

## **The Sublime as Boundary Experience of Nature**

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### **Abstract**

In this paper I will consider the sublime an aesthetic category not only naming but symptomatically expressing and interpreting an *experience of boundaries* that reveals our relating to nature, and I will attempt to explore the possibility of this alternative notion of the sublime. *First*, I will use this approach for a critical reading of the Kantian sublime, and its postmodern counterpart in Lyotard’s thought, and I will introduce the notion of the sublime understood as boundary-experience. *Second*, based on some Heideggerian insights I will show how this aesthetic experience is rooted in underlying ontological questions. *Third*, I will reveal the existential implications of conceptualizing the sublime as a boundary experience of nature.

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In the aesthetic tradition, starting from Burke and Kant, and up to present theories, the sublime has come to be known as the contradictory feeling of something infinite and transcendent in the experience of nature (or, rarely, art). Outside the aesthetic context, the term sublime has a rich and complex history, as it went through shifts of meaning and use in many different theoretical and practical contexts. It meant the ascent of elements toward the surface of the Earth (geology), substance purification (alchemy), elevated style (rhetoric), raising of the soul up to the deity, relating to something higher (theology) and finally, as sublimation. It was used in psychoanalysis to name the human ability to repress unacceptable (sexual) urges and replace them with higher (social) aims. This short list of meanings can already explain the confusions and uncertainty that we find when dealing with the etymology

of the word.<sup>1</sup> However, the etymology deserves a closer look as it reveals some potential alternative ways of conceptualizing the aesthetic experience of sublime and possibly also its deeper, ontological roots.

Sublime derives from Latin, composed of *sub-*, meaning under, up to, close to, and one or maybe more of the following three words: *limes* (limit, boundary), *limin* (threshold, lintel) or *limus* (sidelong, oblique). In all cases, sublime implies some dynamism, a movement upward (or even down), until reaching some limit (be it an upper or below limit – threshold or lintel). Another possible etymology is from *super limas*, meaning above the slime or mud of this world. Although this is questioned by most specialists and linked strictly to the religious use of the term, it might be useful to keep as it reveals not so much the correct etymology but certainly one meaning the term acquired along its history.

Putting aside the inconclusiveness of the etymology, one thing seems certain and all etymologies agree on this point: the sublime involves reaching some limit (even the last, questionable case implies the notion of limit). Another observation worth making is that the term suggests a process, something that happens in time, and not just an attribute or characteristic.

This is a minimal result of a complex etymology; however, the aim of this paper will be to show how this minimal result can be put to work in conceptualizing and interpreting the aesthetic sublime as an experience of and at the limits or boundaries (I will use the two interchangeably) of our experience, rather than a way of crossing boundaries towards something transcendent, as it has been traditionally thought.

The traditional notions of the sublime were all linked to or tended toward something beyond the limits of experience. The sublime has been thought as the presentation (although usually negative presentation) of the metaphysical as such,<sup>2</sup> so the theories of sublimity became metaphysical discussions of some sort or another. In contrast, a notion of the sublime that focuses on the boundary reached and experienced within the sublime has the potential to free the notion from metaphysical pathos. Will this be the same notion or refer to the same

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<sup>1</sup> Jan Cohn, Thomas H. Miles, “The Sublime: In Alchemy, Aesthetics and Psychoanalysis”, *Modern Philology*, Vol. 74, No. 3. (Feb., 1977), 389–304.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, “Sublime Truth”, in *Of the Sublime: Presence in Question* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 72.

kind of experience as the traditional notion of the sublime? To answer this, a few preliminary remarks are needed.

From its earliest introduction into aesthetics, from Joseph Addison and John Dennis, through Burke, Kant, Herder and Schopenhauer and up to some postmodern theories, the term sublime was exclusively or eminently used with regard to nature. We must not consider this a mere coincidence of theoretic approaches, but conclude and consider that the sublime is a notion that expresses and interprets our problematic relating to nature in different historical and philosophical contexts. I will thus leave the question of the sublimity of art quite open here and focus on the notion of the sublime as an expression of our encounter with nature.

I will argue that the sublime does not disappear with its metaphysical premises. Just as before, today it still provides us with the possibility of re-thinking and re-considering our relationship with nature on quite different grounds. We still encounter and experience nature, and we still call our experience within nature sublime in some extraordinary circumstances (the case of the sublime always involved extraordinary circumstances of occurrence). But the notion of the sublime does not merely name an experience; it also interprets it in a certain way. And the interpretation is always as historical as the experience is. So as our encountering or relating to nature has changed throughout history,<sup>1</sup> the notion of the sublime can and has to change with it.

I reject the opinion put forward in more recent literature that the sublime has lost its extraordinary and rare character in the postmodern age (becoming a common occurrence, a commonplace even) to be replaced by ethical issues involved in the question of our being in nature.<sup>2</sup> This rests on the claim that natural disasters are no longer a serious threat to everyday life and nature as such has gradually disappeared from our environment. The first part of the claim is not only an extremely naïve but a simply wrong presupposition, as natural disasters continue to be a threat (although there is no reason why the sublime should exclusively be related to these). And while it is true that our environment became more and more artificial, it is absurd to claim that nature has disappeared altogether (if this were the case, the ethical

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<sup>1</sup> For an excellent and detailed overview of the historical changes in the concept of nature, see Pierre Hadot, *The Veil of Isis: An Essay on the History of the Idea of Nature* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Emily Lutzker, *Ethics of the Sublime in Postmodern Culture*, <http://www.egs.edu/mediaphi/Vol2/Sublime.html>

issues than are claimed to replace the sublime would make no sense either). Plus, our technological or artificial environment (regarded as our second nature) can and does sometimes face us with the same questions as nature.

As a working hypothesis, I will consider the sublime an aesthetic category not only naming but interpreting an experience of boundaries that reveals our relating to nature, and I will attempt to explore the possibility of this alternative notion of the sublime. The concept of the boundary helps in the approach of the sublime as it involves a difference (between the two realms or sides or aspects of reality separated by the boundary) but also a connection or unity established precisely at the boundary. In the case of the sublime, the boundary refers to the limits of our cognitive capacities (rationalizing nature and our surrounding world in general – up to a point where this proves impossible) and practical possibilities (reaching the point where we come to the limits of what we can do, how we can move or act in nature).

To reveal the possible implications of this alternative notion of the sublime, I will proceed on three levels of discussion. *First*, I will use this approach for a critical reading of the Kantian sublime, and its postmodern counterpart in Lyotard's thought, and I will offer the new, alternative notion of the sublime understood as boundary-experience. *Second*, based on some insights of Heidegger's ontology I will show how the aesthetic experience is rooted in underlying ontological questions. *Third*, I will reveal the existential implications of conceptualizing the sublime as boundary experience.

## **I. Kant's and Lyotard's sublime vs. the sublime as boundary experience**

*"A singular change, too, had come over the heavens. Around in every direction it was still as black as a pitch, but nearly overhead there burst out, all at once, a circular rift of clear sky – as clear as I ever saw – and of a deep bright blue – and through it there blazed forth the full moon with a luster that I never before knew her to wear. She lit up every thing about us with the greatest distinctness – but, oh God, what a scene it was to light up!"* (Edgar Allan Poe: A Descent into the Maelström)

### *A. A critical reading of Kant*

In the Introduction to *The Critique of Judgment* Kant outlines his project of linking together and unifying understanding (nature) with

reason (freedom), through an inquiry into the a priori conditions of judgment. Within this project, it seems that the case of the sublime presents a worrisome conflict between the faculties: our imagination and understanding (our sensitive and cognitive faculties) fail in presenting the ideas of our reason (the faculty of freedom). There is an unbridgeable tension between the two sides, which seems to be an obstacle in front of the whole unifying project and thus a problem to be solved.

