

Introduction

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The sublime is a concept that has never ceased to attract and to fascinate scholars. In its classical formulation, it dates back to the eighteenth century, but some of the issues that characterize its origin – such as the border between representation and the unrepresentable, or between form and formless, pleasure and terror – return strongly in contemporary thinking. In this regard, opinions are divided. Is the sublime an already outdated notion that can only be discussed from a historical point of view? Or does it also contain important elements for the current philosophical debate? Moreover, have the transformations that the sublime has undergone in the contemporary world substantially distorted it, or have they instead brought to light some new possible implications of this concept? This issue of "Itinera" is dedicated to these and other similar questions, starting from the traditional definitions of the sublime between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, until its most recent interpretations.

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The concept of the sublime has its origins in antiquity. In the treatise of the so-called Pseudo-Longinus (I a.C.) the author expounds upon the capacity of poetry and discourse to elevate the soul¹. In the aesthetics of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth century, in which Longinus was translated and widely discussed, it indicates a particular experience, different or even opposite to that of beauty. In the thought of the philosopher Edmund Burke, the sublime has to do with a range of privative qualities, such as vacuity, darkness, solitude and silence, whose spectacle becomes threatening and delightful at the same time². In the same century, Immanuel Kant considers the sublime as the experience of a limit of our imagination when faced with something that we perceive as extremely vast or powerful (typically, but not necessarily, the forces of nature). It is exactly this experience which permits, according to Kant, one to feel the moral dimension³.

Is a notion with such a long history still important today? Or is the interest in the sublime a merely historical one? There was a phase, in Twentieth century philosophy, in which the answer to the latter question was: definitely not. In the second half of the century, the sublime has often been considered key to understanding our contemporary times⁴. The contrasts which characterize the sublime from its origins – such as the opposition between the image and its limits, and the strange unity between pleasure and pain that is typical of this kind of experience – have been seen as the features of contemporary art and thinking in general. A part of this issue of *Itinera* is dedicated to

¹ Longinus, *On Sublimity*, in D. A. Russell, M. Winterbottom (eds.), *Ancient Literary Criticism: the principal Texts in New Translations*, Oxford University Press, Cambridge Ma. 1972, pp. 462-495.

² E. Burke, *A philosophical enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful*, Routledge, London 2009, part II, section VI.

³ I. Kant, *Analytic of the Sublime*, in Id., *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge Ma. 2000, pp. 128-159.

⁴ See on this M. Carboni, *Il sublime è ora*, Castelveccchi, Roma 2003.

this Twentieth century renaissance of the sublime, and to its meaning in today's context – hence the title of this issue, drawn from the famous statement by Barnett Newman “The sublime is now”, here formulated as a question: *Is the sublime now?*

Asking about the contemporary value of the sublime also means investigating how its interpretation is changing nowadays, in 2021, and what new forms has it taken. This involves a number of problems. On the one hand, one of the first critiques that has been raised with respect to contemporary uses of the sublime, for example, is that in all these cases the concept becomes too general and loses its original character⁵. On the other hand, faced with this objection, the most relevant move might be to respond by raising another question: why did so many contemporary thinkers feel the need to refer to the tradition of the sublime? Does this not mean that the concept itself has some features that continue to attract our interest, despite (or precisely through) its metamorphoses?

Such an issue arises from the editors' research on the living core of the sublime and its contemporary forms of existence and uses⁶. This involves an interdisciplinary work, at the intersection between philosophy, experimental psychology and neurosciences, bringing out a series of seminal issues that still seem to cross-cut disciplinary boundaries: What do humans seek today in the experience of the sublime? And what can this type of experience offer them? How can frightening and painful objects become a source of pleasure and attract people rather than scare them away⁷? Does the sublime still have the same name or is it referred to differently depending on the discipline and the domain of study?

This idea of a «sublime for the living» informs the opening paper of this issue, a philosophical dialogue in which Robert Clewis and Kathrine Cuccuru discuss «both the sublime's complex philosophical past and its emerging future in empirical research». The two questions are strictly connected since, in order to investigate the sublime empirically, it is necessary to first have a definition (or at least a description) of what the sublime is. Are there many kinds of sublime – the Burkean one, the Kantian one, the Schopenhauerian one etc. – or is there a unique type of experience that can be called “sublime”? In order for psychologists to do empirical research, it

⁵ For this type of objections see E. Garelli, *Introduzione*, in Id. (a cura di), *Il sublime e le arti*, in “CoSMo: Comparative Studies in Modernism”, 8 (Spring), 2016, pp. 7-26.

⁶ The editors are members of the international research group “The sublime: interdisciplinary perspectives”, directed by Maddalena Mazzocut-Mis. Among the projects that the group is carrying out, there are PROMETHEUS (Promoting Education of Scientific and Technological Societal Issues Through Sublime), funded by Cariplo, and “The origin of the sublime power in the brain: an integrated EEG-TMS study”, funded by the Bial Foundation. Among its most recent publications on the sublime: C. Rozzoni, E. Sejten (eds.), *Rivister le sublime*, Mimesis, Paris 2021. A. Chirico & A. Gaggioli (2021). *La profonda meraviglia: la psicologia dei momenti di eternità*. Milano: San Paolo.

⁷ See on this M. Mazzocut-Mis, *The Pleasure of Weeping: The Novelty of a Research*, in P. Giacomoni, N. Valentini, S. Dellantonio (eds.), *The Dark Side: Philosophical Reflections on the “Negative Emotions”*, Springer Nature Switzerland, 2021, pp. 159-175.

seems necessary to individuate at least some common features. Specifically, a first endeavor of philosophers and psychologists should be to identify common language, and an operational definition of the sublime and related constructs, such as awe. Through their collaboration, philosophy, psychology, and neurosciences can become more self-aware of their theoretical commitments and contribute to «improve our contemporary understanding» of the sublime.

