reason for the rejuvenated use of Gothic components in art.

Instances of the sublime can be found throughout what has become known as the first Gothic text, *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole, in which paintings come to life and dark tension is omnipresent as characters battle their various personal imprisonments.²⁴ In Walpole's writing, the characters are not found to be seeking out a sublime experience; it is instead their most frightening interactions with varying degrees of the sublime that most significantly alter the paths of each character while creating a taboo sort of intrigue amongst audience members. At the novel's close, the union of the characters Theodore and Isabella is a result of the shared sorrow they have endured over the course of the novel, a testament like Burke's observation of the power in pain evoked by the sublime. Through the more supernatural and absurd elements of Walpole's writing, readers encounter a view of the sublime that is reminiscent of the quote "One step above the sublime, makes the ridiculous" (15),²⁵ by Thomas Paine. As Paine's words note, engaging in the philosophical and deep thought that comes with analysis of the sublime also comes with an elevated potential for being serious to a point of silliness, an idea that Walpole appears to be one of the first authors to engage with through the overdramatization of some the novel's sublime characteristics. At this point, an explanation for Walpole's usage of the Gothic and the sublime together in his text may be found: a goal of critiquing the government within which he was employed.

For Walpole, creating a work that at times views the sublime through a satirical tone was potentially apt for critique as, up to this point, considering sublime thoughts and experiences was thought to be a privilege exclusive to society's upper-class. As Walpole supported the end of the

²⁴ Walpole, Horace. *The Castle of Otranto*. Edited by Nick Groom, 3rd ed., Oxford University Press, 2014.

²⁵ Paine, Thomas. *The Age of Reason*. 1795. Edited by Kerry S Walters, Broadview Editions, 2011.

British monarchy and encouraged a societal shift towards more individual liberties, his use and punishment of an evil-hearted noble, the character Manfred, appears to indicate a more political meaning behind his work. Embodying the cruel and brooding standards of a literary villain, Manfred is classified by Isabella as having a “severe temper... who had imprinted her mind with terror” (Walpole 19),²⁶ sharing the noble status typical of many seeking out and discussing the sublime experience at this time. By the novel’s close, Manfred loses his throne to the lowly Theodore who is the son of an average friar, demonstrating Walpole’s pull away from class norms of this period. In the novel’s last lines, a supernatural sublime experience transpires, a mysterious figure appearing in a vision to cement Theodore’s place as ruler, a somewhat absurd moment in the wake of the torment faced by the cast of characters. Not only does this spectacle create a sublime moment for characters from a wide-range of social backgrounds, it also emphasizes the ridiculousness of the deaths that have happened.²⁷ With what appears to be a blatant attack on bloodline supremacy and the rash decisions of those hungry to maintain their power acting as indicative of how far he believed the British monarchy to have fallen, it's logical that he may have been using a more ridiculous sublime to parallel how easily this fall could occur. Even so, discourse as to whether Walpole truly intended to criticize his government continues because his actual political work was not considered the most progressive of his peers. Walpole even went as far as to claim *The Castle of Otranto* as the work of a 16th century Italian manuscript that he had transcribed, with Walpole wanting to remove himself from any backlash the novel may have received in its attempt to explore unconventional literary ideas.²⁸ All things considered, the extent to which Walpole aimed to display disdain with the British legal structure of his time may very well have been tethered to what degree his use of the sublime in *The Castle*

²⁶ Walpole, Horace. *The Castle of Otranto*. Edited by Nick Groom, 3rd ed., Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. 19.

²⁷ Ibid. Pp. 103-104.

²⁸ Missing, Sophie. “*The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole.” *The Guardian*, 13 Mar. 2010.

of Otranto was intended to be a satire of the aesthetic's value. Still, his distinct usage of the sublime, specifically within the darker genre that is the gothic novel, paved the way for forthcoming writers to paint the sublime experience in different colors.

As the 18th century was coming to a close, poetry came to act as a new medium for contemplating the merits of the sublime, with William Wordsworth operating at the forefront of this movement. A prominent British poet who enjoyed illuminating his political views in his writing, Wordsworth helped launch the Romantic movement through his creations with Samuel Taylor Coleridge. During the Romantic period, Wordsworth and his contemporaries formulated poems that sensationalized sublime moments, with one of the most prominent examples of this appearing in Wordsworth's "The Solitary Reaper." Published in 1807, "The Solitary Reaper," tells the tale of a speaker who is watching and listening as a young girl sings a song while reaping grain out in a field. Though the speaker is unable to understand the words of the song, he is struck by their beauty as the melody seems to be harmoniously "Breaking the silence of the seas" (Wordsworth, Line 15).²⁹ Through this line, Wordsworth showcases an interpretation of the sublime that draws upon the natural relationship present in Kant's writing but offers a unique voice in highlighting a sublime experience that does not rely on terror to create astonishment. Although Wordsworth had highlighted more traditional iterations of the sublime in his earlier poetry, such as the description of awe-inspiring nature that contains both light and dark forces in "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey,"³⁰ this full distinction from previous portrayals of the sublime taking place in his later poems helped lead the charge towards more Romanticized sublime moments in literature.

One final example of his writing, the long autobiographical poem titled "The Prelude,"

²⁹ Wordsworth, William. "The Solitary Reaper." Poems, In Two Volumes, 1807.

