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Wittingslow, Ryan Mitchell

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Effing the Ineffable: The Sublime in Postphenomenology

Ryan Wittingslow

Abstract: Motivating this article is an interest in how postphenomenological technical relations participate in aesthetic experiences. Introducing aesthetic experience into our analyses of technical relations allows us to better tease apart the distinction between our relationship with the artefact, and how we experience that relationship. However, the sublime poses a unique set of complications for postphenomenologists. Thanks to the overwhelming qualities of the sublime, it is unclear where sublimity fits within the Ihdean relational taxonomy—or indeed, if it can at all, given that sublime experience would in principle overwhelm and dissolve the extant relation. This article resolves this apparent tension, and offers an accounts of how sublime experience is able to be reconciled with Ihdean postphenomenology.

Key words: philosophy of technology, postphenomenology, aesthetics, sublime

1. Introduction

Motivating this article is an interest in how postphenomenological relations participate in aesthetic experiences: experiences that we might normally (and non-exhaustively) describe as categorically ‘beautiful’; ‘tragic,’ ‘comic,’ or ‘interesting’ (Chandler 1921); ‘zany’ or ‘cute’ (Ngai 2010); ‘grotesque’ (Kieran 1997); ‘authentic’ (Wittingslow forthcoming); or, as concerns this article, ‘sublime.’ Further motivation lies in the observation that, even within the broad church of postphenomenology, there is an almost-complete absence of any discussion of aesthetic experience within the context of technical relations.

I believe that introducing aesthetic experience into our analyses of technical relations allows us to better tease apart the distinction between our relationship with a given artefact or system, and how we experience that relationship. This

approach helps us more completely describe our relationships with things in the world. However, whereas all of the named aesthetic categories come with their own sets of moving parts and pose their own fair share of problems with respect to where they ‘fit’ within postphenomenological taxonomies, the sublime poses a unique set of complications for postphenomenologists. These complications, moreover, are not simply premised upon the difficulties inherent in reflecting on the ineffable.

The sublime describes a certain kind of raw, unmediated experience that exceeds our capacity to make sense of it. As a consequence, it is unclear where sublimity fits within any existing Ihdean or post-Ihdean relational taxonomy—or indeed, if it can at all, given that sublime experience would in principle overwhelm and dissolve the extant relation. This strikes me as problematic, given that the power and robustness afforded to us by postphenomenological taxonomies is premised upon their capacity to characterise potentially any given human-artefact or human-system relation.

In attempting to resolve this problem—or, attempting to eff the ineffable—I have divided this article into three parts. The first is a necessarily brief outline of the Kantian sublime. Although this picture is obviously incomplete, it ought to clarify and summarise what I take to be the most significant features of Kantian sublimity: namely, the mathematical and dynamical sublime as distinct sublime ‘modes.’ The second part of the article is my attempt to reconcile this Kantian picture with Husserlian phenomenology, via the work of Ruud Welten. Finally, in the third and concluding part of the article I propose a means by which it is possible to reconcile the twin modes of Kantian sublimity with postphenomenology. In particular, I make clear how we can make sense of the Kantian sublime with respect to Don Ihde’s now-conventional taxonomy of embodied, hermeneutic, background, and alterity relations.¹

2. Background Concepts

In order to put all my ducks in a row, I will do two things. First, I will outline the key features of Kantian sublime, particularly as it manifests in its ‘mathematical’ and ‘dynamical’ modes. I argue that each mode is subject to a distinct postphenomenological apparatus. Second, I will briefly outline the most significant ‘technical relations’ posed under Ihdean postphenomenology. In so doing, I refer specifically to Ihde’s original four technical relations.² These background concepts serve as the bedrock for my subsequent analysis.

2.1. The Kantian Sublime

Before I begin, a note on some of my choices here. While I am using Immanuel Kant's machinery in this instance—and although I am, broadly speaking, a Kantian about the sublime—I do not believe his description of the sublime to be conclusive. Indeed, I think that there is a great deal of value not only in scholarship that extends Kant's story, particularly in the case of the literature surrounding what is called the 'technological sublime' (cf. Miller 1965; Nye 1994; Kasson 1999; Marx 2000, among others), but also non-Kantian contenders to the sublime, as in the cases of Johann Gottfried Herder (1800), Arthur Schopenhauer (2010), Rudolf Otto (1968), or Jean-François Lyotard (1994). Nonetheless, I begin this enterprise with the Kantian sublime for the simple reason that it is the description of the sublime that has attracted the most scholarly attention and, as a consequence, is the description of the sublime that is (one hopes) best understood by the broadest scholarly population. Even though a given reader may disagree with either the Kantian assumptions underpinning this exercise or the Husserlian mechanisms by which I argue sublime experiences manifest, I hope that this analysis will assist in helping others discuss both sublime experience specifically, and aesthetic experience more generally, using the conceptual machinery of postphenomenology.

In his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Edmund Burke claims that sublimity and beauty are subject to two distinct causal apparatuses; translated into an Aristotelian register, they have quite different formal, material, efficient, and final causes. This is in contrast to earlier claims that the sublime is a sub-class or kind of beauty; for Burke it is another category of experience entirely. Instead of beauty being a matter of bombast and passion, as Longinus described, Burke leaves it denuded: something that is beautiful is simply that which is well-formed and aesthetically pleasing. This is not to say that beauty is a neoclassical matter of expressing the correct formal properties. Instead, beauty in a Burkean sense is causally motivated by the passion of love: "We ought, therefore, to consider attentively in what manner those sensible qualities are disposed, in such things as by experience we find beautiful, or which excite in us the passion of love, or some correspondent affection" (Burke 1889, 1:131–32). The sublime, meanwhile, is causally motivated by the passions of fear or astonishment; we perceive things as sublime due to their purported capacity to destroy us. This acknowledgement of our smallness in the face of God's immense power and majesty is itself profoundly pleasurable: we take delight in our own horrifying circumstances. He writes:

