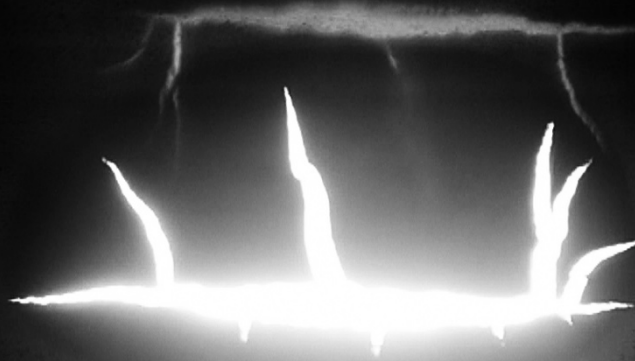


# The Sublime Experience in Film And Installation

Research Through Practice on the  
Dynamics of the Burkean Sublime



Kevin Craig  
Masters by Research  
MIRIAD  
2016

**The Sublime Experience in Film And Installation**  
Research Through Practice on the Dynamics of the  
Burkean Sublime

Kevin Craig

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the Manchester  
Metropolitan University for the degree of Master of Arts (by Research)

MIRIAD:

The Manchester Institute for Research and Innovation in Art and Design  
Manchester Metropolitan University

2016

I would like to thank Professor Steve Hawley and Dr Toby Heys for their patience and encouragement.

I would also like to thank H Mather for her understanding and support.

## Abstract

This practice based MRes project examines the physiological terror-sublime proposed by Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Using the *Enquiry* as a manual for artistic production, and employing word charts to map the territory, this project looks to embody ideas of the Burkean sublime in contemporary practice.

Simon Morley, in the introduction to *The Sublime*, broadly describes the subject as

‘...fundamentally transformative, about the relationship between disorder and order, and the disruption of the stable coordinates of time and space...in looking at the relevance of the concept to contemporary art, we are also addressing an experience with implications that go far beyond aesthetics... Awe and wonder can quickly blur into terror, giving rise to a darker aspect of the sublime experience, when the exhilarating feeling of delight metamorphoses into a flirtation with dissolution and the ‘daemonic’

(Morley, 2010:12)

This project uses Burke's *Enquiry* as the premise for the creation of gallery-based film and installation, alongside a written comparative analysis of relevant

literature and artworks, in order to identify a proposed nihilistic turn in the Burkean terror sublime.

In the sublime experience, the reveal of an external annihilating power, a shift in perception or a realisation of great depth or distance, leaves us newly aware of our physical limits and the limits of our rational capacities. The possibility of art to discuss an experience at the edge, where conventional language falters, has resulted in a range of artwork, across mediums, which can be identified with the sublime. Distinct from beauty and containing feelings of awe and reverence, the rush of the sublime can be discerned in the installations of Finnish duo IC-98, Anish Kapoor's deep, dark voids and Bruce Conner's apocalyptic *Crossroads* (1976).

Through a process of making and reflection focusing on the dynamics of the Burkean sublime, and with reference to contemporary writing on the subject in both aesthetics and philosophy, this MRes asks - how is the sublime in Burke's *Enquiry* distinct from the Kantian transcendent sublime, what is the pleasurable terror at the heart of the *Enquiry* and, by addressing Burke's ideas through the artistic process, can a pessimism at the heart of Burke's system be traced?

# **Contents**

Abstract	4
Introduction	9
The Burkean Sublime Now	18
Questions, Objectives & Methodology	20
<b>Methodology</b>	<b>22</b>
Identifying the dynamics of the Enquiry	23
Translating Burke's ideas	24
Experimentation with representation	25
Reflection on practice to identify traits and dynamics of the Burkean Sublime	25
<b>Introduction to the Burkean Sublime</b>	<b>26</b>
The Burkean System	27
Perspectives on the Burkean Sublime A Comparative Analysis	34

## Chapter 1

<b>The Empiricism of Burke's Enquiry</b>	<b>35</b>
1.1 - The Scientific Enquiry	36
1.2 - The Empirical and the Metaphysical	41
1.3 - A Horizon of Thought	50
1.4 - The Sublime Landscape	54
1.5 - 'Words and Feelings'	68

## Chapter 2

<b>Burke, the Kantian perspective &amp; a Non-Transcendent Sublime</b>	<b>72</b>
2.1 - Kantian Transcendence	74
2.2 - The Non-Transcendent Sublime	81
2.3 - A Masochistic Experience	84
2.4 - Transcendence/Non-Transcendence	92

Chapter 3	
<b>The Terror Of The Burkean Sublime</b>	<b>102</b>
3.1 - Weiskel and Anxiety	105
3.2 - The Turin Horse	109
3.3 - Turned Upside Down and Torn Apart	114
3.4 - Destruction as production	117
3.5 - Nothing further happening	129
3.6 - The Great Day Of His Wrath and The Sea of Ice	132
 Chapter 4	
<b>The Apocalypse of the Burkean Sublime</b>	<b>140</b>
4.1 – Crossroads	141
4.2 - In The Dust Of This Planet	145
4.3 - Triptych	149
4.4 - Attonitus 16mm and Vereor 16mm	156
 <b>Conclusion</b>	<b>164</b>
Analysis	164
Conclusion	166
 References	171
Bibliography	175
Appendix	Attached



## Introduction

The origin of this MRes project stems from two short statements on Burke's *Enquiry*. In the December 1948 article *The Sublime is Now* for Tiger's Eye, American abstract expressionist painter Barnett Newman casts a critical eye over the discourse of the subject and the hierarchal structure of beauty and the sublime. Although Newman writes that Burke's ideas are 'unsophisticated and primitive' (1948:25), he further states-

'To me Burke reads like a surrealist manual'

Luke White, in *The Sublime Now* writes of the approach of artist Damian Hirst to *Enquiry*-

'It often appears as if he has taken Burke's treatise on the sublime as a handbook for cultural production (which, of course, is exactly what it was).'

(White & Pajaczkowska 2009:156)

Taking these statements as a starting point, this project looks to engage with *Enquiry* through the practice of film and installation, and interpret Burke's physiological theories through the materiality of artistic practice to reach a closer understanding of the terror sublime, whilst examining how the terror of *Enquiry* has been interpreted, through a comparative analysis of relevant

literature. Rather than create work that incidentally incorporates Burkean ideas, this project uses the *Enquiry* as a 'manual' to create works from a Burkean perspective, taking further inspiration from contemporary writing on the *Enquiry*.

Each series of works created draws upon the idea of the terror-sublime, a theory that has been dismissed somewhat in the discourse of the subject as a precursor to the more reasoned, transcendent sublime of Kant. With its emphasis on the encounter between the self, the world and our ideas and concerned with a momentary realisation of a hierarchy of power, the Burkean sublime presents a dangerous, awe-inspiring and nihilistic cosmos.

As an artist working with analogue and digital film and projection, approaching Burke's *Enquiry* as a 'manual' with which to examine the sublime experience has opened up possibilities within my practice, leading to a new understanding on the material nature of film as object and of the relationship between material and image. That contemporary artists are drawn to the sense of shock, of drama and danger (which affect the audience rather than pacifying with a sense of beauty), is perhaps no surprise. In approaching this project, it became apparent that the traits which identify the Burkean sublime are more distinct than notions of shock alone. In the visual arts, elements of Burke's theory can be seen in the hazardous,



Casper David Friedrich *Sea Of Ice* (detail) (1823-24)



Captain John Noel's *The Epic of Everest* (1924)



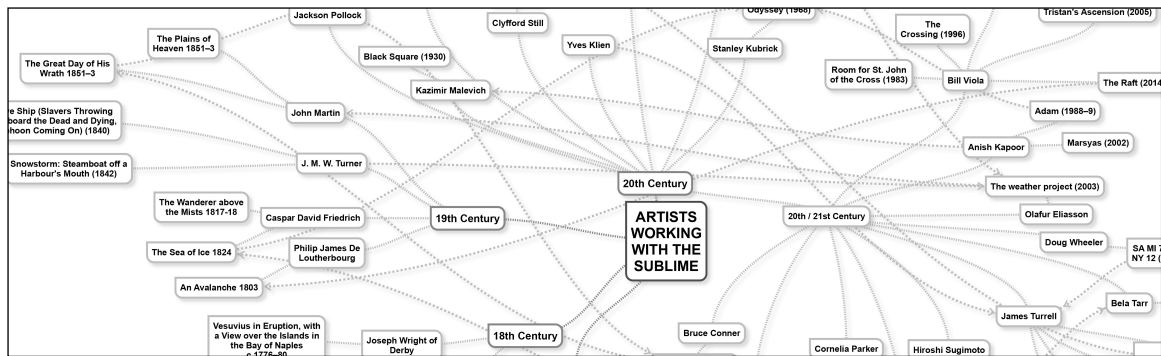
IC-98 *Abendland (Hours, Years, Aeons)* (2015)

destructive, dramatic and often imaginary landscapes of nineteenth century painters including Casper David Friedrich, John Martin and Philip James de Loutherbourg. But it is not only in the natural sublime of landscape painting that we can identify the causes and intentions of the *Enquiry*. A sense of the Burkean sublime is evident in the work of American abstract painters Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko and the black paintings of Ad Reinhardt, where representation and beauty are rejected<sup>1</sup>. There is something of the Burkean terror in Captain John Noel's 1924 documentary *The Epic of Everest* as, against the backdrop of ice and mountains, the human figure diminishes and the climbers dwindle in number. Anish Kapoor's deep voids suggest a vastness and infinity that is unsettling, and Bruce Conner's 1976 film *Crossroads* addresses power and annihilation through the repetition of nuclear test footage, which leads us again and again into the abstract. Hiroshi Sugimoto's photography series *Seascapes* shares a sense of deep (infinite) time and nihilistic space with IC-98's 2015 installation *Abendland: Hours, Years, Aeons*. Burke's thoughts on power and the unknowable terror of the infinite can also be discerned in Eugene Thacker's cosmic pessimism and theories of non-anthropocentrism.

The *Enquiry* locates the sublime in the ideas of vastness, power, in darkness and in privation. Utilising the causes of Burke's sublime experience and drawing comparisons with contemporary theory, this MRes uses artistic practice and process to access *Enquiry's* theories on Burke's own terms of the physical and the experiential.

---

<sup>1</sup> Barnett Newman *The Sublime is Now* (1948:25)



See Appendix (p7)

The practical work created as a part of this research draws upon the possibilities of the Burkean sublime as suggested by these artists, both historical and contemporary, whilst using Burke's text as a 'handbook for cultural production' (White & Pajaczkowska 2009:156). The video/sound/print series *The World Without Us* looks to Burke's notions of Power, Privation and Vastness, depicting the landscape in crisis. As the Burkean sublime concerns itself with a physical world and our reactions to it, the imagery of *The World Without Us* series presents a fracturing of this physical world and the separation of the sublime from the beautiful. These ideas are brought even closer to abstraction in the *Attonitus 16mm* film. *Strange Alteration* and *Triptych* both employ imagery from the *Enquiry* and, using the possibilities of digital editing, projection and sound, suggest *Obscurity* and the 'splendid confusion' (1759:71), which Burke attributes to sublime. These works contribute to the field of the sublime by engaging with Burke's theories in the fragmentary, large scale, non-narrative and visually abstract manner possible in the practice of film and installation. Burke warns against representational painting as being too imitative and exact to adequately produce the vague and obscure sublime image (1759:157), yet film and installation allow for the an

approach which is both poetical and physical, terms which Burke himself places the sublime in relation to. Discussing the idea of the numinous (which is related to the sublime experience<sup>2</sup>), artist Jungu Yoon suggests that a multimedia approach-

‘...has provided the viewer with the circumstances to access the out of the ordinary, or that which is beyond the natural order of things...[Multimedia works] interrelate in many ways with surrounding media, and involve and interact in dynamic processes with the viewers.’

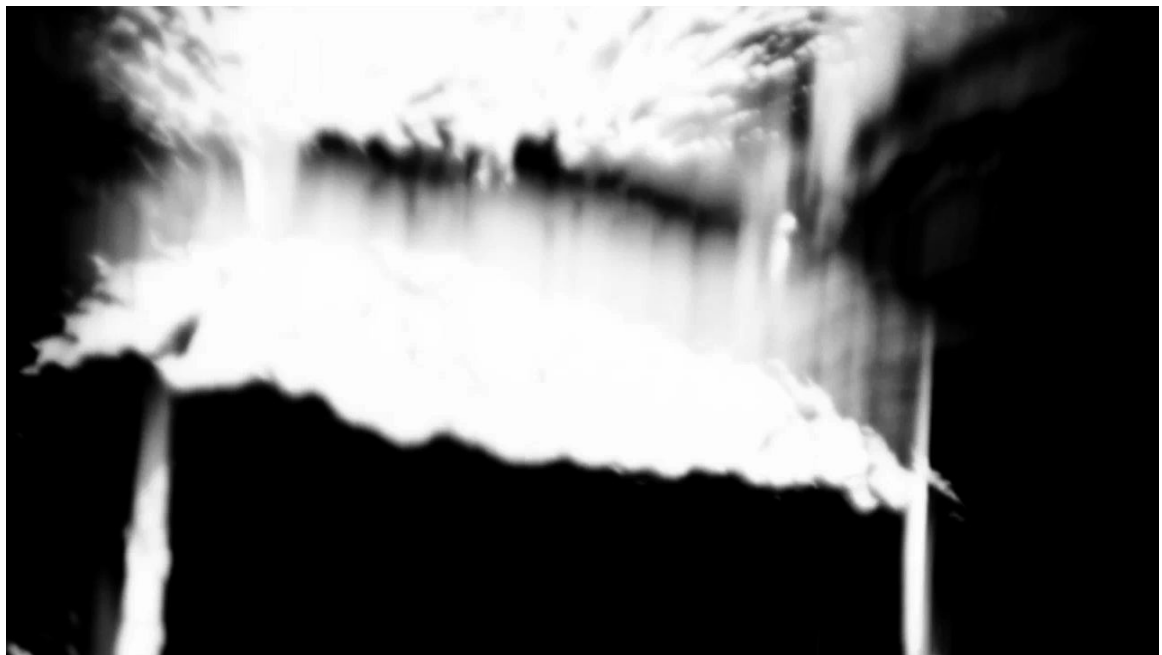
(Yoon 2010:128-9)

---

<sup>2</sup> See Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (1923)

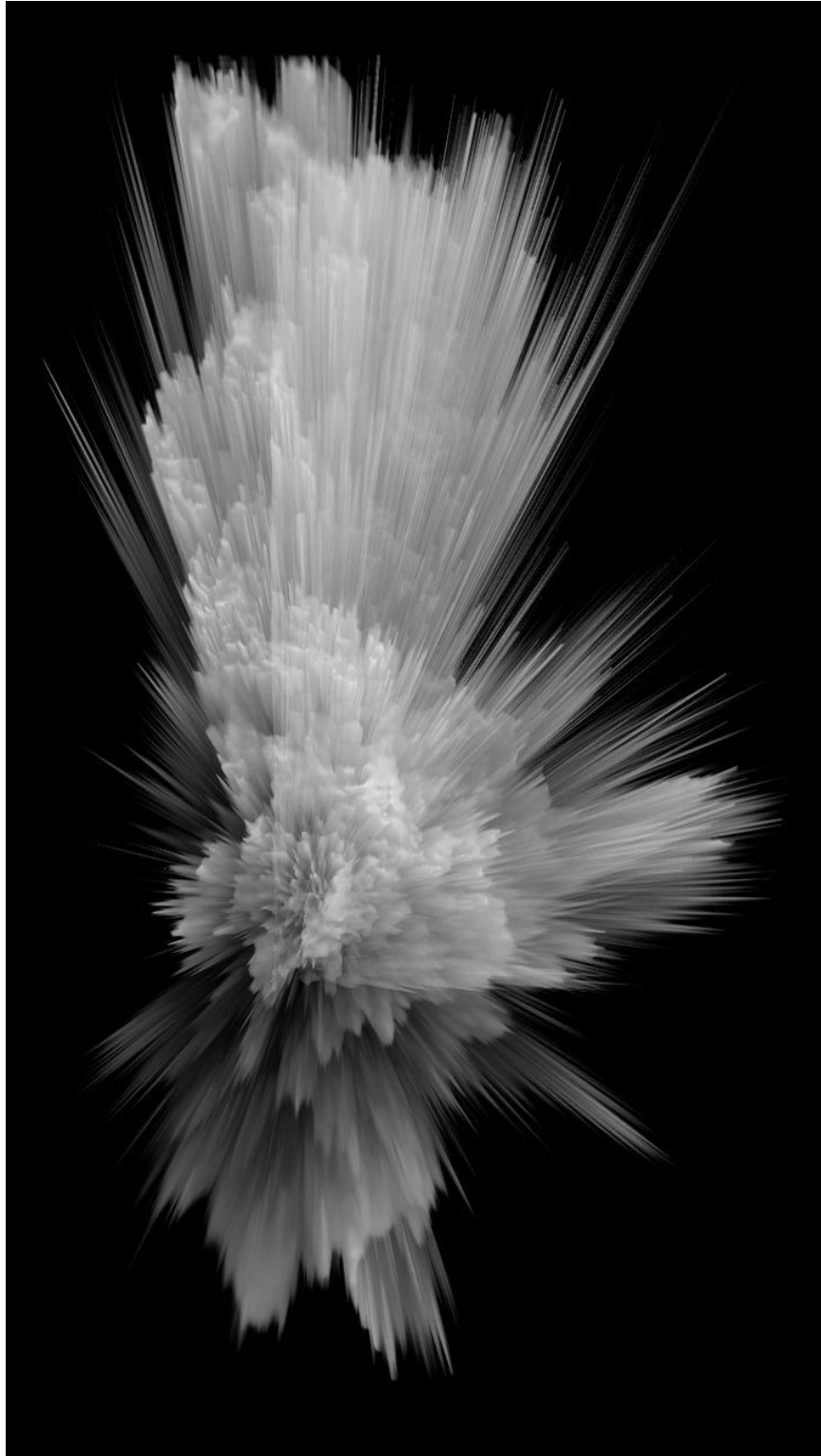


*The World Without Us* (Digital Film 13:55). This work became the centre-piece of the project, involving images of landscapes, destruction, voids and scale.



*Attonitus 16mm* (Digital Film 06:26). Developing from *The World Without Us*, this film saw the visual language move closer towards abstraction.





*The Ocean Is An Object Of No Small Terror* (Digital Film- Continuous Loop)  
This work evolved from ideas of the metaphysical in the Burkean sublime

## The Burkean Sublime Now

Claire Pajaczkowska notes in the introduction to *The Sublime Now*-

‘...the past century has seen a revolution in the understanding and status of language and representation, so that we now have a different relationship to limits, thresholds, liminalities and edges of culture; the spaces of sublimity are more evident to us, more various and more distinctive.’

(White & Pajaczkowska 2009:1)

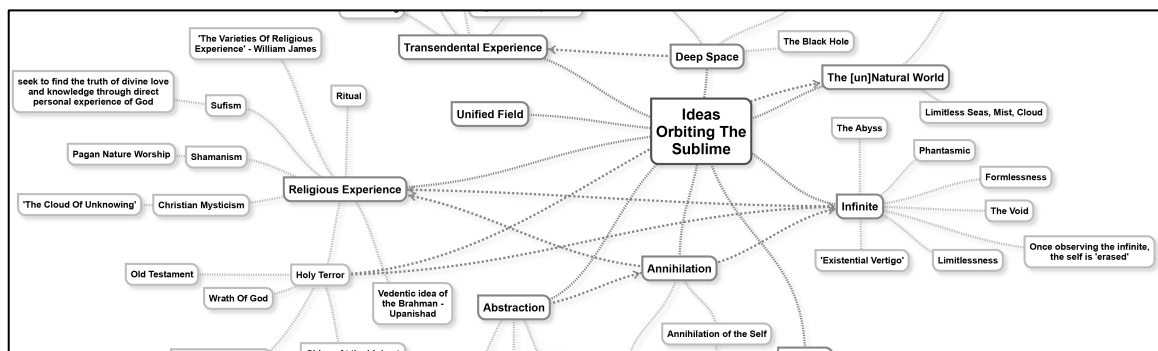
In a changing cultural landscape, the idea of a pleasurable terror - distinct from beauty - remains with us. Although falling out of favour occasionally, the sublime has seen a resurgence recently (Tate Britain’s major 2010 exhibition *Art And The Sublime*, Marc Quinn’s 2015 exhibition *The Toxic Sublime*, for example). In the wake of Kant’s *Critique Of The Power Of Judgement* (1790) writers including Hegel, Schopenhauer and Derrida have thoroughly excavated and explored the sublime, with new associations and interpretations adding to the field. This diversification has led to a ‘certain vagueness’ in the discourse (White & Pajaczkowska: 2009).

‘Kant’s centrality is probably inevitable, given his status as an intellectual giant of modern European thought; however, given that there are so many essays... which are critical of Kant and his legacy, we might also start to ask ourselves whether there

are not other, less explored, resources in the history of the sublime which may be of value in rethinking the concept.'

(White & Pajaczkowska 2009:15)

As we approach the two hundred and sixtieth anniversary of the publication of the *Enquiry*, this project addresses Pajaczkowska's suggestions of a need to re-examine resources outside of the shadow of Kant's work, engaging with the Burkean system through the practice of film and installation. These methods of practice allow for a specific kind of poetic exploration, in which correlations between Burke's theories, contemporary arts practice and philosophical and aesthetic theory can be drawn upon equally to produce new artwork, which includes the use of sound, duration and physical presence. Used conjointly, these methods can reveal further correlations and connections between concepts of the Burkean sublime to trace the distinct territory and implications of the *Enquiry*. This project is not a review of eighteenth century aesthetic theory, but a specific re-examining and engagement with the theories of Burke's *Enquiry* in an effort to discover the implications of Burke's terror sublime and how they can be interpreted today.



See Appendix (p9)

## Questions

- How is the Burkean sublime distinct from the idea of a transcendent sublime?
- What is the pleasurable terror at the heart of Burke's *Enquiry*?
- By addressing Burke's ideas through the artistic process, can a nihilism at the heart of Burke's system be traced?

## Objectives

- To create a series of gallery-based works which respond to Burke's theories, applying Burke's ideas to contemporary art practice.
- To examine Burke's theories through the use of research through praxis, to reach an understanding of the subject through a system of making and reflection.
- To undertake a comparative analysis of texts regarding the sublime via an overview of relevant literature
- To identify traits of the Burkean sublime in contemporary art practice within the comparative analysis

## Methodology

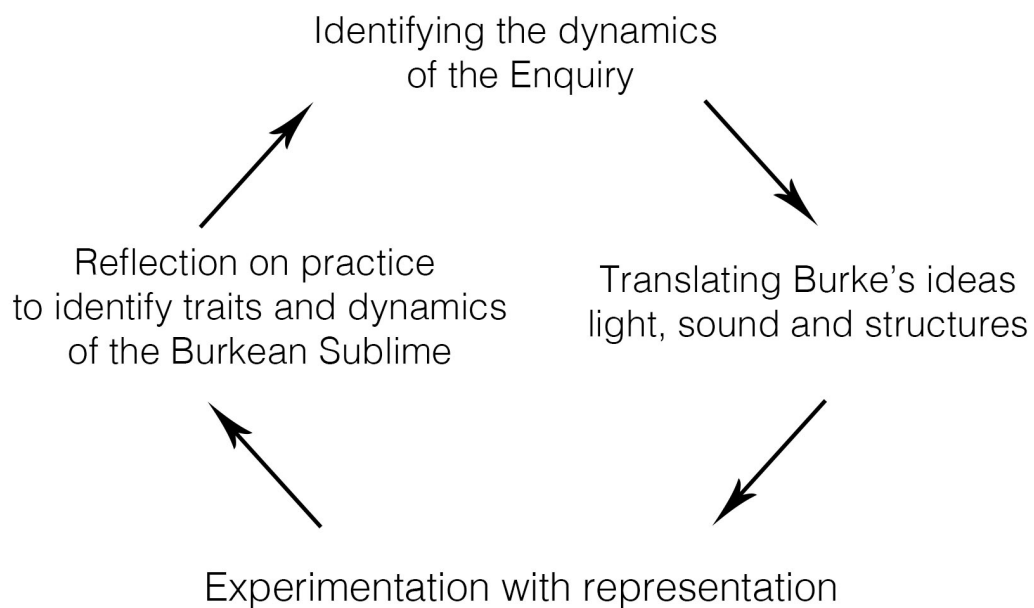
- To identify the dynamics of the *Enquiry*
- To use practice to access ideas of the Burkean sublime
- Translating Burke's ideas in conjunction- light, sound and structures

- Reflection on practice to identify traits and dynamics of the Burkean Sublime

## Methodology

This practice based research project utilises a cyclical system of research.

- Identifying the dynamics of the *Enquiry*
- Translating Burke's ideas - light, sound and structures
- Experimentation with representation
- Reflection on practice to identify traits and dynamics of the Burkean Sublime



## Identifying the dynamics of the Enquiry

To begin the process of the research, several word charts were created<sup>3</sup>. The intention was to map the territory of the Burkean sublime, listing ideas, imagery and artworks that were associated with the theories of the *Enquiry*. Working in this manner, utilising imagery, effects and ideas of the *Enquiry* directly as if it were a manual that informed the processes of the work, connections could be discerned and divergences noted between concepts and ideas surrounding Burke's system. The origin for the beginning of each chart was not fixed, but determined by either

- an essay or piece of writing
- a question which arose from Burke's text
- a theme or idea emerging from the process of making

These charts then were added to as relevant ideas arose from the practical artistic process.

This led to identification of themes for

- the comparative analysis
- the generation of practical work

---

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix i

As a visual artist, these charts allowed me to see graphically connections outside of context (between artworks and writing) and outside of a timescale (eighteenth century writing alongside 21<sup>st</sup> century theory). This aided in the poetical approach to Burke's text and was inspired by Burke's statement-

'The truth is, if poetry gives us a noble assemblage of words corresponding to many noble ideas, which are connected by circumstances of time or place, or related to each other as cause and effect, or associated in any natural way, they may be moulded together in any form, and perfectly answer their end.'

(Burke 1759:156)

### Translating Burke's ideas - light, sound and structures

Upon identifying connections within the word charts, the second stage of the process was to interpret or translate these ideas into practical work. Within the word charts, themes and recurring imagery begin to emerge, which provided a starting point for film projects. Ideas would be tested as sketches short clips and maquettes. This process was documented as an ongoing blog, which includes film, sound and structural tests, and initial analysis and commentary.

<http://sublimefilminstallation.tumblr.com>.

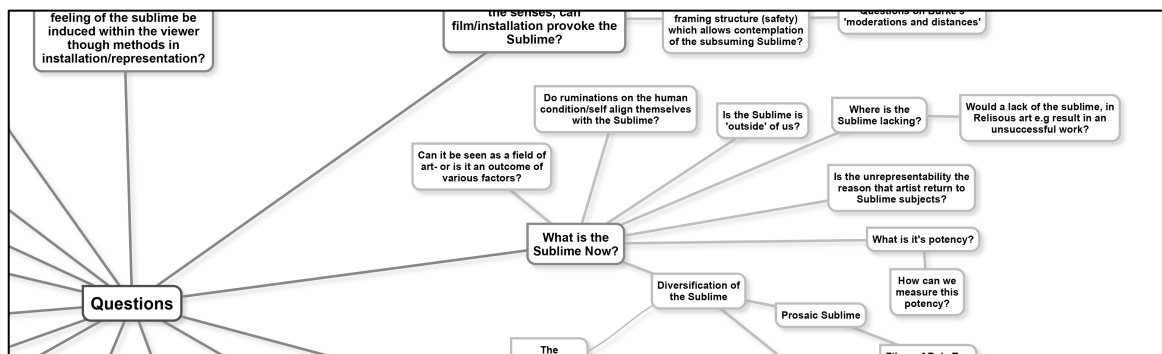


## Experimentation with representation

After the initial tests were created, a second process of making and artistic production was begun, to refine ideas in reference to the themes that emerged from the word charts. It was at this stage that the materials used were able to inform the research (for example the destruction of the 35mm slides of the Alps in *The World Without Us* series).

## Reflection on practice to identify traits and dynamics of the Burkean Sublime

In analysing the practical work, any new connections, questions and themes were added to the word charts, with the aim of generating further practical works and defining areas of the research which could inform the comparative analysis.



See Appendix (p1)

## Introduction to the Burkean Sublime

Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1759) occupies uneasy ground in the discourse of the subject. Although praised as having a 'massive and lasting impact on the discussion of the sublime' (Shaw 2006:48), Burke's idea of a physiological terror sublime has been described as being 'cumbersome, not to say silly, and (depending) on an antiquated physiology' (Weiskel 1976:88). Throughout literature on the subject the *Enquiry* is acknowledged as an important, yet limited work.

'Burke described many emotions associated with the sublime, the conditions under which the sublime may be experienced, and he cited many instances of terror incited by fear. His analysis, however, did not proceed beyond such descriptions.'

(Berleant 2010:12)

Published over 30 years before Kant's *Critique Of The Power Of Judgment* (1790), which came to dominate literature on the subject of the sublime (Crowther 1989:2), Burke's *Enquiry* has been compared, and evaluated in relation, to Kant's text<sup>4</sup>. Yet, as seen in the writing of Vanessa Ryan and Thomas McEvilley, this

---

<sup>4</sup> See - Ferguson 1992:3, Weiskel 1976:93

historical reading of the sublime as a progression from eighteenth century British aesthetics to Kant's mathematical and dynamic subjective sublime is, perhaps, a misstep. If we take this stance, that the *Enquiry* is not merely a step in some teleological progression toward the transcendent and rational sublime of Kant but a separate theory with its own outcome and intention, then the territory of the Burkean sublime can be more clearly defined.

### The Burkean System

With the *Enquiry*, Burke attempts a process of categorisation of events and objects that he believes evoke feelings of the sublime or of the beautiful. Within the *Enquiry*, these two states are distinct and separate (1759:88). Burke is modest in his intentions- he repeatedly states that the *Enquiry* is an investigation and a meditation on the feelings aroused by objects (and ideas) and how they may affect us. Perhaps aware of the ramifications of discussing as nebulous a field as *our Ideas*, Burke states the limits of the *Enquiry*-

‘I do not pretend that I shall ever be able to explain, why certain affectations of the body produce such a distinct emotion of the mind, and no other; or why the body is at all affected by the mind, or the mind by the body.’

(Burke 1759:117)

The Burkean system begins with the question of pain and pleasure. Drawing on the work of Locke (1759:31), Burke suggests that pain and pleasure are separate

entities and are not dependent upon one another. The natural state of the mind is that of 'indifference' (1759:30). From this neutral state we are moved by external phenomena to either pain or pleasure.

'There is nothing which I can distinguish in my mind with more clearness than the three states, of indifference, of pleasure, and of pain. Every one of these I can perceive without any sort of idea of its relation to any thing else.'

(Burke 1759:31)

For Burke, once *pleasure* is attained, it then subsides and we are returned to our state of indifference, tinged with a 'soft tranquility' (1759:32). This *pleasure* is the result of the experience of *beauty* - beautiful objects (and ideas) provide us with a sense of pleasure. What are more problematic than the reasonably simple idea of the beautiful providing us with *pleasure* are the notions of *pain* and the sublime. Pain and the removal of pain provide a quite different outcome and feeling-

'...let us recollect in what state we have found our minds upon escaping great danger, or... some cruel pain... impressed with a sense of awe, in a sort of tranquility shadowed with horror.'

(Burke 1759:32)

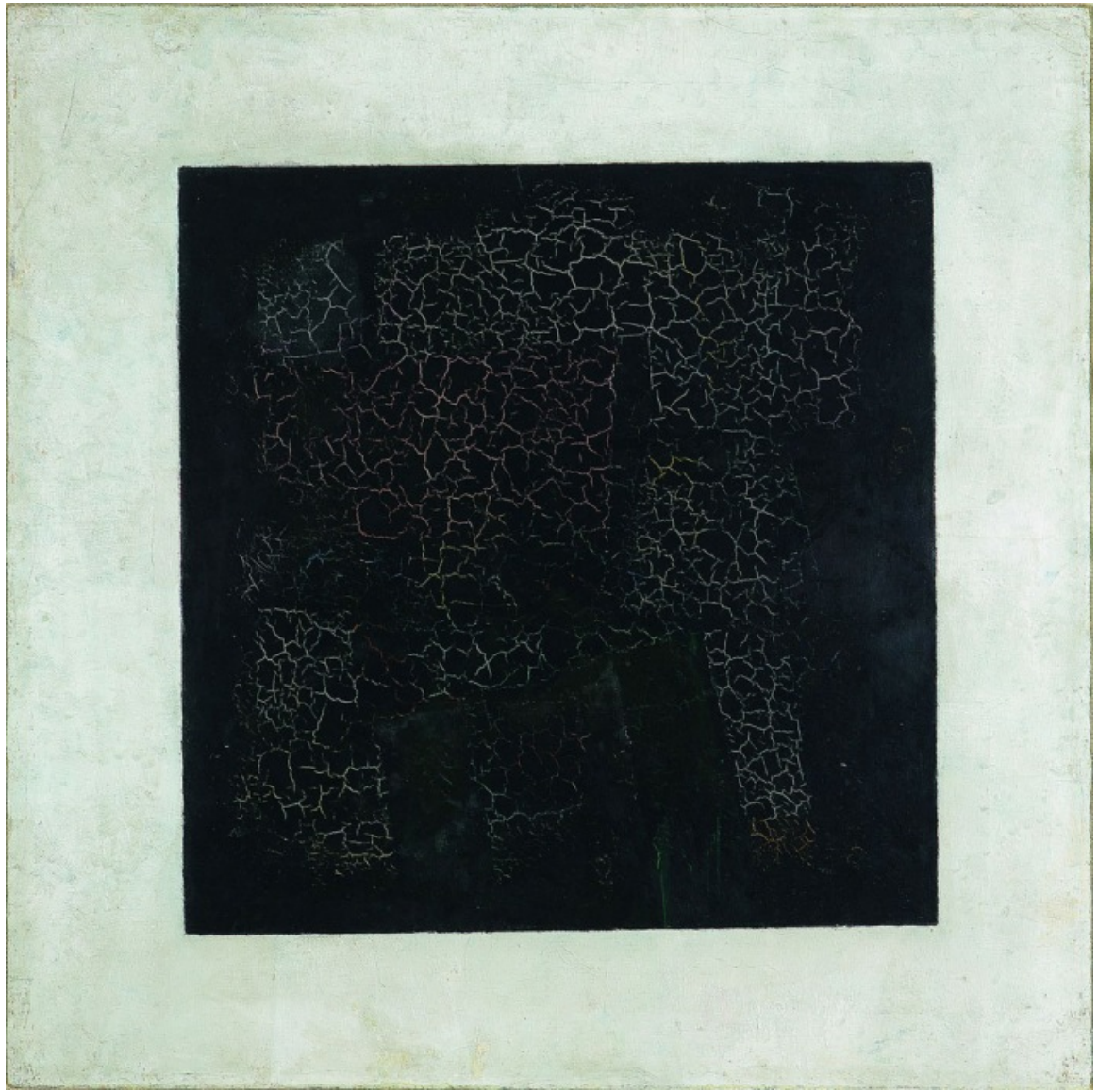
So the removal of pain, which leaves us impressed and in awe is, according to Burke, not *pleasure* (because pain and pleasure are separate entities) but neither does it remain *pain*. Burke terms this feeling of the removal of pain *delight*. Objects (and ideas) that provide us with a sense of *delight* are Sublime. This notion of *delight* arising from non-beautiful objects raises correlations between Burke's theories and Modern art. The American abstract painters, particularly Barnett Newman, sought an end to the tyranny of the Greek derived idea of beauty, claiming that 'The impulse of modern art was this desire to destroy beauty.' (Newman, 1948:26). In this sense, Burke's theories foreshadow Modern (and post-modern, and post-post-modern) Art's discarding of Renaissance notions of beauty (Newman, 1948:26).

'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'

(Burke 1759:36)



Barnett Newman, *Untitled (The void)* (1946)



Malevich *Black Square* (1913)

The Burkean sublime is an 'incomprehensible darkness, more awful, more striking, more terrible' (1759:58). Yet rather than claim that we find *delight* in genuinely horrible or terrible things, Burke takes one step back. At a certain distance, or viewed from a position of safety, the terrible thing which threatens us is no longer capable of actually harming us. The sublime becomes a vicarious thrill, the shock of the encounter exciting us away from our default mode of 'indifference'.

'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.'