³⁰ Wordsworth, William. "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey." Lyrical Ballads, 1798.

serves as evidence of Wordsworth's own acknowledgment that how his mind construed the sublime had changed as he matured. In the first book of "The Prelude," Wordsworth comes to face a sublime moment as a young boy when he steals a shepherd's boat and finds himself facing a mountain above the lake that he interprets as nature threatening him for his crime.³¹ At this point, Wordsworth's states that his younger self endured a period of "darkness, call it solitude / Or blank desertion" (1805. Book 1. Lines 123-124), a mental punishment he is unable to comprehend during this period. Wordsworth is seemingly aware that this event is a step towards engaging with a force that is not human, but his lack of understanding results in fear rather than the creation of a beneficial relationship with this power. In the poem's fourth book, Wordsworth again faces a sublime experience when he climbs to the top of Mount Snowdon and the scene at hand pushes him to consider his own mortality, but in this second scenario, he has developed a greater appreciation and understanding for the sublime than had been possible in his youth. Due to the number of monumental life experiences that had occurred since his first encounter with the sublime, Wordsworth opens his mind to what could be a terrifying moment and instead views it as a moment for personal growth, vowing to live a noble life (1805. Book 14. Lines 69-79). Due to the high heights he reaches and the cliffs sprawling out in front of him, Wordsworth comes to sense the presence of a higher power. Having this experience later in life, Wordsworth's identification of a connection to the natural world and heightened spiritual awareness display his alignment with the transcendent order delineated by Weiskel. By reviewing the wide-spread popularity of the sublime at the turn of the 18th century, it can be seen that some of the earliest traces extend back to the work of English writer and politician Horace Walpole along with those behind Gothic literature from this time. Taking note of the fact that Wordsworth's poetry came after Walpole's debut novel, released in 1764, it is key to recognize that despite their distinct

³¹ Wordsworth, William. "The Prelude." 1805. Edited by Tim Milnes, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

differences in style, Walpole's Gothic text may have served to guide Wordsworth towards this more Romantic direction, a more positive take on the sublime than creations like Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*.

Commentaries on the value of the sublime have continued to range across a rather wide spectrum, with works praising the strength of this force while others have parodied those who did not consider the consequences of such destruction. One such example that borders on the latter exists in *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelly, which shares a view of the sublime following the same negative pattern discussed in relation to *The Castle of Otranto*. One particular sequence that indicates Shelly's belief that humans had become overly fixated on the sublime takes place when the titular Dr. Victor Frankenstein is confronted by his creation on a glacier in the European Alps. While a few paragraphs are dedicated to detailing how the setting lends itself to creating a sublime experience for the two with Dr. Frankenstein going on to state that "I remained in a recess of the rock, gazing on this wonderful and stupendous scene...My heart, which was before sorrowful, now swelled with something like joy" (Shelly 138).³² Only a few moments later, Dr. Frankenstein encounters his creation, a large and overpowering figure that shares many characteristics with the expansive nature around them, who chastises the doctor for not recognizing the irony of the man's continued expression of love for the sublime while simultaneously despising the creature formed by his own making (Shelly 139-141). Though the monster's distaste for the sublime could be explained away as a flaw, Shelly's use of the sublime in other portions of the novel reinforces the fact that the creature recognizes the potential danger of the sublime that humans do not. Another scene that demonstrates this view is the monster's creation, in which "the rain pattered dismally against the panes, and my candle was nearly burnt

³² Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft. *Frankenstein, or, the Modern Prometheus*. 1818. Edited by Kathleen Dorothy Scherf and David Lorne Macdonald, Broadview Press, 2012.

out, when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open” (Shelley 93). Instead of reveling in what is clearly a sublime moment, as he does in the Alps, Dr. Frankenstein is immediately terrified by his product and flees from the being, the creature representing the moment he crossed a moral line with little thought about the consequences.

Each scene’s circumstances provide interesting insight into whether the costs outweigh the benefits of a sublime experience when humans are constantly pushing boundaries to reach an extended point of sublimity. Represented in Wordsworth’s poetry and Gothic cathedrals, the association with the sublime and the divine is prominent throughout many forms of art, but Shelley suggests that this approach can be utilized as justification for oppression or violence. Looking to Dr. Frankenstein’s fixation on the sublime, this critique is drawn out through the irony that he is so intent on experiencing nature and the divine in its highest form while also allowing his creation to become an outcast. It is likely that Shelley’s motivation for critiquing the sublime came because of the struggles she faced as a woman in the early 19th century.

Discussed further in Anne Mellor’s *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters*, Shelley believed that the monster in her novel represented the way in which humans categorized nonhuman creatures as inferior or evil.³³ According to Mellor, Shelley was advancing the idea that “the mind is more likely to respond to the unknown with fear and hostility than with love and acceptance” (136), which hints at the feeling of inferiority many women felt cast upon them by men, while emphasizing the irony of man’s search for powers that may only bring them closer to evil. Going further, Mellor indicates that Shelley saw relationships between mankind and nature to be beneficial when humans display a respect for the world’s power while ventures that lack this respect, such as Dr. Frankenstein’s work, lead to the rise of a destructive side of nature

³³ Mellor, Anne K. *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters*. Routledge, 1989, Pp. 131-142.

uncovered through reckless searches for the sublime. Just as men had historically classified women as something to be controlled, this same view of the natural world and the sublime was something that Shelley claimed could quickly turn catastrophic.