If we rejoice, we rejoice with trembling; and even whilst we are receiving benefits, we cannot but shudder at a power which can confer benefits of such mighty importance. When the prophet David contemplated the wonders of wisdom and power which are displayed in the economy of man, he seems to be struck with a sort of divine horror, and cries out, how fearfully and wonderfully am I made! (Burke 1889, 1:97–98)

Although Burke's characterisation of the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime proved influential, it is Immanuel Kant's response to Burke that is better known. Burke, claimed Kant, did not pose any serious answers to the question of sublimity and the pleasure we derive from it: "To make psychological observations, as Burke did in his treatise on the beautiful and the sublime, . . . is probably the sole true duty of empirical psychology, which can hardly even aspire to rank as a philosophical science." Indeed, Burke's work lacks any genuine understanding of the "systematic connection of empirical rules" that characterise *real* philosophy (Kant 1965, 146). Contra Burke's submission that sublimity was motivated by terror, Kant was of the view that terror was a symptom of sublimity, not a cause. In *The Critique of Judgement*, Kant describes sublimity as an experience that somehow exceeds our capacity to parse it: "the mere capacity of thinking which evidences a faculty of mind transcending every standard of sense" (1969, 97–98).

Kant argues that these experiences can exceed our sensible capacities in two distinct, but non-exclusive, manners: size and power. I will enumerate these in turn.

1. The sublimity of size is what Kant refers to as 'mathematical' sublimity: it is the awed gasp one involuntarily voices when seeing the Grand Canyon for the first time, or the terrified gratitude one experiences looking at the Earth from space. It is a tacit reminder of the insignificance of the human scale by virtue of the fact that something like enormous distance, size or length becomes both conceivable and unable to be experienced. That is to say: although it is possible for me to conceive of the numerical relationship between parts in the case of vast physical scales (say, the distance between a space station and the Earth), it is impossible for me to experience that relationship between parts; my sensorium is too limited and too imperfect to ever grasp the limits of those scales.
2. The second kind of sublimity—what Kant calls the 'dynamical' sublime—is the measure by which people are able to take disturbed pleasure in vast displays of power. It is clearly differentiated from mere fear; as

Kant writes, “it is impossible to take delight in terror that is seriously entertained” (1969, 91). Instead, it is a consideration of vast power from a distant vantage point. Because our “power of resistance” is “trifling” in comparison with its might, and because we are incapable of subjecting ourselves to the full sensory plenary of the phenomenon whilst still retaining some sense of self, we individuate in the face of that immeasurableness: “[it] gives us courage to be able to measure ourselves against the seeming omnipotence of nature” (1969, 111). Consider Rainer Maria Rilke in *The Duino Elegies*: “For beauty is nothing / but the beginning of terror, which we are still just able to endure, / and we are so awed because it serenely disdains / to annihilate us.” (2014, 3)

In response to the boundlessness of these experiences, whether dynamical or mathematical, Kant’s sublimity describes the condition of the experiencing subject. His sublime denotes a disinterest combined with a sense of imminent dissolution; of possible and complete physical destruction at the hands of forces utterly beyond our ken or control. The enormity of an event we call sublime demonstrates the inadequacy of our senses, while at the same time making clear to us the superiority of our cognitive capacities. For Kant, it is the realisation of this ‘supersensible substrate’ that is the location of true sublimity: it is the affirmation of one’s own selfhood amidst an experience of excess. Unlike Burke’s reading, which has the sublime inherent to the world itself, in Kant the sublime refers only to the elevated, intellectual pleasures one feels when one affirms the power of the mind in response to overwhelming circumstances. Although we are inherently unable to take full stock of what is being experienced, we are able to identify it; and thus we experience joy and power in the process of individuation. To experience the sublime is to experience yourself as a discrete, intelligent being. We also find these sentiments implicit in the art, architecture, and literature of the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. From Caspar David Friedrich’s *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer*, to the giddy arches of Gothic Revival cathedrals, to the marine violence of J. M. Turner’s landscapes, we find everywhere this obsession with space, scale, size, and power: of being something very small, existing entirely at the discretion of a vast and indifferent universe.

2.2. Technical Relations

Within the context of postphenomenology, ‘technical relations’ refer to the classes of possible interactions that we can have with the world and the objects that constitute it. These interactions should not only be understood in terms of the material

and cognitive affordances they provide (cf. Gibson 2013, 119), but also in terms of how technical objects, by virtue of offering these affordances, also help constitute the behaviours, capabilities, and attitudes of human users: what we can describe more generally as ‘human-technology relations.’ By example: wearing eyeglasses not only affords the capacity for improved eyesight, it also materially influences the behaviour and physical constitution of users. Similarly, a handgun not only affords the capacity to shoot other people; it, by virtue of granting the affordance, also makes users far more likely to shoot other people (or themselves). In so doing, technical objects both mediate, and are mediated by, human users. One cannot separate artefacts from use, nor can we separate humans from those artefacts. Subjective perception and material objects are co-shaped; both object and user are constituted *by* the human-technology relation.