(Burke 1759:36)

Burke goes on to categorise objects, sounds and experiences as sublime or beautiful, including Terror, Obscurity, Power, Privation, Vastness, Infinity, Magnificence, Light, Sound and Loudness as the causes of the feeling of the sublime. In this attempt at categorisation, Burke's *Enquiry* 'far exceeded, in terms of scope and intellectual acuity, the outpourings of previous writers' (Shaw 2006:48). Within the taxonomy of the sublime, the notions of terror and power recur throughout, as Burke proposes the physiological affects of these objects and experiences. The physical affect of these objects upon our bodies in turn affects the mind. Darkness and extreme light are sublime because they are too great for our senses to deal with. They cause a physical pain to the eyes as



they overpower us. Loud sounds are sublime and the noise ‘awakes a great and awful sensation in the mind’ (1759:75). There is a sense of physical destruction, which in turn induces a sense of fear. Privation and absence are also linked to the sensation of the sublime. In a brief section within the *Enquiry*, Burke cites ‘Vacuity, Darkness, Solitude and Silence’ as ‘all terrible’ (1759:65). In describing the poet Virgil’s use of privation, Burke states that he seems ‘seized with a religious horror’ (1759:65). The sublime comes not only from that which is, but also in that which is not. It can arise from excess (as an overload of the senses) or from lack (an absence of comfort). Like Longinus, whose *On the Sublime* Burke draws upon (1759:46), the *Enquiry* also finds the sublime in language and poetry, specifically for Burke in the ‘gloomy pomp’ (1759:55) of Milton’s dramatic and bleak descriptions of Hell in *Paradise Lost*.

The sublime comes not only from the physicality of Burke’s causes, but also from the ideas of darkness, or of privation, or of infinity. It breaks free of its empirically provable actuality and becomes possible in our perception of those ideas. At this point the sublime is not longer tied to what *really* is, but can emerge from what we feel and experience in our ideas.

## Perspectives on the Burkean Sublime- A Comparative Analysis

This comparative analysis focuses on the terror sublime of Burke. By examining the notions, criticisms and approaches towards a range of aspects of *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, this written component identifies distinct qualities of the Burkean sublime, looks to historical and contemporary art that embodies these qualities and includes notions and ideas which have arisen within the practice based research.

This comparative analysis project confines itself to

- The interpretations and criticism of Burke's methods of empiricism
- The question of a non-transcendent sublime
- The interpretations of the terror of the Burkean system and re-evaluations of the *Enquiry*.
- The final section draws parallels between the terror of Burke and Eugene Thacker's notion of the *world without us*, and how this correlation suggests a speculative reading of the Burkean sublime.

## Chapter 1 - The Empiricism of Burke's Enquiry

This chapter examines the criticism of Burke's empiricism in the *Enquiry*, how this empiricism was approached in the process of artistic practice, and the question of the metaphysical in Burke's sensual theory of the sublime experience. In Burke's sublime of the purely sensuous, how can metaphysical concepts like a deity, or external Other be reconciled?

In reviewing the criticism of Burke, it is the empiricist methodology at the heart of the *Enquiry* that is seen to be problematic. Burke establishes the theory of the sublime on an empirical model of sensory experience, of things and objects, which affect us in a uniform manner. Burke looks to categorise these objects as sublime (or the cause of the sublime experience) according to their sensual qualities. Burke's scientific, empiricist approach to the subject is revealed in the *Preface to the Second Edition*

‘...we ought to examine every distinct ingredient in the composition, one by one; and reduce every thing to the utmost simplicity; since the condition of our nature binds us to a strict law and very narrow limits.’

(1759:4)

Ironically, it is Burke's attempts to make the sublime 'distinct' through categorisation that lead him into unsure waters. Burke appears to be concerned

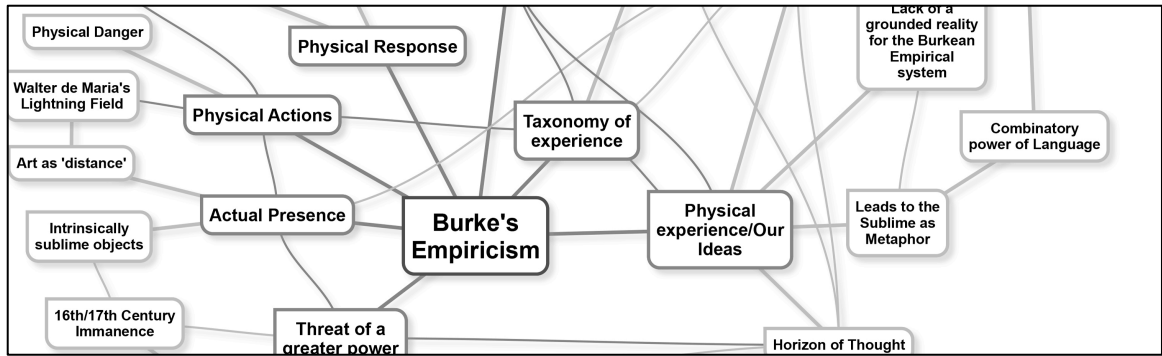
with the encounter between the identifiable, sensuous world and us, but then the *Enquiry* also begins to find the sublime in ideas and associations. The precise nature of the location of the sublime begins to slip, undone from within as Burke equates objects with mental images. Language and context begin to change the quality of objects, to allow them to become sublime. In accepting that ideas are equal to the object itself, cracks begin to appear in the notion of an empirically proven categorisation of the sublime experience.

### 1.1 The Scientific Enquiry

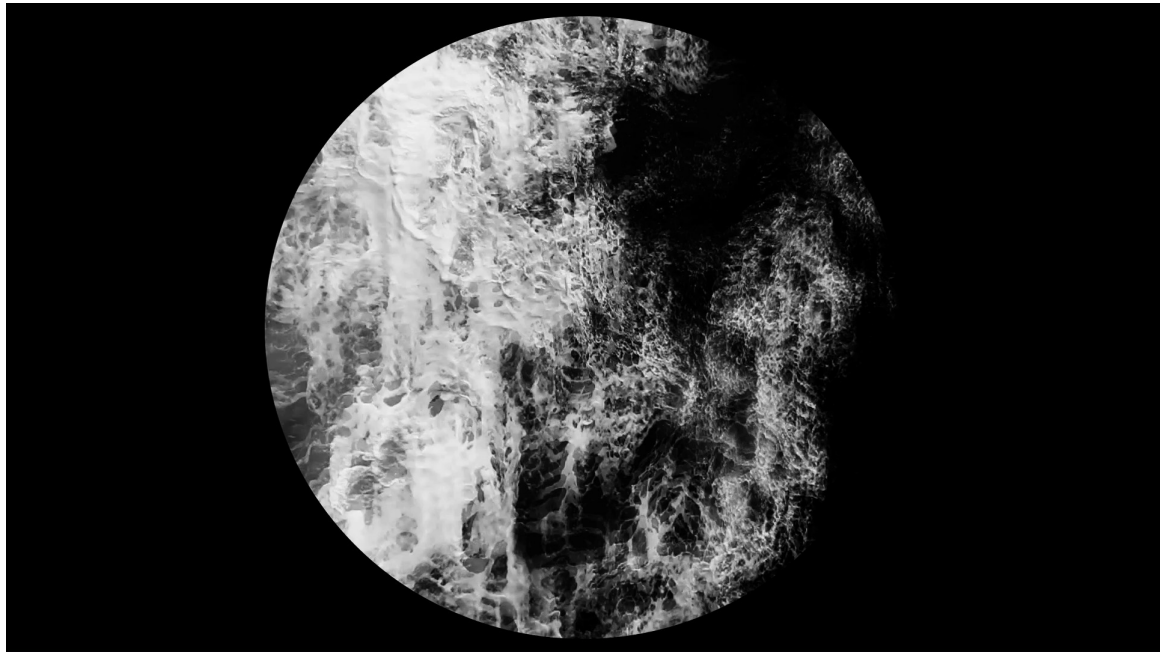
Phillip Shaw in his overview of subject *The Sublime*, notes that the empiricism of Burke places the sublime as ‘an object not only of philosophical but also scientific enquiry.’ (2006:49). The sublime becomes a practical, physical event. How the body physically reacts to objects causes a modified pain. (Burke 1759:36). For example, the object that appears to be infinite is difficult to look at in its entirety, loud sounds startle, and extreme light or darkness leave us sightless. These are, for Burke, empirically testable notions, which affect us all equally. As physiological phenomena, they are repeatable, testable and based upon an idea of how we interact with the physical world in which we live.

*Strange Alteration*, the initial work produced for this project, is an exploration of these ideas of empiricism, scientific enquiry and subjectivity. Using the *Enquiry* as a manual, this film and installation drew on imagery from several chapters which Burke cites as causes of the sublime– oceans, fells, and ‘heathen temples’- with a soundtrack of NASA recordings of space and a binaural beat

with a perceived 18Hz differential. Burke discusses the use of sound to evoke feelings of the sublime. Rather than rhetoric, Burke discusses over several paragraphs how intermittent sounds and noise (as opposed to music) can produce an anxious uncertainty (Burke 1759:75-8). Following Burke's lead, I sought to implement these ideas within this piece. The binaural beat is produced as two sound waves (in this case 200Hz and 218Hz), played simultaneously. This produces an illusionary 'beat' of 18Hz, which is subjective- the beat appears to be there, but does not actually exist. The film itself was a compilation of several test films, developed in the early stages of the project. Once digitally edited together, these films became a non-narrative, collage of images, played to a single participant at a time, with sound provided by headphones. Before and after viewing the film, participants were asked to fill in a bi-polar emotional response test (BART), to ascertain any emotional shift from a calm or relaxed state, to an agitated or anxious state. The approach was an attempt to elicit a physical sensation, directly using themes of the sublime as noted in the *Enquiry*, as if it were a handbook for production. This resulted in a theatrically scientific installation (as noted by participants who felt that the BART tests added a dramatic touch). Yet it was the empirical nature of the installation that I felt, on reflection, stifled some of the numinous aspects raised by the Burkean sublime. The theatrically scientific framework, much like Burke's initial emphasis of objects as sublime, brought with it a sense of order, of reason, to the detriment of the sublime moment or experience.



See Appendix (p16)



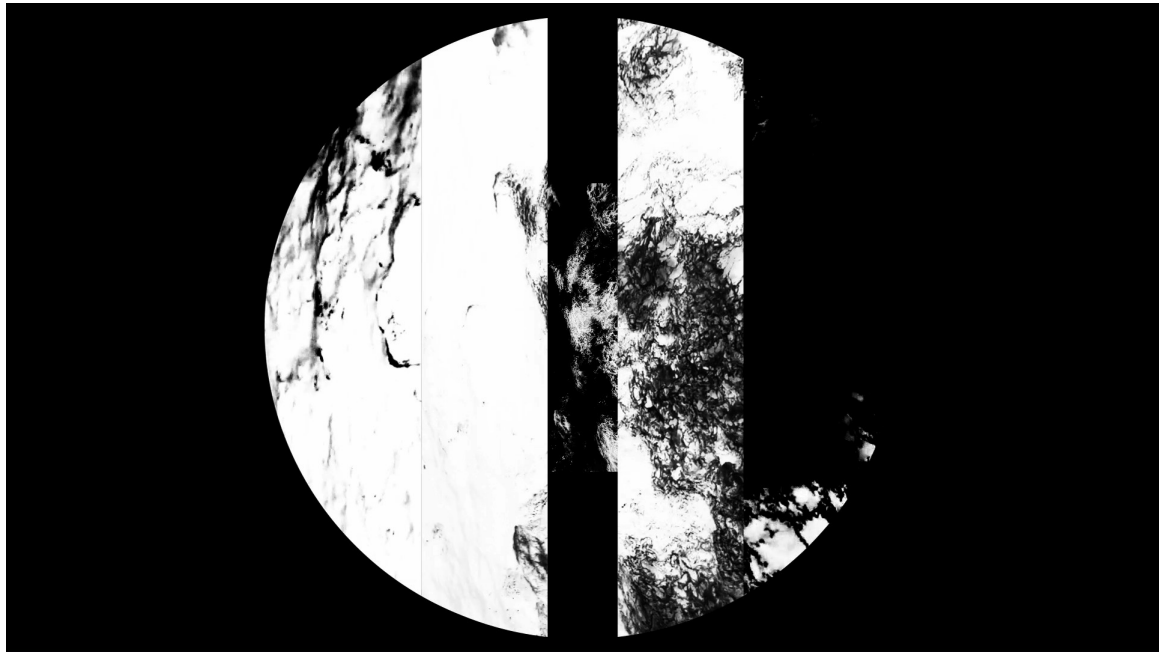
Strange Alteration (Digital Film 03: 42min)

This installation piece was projected onto a circular screen, to a single viewer at a time.



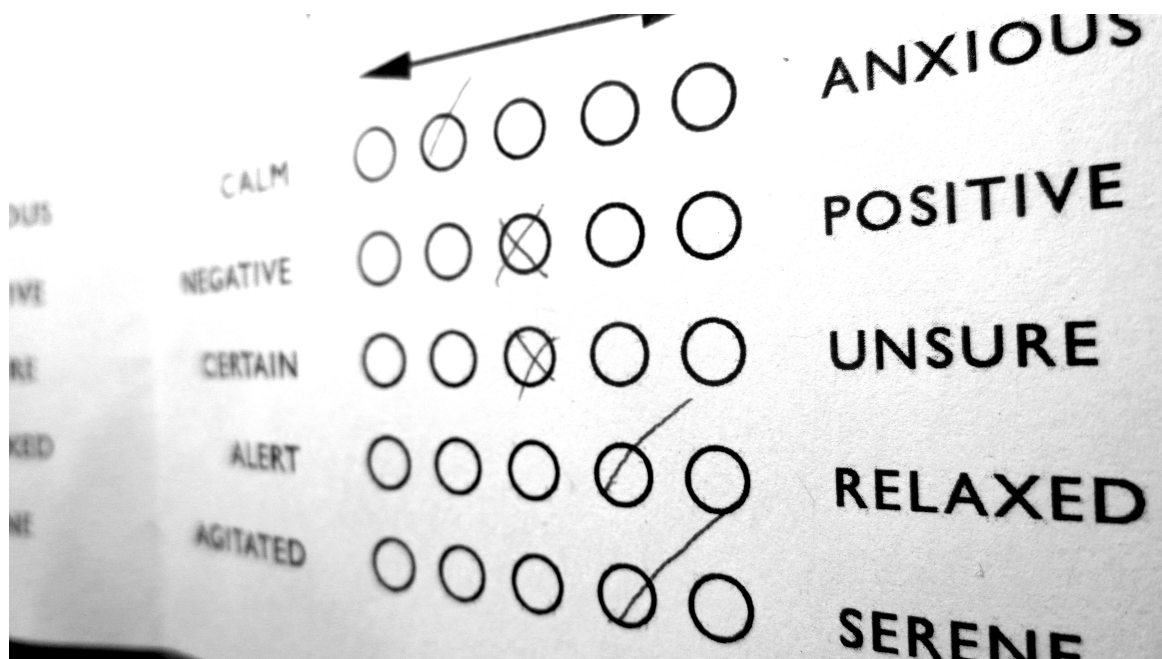
Strange Alteration (Digital Film 03: 42min)

The soundtrack was delivered through headphones, to stimulate an immersive experience.



Strange Alteration (Digital Film 03: 42min)

The film was a collage of imagery, drawn directly from the *Enquiry*.



Strange Alteration (Completed BART Test)

These emotional response tests encouraged a sense of the experiential in audience members.



## 1.2 The Empirical and the Metaphysical

‘It is one thing, for instance, to claim that my feeling of lethargy is caused by the physical state of hunger and quite another to state that my idea of infinity is produced by eyestrain.’

(Shaw 2006:49, 50)

As Shaw demonstrates, the notion that our idea of infinity is made sublime by the stresses placed upon our eye muscles (when observing an object which implies infinitude) is, from a standpoint of the twenty-first century, a little tenuous.

Yet aside from Burke’s physiological inaccuracies or tenuous theories of *how* stimuli affect the physical body (which in turn affect the mind) (Burke 1759:124), the empirical framework has greater ramifications for Shaw. Namely, that by categorising the sublime as a sensuous, physical phenomena, the experience is removed from the metaphysical.

‘As a follower of the empiricist school of philosophy, Burke maintains that our knowledge of the world is derived entirely from the evidence of the senses: what we can see, taste, touch and smell. The argument of the treatise, in contrast to that of his predecessors, is thus almost entirely secular: God is no

longer required to guarantee the authenticity of our experience.'

(Shaw 2006:49)

As noted in regard to the *Strange Alteration* installation, the purely sensuous approach to the sublime appears to be lacking some form of metaphysical presence. In the framework of scientific enquiry (however theatrical), the sublime appears as little more than reaction. Although startling at times, and occasionally poetic in its approach, it is devoid of the 'existential vertigo', which Paul Crowther cites (1989:170) as an element of the sublime experience. *Strange Alteration* exhibited the imagery of the sublime. Yet the sense of reason and the measurements of emotional state, without a further sense of a strange, spiritual element, appeared limited. This led me to question the position of the spiritual element present in the Burkean system.



Strange Alteration at the A\OID Exhibition, MMU 2015

Despite the claims of Phillip Shaw, Burke makes repeated affirmations throughout *Enquiry* that confirm a spiritual element- that all sublime experience is derived from the 'Godhead'. In what is a pivotal chapter of the *Enquiry* (1759:59), Burke names the Divine as the ultimate origin of the sublime. What should be noted is that Burke does not tie the origin of the sublime to the Christian god, but a more primitive deity. Burke treads a fine line, not aligning the *Enquiry* with Christian ideas of the Divine, yet retaining the metaphysical thought as the font of the sublime. In this respect, Burke is suggesting a Godhead much closer to Rudolf Otto's notion of the *Numinous* outlined in *The Idea of the Holy*.

'Before the Christian religion had... humanized the idea of the Divinity... there was very little said of the love of God. The followers of Plato have something of it...the other writers...nothing at all... Thus we have traced power through its several gradations unto the highest of all, where our imagination is finally lost; and we find terror... its inseparable companion... Now, as power is undoubtedly a capital source of the sublime, this will point out evidently from whence its energy is derived, and to what class of ideas we ought to unite it.'

(Burke 1759:62, 63)

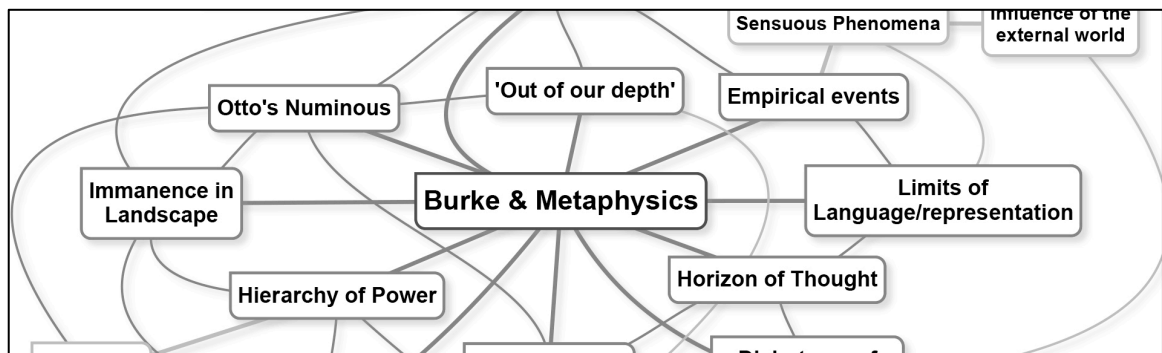
In *The Ocean Is An Object Of No Small Terror*, I returned to the ocean imagery of the *Strange Alteration* installation and the causes suggested by the *Enquiry*. Taking Burke's work as a manual, I examined the section on Terror.

'...the ocean is an object of no small terror. Indeed terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently the ruling principle of the sublime.'

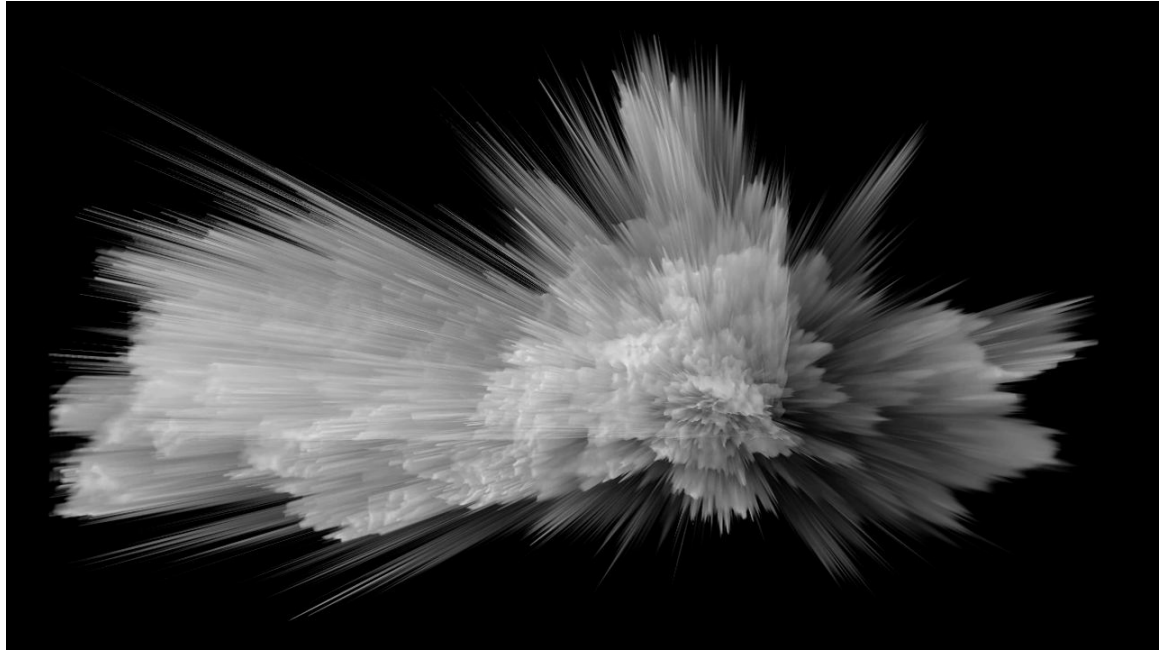
(Burke 1759:54)

From this short section I took the notion of the ocean as object that hides within it a greater depth than appears at its surface. As a physical, mutable object, I began to think of the ocean as straining against its physicality, of evoking a terror. To create the film *The Ocean Is An Object Of No Small Terror*, I began filtering the constantly shifting images of a sea-scape through digital processes. I sought to include some element of the numinous with the sense of the power of nature found, for example, in footage of hurricanes or tornadoes. The intention was to portray some sense of the immanence of Burke's deity, which involved both representation (of the physical power) and a lack, or privation, of depiction. As the ocean footage was processed, it became more difficult to discern what was being shown, as the image was distorted and abstracted. Yet the movement and the constantly shifting nature remained. I did not want to make a kind of religious work as such, but to look instead to the sense of the Godhead in the *Enquiry*, as a mysterious other, a force that is made apparent and in the world, away from religious iconography. As the

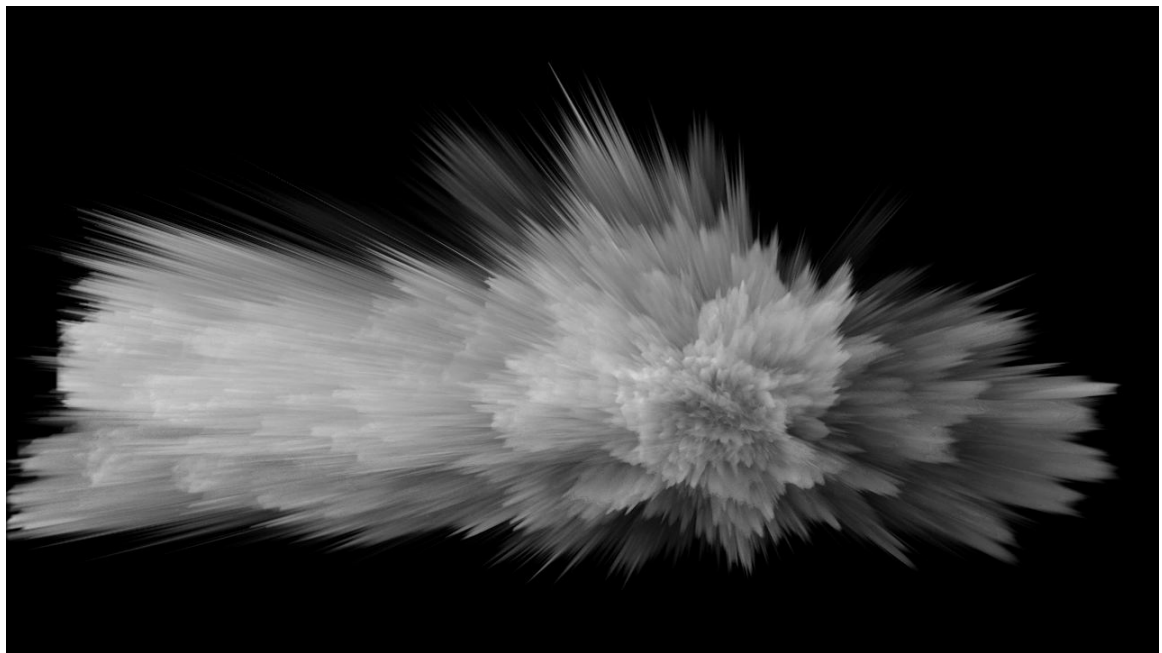
imagery gathered for *The Ocean Is An Object Of No Small Terror* was distorted and developed, I became aware that there was a resemblance to nuclear or atomic imagery. Projecting the footage, I placed the projector onto its side, producing a taller image, over two and a half metres, which appeared to break out of the floor as an explosion, reaching up to the ceiling. Rather than a film as such, the work took on the appearance of a light sculpture, reminiscent of the work of Anthony McCall. The stark monochrome of the projected image suggested an ethereal quality, which was absent from the *Strange Alteration* installation. It initially seemed counter intuitive, that a process as digital as was used in *The Ocean Is An Object Of No Small Terror* could produce a numinous or immanent element. But it was the original motion of the seascape that grounded the digital qualities, with its organic movement.



See Appendix (p19)



*The Ocean Is An Object Of No Small Terror (Digital Film- Continuous Loop)*  
The continually shifting, organic movement of the ocean was retained in the digitally altered imagery.



*The Ocean Is An Object Of No Small Terror (Digital Film- Continuous Loop)*



*The Ocean Is An Object Of No Small Terror* (Digital Film- Continuous Loop)  
Experimentation with projection techniques produced new visual connections  
with apocalyptic imagery.

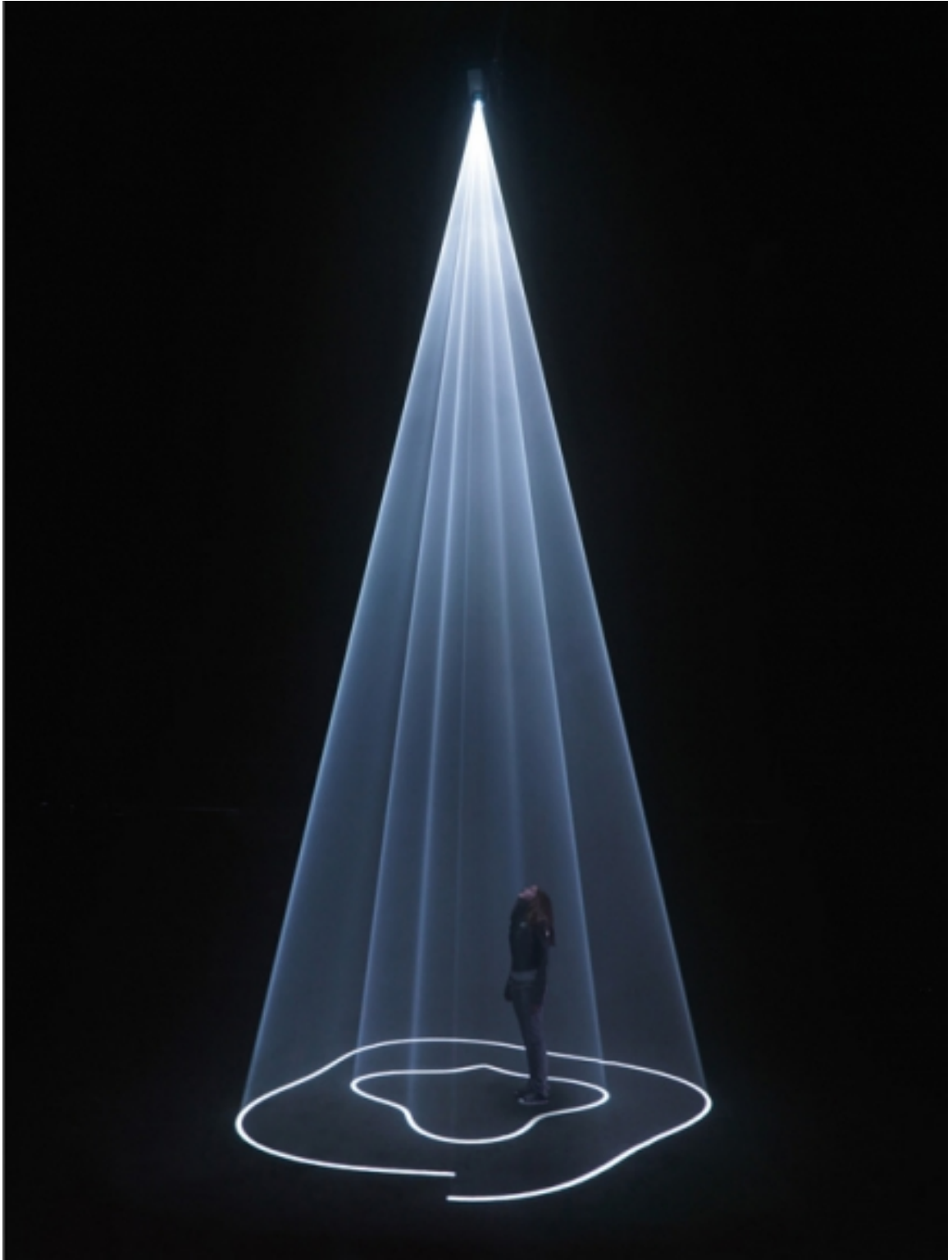


*The Ocean Is An Object Of No Small Terror* (Digital Film- Continuous Loop)  
Further projection experimentation.



*The Ocean Is An Object Of No Small Terror* (Digital Film- Continuous Loop)  
The film projected into a gallery space.





Anthony McCall *Coupling* (2009)

### 1.3 A Horizon of Thought

Within the *Enquiry*, there is the question of how Burke can claim that the Godhead is the source of the sublime and at the same time limit the *Enquiry* to an empirical exercise? It seems unlikely that the metaphysical and the empirical could operate harmoniously within the same system. If Burke places the sublime in the purely sensuous, how can metaphysical concepts like a deity be a part of that system? There are two factors that allow for this possibility-

Firstly, that Burke places the Godhead as the unknowable pinnacle of the hierarchy of the sublime. As an unknowable object, Burke's deity is beyond language and beyond the remit of *Enquiry*, which studies the physiological aspects alone. Burke places us in a purely sensuous world, but acknowledges a further, greater power.

‘That great chain of causes, which, linking one to another, even to the throne of God himself, can never be unravelled by any industry of ours. When we go but one step beyond the immediate sensible qualities of things, we go out of our depth. All we do after is but a faint struggle, that shows we are in an element which does not belong to us.’

(Burke 1759:117)

It is a quality of the Burkean power/deity that it is beyond us, out of our depth. In this sense, Burke draws a line between our sensuous world and the world

beyond. We are affected by this secondary world, yet it remains unknowable to us.

Secondly, there is the notion of the divine within the natural sublime. Thomas Weiskel, in *The Romantic Sublime*, notes that elements of the idea of God had, through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, become embodied in the natural sublime.

‘If the only route to the intellect lies through the senses, belief in a supernatural Being finds itself insecure. God had to be saved, even if he had to marry the world of appearances... The emotions traditionally religious were displaced from the Deity and became associated first with the immensity of space and secondarily with the natural phenomena (oceans, mountains), which seemed to approach that immensity. Soon a sense of the numinous was diffused through all the grander aspects of nature.’

(Weiskel, 1976: 14)

Therefore it can be stated that Burke, by accepting that the divine is absolutely beyond us, to the point that to discuss it or attempt to articulate it in language directly would lead us ‘out of our depth’, suggests a horizon of thought. This horizon of thought can be felt in the ‘grander aspects of nature’. The sublime we encounter, whether through physical affects or the combination of words, is

ultimately traceable to this unreachable 'Godhead'. The numinous qualities of Burke's deity can be experienced in the physical or linguistic aspects of the sublime (infinity, immensity (Weiskel 1976:14)).

This numinous quality can be discerned in Philip James de Louthembourg's *An Avalanche* (1803), where a break in the clouds illuminates the falling rock and snow, which threatens the obviously terrified climbers who are dwarfed by the power of nature. This connection between the numinous and the phenomenal avoids any strict connotations of a God, but there is still the sense of the Other, via the 'grander aspects of nature'. This immanence is also present in Bill Viola's film work *The Raft* (2004). Although removed from the landscape, the torrent of water that threatens and subsumes the actors appears suddenly and with great force. Viola describes the work as 'an image of destruction and survival'<sup>5</sup>, and there is a sense of an unseen greater force at work, which makes its presence felt through physical phenomena. Like de Louthembourg's *An Avalanche*, the physical phenomena is of an indistinct form- the blast of water is lit from behind and the mist as it hits the bodies of the actors is illuminated, the whole scene abstracted by the torrent. de Louthembourg's avalanche is similarly illuminated. The rough rocks echoed by the clouds of snow and the clouds above.

---

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.acmi.net.au/exhibitions/past-exhibitions/2011/bill-viola-the-raft/>



Philip James de Loutherbourg *An Avalanche* (1803)



Bill Viola *The Raft* (2004)

Phillip Shaw's separation of the sublime and the metaphysical arises from what he perceives is the lack of a *necessity* for a God in Burke's empirical system. If empiricism is only concerned with the physiological affects of objects, and the idea of the sublime originates from this affect, then at what point is a God required to intervene? Shaw's reading of a sublime without metaphysics denies the *form* of the deity in *Enquiry*, which in the history of the discourse is diffused into the material world (in the natural sublime of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries). Burke references this immanent Godhead-

‘To be struck with his power, it is only necessary that we should open our eyes.’

(Burke 1759:63)

Burke sidesteps the issue of the physiological sublime not requiring for a deity, by infusing the deity into the physical world.

#### 1.4 The Sublime Landscape

The notion of infusing the divine into the landscape brings into play a duality in which we are separate from, and subservient to, an exterior world. In the sublime landscape of de Louthembourg the climbers are tiny and helpless against the avalanche's vastness. There is a mutability of the world as the landscape falls into crisis.

‘a poignant contrast between the infinite vastness of a pantheistic God and the infinite smallness of His creatures...These infinite, glowing voids carry us beyond reason to the Sublime; we can only submit to them in an act of faith and let ourselves be absorbed into their radiant depths.’

(Rosenblum 1961:110)

For Burke, the sublime landscape is one that acts *upon* us, infused with a dynamic force. Smooth, placid streams, flowers and gentle slopes of earth are firmly in the category of the beautiful (Burke 1759:103-4). Vistas that suggest a tumultuous *otherness*, are rugged, shifting or obscure, which exhibit qualities of immanence, are sublime. James Ward’s glowering *Gordale Scar* (1811-15) with its low perspective and threatening appearance, depicts

‘...vertiginous heights... spread out into unpredictable patterns of jagged silhouettes. No laws of man or man-made beauty can account for these God-made shapes: their dark, mysterious formations (echoing Burke’s belief that obscurity is another cause of the sublime) lie outside the intelligible boundaries of aesthetic law.’

(Rosenblum 1961:109)



James Ward *Gordale Scar* (1811-15)



That the Burkean sublime and landscape (as an external world) are inextricably linked is evident in Burke's physiological ideas. We are affected by the events which happen 'out there', in landscapes that have become imbued with qualities of an unknowable force. In Ward's *Gordale Scar*, our point of view is at the bottom of the Scar, amongst the deer and cattle. Above, the towering cliffs are monolithic and dark, almost blending into the clouds. In silhouette, they are both solidly present in an imposing physical manner, and simultaneously mysterious. The viewer is dwarfed in this darkness of the cliff face, and the dominance of the landscape over us is made plain. In Peter Graham's *A Spate in the Highlands* (1866), the landscape is actively animate. The mountains recede into the clouds again, mist rolls into the sky and the river has burst its banks. This natural world in flux is accentuated by the broken bridge, which has failed in the face of nature, as the tiny figure throws his arms into the air to prevent cattle falling into the river. This mysterious and dangerous animation of the landscape, that obscures its own borders and which we are helpless in the face of, delineates the duality between us and the world, re-enforcing a hierarchy of power. The dark, wild landscapes of de Louthembourg, Graham and Ward are infused with a powerful immanence that is greater than us (demonstrated by the broken bridge, or the terrified climbers) and that operates on a scale that renders the figures within not only in jeopardy, but also as insignificant. Rather than becoming anthropomorphised through animation, the landscapes of Graham and de Louthembourg are made strange, chaotic and mysterious in their flux.



