
ON THE SUBLIME

Zachary Sng
Dept. of German Studies, Box 1979
Email: Zachary_Sng@Brown.edu

OFFICE HRS: Wed 1-3 p.m. (or by appt.)
Rm 108, 190 Hope Street
Tel: 863-3002

To trace the waxing and waning fortune of the term 'sublime' is a difficult task indeed: the concept sees a meteoric rise in the eighteenth-century that carries over into the early nineteenth-century, but this is followed by decades of neglect until its triumphant resurrection in the middle of the twentieth century. Today, it is a designation that is very much in circulation in a number of fields: art theory, literary criticism, cultural studies, media studies, etc. The term covers an astonishingly wide semantic spectrum: from its original designation of a 'high' or 'elevated' style, it was broadened in the 18th century to become associated with terror or awe, and in contemporary writings, it is used quite liberally to refer to anything disturbing, uncanny, or subversive.

This seminar's aims are two-fold:

- (1) an introduction to the key historical texts from which contemporary discussions of the sublime are drawn, with attention to the historical and intellectual contexts in which these texts intervene
- (2) a discussion of some recent writings on the sublime that engage with this historical textual corpus

(1) THE SUBLIME FROM ANTIQUITY TO THE 19TH CENTURY

We will look Longinus' treatise followed by a selection of texts drawn from the British and German traditions in the 18th and 19th centuries. The emphasis will be on understanding the role that the sublime plays within the aesthetic models being developed by these writers, and also its importance for the connections that are being made between the aesthetic and other domains such as ethics, history, social theory, etc.

(2) CONTEMPORARY WRITINGS ON THE SUBLIME

We will look at some important recent writings that attempt either to extend the theoretical account of the sublime provided by earlier authors, or to consider them in connection with the specificity of (post)modernity. We will try to engage the particular claims that these texts present about the sublime as well as their readings of earlier authors.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

(1) There will be **short response papers (1-2 pages each)** due at the beginning of each session. For some response papers, you will be asked to respond to the entire work or section of the work assigned; for others, you will be asked to consider particular passages.

(2) You will also be required to write a **longer research paper (12-15 pages)** at the end of the semester. For this, you should come up with a topic of your own choosing, and produce a bibliography of key texts as a starting-point.

You will be required to :

- (a) **hand in a working bibliography**
- (b) **present an outline of your final research project** during the last session of the semester
- (c) **hand in the final paper by 18 Dec 06**

Your research paper **should not be a mere review of existing scholarship**. Instead, you should be prepared to make **an original argument** or **pose an original question** about the topic. Your bibliography should consist not only of critical literature on the topic, but also relevant primary texts, and you should be using the primary texts to support and develop your argument(s).

Some suggestions for final research topics:

- You could explore the sublime in a particular medium of artistic representation, such as music, digital art, photography, etc. Does the relationship between form and content / artist and spectator / etc. in this specific medium affect how the sublime operates? Does the operation of the sublime in this medium highlight a particular point, extend an account, or show up a particular problematic that has been treated by historical theorists of the sublime?
- You could consider how a particular critical discourse (feminism, post-colonialism, queer studies, etc) has made use of the sublime. Does the sublime provides an especially effective form of critical leverage for this discourse, or conversely, are there problems that you see in deploying the sublime in this discourse?
- You could take a 'text' (considered broadly: a poem by Wordsworth, a landscape painting by Turner, a fairy-tale by Tieck, etc) that has been read conventionally as illustrating the sublime, and subject it to an original reading that brings out something new. You would then have to elaborate what you think would be the theoretical import of your reading, considered against conventional readings of the text.