There are a few questions to be asked about Kant's account for the sublime and a few underlying premises to be revealed. Both suggest that the problem of the sublime contributes to our problematic relationship and relating to nature itself and nature in us. Kant's account of the sublime can be interpreted as presenting, interpreting and resolving the tension between our will as one among the other causes in nature (weak, in this respect) and the will as absolutely independent of nature (freedom). This is possible because the real question that Kant is concerned with is that of the "true nature" of the will. He states this in the Introduction: "Now, the question in respect of the practical faculty: whether, that is to say, the **concept, by which the causality of the will gets its rule, is a concept of nature or of freedom**, is here left quite open." (CJ Introduction)<sup>1</sup>

I will argue that Kant's solution is a hierarchy within the subject, between the faculties in tension, so that the whole account of the sublime (*Erhabene*) is motivated by this hierarchical metaphysics of the subject.

I will also argue that the internal conflict between the faculties can be translated back into an exterior conflict, with nature. The possibility of this interpretation is allowed by Kant himself: "Sublimity, therefore, does not reside in any of the things of nature, but only in our own mind, in so far as **we may become conscious of our superiority over nature within, and thus also over nature without us** (as exerting influence upon us)". (CJ 28)

*The first moment of the sublime*: the inadequacy of our imagination and will to nature's magnitude and might as the source of the negative feeling

The contra-purposive, formless, unbound in nature frustrates our imagination and understanding, does not fit with them, since they require form and concept to grasp and know. When faced with ungraspable

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<sup>1</sup> I will refer to Kant's *Critique of Judgment* as CJ, followed by the section number.

magnitude (mathematical aspect) and overwhelming power (dynamical aspect) in nature, imagination reaches its limit and brakes down. Here, in the first instance, the conflict seems to be external: our faculties turn out to be weak and limited compared to the magnitude and might of nature, and this causes some “negative feelings”. But this conflict also reveals deeper problems for the transcendental approach itself.

In Kant’s transcendental philosophy the world is the immanent and constructed world of phenomena. As all categories of understanding apply a priori to all phenomena, presented by imagination, it shouldn’t and couldn’t be the case that some phenomena exceed understanding or imagination.

“The counter-purposiveness of the sublime appears to forbid any accord between nature and the faculty of judgment; it supports the disquieting hypothesis of a ‘chaotic aggregate’ of phenomena, of a ‘step-mother nature’ who would no longer allow herself to be subordinated to the Law of freedom.”<sup>1</sup> This is more than disquieting for an idealistic, transcendental approach, as it reveals the limits of the approach itself by presenting something not arranged and ordered by the conditions thought to be a priori for something to become a phenomenon. This is scandalous when we were supposing a lasting and coherent order of the world *qua* phenomenon, one that can be deduced from and grasped by our faculties, but the sublime appears as a sign that ultimately, the appearing of the world, the world as a phenomenon is not the work of imagination.<sup>2</sup>

And is it in fact only our imagination that is frustrated in this first moment, or our will too? In spite of his objections against Burke’s empiricist, psychological account of the sublime, Kant himself uses a terminology of vital forces and psychological states, and this reveals where the true source of the negative feeling is. Notice, in the first instance it is not our imagination, but our vital forces that are “checked”. This is still when nature has not completely disappeared from the account. The terminology of vital force implies the notion of power and of will. Thus the negative aspect of the feeling of the sublime seems to rely not so much on the negative presentation (the fact that the imagination through reaching its limit offers a negative presentation of the unrepresentable ideas of reason should and could not result in any negative feeling) and the failure of imagination (as this will be explained away). The negative feeling that emerges in this first instance is rooted

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<sup>1</sup> Jakob Rogozinski, “The Gift of the World”, in *Of the Sublime...*, 136.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Rogozinski, “The Gift of the World”, 154.

elsewhere, in the fact that our will encounters some obstacle, proves to be weak and insignificant in comparison with another power. So the source of fear (as it cannot be actual fear from something threatening – that would not be sublime) is the limit of our power and will, the limit of our control. It is the frustration of not being able to attain total control.

*Second moment of the sublime:* the inadequacy of nature's magnitude or might to reason and the positive feeling.

In the experience of the sublime imagination is faced with absolute magnitude and power, thus something unrepresentable and ungraspable. Instead of being filled with wonder as to how this could happen, Kant turns it into the wonder of reason. He approaches "nature itself" as something "supersensible", i.e. an idea of reason and this is why he replaces talk of nature with talk of reason in his account of the sublime.

The argument goes as follows: since everything in nature can be measured only by comparison, the absolute, which is without measure and comparison, can not belong to nature, but has to belong to reason, alone capable of thinking the absolute and the infinite.<sup>1</sup> So the task of presentation in front of which imagination fails, actually comes from reason (not from nature). Thus the conflict which seemed to be external is really inside the subject, between its faculties. And with this, the worrisome puzzle for the transcendental approach is explained away: it is not some phenomena that frustrated our cognition, but the infinite ideas of reason.

Kant goes on to describe a fractured subject, a battlefield almost, in which the faculty of imagination (which provides presentation) and that of reason (which thinks the infinite) are in conflict with each other. The contrast between the two is so strong, that they almost become subjects themselves, with their own feelings.<sup>2</sup> Imagination reaches its

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<sup>1</sup> "The systematic division of the cosmos conduces to this result. For it represents all that is great in nature as in turn becoming little; or, to be more exact, it represents our imagination in all its boundlessness, and with it nature, as sinking into insignificance before the ideas of reason, once their adequate presentation is attempted." (CJ 26)

<sup>2</sup> Lyotard plays on this dramatic account, writing a story with these faculties as characters: "The Family story of the Sublime". See Jean-François Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 179–181. However, Lyotard does not seem bothered by this dramatic account; in fact, the fractured subject is precisely what draws him to the Kantian sublime as he sees in it an early sign of the postmodern.

limit and does violence to himself while trying to extend this limit, to live up to the expectations of reason. However, it falls short, and in the end is defeated by the almighty reason and its infinite Ideas. The ‘negative feeling’ Kant claims to be inherent in the sublime seems to be the fear, pain and defeat of imagination. But who has ever felt his imagination hurt? Or his reason feel pleasure for that matter? Of course, we are told that the feeling of the sublime is different from both of these. However, it is quite hard to see how we get from the imagination being afraid and reason feeling almighty to the actual feeling of the sublime. Who feels the sublime and what would account for the unity of the feeling?

When our imagination fails, it can certainly be sad, frustrating and so on, but would it be terrifying, horrifying, and scary? Especially as it turns out that our imagination fails in front of our ideas of infinity and freedom? As was shown above, the frustration is not of the imagination, but ours, and it appears in front of nature displaying ungraspable and uncontrollable might (power) over us.

