

Terror and the Sublime in the So-Called Anthropocene

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The earthquake of Lisbon reached far enough to cure Voltaire of Leibniz's theodicy, and the visibly comprehensible [*überschaubare*] catastrophe of first nature was insignificant compared to that of the second, social one, which defies human imagination since it readied real hell from human evil.

—Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*

In a rapidly warming world, the room for any modernist theodicy is as rapidly disappearing. Climate science has made it plain what it would mean to let business as usual run its full course.

—Andreas Malm, *The Progress of this Storm*

In modern Western aesthetics, terror and the sublime go together. For canonical theorists and commentators of the eighteenth century, the sublime encounter with nature renders terror delightful, or at least enjoyable, through a “negative pleasure” variously derived. After the violence of mid-twentieth century, critical theorists of the sublime were more certain than ever about the involvement of terror, but some accounts of the negative pleasure did not survive the Second World War. Renewed reflection on the sublime after 1945 has clarified the social context and historical character of this aesthetic category. The feeling has changed, as modernity has unfolded, and as the relations and interactions between society and

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nature have come to impact planetary climate and ecology. There are, evidently, many kinds and qualities of terror; and different terrors, it seems, produce different sublimes. Today, in the so-called Anthropocene, a new planetary context of terror is emerging. While one contemporary philosopher reflects on “the sublime Anthropocene” (Williston), a cultural theorist writes about “the Anthropocene sublime” (Horn).¹ This paper engages with contemporary reflection on the sublime, in the context of socially driven climate chaos, toxification, and extinction. I review the history of the sublime in modern and contemporary aesthetics, explore the emerging context of terror today, and ask how this context may be shaping new aesthetic experiences of terror and the sublime.

Modernity’s Sublime

Two years after the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 and 32 years before the social eruptions of the French Revolution, the young Edmund Burke clearly articulated the vital connection between terror and the sublime. Whatever triggers or has to do with terror, Burke asserted, is a source of the feeling of the sublime, “the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling” (36). More complex than terror, the sublime is terror with added delight (43). Like pain and danger in general, terror can become delightful “when it does not press too close” (42). If terror does press too close, then delight is excluded. Some distance in time or space, some spectatorial security, then, renders terror enjoyable: the sublime delights because its full threat is mediated and experienced vicariously (36-37). Yet for all this, the sublime is not a funhouse, is no mere frisson. Burke retains the ancient accents on awe and elevation, because the threats and dangers that activate the sublime are “passions which belong to self-preservation” and are “the strongest of all the passions” (47). The powers of nature, Burke notes, act on us as “an irresistible force” that compels respect and astonishment (53). As a locus of energy, storm, and danger, for example, “the ocean is an object of no small terror” (54). Burke sums up the elements in the mix and the relations between them with a nice concision:

The passions which belong to self-preservation, turn on pain and danger; they are simply painful when their causes immediately affect us; they are delightful when we have an idea of pain and danger, without being actually in such circumstances; this delight I have not called pleasure, because it turns on pain, and because it is different enough from any idea of positive pleasure. Whatever excites this delight, I call sublime (47).

¹ I discuss these phrases and their authors below, toward the end of the text.

The element of terror, then, cannot be dispensed with. Indeed, Burke concluded, “terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently *the ruling principle of the sublime*” (54, my italics). No terror, no sublime.

In 1790, still feeling as it were the aftershocks of the Lisbon earthquake, Immanuel Kant reworked Burke’s conjectures into a new tale of terror banished and nature mastered. In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant famously detaches the sublime from nature and relocates it in “the ideas of reason” (99). Earthquakes, tsunamis, storms, and volcanic eruptions may excite “passions that belong to self-preservation,” as Burke put it, but such natural disasters are only sublime for Kant insofar as they lead us away from mere sensibility and toward the supersensible (and superior) ideas of reason. This move devalues “sensibility” (*Sinnlichkeit*) vis-à-vis reason (*Vernunft*); embodied knowledge, for Kant, may be involved in the sublime, but only rational knowledge deserves respect and admiration. Strictly speaking, then, nature may be threatening, but can never, for Kant, be sublime. He rewrites Burke’s “delight” as a “negative pleasure” (*negative Lust*) and breaks down the mixed feelings into a tight sequence of subjective moments (98). The sequence generates a plot, the protagonists of which are nature, the imagination, and human reason. First, the vast size or violent force of nature puts the imagination into painful crisis; this is the moment of terror and overpowering.² Then in a second moment, reason comes to the spectator’s rescue: reason recognizes itself as a power separate from and ostensibly superior to nature (106, 120-123). Reminded of the supersensible destiny of rational moral agency, the spectator recovers his dignity.³ In this philosophical story, what begins in pain and humiliation, as the puniness and vulnerability of the human body in nature is exposed, ends in satisfying self-admiration, as “reason reveals in us a superiority over nature” (120-121). Conveniently enough, Kant’s sublime lifts the rational modern subject right out of nature and “keeps the humanity in our person from being degraded” (121). The sublime tames, manages, we could even say intellectually administers, the awesome power, scale, and physical threat of nature, and asserts human entitlement to rational supremacy over the non-human – and over the non-rational, wherever it may appear, emphatically not excluding the human body itself.