Peter Graham *A Spate in the Highlands* (1866)



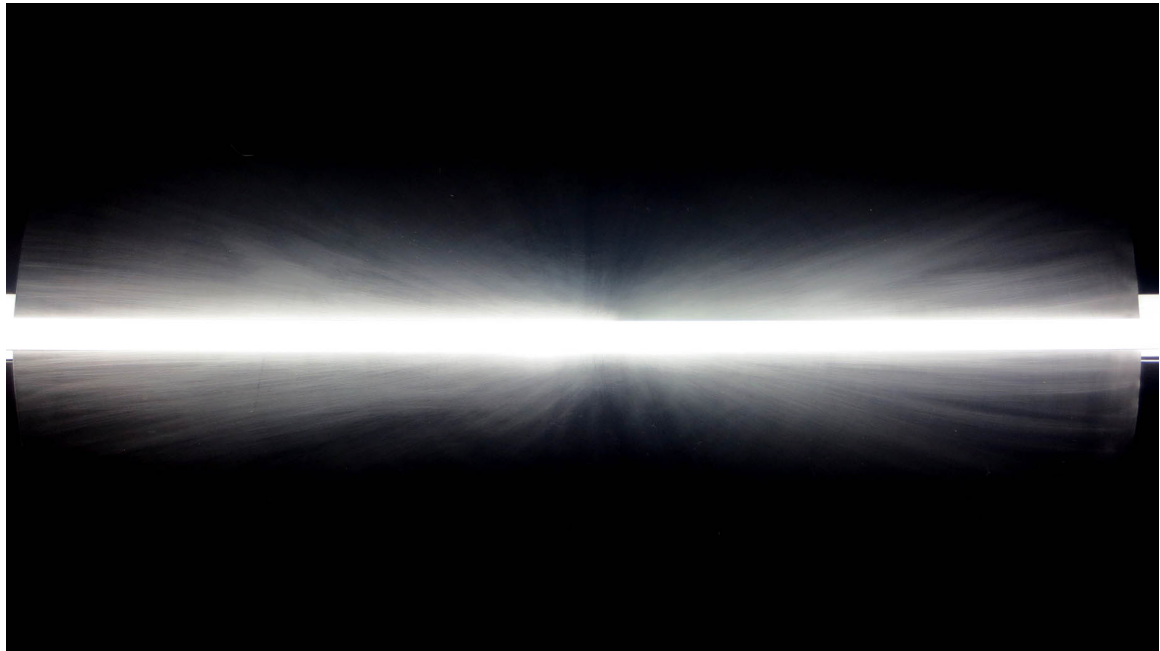
Casper David Friedrich's destroyed painting *High Mountains* (1823-4)

In *Structure I* and *Structure II*, I looked at this idea of immanence and physicality. Returning to Burke's *Enquiry* as a handbook, and aware of the affect of light in the work of de Louthembourg, I began to experiment with structure and light. Rather than only darkness, Burke also cites light as capable of producing the feeling of the sublime (Burke 1759:73). Taking Burke's ideas as guidance, and also re-examining the *Enquiry's* ideas on sound, two steel structures were devised that operate in different ways. *Structure I* was developed in relation to the idea of a 'horizon of thought' and the natural world. Two theatrical flats were designed to resemble the mountains of Casper David Friedrich's destroyed painting *High Mountains* (1823-4). A steel disc holds a horizontal neon tube behind these mountainous shapes. *Structure I* is 2.3 metres tall and of variable length/width, following Burke's notion that vertical objects of some height hold more 'force' (Burke 1759:66). With *Structure I* it was my intention to build a large-scale object, which would be physically present to the audience. The disc and the horizon created by the neon tube form a halo behind the mountain shaped flats, which are projected onto, implying a continually shifting surface. The implied and shifting landscape of *Structure I* is partly in reference to nineteenth century landscapes, but the neon tube and its reflections onto the steel disc also reference Barnett Newman's minimal 'zip' paintings and Anthony McCall's light sculpture works. The pure light of the horizontal tube was an attempt at the depiction/non-depiction of numinous, with the more physical phenomena presented by the mountain shaped flats in the foreground. *Structure II*, I felt, required a greater sense of threat. A similar steel disc is connected to a 12" speaker, held in place

by 8 steel springs. The disc is slightly conical, allowing for a better fit and therefore a greater resonance with the speaker. Played through this speaker are sounds developed using the Virtual ANS synth<sup>6</sup>. This system emulates the ANS synthesizer, (used to soundtrack Tarkovsky's films *Solaris*, *The Mirror* and *Stalker*) which transforms images into sound. For *Structure II* (and other films developed for this project), I used the Virtual ANS to translate John Martin's *The Great Day Of His Wrath* (1851-3) into a droning soundscape. The intention with *Structure II* was to make the landscape of Martin's painting into a phenomenal object (in this case sound and resonating disc), and that this sound would retain some of the Burkean power of the sublime. Martin's painting of biblical destruction by an unseen deity, presenting a phenomenal world in crisis, seemed appropriate for this work. The atmospheric sound produced is, in conjunction with the resonating disc, a physical experience. This work was an attempt to embody the idea of the sublime within the physical, whilst maintaining an unspoken connection to the numinous.

---

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.warmplace.ru/soft/ans/>



Structure I (Steel, neon tube, wood, plaster)

The structure was an attempt to illustrate the notions of immanence and the physicality of the Burkean sublime. The notion of the horizon is represented by the neon tube, which splits the disc in two, placing the 'mountain' flats into shadow.



Structure I (Steel, neon tube, wood, plaster)



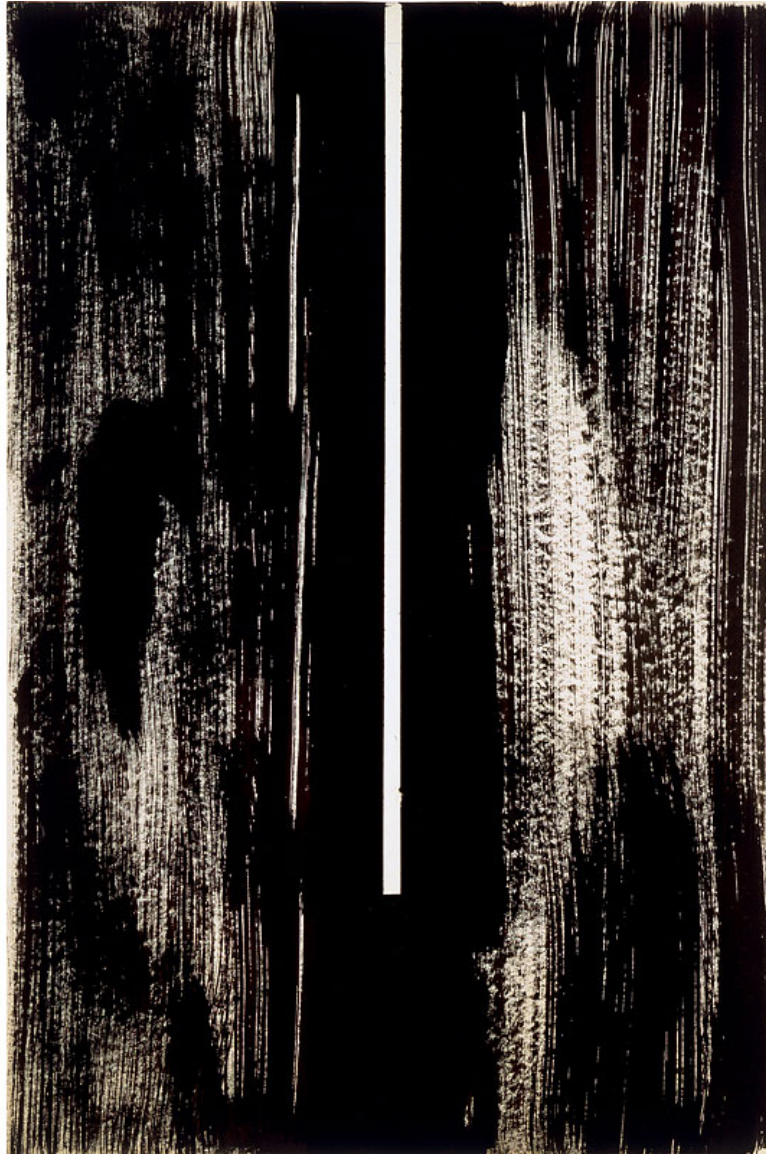
Structure I (Steel, neon tube, wood, plaster)  
The structure suggests a Friedrich's (now destroyed) landscape  
of *High Mountains* (1823-4) and Ward's *Gordale Scar*.





Structure II (Steel, 12" Speaker)

Distorting and reverberating the sound produced by the ANS synth, Structure II converts the visual painted object into physical presence.



Barnett Newman\_ *Untitled (The Cry)* (1946)



Andrei Tarkovsky *Solaris* (1972)

Tarkovsky's film utilised the original ANS Synth to produce a complex soundscape from visual imagery

### 1.5 'Words and Feelings'

Phillip Shaw's critique of the empiricism of Burke finds greater fault in the framework as soon as the question of language and our ideas arises. Noting the ambiguity of the *Enquiry*, Shaw states

'For whilst at no point does Burke concede the radical possibility that sublimity is an effect of language, his argument seems constantly to be on the verge of declaring this possibility... Where Burke's empiricism clearly collapses, however, is in his account of the relations between words and feelings.' (Shaw 2006:49, 50)

For Shaw, the issue lays with the idea that language can evoke the sublime because it does not represent objects clearly. According to Burke, language is able to create ambiguous combinations ideas of images in the mind. By 'conveying the affections of the mind' (Burke 1759:56), these combinations of words can create a poetic impression, which can overcome the self as a sublime experience (Shaw 2006:52). In this way, the combinatory power of language stirs the passions and the ideas evoked by words affect the feelings or emotions of the individual. This concept of evocation shifts the origin of the sublime from the purely physiological into language and ideas. Once the possibility of our own ideas evoking the same response as external objects is established, we can no longer be certain of empirical truth.

Burke's attempt to counter the lack of empirical truth once the sublime arises in language is to claim (in the *Introduction On Taste*, from the second edition) that some judgments on taste are universal. Noting the precipice upon which he is perched, Burke surveys the possibility of a purely subjective account-

‘...if Taste has no fixed principles, if the imagination is not affected according to some invariable and certain laws, our labour is like to be employed to very little purpose; as it must be judged useless, if not an absurd undertaking, to lay down rules for caprice, and to set up for a legislator of whims and fancies.’

(Burke 1759:12)

Burke's empirical framework is, therefore, totally reliant on a fixed principal of taste. For the empiricist framework to work absolutely, we must universally all believe that some ideas are painful, awe inspiring or annihilating in their power. Frances Ferguson in *Solitude And The Sublime* claims that the universality of taste is the ‘critical impasse’ for Burke. If we all agree on what the sublime is (due to taste being universal), the sublime is no longer unique. Once the psychological becomes capable of producing the feeling of the sublime, the empiricism of the *Enquiry* falters.

‘on the one hand, the very possibility for validating perceptions of the sublime rests upon the assertion that taste is universal, a

proposition that of necessity can be validated only by custom ('all men are accustomed to...'); on the other, communal assent to any account of sublime experience robs the sublime of its singularity, its difference, and threatens to shift the sublime into the beautiful, the area of custom.'

(Ferguson 1992:47)

For both Ferguson and Shaw, the *Enquiry* becomes ambiguous and obscure. The empiricist framework crumbles as the sublime shifts from the external world into the psychological interior.

'Now, as soon as emotions enter into the empirical calculus, ideas of truth and knowledge are placed under considerable stress... Yet as the *Enquiry* points out, the expression of what 'really is' is not the concern of a theory of the sublime'

(Shaw 2006:50)

The combinatory power of language marks the limit of empiricism (Shaw 2006:50), as words evoke greater, more obscure mental terror than objects. Through rhetoric and poetry, the divine comes closer to being described, whilst remaining mysterious and concealed. Burke's empirical system is clouded by the very obscurity and darkness the *Enquiry* evokes for the sublime.

'his achievement in *Enquiry* was to have walked between empiricism and irrationalism....proceeding along such a dangerous course only because he wasn't aware of the issues, and consequently failed to recognise that he was in danger. Burke, in this view, is interesting despite himself

(Ferguson 1992:40)

## Burke, the Kantian perspective and a Non-Transcendent Sublime

In the previous chapter we have seen that the empiricism of the *Enquiry* does not rule out notions of the metaphysical, once the idea of immanence and a horizon of thought are introduced. In fact, Burke places the 'Godhead' at the pinnacle of the sublime. All sublime experience is an echo of this power, which lies beyond our rational capacities. The artworks created (*The Ocean Is An Object Of No Small Terror, Structure I* and *Structure II*) began to deal with these ideas of immanence and the interaction between the physiological and the numinous. In this chapter I will go on to examine how Burke's theory of a threatening and dangerous world, imbued with a power which we cannot understand or comprehend, does not offer the transcendence vital to the sublime of Immanuel Kant. This chapter then looks at contemporary artworks that illustrate the gulf between Burke and Kant, and how physical process and the ruptured surface can suggest the obscure threat of the Burkean sublime.

Criticism of Burke has cited the *Enquiry* as being ambiguous and obscure in its empirical framework (Shaw 2006:49), veering towards irrationalism (Ferguson 1992:40). For Ferguson, the problems raised by Burke's system of empiricism and the shifting, indeterminable sublime of the *Enquiry* were to be clarified, in the discourse, by Immanuel Kant's aesthetic theories.



‘In my view, Kantian aesthetics not only address such a central problem of empiricist aesthetics – the relative standing of objects and representations- but goes a long way toward resolving it by the simple argument of structure... Whereas Burke had treated aesthetic experience as if it involved basically the pleasure and pain that one has responding to objects, Kant assigned a much more distinct area to it.’

(Ferguson 1992:2-3)

According to Ferguson and Shaw’s criticism of the *Enquiry*, by including the emotional and psychological affects of sublime objects, the Burkean system slides between a scientific study of physiological phenomena and the subjective world of ideas. The notions of an empirical system begin to falter as the distinctions between objects, words and ideas blur.

Setting aside the problems raised by the *Enquiry*’s empiricist methodology, and turning instead to the intentionality of the theory, this section looks at the idea of how transcendence is seen to be possible in the Kantian system, Burke’s non-transcendent sublime and finally gives examples of the Kantian transcendent and the Burkean non-transcendent sublime in artistic practice.

## 2.1 Kantian Transcendence

For Ferguson, Kant's act of distinguishing a structure to the sublime in the *Critique of Judgment* allows the Kantian sublime to

'..avoid the Burkean empiricist competition between objects and the representations through which they are known, and to advance a view of aesthetic objects as the more or less substantial versions of mental images.' (Ferguson 1992:3)

By placing the experience of the sublime within the subjective, the Kantian system moves away from the sensuous world of Burke. The sublime becomes an internal event, governed by reason.

'Early on in the first Critique Kant uses the term 'reason' in its theoretical sense, to encompass this general activity of the understanding. But in the Transcendental Dialectic he treats 'reason' as a more specialized employment of understanding. Its specific function is to formulate 'principles', that is concepts which seek to systemize and unify other sets of concepts.'

(Crowther 1989:31)

Thomas McEvelley, in *Turned Upside Down and Torn Apart* (2001:67) suggests that the 'superadded thought' of Kant, (in which the subject heroically comprehends the mental complexity and vastness of the sublime experience)

and the dominance of reason, dispel the darkness and mysterious power that inhabits the heart of the Burkean sublime. Whereas Burke's theory draws upon encounters with terrifying ideas of darkness, obscurity, privation and power, in the Kantian sublime the human mind is capable of, at the very least, coming to terms with the sublime experience. Within the Kantian framework, we are enriched by the sublime experience as our reasoning and understanding overcome the power of the sublime object. This mental struggle (in which reason allows us to comprehend the near impossible, saving us from 'existential vertigo' (Crowther 1989:170)) provides the pleasure of the Kantian sublime.

'...while we cannot grasp infinity in sensible intuition, we can... at least think it as an idea of reason, thereby evidencing the superiority of our rational over our sensible being. We are thus led to the 'idea of the sublime'.

(Crowther 1989:95)

In this way, the Kantian sublime is a transcendental experience (Crowther 1989:16, Shaw 2006:88). Despite the vastness of the external object, the mind can comprehend the concept. Casper David Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818) is a fine manifestation of the Kantian rational, transcendent sublime. Urbane and civilized, the Wanderer of Friedrich's painting stands unbowed against a landscape of perilous mountains, which are swathed in a drifting mist obscuring the ground, leaving only the extremities of the crags exposed. The landscape is undoubtedly hazardous, the depths hidden. Yet the

confident figure is not cowed in terror. Dominance, in the focus of the image and in the posture, belongs to the Wanderer.

Taking these notions of dominance and non-transcendence, I created the digital film *Beneath*, which features a mountainous, fragmented landscape. Using the *Enquiry* as a manual again, I followed its guidance on the sections on Magnificence (Burke 1759:71) and Vastness (1759:66), intertwining Burke's ideas with his quotation from the book of Job 'Then a spirit passed before my face' (1759:58). In the film, clouds of fog or light obscure a slowly drifting landscape, created using macro photographic lenses, broken shards of plaster and 16mm film stock. Unlike Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*, there is no figure with which to identify. As the mountainous shapes recede into the black surface of the film, or are lost in the 16mm haze, the viewpoint constantly changes.



Casper David Friedrich *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818) embodies the notion of the Kantian transcendent sublime.

This viewpoint remains low, beneath the mountains that loom above it. This looming effect, aided by the slow zoom of the camera, was intended to give the landscape a sense of dominance. The soundtrack is built up out of distorted ambient sound that, in combination with the scaled up visuals and the obscuring 16mm footage, add to this sense of uncertainty and dominance within the film. The intention was to create a landscape that could not be overcome due to its fragmentary nature and a terrain which could not be mapped, due to its obscurity. In this sense the landscape of *Beneath* rejects reason through its uncertain nature. The random damaging and marking of the 16mm film stock aided this uncertainty. I could not predict how the 16mm would appear, as oil resists and the occasional acetate burn provided flares and fog.

Crowther's reading of the Kantian sublime as an 'idea of reason' which ultimately leads us to a 'superiority' is very different from the sublime of *Enquiry*, as we see in Burke's description of the astonishment of the sublime experience –

'...that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it'

(Burke 1759:53)



*Beneath* (Digital film 01:24)

An exploration of macro photography and 16mm abstraction, which would develop throughout the research by practice.



*Beneath* (Digital film 01:24)

The film developed from ideas of the fragmented landscape, created using shards of plaster, sculpted to resemble mountains.



*Beneath* (Digital film 01:24)

The treated 16mm film caught and burned in the projector gate, providing imagery of destructive forces.



*Beneath* (Digital film 01:24)

Digitally overlaying the 16mm footage obscured the 'mountain' images.



## 2.2 The Non Transcendent Sublime

Throughout the *Enquiry*, Burke emphasizes a system of dominance and supremacy, in which the divine (as the ultimate source of the sublime) is at the apex (1759:59-65). Within this hierarchy of power, we fear the 'rapine and destruction' (1759:60) of the sublime which threatens to destroy us. This is the threat evident can be interpreted in de Louthembourg's *An Avalanche*, Viola's *The Raft*, Martin's *The Great Day Of His Wrath* and Bruce Conner's atomic *Crossroads*. These works visually present the idea of an external threat, against which we are defenceless. Rather than suggesting a transcendence of the sensuous world through the act of reason that overcomes the initial threat as with the Kantian sublime, we achieve *Delight* in the Burkean sublime through the concept of the sublime object (or idea) (1759:34) that suggests our destruction and remains unknowable. This sense of an obscure threat is evident in the violent landscape in crisis of John Martin's apocalyptic paintings and is felt obliquely in the slow shutting down of the universe in Bela Tarr's nihilistic film *The Turin Horse* (2011). These visual works suggest an outer force, which we are powerless against and cannot comprehend. Burke's sublime is specifically that which we cannot grasp.

Both Vanessa L. Ryan and Peter de Bolla (1989:293) note the danger of reading the Burkean system (or, indeed, English eighteenth century aesthetic theory) as anticipating a shift towards Kantian subjectivity. Ryan in *The Physiological Sublime: Burke's Critique of Reason* states-

‘The teleological reading of British aesthetics - the perceived inexorable movement toward the subjectivism of Kant - takes for granted that the experience of the sublime implies transcendence. Reading Burke through such a Kantian perspective fails to recognise that Burke minimizes the role of the mind in the experience of the sublime and that he characterizes the sublime as a natural force that is by its very definition beyond man’s ability to control.’

(Ryan 2001:267)

Ryan goes on to question Ferguson’s Kantian reading of Burke in *Solitude and the Sublime* (1992:50), concerning the empowerment of the perceiving subject. In the *Enquiry*’s section on Power, Burke discusses the Biblical prophet David-

‘When the prophet David contemplated the wonders of wisdom and power which are displayed in the economy of man, he seems to be struck with a sort of divine horror, and cries out, *fearfully and wonderfully am I made!*’

(Burke 1759:63)

Ferguson relates that Burke’s statement ‘affirms God’s omnipotence while at the same time recalling that man is made in the image of God.’ (1992:50). Ryan suggests that Ferguson’s reading of Burke here infers that the *product* man is the ‘wonderful’ thing. That man is wonderful because he is made in the image

of God, and in recognizing this is empowered. Ryan takes issue with the suggestion that empowerment is the point of Burke's statement-

'A closer reading, however, suggests that David's exclamation, 'fearfully and wonderfully am I made!' refers not to the *product*, but to the *act* of making. We are not so much empowered by the sublime contemplation of the divine; we are overwhelmed by a power superior to ours.'

(Ryan 2001:274)

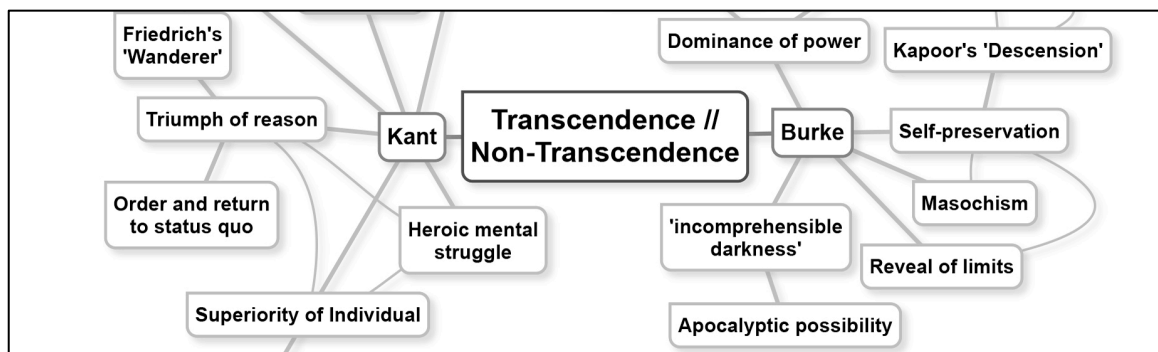
In Ryan's reading the subject, David, is not empowered by the thought of the divine that has created him. In contemplating this idea of the divine, David 'cries out' in reaction to a higher power that is awe-inspiring, fearful and horrifying in its capability. There is no sense of understanding or rational appreciation for the divine, but a holy terror at the *idea* of a dominant power.

### 2.3 A Masochistic Experience

The question of control and empowerment is central to the discussion on the transcendental qualities and the Burkean sublime. If the Burkean sublime does not elevate us, does it diminish us? For Ferguson, the Burkean sublime is an 'almost purely masochistic experience' (1992:48). Shaw states that 'in contemplating that which exceeds the evidence of the senses, the self succumbs' (2006:52). Crowther notes that the delight of the Burkean sublime is 'deeply bound up with our instinct for *self-preservation*.' (1990:8). We begin to see within the *Enquiry* a sublime that is concerned with a dangerous and dominating experience. There is a delineation between this powerful dominant force (which may be a physiological event or the *idea* of a physiological event) and the self that must be preserved from it. In this manner, the Burkean sublime reveals our limits. The sublime is that which is beyond the limits and beyond our capacity to control.

Peter Tscherkassky's short film *Outer Space* (1999) suggests, through the materiality of film, a dangerous world in supernatural crisis. Using footage of Sydney J Furie's 1981 supernatural suspense film *The Entity*, Tscherkassky splices, cuts, overlays and damages the footage. Taking a film that is concerned with the attack of a spectral, unseen and unknowable force, Tscherkassky has the film itself break apart, become more uncertain, more unknowable. The violence of *Outer Space* is palpable. It is as if the physical form of the film cannot contain the force of the images it contains. As the soundtrack screeches and distorts, Hershey's character struggles to survive the assault, as the viewer

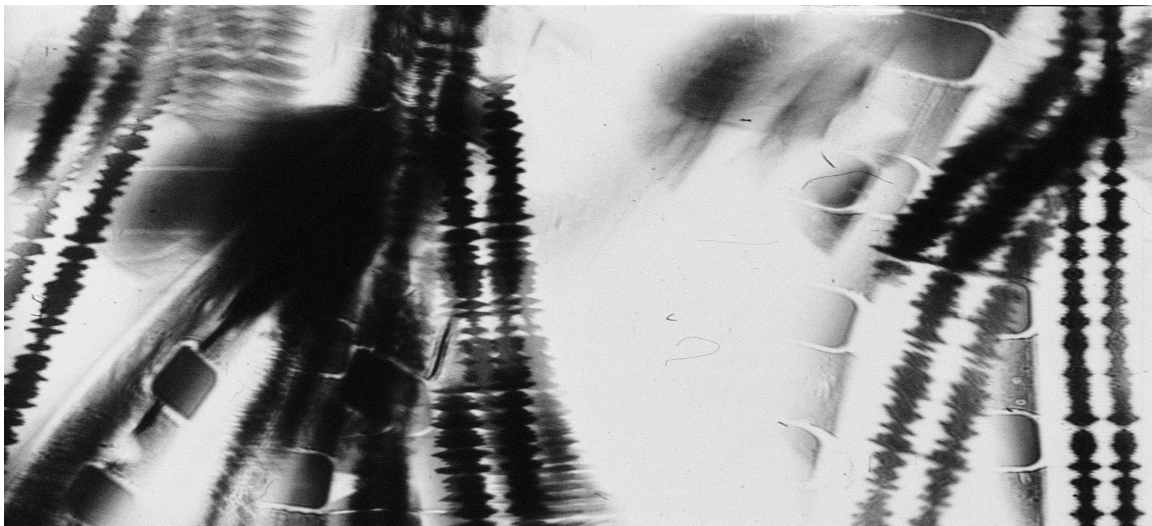
struggles to understand the images. The narrative of *The Entity* is also torn apart, as scenes loop, repeat and are mirrored. The attack upon Hersey of a supernatural force, and the visual attack upon the viewer as the material of film is torn apart, both suggest a force at work that is beyond boundaries. As the narrative breaks down and the material film breaks down, there is no resolution available to Hershey's character or for the viewer. In the face of this breakdown, where the material world is made uncertain and boundless there can only be self-preservation and survival. Tscherkassky's film is a threat of domination. By referencing its own materiality at the brink of being unable to contain the images held upon it, this threat is extended out to the viewer. Through cutting, editing and distorting sound and visual images, Tscherkassky presents the idea of a boundless force that could break free of its medium.



See Appendix (p14)



Peter Tscherkassky *Outer Space* (1999)



Peter Tscherkassky *Outer Space* (1999)



Peter Tscherkassky *Outer Space* (1999)



Peter Tscherkassky *Outer Space* (1999)

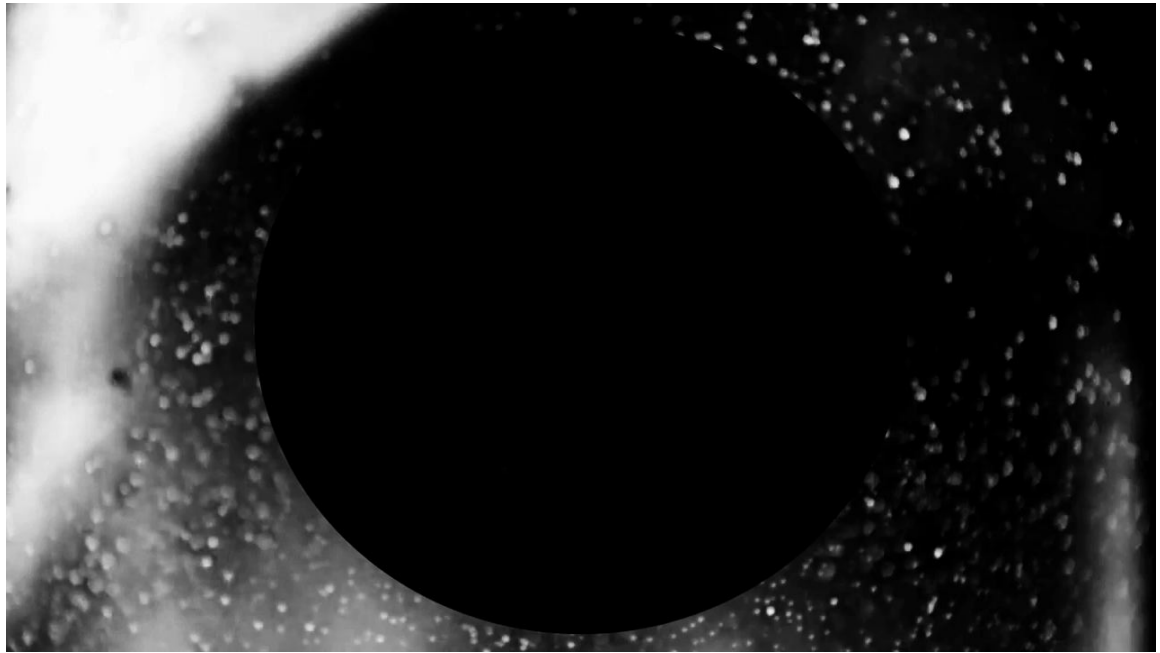
After experimenting with the destructive method of creating 16mm film images with *Beneath*, and inspired by Tscherkassky's violent film, I returned to the 'handbook' of the *Enquiry* and the idea of material destruction as a method of embodying notions of the Burkean sublime. Using oil resist on the acetate of the film stock and trapping the 16mm in the gate of a projector, I was able to produce abstract images and burnouts. Two short films, *Nibiru* and *End One*, used this destructive method, which would go on to inform later series of works.

'Burke 'opposes the sublime to what is subservient, safe, and useful, writing that whatever is in conformity to our will is 'never sublime'.... It is specifically the threat of domination and destruction that engenders the sublime.... the sublime object remains impervious to human efforts at conquering, domesticating, and exploiting the natural environment.'

(Ryan 2001:274)

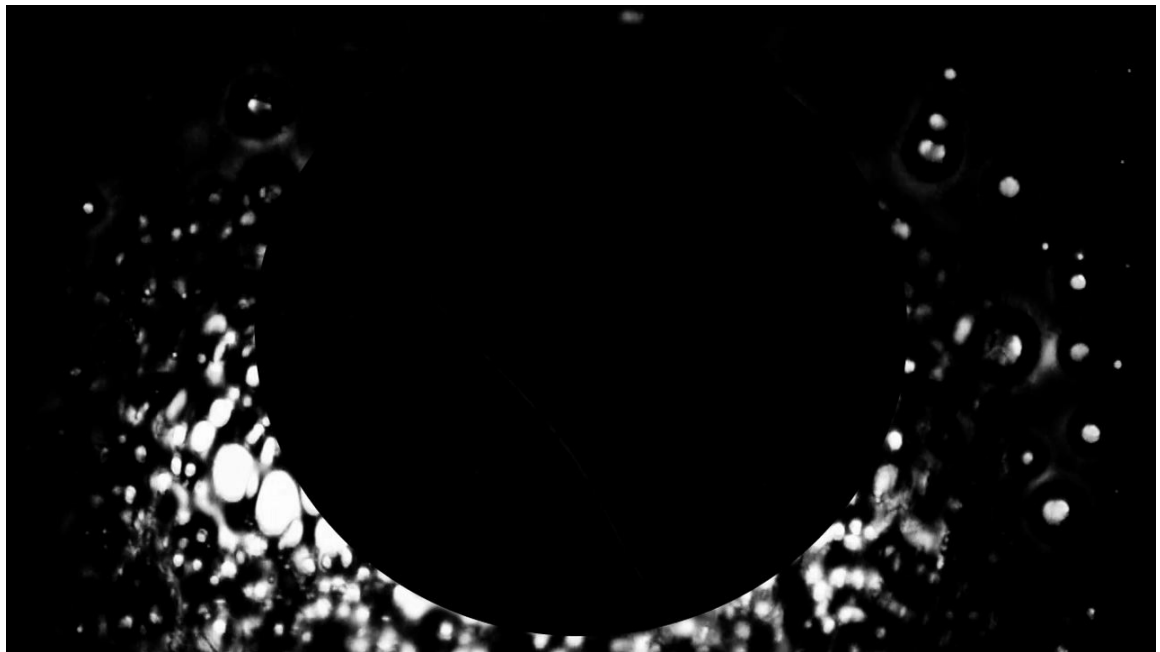
Once removed from the notion of transcendence (that the sublime is in some way a noble event that can grant us a superiority through our use of reason), the terror of the Burkean sublime becomes more evident. Not only is the sublime experience dangerous and dominant, but also to qualify as sublime for Burke it must remain unconquerable, unfathomable, beyond comprehension and greater than us. This sublime extends to Our Ideas, as words combine to produce concepts that are unsettling, that border the realms





*Nibiru* (16mm and Digital Film 01:26)

Further experiments with 16mm film and digital overlays explore ideas of voids  
obscurity and darkness.

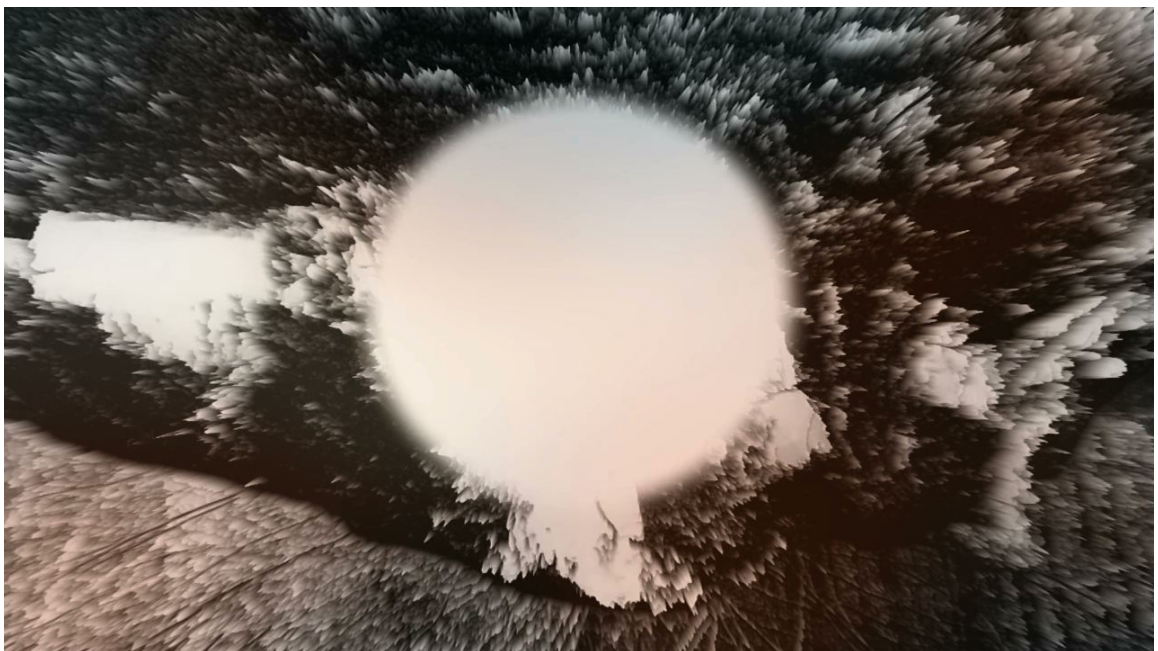


*Nibiru* (16mm and Digital Film 01:26)



*End One* (Digital Film 02:16)

This short sequence returned to notions of shifting landscape and manifesting voids.



*End One* (Digital Film 02:16)

In the sequence, the landscape is digitally thrust outwards, moving into the abstract.

of the unthinkable and that are associated with our domination by a higher power. For example, to return to the notion of evocation in language, Shaw examines Burke's comments on John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and the 'universe of death' (Burke 1759:159). Shaw notes that, for Burke, the speculative horror of the 'universe of death' is a concept which

'...is brought into being by a power unique to language. The cloudiness, uncertainty, and terror of this idea is intimately linked with the combinatory power of language; it is words and words alone that allow the mind to link disparate entities together.'

