

## Book Review published in *Environmental Values* 2015

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*The Sublime in Modern Philosophy: aesthetics, ethics and nature,*

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In this detailed, scholarly work Emily Brady seeks to renew the aesthetic concept of the sublime by clarifying its heritage and demonstrating its relevance to contemporary, environmental sensibilities.

Part one, the historical part, is a comprehensive examination of the 18th century sublime. It analyses the development of the concept from Addison, Baillie, Gerard, Burke, Kames, and Alison before approaching Kant's early and later formulations. The British sublime is clarified through the analysis of common themes without over-ascribing conformity to the views. These theorists were talking about the emotional impact, the role of imagination, moral and religious ideas connected to an aesthetic experience of certain types of natural phenomena or vast human constructs. The parts of nature they repeatedly refer to are: towering mountains, stormy seas, vast deserts, earthquakes and volcanos. Brady establishes that the useful distinction between the sublime experience from vastness or from power is well established prior to its appearance in Kant's work as the mathematical and dynamic sublime, as is the relationship to freedom of the will. Whether the strange pleasure of the sublime is a humbling response to nature or a response to the human faculties in its 'lofty conception of its own capacity' as Kames states it (p.44) is examined through these 18<sup>th</sup> century theorists.

Brady then takes us through the Kant's pre-critical anthropological work, which seems to rely heavily on the British theorists, to the later *Critique of Practical Judgement*, where the integration of the sublime with Kant's broader metaphysics demands some changes in emphasis. I agree that the earlier work strikes a truer experiential chord, but it is fascinating to see the argument of the *CJP* sublime laid out with such care for the original text and for the continuing Kantian debate. In terms of the charge of hubris, prompted by Kant's replacement of the object of nature as sublime with the powers of reason as sublime, Kant could not have a kinder or more assiduous commentator to find a possible route through to a more environmentally palatable construction of what he meant. This detail might seem more than the environmentally focused reader would need, but it does prepare the ground for components that will be used later in part two, not least of which is the shift in Kant's *CPJ* to entirely natural phenomena. Through Schopenhauer to the Romantics we see the shift toward nature as a direct cause of the sublime. However, now the way in which that feeling stimulates reflective elements in the human comes from experiencing ourselves as situated within nature. By opening to nature we become more aesthetically sensitive and able to feel and express greater emotional and imaginative depths and gain a sense of our freedom.

Part two, the contemporary sublime, would appeal to a wider readership in the way it tackles a range of subjects from a contemporary perspective: whether art can be sublime; the relationship between tragedy and the sublime; the differentiation between the sublime, terrible beauty, and ugliness; and the culminating chapter on the environmental sublime.

By drawing on the historical work in part one, Brady establishes clear problems with the claim that art can be sublime. There are aspects of the sublime experience that art cannot deliver: namely the scale, the formlessness, and the wildness or disorder. These can be represented in art but there is something missing when the observer is not environed by the art. As Brady notes, even attempts such as Rothko and Newman's work to prompt the sense of formlessness of a sublime experience fall short. More recent immersive work, such as Turrell's *Perceptual Cells* she sees as more successful in provoking some of the anxiety-raising effects where we can momentarily lose the framing of the 'art event'. Potentially sublime works, according to Brady, are those that have large scale and enviroing aspects. She examines the Empire State Building and Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*. The case for the Empire State Building feels less convincing than that made for *Spiral Jetty*. However, the latter is land art that, it is claimed, was invoked in the artist by the place. Thus it would express an already inherent sublimity.

Through a discussion of tragedy Brady addresses the paradox of pleasure from negative emotions. The importance of the earlier discussions on the oscillation between pleasure and the negative emotion of feeling overwhelmed becomes clear. We do not convert fear into pleasure; in the sublime maintaining the two together is part of this challenging experience. As Brady says: "Rather than sharing the drama of human tragedy through the arts, with the sublime we share a richer grasp of nature in its remarkable moments, and an existential sense of the limitations of humanity" (p.164). She goes on to give a sensitive treatment to the difficult subject of natural disasters: where violent natural events bring about human tragedy or human caused events create a tragic spectacle such as 9/11. In these cases she rightly avoids any direct conflation with an aesthetic concept.

A discussion of terrible beauty and ugliness develops the theme of moving away from what Brady calls 'easy beauty' to a broadening of our aesthetic responses and thus our appreciation of the natural world. Rather than ecological awareness allowing us to see value in the ugly creature the sublime has taught us that openness to that which is challenging brings about a shift in ourselves and deeper relationship with the world. This does more than avoiding anthropocentrism by ascribing intrinsic value to that which we find distasteful, it explores the distaste to find in it ways of building a new relationship.

The concluding chapter leads us into seeing the sublime as a modern and productive approach to the ethics and aesthetics of the environment. In sections here we can see how the metaphysical aspects of the sublime do not have to imply theistic interpretations that would move us beyond nature. Like Hepburn, Brady agrees that there is a role for the metaphysical imagination in the sublime. She says:

Metaphysical imagination helps to articulate that awareness [of self in relation to the world] – an opening out of felt experience that sublime astonishment produces. If we want to keep hold of the transcendental thread in the sublime, we might speak of a type of *aesthetic* transcendence occurring through metaphysical imagination. This is not a transcendence over, above, or apart from nature; rather, it is one in which we get a better sense of how we are related to nature. (p.192)

This brings us back again to the sticky question of the claimed hubristic nature of the sublime as an impediment to its usefulness to a contemporary understanding of environmental thinking. In a subsection on 'the anthropocentric argument' Brady brings together previous strands and new

contributors, such as Godlovitch, but she rejects a radical decentering of the subject as outside of, and potentially losing the value of, the sublime. For her the sublime experience already presents us with the humility inducing power of the ungraspable. Thus the sublime is presented as a fascinating and life affirming aesthetic experience that has ethical power invoking respect of and better treatment of the environment.

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