Kant’s ruse of reason, in which the sublime is dematerialized in order to be reincorporated into the intellectual body of Enlightenment rationalism, has its

² The crisis of the imagination results from the subjective encounter with unboundedness. The imagination, being what it is, tries to capture the unbounded within a bounded image. When it is the size or magnitude of nature that leads the imagination to its limits, then Kant calls this the “mathematical sublime” (103-117); when it is nature’s power, in the sense of force or might (*Macht*, implying violence, *Gewalt*), that does so, then this is the “dynamic sublime” (119-126).

³ As Christine Battersby (2007) has shown, the modernist subject of the Kantian sublime is conceived as a European male. Riven with historical blind spots and biases, Kant’s moralizing aesthetics acknowledges human difference only to operate exclusions.

social context. In Kant's time, nature *qua* threat was exemplified by the Lisbon earthquake, a deadly natural disaster the shakes and shudders of which reverberated across modernizing Europe, setting loose anxieties deeply unsettling to Enlightenment meliorists (Ray, *Terror* 19-32).⁴ Before Kant, the philosophers had debated the relation between nature and society indirectly, through the screen of the problem of evil. The tendencies were either to take refuge in theodicy (Leibniz) – all for the best in the best of all possible worlds, God would not have made it otherwise – or else to adopt a resolute pessimism (Voltaire). Rationalizing the enjoyment of terror, Kant's modernist aesthetics becomes philosophical support for all social projects of modernization, including ecocidal engineering and the industrial exploitation of plants and animals. In the Kantian sublime, the threat that nature never ceases to pose to fantasies of human planetary mastery through reason, science, and enlightened techno-control is fended off, in rigorous argument if not in fact. Kant's three *Critiques* were thus a potent cultural medicine that quieted certain anxieties of the modern intellectual subject – and seemed effectively to defend the modern myths of automatic progress, as Theodor W. Adorno among others clearly saw.

Adorno's "after-Auschwitz" critique of Kant's sublime, as I read it, enacts three crucial displacements (Ray, *Terror*). First, Auschwitz, for Adorno, must be seen as a demonstration of genocidal powers and tendencies unfolding from within the integrating administrative techno-logics of modernity itself.⁵ After 1945, the terrors of global social processes came to eclipse the terrors of raw nature. If the Lisbon earthquake once shook the imagination to its core, what happened in the gas chambers shook it even more. Demonstrated for all to see and bodily absorb, and thereafter held in reserve, the genocidal powers of modern nation-states and corporations function actually and potentially, consciously and unconsciously, as threat – as the real arsenals of social control. Second, this threat is global. There is no longer any place or position of security, from which this spectacle of terror can safely be overseen and enjoyed. We are made to understand, in our minds and bodies, that this social threat includes us. Reason, in this situation, cannot come to the rescue. If rational critical reflection reveals anything, it is that all positions of relative advantage ultimately vanish before the new powers of violence and genocide. Even vast asymmetries of social power are reversible

⁴ Economic historian Alvaro S. Pereira (2006) calculates that the Lisbon earthquake, together with the resulting tsunami and fires, caused between 40,000 and 50,000 human deaths in Portugal, Spain, and Morocco, and economic damage equivalent to between 32 and 48 percent of Portugal's Gross Domestic Product.

⁵ Hiroshima names a power of genocide that is obviously different from the industrial murder of Auschwitz, and yet these two place names are also closely related in time, social context, and social logic. I argue elsewhere that a non-conflating articulation of these place-names is necessary, and that these two logics of terror and genocide must be thought together within the critical theory of modernity (Ray, *Terror* 161-162).

accidents of history, not guarantees of safety. Third, what “the ideas of reason” bring to mind after 1945 is not, therefore, the dignity and supremacy of reason, but rather its degradation and humiliation. Auschwitz, together with Hiroshima, announces the end of both mythical automatic progress and of the Kantian sublime: “No universal history leads from savagery to humanity, but one does lead from the slingshot to the mega-bomb” (Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* 320, translation modified). We can be in denial about this, of course, but Adorno is unequivocal: in the face of modernity’s actual history, reason’s rescuing moment fails to arrive. The after-Auschwitz sublime liquidates all its internal moments of enjoyment and ends, not in self-admiration, but in shame, shudder, and deeper subjective crisis. Even Auschwitz can be turned into a culture industry plaything, it must be admitted, but not without a disavowal that proves, let us say, unsustainable. For Adorno, only a hermetic and dissonant art can avow the social disaster through silence and negative presentation; the “shudder,” or disturbance, triggered by such art can be called sublime, but only so long as we realize that this ruined sublime is emptied of compensatory satisfactions (Ray, “On the Mattering” 17-22). Adorno shows us, then, that terror and the sublime are not static experiences. Historically produced and conditioned, the feeling of the sublime changes over time. In the glare of history, past sublime feelings may become impossible. But if Adorno analyzed the ruination of Kant’s modernist sublime, what happens now to Adorno’s after-Auschwitz, post-Hiroshima sublime, in the so-called Anthropocene?