Ihdean technical relations are an attempt to further speciate the broader category of human-technology relations. Key to the programme is Ihde’s insight that not all human-technology relations are alike. Indeed, depending on both the object employed the means of employment, there are at least four different ways in which we might enter into a human-technology relation with our artefacts. Briefly, the four Ihdean relations are as follows (1990, 72–123):

1. Embodiment relations describe those relationship where our artefacts disappear into our phenomenological schema. Here, what Ihde calls an “enigma position” emerges between the collapse between ‘I’ and ‘technology,’ as our devices both offer certain affordances and recede from view. Ihde uses the following schema: (I-technology) world. Eyeglasses and hammers are examples of technologies that facilitates relations of this type.
2. Hermeneutic relations allow us to better understanding the world by virtue of reading an artefact. In this case, the enigma position has changed place, being instead between ‘technology’ and ‘world’; the device does not withdraw from our attention, but rather reveals an aspect of the world that would have been hitherto inaccessible: I (technology-world). Thermographic cameras are an example of a technology that facilitates relations of this type.
3. Alterity relations describe technology when it is in the capacity as something with which to be interacted. In this schematic, ‘world’ is removed and ‘technology’ takes its place. Alterity relations as the kind of relationship that occurs when we treat objects *as if* they were an other: I technol-

ogy-(-world). An automatic teller machine is an example of a technology that facilitate relations of this type.

4. Background relations are not explicitly related to the 'I' at all, but rather serve to provide and shape "the context of our experience in a way that is not consciously experienced" (Verbeek 2001, 132). Background relations provide the necessary context for the other three Ihdean relations; indeed, many instances of embodiment, hermeneutic or alterity relations would be impossible without the mute cooperation of background relations. Indoor plumbing and air conditioning are examples of technologies that facilitate relations of this type.

However, Ihde claims, we should not make the error of thinking that artefacts can only host a single kind of technical relation. To the contrary, he argues that artefacts are inherently ambiguous. Extending Martin Heidegger's story of a hammer that moves from *Zuhandenheit* to *Vorhandenheit* in the process of being made broken, Ihde's taxonomy permits the possibility that artefacts can host a multiplicity of technical relations depending on contingent factors. Central heating, for example, operates in a background relation when it functions correctly, and an alterity relation when the artefact requires attention and maintenance. Indeed, artefacts are underdetermined by their designs: while, for instance, a flathead screwdriver is designed for fastening screws, it is equally useful for opening tins of paint or defending yourself from an attacker. Artefacts can be relationally 'stable' in a multitude of different ways; their interpretation and function is sensitive to (among other things) circumstance, pre-theoretic assumptions, and the individual needs of users. Ihde calls this phenomenon 'multistability.' Acknowledging and understanding multistability is intrinsic to applying any postphenomenological method.

Finally, it is also worth noting that postphenomenological scholarship is for the most part quite deflationary about the ontological nature of technology. Whilst Ihdean postphenomenology certainly possesses an Heideggerian inheritance, approaches inspired by Ihde do not propagate the untenable distinction between "artificial" and "natural," thanks in large part due to the intellectual influence of American pragmatism. Instead, postphenomenology tends towards a more pluralistic, common-sense approach to the relationship between technology and the world.

3. A Phenomenology of the Sublime

In the previous section I gave two very brief *précis*: summaries of both Kantian sublimity and Ihdean postphenomenology as they are relevant to this article. In this section I will take the former and provide an Husserlian analysis of the means by which sublime experience, in the most general sense, makes itself manifest. This will lead to my third and final section, wherein my Husserlian analysis is reconciled with the Ihdean schema discussed above.

Due in no small part to the fact that sublime experiences categorically exceed description, and irrespective of whether or not the sublime experience in question is mathematical, dynamical, or technological, there is a dearth of scholarship on the phenomenology of sublimity. Nonetheless, while sublime experience may escape description, I believe it possible to outline the mechanism of action by which sublime experiences occur; this description of the sublime mechanism will prove integral to the final section of this article. I take the hard kernel at the centre of Kant's description of sublimity to be basically correct: we feel the sublime when we are confronted with a percept that we are unable to integrate into a cohesive whole. Faced with this unintegrated percept, we are unable to do anything but affirm our own independence from that percept; in that affirmation we find exhilarating, humiliating pleasure. However, I think Kant's account of this can be extended and clarified by appealing to the methods of Husserlian phenomenology.

3.1. *The Problem of Surplus*

Phenomenology is the study of appearances. Unlike empiricism, it does not argue that objects exist beyond perception; unlike idealism, it does not argue that perceived reality is fundamentally immaterial. Instead, it seeks to occupy a middle ground. Edmund Husserl's philosophical program is motivated by this intuition: it is a lengthy attempt to rigorously reconcile idealism with empiricism by speaking of things as we are made aware of them: as worldly objects perceived by a transcendental ego (Husserl 1981). The cornerstone of this philosophical apparatus is the concept of 'intentionality,' or 'about-ness.' When I perceive an object in the world, I 'intend' the object; my perception is 'about' the object. Per Husserl's description, intentional acts are bounded by two poles. The first, *noesis*, describes mental act-processes: for instance, the act of liking or disliking something. However, *noesis* requires an object towards which it must be directed; an object upon which *noesis* is moored. This object is *noema* (translated from Greek: "that which is thought about"): "Corresponding in every case to the multiplicity

of Data pertaining to the really inherent noetic content, there is a multiplicity of Data, demonstrable in actual pure intuition, in a correlative ‘noematic content’ or, in short, in the ‘noema’” (Husserl 1983, 1:214). As a consequence of the process of intention, Husserl claims that we can no longer naïvely assume the world to be the way it appears to consciousness. Instead of engaging in the belief that the world has been given to us freely and completely, we must suspend this ‘natural attitude’ in favour of the acknowledgement that our apperception of the world is lumpy and incomplete; a mess of acts of *Sinngebung*, or ‘sense-bestowal’ by a collection of intentional agents (Dodd 1996, 420). Whilst Husserl certainly wants to preserve the notion that there is undeniably a world beyond our perceptions (just as there is an internal universe comprised of mental structures), it is in consciously apprehending the things in the world and making sense of them that both the internal and external worlds become constituted for us in what Husserl calls our ‘lifeworlds.’ Whatever passes for our lifeworlds are cobbled together both from the perceptual ‘adumbrations’ (perspective, shadows) we have of the things in the world, and the consequences of the perceptual adumbrations of the people around us:

