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Sublime and Anti-sublime: Reconsidering the Relation of the Sublime to Technology

Konstantinos Vassiliou

Abstract

The aesthetic notion of the sublime has been traced in different fields in the growing spheres of technology, capitalism, and digitality. The variable character of the sublime is partly due to the fact that it is identified with specific objects or sources. It can emerge whenever there is an antithesis between the infinite extensions of reason and the limits of the representative faculty. Taking into account this variance, this article seeks to reexamine the relationship of the sublime to technology, especially in view of current digital capabilities. In doing so, I argue that the notion of the sublime involves its own peculiar traits for delimiting and even blurring the boundaries between the natural and the technical. This seems to be so because techniques and language may shift and sometimes contest the incommensurability of reason and representation that lies at the heart of the sublime. Moreover, this phenomenon is countered by an anti-sublime effect (Manovich) that is achieved through the extensive mapping and visualization abilities of digital media. In contrast to the sublime, the anti-sublime is not based on contemplation but on habitual behavior. By relating this characteristic of the anti-sublime to the work of Félix Ravaisson, it finally seems that the sublime has been significantly affected by digital culture and is likely to influence any further demarcations between the natural and the technical.

Key Words

anti-sublime; digital aesthetics; habit; Kant; Félix Ravaisson; sublime; technology.

1. Introduction

The dynamic and, in many respects, daunting scale of modern technology and metropolitan development-at-large has given rise to several discourses on the sublime from different cultural and historical perspectives. Jean-François Lyotard and Fredric Jameson have brought forward inner affinities of the sublime with digital technology and capitalism, providing valuable insights on how these elements are imprinted in contemporary temporalities and subjectivities.^[1] Mario Costa and Vincent Mosco have explained how the sheer mass of the interconnected mediascape is capable of generating tensions and infatuations that are usually associated with the sublime.^[2] Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe has described possible links between the sublime and contemporary philosophical discourse, focusing on the ability of technology to reshape the horizon of the post-human.^[3] In addition, the sublime has been traced within a great array of cultural and technological practices from light-art to radio.^[4]

The variance of these accounts bears testimony to a common trait and, in some ways, even a problem when analyzing the relationship of the sublime to cultural and social phenomena, namely that there is no sublime object *per se*. That is because the sublime cannot actually be considered identical to specific objects, natural or technical, and no object inherently has a sublime character. The sublime arises only through certain mismatches of rationality and imagination. This was one of the key arguments of the Kantian analysis of the sublime, which still remains the main philosophical reasoning on the subject. According to Kant, there is no definite attribute of the sublime object since "sublimity is not contained in anything in nature but only in our minds as we can become conscious to nature within and also to nature outside us."^[5] This does not disrupt the experiential aspect of the sublime but rather enlarges its scope and variability. In addition, Kant presupposes that the sublime can arise only from a repository of moral ideas, since "what we call sublime will appear merely repellent to the unrefined person."^[6] One that does not know or share these kinds of ideas will usually be overcome with fear or repulsion against natural or artificial phenomena that can generate the feeling of the sublime.

Given these intellectual and perceptual complexities, it should be noted that mere enthusiasm and awe, which often envelop the reception of technological innovation, should not always be associated with the sublime. This may be the reason why the issue of the so-called "technological sublime" has been at the periphery of philosophical scholarship but has become a more focused subject of discussion in American historiography. David Nye sought to trace a specifically American technological sublime that stems from American morality and cultural values, making the implicit philosophic argument that "sublimity is not inherent but a social construction."^[7] This seems like an overstatement of the Kantian argument that the sublime is dependent upon moral ideas. Nevertheless, the issue that seems to arise bears not on what exactly is the sublime in technology but on how technology can

be a vehicle for the communicability of the sublime and whether this is hindered or alternatively enhanced by specific cultural mindsets and social experience.