(Shaw 2006:53)

Milton's 'universe of death', although speculative, is a hostile concept. Through the 'combinatory power of language' we are presented with a concept of death *plus*. As an image of the Burkean sublime, it captures the qualities that separate Burke from suggestions of transcendence- it is unconquerable, unfathomable and oblique.

#### 2.4 Transcendence/Non-Transcendence

James Turrell's *Ganzfeld: Double Vision* (2013) is a site-specific installation, located beneath a water reservoir in Ekeberg Park, Oslo. Turrell's *Ganzfeld* series of works utilize light and space, stimulating a loss of depth perception. In viewing this work, there is a sense of being on the brink of the infinite. There is a gentle feeling of the sensuous world being pulled away, as the eye struggles to focus on the permanently shifting light and the curved, seamless walls. On visiting *Ganzfeld: Double Vision* in 2015, the attendant warned the small group gathered to beware of the edge of the platform. There was a draw to move closer to the screen, which appeared to be immeasurably distant. Some people stood staring into the empty space. Others sat at the edge of the platform, legs dangling into what appeared to be a void.

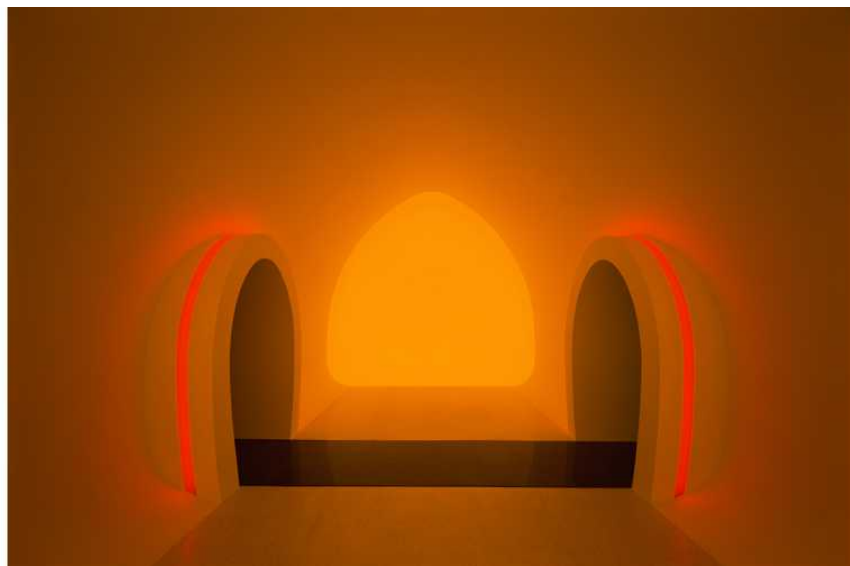
In the essay *The Fable Of Place*, George Didi-Huberman writes of experiencing Turrell's installations-

'Turrell's works often begin by imposing an act of *closure* or privation. But the intent is always the gift of experience dispensed in light; and therefore the works allow, in the end, an act of opening'

(Didi-Huberman 2001:46)



James Turrell *Ganzfeld: Double Vision* (2013)



James Turrell *Ganzfeld: Double Vision* (2013)



James Turrell's *Ganzfeld: Double Vision* (2013)

The completeness of the light within *Ganzfeld: Double Vision*, which varies and shifts from barely perceptible to intense, appearing to be without source, is initially disorienting and ultimately encompassing. The room appears infinite as the sense of scale drifts. But there is a subtlety to Turrell's work that prevents any overriding sense of fear. As an experiential work, the soft pinks and acid greens envelop the viewer in a calming atmosphere, with the gentle phasing of the light.

Anish Kapoor's *Descension* (2014), which debuted at the 2015 Kochi-Muziris Biennale, also utilises ideas of perception and, like so much of Kapoor's work, the void. The ten-foot pool of black water maintains a constant, fast moving vortex. At the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, the pool was installed into the floor of the gallery, surrounded by a metal railing. The force of the vortex is such that the surface of the pool is sucked into a central black hole, yet the pool does not empty, but instead continues to swirl and churn. The whirlpool is violently active, the title of the installation suggesting even greater depths below the visible surface.

With these two contemporary installations, we can discern qualities of the Kantian transcendent and the Burkean non-transcendent sublime. Kapoor and Turrell's works exhibit general notions of the sublime, which can be found in the theories of Kant and Burke. Both works suggest a greater force or power; for Turrell it is the infinite and endless light space, for Kapoor it is in the continually sucking depths. Both works suggest immensities and formlessness;

for Turrell it is the notion of light as ‘substance’ (Didi-Huberman 2001:46), for Kapoor it is the shifting, nebulous surface of the black water. Yet there is a distinctly atmospheric difference between these two works.

In a promotional film<sup>7</sup> for the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, Kapoor discusses the importance of scale in his work. He states

‘Of course it is, at one level, in some relation to the Kantian sublime... I think fear does have a lot to do with it...’

I would propose that Kapoor’s *Descension* exhibits a closer relationship to the theories of Burke’s *Enquiry* than the transcendental sublime of Kant. In his statement Kapoor does note a fundamental principle of the Burkean system, the sense of fear. *Descension* is a violent work. It suggests violent depths. The pool is filled with black water, the surface opaque. There is an obscurity in its scale (its depth) and a formlessness in its shape (its surface). Through the power of its hidden mechanisms the water is continually forced out of its natural state. If we were to fall into this pool, there is the distinct sense that we would be pulled down into the void at the centre of the vortex.

---

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.kochimuzirisbiennale.org/project/anish-kapoor/>

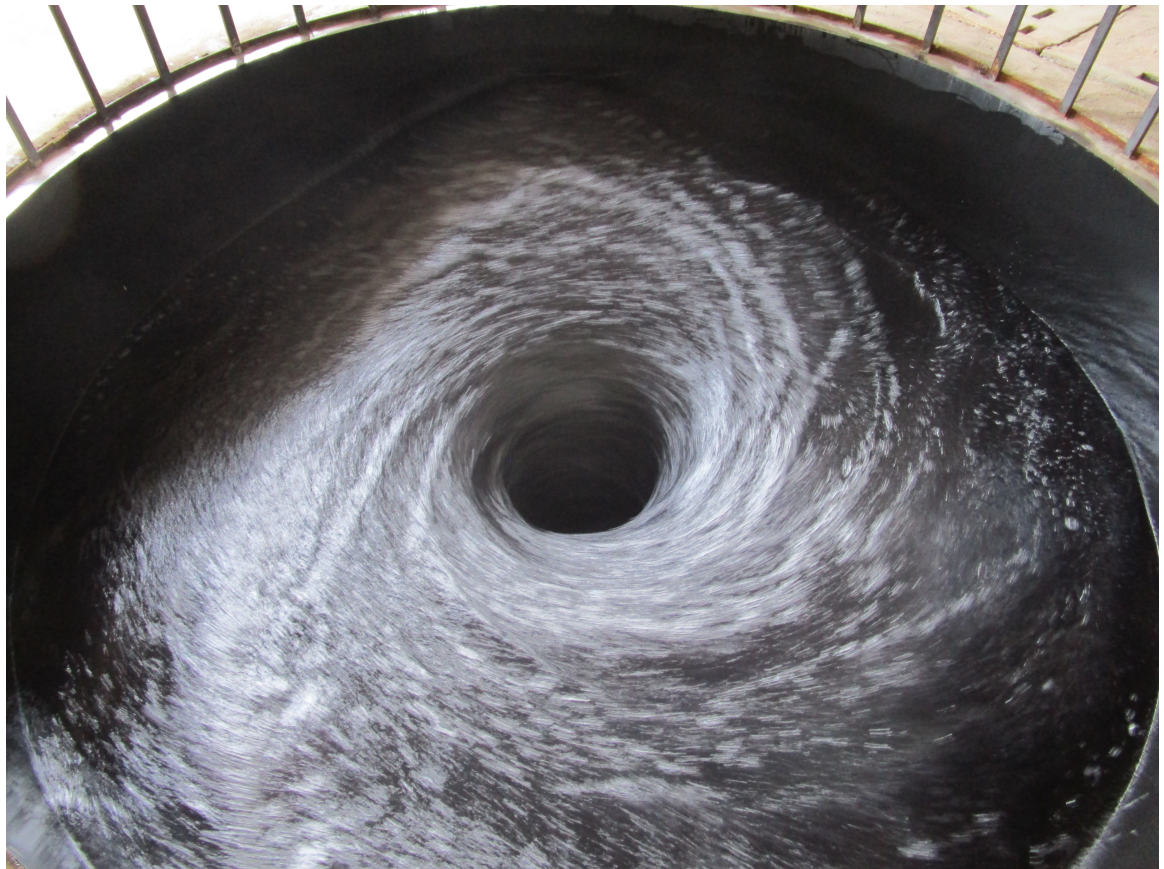




Anish Kapoor's *Descension* (2014)



Anish Kapoor's *Descension* (2014)



Anish Kapoor's *Descension* (2014)

‘For fear being an apprehension of pain or death, it operates in a manner that resembles actual pain. Whatever therefore is terrible, with regard to sight, is sublime too, whether this cause of terror be endued with greatness of dimensions or not; for it is impossible to look on anything as trifling, or contemptible, that may be dangerous.’

(Burke 1759:53)

*Descension* holds in its centre a physiologically present void. It suggests a physical danger to the viewer. It is-

‘...a sort of delightful horror, a sort of tranquility tinged with terror; which, as it belongs to self-preservation, is one of the strongest of all the passions. Its object is the sublime.’

(Burke 1759:123)

Writing of Kapoor’s sculptural work, Rainer Crone and Alexandra Von Stosch note the Burkean sense of the void and the sensuous qualities that absence can engender-

‘A feeling of loneliness can also characterize the experience of seeing Kapoor’s works. The viewer confronts funnel-like cavities in which the surface of the object seems to retrench into itself... It feels as if the eye is sent into some inscrutable

depth, giving an idea of infinity, offering even the dissolution of the individual viewer. The absolute concentration on the experience of perception leads to a subjugation under the power of the work.'

(Crone & Stosch 2008:30)

Turrell's *Ganzfeld: Double Vision* offers a very different sublime experience. Without the terror of the Burkean sublime, the affect of the installation on the viewer follows the Kantian dynamic of the Mathematical sublime, as described by Crowther:

'In our encounter with vast formless objects, we are led to estimate the greatness of their magnitude by ... infinity as a whole. Yet in searching out this fundamental aesthetic measure imagination is led into a regress that quickly overwhelms its powers of comprehension. It is totally unable to present the measure in terms of the single intuition which reason demands. Despite this, the felt frustration of imagination's inadequacy gives way to a feeling of pleasure at the fact...which transcends the limitations of our phenomenal being.'

(Crowther 1990:100)

Like Friedrich's Wanderer, the viewer of *Ganzfeld: Double Vision* stands on the precipice of the seemingly infinite. Unlike Kapoor's *Descension*, *Ganzfeld: Double Vision* does not carry with it an association of physical destruction. Rather than a void of darkness, there is an infinite 'substance' of light (Didi-Huberman 2001:46). Without the notion of domination at its core, there is the possibility of transcendence in contemplating Turrell's light installation.

Within the Burkean sublime, terror is the fundamental principle. This terror denies us the capability of reason. The sublime object is associated with some form of destruction or danger. In this denial of reason, the transcendence of Kant is not possible. In this reading, the Kantian and Burkean sublimines are opposed in their intentions. For Kant, reason saves us from the 'existential vertigo' of the infinite, granting a sense of pleasure that constitutes the sublime feeling. For Burke, the sublime comes in the form of 'an 'incomprehensible darkness' that reason cannot... must not, dispel' (Adam Phillips in the Introduction to the *Enquiry* 1759:xxii).

## The Terror Of The Burkean Sublime

As we have seen in the previous chapter, by reading the sublime of the *Enquiry* as a non-transcendent, dominant event and identifying these properties in artworks, it becomes apparent that the Burkean sublime is far from Kant's victory of reason, but instead reveals an uncertain world, demonstrated by Tscherkassky's broken materiality or Kapoor's treacherous, sucking surfaces. In these artworks (and in my own films *Beneath* and *Nibiru*) this uncertain, possibly antagonistic, world is glimpsed through a destruction, tear or lacunae. This reveal, whether through physiological shock that shows our limits, through concepts evoked by poetic language or through images of the external world at risk from a greater force, elicits a terror. That the Burkean sublime is reliant on terror is made plain in the much-quoted passage from the *Enquiry*-

'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*.'

(Burke 1759:36)

What is the terror that shapes the sublime of Burke? What does it refer to? Is there a fundamental fear, which Burke's theories point towards?

Burke cites death as the ultimate terror, which we associate all other pain with (1759:36). For the idea or association of death to function as a form of *delight*, then Burke claims that there must be some kind of distance.

‘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, as we every day experience.’

(1759:36,37)

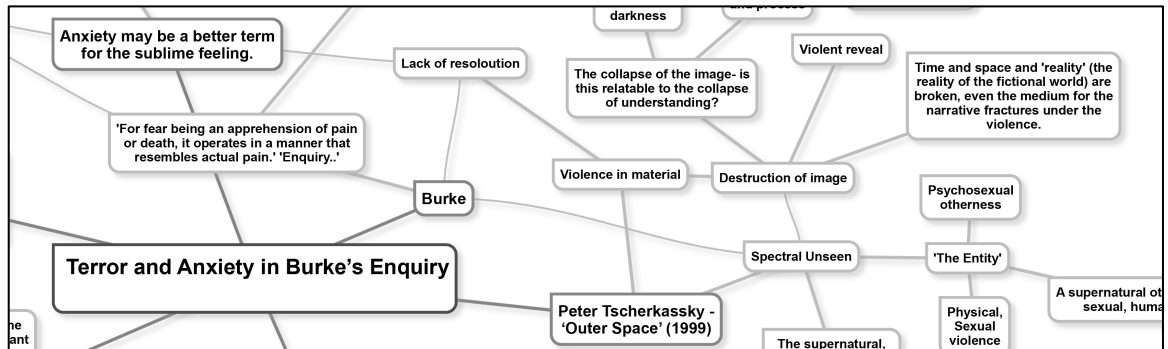
Yet Burke also suggests the idea of the Godhead, which is beyond our conceptual ability, as the source of the sublime and

‘from whence its energy is derived, and to what class of ideas we ought to unite it.’

(1759:64)

This chapter looks at how Thomas Weiskel, Thomas McEvelley and Jean-François Lyotard have interpreted that notion of terror in Burke’s *Enquiry*. These approaches range from a Freudian analysis, to a metaphysical, cosmological reading and to the horror of privation. This chapter also looks at how the artistic processes in the production of the *World Without Us* series produced apocalyptic imagery through an act of destruction and Bela Tarr’s nihilistic *The Turin Horse* (2011), which exhibits elements of the Burkean

sublime. The final section examines two nineteenth century paintings of apocalyptic visions from a Burkean perspective, John Martin's *The Great Day Of His Wrath* (1851-53) and Casper David Friedrich's *Sea Of Ice* (1823-24).



See Appendix (p15)



### 3.1 Weiskel and Anxiety

In the previous chapter, the hierarchy of power of the Burkean sublime and the notion of a dominant force that cannot be overcome (which thereby prevents the transcendence which characterizes the Kantian sublime) were discussed. Both Burke and Kant acknowledge the involvement of a dominant power, which remains unchecked in the Burkean sublime, but that is finally overcome by reason as the 'super-added thought' in the Kantian theory (McEvelley 2001:67). Thomas Weiskel, in *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (1976), interprets this superior power within a Freudian context. Weiskel states that-

‘There is no evident mystery in Burke’s “terror”: it is fear of injury, pain and ultimately death. In Burke’s view, everything sublime either (a) directly suggests the idea of danger (b) produces a similar effect physiologically, or (c) is some modification of power. But power is nothing more than the indirect suggestion of danger.’

(1976:92)

Weiskel notes that the Burkean sublime is not an actual danger, but a psychological danger produced by association, suggestion or 'similar effect'. In the chapter *The Logic Of Terror*, Weiskel expands upon the mechanisms by which he proposes the terror of the sublime experience operates, relating it directly to a Freudian framework-

‘The power of anything is ultimately “its ability to hurt”. The fear of injury points genetically and synecdochically to castration anxiety. We know that the castration fear of the young boy is not realistic; nevertheless, it operates subjectively as a real fear. A fantasy of aggression or resistance toward a superior power is played out in the imagination...The fantasized character of castration anxiety seems related to the mediated conditionality of the sublime moment: on the one hand, the “ability to hurt’ must be objective and obvious; on the other hand, it must not be actually directed against oneself, or the fantasy dissolves into genuine panic and the objective defense of flight.’

(1976:93)

Weiskel here proposes that the dynamic of the sublime affects us in the same manner that Freudian castration anxiety affects us- through a ‘resistance’ and the ‘recognition of futility’ (1976:93). The dominant power threatens the subject via its perceived strength and we feel terror because of the perceived capability of the dominant power. Recognizing the impossibility of overcoming the superior power, Weiskel suggests-

‘The fantasy of injury ends in the simultaneous perception of defeat and the realization that the threat is not, after all, a real one.’

(1976:93)

For Weiskel the terror is one of a self-perceived destruction of the self, a death fantasy, which is overcome through ‘identification’ with the perceived threat (1976:93). What makes this reading problematic when considering the Burkean terror-sublime is that Weiskel is conflating the theories of Burke and Kant, seeing transcendence as the outcome of both theories (1976:83). This becomes evident as Weiskel discusses the ‘positive resolution’ of terror in the-

‘...third phase, which is psychologically an identification with the superior power...Hence the importance of the sublime, for this is the very moment which the mind turns within and performs its identification with reason.’

(1976:93)

This is in accordance with Kant’s theory, in which a triumph of reason produces the pleasure of the sublime, but at odds with a Burkean theory, which is ‘eternally ungraspable by reason’ (McEvelley 2001:65). Although Weiskel begins his essay with reference to the *Enquiry*, he re-enforces his argument with the three-stage system of Kant’s dynamical sublime (1976:93). This reading of the *Enquiry* from a Kantian perspective disregards the lack of a transcendent

resolution to the Burkean sublime (as discussed in the previous chapter with reference to Vanessa L Ryan), where the delight of the sublime experience is achieved only through self-preservation (Burke 1759:36). The 'psychological identification' posited by Weiskel does not occur in the Burkean system.

Yet Weiskel's interpretation of the terror of the sublime as an anxiety and the notion of the 'recognition of futility' (1976:93) is intriguing. If we read anxiety as an unease of an uncertain outcome, a fear of the unknown, this fits well with Burke's 'incomprehensible darkness' (Burke 1759:58). As Weiskel states '...the sublime is not the feeling of terror itself; it is a response to terror' (1976:87).

### 3.2 The Turin Horse

This 'recognition of futility' and the 'incomprehensible darkness' are evident in Bela Tarr's bleak apocalyptic allegory *The Turin Horse* (2011). Glacially slow, the film follows a father and daughter, along with their workhorse, as the world around them appears to end over six days, a form of anti-Genesis. This leads to a succession of privations until they are finally left in darkness. Tarr said of his work-

'we just wanted to show you something about the power of nature... I've always thought about the questions: what is the power of humanity, what is the power of nature, and where we are, because we are a part of nature.'<sup>8</sup>

Unlike Tscherkassky's violent short *Outer Space*, Tarr's *The Turin Horse* is incredibly slow paced, with very few edits. The concept of a greater external force, manifested as nature, is present in the constantly howling winds that prevent the characters leaving their farm. As the film progresses, the father and daughter struggle to survive in the increasingly harsh environment. This apocalypse, unlike the *sturm und drang* of John Martin or de Louthembourg, is a destruction by privation. Obscured by the high winds, the world of *The Turin Horse* collapses into a state of nothingness. The landscape fades into a grey abstraction, visually reminiscent of the work of photographer Hiroshi

---

<sup>8</sup> Interviewed in Electric Sheep Magazine  
<http://www.electricsheepmagazine.co.uk/features/2012/06/04/the-turin-horse-interview-with-bela-tarr/> [Accessed May 2015]

Sugimoto. In several of Sugimoto's Seascape photographs, the horizon is lost into an infinite murk and definition between ocean and sky is indeterminate. The earth becomes uncertain as the physical distinction between objects is obscured or abstracted. As Tarr's protagonists struggle to exist in this environment, their fragility becomes more evident. They are unable to leave and face being subsumed by the approaching void. *The Turin Horse* exhibits elements of the Burkean sublime, in a manner very different to Tscherkassky or de Louthembourg. The threat does not manifest through the representation of a violent action, or via a sudden shock. Nor is it the physical breaking apart of the material and narrative surface of Tscherkassky's film. Yet there is still the sense of the physical world as a source of the 'rapine and destruction' (Burke 1759:60) as the father and daughter are powerless against the natural (or un-natural) forces. Tarr's poetically shadowed images echo Milton's 'dark and dreary vale....a universe of death', a poetic phrase that Burke cites as producing a 'very great degree of the sublime' (Burke 1759:159).



Bela Tarr *The Turin Horse* (2011)



Bela Tarr *The Turin Horse* (2011)



Bela Tarr *The Turin Horse* (2011)



Bela Tarr *The Turin Horse* (2011)





Hiroshi Sugimoto *Sea of Japan* (1986)

### 3.3 Turned Upside Down and Torn Apart

Burke's listed causes of the sublime imply an unknown that may occur- in darkness, or obscurity, or vastness. Is the terror of the sublime an anxiety arising from the awareness of our fragility and the *possibility* of our destruction? Thomas McEvelley, in *Turned Upside Down and Torn Apart*, considers the ideas of destruction and fragility in relation to the capability of the Burkean sublime-

'... the issue is emotional comfort, or the lack of it. Beautiful things are always in the comfort zone; they make one feel secure and happy about oneself. The sublime, however, is always outside of the comfort zone; it is everything that will not allow one to be comfortable in one's existence, that threatens one's security and injects chaos into harmony and order- everything, in short, that tears cosmos apart.'

(2001:62)

McEvelley's reading the Burkean terror of the sublime as an anxiety of a chaotic external world suggests a sublime that is antagonistic towards us. The sublime appears in the destruction of harmony and reason. It is a threat to what we are (our selves which we understand via our rational senses). A threat which is on the verge of manifesting.

‘Being scared of the dark is the sublime; being alone and frightened because, being alone, one has no ally to take refuge in, is the sublime; being in a silent place that seems threateningly still, as if something is about to leap out at you is the sublime; an eerie emptiness in which something may rise and attack unexpectedly is the sublime.’

(2001:63)

McEvelley suggests a sense of the Burkean sublime lurking outside of the rational world like some Lovecraftian horror, a threatening *other* which is anathema to our existence and continued security. Of Burke’s *Vastness* and *Immensity* as causes of the sublime experience, McEvelley notes-

‘...its intentions are apt to be unknown to you, impossible to cognize it all at once. You would only be able to see that part of it that was close to you, but always with the uneasy or terrifying knowledge that there may be much more of it that you cannot see, the nature and intentions of which are unknown.’

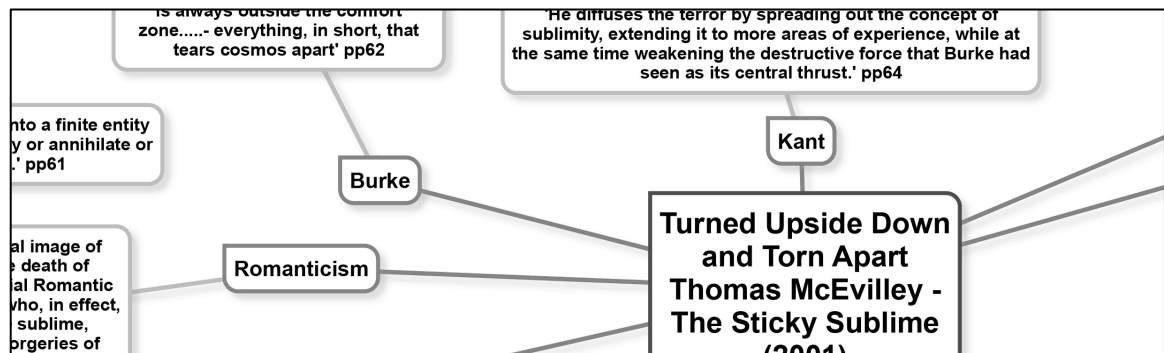
(2001:62)

Speaking of Longinus (from whose tradition the Burkean sense of the sublime arises from), McEvelley notes the ferocity and otherness of the sublime.

“Longinus” seems to imply that some force outside the world is destroying it, a force with ultimate power, which is threatening annihilation to all individual things and beings—humans, pieces of furniture, plants in the garden, angels in the sky, and so on.’

(2001:57)

McEvelley’s reading of the Burkean sublime is an encounter with a cosmological threat, rather than the internalized authoritarian/castration anxiety of Weiskel. McEvelley’s speculative annihilation occurs when the (metaphysical) infinite subsumes the finite thing (2001:51). In the infinitude, the finite can no longer exist (due to the ‘Oneness aspect of things’ (2001:51)).



See Appendix (p13)

### 3.4 Destruction as production

Continuing the use of destruction as a form of production, and in light of McEvilley's speculative annihilation of the Burkean sublime, I began what became the largest series of practical works in this project. This series also drew upon the still nihilism of Tarr's *The Turin Horse*, the apocalyptic anxiety of Bruce Conner's *Crossroads*, Tscherkassky's materiality and would ultimately lead back to the aesthetics of nineteenth century painting.

Taking to *Enquiry* again as a handbook for production, I looked to the section on Power, in which Burke quotes biblical sections, that discuss the affect of an immanent power on the landscape.

*'The earth shook, (says the Psalmist,) the heavens also dropped at the presence of the Lord... Tremble, thou earth! at the presence of the Lord... which turned the rock into standing water, the flint into a fountain of waters!'*

(quoted by Burke 1759:64)

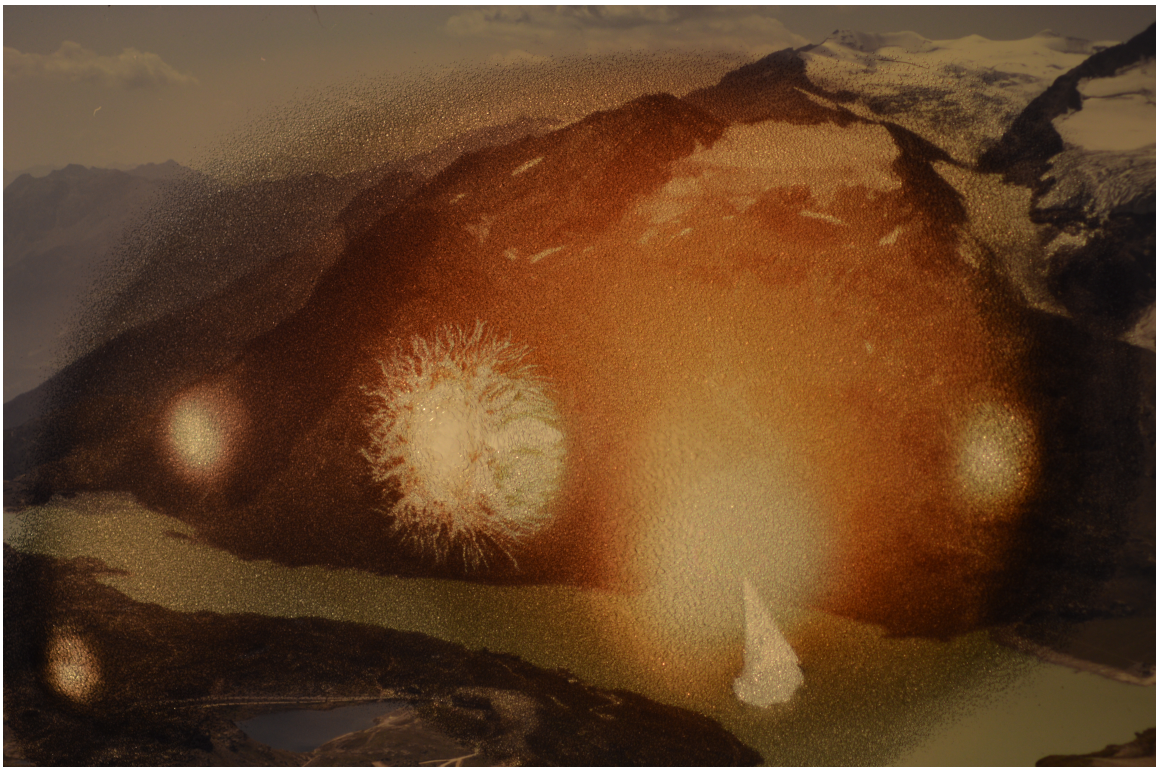
In reference to this quote, Burke notes that the connection between Power and terror is inseparable. Following Burke's imagery and ideas, I sought to embody this passage through a process of destruction of materials.

After experimenting with the material of 16mm stock and macro photography in previous experiments in film, and aware of the imagery of mountainous landscapes within the discourse of the sublime, I purchased five hundred 35mm

slide photographs of the Alps. I intended to use these slides to create work that referenced Burke's separation of the sublime and the beautiful, and included aspects of McEvelley's concept of 'a force outside of the world... threatening annihilation' (2001:57). Mounting the 35mm slides in a vice, I closely filmed the burning of the images. As the flame touched the surface of the slides, the acetate warped and the image buckled, darkened and often broke apart entirely. I was conscious that the burning was altering and transforming the images from something quite beautiful into images that evidenced the effect of a destructive power. After filming the act, the results of each burning were also photographed.



*The World Without Us (Digital Image)*



*The World Without Us (Digital Image)*



*The World Without Us (Digital Image)*



*The World Without Us (Digital Image)*



The resulting digital film footage was then made monochrome, partly to give the slides continuity and partly as a nod to Burke's declaration on gloom,

'An immense mountain covered with a shining green turf, is nothing, in this respect, to one dark and gloomy; the cloudy sky is more grand than the blue; and night more sublime and solemn than day.'

(Burke 1759:75)

A slow digital zoom was added, to give the viewer the impression of drifting into the images and abrupt cuts were made between each scene to reinforce the sense of repetition. Wary of any notion of narrative or progression, I edited the film to constantly return to the moment of destruction. This was to impart a sense of an anxiety that arises from a continual return to a trauma, as noted by Burke

'they remain whole days and nights... in the constant repetition of some remark, some complaint... which having struck powerfully on their disordered imagination, in the beginning of their frenzy, every repetition reinforces it with new strength, and ... continues it to the end of their lives.'

(1759:67-8)



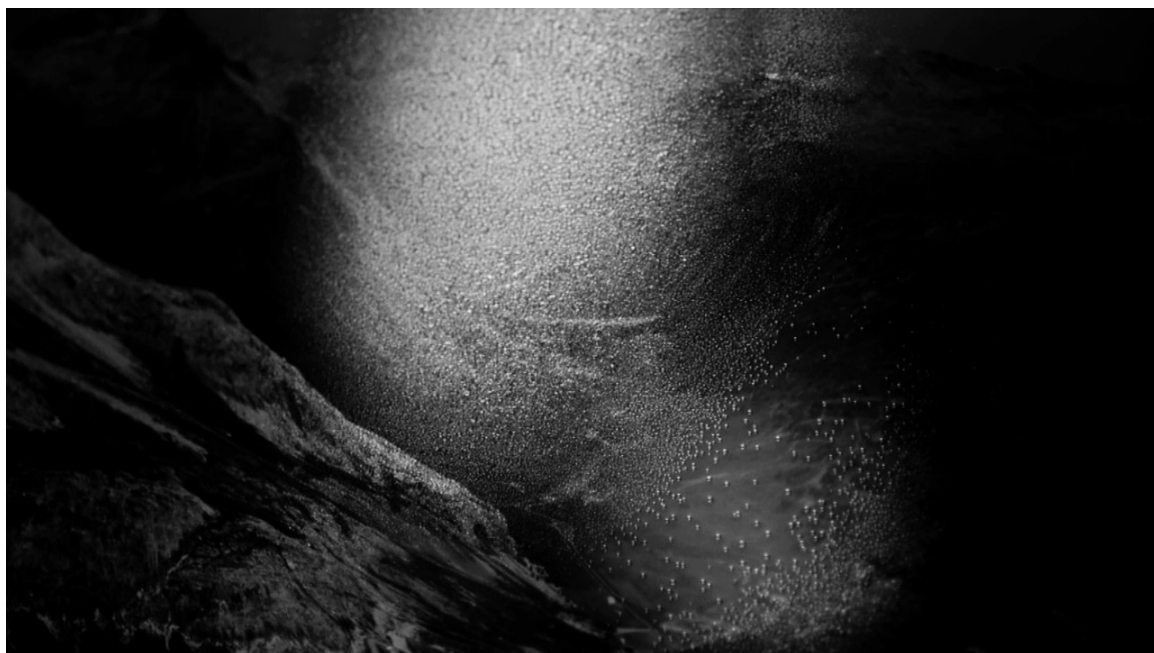
*The World Without Us* (Digital Film 13:55)

Digitally filtering the images into a dark monochrome, the film became more obscure and threatening.



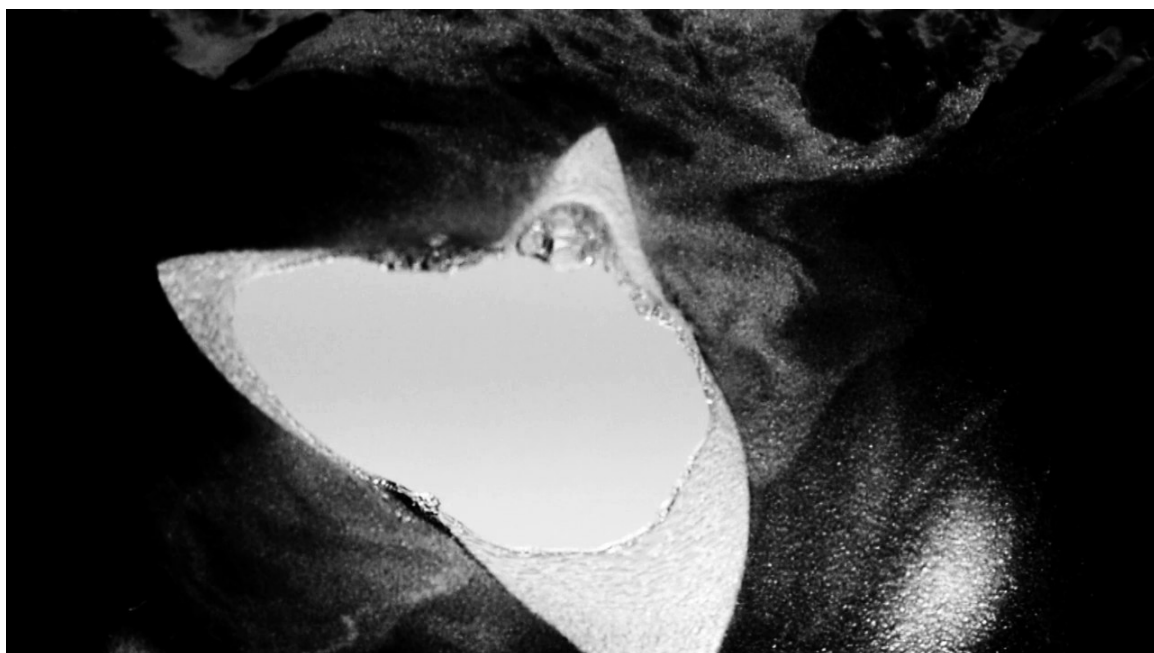
*The World Without Us* (Digital Film 13:55)

The surface of the 35mm slides reacted in unforeseen ways as they were burnt, occasionally producing 'lightning' patterns, and ruptures.