In whatever way we may be conscious of the world as universal horizon, as coherent universe of existing objects, we, each “I-the-man” and all of us together, belong to the world as living with one another in the world; and the world is our world, valid for our consciousness as existing precisely through this “living together.” (Husserl 1970, 108)

Husserl does not only describe a tangled skein of gaze and intention. He is also sensitive to how our intentions shape our attitudes to and beliefs about the properties (whether true or not; whether previous, current, or anticipated) of intentioned objects: what he calls the intentional ‘horizons’ (Husserl 1983, 1:107) of the noema. Our intuitive consciousness of anything is always accompanied by a sense of what it is *not*. This is why, for instance, when you go to fish an apple out of the fruit bowl, you not only have a sense of what an apple *is* (red, round, sweet, sometime home of worms), but also what an apple is *not* (hard, wooden, painted blue). These intentional horizons delimit the ambit of the intentional act. They are necessarily finite in what they intend, because there is a given object or state of affairs that adheres to the intention. So, for example, the laptop upon which I work is bounded within a given intentional horizon that is constituted by the nature of my interactions with that object. Should I wish to put the closed laptop in my bike bag, I engage with the noema within the context of its intentional horizon: a

horizon that reflects my beliefs that it is both sheathed in aluminium and heavier than it should be. However, neither the noema or its concomitant horizon is static. For example, when I interact with my computer in order to edit this document that you are currently reading, my attention shifts and contracts: rather than being about the computer qua physical object, my noesis is redirected towards the file in which I am typing. In the first instance, my attention is ‘about’ the computer; in the second, it is ‘about’ the document. As my attention shifts, so too does the noematic object. The computer and the document are distinct, if overlapping, noema, united by a common material object. They are each incomplete adumbrations of the device in question.

Intention is a finite concept. Noema are bounded, whether or not the noematic object in question is a physical object (tables, chairs), a conceptual object (numerals, *eidoi*), a cultural or epistemic norm (democracy, truth), an emotion (love, hate, rage), or otherwise. The noematic object fulfils the lacuna left open by the process of noesis; it has insufficient autonomy to exceed that inquiry. Except, of course, that sublime experiences *do* exceed the bounded limits of intention: The experience of sublimity occurs because a sublime experience is an experience of surplus. What is experienced is altogether too much to be contained within a given intention. While the sublime does not destroy subjectivity (indeed, it facilitates it, per the Kantian story), it exceeds the horizons of subjectivity. The sublime seems to exceed or saturate the intentional act; when we say that the feeling of sublimity is too much, what we are saying is that the fulfilment provided by the world exceeds our capacity to parse it, and we are left over-full by the surplus of experience. This ‘problem of surplus’ clearly poses an issue for an Husserlian picture of intention.

3.2. The Husserlian Sublime

Ruud Welten is one of the few scholars to have directly addressed the problem of surplus, arguing in a recent paper that surplus is an unavoidable feature of perception. Taking from Husserl the admission that objects are not given to us completely in the process of perception—“The things we see [*die gesehen[en] Dinge*] are always really and actually more than what we see of them” (Husserl, quoted in Welten 2011, 216)—Welten argues that the noematic objects of Husserlian intention are underdetermined by the framing of noesis. As he writes, “what you get is more than you see” (2011, 216). I confess that I am broadly in favour of this reading. Commonsensically, we always have a surplus of experience: never do we exhaust the qualities of the world by perceiving it. When I look at a mug, or an apple, or the Eiffel Tower, I am only seeing shadows, angles, adumbrations. We do

not even take full advantage of the sense data to which we have access; although there are many things within my visual field, I cannot see all of them, due to a combination of physical, perceptual, and cognitive inadequacies. There is *always* an information and sensory excess. However, whilst even the meanest tableau provides a surplus of experience, I am able to translate that data into something useful: my mind helpfully makes sense of the desk in front of me, allowing me to type and sip my coffee without slipping into terror. It is, in a sense, a mental description of the raw and unavoidable sense data with which I am surrounded—data that Husserl calls *hyle*. This description, while incomplete, is sufficient to allow me to navigate the world in which I find myself.

Welten concludes his paper with an intriguing possibility, albeit one that I think demands further analysis. Invoking the work of Michel Henry and Jean-Luc Marion, Welten proposes a phenomenology of the sublime that is removed from the noesis-noema dyad entirely. For Welten, the sublime is not the awareness *of* something, but the awareness of consciousness itself. “It means being overwhelmed,” he writes, “not by the perceptibility of an object such as a pyramid or a painting, but by the imposing presence of our own consciousness” (2011, 219). There is, I think, something to this idea; not only does it cohere nicely with the Kantian sublime, it also fills a substantial lacuna in Husserl’s scholarship. However, I think Welten misses something key: whereas sublime experiences may simply be a consciousness’s awareness of itself, he fails to address the fact that experiences of sublimity are usually—and perhaps necessarily—accompanied by some kind of perceptual or existential *trauma*. Even though sublime experiences, per Kant, cannot be accompanied by fear, sublime experiences are entangled with what Joseph Addison describes as an “agreeable kind of horror” (Addison 1773, 261). While this may not be true for all sublime experiences, as in the case of the “oceanic” sublime that Welten explores in his paper, it strikes me as unusual to disregard this feeling of horror or trauma entirely.