Hence, as no object is inherently sublime, it would be difficult to philosophically define a specific technological sublime. It would seem more useful to examine if and how technology affects the mental and imaginative incommensurability that creates the sublime in the first place. Within this kind of problematization, this article will focus on the increasing enhancement of visualization and mapping techniques. The sublime is an ability of the imagination, and the fact that technology, notably through visual media, can widen our oversight of natural and technical objects is likely to affect the limits of representation. The very term "technological sublime" seems to denote a difference from the "natural sublime." But what this essay will explore is whether the sublime is a category that creates its own useful distinctions between the technical and the natural. From this perspective, it will be argued here that the sublime does not concern merely aesthetics but, as even the early accounts of the sublime seem to point out, can also be an analytical tool for several demarcations of the natural and the technical or the artificial, and help us to better grasp the cultural dimension of digitality.

2. Was the sublime always technological?

The treatise that was the source for the sublime in modern thought is pseudo-Longinus' *Peri Ypsoys*, a treatise on rhetoric probably written in the first century ACE, which seems to have been centered on the limitations of the natural and the technical. A main theme is whether the appearance of the sublime in discourse is due to a formal rhetorical training or to an innate ability to evoke and sense sublime experiences. As Baldine Saint-Girons argues, this introduces a long-standing dilemma in the history of the sublime as to whether it is subject to *physis* or *technè*.^[8] Of course, this distinction does not concern the actual object that stirs up the feeling of the sublime. It mainly involves the inner disposition and representative ability of the spectator or the listener. In other words, the link of a technical element to the sublime is not initially based on a gigantism or dynamism of a device but on whether the sublime is the outcome of a natural disposition or of an artificial and taught method of reasoning.

The solution to this issue in pseudo-Longinus's treatise seems to lie in a middle ground, that is, that the sublime must be cultivated through figures of speech but fundamentally concerns a natural and inner ability. More specifically, it argues that there is a natural tendency to push the limits of the human representative faculty, an argument that will be decisive for the philosophical development of the term even in the modern period. As pseudo-Longinus informs us, "nature has called us into life, to the whole of universe, to be spectators of her games and eager competitors" but at the same time "the whole of universe is not enough to satisfy the speculative intelligence of the human thought."^[9] So it is from "natural instinct that we admire not the small streams" but the "Nile, the Rhine, the Danube and above all the Ocean."^[10] Hence, the origins of the sublime appear to be in the gray zone between formal representation abilities and techniques of imagination, verbal or depictive.

It is useful to point out that Kant argues that the sublime is not primarily able to reveal the technical dimension of nature. On the contrary, Kant considers that the beautiful would be more apt to help us locate a common technical dimension in humans and nature. He points out that the "self-sufficient beauty of nature reveals to us a technique of nature," a technique that is capable of generating the idea of "purposiveness with respect to the use of the power of judgment in regard to appearances."^{[11],[12]} This bears the potential to expand the "concept of nature, namely as mere mechanism, into the concept of nature as art."^[13] On the contrary, the sublime exhibits none of these characteristics and precludes the idea of natural purposiveness, while it suggests that "the possible use of its intuitions makes palpable in us a purposiveness that is entirely independent from nature."^[14]

So following pseudo-Longinus, Kant makes the point that the sublime corresponds to a specific intuitive and innate stratum in human perception. But Kant was also aware that technical enhancement could influence the scales and magnitudes that fall within the human range. Indeed, the philosophical debate of the notion of the sublime in the eighteenth century was contemporary to a radical enhancement of the technology of optics. For example, by the time Kant was writing his *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), William Herschel had already discovered Uranus through the use of the telescope, the first planet that cannot be seen with the naked eye, whereas several decades before, the Dutch Antonie van Leeuwenhoek had discovered bacteria through a microscope. That basically meant that the actual limits of representation were greatly altered by technical apparatuses, an issue that the so-called "archeology of media" has investigated in depth.^[15] In Kant's analysis of the sublime, especially in what he coined the "mathematical

sublime," this change of scale by technical means was already embedded in human subjectivity. As he explains:

Here one readily sees that nothing can be given in nature, however great it may be judged to be by us, which could not, considered in another relation, be diminished down to the infinitely small; and conversely, there is nothing so small, which could not, in comparison with even smaller standards, be amplified for our imagination up to the magnitude of a world. The telescope has given us rich material for making the former observation, the microscope rich material for the latter.^[16]