READINGS

Longinus, *On Great Writing (On the Sublime)*, (Hackett, 1991)

Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into Our Ideas of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Oxford UP, 1998)

Reading Packet (available at Allegra)

Contents of Reading Packet:

- I. Neil Hertz, "A Reading of Longinus," *The End of the Line: Essays on Psychoanalysis and the Sublime* (Columbia UP, 1985), 1-20.
Suzanne Guerlac, "Longinus and Subject of the Sublime," *New Literary History* 16.2 (1985): 275-89.
Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux, "Preface to His Translation of Longinus on the Sublime," *Selected Criticism*, tr. Ernest Dilworth (Bobbs-Merill 1965), 43-52.
- II. Immanuel Kant, selections from *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, tr. Paul Guyer (Cambridge UP, 2001).
J.-F. Lyotard, "Aesthetics and Ethics in the Beautiful and the Sublime," *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, tr. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford UP, 1994).
- III. Friedrich Schiller, *On the Sublime (Über das Erhabene)*
Friedrich Schiller, *Of the Sublime (Vom Erhabenen)*
- IV. G. W. F. Hegel, selections from *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, tr. T. M. Knox, (Oxford UP, 1975)
Paul de Man, "Hegel on the Sublime," *Aesthetic Ideology* (U. of Minnesota Press, 1996), 105-118.
- V. Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Sublime Offering," *Of the Sublime: Presence in Question*, tr. and ed. Jeffrey S. Librett (SUNY Press, 1993), 25-53.
Neil Hertz, "The Notion of Blockage in the Literature of the Sublime," *The End of the Line*, 40-60.
- VI. Barbara Freeman, "Love's Labor: Kant, Isis, and Toni Morrison's 'Beloved,'" *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction* (U of California Press, 1997), 105-149.
C. Battersby, "Stages on Kant's Way: Aesthetics, Morality, & the Gendered Sublime," *Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality*, ed. Naomi Zack, et. al. (Blackwell, 1998), 227-44.
- VII. B. Newman, et. al. "The Ides of Art: 6 Opinions on What Is Sublime in Art?," *The Tiger's Eye*, no. 6 (December 1948): 46-57.
J.-F. Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde," *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (Blackwell, 1989), 196-211
Louis Marin, "On a Tower of Babel in a Painting by Poussin," *Of the Sublime*, 177-91.

CLASS SCHEDULE

Class 1: Sept. 07 INTRODUCTION

Class 2: Sept. 14 LONGINUS

Longinus, *On Great Writing*

N. Hertz, "A Reading of Longinus"

S. Guerlac, "Longinus and Subject of the Sublime"

Boileau, "'Preface to His Translation of Longinus on the Sublime"

Class 3: Sept. 21 BURKE

E. Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin*

Class 4: Sept. 28 KANT I

Class 5: Oct. 05 KANT II

I. Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (selections)

F. Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime* (selections)

Class 6: Oct. 12 SCHILLER

F. Schiller, *On the Sublime (Über das Erhabene)*

F. Schiller, *Of the Sublime (Vom Erhabenen)*⁴

Class 7: Oct. 19 HEGEL I

Class 8: Oct. 26 HEGEL II

G. W. Hegel, *Lectures on Aesthetics* (selections)

P. de Man, "Hegel on the Sublime"

Class 9: Nov. 02 THE SUBLIME LIMIT

J. L. Nancy, "The Sublime Offering"

N. Hertz, "The Notion of Blockage in the Literature of the Sublime"

Class 10: Nov. 09 THE GENDERED SUBLIME

B. Freeman, "Love's Labor: Kant, Isis, and Toni Morrison's 'Beloved'"

C. Battersby, "Stages on Kant's Way: Aesthetics, Morality, & the Gendered Sublime"

Thu Nov. 3, 2006 -- NO CLASS (Thanksgiving Recess)

Class 11: Nov. 30 THE SUBLIME IN ART

L. Marin, "On a Tower of Babel in a Painting by Poussin"

B. Newman, et. al. "The Ides of Art: 6 Opinions on What Is Sublime in Art?"

J.-F. Lyotard "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde"

Class 12: Dec. 07

Presentations on Final Papers (Working Bibliographies due)