In response to this problem, I offer a tentative solution. Given that all objects are underdetermined by our perception, it might be that a sublime experience is one wherein circumstances make clear the extent to which our perceptions underdetermine the objects around us. Imagine for a moment that you are drinking a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice. At no point in the process are you capable of denying or avoiding the sensory—that is to say, *hyletic*—demands made upon you by the tart, pulpy liquid; once committed to the process of drinking, the associated sensory information comes along as if for free: “concepts of stuff and form force themselves upon us if we presentiate to ourselves any clear intuitions

or clearly effected valuations, acts of liking, willing, or the like” (Husserl 1983, 1:204). However, whilst unavoidable, the sense data is constrained and contained by the intentional horizon; my expectations massage and delimit the sensation into parseable pieces. However, it is easy to picture what would occur had I *not* been in possession of the correct intentional horizon. Imagine, for a moment, that you are awakened by an unbearable desire for a glass of milk. In the dark, you muzzily make your way to the fridge, and open the door. Inside the fridge it is also dark; belatedly, you remember that you forgot to change the expired bulb. You reach into the blackness, grab the first bottle that comes to hand, and take a deep swig. You realise, far too late, that you grabbed a bottle of orange juice instead of the bottle of milk you were intending. The zesty acidity shocks your palate; you recoil as if in horror. You discover, the hard way, that the intentional horizon for milk is entirely inappropriate for managing your sensory expectations of orange juice; your hyletic experience of the juice is both unmanaged and in surplus. You experience this moment of uncertainty, with your intentional horizons in flux, as traumatic; you are revolted and upset until those horizons can re-establish themselves.

In this way, new horizons of intention are constantly being drawn and redrawn with respect to our previously-held horizons of intention: for example, after your startling experience you might redraw your horizon of intention thus: “orange juice is *like* milk, except orange, pulpy, and tart.” This process of redrawing is, I claim, the genesis of sublime experience. However, it is not the mere process of redrawing that makes a given experience sublime. Instead, and due to the number of variables in play, sublime experiences are those experiences that are so overwhelming or alien as to be irreconcilable with *any* intentional horizon within your possession; our experience is absolutely and necessarily underdetermined by those horizons. The feeling of sublimity is due less to our sensory machinery becoming overwhelmed in the face of an abundance of hyletic data (whether size, power, or other). Instead, events that stimulate sublime experience are so radical that we cannot maintain even the fiction of control over our sensory environments. There is *too much* that we cannot reconcile with existing horizons of intention, and we simply cannot parse what we experience until we redraw those intentional horizons to take this new state of affairs into account. Moreover, because we are unable, at least momentarily, to integrate the experience of that Husserlian excess into a single, coherent whole, we can only make the Kantian move to re-individuate and reaffirm what it means to be human: small, insignificant, and destined to die.³

4. The Sublime and Postphenomenology

Having rendered a general, Husserlian description of the Kantian sublime, I will now reconcile this description with Ihdean postphenomenology. Of particular interest is the extent to which different technical relations host the two Kantian sublime modes, and under what circumstances. In order to make this analysis more manageable, I will speak about these relations with respect to two case studies and some supplementary examples. To that end, for the mathematical sublime I will discuss New York City as my case study; for the dynamical sublime, I will discuss the Trinity Test.

4.1. *The Mathematical Sublime*

At the time of writing, New York City is the largest metropolitan area in the world by urban land mass, with an area of 11,640 kilometres squared. In addition, it is one of the largest urban agglomerations in the world, with a Metropolitan Statistical Area population of over 20 million people. (By point of comparison, the total population of the Netherlands, my current country of residence, sits at approximately 17.2 million.) In 2015, the New York MSA provided a gross metropolitan product of nearly 1.6 billion US dollars; approximately half a billion dollars more than the gross domestic product of Australia (my country of origin). It is a global hub for finance, education, and manufacturing, as well as being a major gateway for migration into the United States; over a quarter of all residents were born outside the USA. The city also features in a number of American national myths. It is a city where anything is possible: the chance of wealth; the liberty afforded to anonymity within a crowd; the opportunity for a fresh start, unburdened by the past. Indeed, by virtue of instantiating those stories, it permits the possibility of hope.

New York City, in short, is *big*. Moreover, by virtue of that same very bigness, it is also a locus for mathematically sublime experience. Consider the first stanza of Allen Ginsberg's "My Sad Self" (1984):

Sometimes when my eyes are red
 I go up on top of the RCA Building
 and gaze at my world, Manhattan—
 my buildings, streets I've done feats in,
 lofts, beds, coldwater flats
 —on Fifth Ave below which I also bear in mind,
 its ant cars, little yellow taxis, men
 walking the size of specks of wool—

Panorama of the bridges, sunrise over Brooklyn machine,
 sun go down over New Jersey where I was born
 & Paterson where I played with ants—
my later loves on 15th Street,
 my greater loves of Lower East Side,
 my once fabulous amours in the Bronx
 faraway—
paths crossing in these hidden streets,
 my history summed up, my absences
 and ecstasies in Harlem—
—sun shining down on all I own
in one eyeblink to the horizon
 in my last eternity—
 matter is water.

Ginsberg, having schlepped to the top of the RCA building, is confronted with the sight of New York City at sunset. Himself a creature of the city—of its alleys, boulevards, institutions, and byways—he identifies landmarks denoting areas of particular personal significance: streets he’s “done feats in”; a childhood in New Jersey; lovers of variable greatness on 15th Street and the Lower East Side; the “absences and ecstasies” of Harlem. And yet, cut through his reminiscence is the acknowledgement of his own profound smallness, along with the smallness of everyone else. New York’s (in)famous yellow taxis are rendered “ant cars”; men are the size of “specks of wool.” Above, and to the west, the sun watches impassively: everywhere is bustle, activity, motion; microscopic and meaningless activity to the enormous yellow blink on the horizon. Finally Ginsberg, overwhelmed by both the size and scale of his city, and the insignificance of his actions and performances within its bounds, succumbs to the sublime moment; his “last eternity” where matter is transmuted into water. This is the mathematical sublime in action.