One may argue that this kind of oscillation between magnitudes and infinitesimal scales embraced all the subsequent development of technical optic devices. However, changes of distant and close vision are not only the outcome of the technical possibilities of enhancement but also result from complex phenomenological situations. In *Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard went to great length to show the limits between inner imagination and actual observation, especially in what he calls "intimate immensity," whereby the subject can potentially magnify, by his imagination, every object or image.^[17] Commenting on Henry David Thoreau's description of nature, he concluded that "any doctrine of the imagery is necessarily a philosophy of excess, and all images are destined to be enlarged."^[18]

Yet it does remain a fact that these phenomenological intricacies have been made rather more concrete since they were materialized in several techniques of the image. Art played a significant role in this. Since its inception, 'the sublime' has been a term that concerned primarily natural observation, rhetoric, and poetry. Jonathan Richardson's *An Essay on the Theory of Painting* (1725) is one of the first attempts to specifically analyze what can be a portrayal of the sublime in painting.^[19] As Lyotard has argued extensively, by the time of high modernism, visual arts had become a privilege of the sublime.^[20] But in addition to art, modern optical means offered a complex patchwork of spectatorship that, in a sense, exteriorizes the changes of scale and magnitude that were once the vehicle of reason and language metaphors. After telescopes and microscopes, the advent of cinema, video, and today, of new image techniques such as 3-D modeling, algorithmic processing, fractals, and so on have created whole new imagescapes where changes of scale are continuously activated.

The main ground for the appearance of the sublime is the incommensurability between rationality and representation. According to Kant, the sublime is generated through a "displeasure" that becomes manifest when "the subject's own incapacity [Unvermögen] reveals the consciousness of an unlimited capacity, and the mind can aesthetically judge the latter only through the former."^[21] In this case, a subject thinks it is impossible to grasp the infinite, yet the very idea that she or he can direct the internal intuitions of the mind towards it produces this kind of incommensurability that simultaneously becomes the source of the sublime. Yet this incommensurability is dependent upon the media of enhancement, first language and, in the modern period, techniques of visualization. This was implicit even in the beginning of the term in pseudo-Longinus's treatise. The underlying technical question is in what way can humans modify and enhance their language capabilities in order to bring forward a sublime experience? But today these capabilities are also those of visual and digital media. So this issue becomes all the more crucial in light of technological advances, since technology seems to shift the gaps of this incommensurability. The extension and immersion of vision are vital components of these shifts, which have increased since the nineteenth century to an extent that they have reached a pervasive cultural range, from the telescope down to digital effects. This reiterates the question of the technological sublime by the fact that technology can present new methods that may contest the very incommensurability between human understanding and observation. As it will be argued in the next section, this is where the very idea of a technological anti-sublime comes into play.

3. The technological anti-sublime

The digital may be associated with several cases of sublime ideas. The unfathomable computing power and interconnectedness that have spread throughout the entire digital realm bears an unimaginable mass of data and information that may be deemed sublime. The same can be applied for the mathematics of digital processing. The application of algorithmic reasoning and formal logic into programmable hardware was the starting point of digital technology. This exteriorization of reason into technical devices could also be the source of sublimity. One may find a most evident and potent example in the conception of the so-called Turing Machine that has been the seed for the subsequent growth of digitality. Turing's algorithm is mathematically proven to be the simplest and most potent device of computing. But this kind of model can also be seen through the prism of the "mathematical sublime," for Turing's

Machine can, by definition, have an infinite capacity of function and computer power.