And what about the positive feeling included in the sublime? It seems that precisely by reaching its limit and still not being able to fulfill the demands put forward by the infinite ideas of reason, imagination succeeds in pointing towards, revealing negatively the greatness and infinite in us. So imagination’s brake-down becomes a negative presentation or sign of reason and its infinite ideas. This negative presentation of our unpresentable (supersensible) ideas of reason brings about the realization that reason can and does set ends that our imagination or understanding (or the two together) cannot attain. This shows that some faculties in us are superior to others: reason is superior to imagination. Let us accept this for the sake of argument, although it is not clear why or how thinking some absolute or infinite can be superior to imagining something.

How or why is this internal triumph of reason pleasant or even sublime? It is still **our** reason that is superior to **our** imagination, so we are still limited. The only way we can find this interior hierarchy to be a source of the sublime, is if we accept an underlying premise. Kant can claim the ability of reason to think the infinite to be the source of sublime because he identifies us (humanity in us) with reason alone as our true nature or destination. The pleasure arouses from this presupposition, thus we enjoy the sublime in ourselves: “Therefore the feeling of the sublime in nature is respect for our own vocation, which we attribute to an object of nature by a certain subreption (substitution of a respect for the object



in place of one for the idea of humanity in our own self—the subject); and this feeling renders, as it were, intuitable the supremacy of our cognitive faculties on the rational side over the greatest faculty of sensibility.” (CJ 27)

The obvious question is: what about the unity or the bridge promised between nature and freedom? Instead of a unity we get a questionable and conflicting hierarchy. Furthermore, the interior conflict and subsequent hierarchy can also be translated back into our being in and relating to nature. Since our faculties that correspond to nature (our natural condition) turn out to be inferior to our elevated, reasonable side, nature turns out to be inferior to reason. Kant himself makes this switch in a subtle way:

“Now in just the same way the irresistibility of the might of nature forces upon us the recognition of our **physical helplessness as beings of nature**, but at the same time reveals a faculty of estimating ourselves as **independent of nature**, and discovers a **pre-eminence above nature** that is the foundation of a self-preservation of quite another kind from that which may be assailed and brought into danger by external nature. This **saves humanity in our own person from humiliation**, even though as mortal men we have to submit to external violence. (...) Therefore nature is here called sublime merely because it raises the imagination to a presentation of those cases in which **the mind can make itself sensible of the appropriate sublimity of the sphere of its own being, even above nature.**” (CJ 28)

As we can see, the conflict of powers is resolved by claiming the superiority of reason to understanding and imagination. And this translates into the claim that our idea of our reason makes us superior to nature within us and nature itself.

This account shows that Kant was well-aware of the borderline aspect of the sublime experience as he links it to our desire to know and represent which are proved to be limited but send to something unlimited in us: our reason, freedom and morality. Kant’s account admits that no matter what superiority or ability to think the infinite we have in us, this is only “revealed”, “signalled” and presented to us negatively, by straining our cognitive faculties to the maximum and reaching the limit. The presentation of the unlimited within us implies and needs the experience of our limits.

However, Kant does not stop here. For him the sublime is a concept of excess and limitlessness that becomes the proof of the infinite

in us. In and through the sublime it seems that we are released, we transcend the limits and constraints of our natural condition. We leave nature and our natural self behind to claim the superiority of our reason.

There is a good reason not to accept the hierarchical metaphysics of the subject which for Kant guarantees its unity too. And this reason will also point toward an alternative account for the experience of the sublime, which I will propose in what follows. With an incredible switch of words, Kant calls nature unnatural when it appears formless, overwhelmingly powerful and irrational. But what is really unnatural about this? Isn't this what nature really is? How can nature be unnatural just because it doesn't fit our rational expectations? Doesn't this mean quite the opposite, that we are not (only) natural?

Nature is not finality, not formed and tailored to fit our expectations. We do tailor it into rational and cognizable units (forms) and tame it to conform to our will, but when in spite of all our efforts it appears formless and aimless, we are faced with the limits of our capacities. Not just some of them, all of them. We cannot escape this by saying that we can think of something unbounded and infinite, thus we are superior. This in no way makes us superior, but it certainly makes us **different**.

I agree with Kant and consider it the truest achievement of his notion of the sublime that at the limit of our faculties, there is a negative presentation of something completely different from nature or natural causes: and this is our freedom.

However, I deny that this difference can be turned into a hierarchy. Any hierarchy presupposes that the elements included in it are comparable, and any intelligible comparison presupposes that the compared elements are at least in some respect on the same scale. But how can we compare the power of nature to freedom, as on Kant's own account their scope or realm of application is completely different? Thus there can be no hierarchy between the two (nature and freedom) as they are not even on the same scale. Our ability to think the infinite, our freedom, and morality (in one Kantian word: our reason) open a whole **new dimension into being**, which is in no understandable way continuous with nature or natural causes— there is a gap, a jump which makes the comparison required by any subsequent hierarchy at least questionable if not impossible. So, since nature and or freedom are not on the same scale, only metaphysical speculation and some ideal of humanity can claim one to be superior to the other.



*Interwar period block of flats,  
Piața Națiunilor, Bucharest  
(Photograph by Bianca Petcu)*

But if we don't accept this whole metaphysics of the subject, both the air of superiority and the pleasure are vanished. Does the sublime vanish with these? And if it doesn't what remains of it? As we have seen, the sublime is not only an experience that marks the limits of our cognitive capacities, but also a case which marks the limits of rational, transcendental philosophy, by revealing an inexhaustible presence: nature. Thus we have to extend our concept and experience of nature by recognizing its presence and appearance at the limit of rational and practical efforts. And the notion of the sublime has to change to refer to this different notion of nature and phenomena.

*B. The postmodern counterpart of the Kantian sublime – Lyotard's account*

For Lyotard "Aesthetic feeling presupposes something which necessarily is implied, and forgotten, in representation: presentation, the fact that something is there now."<sup>1</sup> The shift in the theory of the sublime from Kant to Lyotard is a shift from aesthetics and the metaphysic of the subject to ontology and the metaphysic of presentation. He also leaves out the disinterestedness from his account of the sublime.<sup>2</sup>

But although this new notion does seem to reflect on the problematic of presence, Lyotard's account is also a shift from philosophical psychology of human faculties and their limitations to the limits of narrative order.<sup>3</sup> So instead of an inquiry into the inexhaustible presence of nature, it becomes a question of presentation within the narrative order. For Lyotard the sublime must abandon aesthetic categories to become programmatic for postmodernism in general. So Lyotard's sublime is actually a rhetorical tool of the unrepresentable, as the following remarks will show.

The "negative presentation" proves to be Lyotard's link between the Kantian sublime and avant-garde. The negative presentation refers to the invisible, indeterminable, and unrepresentable, thus opens for Lyotard a

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1991), 111.

<sup>2</sup> For an intriguing analysis of the „indirect-not to say perverse" interest involved in the sublime, i.e. the interest of reason and will, see Jean-François Lyotard, "The Interest of the Sublime", in *Of the Sublime...*, 109–132.

<sup>3</sup> Timothy H. Engström, "The Postmodern Sublime?: Philosophical Rehabilitations and Pragmatic Evasions", *Boundary 2*, Vol. 20, No. 2. (Summer, 1993), JSTOR, 191.

new, ontological dimension of conceptualizing the sublime and postmodernism.