Setting aside what may have been Shelley's motivation, it is apparent that her writing displays an awareness for how chasing confrontations with the sublime can quickly prove detrimental when the seeker puts themselves in a more dangerous position than they had anticipated. Although Shelly's novel may not have been the first to characterize the search for the sublime as a negative step towards perverted practices, *Frankenstein* inspired many works that seem to run their own risk analysis of humans crossing over what is natural in search of enlightenment. Since the hunt for the kind of growth that can come from the sublime may often lead individuals into dangerous situations, it fits perfectly as a tool for works hoping to provide commentary on this moral dilemma. Ultimately, *Frankenstein* would create a sort of blueprint for a vast number of science fiction (SF) works that critique the way in which humans attempt to advance themselves through pursuing potentially reckless meetings with the sublime. Such art has served the purpose of making the concept of the sublime, an idea once exclusive to high thinking philosophers and politicians, more accessible to the masses. Although the sublime is not typically studied as heavily in the 21st century as it once was, a variety of modern creations have demonstrated an affinity for this aesthetic and have once again questioned its merits. While creators certainly draw influence from a slew of artistic and philosophical predecessors, the impact of the Gothic sublime is one that can be very easily deciphered within pieces of modern film, more specifically works of Science Fiction (SF). With SF based features such as *Alien* (1979), *The Matrix* (1999), and *Avatar* (2009) representing a few of the highest grossing films of all time, it is evident that considerations of the sublime have continued to reach a wide audience

and will likely have a noticeable impact on the worldviews of generations to come. Resulting from their strong appeal amongst the masses, SF films have worked to bring about a revitalized exploration of the sublime that rivals the level of interest found in this area throughout 17th to 18th century discussions of aesthetics regardless of whether viewers fully understand the sublime or not.

Chapter 2: Enter Science

Although the term ‘sublime’ has come to take on a variety of meanings since it was first introduced, the presence of the same sublime discussed by Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, and their contemporaries continues to be prominent within twentieth and twenty-first century art. Not only has Gothic literature seen a resurgence through the popularity of tales about vampires, ghosts, and zombies, but its influence has also helped to shape art across new forms of expression. With the medium of film becoming the most dominant form of art in the years leading up to and within the modern era, those looking to explore the sublime have been granted a newly developed avenue for this purpose. Though some time had passed between the life of Edmund Burke and the first moving picture, the rise of the science fiction genre has offered a home for considering his philosophy through a recently enhanced lens. Establishing films such as 1903’s *Le Voyage dans La Lune (A Trip to the Moon)* and 1927’s *Metropolis* as two of the earliest SF productions, its equally important to note that Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is considered by many to be the first SF novel, setting the stage for films of this style.³⁴

A fact that is of even further interest is that SF films were suggested to have arisen from early horror films in the same style that *Frankenstein* showcased ties to Gothic literature, both literary and filmed forms of SF sharing more horrific bases.³⁵ As can be seen from comparisons between *Frankenstein* and a multitude of other SF publications, both the search for the sublime and the motivations of SF characters are often tethered to an interest in better understanding the complexities of the world, for better or worse. Ultimately, this interconnectivity speaks to the relationship of science and the sublime as the former offers a vehicle for studying the feelings of

³⁴ Stableford, Brian. “Frankenstein and the Origins of Science Fiction.” *Anticipations: Essays on Early Science Fiction and Its Precursors*. Edited by David Seed, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, NY, 1995. Pp. 46–57.

³⁵ Sobchack, Vivian Carol. *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film*. 2nd ed., Rutgers University Press, 1987. Pp. 28.

transcendence found in sublime moments while seeking out the latter can drive humans to pursue scientific exploits. With the genre typically abbreviated to SF in order to include works of speculative fiction, which may have no grounding in science, science fiction creates an optimal space for thought-provoking works of this form. Subsequently, sublime moments are commonly found in science fiction works in ways that may have been inconceivable for philosophers like Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant who lived well before the Age of Science.

What is distinct about the majority of SF film is that its creators do not seem to set out with intentions to form something that is purely sublime, as appeared to be the intent of Friedrich and other Romantic artists, instead looking to benefit from the sublime's ability to convey their respective messages. Paralleling their predecessors, the result of sublime interactions in SF can be either positive or negative, but oftentimes the sublime is only a force tipping the forthcoming action in one of these directions, frequently represented through a character's conscious choice. Apart from establishing contemporary takes on the sublime through this medium, film has also succeeded in allowing sublime experiences to be felt by each of the human senses as triggered by the characters' situations and the viewers' relationship to them. Proven by the scientific advancements made during this period of the 20th and 21st centuries, the reach of SF productions has further developed the scientific knowledge of audience members while also introducing many to both old and new takes on the sublime through several consistent tropes.

In order to understand how the science fiction genre has operated as an important field for sublime moments to be portrayed and analyzed, it is necessary to look over some of the most common definitions and themes of SF storylines. For SF writer and critic Judith Merril, limiting the genre to one definition is harmful to this kind of work because of how expansive it can be.³⁶

³⁶ Merril, Judith. "What Do You Mean: Science? Fiction?" SF: The Other Side of Realism. Edited by Thomas D. Clareson, 1971, Pp. 53-60.