In that sublime moment, what is Ginsberg’s technical relation with the city? Cities are, after all, artefacts, and thus appropriate loci for technical relations. Given both their enormous size and the plurality of their ends this might seem unintuitive, but being products of human intention they certainly possess the sufficient features for artefactuality. Like all artefacts they have effects that are both intentioned and non-intentioned: a city can house millions of people (intentioned effect) and yet cause ecological damage (non-intentioned effect), in much the same way that a bandsaw can cut wood (intentioned effect) and yet produce noise and sawdust (non-intentioned effect). While cities are unlike many other artefacts

in that they, in addition to having intentioned and non-intentioned effects, are comprised of and constituted by the actions of the thousands, if not millions, of people resident in that space, this does not challenge the city's artefactual status. In the words of Barry Allen: "Any city is at some level literally handmade. A city is an architectural actuality, an immensely complex physical artifact" (Allen 2005, 266). Moreover, our technical relations with these cities are, using the Ihdean vocabulary, 'multistable': they permit a multiplicity of uses traversing a multiplicity of technical relations (cf. Ihde 1986). While we might not put a great deal of thought to it as we go to work, buy groceries, or slink gratefully to the pub after a long day, our relations with the urban spaces in which we live are neither naïve nor indexical. Instead they flit and skitter, shot through with contingency, whilst simultaneously constrained by the horizons of our intentions. Consider the following instances:

1. Driving across town on an empty freeway at three in the morning;
2. Buying train tickets from an automated kiosk;
3. Drinking coffee at a café set on a crowded public plaza;
4. Spying on the neighbours in the apartment across the street;
5. Loafing through the streets in the spirit of *flânerie*;
6. Navigating a bus system whilst heavily inebriated;
7. Reading a book about the city in which you live;
8. Protesting the construction of a poorly-considered municipal development;
9. Rediscovering lost urban spaces as part of a psychogeographic *dérive*.

All of these encounters are *with* the city in one way or another, even if the encounter is only with a phenomenologically narrow slice of that artefact. Each individual encounter hosts at least one Ihdean technical relation, and in many cases two or more nested, chained, or parallel relations.⁴ Cities provide an enormous layer cake of technical relations; multistability writ large. It is this sense of what we might call 'relational potential' to which Ginsberg awakens in the first stanza of "My Sad Self." Atop the RCA building, surrounded by the city of New York and motivated by reminiscence, Ginsberg becomes aware of the vast network of relations—past, present, future; parallel, chained, nested—in which he is embedded. Ginsberg's conventional relationship with the city is undeniably some species of background relation; it exists primarily as a vector for other more sensible relations. However,

in this particular moment the ‘givenness’ of the city-as-background is threatened. He becomes aware *of* the city-as-background: that is, of the city as a ‘space of relations.’ He is startled to encounter the city as an enormous *other* of which he is nonetheless a part: as an unimaginably vast host to an innumerable number of relations. In so doing, his intentional horizon of the city is traumatically, gloriously redrawn in a way for which he is entirely unprepared. Triggered by his recollections, this lurching, groundless redrawing—from background relation to alterity relation—is experienced as a moment of mathematically sublime experience.

From this specific instance, I think we are able to make a general claim as to how mathematically sublime experiences manifest—or, minimally, one mechanism by which they can manifest. Any kind of mathematically sublime experience necessitates an abrupt phenomenological shift from background relation to alterity relation: a process whereby the background is brought forth, rendered ‘other.’ The person who experiences the sublime experience becomes aware of his or her place in that space of relations: as something distinct from, yet nonetheless part of, the newly-foregrounded background. Moreover, this process of awareness requires a complete redrawing of the intentional horizon that existed for the given background: the new relation can’t be contained within any given intentional horizon within the repertory of the experiencing subject. This traumatic process manifests as sublime experience.

Furthermore, this description of the postphenomenological processes underpinning the mathematical sublime also functions perfectly well when applied to less obviously technological cases. Take, for example, the vision of Earth from space as described by Neil Armstrong, the first man to walk on the Moon: “It suddenly struck me that that tiny pea, pretty and blue, was the Earth. I put up my thumb and shut one eye, and my thumb blotted out the planet Earth. I didn’t feel like a giant. I felt very, very small” (Armstrong, quoted in Pearlman 2010, 405). Here, Armstrong also describes the background-to-alterity transition: a creature born of Earth, our first emissary to another astronomical body, is suddenly afforded the ability to encounter the Earth as an *other*. The Earth, for so long the background and bosom of humankind, is instead made a “tiny pea, pretty and blue”: an explicit and traumatic move from background to alterity relation. In Armstrong, this trauma manifests as a feeling of radical and profound smallness: a textbook instance of the mathematical sublime.

4.2. *The Dynamical Sublime*

From 1942 to 1946, the Manhattan Project was a primarily-American research and development initiative that produced the first nuclear weapons. Motivated by fears that Nazi Germany was busy attempting to develop their own nuclear devices via the second *Uranverein*, or ‘Uranium Club’ of 1939 to 1943, the Allies expended some two billion US dollars (approximately 22 billion in 2016 dollars) towards making nuclear armaments a reality. Led by the United States and aided by the United Kingdom and Canada, the project was directed by then-Brigadier General Leslie Richard Groves, and was comprised of a number of secret laboratories and other sites: Oak Ridge, Hanford, and Chicago, among others. The most famous of the secret labs that helped make up the project is the Los Alamos Laboratory. Directed by Robert Oppenheimer, Los Alamos was the place where the first nuclear warhead—nicknamed ‘the Gadget’—was designed.