Terror in the Wake of the Holocene

As is well known in 2020, the planet is rapidly leaving the relatively mild and stable climate of the Holocene, which has generally favored the emergence and development of human societies, as well as abundant biodiversity (Zalasiewicz et al.).⁶ Today, we are witnessing, and increasingly directly experiencing, planetary changes that may be called, with some irony but little exaggeration, a meltdown; these changes include, in addition to global heating: climate chaos, ocean acidification, ice melt and sea-level rise, globalized toxification, the collapse of ecological assemblages, and the mass extinction of species. These changes, as well as their causes and implications, are widely discussed and debated across the sciences and

⁶ Geologists define the Holocene as the epoch of geological time that began after the last glaciation, some 11,650 years ago. A Working Group of the International Commission on Stratigraphy’s Subcommittee on Quaternary Stratigraphy is, as of January 2019, still considering whether to grant the term “Anthropocene” formal status as a unit of the Geological Time Scale. The proposal under review would grant the Anthropocene status as an “epoch” within the Quaternary period, which would entail formally marking the end of the Holocene with a stratigraphic “golden spike” (Zalasiewicz et al.).

critical humanities under the term “Anthropocene.”⁷ As the qualifier “so-called” in title of this essay signals, the term has problems and has generated much debate, as well as numerous critical counter-terms. “Capitalocene,” proposed separately by Donna J. Haraway, Andreas Malm, and Jason W. Moore, is the counter-term that has gained the most traction in debates within the critical humanities; others include “Chthulucene” (Haraway), “Necrocene” (Justin McBrien), and “Anthroscene” (Jussi Parikka).⁸ Welcomed or not, the debates about the end of the Holocene will not be long evaded by any of us.

The planetary changes indicated above are unprecedented in human history, both quantitatively and qualitatively. They are already disastrous, and will become more so as the planet heats up further and sea levels rise higher. A 2012 study estimates that climate change already causes 400,000 human deaths each year, and that another 4.5 million deaths are caused annually by air pollution, cancers, and other hazards linked to the carbon-intensive global economy (McKinnon, et al. 18). By 2014, the number of annual climate refugees (averaged over the previous seven years) had already reached 26 million people per year, or one person every second, as reported by Walter Kälin of the Geneva-based Nansen Initiative (Geiser). Non-human climate refugees remain uncounted, but planetary transformations are already devastating many ecological assemblages, from forests of all kinds to coral reefs, and are permanently disappearing irreplaceable non-human life-forms and life-ways. Losses of wildlife abundance and biodiversity due to climate and other planetary changes have led many biologists to warn of the “Sixth Extinction” in Earth history (Dawson; Kolbert; Wilson).⁹ Destructive events indicative of climate chaos and planetary meltdown, including heat waves, droughts, wildfires, floods, and exceptionally strong storm seasons have of course also become the stuff of everyday news over the last four years. For humans and nonhumans alike, there will be no easy exit from the Holocene. There is ample justification, then, for speaking of terror in this context. It may seem that the terror accompanying planetary change belongs to the category of natural disasters or catastrophes, but a closer look will show that this is not the case.

The scientific literature on the so-called Anthropocene, including the much-cited five-year *Assessment Reports* of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, routinely speaks of “anthropogenic” (human caused) global warming and environmental change (IPCC). As critics have pointed out, to assign causal

⁷ Since the term was introduced in 2000, the literature about the Anthropocene has grown rapidly, and now exceeds the reading capacities of merely mortal researchers. References in this essay are necessarily selective, rather than comprehensive, and are focused on works I deem to bear helpfully on problems related to terror and the sublime.

⁸ On the debates about terminology, see Demos; Haraway; Malm; Moore. For commentary, see the “Glossary” of *The Anthropocene Atlas of Geneva* (Ray et al.).

⁹ There have been five mass extinction events in the earth’s history; the last one, some 65 million years ago, was the end of the dinosaurs.

responsibility to *anthropos*, mankind, or the human species in general, is scientifically meaningful but politically unhelpful and even deceiving (Malm and Hornborg). It would be far more politically relevant to know what specific social forms and processes are driving planetary meltdown. In fact, these forms and processes are well known: they are organized and directed by powerful social agencies, to the benefit of a powerful social minority.¹⁰ The greenhouse gases that are the main driver of global warming were historically and still are emitted into the atmosphere by the extraction and combustion of carbon-based energy (IPCC). The use of fossil energy is a socially decided and organized activity, not a law of the universe; it could cease tomorrow – and if it does not, the reasons are exclusively social.¹¹ Those reasons will not be found coded into our DNA; they are the results of social direction and of the conversion of past fossil combustion, including all the violence required to achieve it, into present social and political power (Bonneuil and Fressoz; Klein; Malm). The role of the capitalist economy in social direction, therefore, cannot be avoided in this context.