What is there now, what is present as such in experience? Lyotard's underlying ontology says: there is a phrase-event – where phrases are occurrences and events are just “what is happening now”. The ontological picture builds on the basic question of Being/non-Being – what is happening in the phrase is that we are surprised that something happens, that there are phrases rather than just nothing (no phrases). This reveals that any phrase implies necessarily the non-phrase (nothing). The mode of being of the phrase is happening, occurrence, not presentation – it does not present something to somebody, it just is (“*Il y a...*”). This “there is...” brings out the ontological aspect of presentation, rather than its traditional epistemological meaning: “The universe is there as long as the phrase is the case.”<sup>1</sup>

Presentation is an event of the presence and Lyotard argues that it is not identical, nor can it be identified with Kant's *Darstellung* (the latter does not refer to the problematic question of “there is..”, just bridges between the intuitive grasp of some ‘given’ and our corresponding concept – thus it enables the subject to form a representation”).<sup>2</sup> “Presentation is not an act of giving (and above all not one coming from some *Es*, or some *It* and addressed to some us, to us human beings). Nor by presentation do I understand the act of *dunamis*, or of potency, or of a will of this potency, a desire of language o accomplish itself. But merely that something takes place.”<sup>3</sup>

The question of being and non-being enters as the feeling that it is possible for nothing to happen. “This feeling is anxiety and surprise: here is something rather than nothing.”<sup>4</sup> This reveals the contingent and fragile nature of all occurrences – they all happen with the background of the necessary possibility of not occurring. Thus: anxiety follows. It is in this anxiety that Lyotard recognizes the true root of the sublime. I will come back later to this issue.

It is obvious that for Lyotard the challenge of the sublime is not related to the limits of some subject but to the limits of presentation

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<sup>1</sup> Rodolphe Gasché, “The Sublime, Ontologically Speaking”, *Yale French Studies*, No. 99, Jean-François Lyotard, *Time and Judgment*, (2001), JSTOR, 119.

<sup>2</sup> See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 65.

<sup>3</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend...*, 75.

<sup>4</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend...*, 74–75.

itself, understood as the limits of narrative. For him, the narrative is synonymous with the desire to totalize (to build a system) and he emphasizes instead the anti-narrative which is attentive to the unrepresentable. Totalizing narratives (or systems) keep the nostalgia of totality alive. But in every system, the most interesting is that which remains outside the system. Accordingly, Lyotard wants and demands the excluded, outside, escaped “abnormalities”, in one word: the unrepresentable. And he wants them presented. Sublime is that which is ill-fitted but elevated, unrepresentable but presented, at the edges or narrative.

But as soon as the notion of presentation is transposed from ontology and into the context of narratives, the problem of differentiating it from representation reemerges. Here, presentation cannot fail to suggest some activity of a subject or some correspondence (something fitting or fitted to something else). Because of this problematic terminology, Lyotard remains closer to the Kantian thought than he would like to admit. It is worth noticing that Kant’s *Darstellung* means both representation and presentation, so actually refers to both. So the frustration and nostalgia involved in the failure of representation is transmitted into the impossibility of complete presentation (impossibility of narratives). This leaves Lyotard’s notion of the sublime with some shred of nostalgia inherited from Kant.

While he recognizes that Kant’s narrative tends to totality, Lyotard shreds this totality. He cannot stop reading the account of the sublime precisely because he finds in it a moment of brake in the totalizing narrative. What he appreciates in Kant is the obvious fragmentation of the subject in the sublime. The sublime shows the subject not to be a unity. Kant resolves the issue by positing the superiority of reason and morality, but the example of disharmony and fragmentation remain.

For Lyotard, the sublime is a concept of excess, but also a slogan of the war against totality and the infinite. The only problem is that he cannot escape Kant’s dialectical terminology of conflicting feelings and the philosophical accuracy is obscured by the dramatizing language and terminology of war. When he takes the sublime over to the programmatic rhetoric of postmodernism, it becomes obvious that he also took over some major dichotomies and language-games from Kant. And most importantly, in spite of drawing repeated attention to the limit involved in the experience of the sublime, he fails to consider the question of the limit and follows Kant in picturing some conflict, war

between the two sides of the boundary: that which is presented and the unrepresentable.

*C. The sublime as an experience of boundary*

Kant, although aware of the boundary included in the experience of the sublime, fails to ask the question about the boundary itself, as he is more preoccupied to emphasize something outside the boundary, something that transcends it. For him the sublime proved to be a rational boundary-category. Does the sublime then lose application once we are done with metaphysical presuppositions and nostalgias? I will try to show that it does not, as it still refers to a lived experience that although rarely, but still happens.

This experience is our encounter with nature in an extraordinary manner, thus not different from what Burke or Kant or other traditional theoreticians of the sublime took as their examples of the sublime. However, once the experience comes to be interpreted in a different way and with a different approach, the notion of the sublime will change considerably. As I pointed out before, the notion of the sublime doesn't just name an experience, but it also interprets it, and the stake of this interpretation is to determine our place or condition in nature. So, to overcome Burke and Herder's empirical accounts, Kant's idealist account, or Lyotard's rhetorical notion, we must inquire into the concrete lived experience of the sublime, unfolding existentially.

The traditional notion and use of the sublime with its negative aspect of almost tragic pathos expresses the failure and limit of the unifying project of capturing and reducing our world to some rational principles. It marked the limits of this project and its negative feeling expressed the nostalgia for what was lost. Translated into our relationship with nature this amounts to the nostalgia of having lost our privileged place in nature, a position that we took for granted for so long. In a thought or philosophy that shreds all nostalgia and focuses on what is achieved and gained from the phenomena present at the limit of our cognitive faculties, the negative feeling vanishes. But the sublime can still mark and express that experience of the limit which in its extraordinary and revealing nature doesn't fail to astonish and fascinate. This new notion will lose the negativity that was thought to be inherent in the sublime, to bring out the positive and affirmative aspect of the experience itself, and it will also keep ecstatic discourse, mysticism and mystification away from the sublime. This quest can be completed by

focusing on what is achieved and what occurs in borderline, extraordinary cases of our encounter with nature.

In this section I will give an alternative account for the experience of the sublime revolving around the following questions: What does it mean to experience the limit of experience? What does it mean to be at the limit?

It is perhaps even paradoxical to consider the sublime a concept as it is the concept that signifies precisely something that exceeds the concept, its control and descriptive capacity.<sup>1</sup> Thus it is a concept of the extreme and of the limit. However, it doesn't have to apply to some metaphysical beyond, but to an experience taking place at or on the limit of experience. Reaching a limit means to arrive to some totality (finite, of course), to something gathered within its limit and presented as a whole. If anything, this should count as a positive achievement or a fulfillment.

Of course, not all boundary experiences are sublime.<sup>2</sup> Following the hypothesis that the sublime is a specific case of boundary experience, the challenge will be precisely to reveal what differentiates this notion of the sublime from other boundary experiences. The first aspect that would make the new notion of the sublime specific is that it will concern that what remains of nature after reaching the boundary of rational approach. At the limit of our cognition we cease to understand nature anymore. But does nature disappear just because we don't understand it? Of course not, it becomes more present, as its present turns into something strange, unusual. What is this presence? It is an unbound, unfitted, indifferent and disinterested natural display that fascinates not because of its beauty, nor its power, simply because it is still there and contrary to all our expectations. It also fascinates because we are there, present within this nature in a different way.

Taking all this into consideration, I will propose a notion of the sublime that is to be applied not to some "object", nor some "subject", but to a certain encounter of the two in an experience of boundary.<sup>3</sup> This

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Engström, "The Postmodern Sublime?...", 190–204.

<sup>2</sup> Facing death, severe illness, war, and many other experiences can also be conceptualized as experiencing boundaries; however, none of them are sublime.