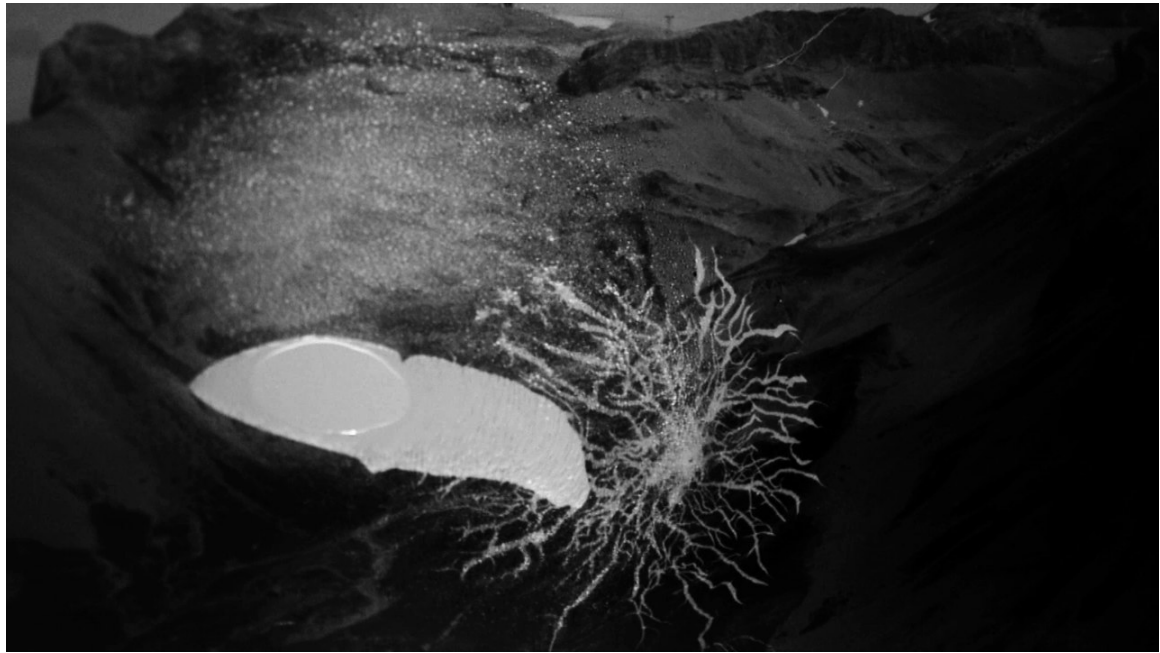
*The World Without Us* (Digital Film 13:55)

The process, at times, rendered the image obscure, moving closer to abstraction



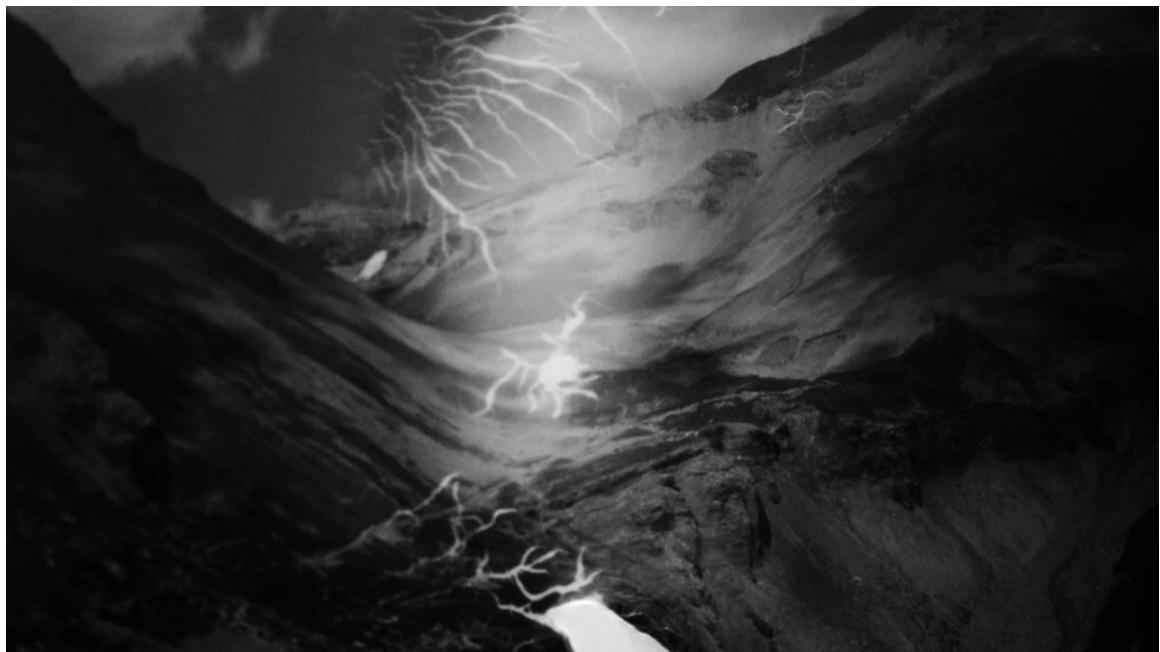
*The World Without Us* (Digital Film 13:55)

Occasionally, the 35mm slides ruptured entirely.



*The World Without Us* (Digital Film 13:55)

The interplay between the 35mm slide and the flame was unpredictable, conveying a sense of the non-rational, wild Burkean sublime



*The World Without Us* (Digital Film 13:55)

The correlations with 19<sup>th</sup> century landscape paintings assisted in embodying the Burkean sublime.

The soundtrack was produced using the ANS synth to process John Martin's *The Great Day Of His Wrath* into a multi tone drone. Sweeping from left to right across the painting, the ANS converts lighter areas of an image into sound. As the ANS reads multiple light patches, multiple notes are sounded. Producing this soundtrack I sought to reference *The Great Day Of His Wrath* aurally, to compliment the visual echoing of the painting that became apparent in the imagery of the burning slides. By using the ANS synth to interpret *The Great Day Of His Wrath* in this way, the visual dynamics of Martin's painting were embedded in the soundtrack. The resulting film, *The World Without Us*, became a thirteen-minute piece. Viewing the film as a large-scale projection produced quite unexpected effects. The originally thumbnail sized images of mountains took on an apocalyptic tone. The small scorch marks and tears in the 35mm slides formed huge organic ruptures, resembling atomic detonations. In the act of projection, the scale of the images took on a new vastness and grandeur, as the landscapes first creep towards the viewer, then melt and buckle. What felt particularly apt in this method of artistic production was the physicality of the film material being broken apart by the external force- the flame. Under the influence of this annihilating force, the burning slides appear to be unable to contain the image and fall into abstraction, becoming uncertain or obscure. This alteration process, from a beautiful image to one that is apocalyptic in nature, is served well by the sequential medium of film. The movement within the image suggests a manifestation into the world. As the slides break apart, the viewer becomes aware of the white space behind the image. This white space is both a part of the image and a rupture within it. In a

sense I felt this related to the notion of immanence (as opposed to a transcendence) of the Burkean sublime as the metaphysical power makes itself apparent to us. This annihilating metaphysical force appears as a nothing, a void. This referenced Burke's statement that -

‘When we go but one step beyond the immediate sensible qualities of things, we go out of our depth.’

(Burke 1759:117)

The manifesting voids of *The World Without Us* are a non-representational form of the metaphysical force.

To supplement the film, a series of large digital prints were made. I sought to reference the film back to nineteenth century paintings, and particularly Martin's *The Great Day Of His Wrath*, which had provided the basis for the soundtrack to *The World Without Us*. The abstraction caused by the burning of the images provided a painterly texture and they struck a similar apocalyptic tone to Martin's work- namely that of the landscape in crisis. Lacking the possibilities of movement that are intrinsic to film, these prints were perhaps not as gloomily threatening as the film, but they did relate more closely to the historical context of the discourse.

*The World Without Us* illustrates several relationships within the idea of the Burkean sublime; connections between scale, destruction, abstraction, the

apocalyptic and immanence. The repeated destruction/rejection of the beautiful is engrossing. The film suggests the continual threat of something breaking apart, descending into nothing.



*The World Without Us* (Digital Film 13:55)



*The World Without Us* (Digital Film 13:55)



### 3.5 'Nothing further happening'

Jean-François Lyotard suggests the terror of nothingness, in the essay *The Sublime and the Avant-Garde* (1998). Noting the distance between Burke and Kant, and the perceived taming of the terror in the sublime by Kant's triumph of reason, Lyotard states-

'Kant may well reject Burke's thesis as empiricism and physiologism, he may well borrow from Burke the analysis of the characterising contradiction of the feeling of the sublime, but he strips Burke's aesthetic of what I consider to be its major stake- to show that the sublime is kindled by the threat of nothing further happening.'

(Lyotard 1998:31)

For Lyotard the threat of a void is central to the Burkean sense of the sublime. That 'nothing further' happens for Lyotard is exemplified by Milton's 'universe of death' (Lyotard 1998:36). It is a privation, and it is apocalyptic in a manner similar to McEvilley's cosmic terror. Lyotard claims-

'Terrors are linked to privation: privation of light, terror of darkness; privation of others, terror of solitude; privation of language, terror of silence; privation of objects, terror of emptiness; privation of life, terror of death. What is terrifying

is that the *It happens that* does not happen, that it stops happening.'

(Lyotard 1998:35)

For Lyotard the threat that the *It happens that* is prevented from occurring is the ultimate terror of Burke's sublime. This negation, of language, of light, of objects, implies an annihilation- a 'universe of death'. The thought of the unthinkable negation is the cause of what Crowther terms the 'existential vertigo' (1989:170). Lyotard goes on to address the issue of how we can gain delight from this nihilistic thought via mediation. For Lyotard, this distance is possible through the art, specifically the avant-garde, which can avoid direct representation - 'It is one thing to make an idea clear, and another to make it affecting to the imagination.' (Burke 1759:55).

'Here then is an account of the sublime feeling; a very big, very powerful object threatens to deprive the soul of any 'it happens', strikes it with 'astonishment'... The soul is thus dumb, immobilized, as good as dead. Art, by distancing this menace, procures a pleasure of relief, of delight. Thanks to art, the soul is returned to the agitated space between life and death...'

(Lyotard 1998:35)

In both McEvilley and Lyotard's accounts, the terror of the sublime is an annihilating idea. For McEvilley it is the cosmos 'torn apart and turned upside

down', for Lyotard it is the concept of nothingness, of the lack of resolution and continuance. As a concept, the sublime is beyond our limits, a privation of everything. It is dangerous enough to leave us 'as good as dead'. For Lyotard the thought of the annihilating idea can be accessed vicariously, from a mental distance, through art. Via this modification and distance, the viewer can experience the *delight*, which Burke states is necessary for the experience to be sublime, rather than simply the *terrible* (Burke 1759:36).

### 3.6 The Great Day Of His Wrath and The Sea of Ice

John Martin's *The Great Day Of His Wrath* (1851-53) is an epic, apocalyptic work. The scale is vast, cities are overthrown as the earth is torn apart by divine forces. There is fire in the sky and lightning bolts strike huge boulders, which tumble into the abyss as onlookers writhe in terror in the foreground, certain to be crushed by the unstoppable force. Martin's third painting in the Judgement series is dramatic, theatrical and an oddly terrifying vision. From a Burkean perspective, the image certainly illustrates the *Enquiry's* causes for the feeling of the sublime. It is dark, uncertain, and vast in scope. Its steeply contrasted colour scheme, from the bright shards of lightning at the edges to the deep black of the central chasm, draws the viewer inwards, deeper into the abyss which stretches out from the centre of the canvas. The collapsing cities and erupting lava flows show the affect of a divine power. The painting depicts the breaking of the sixth seal-

'And, lo, there was a great earthquake' and the sun became  
black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood;  
And the stars of heaven fell unto the earth, even as a fig tree  
casteth her untimely figs, when she is shaken of a mighty wind.  
And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together;  
and every mountain and island were moved out of their places.'

(*Revelation* 6:12-14)



John Martin *The Great Day Of His Wrath* (1851-53)



Detail: John Martin *The Great Day Of His Wrath* (1851-53)

Lyotard states that for Burke the sublime was a ‘matter of intensification’ (1998:35). Martin’s painting shows the physical, knowable world breaking apart, taking the apocalyptic imagery and amplifying it by treading a fine line between representation and obscurity. Although we see the detail of the buildings and the rock formations, the chasm into which they are falling is inscrutable and dark. The scale is vast, as whole cities are thrown into the air, the mountains collapsing. Comaroff and Ker-Shing in *Horror In Architecture* note this terror of a world in flux.

‘The horrible has to do, in part, with a shifting of territorial borders. This is true of bodies and geographies. It moves the line of radical alterity, that which separates ourselves and others, to an inappropriate location... The abnormality thus gives imaginative form to anxieties about being human under evolving conditions, in a de-familiarized world.’

(Comaroff & Ker-Shing 2013:30)

In *The Great Day Of His Wrath*, Martin takes the known world and breaks it apart. The painting does not offer the possibility of transcendence. There is a lack of opportunity for heroic escape or reasoning in this world torn apart. The figures, which are situated at the very bottom of the picture, provide scale for the destruction from above. They succumb to the divine power. What the painting does present is an impression of an end to finite objects. The outer edges of the landscape are folded into the central chasm. Although the

destruction is caused by a metaphysical power, the affects are of the physical world. Martin does not show us the divine. Like Burke who refuses to go 'one step beyond the immediately sensible qualities of things' (1759:117) *The Great Day Of His Wrath* shows the affect of Burke's ultimate cause. In combination the earthquakes, lightning and the abyss each intensify one other. If there were to be 'only' an earthquake or 'just' lightning, the image would be merely impressive. But by combining these events there is a sense of completeness, a sense of *everything* in flux. The idea of the 'divine presence felt to be immanent in nature' which Weiskel notes (1976:14), is demonstrated by the lack of any overt representation of the divine. Instead the manifestation of the supreme power is illustrated by the destruction of the physical world. It does not just depict a violent scene, but *the* violent scene of the *end*. It infers the end of everything through the moment of cataclysm.

Casper David Friedrich's *Sea Of Ice* (1823-24) depicts a very different kind of *end*. A landscape of fractured ice sheets stretches into the distance. There is the sense of the aftermath of a cataclysm, with a ship half buried and trapped in the ice. Unlike *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818), which, as noted in the previous chapter, can be read as embodying the essence of a Kantian sublime (Koerner 1990:181), Friedrich's *Sea Of Ice* portrays a less romantic, heroically inclined atmosphere. As demonstrated by the broken ship and the fractured ground, the landscape is inhospitable. With the inclusion of the ship, Friedrich suggests not only human activity, but also the failure of human activity. The landscape, through its inherent power, is shown to dominate the human.

'In the visual arts of modern Europe, the sublime was first expressed as a landscape theme, most famously in the works of Casper David Friedrich. Either hugeness of natural entities like mountains and seas was presented as towering over and trivializing the affairs of humans, or the vastness of nature was seen to roll over whole cultural traditions, leaving silent ruins as *memento mori* not for individuals but for entire civilizations.'

(McEvelley 2001:71)

The *end* depicted by *Sea Of Ice* has already occurred. There are no figures to identify with, only the remains of effort. The idea of vastness in the painting is





Casper David Friedrich *Sea Of Ice* (1823-24)

reiterated by the repetition of the central fractured ice sheets. The rupture is not contained in the foreground, but occurs again and again, towards the horizon, with the ship half hidden in the expansive slabs.

‘This icy pyre appears on closer examination as less a scene of nature, but rather a machinery of death...The icy slabs appear like the grinding surfaces of a vast machine.’

(Leslie 2009:36)

Whereas Martin’s painting revels in the ‘ultimate power, which is threatening annihilation to all individual things and beings’ (McEvelley 2001:57), Friedrich’s painting is of privation, along the lines of Lyotard’s fearsome description of a ‘privation of objects, terror of emptiness; privation of life, terror of death.’ (1998:35). There is a stillness to Friedrich’s painting, which initially seems at odds with the violent sublime of Burke. The icy spires, in their immensity, suggest deep time, a scale beyond the human timeframe. The *Sea Of Ice* is distinctly *un-human*.

‘This scene is without an opposing subjectivity. It is a horror that has already occurred, not one in its unfolding, and it is not one graspable by human ratio. Death is absolute and already completed, including the death or never-birth of reason.’

(Leslie 2009:36)

It is perhaps worth noting that both *Sea Of Ice* and *The Great Day Of His Wrath* depict ruins (the ship) or cities in ruin. In both paintings the ruins are hidden, small in relation to the vastness of the sublime object. These ruins not only suggest the loss of 'entire civilizations' but by virtue of the scale, the inconsequentiality of the civilization. In a sense both *Sea Of Ice* and *The Great Day Of His Wrath* are nihilistic in their outlook, as neither scene allows for us to be saved, instead offering the 'recognition of futility' Weiskel noted as a characteristic of the sublime. (1976:93).

Both *Sea Of Ice* and *The Great Day Of His Wrath* depict a fracture of the world. The landscape of *Sea Of Ice* is a fractured geography- revealing in its fissures the remains of human effort. *The Great Day Of His Wrath* shows the material world as it is broken apart and unmade. The sublime experience is of seeing the fractures and fissures- the abyss and torn landscape of *The Great Day Of His Wrath*, or the 'grinding surfaces' of *Sea Of Ice*.

## The Apocalypse of the Burkean Sublime

By regarding the Burkean sublime as a speculative glance of our annihilation (that we engage with through works of art like Martin's *The Great Day Of His Wrath* or Tarr's *The Turin Horse*), we have seen that there is a pessimistic turn; in the Burkean sublime there is no triumph, only the *delight* of self-preservation, of surviving. Burke's physiological causes as categorised in the *Enquiry* can be traced to the idea of near annihilation, to a chaotic and unknowable world. In using the *Enquiry* as a manual for artistic production, the images produced through observing notions of darkness, power, obscurity and grandeur (as in *The World Without Us* film) became apocalyptic to an unexpected degree. In this film, and others examined in this chapter, there arises the paradoxical reveal of the unknowable.

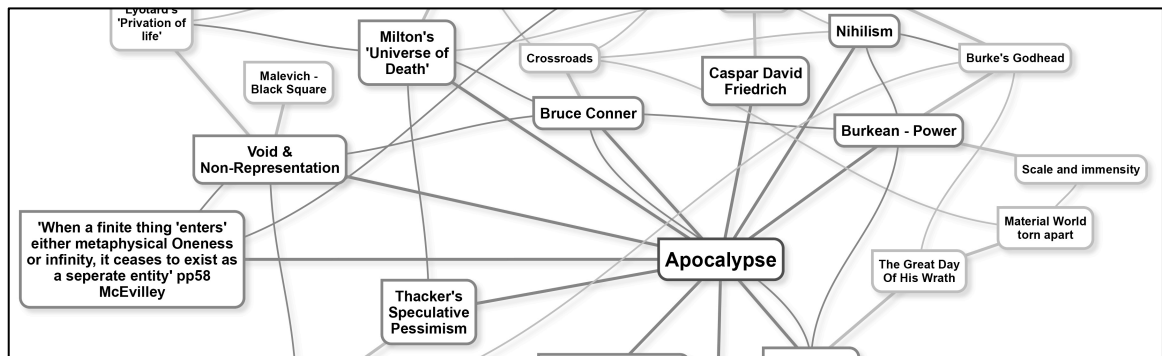
In this chapter, the abstraction of Bruce Conner's *Crossroads* (1976) is considered as leading towards a speculative terror, Eugene Thacker's theories of the *world-without-us*, and the development of an artistic process of destruction. This process is concerned with a reveal of a sense of the hidden.

#### 4.1 Crossroads

Watching Bruce Conner's 1976 film *Crossroads* is a mesmerising and disturbing experience. Over the course of 36 minutes, documentary footage of the 1946 Baker nuclear test in the Bikini Atoll is repeated, at varying speeds, from multiple angles. Again and again, the film shows the explosion, the resulting shockwaves across the water and the iconic mushroom cloud, expanding into abstraction, almost impossibly large. The shifting form of the water becomes an unnaturally sculptural object, filling the screen. In one shot, the force of the explosion sends a huge mass, part cloud and part wave, towards the camera. The scale is so vast that the water appears to hang motionless, yet at the same time move uncontrollably towards the viewer. The film is terrifying as a display of power and, watching the film in the Thomas Dane Gallery, London 2015, I found myself waiting for the explosion to occur and re-occur, drawn to see it again. In the editorial repetition of the nuclear footage, Conner creates a bleakly meditative sensation. Rather than becoming desensitised through repetition, each explosion reinforced the impact of the preceding shot. The footage shows the manifestation of an immense power, which appears to tear the 'cosmos apart' (McEvelley 2001:62), as the world falls into a physically abstract state. *Crossroads*, like Kapoor's *Descension* and the destructive materiality of Tscherkassky's *Outer Space*, can all be read as the a *beautiful surface* under assault from a destructive force.



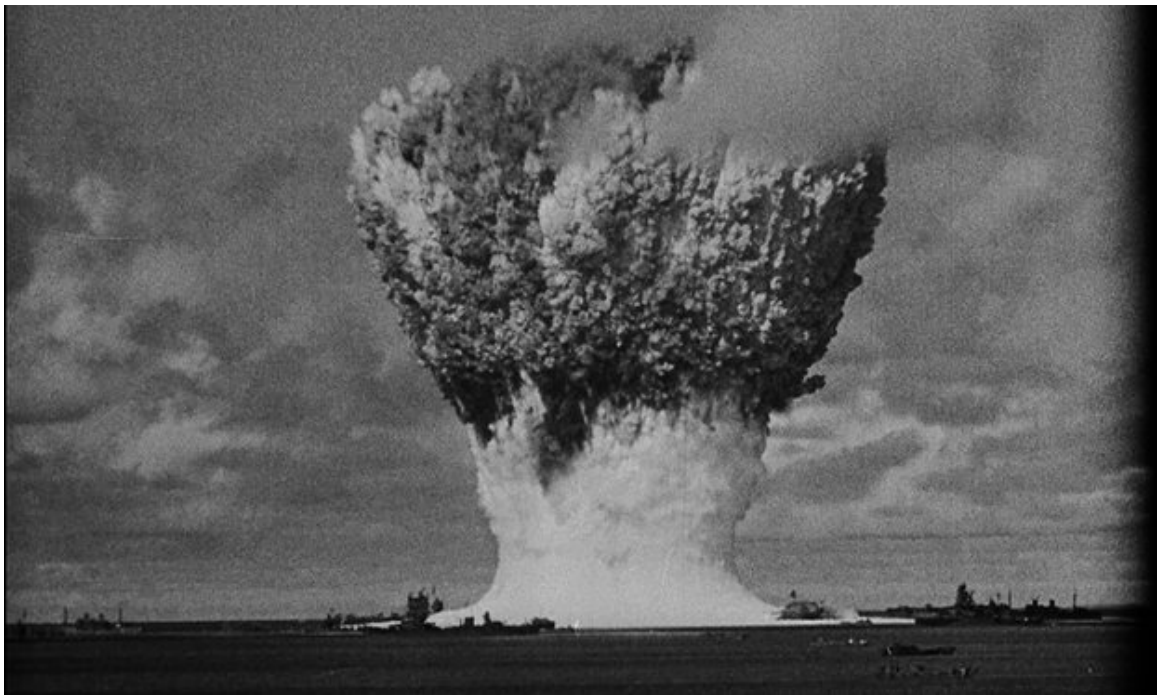
Bruce Conner *Crossroads* (1976) at The Thomas Dane Gallery



See Appendix (p17)



Bruce Conner *Crossroads* (1976)



Bruce Conner *Crossroads* (1976)

Conner's film shares with Burke's *Enquiry* a fascination with the thought of that which is so immense, destructive and powerful that it is almost unthinkable. For Burke this is the 'incomprehensible darkness' (1759:58) or the 'almighty power, [from which] we shrink into the minuteness of our own nature, and are... annihilated before him' (1759:63). Drawing comparisons between Conner's film and my own film *The World Without Us*, it became apparent that the representation of destruction was not the sole link to Burke's theory of the sublime in the visual arts. The action cinema of Hollywood is filled with explosions, with violent acts, which do not, in themselves, evoke the Burkean terror sublime. What Conner's film suggests in its meditative contemplation of the nuclear tests footage is a speculative terror, the essentially unknowable *concept* of extinction from a greater power. This is directly related to Lyotard's terror of the 'privation of life' (1998:35), or Milton's poetical 'universe of death', as an implication of an unthinkable world. Despite its origins of documentary test footage, *Crossroads* becomes a tantalizing glimpse into a speculative world beyond our possible experience, through the act of the edit and repetition.

'The rage to destroy the orderliness of beauty...is the sublime.

The sublime is sheer chaos, beyond reason, beyond finite,  
beyond order.'

(McEvelley 2001:59)



#### 4.2 In The Dust Of This Planet

Eugene Thacker's *In The Dust Of This Planet: Horror of Philosophy Vol. 1* is not specifically concerned with theories of the sublime, but at its core is a theory that presented, in the course of my research, a new perspective on the terror sublime of Burke's *Enquiry* and the speculative nature of the apocalyptic imagery of Friedrich, Martin and Conner. Thacker's book is concerned with the 'paradoxical thought of the unthinkable' (2011:2) and refers to a philosophical standpoint of Cosmic Pessimism (2011:17). Within Thacker's theory, there is a division between *worlds*. There is the human world, the world in which we live, 'interpret and give meaning to', which Thacker terms the '*world-for-us*' (2011:4). Outside of this world is

'..the *world-in-itself*. This is the world in some inaccessible, already-given state...a paradoxical concept; the moment we think it and attempt to act on it, it ceases to be the world-in-itself and becomes the *world-for-us*...a horizon of thought, always receding just beyond the bounds of intelligibility...So, while we can never experience the *world-in-itself*, we seem to be almost fatalistically drawn to it, perhaps as a limit that defines who we are as human beings.'

(2011:5)

It may be possible to think of this *world-in-itself* as the 'not yet known'. This notion of a world which is unknown, but that may become known, suggests for

Thacker the idea of a third *world*, ‘a spectral and speculative world, the *world-without-us*... the “dark intelligible abyss”’ (2011:5-8), which-

‘regardless of how much knowledge we produce about it, always retains some remainder that lies beyond the scope of our capacity to reveal its hiddenness.’

(2011:53)

Thacker finds this idea of the *world-without-us* evident in the speculative horror of Lovecraft, Fred Hoyle’s *The Black Cloud* (1957), J.G Ballard’s *The Wind From Nowhere* (1961) and, in the distinctly Burkean, anonymous, twenty-first century poem *The Subharmonic Murmur of Black Tentacular Voids*. For Thacker, in these works we paradoxically see the reveal of the ‘hiddenness of the world’ (2011:53).

‘The hidden world, which reveals nothing other than its hiddenness, is a blank, anonymous world that is indifferent to human knowledge, much less to our all-too-human wants and desires. Hence the hiddenness of the world, in its anonymity and indifference, is a world for which the idea of a theistic providence or scientific principle of sufficient reason, are both utterly insufficient.’

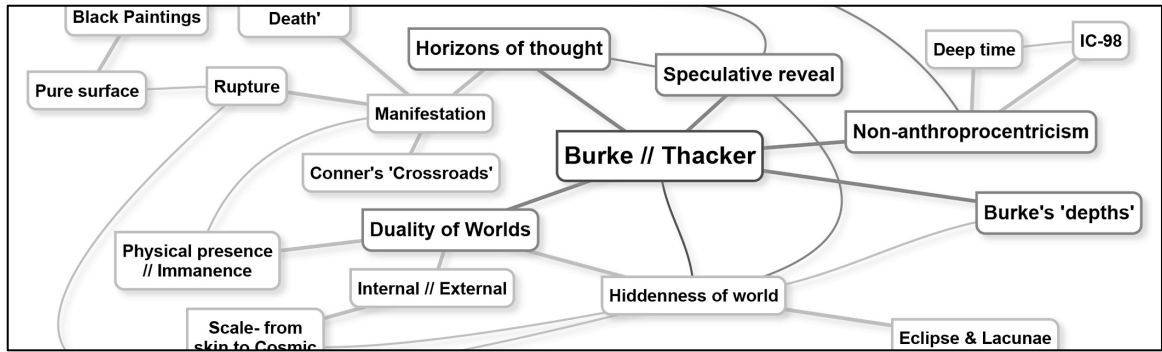
(2011:53-4)

If we were to understand the ‘incomprehensible darkness’ and terror of Burke’s *Enquiry* as correlating with Thacker’s world-without-us, then the obscurity, darkness and privation, which Burke categorises as evocative of the sublime experience, are suggestive of the paradoxical reveal of the ‘hiddenness of the world’.

‘That great chain of causes, which, linking one to another, even to the throne of God himself, can never be unravelled by any industry of ours. When we go but one step beyond the immediate sensible qualities of things, we go out of our depth. All we do after is but a faint struggle, that shows we are in an element which does not belong to us.’

(Burke 1759:117)

In the non-transcendental Burkean sublime, we encounter a physiological reveal (through darkness, magnificence, obscurity, infinity or vastness), which, in turn, presents a further hiddenness or depth. The ultimate source of the sublime is unknowable and other to us. This depth, like the centre of the vortex of Kapoor’s *Descension*, is evident, but leads to a further hiddenness, which ‘does not belong to us’.



See Appendix (p18)

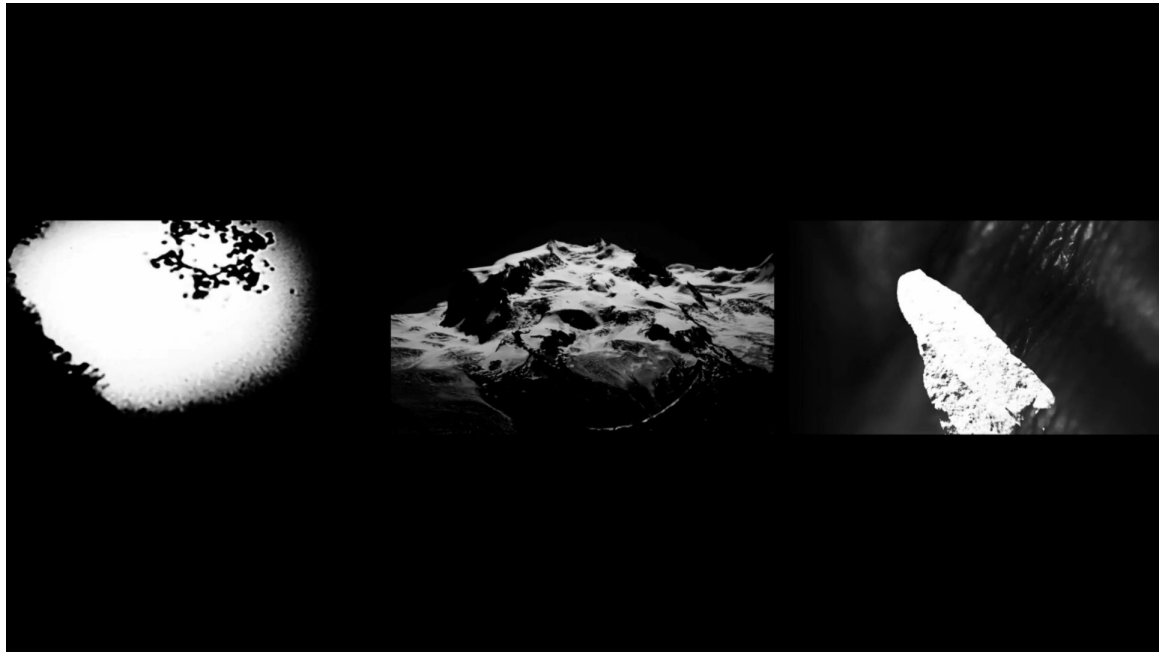
### 4.3 Triptych

Incorporating elements of the film *The World Without Us*, I began to draw together several strands of work into *Triptych* (digital film 03:20min). Using Burke's theories again as a manual, I sought to bring together a range of images from the *Enquiry* as a dense collage of imagery, prompted by the short passage from the *Enquiry* concerning the poetic creation of a sense of the sublime-

‘a tower, an archangel, the sun rising through the mists, or in an eclipse, the ruin of monarchs, and the revolutions of kingdoms. The mind is hurried out of itself, by a crowd of great and confused images.’

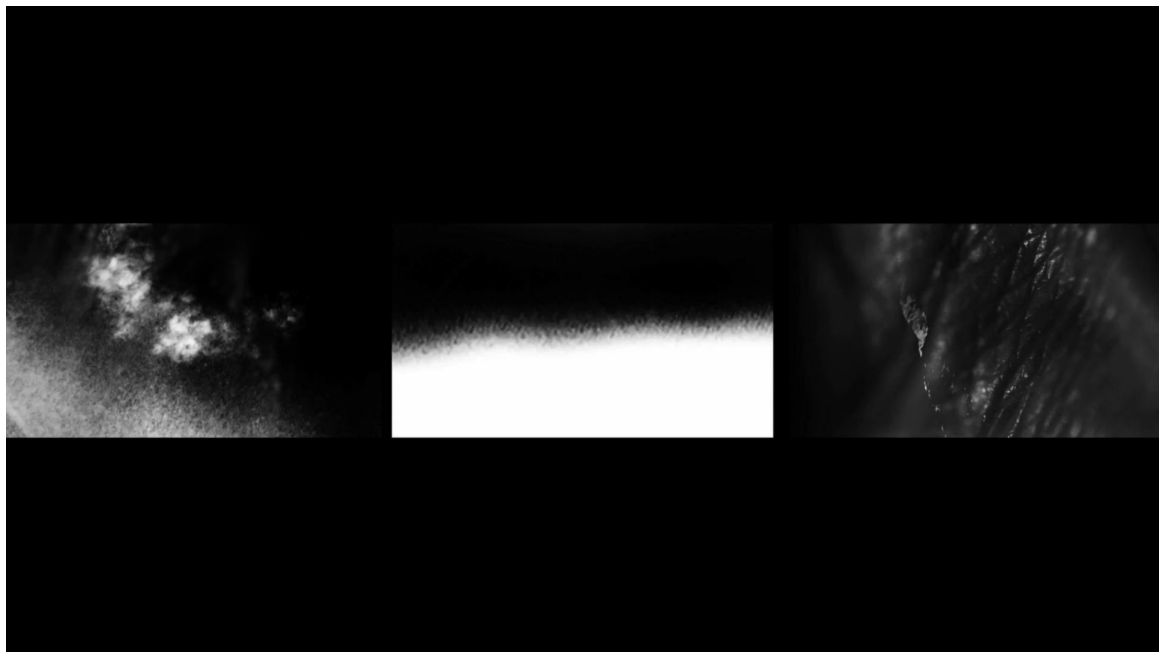
(Burke 1759:57)

With the film I also sought to address Thacker's notions of worlds, both those available to us, and those that are hidden. The film consists of three components, macro photography of skin (denoting both Burke's notions of the physiological and Thacker's world-for-us), footage of fragmented landscapes or ruins (denoting Burke's physiological aspects of the world we encounter and Thacker's world-in-itself) and finally a planet, eclipsed (as a representation of the apex of the Burkean hierarchy of power and Thacker's world-without-us).

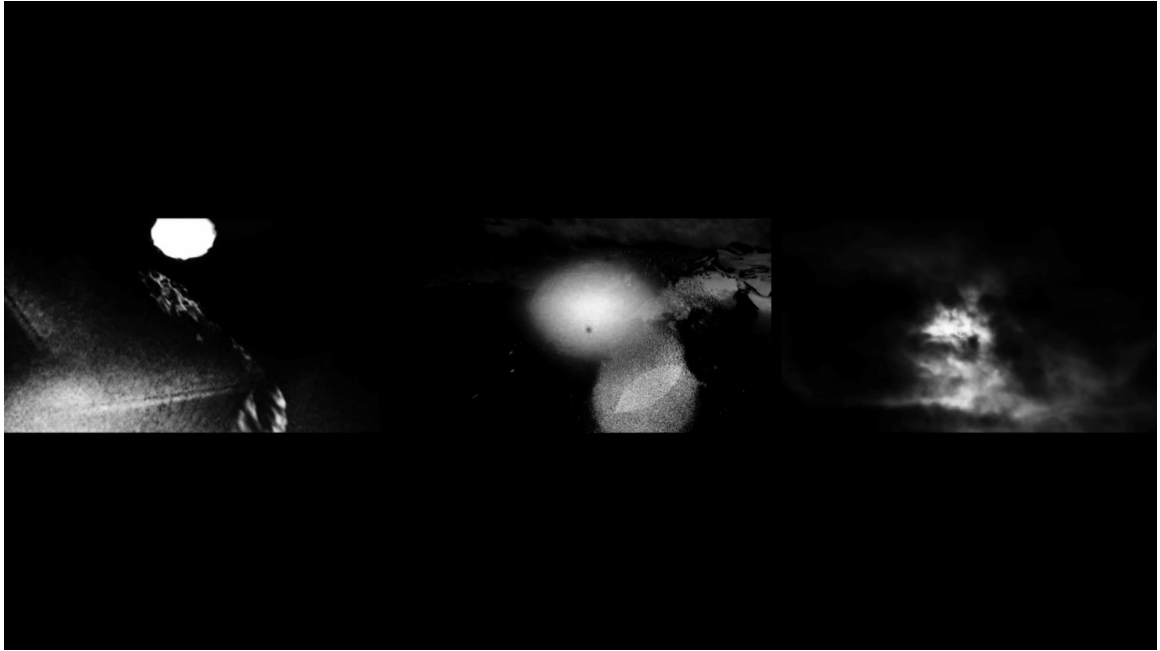


*Triptych* (Digital Film 01:09)

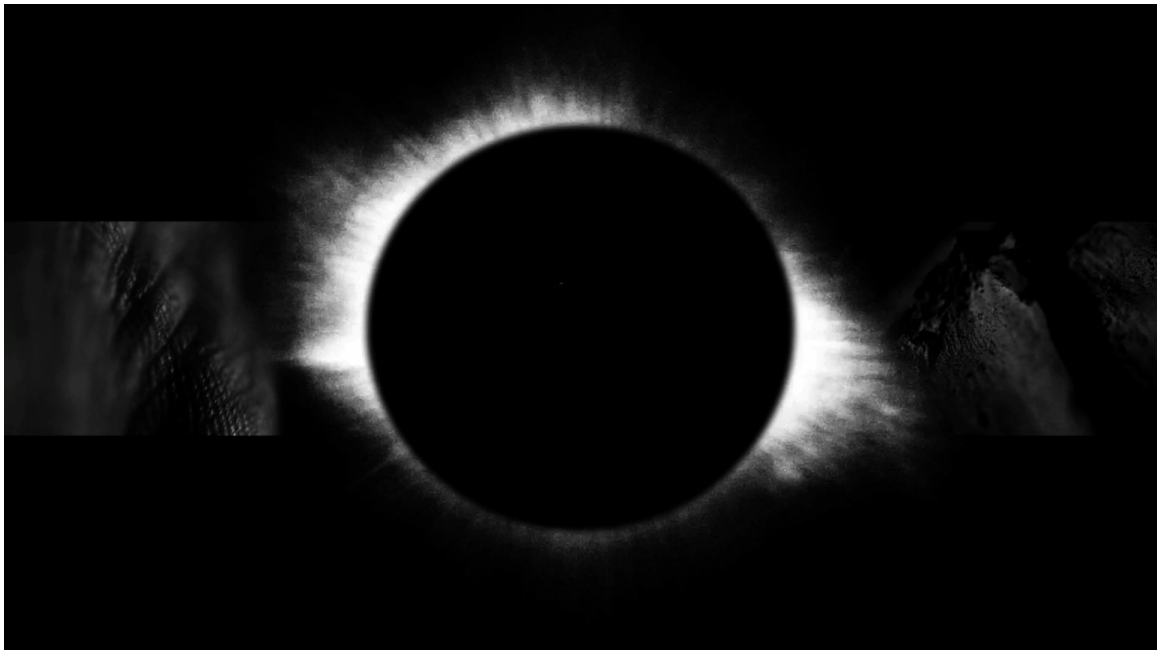
Digital compositing allowed for a poetic interplay between the images taken from Burke's *Enquiry* and ideas suggested by Thacker's *In The Dust Of This Planet*.