Stating in “What Do You Mean: Science? Fiction?” that “I do not recall one (definition) that stood up unflinchingly to the light of day. They all relied...on certain axiomatic assumptions about the meanings of “science” and “fiction”” (53), Merrill highlights a similarity between SF and the sublime in their inability to be bound to tight constraints. While countless critics and creators have gone back and forth debating which definition is accurate, those that are in the same vein as film historian Carlos Clarens, who once classified SF as “Hard to define abstractly, science fiction is instantly recognizable,”³⁷ leave this distinction more open to subjective interpretation.

Nonetheless, there are certainly general characteristics and ideas that are traditionally associated with SF, much like the sublime. From rocket ships and aliens to time machines and robots, the types of items frequently present within SF allow for issues to be examined satirically, by making fun of some of the quirks of the genre, as well from a more existential point of view through centering on potential problems stemming from scientific research. Nearly every single work of SF that has been created is based upon the theme of human exploration. Some SF films view this aspect of human nature with admiration and hope: 2014’s *Interstellar* sees space exploration save humanity from climate crisis³⁸ and 1960’s *The Time Machine* depicts time travel as the mechanism by which the protagonist helps build a better future for mankind,³⁹ but this is not always the case. Similarly to pieces critiquing the search for the sublime, SF films tend to craft stories in which humans push the boundaries between themselves and concepts that seem unnatural or immoral, often to their own detriment: In *Annihilation* (2018), a team of scientists enter a mysterious environmental disaster zone that mutates all life within it and that

³⁷ Clarens, Carlos. *An Illustrated History of the Horror Film*. Capricorn Books, 1967, Pp. 11.

³⁸ Nolan, Christopher, director. *Interstellar*. Legendary Pictures, 2014.

³⁹ Pal, George, director. *The Time Machine*. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1960.

threatens the future of humanity⁴⁰ and 1951's *The Day the Earth Stood Still* features an alien who arrives on Earth with a message of peace and warning about humanity's destructive expansion, stating that they will be obliterated if they do not stop entering into international conflict and plundering the Earth.⁴¹ Each of the examples given have strands of horror attached to them that reveal how closely related the science fiction and horror genres really are. Just as these messages can be both positive and negative, their various usages create opportunities for the sublime to be shown at its best and at its worst, with each director casting a different light on the aesthetic.

One other theme that is common within the realm of SF film is innovation. Building off other exploratory aspects of the genre, the innovation facet of these works employs human engineering and technological advances to imagine alternate realities and artificial intelligence. Yet again, the consequences of such action can be a blessing for humanity, or a curse: *Jurassic Park* (1993)⁴² and *Gattaca* (1997)⁴³ display futures where humanity is able to create authentic dinosaur clones in the former and genetically engineer specific traits within humans in the latter. In *Jurassic Park*, the dinosaurs end up breaking free of their cages and killing many of their human visitors while *Gattaca* sees eugenics become common in modern society and as a result, the protagonist faces discrimination on account of his genes not having been artificially enhanced. Although these two films appreciate the immense power that can come from human advancement, they also indicate that there is a capacity for negatives to be attached to this progress.

Nevertheless, dystopian futures and ventures into the unknown are just a few kinds of settings that lend themselves to producing both SF and horror films, with scientifically

⁴⁰ Garland, Alex, director. *Annihilation*. Paramount Pictures, 2018.

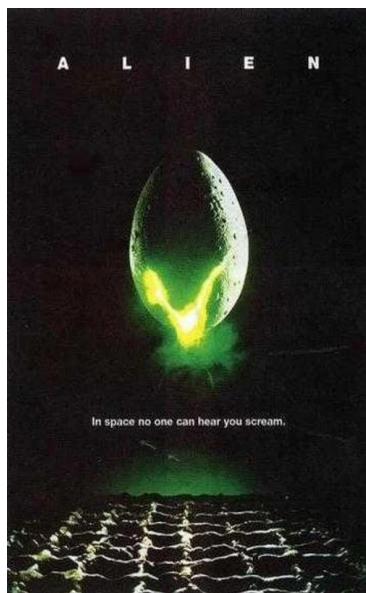
⁴¹ Wise, Robert, director. *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. 20th Century Fox, 1951.

⁴² Spielberg, Steven, director. *Jurassic Park*. Universal Pictures, 1993.

⁴³ Niccol, Andrew, director. *Gattaca*. Columbia Pictures, 1997.

engineered beasts and extraterrestrial life representing only two of the multiple types of characters that share this ability to persist in either genre. For this reason, it can be difficult to determine where the lines between horror and SF are to be drawn, with each often just a step beyond from the other, but this somewhat muddled distinction does not prove detrimental to the sublime's presence in modern film, instead acting as a testament to how it persists outside of one singular genre. As demonstrated by popular SF features with elements of horror, such as Ridley Scott's *Alien*, adventures into the sublime can often require or be enhanced by the addition of some terrifying aspects.

Despite receiving mixed reviews when released in 1979, *Alien* has come to be considered one of the best SF films of all-time by prolific critics such as Roger Ebert and George Siskel.^{44,45}



In *Alien*, a rag-tag group of pilots, engineers, and scientists on a commercial freight ship travel to the outer reaches of space in search of a distress signal heard during their journey back to Earth.⁴⁶ Locating the moon from which the signal originated, LV-426, a few members of the crew leave their ship to look for any signs of life. One member of the crew, Kane, is attacked and becomes host to an alien. Soon after, Kane dies as a result of the alien's infestation; the alien then hides out on the ship and eliminates each crew member one at a time. At the film's climax, the protagonist and only remaining crew member, Ripley, is caught

in a fight between herself and the nearly unstoppable alien, a battle that appears to end in her

⁴⁴ Ebert, Roger. "Alien Movie Review & Film Summary (1979): Roger Ebert." Movie Review & Film Summary (1979) | Roger Ebert, 26 Oct. 2003, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-alien-1979>.