On the other hand, although the abstract mathematical models and the inner, largely invisible and non-representable networks of digital technology are easy to associate with the sublime, the actual software and devices that have shaped new means of visualization can have the reverse effect. So even if digitality is based on an unrepresentable mass of hidden interconnections, Lev Manovich has succinctly noted the fact that the cleavage between the presentable and the unrepresentable is largely overridden by the abilities of digital mapping. For Manovich, this creates an effect of "anti-sublime," where there is a "promise" that the seemingly unrepresentable mass of data and flows of information can be boiled down to data diagrams and graspable visual patterns. As he explains:

This promise makes data mapping into the exact opposite of the Romantic art concerned with the sublime. In contrast, data visualization art is concerned with the anti-sublime. If Romantic artists thought of certain phenomena and effects as un-representable, as something which goes beyond the limits of human senses and reason, data visualization artists aim at precisely the opposite: to map such phenomena into a representation whose scale is comparable to the scales of human perception and cognition.[22]

Lev Manovich's hypothesis on the anti-sublime may acquire various and extremely pervasive ramifications in the age of big-data, digital mining, and ubiquitous interconnections. Of course, data visualization and diagrams are not a recent invention and have played a key role in shaping modern and contemporary visual culture. From Florence Nightingale's *Rose Diagram* in Victorian Britain (c. 1859), which determined the causes of mortality in the Crimean War, thus establishing hospital hygiene as a key component to war casualties and public health in general, down to media and science, diagrams have become a standard component of visual culture. But with digital mapping this technique has acquired more applicability and immense informational use.

One may argue that the anti-sublime element is not only to be found in the narrow confines of digital devices. Meteorology is perhaps a prime example of how large quantities of data, and, ironically, even the tremendous meteorological phenomena that provide a common example for the dynamic sublime of nature, can also be considered as an example of the anti-sublime. Today, weather maps and forecasts reports can condense vast movements and powers that were once thought to be out of human grasp. In addition, any kind of analytic and thorough mapping, from the biogenetic level, such as the brain and genome mapping, to that of energy and climate level, can actually transform unharnessed magnitudes into manageable and presentable information. On an overall level, one may detect a certain antithesis of sublime and anti-sublime that lurks in techno-scientific achievements, and this may also imply two radically different approaches and aesthetic stances: one fueled by awe and the sublime against the vast space, deep time, and big data of computation, and one that is focused on shortening and bridging these huge asymmetries between human and natural scales.

This reversal of the sublime in data visualization cannot only claim to downsize the mathematical mass of data but also to reverse another feature of the sublime, that is, that it cannot exactly possess universalized communicability. Kant had already expressed doubts about the universalizing of the sublime, since it presupposed a "supersensible vocation" that involves a "moral foundation." [23] In this sense, the anti-sublime is not to be thought of as what Arnold Berleant described as the "negative sublime," analyzing the reactions and reception of terrorism. The negative sublime involves the "recognition of negativity whose enormity cannot be encompassed in either magnitude or force." [24] In this case, "death" and "body counts" are the source of the negative sublime, since they are "beyond measure." [25] This effectively stamps the sublime experience with far-reaching distress and it remains also based on moral grounds. The anti-sublime cancels these moral underpinnings and transforms any spectacle or data into universally communicable information and statistics. But what also seems to be at stake is another notion that is vital to the sublime, namely that of incommensurability between reason and representation, which will be examined in the final section.

4. Habit and the demise of incommensurability

Liotard argued that "the sublime is neither moral universality nor aesthetic universalization but is rather the destruction of one by the other in the violence of their differend." [26] On the contrary, the anti-sublime annuls this differend by promoting an informational universality and a universalization of human sensorium, which are unified along the habitual behavior of users. Visualization and mapping do not only affect the perceptive plain of technology but also enable the channeling of data

to uses and habits. Intelligent agents, data mining, and economic and security algorithms, along with many other tools of current digital technology, have the capacity to turn vast flows of data and actions into a double-feedback between measurements of user/consumer behavior and habitual responses. Hence, something that initially seems to emerge as a sublime mass of interconnections is not only condensed and displayed graphically but can also be effectively linked to interactive use and generate habitual rather than contemplative reception.