The causes of the shocking collapse of wild mammal, bird, fish, amphibian, insect, and plant populations are also no secret: disappearing wildlife and species extinction are driven by habitat destruction, overharvesting, and the introduction of new species into local ecological assemblages by design, travel, and the global economy – all exacerbated by the stresses of global heating and toxification (Jackson; Wilson). In 2016, well-known conservation biologist Edward O. Wilson warned: “all available evidence points to the same two conclusions. First, the Sixth Extinction is under way; and second, that human activity is its driving force” (55). Just one year later, the three co-authors of one scientific study felt compelled to describe the current situation as “biological annihilation via the ongoing sixth mass extinction” (Ceballos et al.). No one can know in advance how far this socially caused extinction event will go, but both the imagination and the rational mind are compelled to extrapolate. As anthropologist and critical theorist Elizabeth Povinelli puts it, the problem of “Nonlife” emerges unavoidably under the pressures of the so-called Anthropocene: in addition to the standard biopolitical problems of life and death, and of life and extinction, we now have to think and take into account the possibility that social forces and processes are returning the planet to a condition of no life at all (8-20). Those who can bear and tolerate the scales of geological time and geochemistry can be reassured in the knowledge that life has, at least once in the planet’s history, spontaneously self-organized and

¹⁰ Before public awareness of planetary meltdown, it could at least plausibly be argued that the dominant social agencies of urban-industrial modernity delivered substantial benefits to the majority of people, but the emerging situation renders dubious, if not already refutes, such political exonerations.

¹¹ To reflect this, among other ways, I qualify “Anthropocene” with a “so-called,” no matter what the geologists finally decide; and I use “socially caused” or “socially driven” in place of “anthropogenic.”

emerged out of Nonlife (Povinelli 44-46). Irony, an old critic noted, is notoriously difficult to verify.

The above indication of the social causes and challenging politics of planetary meltdown is cursory, but suffices to throw the novelty of terror at the end of the Holocene – and perhaps the endgame of modernity itself – into stark relief. Currently, anxieties about planet and extinction are entering mainstream politics in many countries, mixing with fury over decades of neo-liberal plunder, austerity, and impunity. However, the elites of Davos and other mediatized summits of global governance are refusing to discuss, let alone consider, any change to the organizing logics that determine the dominance of capitalist economy over politics, and the dismal interactions of both with planet and biosphere. This *social intransigence* intensifies terror as it approaches unknown social, as well as ecological, tipping points. For the dominant capitalist class of globalized contemporary society, the imbrication of capital accumulation and planetary meltdown represents a metabolic crisis with no clear solution. The only agreed on adaptation plan seems to favor the fortification of borders and increasing militarization. Climate and ecological crises now unfold in combination with spreading anti-austerity insurrections, driven by generalized social and economic precariousness and new extremes of wealth inequality. The resulting global drift toward more authoritarian forms of governance includes strong fascist accents (Ray, “Diasporas”). In 2017, Oxfam found that wealth inequalities had grown so extreme that the eight richest men in the world owned as much wealth as the poorest half of humanity, some 3.6 billion people (Hardoon). The socially most vulnerable are also those most exposed to climate chaos. At the end of the Holocene, social intransigence is no guarantee against social volatility: old social terrors are today’s returning repressed.

The political impasses, which emerge promptly once the issues of power and economy are no longer avoided, are part of the terror and belong to its experience. Social terror had already become global by 1945, as seen above, in Adorno’s re-writing of the Kantian sublime. But the subjects of modernized society could still think they had succeeded in keeping terror at bay, if there were no new genocidal relapses to Auschwitz or Hiroshima. In the so-called Anthropocene, however, we are forced to face a further turn, another permutation of terror: now, merely the everyday business-as-usual of modernity, if continued, will carry life on our planet over a cliff. An earth warmed three or four or six degrees Celsius would be a radically unknowable disaster, one that appears “visibly comprehensible” only in the projected mastery fantasies of the geo-engineers, which offer to the strongholds of intransigence their needed path of political least resistance. But science and technology development do not escape the social force field, and for this very reason are not free to deliver salvation from social antagonisms and ecological fallout. Society can save itself only by changing itself, radically and quickly enough. In 2019, society is altering the course of evolution without precaution or

respect. Both the global public at large and the directors and beneficiaries of the global economy know what capitalist modernity is doing; no one today can plausibly claim much ignorance. Avoidance, denial, disavowal, addiction to modernity and its lifestyles, and other psychological patterns may be symptomatic but are still social facts. At this time at least, the imperatives of growth and accumulation grip and control social subjects more effectively than the strongest of Burke's "passions of self-preservation." Society's heedless collision with the nature that fostered and supported it is now an uncontrolled wreck. Capitalist modernity still names the global social process today; "eco-genocide" names its wanton violence.¹²

The Persistence of Nature

Modernity's impacts on the planet and its life forms are shaping new experiences of terror. But as isotherms and climates migrate and living localities are increasingly disturbed and displaced, how are the meanings of planet and nature affected? The intellectual and emotional pressures of the so-called Anthropocene are stimulating a deep reconsideration of given assumptions across the critical humanities, social sciences, and the arts, if not yet in the boardrooms of power and corridors of governance. By many approaches and with diverse results, scholars and artists are struggling with the findings of the earth sciences and are rethinking the categories of human and non-human, nature and the social, bios and geos. Indeed, numerous thinkers in the sciences and critical humanities have felt justified in jettisoning the whole of category of nature.¹³ The arguments are various and contentious, reflect deep differences with regard to metaphysics and epistemology, and often abound in technical subtleties. One simple claim, however, recurs frequently enough to indicate a new common sense: since there is no place on the planet that is not now impacted and altered by human activities, we can conclude that nature has disappeared into the social. The time has come, therefore, to dispense with the category, or sometimes the idea, of nature as something separated or analytically distinct from society. For many thinkers, one meaning of the Anthropocene is that the old nature/culture binary has become passé.