<sup>3</sup> Before proceeding, it is worth to note that there have been other attempts to conceptualize the sublime in light of the boundary involved in the lived experience. The most notable one is Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Sublime Offering*, which, however, in contrast to this attempt, uses the notion of the boundary to express how the sublime can present something unlimited, some "infinity of beginning" that never becomes complete. He takes this beginning to mean that



encounter thus will have two inseparable aspects: there is something occasioning the sublime and there is a feeling arousing from this experience.

1. *The occasion of the sublime*

What are we tempted to call sublime, if anything? These are usually “wild” landscapes, i.e. segments of nature devoid of humans and signs of humans, such as high mountain-views, the snowy-icy panoramas of the poles of the earth, unexplored forests abundant with colours and life, the ocean, the starry sky, and so on. But also, we call some natural process viewed from a (safe) distance sublime, as a storm, a volcano erupting, whirlpools, sunsets-sunrises, and others.

What is common in all these cases is that they offer a different, unusual or extraordinary encounter with nature. Of course, the line between what is ordinary and extraordinary can differ not only historically and culturally, but also in a more simple way: according to where we live. But in all cases, when we call some experience sublime we are faced with something unusual and ungraspable that lurks at the limit (or better said: on the limit) of the familiar, normal, ordered and regular experience.

In our ordinary experience we are under the impression that nature or our environment in general is just there to satisfy of our theoretical curiosities (readable), or to aid our practices and purposes (controllable). We feel we are at home in nature, in harmony with it, perhaps even that superior to it and privileged within it. But the experience of the sublime is one of those rare occasions when a shift occurs, a brake in this optimistic frame of normality and at the limit of our cognitive and practical capacities nature appears to us in a whole different light: it is raw and nude being, indifferent toward us, not for us but for and in itself alone. And suddenly, nature is not home anymore, but a display, a presence of diversity and complexity that is obviously too

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there is an image, hence a limit, along whose edge something unlimited makes itself felt. This account, although it offers many fruitful insights into the experience of the sublime, fails by introducing the “borders” of the limit, to suggest the “presence” or “fact” of there being something unrepresentable. This is problematic, as it amounts to introducing another boundary at the border of the boundary, thus multiplying boundaries to the infinite. And the “unlimited unrepresentable” still suggest the same nostalgia for the metaphysical as in Lyotard’s case. See Jean-Luc Nancy, “The Sublime Offering”, in *Of the Sublime...*, 25–53.

much for us to grasp. There is no possibility of complicity between things and thought. Nature asks no questions and answers no questions from us. Nature ignores us. And this occasions the sublime as it offers a “peak” into a whole different side of reality, as if without us.

So in order for the sublime to occur, the familiarity and fittingness of the surrounding environment has to change. Nature has to appear not necessarily threatening, just indifferent towards us, not reliable, not familiar and not ordered to fit our expectations. Nature does not respond to our rational approaches and questions, it evades us and shows itself evading us.

Consider one of Kant’s examples for what is ultimately and most sublime, the inscription on the Temple of Isis (symbol of Mother Nature): “I am all that is and that was and that shall be, and no mortal hath lifted my veil.” (CJ, 49) This is sublime somewhat in spite of Kant, as it expresses that nature is impossible to be captured or unified under rational principles (that is why no mortal has lifted the veil). This is not to say that nature is irrational. Both rationality and irrationality are human (mortal) categories, but nature is what it is and all that is behind this categories. So it is precisely when rational categories reach their limit (when nature cannot be represented) that nature can appear as such: its “inhuman” aspects come into play in all their diversity, to signal its inexhaustibility.

And one can say that what the sublime offers is a peak behind the veil, however, one that is not an achievement of man, but is an appearance, an occurrence of nature showing itself. Thus the question of representation or access becomes one of appearing. Nature, its appearing becomes constitutive for the sublime.

What does it mean to reach the limit of our cognitive and practical capacities? The examples of sublime experience all have some reference to either a view or a process that is not graspable and/or not controllable by anything we do or think. The abundant diversity we encounter in a mountain-view defies and slips away from rational explanations (better said, makes them useless). A sublime storm or a volcano erupting limit our possibility of movement: if we go closer, if we abandon the safe position of a spectator, they will threaten our life. The sublime gives us an outline of our limitations and difference. From out finite point of view, i.e. from our rational limits the vast variety and complexity of natural forms appears formless and ungraspable.

Thus the sublime experience requires the presence of nature at the point where our functional relating to nature brakes down. A presence, which, however unfitting and ungraspable, is still present as phenomena. It follows that the appearing of nature is not a matter of representation or presentation. It is not up to us. The limits of representation are not the limits of phenomena. It is not presented and it cannot be represented by us, nor understood by us, still, it is present within our lived experience, it reveals itself in its unfittedness. It is when we stop understanding and start to contemplate.

What we call wild and nude nature, or what Kant called “raw nature” refer to the same aspect or appearance of nature: its apparent independence of any human activity. Not only specific human transformation, manipulation and transformation – human activity here refers to the larger and deeper notion of recognizable purpose. Nature is usually called sublime not for any ontic determination that it might have,<sup>1</sup> but for appearing, for manifesting and manifesting no consideration, no interest in us.

For Kant, the negative presentation showed or signalled the infinite, but in fact, if we consider the boundary involved in it, it is actually a presentation of all that can appear (it is this appearance itself that fascinates), a “positive” presentation not in the sense that it would present some object or collection of objects, but it does present that there is an appearance.

Thus, the occasion of sublime is nature manifesting its presence independent of anything we do or think about it. It manifests *that* and *how* it is without us. There seems to be a paradox here: how can nature appear to us without us? It can not, of course. A phenomenal in-itself is contradictory or to say the least, an abstraction (leaving out consciousness of it).<sup>2</sup> It still appears to us, only not for us. In order for anything to appear, there needs to be some awareness of its appearing. And this leads to the second aspect of the sublime, inseparable from the first: the feeling involved in the sublime.

## 2. *The feeling aroused by the sublime*

The second aspect of the sublime is the presence, actuality of a feeling. This is the feeling that feels itself and feels itself different. “*The*

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Éliane Escoubas, “The Simplicity of the Sublime”, in *Of the Sublime...*, 61–62.

<sup>2</sup> However, its being is not an abstraction. I will come back to this issue in the final part of this paper.

*sublime is a feeling, and yet, more than a feeling in the banal sense, it is the emotion of the subject at the limit.*"<sup>1</sup>

When faced with the absolute indifference and unfittedness of the environment or some portion or process of it, the limits of knowledge, power, comprehension, and imagination are reached and become "visible", i.e. they are presented and signalled. The limit is presented and signalled by a feeling intense enough to actually feel itself or become conscious of itself. What does it mean for a feeling to signal its own actuality? How is this even possible? It is possible if we understand the feeling as the reflexivity of thought that can signal its own state by its state. This is what Lyotard calls "tautegorical" reflexivity, which in a Kantian context refers to a reflective judgment judging the state of a feeling that makes the subject aware of its own state.<sup>2</sup> However, if we do not want to commit ourselves to any metaphysical claims or presuppositions about what the subject or its "true nature" is, the conclusion of this reflexivity is not that there is a subject; it is just that there is a feeling. As Lyotard puts it, this feeling is merely a promise of a subject, of a unity of some sort.<sup>3</sup>

Without any assumptions about a subject, what is the consequence of the fact that there is a feeling? The presence of a feeling is a presence of something different within a disinterested and indifferent, neutral environment. This is because a feeling is never neutral or indifferent and never completely devoid of all interest (although it can be devoid of some interests or other), and as such, it is "unnatural" presence in nature. The feeling represents a completely different dimension of being within nature, one that is reflexively aware of its own state. The sublime encounter as a boundary experience shreds light on, signals and presents this difference.