⁴⁵ Poster for the film *Alien*. Fandom, 2023, <https://alienfilmopedia.fandom.com/wiki/Alien>.

⁴⁶ Scott, Ridley, director. *Alien*. 20th Century Fox, 1979.

favor by the time the credits roll. While the action is the focal point of *Alien*, there are a few prominent sublime moments that are particularly relevant to research on the subject. When the crew arrives on LV-426 establishing shots are shown to set the scene, with tall and ragged cliffs showcasing the eeriness of the satellite planet. Although the terrifying darkness around these rock structures creates the opportunity for a sublime experience, these wide shots lack the required human component. At this point, the crew members begin to scour the moon, the dark and cold form of their surroundings bringing them to a moment of sublime that is rather Burkian because of the power teeming through the landscape. With the camera panning between each explorer as a minimal amount of dialogue takes place, viewers of the film are directly watching the crew express awe and wonder at a world beyond their comprehension as they traverse the moon. Surrounded by a mummified alien body and other remnants of a technologically advanced civilization, the crew realize how insignificant they appear compared to this type of unfamiliar being. Eerie, ambient music fills the empty space created by the lack of dialogue, enhancing the feelings of curiosity that are mirrored by tension as the music picks up speed. As the astronauts traverse the moon, the sublimity of the situation remains present until the alien latches onto Kane's helmet, the music swelling up to a climatic shriek and the physical harm caused to Kane simultaneously signifying the end of the sublime moment.

Even though this is not the only sublime moment in the film, like many of the others, it is a display of how an experience of this kind can quickly devolve chaotic terror. In this instance, the crew's journey through the unknown, though well-intentioned, proves to be a terrible experience as it leads to the deaths of nearly all its members. Audience members may consider whether Scott intends for this sublime moment to exemplify how seeking the sublime can authorize reckless behavior or if it is instead a danger to be always wary of because it can be

accessed without intention, as is the case for the innocent woman in *The Nightmare*. With the tagline “In space, no one can hear you scream” prominently featured in the film’s advertising, it’s clear that this focus on creating a sublime-based terror was intentional, though in this case, Scott may only be using the sublime to warn humans of the possible devastating effects of exploration without caution or self-awareness.⁴⁷

Nevertheless, this scene is not necessarily meant to act as a critique of the sublime, but instead serves as an example of how the alien invader trope has acted as a means of expressing human fear of that which is more powerful than mankind. Like many traditional examples of the dynamically sublime, the threatening aura and resulting carnage of the crew’s visit to LV-426 certainly serve to create exhilaration within the characters, though there is no benefit to be received from this sublime interaction. Without taking away from any of the acclaim *Alien* has received as a landmark in SF film, it is noteworthy that the small bit of positive potential found in its most key sublime moment, the possibility of learning from this alien race, is rapidly overwhelmed by the harm caused to its characters. Since the film does not aim to fully criticize or uplift the sublime, it seems as though it falls short of using it to deliver any meaningful message and instead, reduces the sublime to a mere device for instilling fear in the crew and shocking the audience.

Missing an opportunity to employ the sublime as an instrument for personal growth, *Alien* is not the only SF film to engage with the sublime in this way, something that has occurred in other works that rely on the sublime as a catalyst for action rather than analyzing its philosophical impact: 1996’s *Independence Day*⁴⁸ and 2005’s *War of the Worlds*⁴⁹ both feature mighty alien forces who tower over humanity, but rather than discussing the deeper implications

⁴⁷ de Lauzirika, Charles, director. *The Beast Within: The Making of Alien*. Lauzirika Motion Pictures, 2003.

⁴⁸ Emmerich, Roland, director. *Independence Day*. Twentieth Century Fox, 1996.

⁴⁹ Spielberg, Steven, director. *War of the Worlds*. Paramount Pictures, 2005.

of extraterrestrial presence on Earth, each elects to focus on the surface level spectacle of action. Films of this style may still have a number of redeeming qualities, their consistent success at the box office being one of them, but they are not the authority on the sublime in SF as other works, such as *The Matrix*, have demonstrated that the genre can employ the sublime for a more profound purpose.

Another science fiction film that explores the sublime is 1999's *The Matrix*.⁵⁰ Directed by Lana and Lilly Wachowski, *The Matrix* is centered on the subject of alternate reality as it



introduces a world where humans are unknowingly locked into a simulation that is controlled by machines.⁵¹ Captured within the simulation at the beginning of the film, the protagonist, Neo, grapples with the question of what is real and what is not. Soon, he is given a choice to accept his place in the simulation and go back to living in a virtual reality or to be pulled out of its system and help a team of other escapees destroy the machines in control. Choosing the second option, Neo works alongside the group who believes he is “the One” (*Matrix*

01:23:12), who is destined to save humanity. By the end of the film, Neo has lived up to this expectation and foiled the current plans of the machines, setting off in flight to finish off the rest of their kind. Multiple sublime moments take place throughout the feature, but what may be the most important is when Neo must make the choice between leaving the simulation and continuing to live within its borders. Standing face to face with Morpheus, the head of the escapees whom Neo had believed to be an urban legend, there already exists a surrealness for

⁵⁰ Poster for the film *The Matrix*. Posterazzi. 2023, <https://www.posterazzi.com/the-matrix-movie-poster-print-27-x-40/>.