Andreas Malm sets out to repudiate this tendency in *The Progress of this Storm* (2018), a book that takes to task many of the academic stars of Anthropocene studies, from Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour to Rosi Braidotti and Jane Bennett. Malm sees "the theoretical obliteration of nature" as a continuation of post-structuralist and postmodernist trends in thinking, which for him align with capital's subsumption of nature under the law of value: "Only in a society that strives

¹² I lay out my reasons for favoring these terms in "Writing the Ecocide-Genocide Knot" and "Resisting Extinction."

¹³ Not to mention the category of the human. For some contours of the discourse on the loss, obsolescence, or social construction of nature and the corresponding emergence of the posthuman, see Braidotti; Latour, *Politics*; Morton; Purdy.

to turn every bit of nature into profit can the idea that nature has no independent existence take root" (217). This reductive characterization of contemporary critical thinking leads Malm to reject too much, and with too many contextual blind spots.¹⁴ I do not follow Malm in his blanket rejection of contemporary reaches beyond anthropocentrism.¹⁵ While his call for a politics of "no extraction, no emissions" (227) is urgently necessary, in this work at least Malm's militancy skips too easily around the contemporary political impasse – the problem I have called political intransigence.¹⁶

However, Malm's case for retaining the analytic category of nature is more compelling. The argument unfolds across the first three chapters, and leans often on philosopher Kate Soper (27-28). Society, Malm points out, initiated global warming by the combustion of fossilized carbon, but the planet is heating only because biochemical laws independent of society already exist and operate (73-77). What happens when carbon dioxide is released to mix with the air and the oceans is not changed in the slightest by human activities, even if the temperature of the air and acidity of the oceans is changed by them. Malm quotes Alf Hornborg to underscore the point: "Human societies have transformed planetary carbon cycles, but not the carbon atoms themselves" (p. 62). If the natural processes had ceased to operate, except at the pleasure of humans, then the planet would not now be exiting the Holocene. Planetary meltdown thus confirms the persistence of nature, not its disappearance into society. While our experiences of nature are social, then, the nature we experience ultimately is not. Society and nature change, and the relation between them changes, but nature does not disappear, does not become identical to society.

¹⁴ One glaring blind spot is Malm's failure to see or acknowledge the importance of Indigenous struggles against new state and corporate land grabs, extractive infrastructure projects, and other forms of modernist neo-invasion. Even in the struggles against tar sands oil and fracked gas pipelines in North America, Malm can see only see the faces of 350.org (174-175). As a result, he misses the challenge Indigenous resurgence is composing to modernist epistemology, law, and contemporary governance. This challenge is radical, as it exposes foundational illegitimacies of settler colonial nation-states and capitalist modernity in general.

¹⁵ Malm, citing the work of Kate Soper, thinks all reaches beyond anthropocentrism are mere performative contradiction, since they necessarily involve speech acts addressed to humans above all other species (114-118). Sure, and no one needs to read *Dialectic of Enlightenment* any more, either, since Jürgen Habermas dismissed the book with a similarly flippant gesture.

¹⁶ Malm boldly calls for "the total expropriation of the top one to ten percent," in order to "eliminate up to half of all emissions in one fell blow and finance a global transition several times over" (190). Aside from a slogan or two – "Less of Latour, more of Lenin" (118) – he fails to indicate here how this "one fell swoop" might actually be collectively organized and survived. However, elsewhere ("Revolution") Malm provides a better discussion of problems of political strategy and agency in relation to planetary meltdown.

Malm does not question or problematize the notions of science and “realism” that ground his argument, either epistemologically or politically. Within the frame of climate science, Malm’s case is a strong one. But playing the scientists off against the postmodernists is not critical enough. The modernist science at the alarms today is also historically implicated in pushing the planet beyond Holocene parameters – and tomorrow will be called on to support the geo-engineers. Given that planetary meltdown is exclusively modernity’s byproduct, it is more than appropriate to question all modernist dogmas and to be wary of reproducing 500 years of elimination and erasure of alternative epistemologies and cosmologies. Indigenous science, seeking technics of kindred mutuality rather than domination, does not have this “nature” problem. Modernist science, deeply entangled with capital and nation-state, remains part of the problem so long as it insists it is the only valid way of knowing the world. Just such an insistence seems to belong to Malm’s “realism.” Despite his apparent rejection of “modernist theodicy” (229), Malm declines to think beyond modernity.¹⁷ In any case, here is a certainty: nature as we moderns have experienced, lived, imagined, and thought about it will now be experienced and lived differently, which in turn will alter our imagination and thinking. The nature of the Holocene is gone, but another nature no less natural is taking its place. On this point modern and Indigenous scientists could probably concur.¹⁸ Moreover, cultural misrecognitions of nature are social errors that in the long run will be corrected for us. It is more likely that nature will reabsorb society, than that modernity will realize its supremacist ambitions to banish nature by controlling it, or by eternally correcting for unintended consequences.