Even if clearly the feeling does not matter (remains unanswered) for its environment, still: there is a feeling and it feels itself feeling something. This is in no way superiority (or inferiority, for that matter); it is just difference, given in an experience at the limit of all experiences. The true lesson or benefit of the sublime is not that we can somehow transcend some limits, to cross over, but to be able to reach it, i.e. to experience the limit in the reflexivity of a feeling.

Also, the feeling arousing from the sublime experience is not sheer self-awareness; it is self awareness aware of being occasioned by

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy, *The Sublime Offering*, 44.

<sup>2</sup> Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic...*, 8–15.

<sup>3</sup> Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic...*, 24.

something else, aware of being a response to something. Feeling feels itself at the limit of something in which it can no longer recognize itself, as this other things has no signs of feeling, purpose, form, interest and so on.

When considering the feeling involved in the sublime, i.e. the sensible aspect, qualitative differences must be allowed. The quality or specific psychological content of this feeling cannot and doesn't have to be specified. Feelings are interpretative reactions that express some attitude, some response to a certain aspect of reality. In this respect, the feeling that arouses in the sublime can differ a lot, as it will be determined by certain expectations and presuppositions which are relative to historical, cultural or even personal differences. Thus the feeling responding to an indifferent and unfitted segment of reality can be sadness, awe, fear, disappointment, surprise, stupor, humility, thrill, honour, admiration, respect, anger, and so on. It can also be some combination of these. But in each case there remains the fact there is feeling, because whatever the specific quality or content of this feeling, this content is different from the reflexive and differentiating content of "there is a feeling".

In contrast, the quantity or intensity of the feeling is not indifferent. The feeling involved in the sublime is always deep, great, as the occurrence has a huge impact on our sensibility. Because of the intensity of the feeling, we might not always be aware of what they are based on, what presuppositions underlie them or what their consequences are. The sublime is a lived experience of astonishment that there is another side of nature than the one we deal with in our usual approach, and astonishment that this can manifest. The impact of this appearance of nature manifests itself not so much as the specific psychological content of the feeling involved in the sublime, but in its intensity. Also, quantity can constitute quality in the case of feelings too. Just as one cell differs in both quantity and quality from one million cells, a feeling, when quantitatively intense or strong, can acquire the quality constitutive for the sublime: feeling itself different from its environment precisely for feeling anything.

The negative feeling thought to be inherent in the sublime always betrays nostalgia for something unachieved. In opposition, this notion of the sublime is as a "gathering" of what is and can be present to us within the limits of appearing itself, so it aims to exhaust the limits of the possibility of appearance, presence. The sublime suspends and makes

impossible our usual activity, evaluation and cognition of nature and transforms our relation to it. There need not be any negativity in the concept of the sublime, not even that of negative presentation: it is simply nature appearing to us in an extraordinary and fascinatingly complex display. And this proves to be out of reach for our rationalizing capacities, however, not out of reach for our sensibility, since it still appears to us (although clearly not for us).

If there is any extension or going beyond in the sublime, it is the extension or modification of our previous concept of nature. The unfittedness and purposelessness present in the sublime modifies, in some sense extends our “ordinary” concept of nature. Nature appears no longer fitting our cognitive and practical ends, but an inexhaustible presence overflowing, slipping away from our approaches.

The difference revealed in the sublime is that our being (existence) and nature’s being do not fully coincide. Existence is a mode of being, one that is conscious, aware that there is something rather than nothing. Only man exists, all other things are. Our being in the world is never a vacant and indifferent state; it is not the position of a disinterested spectator, as it is always a lived experience. We are not in our environment as stones are; we are “attuned”, aware of it, marked by it and reflecting it.

In the sublime we get the manifestation of feeling and nature at once: where they meet (touch), at their common boundary. A boundary that separates, as it marks a difference, but also unites, as it makes the separated sides touch at precisely this limit and reveal them to be two aspects of the same occurrence. So we don’t refer the sublime to nature itself, nor the feeling involved in us encountering it, what we call sublime in the sublime experience is the comparison and difference of what is present without feelings and the feeling that is also present, as a feeling.

As an experience of boundary, the sublime can be conceptualized as the experience of our difference from our environment. Thus the sublime is an event of encounter between an indifferent and disinterested segment of reality and the absolute feeling that there is a feeling different from its environment. Neither of these can be dropped out of a theory of sublime, since as an event and an encounter, sublimity has a double aspect. In this respect, we have every right to call nature or some part of it sublime, or call the feeling sublime, but properly, nothing in our environment is sublime and there is no sublime feeling that is not a response to something or some aspect of our environment. But the

predication of sublimity refers to this encounter, so it is not objective, nor subjective.

The advantage of this account and this notion of the sublime is that it can include both that which occasions the sublime and that which actually experiences it without limiting or formalizing what is sublime or what the content of the feeling is. It is also flexible as it can include and be sensible to historical and cultural differences in the experience of the sublime.

This approach emphasizes the boundary as that which marks the difference. But do we not sink into dualism in this way? Do we not build an abyss, an absolute distance with this emphasis? In order to avoid this, and to show how it can be avoided, we need to answer two follow-up questions that have the potential of revealing the ontological roots and existential consequences of the experience.

The sublime is a matter of appearing and presence (and not a matter of representation or presentation). Thus the underlying questions to be asked refer, first, to the possibility of this appearance, and second is how the diagnosis or appearance of the difference is possible. How can something appear, rather than nothing, and what is the relationship of that which manifests itself and that to which it is manifested? So the challenge is to reveal the sublime as a special and specific case or instance of a more general ontological and existential experience.

## **II. The ontological roots of the sublime experience**

In the sublime, as I presented it, there is an occurrence of disclosure of nature. It is not difficult to link this to what Heidegger (and Lyotard, following him) calls event, *Ereignis*.

Lyotard shows nostalgia by demanding that which is unrepresentable to be presented, although, by his own definition it cannot be presented in any effort, as all presentation requires some form. However, that which cannot be represented or presented, can still be present, it can reveal and show itself, otherwise we wouldn't know about it. One must not think of this unrepresentable as some metaphysical or mystical beyond. For something to be unrepresentable simply means that its presence cannot be controlled, it does not depend on our agency to bring it about or grasp it.

Nature can appear as such and such (unfitted, for example) because it can appear at all, be present. The sublime occasion is an appearance of the ontological: that there is nature and awareness of it, rather than nothing. So the sublime could be interpreted and understood

as a special instance of that ontological surprise and difference that Heidegger or Lyotard talk about: surprise that there is something rather than nothing. The sublime instance of this surprise could be formulated like this: surprise that there is nature (or some natural event) and it can appear to us “as if being on its own”, without us, rather than nothing over and above nature “for us.”