*Triptych* (Digital Film 01:09)



*Triptych* (Digital Film 01:09)



*Triptych* (Digital Film 01:09)

The final image of *Triptych* breaks the three part form of the film, with an 'eclipsed', or hidden planet.

In layering these representations, the film attempts the creation of an atmosphere of uncertainty, as scale –from the human to the cosmological- is undetermined. Through the digital editing processes, the images of skin blend into landscapes and rocks phase into images of the solid blackness. Between these three components there is footage of static and video feedback. This static serves to link the three components, as both a boundary and as a liminal space, a visual noise between each component, a frequency between frequencies.

In the making of *Triptych*, through the use of footage of a partial eclipse and light travelling across landscapes, there occurred not only the sense of distance (from the human to the cosmological), but in turn a sense of time and timelessness. The triptych format allowed for a separation of differently scaled events to occur simultaneously, whilst the digital editing and compositing allowed for an overlapping, disrupting any notion of narrative and increasing the sense of uncertainty. In the overlap the scale of both distance and time is uncertain and obscure.

In Finnish duo IC-98's *Abendland (Hours, Years, Aeons)* installation for the Venice Biennale 2015, a sense of both deep, mythical time and of a speculative post-human world pervade the work. Digitally augmented landscapes and dark vistas grow and mutate, suggesting vast stretches of time.



‘Human presence haunts their oeuvre.... What remains are signs of their impact, the ruins of civilization.... as IC-98 subtly challenges the anthropocentric viewpoint.’

(Elfvig 2015:70)

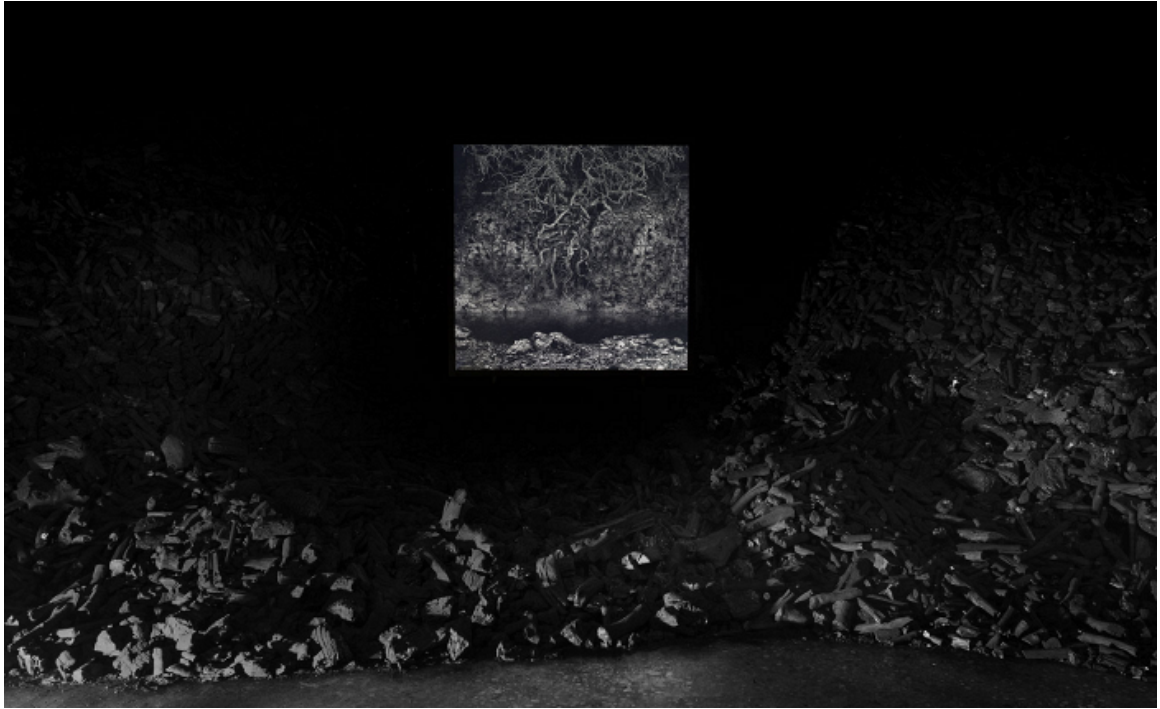
The notions of ruins and of a speculative, non-anthropocentric viewpoint are reminiscent of the post-human ice sheets and shipwrecks of Friedrich’s *Sea of Ice*. Dark and gloomy, IC-98’s installation featured a floor littered with debris and stones, forming a physical barrier between audience and screen. From this threshold, the audience watches as a tree moves in a deep blackness, both floating and rooted into the earth. The empty darkness on the screen, from which the tree emerges, brings with it notions of privation and vastness. In the *Enquiry*, Burke comes close to this sensation of deep, or mythic, time in reference to ‘druids’ and ‘heathen temples’ in the section on *Obscurity*.

‘Almost all the heathen temples were dark....the Druids performed all their ceremonies in the bosom of the darkest woods, and in the shade of the oldest and most spreading oaks.’

(Burke 1759:54-5)



IC-98 *Abendland (Hours, Years, Aeons)* (2015)



IC-98 *Abendland (Hours, Years, Aeons)* (2015)



IC-98 *Abendland (Hours, Years, Aeons)* (2015)

#### 4.4 Attonitus 16mm and Vereor 16mm

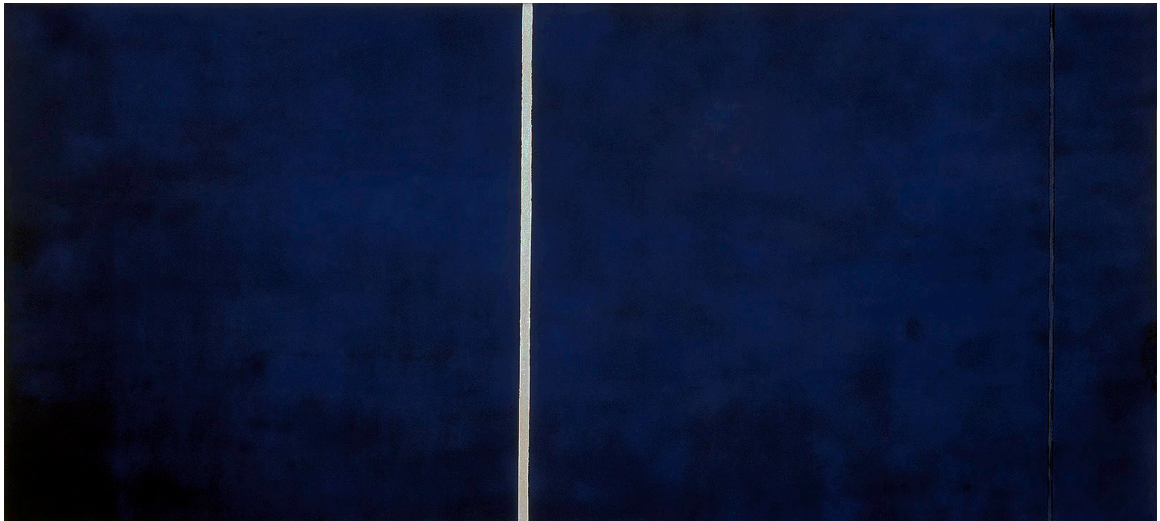
If the terror of the Burkean sublime is the revelation of a deeper, non-anthropocentric 'hiddenness', or the speculative glimpse of a world-without-us, then how can this be realized or embodied in artistic practice? In the final two films of this MRes project, I looked to define my visual language concerning the Burkean sublime, which had emerged through the process of praxis and reflection. I sought to replicate the forms created by the burning and breakdown of the material of film, in an abstract, obscure manner. Following the material destruction of the *World Without Us* film/print series, and acknowledging the work of Bruce Conner, IC-98 and Barnett Newman and Ad Reinhart's rejection of beauty and representation, these two films were concerned with the breaking of the dark *beautiful surface*. These tears, ruptures and breaks in the material surface of the image were, I felt, evocative of the physiological power and reveal of the Burkean sublime. The ruptures would emerge and return into a black, blank ground. McEvelley notes of the work of American abstract painters Newman and Reinhart-

'The fragments of the once-beautiful world... turned upside down and torn apart, sink beneath the pictorial surface into the black pit of infinite non-being or non-manifestation that lurks sinisterly beneath all beauty as a promise of its ultimate annihilation.'

(McEvelley 2001:72)



Ad Reinhardt *Abstract No.5* (1962)



Barnett Newman *Catherdra Magna* (1951)

The process began with the testing of a range of blank 16mm leader film. Each batch of film stock was placed into a projector and slowly moved through the projector gate, resulting in a 'burnout', which allowed light from the lamp to spill out. Often the film snapped, warped or buckled very quickly, the acetate melting beneath the heat of the projector bulb. After a series of tests, a thin, plastic leader stock was found that split apart from its acetate backing, but maintained sufficient integrity to continue being passed through the projector. In a sense, this film stock *survived* contact with the destructive object (the projector bulb). Whilst digitally re-filming the projected image of the 16mm leader, the loop of the film stock was manually pulled through the projector's gate.

In the resulting film, *Attonitus 16mm* (digitally augmented and with a soundtrack provided by the ANS synth), the burns and tears appear organically out of the black pictorial surface. The abstract images created through the act of destruction are evocative of nuclear imagery (the most abstract aspects of Conner's film) and of clouds or lightning (as in the physical phenomena which signal the divine cataclysms in the paintings of John Martin). As the chaotic fissures emerge from the darkness, the images appear to be on the verge of resolving into a rational, comprehensible form, yet fail to do so. They remain in a state of obscurity and abstraction. Occasionally the forms produced are reminiscent of macro photography of biological or chemical interactions. These quickly mutate and alter

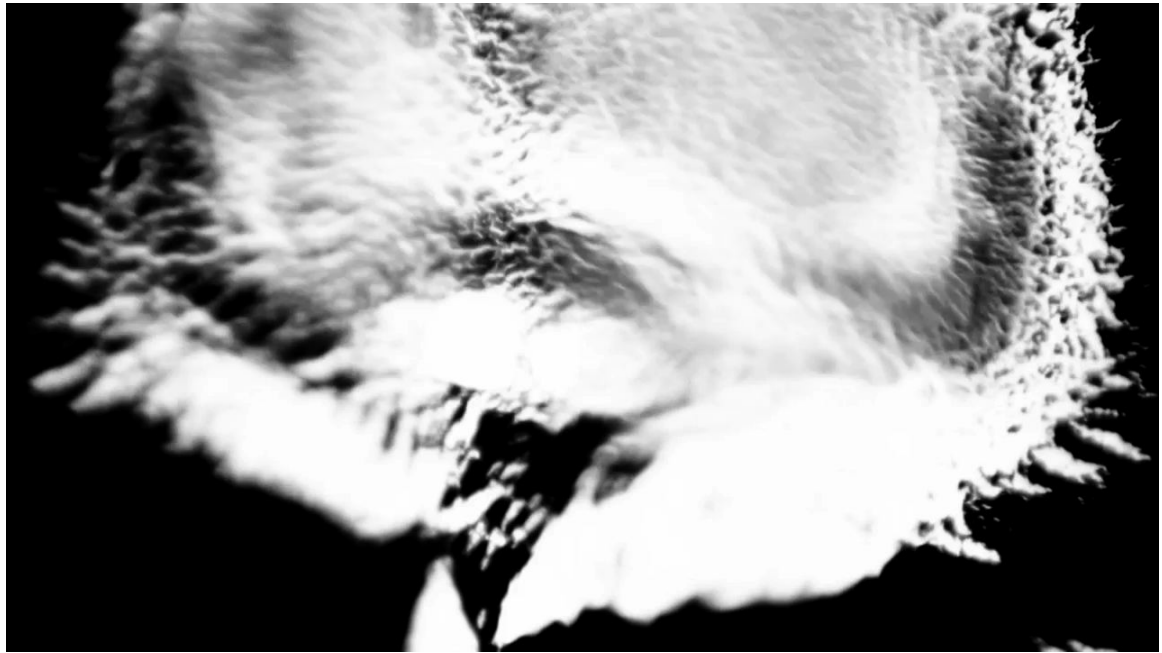


*Attonitus 16mm* (Digital Film 06:26)

Imagery produced through material destruction. The splitting of the 16mm remains unresolved, never burning through entirely, but continually threatening to do so.



*Attonitus 16mm* (Digital Film 06:26)



*Attonitus 16mm* (Digital Film 06:26)

Fluctuations in focus, caused by the film buckling in the projector gate, give the impression of scale and immensity.



*Attonitus 16mm* (Digital Film 06:26)



as the focus shifts (caused by the film warping in the heat), the scale seeming to shift into possible landscapes, or cliff faces, or clouds.

Further experiments with the 16mm film stock resulted in a second film, *Vereor 16mm*, which used the same process of burning, manual manipulation and projection. In an attempt to capture the moment of rupture directly, the digital camera was focussed straight into the lens of the projector. As the 16mm film stock erupted and tore apart, the imagery produced was very different from that of *Attonitus 16mm*. More violent in appearance, *Vereor 16mm* suggests distant ruptures and lightning, emerging from the darkness of the pictorial surface. Less hazy and more defined than *Attonitus 16mm*, the methods used to produce *Vereor 16mm* resulted in a more brutal, less controlled imagery.

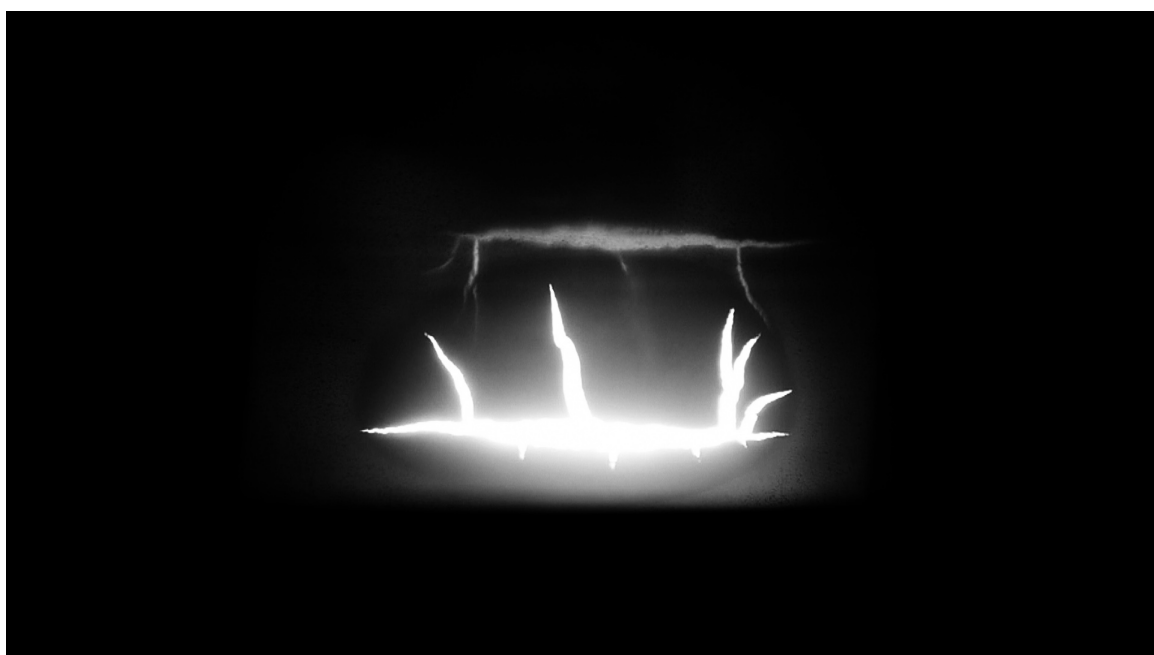
In the indistinct, emerging images that are manifested in the act of destruction, both *Attonitus 16mm* and *Vereor 16mm* exhibit a surface disrupted by a hidden power. Whilst the material destruction is a sensual act, of extreme heat overcoming a susceptible surface, the visual outcome is somewhat apocalyptic in its imagery. Like Thacker's *world-without-us*, the reveal of the films (in the form of ruptures) paradoxically discloses a hidden other behind the surface, mirroring Burke's metaphysical 'depths' which leads us 'beyond the immediate sensible qualities of things' into 'an element which does not belong to us'.

(Burke 1759:117)



*Vereor 16mm* (Digital Film 01:48)

Filming directly into the projector lens altered the quality of the images, producing a more violent, brutal aesthetic.



*Vereor 16mm* (Digital Film 01:48)



*Vereor 16mm* (Digital Film 01:48)

Erupting from the material surface, the strobing images evoke a nuclear aesthetic. The film captures the surface tearing, but reveals nothing of what is behind the surface.



*Vereor 16mm* (Digital Film 01:48)

## Conclusion

### Analysis

The use of charts<sup>9</sup> to collate ideas and concepts concerned with the Burkean sublime allowed for an overview of the discourse. This overview did not differentiate between historical and contemporary, or between textual and visual notions of the sublime. This accumulative and visual process enabled ideas that arose through practical work to find context and correlations within the discourse, which in turn, provided further possibilities for artistic production. For example, this process aided in viewing the Burkean sublime as ideologically distinct from the Kantian transcendent sublime, as ideas of dominance and immanence came to orbit the Burkean approach. Being able to make these connections graphically was extremely beneficial to myself as a visual artist. One drawback of this technique was the complexity such images produce, as multiple connections began to form indiscernible webs of ideas. In an attempt to counter this, multiple charts were required.

Through the process of digital editing and compositing, multiple ideas and notions of the Burkean sublime could be represented simultaneously. This technique arose directly through the use of the word charts and led to the production of the films *Triptych*, *Strange Alteration* and *Beneath*. The process allows for the embodiment of Burke's notion of the sublime as a 'strange confusion of ideas' (1759:151). This method proved to have advantages and

---

<sup>9</sup> See Appendix

disadvantages. Although a poetic confusion of images was possible, which was an attempt to demonstrate the absence of certainty and reason suggested by the *Enquiry* in the films, it became somewhat difficult to focus on a single aspect of the Burkean system. In this way, the films mirrored the word charts, and equally required an imposition of purpose or focus to achieve a greater impact. This became evident in the creation of the *World With Us* film and print series, which had a more defined emphasis on the destructive essence of the sublime.

Drawing on the ruinous and non-representational notions of the Burkean sublime suggested by the work of McEvelley and Lyotard, and the apocalyptic, abstract, dominating force of Conner's *Crossroads* and Tscherkassky's *Outer Space*, it was in the material act of destruction that my own visual language of the Burkean sublime emerged. In using these techniques it became apparent that, once the process was begun, I was no longer in control of the outcome. This added to the associations between practical process and the notions of the Burkean sublime, as a non-rational, chaotic other. The blank, white light exposed by the ruptures and voids created through this process drew further correlations with Burke's approach to the metaphysical, which is both manifested through the physiological and at the same time remains hidden, undisclosed and non-representational (Burke 1759:117). It was, I felt, this correlation between the images created through the breakdown of the materiality of the 16mm film, the physiological causes of the Burkean sublime and the notion of a reveal of an unknowable hiddenness to the world, which

resulted in the embodiment of the Burkean sublime in the *World With Us* and subsequent films.

### Conclusion

During the course of this MRes project, the use of contemporary artistic practice has been instrumental in understanding dynamics and mechanisms of the Burkean sublime. This is perhaps best illustrated by the methods of material destruction that informed the films *World Without Us*, *Attonitus 16mm* and *Vereor 16mm*. In the ruptures and physical tears which provide the visuals for these films, there occurred a culmination of several ideas on the Burkean sublime- of destruction, of a reveal, of the landscape in crisis, of a visual language of non-representation, of immanence, of annihilation – ideas which manifested through practical work. The word charts mapped a territory, but it was in the experimental process and practice that the visual language of the project formed, which then refocused or led the theoretical work. In the experimentation with the materiality of the film, where control is relinquished, these ruptures and tears manifested out of the dark surface. When combining filmed elements as overlays or digital compositions, the visual poetics became apparent only in practice, through the act of making. The use of sound and structures provided a physical, haptic element that aided in experimenting with a system that discusses physiological aspects of experience. In this way, the use of contemporary artistic practice as research has allowed me to access notions of the Burkean sublime, which would have remained elusive in a purely textual research project.

The notion of approaching the *Enquiry* as a manual for artistic production was initially intended to aid in the creation of artworks, simply by following Burke's instructions- of loud sounds, scale, colour, darkness, etc. Yet as the project progressed, what became evident was that working with the imagery that Burke draws upon to explain his ideas began to inform my own visual language and guide my use of materials in unexpected ways. Developing imagery based on Burke's concepts of obscurity, darkness and power, the video work began to become more abstract, more materially violent, more apocalyptic. Rather than work directly and sequentially through the *Enquiry*, the chaotic, non-rational sense of the Burkean sublime led me to engage with the concepts in combination, to take an excerpt of Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Burke's description darkness as the foundation for a piece of work. This led to a more poetic reading of the *Enquiry*. Burke's essay took on a duality, as a theory to be researched, understood and examined, and as a resource of imagery, conceptual connections and poetic inspiration.

Examining the terrain mapped out by Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* revealed a theory which is distinct from a Kantian notion of the sublime and is comparable to strands of contemporary ontological thought, as expressed by Eugene Thacker, IC-98 and Anish Kapoor, et al. As proposed by Thomas McEvelley and Vanessa L. Ryan, the separation of the *Enquiry* from Kant's theory of the sublime is vital to understanding the scope, range and intention of the Burkean sublime. Rather than a heroic triumph of reason, the *Enquiry* is concerned with the thoughts and implications of human limits in a non-anthropocentric universe, which contains within it an unknowable, hidden quality.

In this thesis, we have seen that-

- The sublime of Burke, although catalogued in a system of empiricism, still maintains a metaphysical element, from which all the feelings of the sublime are ultimately derived
- This dominant power as an unknowable force can be discerned in both historical and contemporary visual art in the break-down of our physical world, the rupture of the beautiful surface, or at the edge of comprehension (Martin's *The Great Day Of His Wrath*, Conner's *Crossroads*, Kapoor's *Descension*)
- In these visual depictions, the ruptures, lacunae, tears or fissures paradoxically reveal a hiddenness of the world (*World Without Us*, *Attonitus 16mm* and *Vereor 16mm* films)



- By revealing an eternally hidden element in the world, the Burkean sublime can be seen to represent a dangerous, awe-inspiring and pessimistic cosmos that challenges ‘the anthropocentric viewpoint’ (Elfving 2015:70)

The pessimism within the Burkean system can be traced to the lack of transcendence and the inadequate capacity of reason to comprehend the sublime experience. Where an unknowable power is manifest, yet remains unknown and hidden even in its reveal, we are left in a world which we will never fully understand and that can, therefore, be perceived as chaotic and obscure. The reveal of the sublime is a glimpse of the permanently unconquerable, that which is ‘out of our depth’ (1759:117). For Burke, once this glimpse ends we feel *delight* in the removal of pain or danger (1759:34) The sublime is a passion of ‘self-preservation’ (1759:123) against a dangerous world. Burke proposes that it exercises our faculties as a demonstration of our limits and our limitedness, manifested in the form of darkness, or obscurity, or privation. Beyond the limit is the speculative world of extinction, as depicted in Friedrich’s *Sea Of Ice* or IC-98’s *Abendland (Hours, Years, Aeons)*. The Burkean sublime does not lift us up through our capacity for reason, but reveals a dark horizon of thought.



## References

Berleant, Arnold (2014) *Art, Terror and the Negative Sublime*

In Marchenkov, Vladimir L. (2014) *Arts and Terror*

Published Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press pp. 1-15

Burke, Edmund. (1759, Reprinted 1990) *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*

2nd ed. Published Oxford: Oxford University Press

Comaroff, Joshua & Ker-Shing, Ong. (2013) *Horror In Architecture*

Published US, ORO Editions

Crone, Rainer & Stosch, Alexandra Von. (2008) *Anish Kapoor: To darkness:*

*Svayambh*

Prestel Publishing /BPI Communications

Crowther, Paul. (1989) *The Kantian sublime: from morality to art*

Published Oxford: Clarendon

De Bolla, Peter. (1989) *The discourse of the sublime: readings in history, aesthetics and the subject*

Published UK: B. Blackwell

Didi-Huberman, George. (2001) *The Fable Of Place*

In Noever, Peter and Birnbaum, Daniel (eds) (2001) *James Turrell: The Other Horizon*

Published Ostfildern-Ruit: Harje Cantz

Elfving, Taru & Söderlund, Patrik. (2015) *Hours Years Aeons: Moving Images and Other Projects 1998–2015*

Published Helsinki : Frame Visual Art Finland

Ferguson, Frances. (1992) *Solitude and the sublime: romanticism and the aesthetics of individuation.*

Published New York; London: Routledge

Koerner, Joseph Leo. (1990) *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*

Published London: Reaktion

Leslie, Esther. (2009) *Icy Scenes From Three Centuries*

In White, Luke, PhD & Pajaczkowska, Claire (ed). (2009) *The Sublime Now*

Published Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars pp. 36-49

Lyotard, Jean-François. (1988) *The Sublime and the Avant-Garde*

In Morley, Simon (ed). (2010) *The Sublime*

Published London: Whitechapel Gallery pp. 27-41

Morley, Simon. (2010) *Introduction//The Contemporary Sublime*

In Morley, Simon (ed). (2010) *The Sublime*

Published London: Whitechapel Gallery

McEvelley, Thomas. (2001) 'Turned Upside Down and Torn Apart'

In Beckley, Bill (ed.) (2001). *The Sticky Sublime*

Published New York: Allworth pp. 57-81

Newman, Barnett. (1948) *The Sublime Is Now*

In Morley, Simon (ed). (2010) *The Sublime*

Published London: Whitechapel Gallery pp. 25-27

Rosenblum, Robert. (1961) *The Abstract Sublime*

In Morley, Simon (ed). (2010) *The Sublime*

Published London: Whitechapel Gallery pp. 108-112

Otto, Rudolf. (1923, Reprinted 1958) *The Idea of the Holy*

2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Published US: Oxford University Press

Ryan, Vanessa. L. (2001) 'The Physiological Sublime: Burke's Critique of Reason'

*Journal of the History of Ideas*

Vol. 62, No. 2 (Apr., 2001), pp. 265-279

Published by: University of Pennsylvania Press

DOI: 10.2307/3654358

Shaw, Phillip. (2006) *The Sublime*

Published UK: Routledge

Thacker, Eugene. (2011) *In The Dust Of This Planet: Horror Of Philosophy Vol.1*

Published UK: Zero Books

Weiskel, Thomas. (1976) *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence*

Published Baltimore, Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press

White, Luke, PhD & Pajaczkowska, Claire (ed). (2009) *The Sublime Now*

Published Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars

Yoon, Jungu. (2010) *Spirituality in Contemporary Art: The Idea of the Numinous*

Published UK: Zidane Press

## Bibliography

Beckley, Bill (ed). (2001). *The Sticky Sublime*

Published New York: Allworth

Liza McCosh (2013) *The Sublime: Process and Mediation*

In Bolt, Barbara & Barrett, Estelle (ed). (2013) *Carnal Knowledge: Towards a 'New Materialism' Through the Arts*

Published London: I.B. Tauris

Crowther, Paul. (1995) *The contemporary sublime: sensibilities of transcendence and shock*

Published London: Academy Editions

Demers, Joanna (2015) *Drone and Apocalypse: An Exhibit Catalogue For The End Of The World*

Published UK: Zero Books

Dickhoff, Wilf (2000) *After Nihilism: Essays on Contemporary Art*

Published Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Feaver, William. (1975) *The Art of John Martin.*

Published Oxford: Clarendon Press

Harman, Graham ( 2012) *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy*

Published UK: Zero Books

Kant, Immanuel. (1709, Reprinted 2007) *Critique of Judgement*

Published Oxford: Oxford University Press

Marchenkov, Vladimir L. (ed.) (2014) *Arts and Terror*

Published Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press

Morley, Simon (ed). (2010) *The Sublime*

Published London: Whitechapel Gallery

Noever, Peter and Birnbaum, Daniel (eds) (2001) *James Turrell: The Other*

*Horizon*. Published Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz

Ray, Gene. (2005) *Terror and the Sublime in Art and Critical Theory: From*

*Auschwitz to Hiroshima to September 11*

Published Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

Thacker, Eugene. (2015) *Starry Speculative Corpse: Horror Of Philosophy Vol.2*

Published UK: Zero Books

Woodard, Ben. (2013) *On an Ungrounded Earth: Towards a New Geophilosophy*

Published Brooklyn, New York: Punctum Books

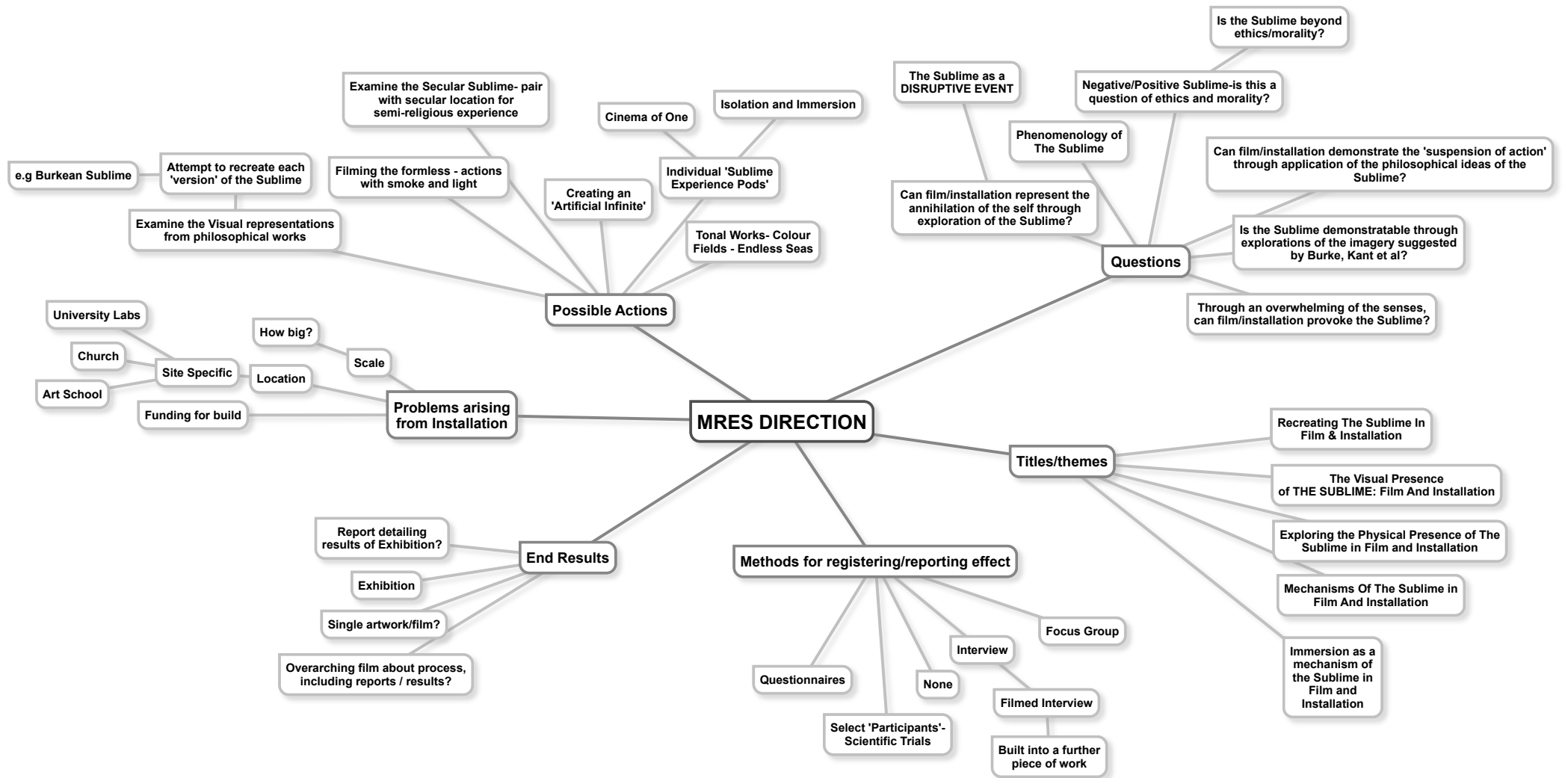


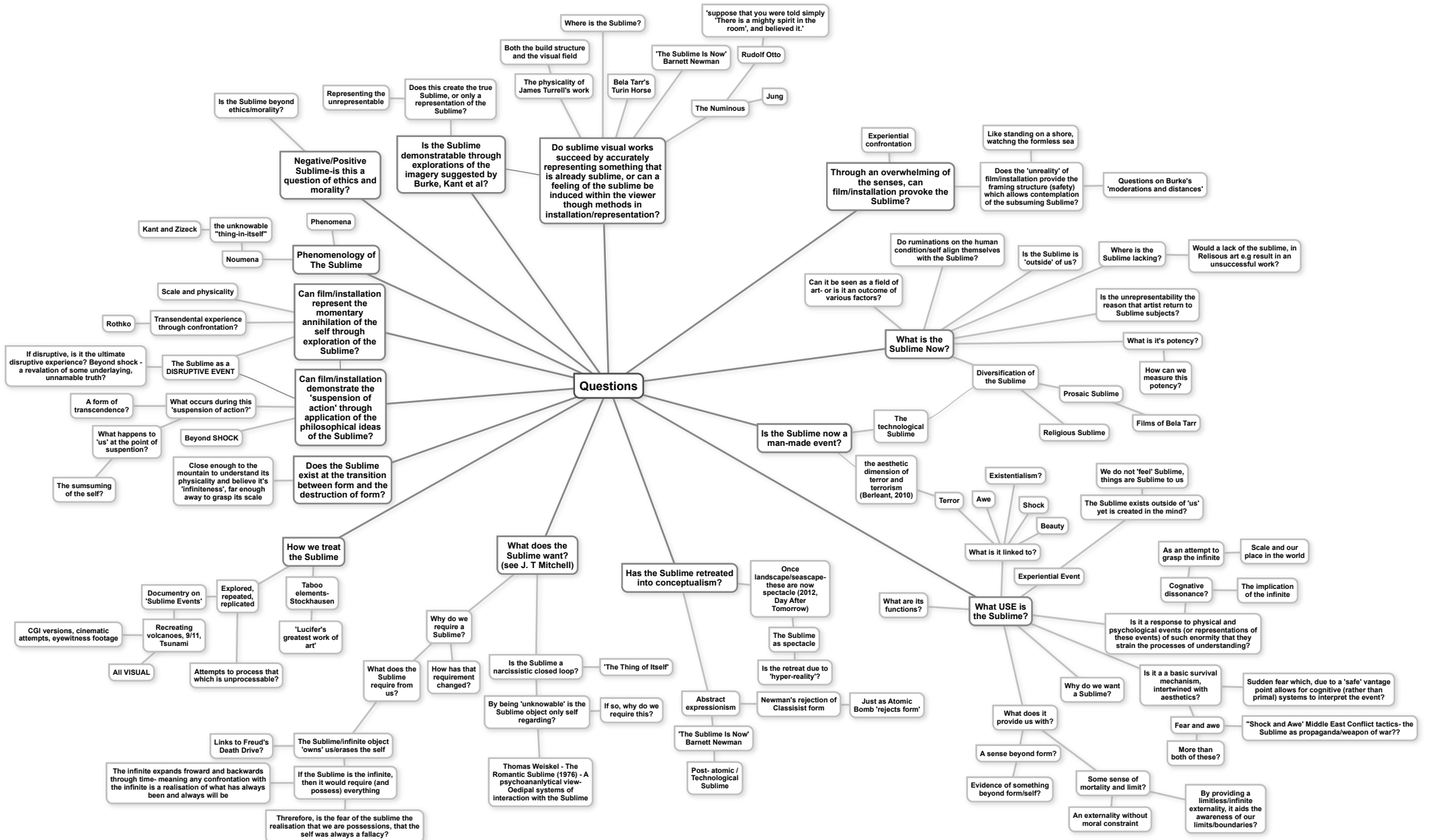


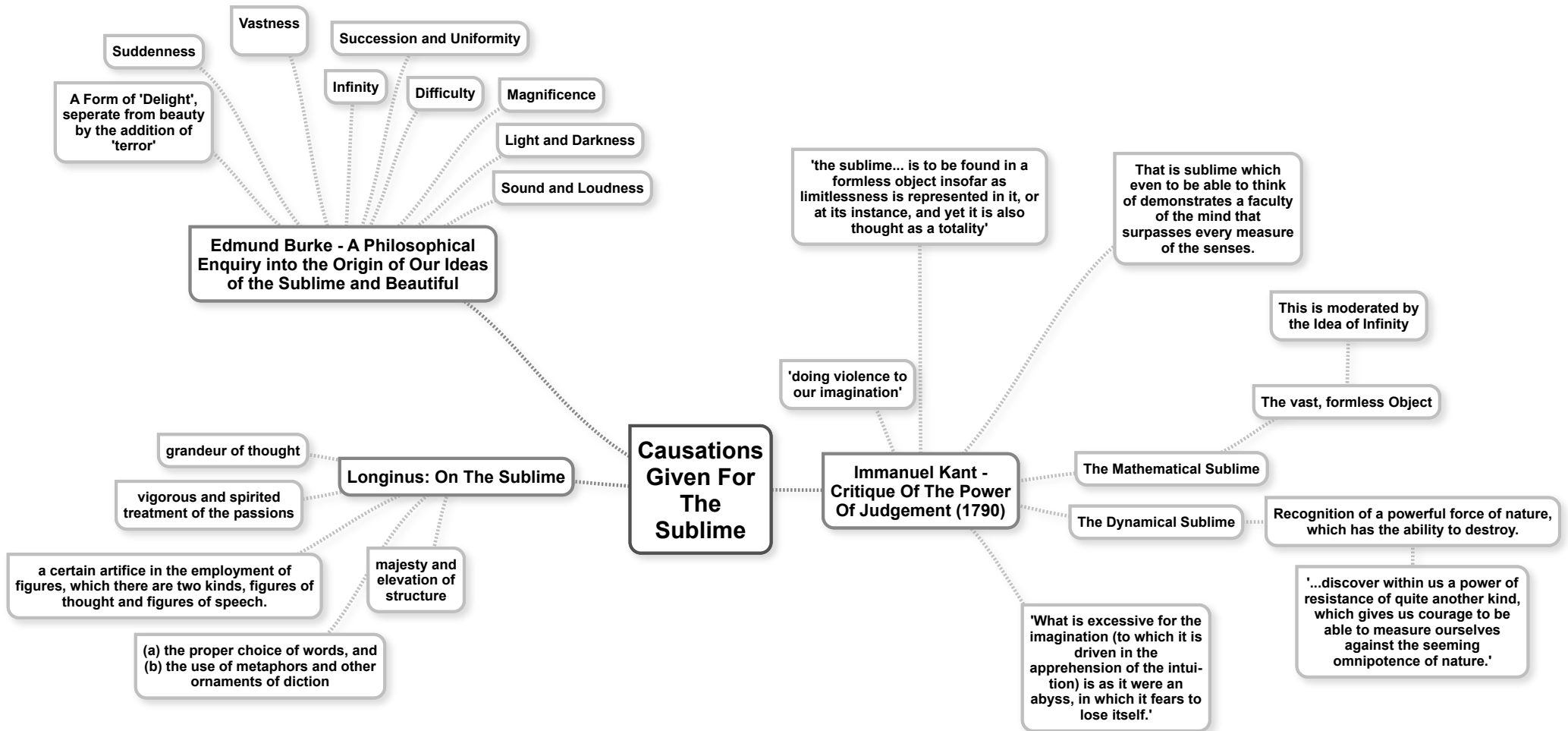
**The Sublime Experience in Film And Installation**  
Research Through Practice on the Dynamics of the Burkean Sublime