In January 1944, after a gruelling and occasionally frustrating R&D process that included a complete redesign of the device, it was proposed that the Gadget be tested. This proposal was approved in March 1944, under the code name ‘Trinity.’ Slightly more than a year later, on the 16th of June 1945 at 0529 hours, what is now called the Trinity test occurred at the northern end of the Alamogordo Bombing Range, in Socorro County, New Mexico. Upon exploding, it released 84 terajoules of energy (approximately equivalent to 20 tons of TNT), bathing the mountains around the test site in searing white light. The blast was felt over 160 kilometres away, and that first now-infamous mushroom cloud reached over 12 kilometres in height. Thanks in part to the record-keeping efforts of the United States Army, there exist a relatively large number of eyewitness accounts of the Trinity test. Some of these accounts are sober, even arid: descriptions of the blast offered without emotion or affect. Others, though, bespeak a dawning realisation of the destructive potential of the Gadget. It is worth quoting two of these accounts at length:

Suddenly, there was an enormous flash of light, the brightest light I have ever seen or that I think anyone has ever seen. It blasted; it pounced; it bored its way right through you. It was a vision which was seen with more than the eye. It was seen to last forever. You would wish it would stop; altogether it lasted about two seconds. Finally it was over, diminishing, and we looked toward the place where the bomb had been; there was an enormous ball of fire which grew and grew and it rolled as it grew; it went up into the air, in yellow flashes and into scarlet and green. It looked menacing. . . . A new

thing had just been born; a new control; a new understanding of man, which man had acquired over nature. (Isidor Rabi, quoted in Rhodes 1986, 672)

The most striking impression was that of an overwhelmingly bright light. . . . I was flabbergasted by the new spectacle. We saw the whole sky flash with unbelievable brightness in spite of the very dark glasses we wore. . . . I believe that for a moment I thought the explosion might set fire to the atmosphere and thus finish the earth, even though I knew that this was not possible. (Robert Segrè, quoted in Rhodes 1986, 673)

These statements describe a moment that is clearly within the register of the dynamical sublime. Indeed, the event could almost have been organised with the dynamical sublime in mind: those viewing were literally considering an instance of vast power from a distant vantage point. Being distant, those viewing were not seriously concerned about their own physical wellbeing. Even Robert Segrè, though momentarily afraid that the bomb would ignite the atmosphere, “knew that this was not possible.” The bomb also shares a sense of the “seeming omnipotence of nature” with Kant’s description of the dynamical sublime (1969, 111); although the bomb was obviously and resolutely man-made, the sheer amount of power marshalled by the Gadget seems almost to turn the explosion into a natural event. Consider the testimony of Isidor Rabi: “A new thing had just been born.” The bomb was not *designed*, it was not *created*. Instead, it was birthed: an unconquered and unconquerable monster. The anthropomorphisation (or perhaps *monstrification*) of the bomb was not an uncommon response, either, as Peter Hales documents. In reference to William I. Laurence’s eyewitness accounts of the atomic detonations at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Hales writes: “Laurence’s transformation of this man-made destruction into a natural event, ‘a living thing, a new species of being,’ that was also analogous to other living things—sun, meteor, a mushroom, a decapitated monster, and, finally, a beautiful, delicate, roseate flower” (Hales 1991, 12).

The set of Ihdean relations that underpin the use and application of the bomb is rather complex. Given that the bomb is, first and foremost, a weapon, one might reasonably expect that it hosts the same technical relations as other weapons. A dagger, for example, functions as a weapon when straightforwardly plugged into an embodiment relation: it both extends our phenomenological scheme and disappears from conscious view, offering certain affordances (cutting, thrusting) in the process. However, not all weapons are so readily integrated. A 9mm handgun, for example, also offers certain affordances. However, the embodiment relation of-

ferred by that handgun is neither as immediate nor as finely-grained as the embodiment relation offered by a dagger. This is in virtue of two things being the case: first, handguns function at a much greater distance than daggers;⁵ and second, that the amount of energy required to pull a trigger is many times lower than the muzzle energy of a 9mm handgun.⁶ Although the handgun still hosts an embodiment relation, it is a relation that is necessarily attenuated compared to the relation offered by the dagger given the increased physical and perceptual distance of the target; feedback of all kinds is reduced.

This process of ‘distancing’ only grows more obvious when we consider the case of atomic warheads. Whether one drops a bomb from an aircraft or delivers it via intercontinental ballistic missile, there is no clear sense in which the bomb can host an embodiment relation. Indeed, the relationship has grown so attenuated that the only embodiment relation is with the apparatus that launches the device. As weapons grow more sophisticated, so too does our distance to those weapons grow. The atomic device itself is no longer part of the phenomenological schema, but is instead treated like an ‘other’: a move from an embodiment relation to an alterity relation. Once suspended in an alterity relation, the Gadget has the capacity to host dynamically sublime experience.

If we recall, the mathematical sublime manifests in the shocking, traumatic transition from background relation to alterity relation. The dynamical sublime also necessarily requires a complete redrawing of intentional horizons. However, the dynamical sublime *inverts* the causal story offered by the mathematical sublime: rather than manifesting in the traumatic move from background relation to alterity relation, the dynamical sublime is revealed in the transition from alterity relation to background relation. Recall the Trinity test: prior to the detonation of the Gadget, observers would have been in possession of a given *noesis* of that particular noematic object. The horizons of that noematic object would themselves be dictated by the individual’s relation to the Gadget: whether scientist, administrator, or military officer. These horizons would likely also include a sense of the object’s capabilities: the number of potential terajoules produced upon detonation; the expected size of the blast. However, upon detonation, those horizons are shattered. The explosion was so unimaginably bright, so enormously vast, so unbelievably powerful that it could not be contained within the assemblage of facts and impressions that comprised the intentional horizon of the Gadget. The explosion overwhelmed viewers, first filling and then replacing the world, even if only for a second. Another instance of sublime trauma: the bomb becomes the background.