Lyotard’s account and use of the notion reveals some ontological implications of the sublime, but I will argue that he ultimately fails in interpreting and translating these implications back into the aesthetic context. He obviously draws on Heidegger’s fundamental ontology and the ontological difference of beings and the Being of beings. I believe that there is a well-founded link between the sublime and this underlying ontology. However, I also think that Lyotard was too much of a Kantian to reveal the full range of consequences involved in this link. Specifically, it is really questionable that the anxiety and relief inherent in the ontological experience of the difference of being and non-being can be translated back into some negative and positive aspect of the sublime. The anxiety concerns the possibility of there being nothing, but as we have seen in all accounts of the sublime, including the one offered by this paper, the sublime feeling does not concern the worry of there being nothing at all. On the contrary, it is the occasion on which there is a clear presence of some “things” (or to be more precise, two “things”: nature and awareness of it), and it is precisely this co-presence that is called sublime.

The anxiety of the possibility of not being can also not be identified with some threat of nature to us either. The threat of nature (its force) is not the threat of its not-being. Identifying the two would be a case of misplaced and misinterpreted anxiety.

It is not proper to call the ontological anxiety-relief duality sublime. The root of a series of this kind of misinterpretations is given by the commonly accepted view that the sublime has to be contradictory, and the subsequent mistake that all contradictor feelings are sublime. The mistake is well illustrated by the following remark from Gasché: “the sentiment that accompanies any happening is a contradictory, or sublime feeling.”<sup>1</sup> It seems that any contradictory feeling can be called sublime which is not just questionable, but simply wrong, and it illustrates how the revelling of the ontological roots of the sublime comes to be

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<sup>1</sup> Gasché, *The Sublime, Ontologically Speaking*, 119.



misinterpreted by this simple reduction of the aesthetic sublime to an ontological occurrence.

An unproblematic translation of anxiety and relief into some contradictory aspects of the sublime would collapse the sublime into a more general ontological account, and imply that the sublime happens in all occurrences of this ontological kind. However, there has to be a difference, a line drawn and the reason why we consider the sublime an aesthetic category, and not an ontological one. The sublime has to be conceived as a special and specific instance of that ontological occurrence and experience of the ontological boundary of being and non-being.

Thus, to see the true ontological implications of the sublime as boundary experience it is worth turning not to Lyotard, but back to Heidegger. Heidegger, in *The Origin of the Work of Art*, offers a phenomenological treatment of aesthetics, focused on the way in which self-concealing being illuminates itself, appears. He does not even mention the sublime, but his methodological approach can be used to reveal the possibility of appearing involved in the sublime too.<sup>1</sup> However, in this paper I choose not to approach the link between the sublime and the Heideggerian ontology from Heidegger's writings on Kant, neither his writings on art, rather to focus on *What is Metaphysics?* and show the revealing coincidences between this account for nothingness and the notion of the sublime as boundary experience.

Heidegger recognizes "presence" as the leading sense of Being throughout Western tradition. But access to this presence is only in the awareness of Being (Dasein). Dasein names the being-in-the-world; more specifically, it is the locus (place or space) where beings and Being reveal themselves, where they become present. But existence cannot be approached with the same categories as other beings (as it was traditionally attempted): it has its own "categories" which Heidegger calls existentials. In order to explore the existential structure of Dasein (and thus the locus where beings and Being become present), the approach must be hermeneutical, i.e. aware of its own historicity.

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<sup>1</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe draws attention to the fact that although the word sublime does not belong to the Heideggerian lexicon, the concept and the sublime itself are everywhere present in his account. Cf. *Sublime Truth*, 77. Also, see Jeffrey S. Librett, "Positing the Sublime: Reading Heidegger Reading Kant", in *Of the Sublime: Presence in Question*, 194, for a convincing argument that without ever using the notion, Heidegger turns the Kantian sublime against the Kantian ontology.

Heidegger reveals the possibility of appearing in the disclosedness of Dasein as being-in-the-world. Dasein is revealed in its moods, which are modes or expressions of his “attunement” to the world, for example joy, boredom, anxiety, wonder and so on. It is important to note that these are not feelings in the psychological sense, as they have no specific cause or reason, but modes (moods) of being in the world. What reveals existence as a whole and its world as a whole is the mood of anxiety. The revealing mood of anxiety is linked to the question of being and nothing, as it is related to the experience of the imminent possibility of not being. It unifies existence and its world in the sheer fact that they are there, present, they are something, rather than nothing.

To distinguish the sublime from this ontological boundary experience, we must read carefully what Heidegger has to say on the different moods that he gives as examples of our attunement to the world. The moods of boredom, joy or excitement over some presence “conceal from us the nothing that we are seeking.”<sup>1</sup> Why and how is that? Is it not precisely because these moods reveal existence so “filled with” some being, some presence, that it can do nothing else but affirm the actuality of this presence? The sublime, which is of course not a mood, but an occurrence, comes closer to these moods that Heidegger calls concealing. The manifestation of nature in the sublime is so obtrusive and overwhelming that it leaves no room to consider the possibility of its not-being.

However, of course, the possibility is there, even concealed. And this is because, as Heidegger shows, every possible presence is only possible with the background of nothing, i.e. every presence implies necessarily that there is something, rather than nothing. And it is the mood of anxiety that reveals this basic ontological limit in every experience. And obviously, as a feature of *every* experience, it cannot and should not be identified with any specific case of it, as the sublime. Thus this is the root of all presences, of sublimity too, but it is not identical with any particular case of presence.

So although the sublime as an occurrence is rooted in this ontology of appearing, it is not identical with the experience of the basic ontological difference, moreover, it is a case of its concealment. This is not a concealment that hides the fact of presence (the fact of appearing)

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger, “What is Metaphysics?”, in, *Basic Writings* (London: Routledge Publishing, 1993), 100.

in some ontic determinations, but of such overwhelming presence that hides the possibility of its being nothing.

The sublime is the pure affirmation of the presence of nature, the pure affirmation that there is something even if it does not fit with us, concealing the possibility of its nothingness. The sublime is not anxiety over the possibility of nothing (not being), but amazed fascination with a presence that certainly is something. Even is Lyotard's notion, when he translates the anxiety into the negative feeling of the sublime, this cannot be about anxiety over the possibility of not being, but anxiety over the possibility of there being something more, over and above, unrepresentable or supersensible, and feeling nostalgia for this. Thus it is still an anxiety about access, about gaining knowledge which is clearly limited. In contrast, the new notion of the sublime is focused on the spectacle of abundant being which is clearly there and can be experienced (although, of course, this is not an experience that would result in any knowledge in the traditional or propositional sense).

In the sublime we encounter an insistent and overwhelming presence in its ungraspable complexity and diversity. This presence is so extraordinary, abundant or even violent that it is impossible to be disregarded, although it cannot be grasped intellectually, only viewed, experienced and felt. The nature present in the sublime slips away and overflows all rational expectations. But it does not stop being a presence, phenomena, moreover, the more unfitted and indifferent to us it seems, the more intrusive and self-asserting its presence becomes.

The sublime is still concerned with the presence and appearance of beings and our presence between them, not with Being. This is what makes it an aesthetic and not an ontological category. The aesthetic experience of boundaries remains sensitive and focused on the manifestation as such, on the "view" offered. It is not the pure being of nature that we are aware of, but nature appearing to us as such and such.