APPENDIX

Kevin Craig  
Masters by Research







**Edmund Burke - A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful**

A Form of 'Delight', separate from beauty by the addition of 'terror'

Suddenness

Vastness

Succession and Uniformity

Infinity

Difficulty

Magnificence

Light and Darkness

Sound and Loudness

**Causations Given For The Sublime**

**Longinus: On The Sublime**

grandeur of thought

vigorous and spirited treatment of the passions

a certain artifice in the employment of figures, which there are two kinds, figures of thought and figures of speech.

majesty and elevation of structure

(a) the proper choice of words, and (b) the use of metaphors and other ornaments of diction

**Immanuel Kant - Critique Of The Power Of Judgement (1790)**

'doing violence to our imagination'

'the sublime... is to be found in a formless object insofar as limitlessness is represented in it, or at its instance, and yet it is also thought as a totality'

That is sublime which even to be able to think of demonstrates a faculty of the mind that surpasses every measure of the senses.

This is moderated by the Idea of Infinity

The vast, formless Object

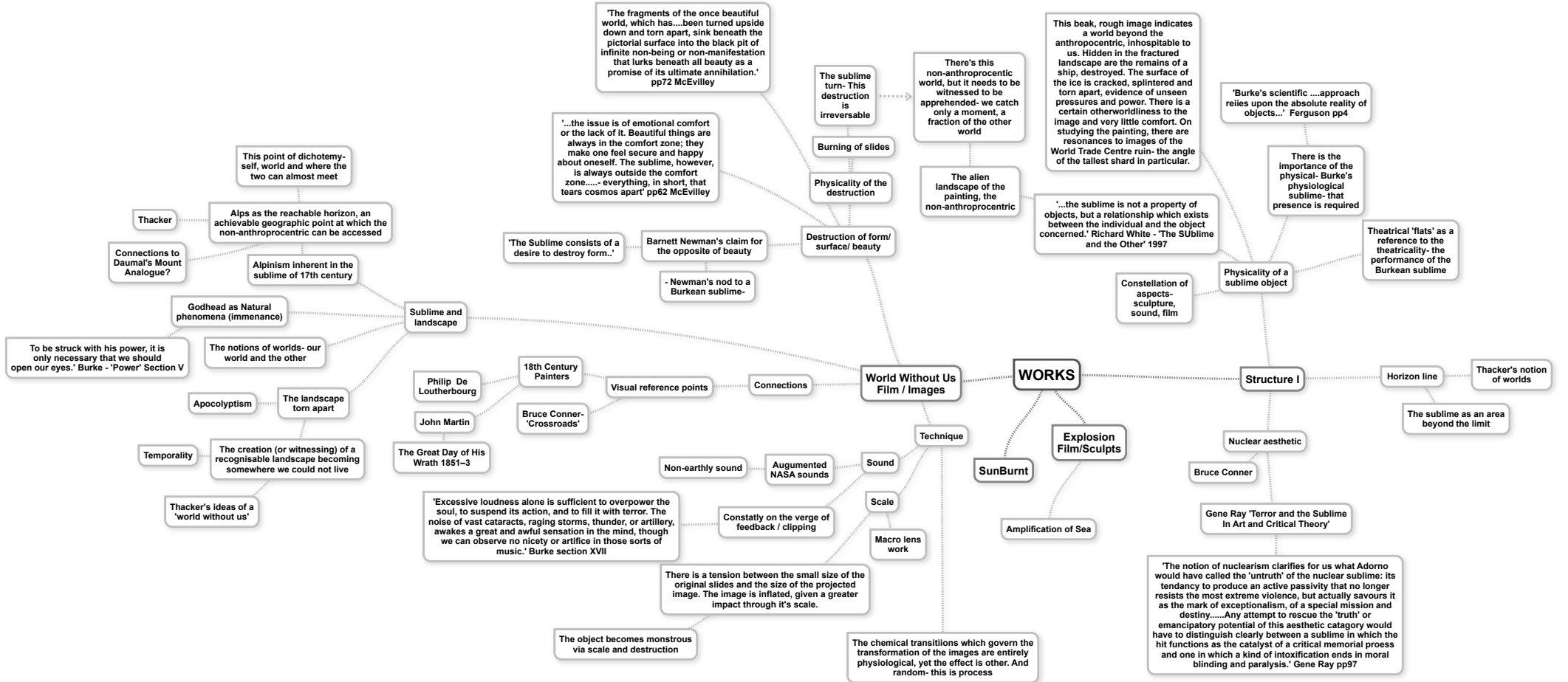
The Mathematical Sublime

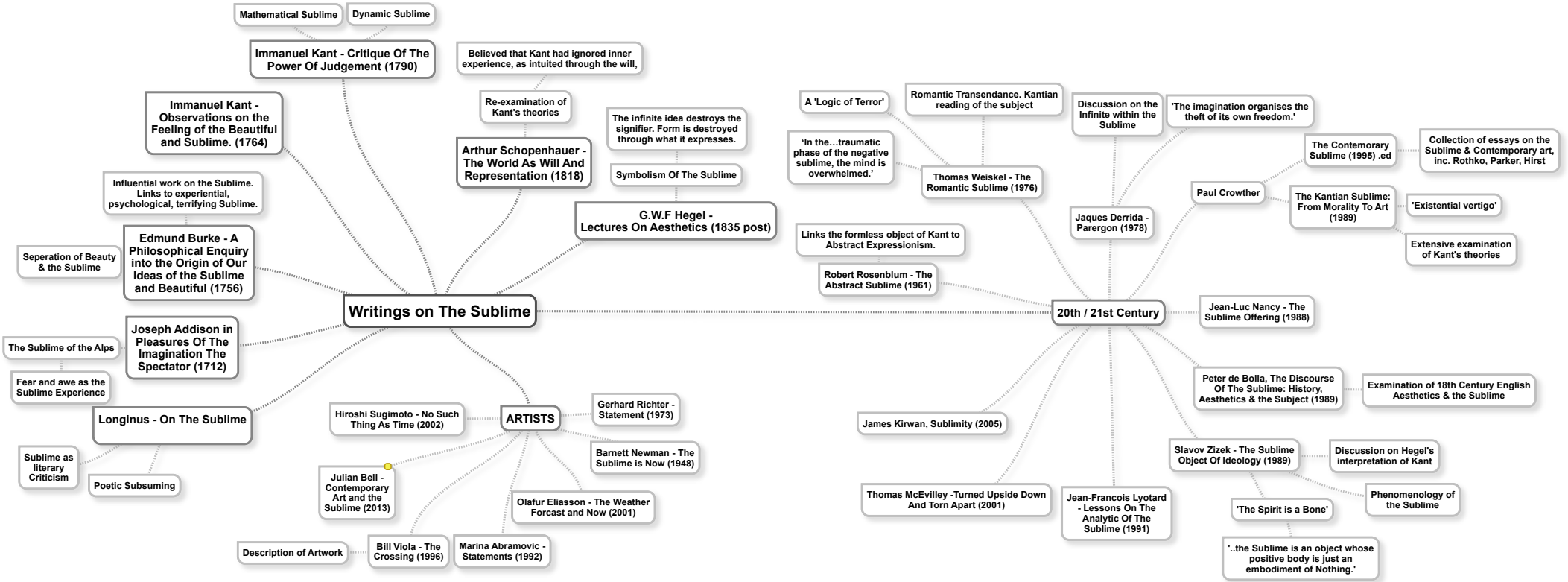
The Dynamical Sublime

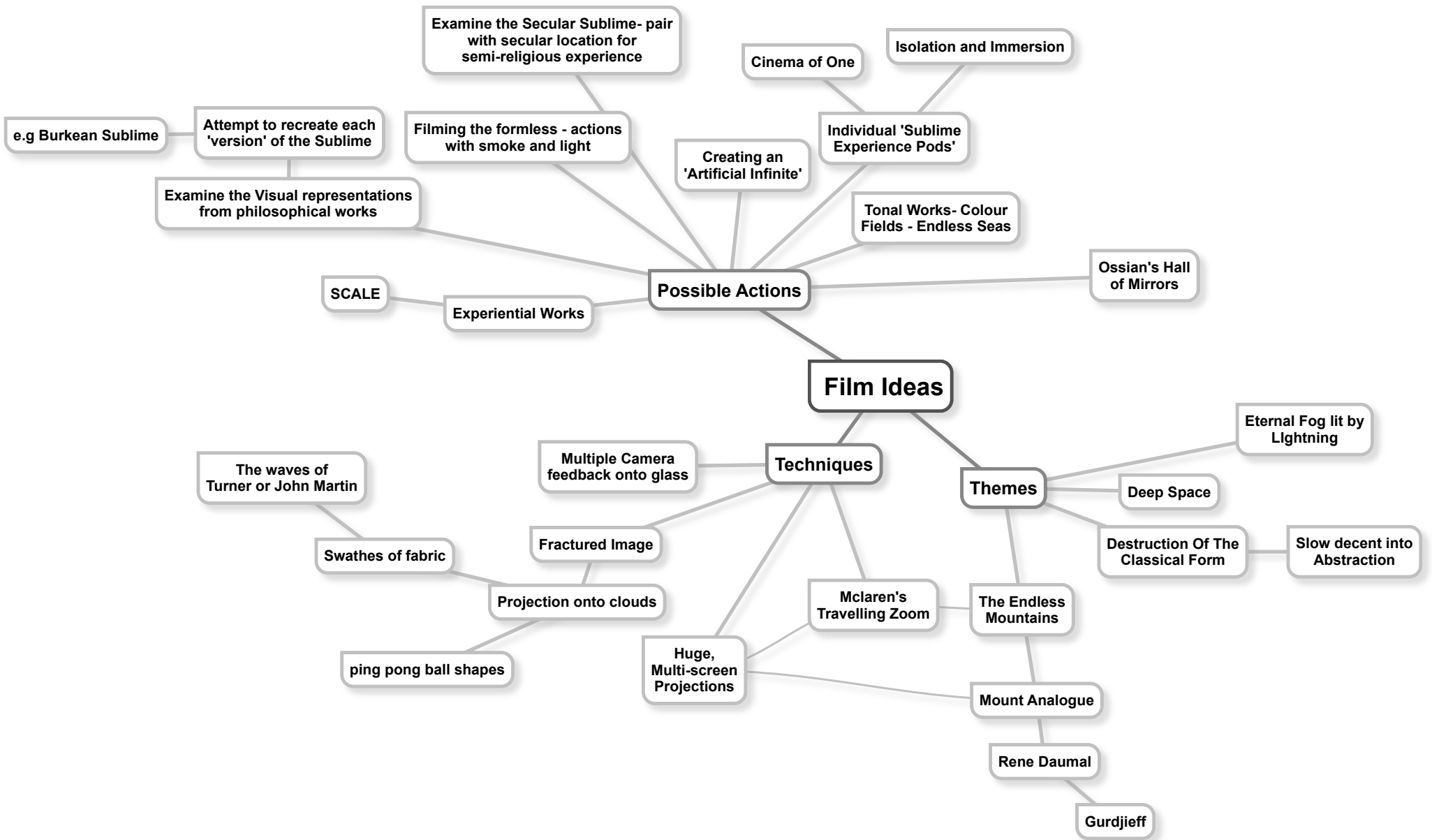
Recognition of a powerful force of nature, which has the ability to destroy.

'...discover within us a power of resistance of quite another kind, which gives us courage to be able to measure ourselves against the seeming omnipotence of nature.'

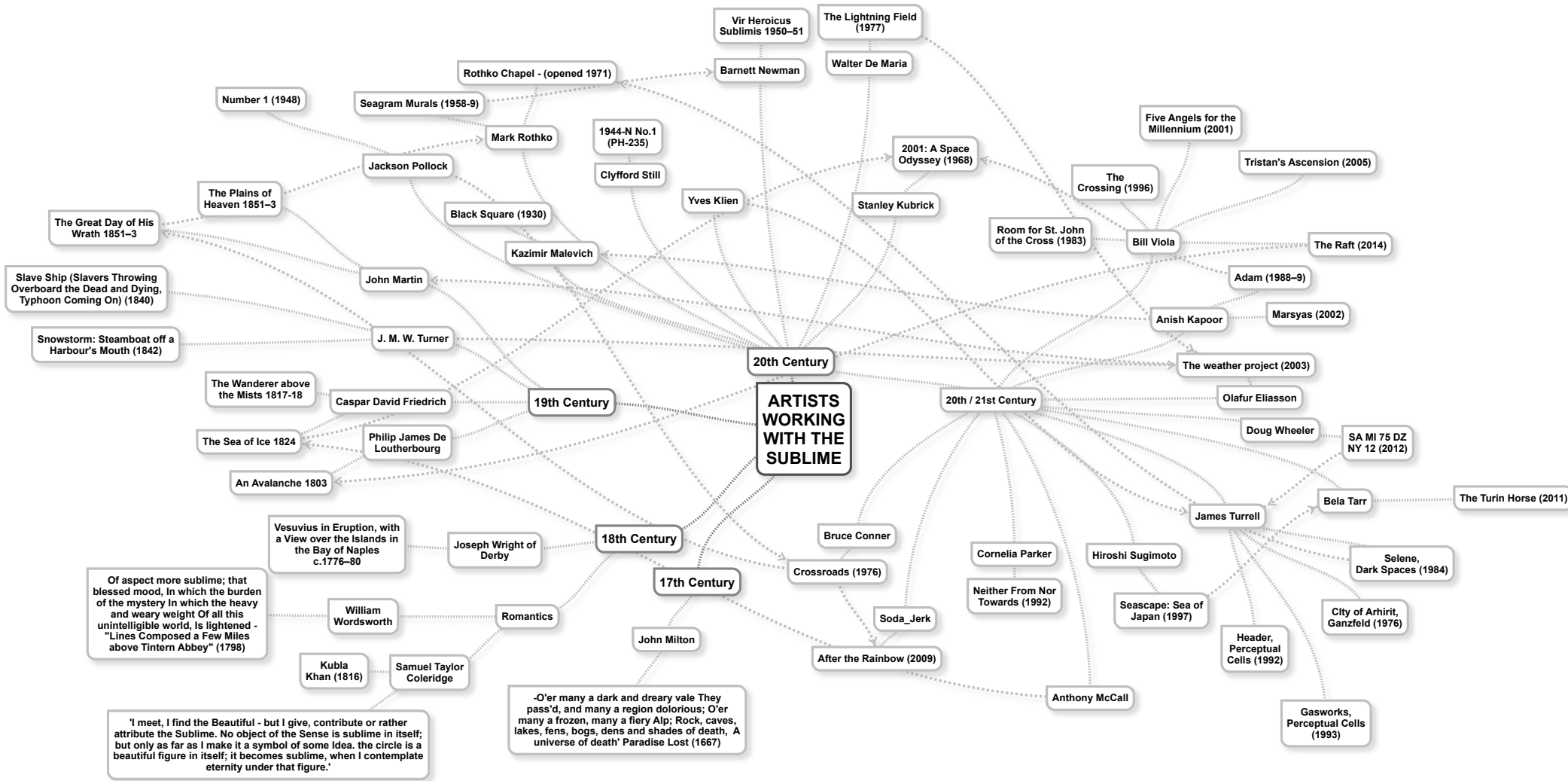
'What is excessive for the imagination (to which it is driven in the apprehension of the intuition) is as it were an abyss, in which it fears to lose itself.'

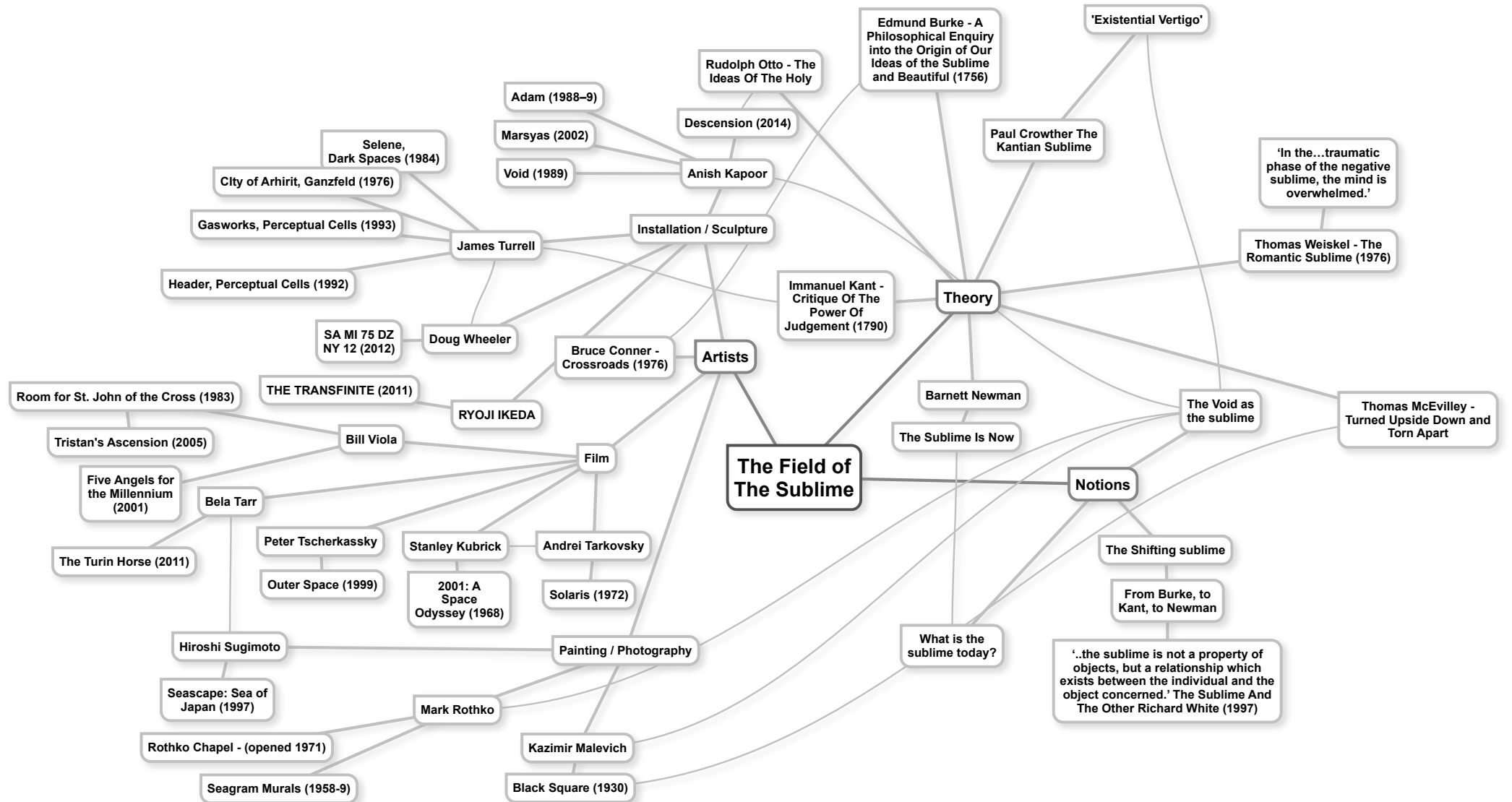


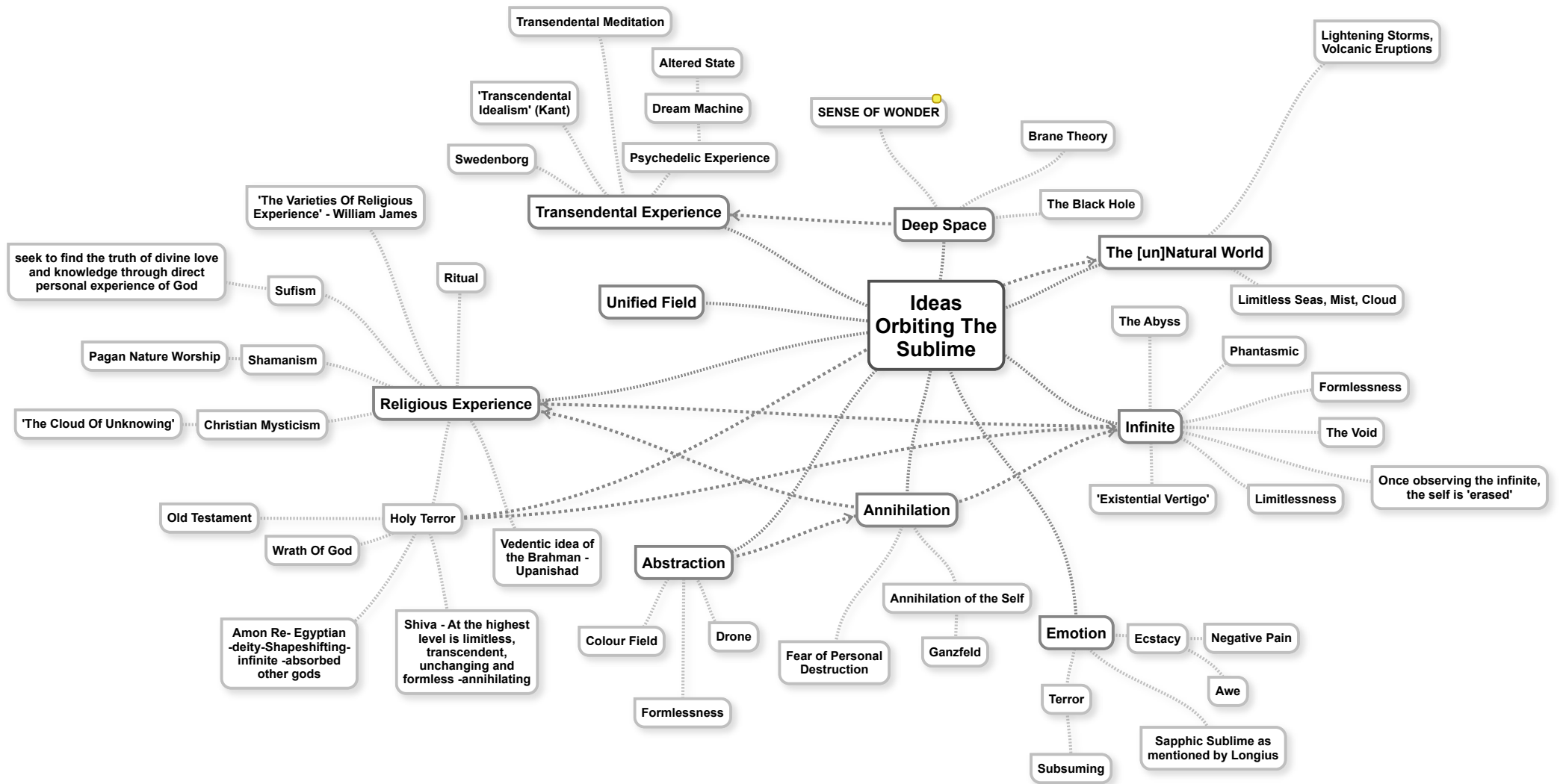












Information is fleeting, but Nothing is eternal??

The cognitive gap between two informations- see the Brahman, Nothing/Void

Stripped of meaning - ultra minimalist- showing the cracks between- the Nothing, the sublime?

'The distribution of information is becoming the only criterion of social importance, yet information is by definition a short-lived element. As soon as it is transmitted and share it ceases to be information but has instead become an environmental given; "all is said"—we supposedly "know." It has been fed into the memory machine. The duration of time it occupies is, so to speak, instantaneous. Between two informations, by definition, nothing happens. A confusion thereby arises between what is of interest in terms of information and in terms of circuitry systems, and another between the avant-garde investigation of that which has just happened—the new—and the is it happening?, the now.' pp39

'It is easy for the public and for artists, advised by intermediaries—the diffusers of cultural merchandise—to draw from this observation the notion that a work of art is avant-garde in direct proportion to the extent to which it is stripped of meaning. Is it then not rather like an event?' pp40

'The avant-gardist task remains that of undoing the presumption of the mind with respect to time. The sublime feeling is the name of this privation.' pp40

The sublime within capitalist economy-  
'There is something of the sublime in capitalist economy. It is not academic, it is not physiocratic, it denies nature. It is, in a sense, an economy regulated by an idea—infinite wealth or power. It does not provide any example from nature that might verify this idea. In subordinating science through technologies, it only succeeds in making reality appear increasingly intangible, subject to doubt, unsteady.' pp39

'I have tried to suggest that at the dawn of romanticism Burke's esthetic of the sublime, and to a lesser degree Kant's, outlined a world of possibilities for artistic expression through which the avant-gardes would later wend their way. There are no direct influences, no empirically observable connections. Manet, Cézanne, Braque, and Picasso probably did not read Kant or Burke. What I am suggesting is more a matter of irreversible deviations in the directional course of art, deviations that have affected all the valences of the artistic condition. The artist would begin to attempt combinations in order to create events. The amateur would no longer experience simply pleasure or derive some ethical benefit from his contact with art, but would instead expect an intensification of his conceptual and emotional capacity, an ambivalent joyousness. The art object would no longer bend itself to models, but would try to present the unrepresentable; it would no longer imitate nature but would be an artifact, a simulacrum.' pp38

'This contradictory feeling—pleasure and pain, joy and anxiety, exaltation and depression—was baptized or rechristened between the 17th and 18th centuries in Europe by the name of the "sublime." It is over this word that the destiny of classical poetics was wagered and lost; it is in this name that esthetics made its critical prerogatives matter to art, and that romanticism—in other words modernity—triumphed.' pp30

'The inexpressible does not reside in an "over there," in another world or another time, but in this: that "it happens." In the determination of pictorial art the indeterminate, the "it's happening," is color—the painting. The color—the painting—as occurrence or event is not expressible, and it is to this that it must bear witness.' pp30

The 'thing of itself' of Zizek?

Is the film able to express itself?

'We tend to assume that nothing will happen without the feeling of anxiety, a term much elaborated on by modern philosophers of existence and the unconscious. This gives anticipation, if we really mean anticipation, a predominantly negative value. In fact suspense can also be accompanied by pleasure—for instance, pleasure in the unknown—and even by joy—the joy, to paraphrase Baruch Spinoza, the intensification of being, that the event introduces. This probably brings up contradictory feelings. It is at the very least a sign of the question mark itself. The question can adapt itself to any tone, as Jacques Derrida would say. But the mark of the question is the "now," now in the sense that nothing might happen.' pp29

Both anxiety and joy in the nothing- the feeling 'before'

'The arts, with whatever their materials, pressed forward by the esthetics of the sublime in a quest for intense effects, can and must overlook mimetic models that are merely beautiful, and must test their limits through surprising, difficult, shocking combinations. Shock is, par excellence, the evidence of (something) happening, rather than nothing at all. It is suspended privation.' pp36

'By concentrating on the sublime and indeterminacy while meditating on works of art, techné [technique] and related institutions such as the academics and schools, mentors and disciples, taste, and the enlightened public of princes and courtiers, undergo a major mutation. The purpose and even the destiny of artworks is questioned. The dominance of techné placed works of art under multiple regulations—that of the studio mode, the schools and academies, shared taste among the aristocracy, a firmness in art that had to do with illustrating the glory of a name, divine or human, and attaching to it the perfection of a cardinal virtue. The idea of the sublime put all of this harmony into disarray.' pp33

Beyond form, the import of technique diminishes. Here the unrepresentability of the sublime resists the system

### Jean-Francois Lyotard The Sublime and the Avant-Garde 1988 'The Sublime'

'Newman's now is a stranger to consciousness and cannot be composed in terms of it. Rather, it is what dismantles consciousness, what dismisses consciousness; it is what consciousness cannot formulate, and even what consciousness forgets in order to compose itself.' pp28

The sublimeness of the now. Dismisses the refusal of the sublime to acknowledge the observer

'Thomas B. Hess, his friend and commentator, felt justified in writing that Newman's time was the Makom or the Hamakom of Hebrew tradition—the there, the site, the place—the way the Torah refers to the unnamable divinity.' pp28

The unnamable- the unrepresentable. The slippery now.

'In... "Prologue For a New Aesthetic, Newman wrote that in his painting, he was not concerned with a 'manipulation of space nor with the image, but with a sensation of time.... not laden with feelings of nostalgia, or drama, or references and history...'" pp28

Time- film allows this. Also, Tarr- Turin Horse

'The question is no longer to please a public by bringing it into a process of identification and glorification, but to surprise it. "The sublime," wrote Boileau, "really isn't something that tenders its own proofs and demonstrations, but a marvelousness that seizes, strikes, and inflicts sensation." Even imperfections—aberrations of taste, ugliness—play a role in this shock appeal. Art would no longer imitate nature but would create a whole other world, eine Zwischenwelt (a between world), as Paul Klee would later say, eine Nebenwelt (a side world), one could say, where monstrosity and malformation have rights because of sublime potential.' pp33

Again the potentialism of the sublime. Imperfection, ugliness and malformation. The sublime outside of beauty. It allows the potential in everything.

The nothing is the sublime is potential. In the beautiful, potential is dead.

'The question was no longer: how does one make art? but: what does it mean to experience art? Any analysis of this last question brings us back to the subject of indeterminacy.' pp33-34

The experientiality of artwork.

Artwork as undetermined - subjective. Potential.

'This frustration of expression kindles a pain, a kind of cleavage within the subject between what can be conceived and what can be imagined. But this pain in turn engenders a pleasure, in fact a double pleasure: the recognition of the impotence of the imagination contrarily attests to an imagination striving to illuminate even that which cannot be illuminated, and the imagination thus means to harmonize its objects to reason—and furthermore the inadequacy of images, as negative signs, attests to the immense power of Ideas. These unruly powers give rise to an extreme tension (Kant's agitation) which sets the paths of the sublime apart from the calm sense of beauty. From any vantage point around this cleavage, infinity, or the absoluteness of Idea, is revealed in what Kant calls a negative presentation, or even a nonpresentation.' pp34

Neat breakdown of Kant's position

'He [Kant] cites the Jewish law banning images as an eminent example of negative presentation: optical pleasure reduced to nearly nothing promotes an endless contemplation of infinity.' pp34

'Avant-gardism is thus present in germ stage in the Kantian esthetic of the sublime. The art, however, whose effects are analyzed therein, is of course essentially made up of attempts at representing sublime subjects. And the question is it happening? does not pertain—at least not explicitly—to Kant's problematic.' pp34

'he clearly ransacked Burke's esthetic for what I consider to be its major gambit—to show that the sublime is kindled by the threat that nothing further might happen. Beauty gives positive pleasure, but there is another kind of pleasure that is bound to a passion far stronger than satisfaction, and that is suffering and impending death. In suffering the body affects the soul, but the soul can also affect the body just as though it were experiencing some externally induced pain, and it can do this solely by means of representations that are consciously linked to painful situations. This entirely spiritual passion, for Burke, is synonymous with terror. Terrors are linked to privations: privation of light, terror of darkness; privation of others, terror of solitude; privation of language, terror of silence; privation of objects, terror of emptiness; privation of life, terror of death. What is terrifying is that the it happens that will not happen, that it will stop happening.' pp34 - 35

Stages of Burkean Sublime

'Veneration' Holy Terror

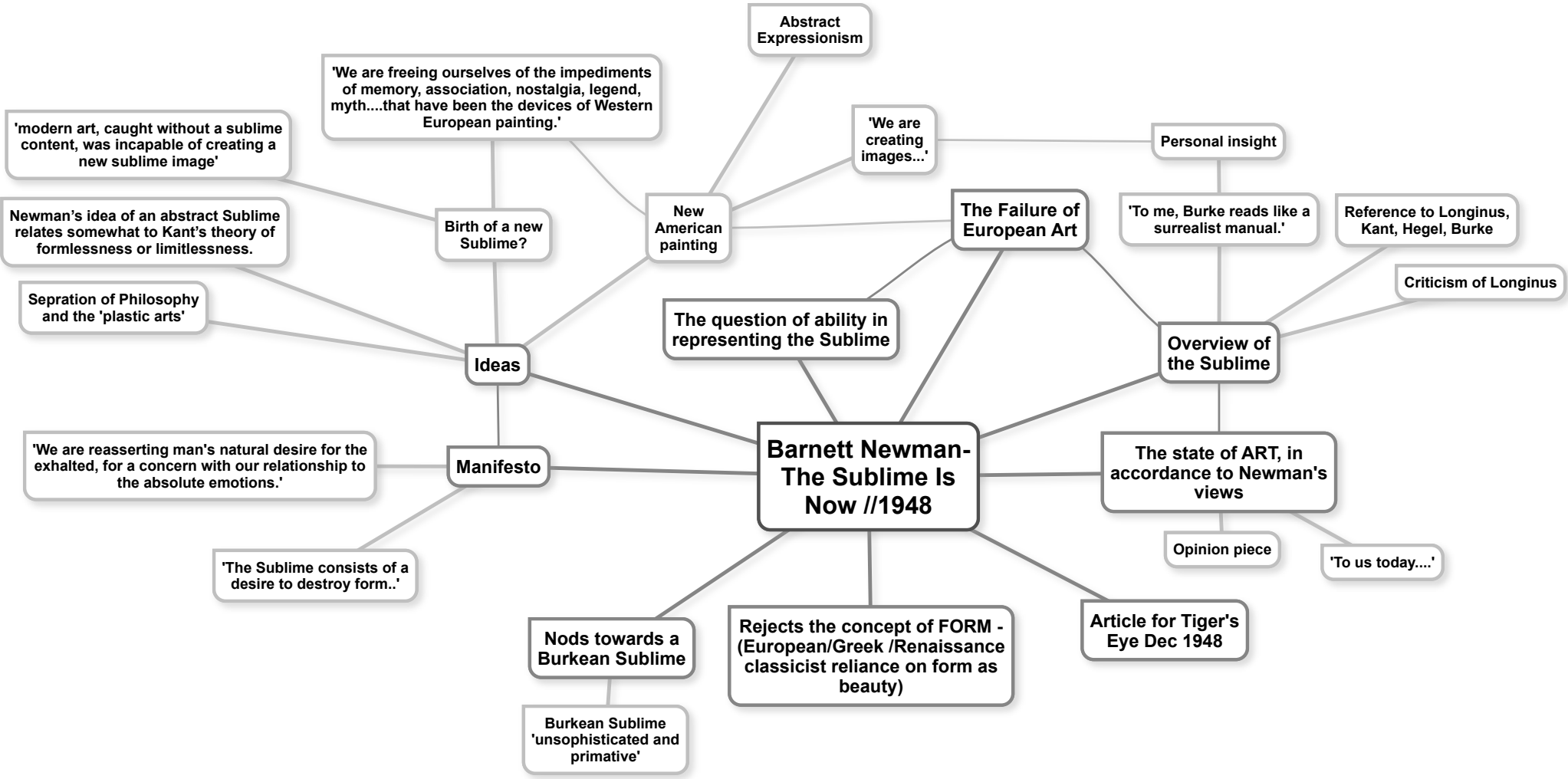
The sublime as amplification

What happens when nothing is amplified?