This traumatic process of alterity-to-background is common to all dynamically sublime experience. Our intentional horizons are withdrawn when something previously understood as an object—say, a storm cloud on the horizon—is suddenly *everywhere*: you are trapped inside the storm, unable to make sense of what you are experiencing and unable to escape. It is so powerful, so all-encompassing and all-consuming that, for the duration of the event, there is no outside. There is only you: a small, modest thing, capable only of individuation as you struggle to make sense of the maelstrom that surrounds you. This is the dynamical sublime.

As with my description of the mathematical sublime, the provided mechanism is also apt for more conventionally “natural” causes of dynamical sublime experience.⁷ By means of example: on the 6th of June 1912, the Katmai volcanic cluster on the Alaska peninsula erupted. The sixty-hour long eruption ejected thirteen to fifteen cubic kilometres of ash into the atmosphere; nearby valleys were covered in a layer of ash nearly 100 metres thick. Eyewitness reported of this experience are telling. In the words of Harry Kaiakokonok and George Kosbruk, who both witnessed the event:

And then afternoon—sometime in the afternoon—it was just like this, bright sunshine, hot, no wind, that’s when the volcano started. Started snowing like that fine pumice coming down. Make a lot of noise, the size of rice, some of it, some of it smaller, and some of it bigger, and some of it was as big as a kettle or pot. Kafia Bay started to get white gradually. That water used to be blue, flat calm, no wind; and started to get white, white, white, and pretty soon all white and dark, dark came. Dark didn’t come all of a sudden, it comes gradually. Getting darker and darker and darker and darker, and pretty soon, pitch black. So black even if you put your hand two or three inches from your face outside you can’t see it ‘cause it was so dark. . . . And then the people started to gather up. (Harry Kaiakokonok, quoted in Schaaf 2012, 53)

[L]ight is coming. Oh boy, just like snow. Can’t see nothing. No kind of tree. All white to mountain. No kind of beach. No bluff. Nothing. All white, the big river. Filled up. No running, the water. Just like cement. That time get hard, boy. Lots of animals that time killed. Lots killed—the bear . . . ducks and everything. (George Kosbruk, quoted in Schaaf 2012, 55)

Much like the testimonies of Rabi and Segrè, Kaiakokonok and Kosbruk’s statements highlight the traumatic transition from alterity to background that is intrinsic to the dynamic sublime. Indeed, Kaiakokonok’s account makes it particularly obvious: the volcano, off in the distance, “starts” by snowing down pumice in all

sizes. But as the eruption persists, so too does the rest of the landscape change into a uniform shade of volcanic white. Even the bay is white: being lighter than water, the pumice stones float, blanketing the sea in ashy white chunks. But then, even as the landscape turns white, the world begins to darken as the ash and pumice blocks out the sun. The volcano, once distant and *other*, grows to occupy the entire world; it becomes the background. In becoming dynamically sublime, it is as if the volcano undergoes metastasis: from object into world.

5. Conclusion

In this article I have demonstrated one possible mechanism by which sublime experience, at least under the Kantian description, can be fruitfully reconciled with Ihdean postphenomenology. While I am satisfied with the account given, given both the vast preponderance of possible sublimes, and the diversification of post-Ihdean technical relations, I certainly have no intention that this article will serve as the final word on the matter. With that in mind, I fully welcome any future extensions or clarifications of the mechanisms posed here.

In addition, I hope that this analysis makes clear the value of discussing aesthetic experience in light of postphenomenological relations. Given the importance of aesthetic experience within the broader category of lived experience, the lack of serious discussion regarding the degrees and kinds of aesthetic experience in human-world relations marks a significant lacuna in postphenomenological scholarship. Furthermore, given that at least under some descriptions, the benefit of postphenomenological methods lie in their capacity to more completely describe our political, cultural, and economic relationships with systems and objects, it behooves us to more clearly explore the postphenomenological mechanisms by which aesthetic experiences occur given that almost all systems and objects possess at least some aesthetic features.

Notes

1. To my knowledge there has only been one other substantive attempt to discuss the sublime within the context of postphenomenology: Lars Botin's 2017 "Sublime Embodiment of the Media." However, and while a very interesting paper in its own right, Botin and I deviate substantially in our attempts to reconcile the sublime with postphenomenology, and his analysis is of limited utility here.

2. While post-Ihdean extensions to postphenomenology can be of great utility when analysing our relations with new technologies and new media (cf. Rosenberger and Verbeek 2015), and may prove of help when discussing aesthetic experiences as-

sociated with those new technologies, the two examples with which I conclude this article can be fully captured within the original Ihdean tetrad.

3. This situation also accounts for why and how human beings can become habituated to circumstances that previously triggered sublime experience: “For Burke and Kant the sublime was a constant, but history has shown that it seeks new objects. . . . Today no one pays attention to a row of brilliant street lights, and even a city skyline may evoke only a polite murmur” (Nye 1994, 237).

4. Buying a train ticket is an alterity relation (with the city) via an alterity relation (with the kiosk); *dérive* is an alterity relation (with the city) via an hermeneutic relation (with the city); driving along the empty freeway is a background relation (with the city) via an embodiment relation (with the car).

5. The maximum effective range for a 9mm handgun is about 1,000 metres under ideal circumstances; the world distance record for knife throwing stands at less than 35 metres.

6. The force required to pull a trigger is approximately 25 joules per metre, whereas the produced muzzle energy is over 400 joules.

7. The question of whether or not the Katmai volcanic cluster counts as an artefact is deeply complex, particularly in light of the broadly animistic character of Alaska Native religious beliefs. Befitting both my lack of expertise in these matters, and the fact that the answer (whatever it might be) will not materially influence the conclusions of this article, I will not attempt to answer that question here.

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