⁵¹ Wachowski, Lilly and Lana Wachowski, directors. *The Matrix*. Warner Bros., 1999.

Neo before the choice is offered. Minimal description is given to Neo besides “No one can be told what The Matrix is, you have to see it for yourself...take the blue pill the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe, you take the red pill, you stay in wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes” (*Matrix* 19:12-21). Through this moment, Neo comes across the sublime as he weighs the benefits of entering a hidden reality that is far more complex and overwhelming than the world he calls home, an awe-inspiring concept as opposed to the less consequential option of taking the blue pill and returning to the safety of the simulation. Audience members are brought into this moment through the dramatic music and the high stakes of such a choice, allowing both Neo and viewers to consider the possibility of existing in a false reality.

Unlike the example of the sublime in *Alien*, Neo’s encounter with the sublime ends up being for the better as it enhances his worldview in a very Kantian manner as the excitement of better understanding his life and knowledge of the larger world, stand before him. Additionally, Neo’s realization that there is another world outside of his own acts as a moment of transcendence that, although not without difficulty, he accepts. One aspect of the sublime present in this scene that is unique, is the human interaction occurring with the choice to enter the sublime not offered by nature, but instead by someone Neo looks to as a possible mentor. An uncommon presentation of the sublime, it is important that the choice remains solely up to Neo and is not influenced by Morpheus, with Neo making his decision as a result of his excitement and wonder. Though Neo must succeed in a variety of dangerous tasks after this moment, the sublime he experiences is a positive part of his life as it helps him to regain personal autonomy and take massive steps towards freeing the rest of humanity.

A message prominent in the film, that seemingly harkens back to Shelley’s interest in

gender equality, is the support of gender fluidity. With each co-director of the piece transitioning gender identities a few years after its launch, *The Matrix*'s discussion of simulated life versus reality has been identified by fans and the directors as an allegory for the struggle of living as a transgender individual.^{52,53} Neo's initial sense of disorientation and disillusionment with the simulated world he inhabits that leads to his eventual discovery of his true identity as "the One," can be understood as a metaphor for the process of discovering one's gender identity. In order to complete his journey, he must reject the expectations and norms imposed by the simulated society to locate his authentic self. According to Lilly Wachowski "we were existing in a space where the words didn't exist, so we were always living in a world of imagination,"⁵⁴ which is why creating an SF piece capable of exploring such concepts was so appropriate for Lilly and her sister Lana, allowing them a dynamic form of expression.

Of course, *The Matrix*'s sublime moments are not the only means by which this message of transitioning gender identities is conveyed, but they certainly act as a compelling force for outlining life outside of traditional gender expectations and classifications. As was seen through Shelley's attempts to examine less common ideas about the issues of gender roles and sexism in the early 19th century, the sublime can be important for urging people to explore views outside the norms created by their society, *The Matrix* achieving this in regard to supporting transgender folks at the close of the 20th century. While *The Matrix* is one popular example of how SF and the sublime can be valuable for commentating on social issues, other films, such as *Avatar*, have also successfully used the SF platform to discuss both social and political problems.

⁵² Currin, Joseph M., et al. "Taking the Red Pill: Using *The Matrix* to Explore Transgender Identity Development." *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*, vol. 12, no. 3, 29 July 2016, pp. 402–409., <https://doi.org/10.1080/15401383.2016.1249815>.

⁵³ McIntosh, Steven. "*The Matrix* Is a 'Trans Metaphor', Lilly Wachowski Says." BBC News, British Broadcasting Corporation, 7 Aug. 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-53692435>.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

In 2009, James Cameron directed *Avatar*, a film that became the highest-grossing feature of all-time in part to mind blowing visual effects significantly ahead of its peers.^{55,56} Telling the story of a paraplegic US Marine, Jake Sully, who is assigned to a mission on the newly discovered world of Pandora, *Avatar* offers opportunities for multiple characters to have sublime experiences.⁵⁷ Like the aforementioned SF films, the exploratory aspect of *Avatar* is key to Jake's encounter with the sublime as he is presented with a renewed ability to walk and live alongside the alien people and creatures of the planet as he plugs his brain into an avatar that contains DNA of the native people. With the Na'vi, and a pair of other humans who also have avatars, Jake has the opportunity to explore a planet that is home to life beyond anything imaginable on Earth. Originally on a mission to gain the trust of and spy on Pandora's native people, Jake discovers a new home for himself amongst the Na'vi. Faced with the decision of turning against the Na'vi and supporting the inevitable offensive by the human military or helping the Na'vi and turning on his own kind, Jake realizes he would rather be with the natives who have accepted and loved him as one of their own. In the end, Jake and the Na'vi prevail, defeating the humans and expelling the survivors from Pandora at which point Jake is permanently transferred into his avatar and the movie ends.



For Jake, the sublime moments are frequent as he examines a brand-new world, but one of the most prominent can be seen when he enters his avatar for the first time, his ability to walk

⁵⁵ Jackson, Josh. "The Top 25 Highest-Grossing Movies of All Time Worldwide." Paste Magazine, Paste Magazine, 4 Apr. 2023, <https://www.pastemagazine.com/movies/highest-grossing-movies/the-highest-grossing-movies-of-all-time>.