This can redirect disinterested aesthetics into the realm of habit. Such a phenomenon is hardly new for technology and audio-visuality. This kind of redirection was one of the main arguments in Benjamin's "Work of Art..." essay, where he privileged distractive-habitual modes of reception against the traditional optic-contemplative mode of aesthetic reasoning.^[27] The issue of "distraction" and "habit" seems to also have been solidified in digital environments, provoking more complex alternations of aesthetic receptivity over the course of communication.^[28]

Hence, the issue of the anti-sublime is largely the outcome of the relationship between habit and contemporary aesthetics. It would very useful here to turn to the rather neglected essay of the French nineteenth-century philosopher Félix Ravaisson, *On Habit*, which surprisingly can be very enlightening on the issue of the anti-sublime in digital media because it also links habit to a crucial notion for the sublime, namely incommensurability. Ravaisson's book sets out to investigate a main philosophical hypothesis, to consider habit not as a mere reflexive response but as a result of intelligence and change.^[29] As Catherine Malabou notes, this follows a large philosophical tradition that includes Aristotle, Hegel, and Bergson, which ascribes to habit a "primary ontological phenomenon" against a second philosophical view, exemplified in Descartes and Kant, that "sees in habit the epitome of inauthenticity, a simulacrum of being."^[30] For Ravaisson, habit is something much more intricate than mere instinct, which is only driven by biological predispositions. Ravaisson considers habit as a cognitive borderline for the limits of nature. As he concludes:

Habit is thus, so to speak, the infinitesimal *differential*, or the dynamic *fluxion*, from Will to Nature. Nature is the limit of the regressive movement proper to habit. Consequently habit can be considered as a method – as the only real method – for the estimation, by a convergent infinite series, of the relation, real in itself, but incommensurable in the understanding, of Nature and Will.^[31]

Ravaisson suggests that habit points to an incommensurability of understanding, intelligence (which he actually identifies to will), and nature, something that is also the building block of the sublime. And as argued above for the sublime, habit seems also to become, following Ravaisson, a method for investigating the limitations of natural dispositions and technical interventions.

However, the anti-sublime announces itself as something able to reverse all that. For Ravaisson, the exact measurement of habits could reveal the actual divides of intelligence and nature or, correspondingly, that between the technical and the natural, but it seems impossible for humans to conduct such measurement. Yet with the vast computing capabilities of digital technology, this seems achievable. So if the sublime had been latently based on the limitations of nature and technique, the anti-sublime and the infinitesimal measurements of habit offer indeed the reverse method for estimating the gap between the natural and the technical. By transforming the sublime into habit, the anti-sublime invalidates a lot of complexities in the theorization of nature and implies that the relationship of culture to nature can become an issue of measurements and habitual behavior and not one of contemplation and theoretical debate; measurements that are enabled by the exteriorization and acceleration of human reason in computation. In this perspective, the anti-sublime appears as a bridle on the sublime by an instrument.

Friedrich Schiller's treatise *On The Sublime* had, in a certain respect, prefigured this kind of antithesis. Schiller placed an emphasis on a dichotomy: on the one hand, the need of man to comprehend and arrange things, and on the other, the acceptance of the sublime as an emancipatory effect, where humans come to terms with their inability to control the natural forces. In this sense, history can also become a source for the sublime. As Schiller explains: "The world, as a historical object, is basically nothing else than the strife of the very natural forces with one another and with man's liberty, whereas history informs us for the achievement of this strife."^[32] To history one may today add the deep time of evolution as well as the prospect of technological transformation of the natural environment and of the human organism. The issue of sublime in technology may well subscribe to such a dichotomy, since technology is arguably establishing itself as a main carrier of historical changes: (technological) freedom against nature and

the transformability of humanity. As Josef Früchtl recently argued, this is already evident in some trends of the current worldview, as it can be exemplified in cinematographic imaginary, reestablishing grand- or meta-narratives that seems to defy the complex stratifications of postmodernism and even give rise to new utopian vision for society.[33]

In all these respects, technology does not seem to offer a special or different kind of sublime over any natural or historical object. It does, though, seem to be a catalyst in order to understand the latent potential of this notion in an era with vital shifts in human capacities and scope. In other words, the sublime may be deemed an aesthetic domain that has an encompassing ability to adjust to the anthropocene schema in the planet. As Kant clarifies in the last sections of the *Third Critique*, the overall development of judgment through rationality and aesthetics will help to transform the powers of nature into culture.[34] But a crucial element in this respect is that, after Kant's own historical time, these teleological schemas have been undergoing radical transformations. For example, Kantian conceptions of natural teleology and purposiveness are not easily adjusted to contemporary findings of biology.[35] In a world where these schemas are debated and where the artificial and the natural seem to be deeply intricate and more difficult to dissociate, the sublime and its coupling with the anti-sublime may help to reevaluate the borderline phenomena between nature and technology.