### **III. The existential implications of the sublime**

By conceiving the sublime as the experience of a basic difference (disinterested nature and ever interested feeling within nature) we risk the collapse of the sublime into a dualistic account of being and existence, and miss the connection between the two. To exemplify this threat, consider the following two examples:

*"A step lower and strangeness creeps in: perceiving that the world is 'dense', sensing to what a degree a stone is foreign and irreducible to us, with what intensity nature or a landscape can negate us. At the heart of*

*all the beauty lies something inhuman, and these hills, the softness of the sky, the outline of these trees and this very minute lose the illusory meaning with which we had clothed them...*" Albert Camus: *The Myth of Sisyphus*

*"All those objects ... how can I explain? They embarrassed me; I would have liked them to exist less strongly, in a drier way, more abstract way, with more reserve. The chestnut tree pressed itself against my eyes. Green rust covered it half way up; the bark, black and blistered, looked like boiled leather. The soft sound of the water in the Masqueret Fountain flowed into my ears and made a nest there, filling them with sighs; my nostrils overflowed with a green, putrid smell. All things, gently, tenderly were letting themselves drift into existence like those weary women who abandon themselves to laughter and say: 'It does you good to laugh', in tearful voices; they were parading themselves in front of one another, they were abjectly admitting to one another the fact of their existence."* Jean-Paul Sartre: *Nausea*

Both of these might pass as examples of the sublime I have described so far. Camus' absurd or Sartre's nausea seem to present the same structure as the sublime, and a common ontological root, as all three are rooted in the question of being and nothing. However, there are considerable differences.

The absurd and the nausea are existentially interpreted encounters with the hostility of the surrounding world, completely focused on the place and condition of existence in this world, and the existential consequences and implications of the manifestation of purposeless being. These interpretations insist on the opposition, conflict and contradiction between our rational capacities and expectations and the world we live in, and both are rooted in Sartre's suspiciously and hopelessly dualistic ontology of in-itself (*en-soi*) and for-itself (*pur-soi*). Sartre's difficulty to establish a bond between being in-itself (that just is what it is) and being for-itself (aware of itself and identical with its possibilities)<sup>1</sup> is transferred and transformed into the irresolvable confrontation inherent in the absurd or the nausea.

The sublime differs from both for the following reasons. The absurd and the nausea show an existential confrontation and revolt

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<sup>1</sup> See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (London–New York: Routledge, 2003), 638 and following.

consequent to the mere experience of difference. While the absurd is revolting, and the nausea almost desperate, the sublime is a more immediate and contemplative witnessing of the difference. The sublime is closer to the stunned awareness of a spectator; however, it is definitely not the position of a disinterested spectator. It is a spectacle which sends the spectator to self-awareness by being aware of the spectacle. So in this respect, it can never be a vacant and indifferent state.

As a conclusion of these short remarks, it becomes obvious that if we are interested in the connection and relation of that which appears and whom it appears to (and not their conflict), we have to turn elsewhere.

What has come to be called existential phenomenology marks a return to lived experience but also provides with a method of approaching phenomena, such as the sublime. The aim of the notion of the sublime presented here was and is to dissolve the apparent duality of its subjective and objective aspect into an experiential unity, which is the unity of the appearance as such. To achieve this, I will turn to Jan Patočka's asubjective phenomenology.

Appearance refers to the fact that something is present here and manifests itself. "But things also show themselves even where the purpose is not directly cognizing."<sup>1</sup> Or - I would add - even when cognition is impossible, such as in the case of the sublime. "Things not only are but they are manifest,"<sup>2</sup> whenever there is someone to be manifested to. Patočka's asubjective approach is this: the way of revealing what actually happens in the manifestation itself is not to simply add or put together the structure of what "shows itself" and the structure of that to which things show themselves. Instead, we must aim for the structure, conditions and roots of showing as such.

Patočka's account on what is involved in manifestation as such can shed some light on the case of the sublime too: "We are interested in things after all. They interest us in what, which, and how they are. We are interested in what shows itself - in our practical orientations and our cognizing. Neither knowledge nor practice...is possible any other way except when something shows itself, but at the same time we are not aware of this showing either in practice or in cognizance."<sup>3</sup> So it is

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<sup>1</sup> Jan Patočka, "What Is the Phenomenon?", in *Plato and Europe* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 16.

<sup>2</sup> Patočka, "What Is the Phenomenon?", 16.

<sup>3</sup> Patočka, "What Is the Phenomenon?", 25.

precisely when we are faced with the limits of our cognitive and practical orientation that the mere fact of showing, appearing is revealed to us. And this is possible because the manifestation is not exhausted by our cognitive and practical orientations: there is manifestation over and above these, but this will only become “visible”, obvious, once we reach the limits of those capacities and experience their brake-down. The show of nature occurs at the limits of a functional relating.

So in order for the sublime not to collapse in any ontological or existential category, we must focus on the sensible aspect of experience that regards solely the appearance and presence as such of something i.e. the mode and structure of appearance. The sublime is a concept of the sheer difference of what appears and awareness of it, conceptualized as two inseparable aspects of the same occurrence. All hierarchies and confrontations lose their sense here, in this co-implication. The appearance is an appearance for someone and that someone can only appear as mirroring some appearance.

The interconnectedness of what appears and awareness of it has to be approached in a subtle way, in order to reveal what is at stake in appearance for us, who are aware of it. This is a relation that is not reciprocal. Awareness is awareness of something (only and exclusively awareness of something), but that something, that presence is not aware of us in return. The *being* of awareness is exhausted and coincides with its content; however, *the being* of what is present does not coincide with the apprehension or awareness of it. Ontologically (regarding its being or existence), there can be no feeling without the world. Consciousness without content is nothing but an abstraction, as it is never “vacant” but always conscious of and about something appearing. In this respect, consciousness is not an attribute of some subject or self but an aspect of the experience, an aspect of appearing itself. The world (and nature), of course can be without the feeling and this is precisely what the feeling feels in the sublime.

Our consciousness and existence depends on our environment which is the content of any awareness and the realm of our possibilities. Our environment does not depend on us in this way, does not need us to exist. Its manifestation is not completely independent of us either, but this dependence does not denote any causal impact. Manifestation simply involves someone to be manifested to. In this sense, manifestation depends on us, as there is no manifestation without awareness of it. But the fact of what is manifested (its being) is independent of us, at it is not

exhausted by being apprehended by us. Thus there is a co-dependency involved in the manifestation, but it is not symmetrical.

### **Conclusions**

The notion of the sublime presented here rests on the assertion that the limitedness or finitude of our rational approaches does not necessarily amount to a failure or a conflict, but is in fact a positive possibility to be able to reach and experience that boundary and to be able to experience at the same time an extra-ordinary manifestation of nature. Thus it is no longer regarded as the mixed feeling of fear and respect, but a privilege to experience at all and to experience something as elevating and magnificent as the sublime.

The sublime is an aesthetic category with ontological roots and existential implications. However, it is not identical with any ontological or existential category. What we draw from Heidegger and Patočka is that the presence of the world and our presence are fused, mutually included in the lived experience. The presence of nature and our presence in it are experienced – they fuse at the boundary of experience. The sublime is an encounter of indifferent nature with the ever different existence. It is an experience that reveals both the basic difference and the essential inseparability of the two.

The specific occasion of the sublime is what makes it different and distinct from ontological and existential categories: it is a fascinating and extraordinary display or image or appearance, one that is different from all familiar and usual appearances as it sheds light of the appearance itself in its own. The enjoyment or delight involved in the sublime is that of a feeling that feels itself and feels itself different from its content – it is the joy of immediate experience. The amazed feeling of co-presence, a consciousness of being there, present in a situation and being presented with an extraordinary view marks our being in, participating in and relating to nature. It is as a peak behind the veil of Isis.