⁵⁶ Poster for the film *Avatar*. IMDB. 2023, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0499549/>.

⁵⁷ Cameron, James, director. *Avatar*. 20th Century Fox, 2009.

having a rather profound effect on him. Filled with excitement, Jake decides to push the limits of his new body, running out of the hospital room that he awakens in, despite the protests of the doctors around him. Once outside, Jake soaks in the beautiful sights of Pandora, digging his toes into the dirt and listening as the birds around him sing. Again, elements of the Kantian sublime are on display as Jake is undergoing a physical and spiritual transformation, primarily motivated by the large scale of his surroundings. With the expansive forest before him teeming with creatures and a society that is beyond human imagination, Jake is left awe-struck by his environment. Whereas many of the sublime moments discussed in the field are centered around overwhelming power that leaves the viewer in terrifying darkness, Jake's experience contains vivid beauty and colors that still succeed in communicating the world's sheer vastness. More so than either of the previous examples, but similar to *The Matrix*, Jake's sublime moment in *Avatar* is indicative of Weiskel's Romantic sublime as Jake transcends the confines of his human form and embraces the ambiguity in front of him. Jake's running represents a modern attempt at pursuing the sublime that, based on the education and new community that he discovers, appears to work to his advantage despite the dangers attached to it.

With the film acting as a critique of imperialism, as the United States of America is attempting to steal the natural resources of Pandora and demolish any life that stands in their way, the sublime and SF are again working in tandem to highlight a sociopolitical issue. As one of the few humans who is aware of the value in leaving Pandora and its people to live as they desire, Jake clearly grows from his sublime experiences in the film, his willingness to battle against his own country on behalf of the Na'vi a signal of his enlightenment, something he shares with each of the humans who has also lived amongst the native people. Still, Cameron crafts a sublime moment early on in the film to convey how his imperialism humans are acting in

the same manner as Shelley's Dr. Frankenstein.

Soon after Jake has taken his first steps in his avatar, there is a segment in which he strikes out on his first field mission. In this scene, a stereotypically sublime scenario is created when he is airlifted across a waterfall and dropped off in the midst of a rainforest. Exposed to an array of species native to Pandora, Jake is focused on pointing his gun at every creature that passes through his line of sight rather than displaying respect for the habitat he is infringing on. Going as far as to hurl verbal insults and challenge one animal that approaches him, Jake is soon put in his place when a more aggressive creature chases after him. Although Jake eventually evolves into a character who shows respect and love for Pandora, his stance in this scene is evidence of Cameron's critique of the human urge to control, as Jake uses the sublime to instill a cockiness in himself instead of as aid for experiencing growth. All things considered, this does not appear to be a criticism of the sublime, as Jake is able to redeem himself through other sublime experiences, but rather an examination of how humans can fail to respect life and nature when in pursuit of self-serving goals.

Through the scene in which Jake is initiated as a Na'vi warrior, a reflection of Cameron's view that the sublime can be a positive addition to life is represented. Led into the mysterious garden in which the Tree of Voices is held, a spot where the spirits of generations of Na'vi rest, by Neytiri, the Na'vi that Jake falls in love with, Jake experiences yet another sublime moment. Standing amongst the glowing limbs of the tree, Jake is able to hear the voices of these spirits, proving his place as a member of the Na'vi. Clearly shocked by the sounds and sights of the tree, this sublime moment signifies the evolution that Jake has experienced and culminates in him sharing his first kiss with Neytiri. It is no coincidence that Jake's first sublime moments, in which he approached the experience more recklessly, are paralleled in this scene that shows he

has earned a place amongst the Na'vi through his appreciation for their way of life. Jake's journey demonstrates Cameron's belief in the ability of the sublime to expand the human mind, much like Kant a few hundred of years before him.

Taking this into consideration, it appears that Cameron does not share a distaste for the sublime, but instead displays a cautious concern in regard to who reaches sublime moments and in turn, how some humans elect to respond to these experiences. Like Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, the political usage of the sublime is not its only purpose, but it remains a very revealing apparatus for the opinions of the film's director. Having worked extensively on environmental initiatives and creating the Avatar Alliance Foundation, a nonprofit organization that funds grassroots conservation work, James Cameron has spent much of his career campaigning for the causes of biodiversity preservation and the responsible use of natural resources that the actions of the military in *Avatar* are actively harming.⁵⁸ Not only has *Avatar* impacted the world of pop culture as the best-selling film of all-time, but it also has helped advance the mission of spreading awareness regarding issues of environmental degradation and imperialism, yet another example of the sociopolitical power of the sublime.