Feedback??

Again, Nothing. Death = nothing. Terror of Nothing.

**Barnett Newman-  
The Sublime Is  
Now //1948**



Abstract  
Expressionism

'We are freeing ourselves of the impediments  
of memory, association, nostalgia, legend,  
myth....that have been the devices of Western  
European painting.'

'We are creating  
images...'

Personal insight

'modern art, caught without a sublime  
content, was incapable of creating a  
new sublime image'

Newman's idea of an abstract Sublime  
relates somewhat to Kant's theory of  
formlessness or limitlessness.

Birth of a new  
Sublime?

New  
American  
painting

The Failure of  
European Art

'To me, Burke reads like a  
surrealist manual.'

Reference to Longinus,  
Kant, Hegel, Burke

Sepration of Philosophy  
and the 'plastic arts'

Ideas

The question of ability in  
representing the Sublime

Overview of  
the Sublime

Criticism of Longinus

'We are reasserting man's natural desire for the  
exhalted, for a concern with our relationship to  
the absolute emotions.'

Manifesto

'The Sublime consists of a  
desire to destroy form..'

**Barnett Newman-  
The Sublime Is  
Now //1948**

The state of ART, in  
accordance to Newman's  
views

Opinion piece

'To us today...'

Article for Tiger's  
Eye Dec 1948

Nods towards a  
Burkean Sublime

Rejects the concept of FORM -  
(European/Greek /Renaissance  
classicist reliance on form as  
beauty)

Burkean Sublime  
'unsophisticated and  
primitive'

'We are freeing ourselves of the impediments  
of memory, association, nostalgia, legend,  
myth....that have been the devices of Western  
European painting.'

'We are creating  
images...'

Personal insight

'modern art, caught without a sublime  
content, was incapable of creating a  
new sublime image'

Newman's idea of an abstract Sublime  
relates somewhat to Kant's theory of  
formlessness or limitlessness.

Birth of a new  
Sublime?

New  
American  
painting

The Failure of  
European Art

'To me, Burke reads like a  
surrealist manual.'

Reference to Longinus,  
Kant, Hegel, Burke

Sepration of Philosophy  
and the 'plastic arts'

Ideas

The question of ability in  
representing the Sublime

Overview of  
the Sublime

Criticism of Longinus

'We are reasserting man's natural desire for the  
exhalted, for a concern with our relationship to  
the absolute emotions.'

Manifesto

'The Sublime consists of a  
desire to destroy form..'

**Barnett Newman-  
The Sublime Is  
Now //1948**

The state of ART, in  
accordance to Newman's  
views

Opinion piece

'To us today...'

Article for Tiger's  
Eye Dec 1948

Nods towards a  
Burkean Sublime

Rejects the concept of FORM -  
(European/Greek /Renaissance  
classicist reliance on form as  
beauty)

Burkean Sublime  
'unsophisticated and  
primitive'

Bill Viola and the Sublime  
Rina Arya - The Art of the Sublime, January 2013  
The Tate

'as a category of aesthetic experience, the sublime gives artists the opportunity to define their relationship to a host of different subjects including nature, religion, sexuality and identity.'

'In Romanticism, two main types of response are discernible: the theological - where nature was viewed as a reflection of the sublime - and the imaginative - where the sublime was seen as a source of creative inspiration for the artist.'

'In The Postmodern Condition (1979), the philosopher and literary theorist Jean-François Lyotard showed how the sublime articulates 'the incommensurability of reality to concept'.<sup>1</sup> It cannot be expressed positively (in figurative terms) and relies on the language of abstraction to give it form. It is expressed in negative terms, such as through the dissolution of form or through the presence of voids.'

A dead end- is this how the sublime works- at total abstraction/dissolution of form, can nothing else be said?

'One could argue that if Newman and other abstract expressionist artists encapsulated the ethos of the contemporary sublime so aptly, then there could be no possible further pictorial development from the abstract expressionist position.'

'Technology widened the possibilities for creating transformative environments that were totally immersive especially in the combination of the relationship between space and light (such as in the work of James Turrell) and in the exciting possibilities for the interaction of the senses from the visual to the aural to the tactile'

'The comparative bathos of looking at a clothed man struggling under water as the central panel of the Nantes Triptych is sobering. There is nothing beyond this. And death does not lead to eternity but only to the cessation of life.'

The nihilistic sublime - the sublime of nothing

This need not be as bleak as it sounds - the liberty of freedom

'Viola's work is about the human condition, which is primarily about coming to terms with the fact that we are embodied and encounter suffering, pain, alienation and death. Some viewers may be able to seek solace in his work - the realisation that there is nothing beyond this life might prompt some to seek fellow-feeling or community with others, as a way of overcoming their limited condition.'

Not only experiential, but confrontational- The size of the room can be controlled.

'the reason that the viewer responds so strongly and emotionally to some of his installations is due to the intuitive aspects of video art, which invites the viewer to participate in an open-ended dialogue.<sup>29</sup> The darkness of the room encourages a feeling of complete absorption in the work. One is not distracted by other visitors as one would be in any other museum experience.'

'In Viola, the sublime does not have an upward inflection: it is not connected with transcendence or the overcoming of the self. Nor does the artist wish to convey the horror of the abyss - the absence of an afterlife as shown in Nantes Triptych - communicates to us the reality of our material flesh-and-blood condition: it just is. In that respect Viola's sublime is closer to Newman's sublime, which conveys the impossibility of representation rather than as a way of attempting to create a dialogue between the phenomena and the noumena.'

Five Angels

'Compared to the more traditional media, such as painting and sculpture, video has the power to engulf the viewer entirely.'

Some justification- engulfment is the way forward with explorations of the sublime.

Breaking of time, spacial position, physicality and formlessness.

'Viola's Five Angels are life-size but their scattered placements, as well as the sensory effects that accompany the movement of the figures, make the overall image formless: the viewer simply cannot take it all in and is completely overwhelmed. The work evokes the duality of the sublime. It plays on our primal fear of drowning while also introducing passages of wonder, namely when the figure emerges from the surface of the water and hovers in mid-air, which defies all expectations.'

'The action of Viola's figures (their rise and submersion in water), coupled with the religious reference in the title, encourages comparison with the Christian sacrament of baptism. Viola takes the core ritualised action of baptism and distorts it to dramatic effect - so that re-emergence does not necessarily follow on from submersion.'

Ritualism- the body. Still there is distortion- also the bodies are near anonymous.

'these trajectories create fear in the viewer and the ascended figure creates exhilaration.'

Fera from the positioning? The movement, or the experience?

'It appears as if they have been invested with supernatural forces, which enable them to defy the laws of nature, or else these are ordinary men suspended in a universe that runs contrary to the laws of science.'

The Otherness of a Kantian sublimity

Also Burkean anti-Cosmos

'The paradox is that, through distortion, the conventional cycle of baptism is reconfigured in the mind of the viewer'

Transcendence through ritual and repetition.

Altering form one state to the next implies there are other states- therefore revelation- the reveal- from one to the next.

The shift- changing, becoming formless

'A recurring motif within the ritual is the threshold or the boundary. This can be visible or invisible (and psychological) but what is paramount is that the crossing of this boundary indicates a shift of state or mentality.'

'the feature of having to process all these different actions on different screens in a darkened room adds to the sublime confusion of the event.'

Referring to the Kantian system of reason overcoming sublimity

Scholar of the sublime, Philip Shaw describes sublimity as referring 'to the moment when the ability to apprehend, to know, and to express a thought a sensation is defeated. Yet through this defeat, the mind gets a feeling for that which lies beyond thought and language.'<sup>14</sup>

'He was interested in the emotions evoked in these religious images with a view to recreating emotive viewing in a contemporary audience but not with the view of inspiring piety to the divine.'

Emotion of the Sapphic sublime- the power of emotion

'Viola's primary subject is the human condition. He is interested in the place of the human in the world, the ambivalence of the forces of nature,<sup>19</sup> the life cycle of the human and the impossibility of representing death. All these issues can be encapsulated in the following central theme - the human's relation to finitude.<sup>20</sup>

And therefore our relationship with a perceived infinite

'Viola's evocations of the sublime do not induce a sense of transcendence in the religious sense of being united with the divine or of understanding our creaturehood. Rather, the experience of the sublime simply affirms the fact of our immanence, which is an immanence of the bodily.'

'The sublime effects of the soaring figures in Five Angels and the mesmerising effects of the three figures in Nantes Triptych transport the viewer from being in a mundane state of mind to feeling beside oneself. However, we are not taken to some otherworldly place but rather return to the mundane with a fresh perspective.'

'In thinking about experiences of the liminal, David Morgan makes a distinction between 'transcendence' and 'transformation'. He defines the former as that which 'posits a mystery present in the work of art as an encounter with a metaphysical order beyond or hidden within the ordinary sensuous world'. In contrast, transformation 'means the rupture of the ordinary domains and patterns of authority.'

Through rupture we learn.'

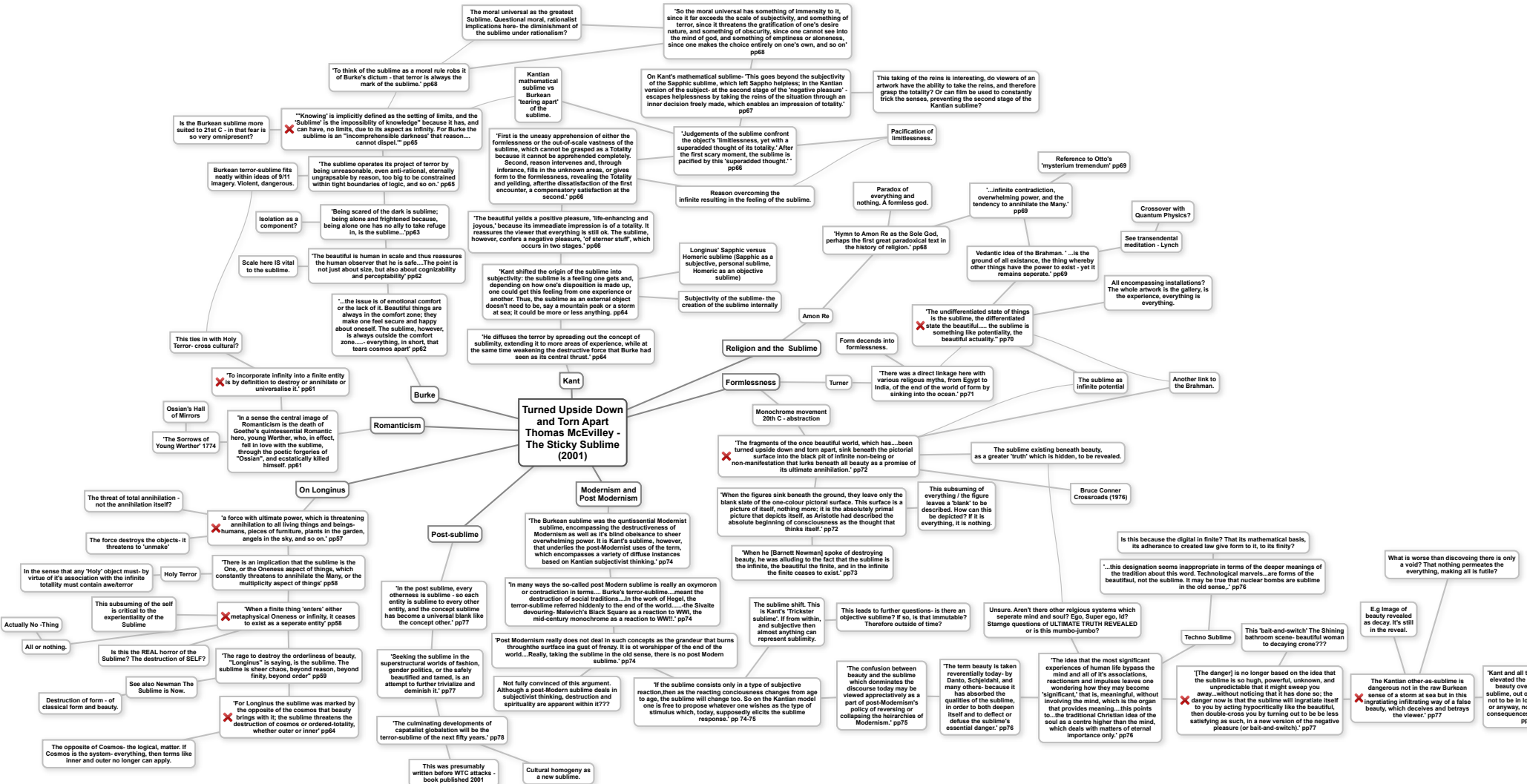
Also Bela Tarr?

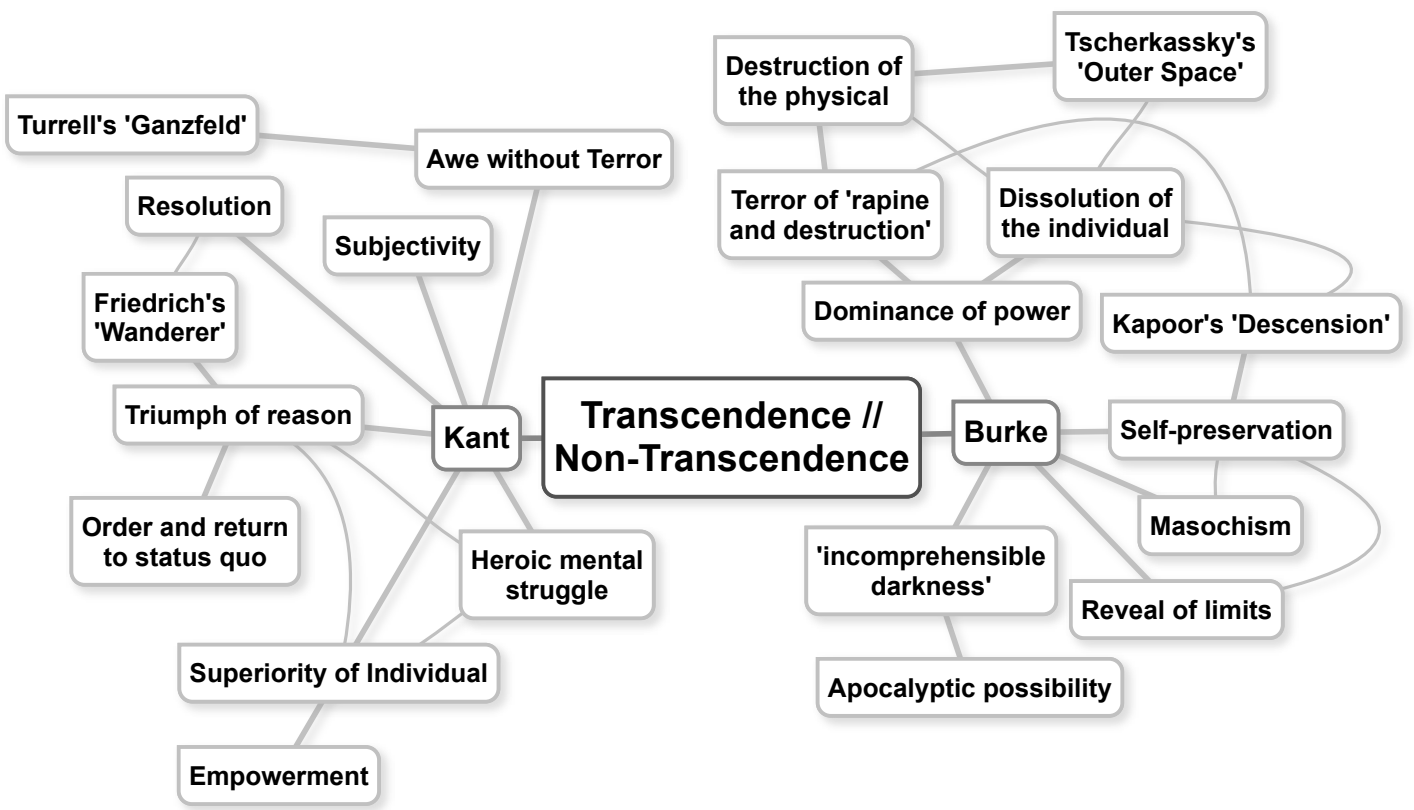
'Viola casts his figures in the role of everyman/ everywoman, and this increases the level of empathy that the viewer has with the work. The observation of minutiae and the manipulation of temporal and spatial frames sharpen the intensity of the vision and the coagulation of emotion.'

'Viola is updating the sublime for a contemporary secular audience. He alludes to religious images and metaphors in his titles and in his art historical references to the past, but then does something radically different by deflecting the focus onto the everyday.'

'We are not experiencing the sublime of Romanticism, which is mediated by symbols and metaphors with reference to a higher faculty. Here we see the postmodern sublime wholly as the other which cannot be assimilated and that retains its shock value.'

Confrontation with the metaphysical within the sensual world. The confrontation with the void for example







# Terror and Anxiety in Burke's Enquiry

Anxiety may be a better term for the sublime feeling.

See the theologian Paul Tillich - characterized existential anxiety as "the state in which a being is aware of its possible nonbeing"

Death as the limit of being human

'The power of anything is ultimately "its ability to hurt." The fear of injury points genetically and synechdochically to castration anxiety.' pp93

'the sublime is intimately and genetically related to anxiety.' pp83

'The Logic Of Terror'

Thomas Weiskel - The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence

'For fear being an apprehension of pain or death, it operates in a manner that resembles actual pain.' 'Enquiry.'

Burke

Burke's unknowable darkness

Materiality and process

Limitation of World

Lack of resolution

The collapse of the image- is this relatable to the collapse of understanding?

Violent reveal

Time and space and 'reality' (the reality of the fictional world) are broken, even the medium for the narrative fractures under the violence.

Violence in material

Destruction of image

Spectral Unseen

Psychosexual otherness

'The Entity'

A supernatural other, with cruel sexual, human desires

Physical, Sexual violence

Peter Tscherkassky - 'Outer Space' (1999)

The supernatural, non-human concept

Daemonic power

Exists only in effect, the 'Thing' remains seperate, indefind

Discussing Burke's reliance upon terror and anxiety in comparison to Kant's re-ordering of the sublime, which placed the sublime feeling within the overcoming of a momentarily terrifying experience. Also exploring the anxiety at the heart of Burke's terror and Weiskel's psychoanalytical reading of Enquiry. Referencing Tscherkassky's 'Outer Space' as contemporary work which presents an unsurmountable terror sublime, displaying Burkean theory in film.

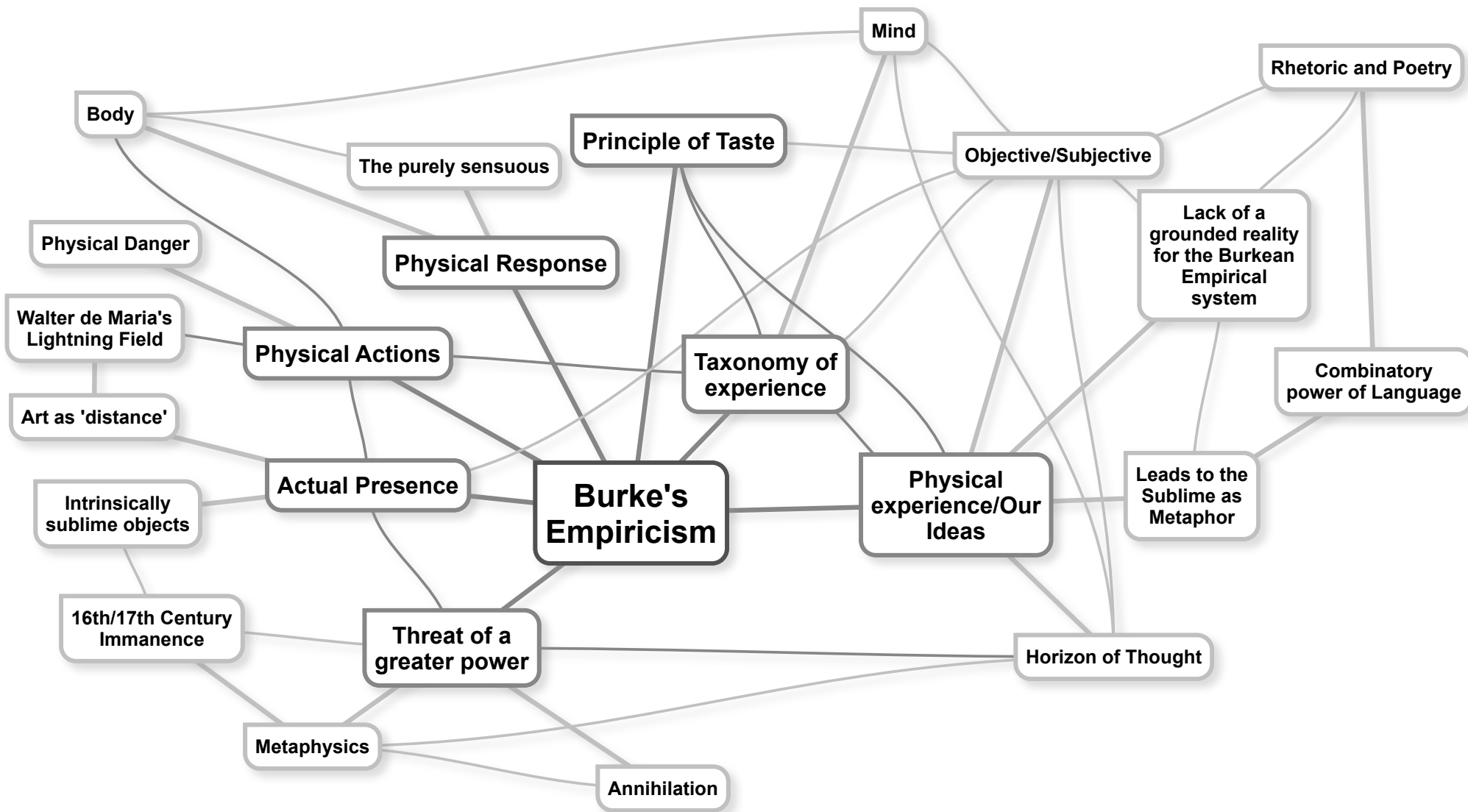
Placing the pleasure of the Sublime moment at the overcoming of the unknowable through reason, Kant neuters the Burkean response

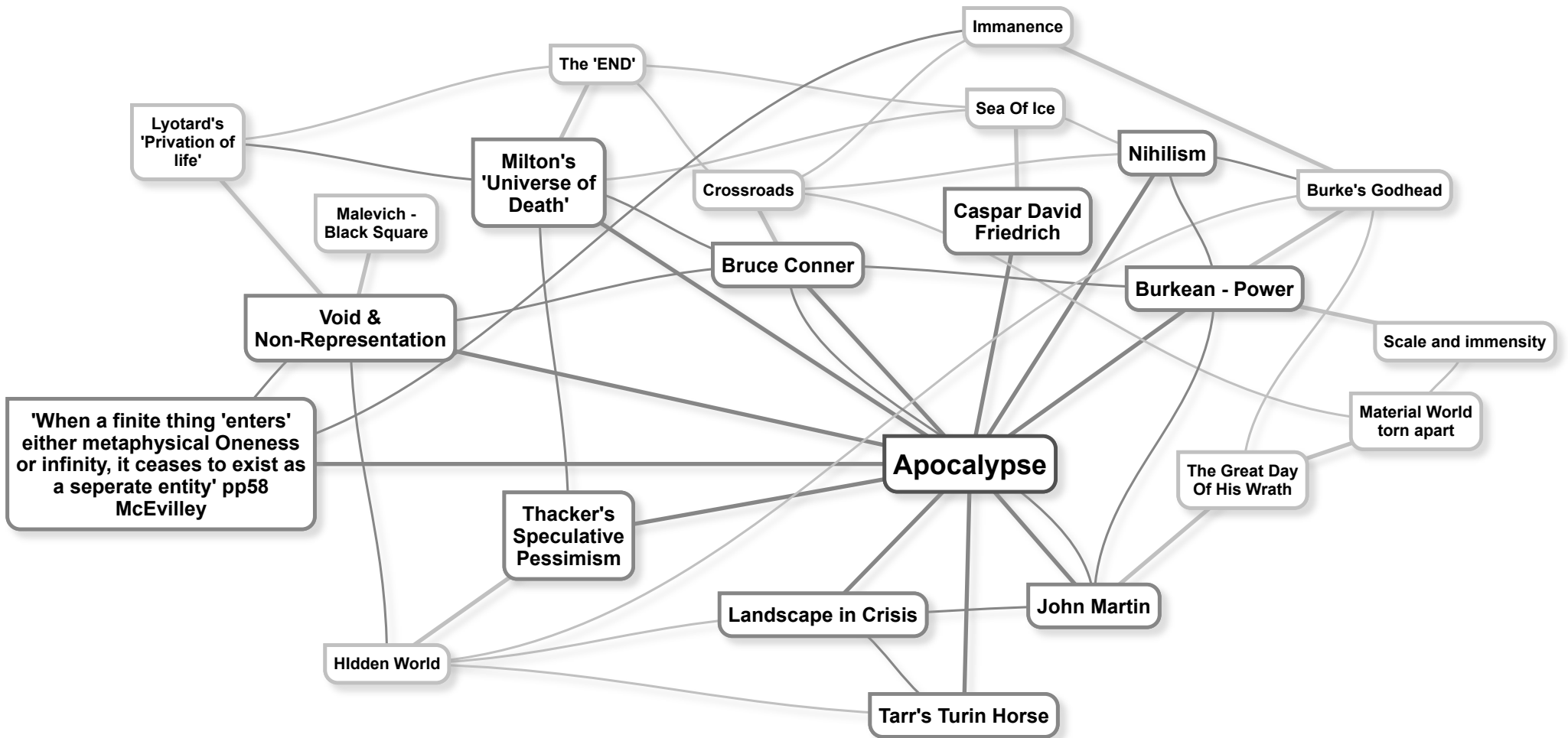
Kant's 'Triumph of Reason' over the sublime

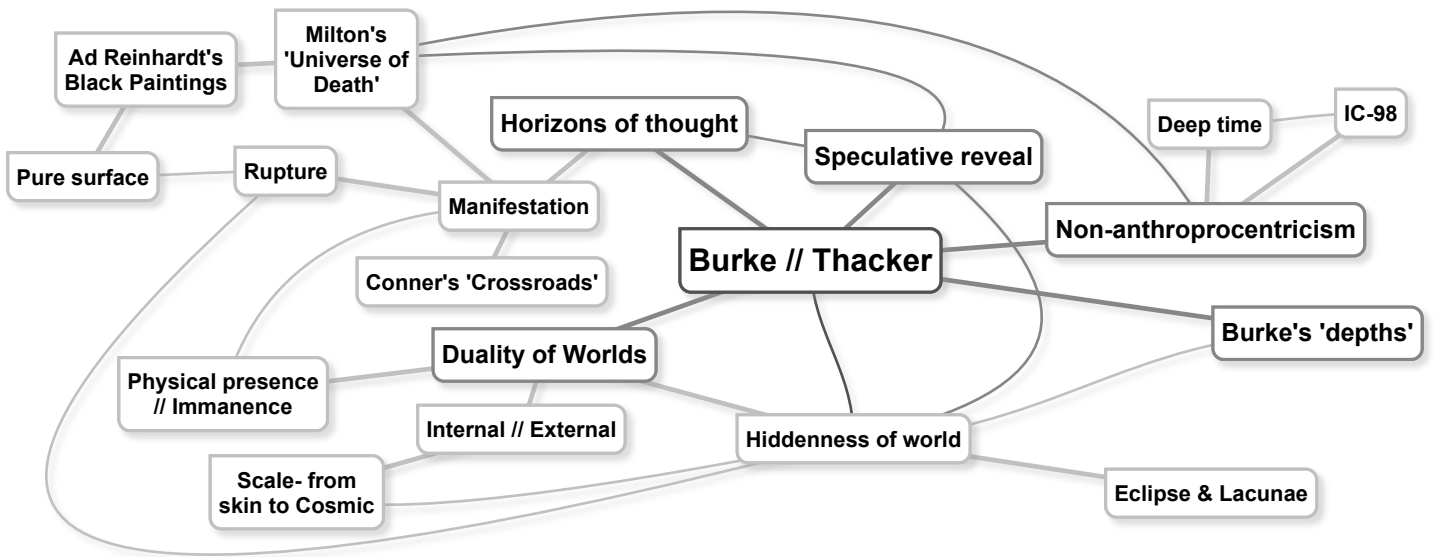
'He diffuses the terror by spreading out the concept of sublimity, extending it to more areas of experience, while at the same time weakening the destructive force that Burke had seen as its central thrust.' pp64 Thomas McEvilley - Turned Upside Down and Torn Apart - The Sticky Sublime (2001)

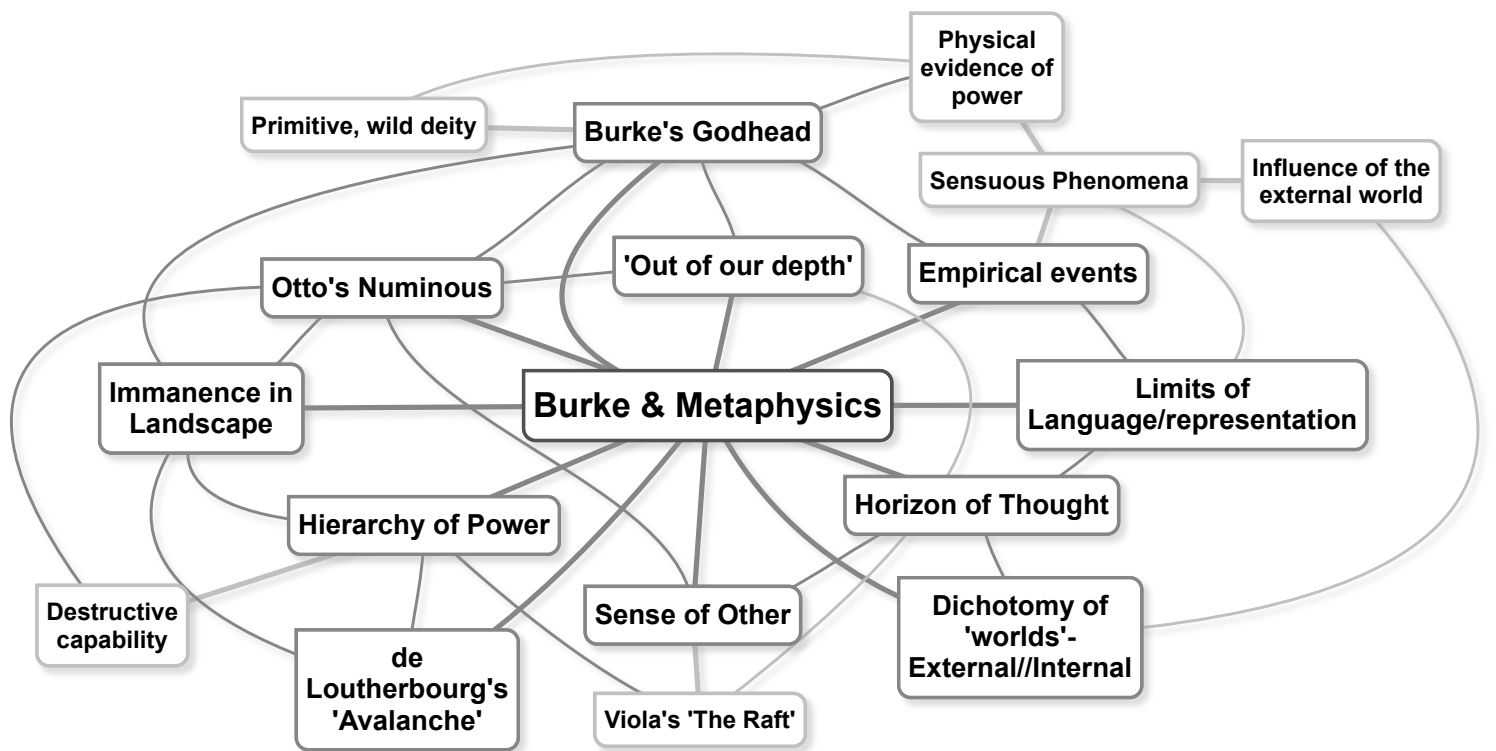
Transcendence

Transcendence as Resolution and overcoming









# Terror and Anxiety in Burke's Enquiry

Anxiety may be a better term for the sublime feeling.

See the theologian Paul Tillich - characterized existential anxiety as "the state in which a being is aware of its possible nonbeing"

Death as the limit of being human

'The power of anything is ultimately "its ability to hurt." The fear of injury points genetically and synechdochically to castration anxiety.' pp93

'the sublime is intimately and genetically related to anxiety.' pp83

'The Logic Of Terror'

Thomas Weiskel - The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence

'For fear being an apprehension of pain or death, it operates in a manner that resembles actual pain.' 'Enquiry.'

Burke

Burke's unknowable darkness

Materiality and process

Limitation of World

Lack of resolution

The collapse of the image- is this relatable to the collapse of understanding?

Violent reveal

Time and space and 'reality' (the reality of the fictional world) are broken, even the medium for the narrative fractures under the violence.

Violence in material

Destruction of image

Psychosexual otherness

Spectral Unseen

'The Entity'

A supernatural other, with cruel sexual, human desires

Peter Tscherkassky - 'Outer Space' (1999)

Physical, Sexual violence

The supernatural, non-human concept

Daemonic power

Exists only in effect, the 'Thing' remains seperate, undefined

Discussing Burke's reliance upon terror and anxiety in comparison to Kant's re-ordering of the sublime, which placed the sublime feeling within the overcoming of a momentarily terrifying experience. Also exploring the anxiety at the heart of Burke's terror and Weiskel's psychoanalytical reading of Enquiry. Referencing Tscherkassky's 'Outer Space' as contemporary work which presents an unsurmountable terror sublime, displaying Burkean theory in film.

Placing the pleasure of the Sublime moment at the overcoming of the unknowable through reason, Kant neuters the Burkean response

Kant's 'Triumph of Reason' over the sublime

'He diffuses the terror by spreading out the concept of sublimity, extending it to more areas of experience, while at the same time weakening the destructive force that Burke had seen as its central thrust.' pp64 Thomas McEvilley - Turned Upside Down and Torn Apart - The Sticky Sublime (2001)

Transcendence

Transcendence as Resolution and overcoming