Commenting on Kant's insistence that the sublime is largely generated within nature and not art, Adorno had argued:

The sublime draws the demarcation line between nature and what later was called arts and crafts. Kant covertly considered art to be a servant. Art becomes human in the instant in which it terminates this service. Its humanity is incompatible to any ideology of service to humanity. It is loyal to humanity only through its inhumanity toward it.[36]

On the contrary, digital technology seems to replant the anti-sublime from human reason to nature, making purposiveness and habit a matter of metrics and mapping. It thus prefigures a kind of humanization of nature. The question that lies ahead seems difficult to answer: Is this humanization of nature concomitant with an inhumanity of our technology? In any case, the relationship of the sublime to technology seems something more than a survival of classical aesthetic categories or mere technological awe, and reveals crucial themes that may finally shape our symbiotic interactions with our devices.

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Endnotes

[1] Jean-François Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde," *Inhuman: Reflection on Time*, transl. by J. Bennington and R. Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), pp. 89-107; Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (London & New York: Verso, 1992); specifically, pp. 34-49.

[2] Mario Costa, *Le sublime technologique*, (Lausanne: Iderive, 1990); Vincent Mosco, *The Digital Sublime: Myth, Power and Cyberspace*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

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[5] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. by P. Guyer, translated by P. Guyer and E. Matthews, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 147.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 148.

[7] David Nye, *American Technological Sublime*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), p. 27. Nye argues that "[a]s Kant proposed, the experience

of sublimity is based on a universal capacity for a certain kind of emotion. But Americans nevertheless shaped this emotion to their situation and needs" (p. 23). The issue of the technological sublime was not introduced by Nye, and he acknowledges his debt to several American historians such as Miller, Marx and Kasson; see Pery G. Miller, *The Life and Mind in America: From the Revolution to the Civil War*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1965); Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964); John F. Kasson, *Civilizing the Machine: Technology and Republican Values in America, 1776-1990*, (New York: Penguin, 1977).

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[9] Longinus, "On the Sublime," *Aristotle, Poetics, Longinus, On the Sublime, Demetrius, On style*, (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press (Loeb Classical Library, 1995) [*On the sublime*, translated by W. H. Fyfe], p. 277 (§ 35).

[10] *Idem*.

[11] Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment, op. cit.*, p. 128 and 129. Kant will elaborate this when in the final sections of his *Third Critique*, where he makes the distinction of "intentional technique" and "unintentional technique" in nature. In the former, nature operates through a teleological technical condition that culminates in human subjectivity. In the latter, the homology between natural and human techniques is basically coincidental; see, Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment, op. cit.*, pp. 253-255.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 130.

[13] *Idem*.

[14] *Idem*.

[15] Cf. Siegfried Zielinski, *Deep Time of the Media: Towards an Archeology of Seeing and Hearing by Technical Means*, (Cambridge, MA & London: MIT Press: 2006).

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[17] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, translated by M. Jolas, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

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[19] Jonathan Richardson, *An Essay on the Theory of Painting*, (Menston: Scholar Press, 1971).

[20] Jean-François Lyotard, "Presenting the Unpresentable: The Sublime," *Artforum*, 20 (1982), 64-69.

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[26] Jean-François Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, translated by E. Rottenberg, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 239.

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[30] *Ibid.*, p. vii.

[31] *Ibid.*, p. 59.

[32] Friedrich Schiller, "Über das Erhabene," in *Werke und Briefe*, vol. 8, (Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 2002), p. 835 (translation by the author).

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[34] *Ibid.*, pp. 297-301.

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[36] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. and transl. by R. Hullot-Kentor, (London & New York: Continuum, 2002), pp. 197-198.

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