Comparing the works of a SF film genre that has risen to immense popularity since the early 20th century is no easy task as there are multitude of ideas and styles that exist under the science fiction banner. Still, *Alien*, *The Matrix*, and *Avatar* stand as three specific examples of how showcasing the sublime has become a standard within SF, each generating a different use and message for this aesthetic. In *Alien*, this use of the sublime represents a more critical view, one in which the experience of the sublime only leads humanity towards their downfall, in a style reminiscent of *Frankenstein*, as opposed to the more inspired views of *The Matrix* and *Avatar*. Neo's search for enlightenment sees the sublime positioned as the path by which an expanded

⁵⁸ Cameron, James. "Before *Avatar* ... a Curious Boy." TED Talk. TED2010, 17 Feb. 2010, Long Beach, California.

worldview is to be obtained, portraying a hopeful approach to the sublime as shared previously by Wordsworth. For Jake Sully, his newly discovered life on Pandora has him taking the same stance as Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*, the sublime offering him placement above the fixed view he held beforehand. With each director's intentions for the sublime varying, some more wary of what it may lead to in the wrong hands and others hopeful for the opportunity it can provide in the right hands, it is obvious that SF creators as a collective have depicted the sublime as both laudable and as potentially problematic. Just as the sublime has played a role in past attempts to better understand the complexity of human experiences and the powers of nature that share a relationship with mankind, SF has demonstrated that this will certainly continue in artistic iterations in the future. As real life innovation and exploration evolves, it is likely that the way in which SF approaches the sublime will also continue to shift, matching the trends of the time or even becoming more prominent in another medium of art. Noted through a few of the films introduced in this research, SF has been important for understanding and motivating the advancement of the modern world, a feat that would be less likely if humans did not cautiously pursue the power of the sublime.

Conclusion

Through consideration of the differing versions of the sublime depicted in Gothic creations of the 1700's to 1800's and prescribed in 1900's to 200's science fiction film, it's apparent that each present two very similar takes on the sublime. Though it is important to acknowledge the variety of ideas introduced through sublime moments in SF, it is also easy to draw connections between these advances and the core messages of the sublime introduced by Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. The Burkian and Kantian philosophies on the sublime that became prominent a few hundred years ago continue to influence researchers like Thomas Weiskel in the modern era and have similarly impacted the work of directors such as James Cameron in the 21st century.

In the present, new research about the relationship between SF and the sublime is limited, but there are a few important takeaways to be examined. Some argue that the sublime moments in SF do not create the environment for audience members to experience the sublime, claiming that these scenes do not create the same feelings as Romantic and Gothic works of the past. Presenting the SF's sublime as a fragment of films crafted specifically for high sales, rather than as platforms expressing quality messages, those holding this view see the spectacle within SF as lacking the growth characteristics of true sublime pursuits.⁵⁹ Opposing perspectives find that there is immense value in the sublime placement within SF film, noting that such utilization allows for filmmakers to advance a variety of social and political thoughts that may otherwise go unheard.⁶⁰ Seen in *Avatar*, science fiction films centered on climate issues (cli-fi) have become particularly prominent at a time in which climate change presents a challenge to humanity with a

⁵⁹ Tuck, Greg. "When more is less: CGI, spectacle and the capitalist sublime." *Science Fiction Film and Television*, vol. 1 no. 2, 2008, p. 249-273. *Project MUSE* muse.jhu.edu/article/269266.

⁶⁰ McCullough, John. (2014). A Los Angeles Science Fiction Sublime. *Space and Culture*, 17(4), 410–420. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.tcu.edu/10.1177/1206331214543872>.

potential for apocalyptic consequences, a reason some critics believe the use of the sublime for this positive purpose, is in humanity's best interest.⁶¹ Although modern usage of the sublime can be flawed, what is most important is the effect it can have on an audience when successfully employed, something SF artists can and should continue to pursue. Certainly, many SF works are known for their more thrilling and horrific scenes, but some of the genre's most popular works have proven that the sublime can be just as exciting as it is terrifying, offering wonderful opportunities for those who chase after it.

Considering the financial success of science fiction films, many of which have been determined to be peppered with sublime moments, it is clear that the sublime retains a notable value amongst audiences, in spite of a decreased amount of widely discussed scholarship on the subject. While the types of sublime that are utilized in such works has and will continue to vary, as long as some form of the aesthetic is contained within popular works, new consumers will carry on the pursuit of better understanding its benefits. Although the sublime's social presence may have shifted since the time of Burke, there is still much to be learned about the human psyche and society's evolution over time by examining the sublime's position in various forms of art. With there being an immense amount of knowledge to be gained from studying this area of art, there is an abundance of work that must be undertaken to properly accomplish this task.

Despite the extensive research undertaken in this project, limitations exist in regard to examining the sublime's usage across other genres of film and differing mediums of art in the 20th and 21st century. Although mentions are made of the horror genre, an equally deep dive into sublime moments present in these types of films would certainly yield other interesting thoughts and speculations about the merits, or lack thereof, of the sublime. By now, instances of

⁶¹ Salmose, Niklas. The Apocalyptic Sublime: Anthropocene Representation and Environmental Agency in Hollywood Action-Adventure Cli-Fi Films. *J Pop Cult*, 51: 1415-1433, 2018. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.tcu.edu/10.1111/jpcu.12742>.

the sublime are likely to be found across nearly all genres of film, with its value constantly shifting. One should also note that just because the motion picture has achieved immense popularity in the 20th and 21st centuries, does not mean that paintings and readings containing the element are no longer being crafted. All things considered, the scope of the sublime is much larger than can be considered by a singular project or philosopher. Additionally, there are a wide berth of philosophical views on the sublime that exist outside of the parameters created by Burke, Kant, and Weiskel, though their viewpoints are extremely relevant to science fiction film. It should be recognized that this may not be the case when exploring other genres of film and their use of the sublime, spaces where other perspectives may be of particular interest. To truly understand the weight of the sublime, multidisciplinary research that engages with facets of psychology and sociology ought to be undertaken to study the effect these experiences have on human behavior. While this work is of considerable size, its merit lies in the growth that can be gained on an individual and societal level from better utilizing the sublime.

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