The terror of extinction events and a possible planetary return to Nonlife colors the moods and anxieties of late modernity. Malm concludes, with Walter Benjamin, that the liberation of nature entails the liberation of society and that both would be necessary to any revolutionary program: “Other species, too, await our liberation” (190). Embracing the negativity of Frankfurt School catastrophism, Malm suggests that global warming “deserves a place, again *mutatis mutandis*, similar to that of Auschwitz in the writings of Adorno: as a catastrophe in which society as a whole discharges itself” (223). In Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics*, nature and society are a dialectical pair forming a determinate unity – “mutual, non-identical mediators,” in the nice phrase of Susan Buck-Morss (118). But the

¹⁷ Apparently, since the strange “as” in the sentence cited in the epigraph to this essay introduces some ambiguity: “In a rapidly warming world, the room for any modernist theodicy is *as* rapidly disappearing” (229, my italics). As I can find no clear referent for it in the preceding sentences, I assume it is an editing error.

¹⁸ “The Air is not the same anymore. The Water is not the same anymore. The Earth is not the same anymore. The Clouds are not the same anymore. The Rain is not the same anymore. The Trees, the Plants, the Animals, Birds, Fish, Insects and all the others are not the same anymore” (Indigenous Elders and Medicine Peoples Council).

determinate unity wrecks on the dying reefs of a melting planet. As I read Adorno from the vantage of 2019, in the mutual shaping of nature and society, nature has predominance over society, just as society, for Adorno, has predominance over the subject (*Negative Dialectics*, p. 126). Adorno rejected today's new animisms and vibrant materialisms *avant la lettre*; the liberation of nature, he thought, will not take place under "the pantheistic subterfuge," but only by the real reconciliation of society liberated from domination (*Aesthetic Theory*, p. 87). But this feels more and more to me like overreach – a conceit of critical theory. Nature, it is now emerging, is quite capable of liberating herself.

The Anthropocene Sublime, So-Called

Between Adorno's death in 1969 and the emergence of public awareness about planetary meltdown in the twenty-first century, there were two notable revivals of interest in the sublime in the critical humanities. The first roughly coincided with a peak in awareness about Auschwitz in the 1980s, and indeed with the transformation of that name into an increasingly instrumentalized academic, cultural, and political fetish (Finkelstein; Ray, *Terror*). At that time, philosopher Jean-François Lyotard pushed thinking about the sublime further along the lines of negative presentation set down by Adorno; with Lyotard, the sublime becomes a cipher for the "unpresentable." The sublime, as Lyotard reformulates it, is now "the event of a passion, of a passibility for which the mind will not have been prepared, which will have unsettled it, and of which it conserves only the feeling – anguish and jubilation – of an obscure debt" (141). Auschwitz is still the major historical referent here, although Adorno's account of the social catastrophe, in which the Nazi genocide was strongly linked to capitalist modernity, becomes diluted in the postmodernist turn. "Jubilation" reappears. The sublime *qua* unpresentable continued to exert a pull of academic attraction well into the 1990s (see *inter alia*, Nancy et al.). In 1993, Paul Gilroy confronted this postmodernist sublime with the historical "complicity of racialized reason and white supremacist terror" (x, 39) that haunts modernity and its claims to enlightenment. The violence and trauma of the slave trade and plantation system is approachable indirectly in art and music, Gilroy argues, through what he names the "slave sublime" (37-39, 213-223). A second revival of interest in the sublime was stimulated by the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon and the subsequent launch of the still-ongoing, US-led so-called war on terror. These events blew up, among other things, the alignment of neoliberal economic globalization and *post-histoire* intellectual resuscitations of mythical automatic progress. Reflections on the sublime refocused strongly on the social terror of history and on the sublime's proximity to trauma, on the one hand, and, on the other, dissolved "the sublime" into a plurality of sublimes, each describing the exposures of particular times, places, and subjective positioning (Battersby; Morley; Ray, *Terror*; White

and Pajaczkowska). Fully opened to the entanglements of history and the social dimensions of terror and trauma, the sublime at the beginning of the twenty-first century seemed to become a flexible category, available to name a range of emotional or passionate intensities triggered by encounters with any kind of overwhelming event or object – any aesthetic experience or traumatic missed experience in which the subject is brought to some threshold of representation or self-representation (Ray, “Hits”).