The two following papers, by Laura Maillo and Giovanni Ferrario, both expressly address the main focus of this issue: what is the sublime today? What aspects of this concept can still be considered relevant and alive today? Where do we find the sublime now? Maillo's answer to these questions is an original and interesting one. Indeed, scholars have often discussed (as also Clewis and Cuccuru bring to mind in their paper) if the sublime is evoked more by nature or by art. Maillo goes beyond this distinction and analyzes an art practice – the butoh dance – that takes place in a natural and wild environment. The butoh dance is sublime because it puts dancers in relation with that which exceeds their identity, with nature intended as the infinite possibilities of living, and with death. Through this artistic practice, humans feel that they are one and the same with nature: «finalmente y, aunque Kant no lo aprobase, se trata de la consciencia de que no hay separación entre naturaleza y sujeto humano». This touches on one of the most interesting aspects of the sublime today, especially in its American interpretations: the relationship to nature and to the ecological problem⁸. For Kant, nature is an important trigger of the sublime but the focus remains on the subject (the subject's limits and the subject's infiniteness: the sublime is the experience and not the object)⁹. On the contrary, in these new interpretations of the sublime, the focus is rather on the “connectedness” with the environment that can be experienced in the sublime.

The example of the butoh dance also raises the seminal problem of whether or not is the sublime an intercultural experience. This question is unavoidable today, because our way of thinking is becoming more and more influenced by contact with other cultures and traditions. In this regard, Giovanni Ferrario's paper establishes a comparison between the sublime in Seventeenth century Europe and in Japanese poetry: both cases show that the sublime is often associated with vastness, but there can also be a sublime of the small things. In this way, Ferrario touches upon another seminal point that has often been discussed in relation to the sublime, i.e., whether the sublime is really distinct from the beautiful, or should we rather think of another form of beauty, one that is strictly connected to the sublime.

⁸ On this see at least E. Brady, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge Ma. 2013.

⁹ See on this S. Feloj, *Soggetti sublimi. Dell'impossibilità di una teoria oggettivistica del sublime*, in E. Garelli (a cura di), *Il sublime e le arti*, cit., pp. 63-75.

The rest of the issue delves into the recent history of the sublime, the one that took place, as noted above, in the second half of the Twentieth century. In her paper, Sarah Wilson examines a trip that the French philosopher Jean François Lyotard made to California together with the French painter Jacques Monory, in 1978. The works of Monory and the thoughts of Lyotard converge in expressing a feeling of stupor and melancholy when confronted with the new American world and the decline of European culture. Wilson focuses on the role technology can have in relation to the sublime. Another issue that the paper raises is whether irony can be a part of the sublime itself, as it seems to be in the extraordinary artworks and narratives that the paper examines.

Dario Cecchi's paper offers a different interpretation of the value of Lyotard's sublime today. He argues that the sublime character of art brings us face to face with the fact that every representation of the world is always «problematic» and «inadequate». This is particularly important today, in an age in which advertising tends to make every image into something absolute and idolatrous.

One of the main sources of Lyotard's interpretation of the sublime was, as it is well known, *The sublime is now*, written by the American painter Barnett Newman in 1949. If one goes back to this text, however, Newman's idea of the sublime appears to be quite different from that of his French interpreter. As Luisa Sampugnaro shows in her paper, what the painter had in mind was not so much, as for Lyotard, an impossibility of thought, but rather the richness of an instant, the instant of the encounter with the world, *before* every cognitive elaboration of it. This seems to be the sense of the well-known “now” that according to Newman constitutes the temporal dimension of the sublime.

Indeed, the sublime has always been related to the instant or the moment. In the Pseudo-Longinus text, the sublime is construed as a thunder that overwhelms the reader or the listener. Is this short moment, however, really a pure present (as Barnett Newman seems to think), or is it rather an intersection between different temporalities? This question arises from Sara Cirillo's paper, which investigates the features that the sublime holds in common with Walter Benjamin's dialectical image and with Marcel Proust's resurrection of the past.

In this way, the question of the sublime becomes connected to that of creativity, not only in art but also in thought. As Katlin Turai shows in her interpretation of Gilles Deleuze's sublime, it is the encounter with chaos or with the «raw material» that gives us the chance to free ourselves from our habitual ways of cognizing. «Yet», as the author lucidly points out, «the encounter with raw, indeterminate material, in itself, is not enough to go beyond a simple sense of being overwhelmed, – an exigent demand on the part of the thinker is necessary as well». Against this background, the sublime becomes what «forces us to think». From this point of view, Francesco Lesce also

elaborates on seminal Deleuzian insights in order to underscore the ways in which the contemporary sublime continues to have a strong connection to ethics. The sublime knows no appeasement, it puts a request before us, to which we should and can still listen in many ways.

The Varia section contains four papers. The first three investigate the border between philosophy and painting. Stefano Esengrini examines Giorgio Morandi's idea of painting, and the role that Paul Cézanne has in it. Rosanna Gangemi's text focuses on Günther Anders' interpretation of George Grosz. Elisabetta Mazzoni deals with the philosophical meaning of David Hockney's artistic production. Finally, the fourth contribution, by Amalia Salvestrini, transports us to the Middle Ages questioning San Bonaventura's notion of image.