The new situation of planetary ecological meltdown was quickly reflected in thinking on the sublime, even as the newly coined term “Anthropocene” was beginning its rapid spread through the earth sciences and, from there, to the social sciences, critical humanities, and even popular culture, gathering momentum with each new five-year *Assessment Report* of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. In 2007, political philosopher Jane Bennett was speaking of “an ecological sublime,” in connection with political ecology and the art of Cornelia Parker. In that talk, one year before the publication of her much-discussed *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett hoped “to open a conduit of contagion” between subjective experience and “thing-power,” her name for “the queer vibrancy of allegedly ‘inanimate’ or ‘inorganic’ matter” (34, 25). At the same 2007 conference at Tate Britain, critical theorist Esther Leslie also took up the term “ecological sublime,” in a wonderful reflection on ice, nature, technology, and the comic character Little Nemo (49). Notions of the sublime had also long hovered near the after-images of Hiroshima. Already in the 1990s, the “nuclear sublime” was a well-established critical way-point for approaching mushroom clouds and nuclear fallout, released by the blasting of war-machines as well as through disastrous accidents such as Chernobyl (1986) and Fukushima (2011) (see Schwenger; O’Brian). The rain of radiation that has fallen over the planet since 1945 is of course a stratigraphic marker of the so-called Anthropocene, and by the time the geologists conclude their discussions, may become the “golden spike” that formally marks the end of the Holocene in the geological record (University of Leicester). I merely emphasize that radiation, in its deadly invisibility, is an exemplary instance of the social terror of globalized toxification. In 2015, Nicholas Shapiro proposed “chemical sublime,” as a term for the accumulation of “small corrosive happenings” in “late industrial” everyday life, “which elevates minor enfeebling encounters into events that stir ethical consideration and potential intervention.” Not all toxins, of course, are so mildly stirring. In a 2011 lecture, Bruno Latour asserted that the sublime is no longer possible in the epoch of climate change: “We realize that the sublime has evaporated as soon as we are no longer taken as those puny humans overpowered by ‘nature’ but, on the contrary, as a collective *giant* that, in terms of terra-watts, has scaled up so much that it has become the main geological force shaping the earth” (“Waiting,” p. 2). Moreover, feelings of guilt “about having committed [climate] crimes for which we feel no responsibility” complicate the Kantian correspondence between the starry skies above us and moral law within us (“Waiting,” p. 4). Latour

has perceived that the name of the sublime is again at stake today. But his invocation of the Romantic sublime inspired by Kant takes no account of the shifting history of this aesthetic category, summarized above. Skipping too fast from Shelley's poetry to our end-Holocene dilemmas, Latour misses the long accumulating wounds and scars of social terror that have come to saturate, inflect, and transform the sublime.¹⁹

As the Anthropocene debates unfold, two divergent approaches to the sublime have emerged. One dismisses it; the other looks, as Adorno did, for whatever fragments of truth content might still be found in its ruins. Exemplary of the dismissalists is T.J. Demos, whose *Against the Anthropocene* (2017) advances a cogent criticism of the photography of Edward Burtynsky. Burtynsky's images are monumental god's-eye views of landscapes in transformation; they show us a world dramatically altered, but the violence of that alteration does not disturb. Instead, it disappears into the fascinating spells of the visual patterns and divine perspective, while at the same time leaving the impression that the big picture has been visibly comprehended. They give us, in other words, the enjoyable terror of the old sublime, which today is a political deception. "The problem is that such images tend to naturalize petrocapiatalism, with a mesmerizing imaging machine in thrall to compositional and chromatic elements of the very framework responsible for our environmental destruction" (Demos *Against* 65).²⁰ The other approach, rescuing critique, can be read in a 2016 paper by philosopher Byron Williston, entitled "The Sublime Anthropocene." Salvaging the category of the "formless" from Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, Williston argues that sublime encounters with formless nature today stimulate not so much rationalist self-admiration as "a self-critical stance" regarding the human place in nature.²¹

Clearly, the ground was prepared for "the Anthropocene sublime" to make an appearance in the discussions and literature; indeed it was in the air, as were other traces and toxins of modernity. And the phrase does in fact appear, neatly deployed by cultural theorist Eva Horn, as the title for a short discussion of the

¹⁹ The same omission disqualifies Jedediah Purdy's gloss on the sublime (252-253).

²⁰ More recently, writing about John Akomfrah's 2015 three-channel video installation *Vertigo Sea*, Demos allows that some artists can do more "than repeat familiar constructions of the sublime." Akomfrah's video, Demos justly notes, "updates [the sublime's] logic within our own cultural-geological present" ("On Terror"). The argument unfortunately does not go much further.

²¹ The quoted phrase is from Williston's online abstract: "In the Anthropocene, humanity has been forced to a self-critical reflection on its place in the natural order. A neglected tool for understanding this is the sublime. Sublime experience opens us up to encounters with 'formless' nature at the same time as we recognize the inevitability of imprinting our purposes on nature. In other words, it is constituted by just the sort of self-critical stance towards our place in nature that I identify as the hallmark of the Anthropocene 'collision' between human and earth histories."

photographic work of artist Justin Guariglia, published in the catalog to a 2017 exhibition called *After Nature* and posted on the artist's website. With an obligatory nod to Timothy Morton's notion of the "hyperobject," Horn defends the sublime as an artistic strategy for producing "bodies of evidence," in a planetary situation the scales and abstractions of which defy traditional representation:

With the awareness of living in a damaged world, art can no longer rely on the representation or imagination of a world "out there," of nature as the object of aesthetic reflection. Yet a nature that is no longer natural is in dire need of being brought to our senses, set before our eyes. While the massive environmental crisis of the Anthropocene may be a hyperobject that defies direct representation, it paradoxically calls for the creation of evidence, of perceptibility, of documents – the renderings of a fleeting world. What is needed are bodies of evidence for a transformation that is both so massive and so tiny, that is happening so fast and so slowly that no image or narrative can ever grasp its breadth. How can we start to sense what we only know abstractly? Producing such bodies of evidence seems like an impossibility – and at the same time, more necessary than ever (Horn).

Neither Adorno nor Lyotard are named, but a notion of negative presentation is nicely operating here. Horn's attempt to rescue the artist along with the sublime is less convincing. Guariglia's monumental aerial photography would seem to be open to the same criticisms Demos brings against Burtynsky's. But according to Horn, Guariglia's monochromatic images effectively combine the view from afar with "sharp detail, and a complex, tactile surface." Successfully "conflating distance and immediacy," Guariglia's work is able to "point out the violence done to nature not only by the human impact and landscapes and climates but also epistemically by a distanced, objectifying approach to natural things" (Horn). The clash of scales, Horn claims, delivers the "emotional shock" and "rational reflection" of the old (Kantian) sublime, but is given added "epistemic and affective twist attuned to the de-naturalized nature in the Anthropocene." I am unable to respond to these images in this way. Granted, I am looking at digital images online, rather than standing before monumental gallery prints, but for me they carry no force of disturbance. They read too much like witty allusions to monochrome ab-ex painting.²²

I end by returning to a photographic image that does disturb and haunt me: Chris Jordan's *CF000478*, from the series "Midway: Message from the Gyre" (2009). The image documents the death scene of a nestling Laysan albatross on Midway, a remote atoll near the plastic soup of the North Pacific Subtropical Gyre. The fist of plastic flotsam that filled the bird's stomach emerges luridly, obscenely, into view, as the carcass decays and peels away around it. The vantage

²² I have already registered my objections to a notion of "de-naturalized nature."

offered is emphatically not one of sublime mastery; the lens is forensic and intimate – near enough to this singular death for the viewer’s nose to fill with memories of what a carcass by the sea smells like. After delivering its punch to the guts, the image yields to reflection and interpretation. It constellates and condenses, rather than conflates, the abstractions evoked by negative presentation: the dissonant temporal scales (the intimate, bounded time of individual mortality; the evolutionary time of a species superbly adapted to its oceanic ecological assemblage; the geo-time of extinction events; the chemical time of indestructible plastic) and colliding natural and social processes (the conversion of solar energy into oceanic currents and climate systems; the continuous biochemical shaping of the conditions for life; plankton, coral, and atoll formation; modernization and capital accumulation; the settler colonial invasion of the Pacific; the globalization of carbon economy and commodity production; the invention and accumulation of plastic). Each time and process unfolds rigorously from the image, as distinct and as sharply delineated as the visual difference between the organic remains of the carcass and the colorful self-assertion of the plastic. Each grinds away at the others, refusing harmony, unity, or reconciliation. Whether or not this plastic starved this individual bird, or merely added stresses to the other factors that killed it, we can see that petrochemical overproduction grows and accumulates as a force of death within the bodies of life. The plastic reveals itself as social fact and symptom. This image, which does not let me go, comes close to the sublime “bodies of evidence” that Horn concisely describes: evidence rendered into image, necessary and impossible, of a fleeting world. The radical reduction of wildlife by social violence now underway is exposed, not as visually comprehensible disaster, but as anguish without jubilation. This image of social terror moves, but unenjoyably. It points to what the ruins of the sublime might still offer to embodied knowledge and insight today.

Conclusion

This essay has elaborated the specificity of social terror in the so-called Anthropocene, in order to query the possibilities of the sublime under pressures of planetary meltdown. The discussion has considered some works of contemporary photography, but the implications would be similar for works of cinema and other visual artistic media. “Artworks,” Adorno wrote, “exercise a practical effect, if they do so at all, not by haranguing but by the scarcely apprehensible transformation of consciousness” (*Aesthetic Theory*, p. 243). The mediated immediacy of works that strangle the pleasures of semblance and spectatorship, he argued, triggers a sublime shudder. This shudder is “an involuntary comportment”; a “memento of the liquidation of the I, which, shaken, perceives its own limitedness and finitude.” (*Aesthetic Theory*, p. 245). It remains unclear to me, what kinds of subjective transformation actually follow such shudders, and with what political

consequences. Nor do I know, or much care, if Adorno would consider Jordan's *CF000478* a valid work of autonomous art. This image, I can say, made me shudder in ways I am still trying to understand and respect. If the sublime is a socially mediated subjective response, then perhaps such shudders can support other modes of urgent embodied knowing, thinking, and feeling today. They at least can be shared and offered for collective interpretation, as the subjects of a global social process run amok ponder the available paths of mutual self-preservation. The predisposition to any such shudder, or any other quality of response to nature or art, is social: an accident of culture, history, and position. Granted, in each human body the borders between nature and the social are somewhat open and unenforceable; but nature does not disappear before the dilemmas of psycho-soma. Self-preservation, too, will be socially and collectively pursued, if at all. But if, instead, the sublime is a direct effect of thing-power on subjects, like the actions of a toxin on the cells of a body, then there is little to be done beyond seeking out medicine, magic, or less harmful "lifestyles." The sublime, I hold, must be understood as a socially mediated and variable subjective response. As far as my own shudders inform me, sublime encounters can still occur, here and there, unpredictably, more or less. Approaching this possibility, I have tried the way of rescuing critique, one finger in the wound, hooked like a question mark.

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