

The Role of the Sublime in Defining the American Identity

The concept of the Sublime has been around since ancient times to describe the awe-inspiring power of nature and the universe, and it has played a key role in modern thought and the construction of American Identity¹.

The aesthetic notion of the sublime was a keystone in western Enlightenment and was developed by central thinkers such as Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. Burke referred to the sublime as a suspension of all emotion that occurs when confronted by terrifying, vast, and powerful nature, and as something that cannot be easily perceived.² He writes that “the passion caused by the great and sublime in nature is astonishment, and astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror.”³ The sublime was used to express a “pleasing horror,” the co-existing of “pleasure and pain,” or a “delightful horror and terrible joy.”⁴ Kant further argued that the sublime was a spiritual experience that transcended the physical realm and the rational thought. Thus, for Burke and Kant, the sublime was a philosophical idea, or a transcendental philosophy. However, the American sublime diverged from this European theory.

The American sublime was not limited to a single subject confronted with astonishing nature. Instead, the American sublime was for all Americans and it “merged with revivalism,” embracing “religion, nationalism, and technology.”⁵ The American sublime was reformulated as progress and was based on the American myth of Westward

¹ Doran, R. (2015). *The Theory of the Sublime from Longinus to Kant*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. P: 2. Doi: 10.1017/CBO9781316182007

² Sandro Marpillero. (2020). Lecture: *Jean François Lyotard, The Sublime and the Avânt Garde*. <https://columbia.hosted.panopto.com/Panopto/Pages/Viewer.aspx?id=7a76cb3f-034d-469b-8861-af080177d5a8>

³ Edmund Burke. (1757). *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*

⁴ Marco de Michelis. (2008). *The Sublime is Now*, Milano, Skira. 29-39.

⁵ David E. Nye. (1996), *The American Sublime, American Technological Sublime*. P: 43

expansion and inhabitation of a sublime wilderness. In reality, the wild, sublime landscape was inhabited by Native Americans, but by rendering them as “savages,” non-human, or part of nature rather than civilization, the Americans were able to claim that their nation was built on a vast, empty, unbounded, uninhabited, and unclaimed space. Moreover, by representing progress over primitive nature as beneficial to urban life, the Americans justified settlement of the land and the development of modern industry. As a result, the notion of the sublime shifted to a celebration of technological progress and engineering feats such as the Erie canal and the arrival of trains and bridges. The Americans therefore transformed the sublime experience into faith in industry and national greatness, and the sublime played a key role in the construction of the American identity.

Urban skyscrapers eventually replace the sublime mountains in nature and the sublimity of modern technology. The skyline becomes the new sublime and a symbol of the domestication of nature.⁶ The metropolitan sublime is visually represented by Hugh Ferriss, who renders the modern city of skyscrapers as the new nature. The skyscrapers represent “disenchanted mountains” which Tafuri recognizes as an urban expression of the natural sublime.⁷ Ferriss’ renderings are often drawn at night and lit up from below in a sublime way, celebrating the achievement of modern construction. The sublime comes to be represented through urban voids and large shadows that are cast by the metropolis, embodying the metropolitan sublime through its darkness.

In the mid 1980, Lyotard resumed the discourse of the sublime as a critique of modernity.⁸ Instead of associating the sublime with the immense power of nature, he uses it to describe the awe and power that is produced by technological and scientific

⁶ Sandro Marpillero. (2020). Lecture: Metropolis. <https://columbia.hosted.panopto.com/Panopto/Pages/Viewer.aspx?id=b16daf73-00d5-425d-8a54-af0e001ffa43>

⁷ Manfredo Tafuri (1983), *The Disenchanted Mountain: The Skyscraper and the City*. The American City: Cambridge. MIT Press.

⁸ Sandro Marpillero. (2020). Lecture: Jean François Lyotard, *The Sublime and the Avânt Garde*. <https://columbia.hosted.panopto.com/Panopto/Pages/Viewer.aspx?id=7a76cb3f-034d-469b-8861-af080177d5a8>

advances in the modern society. Moreover, he was interested in how the sublime has the ability to freeze time and refers to Newman's work and his interest in creating "a sensation" or "a suspension" of time.⁹ He writes that "the avant-gardist task remains that of undoing the presumptions of the mind with respect to time. The sublime feeling is the name of this privation."¹⁰ In other words, he claims that by undoing the presumption of rational thinking that was embodied by Kant and rather introduce time, is the sublime.

This suspension of time is present also in Edward Hopper's paintings as he's able to expand the present moment. This suspension of time, or expansion of the now is arguably the modern sublime, and we see this in Duchamp's readymades as well.

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In my animation video, I wanted to explore the shifting notion of the American sublime and its role in constructing the American identity. In order to do that, I used an iconic subject by the American painter Edward Hopper, who's famous for his depictions of the quotidian American urban life. By dehumanizing his subjects, Hopper critiques the industrial progress and the technological sublime, focusing on the environment of the metropolis as nature transformed by humans. In his paintings, Hopper conveys the feeling of emptiness, loneliness, and silence, and by focusing on the ordinary he makes us aware of the effect that standardization of American life had on its people.¹¹

After walking through an empty, urban street, the subject in my video enters a bar and is captured staring at her American passport. Her expression is lonely and melancholy, and her lack of eye contact is distancing her from the viewer. In my video, the subject is searching for her lacking identity, and does so by flipping through her passport.

⁹ Jean-Francois Lyotard. (1985). *The Sublime and the Avant-Garde*. Edinburgh Univ. Press. P: 89.

¹⁰ Jean-Francois Lyotard. (1985). *The Sublime and the Avant-Garde*. Edinburgh Univ. Press. P: 90.

¹¹ Rachael M. Crouch. (2007). *Rhetoric and Redress; Edward Hopper's Adaptation of the American Sublime*

While she's flipping through the pages, she's reviewing the evolution of the American sublime as the root of the American identity.

At first, she looks at Asher Brown Durand's painting *The Indian Vespers* which depicts a Native American subject in a sublime, American wilderness, and God is present through the dramatic lighting. The Native American subject is depicted as part of nature, destined to be dominated and exploited.¹² Thus, the painting is a visual representation of the American ideology and the American Myth of occupying vacant land which has been fundamental to the construction of the American identity.

The following pages in the passport depicts Durand's painting *Progress*, which depicts the industrial transformation of nature.¹³ It clearly opposes the vast, wild nature to the east with the developed civilization to the west, staging the origin of America as a triumph of a white European civilization over nature."¹⁴ The "savages" in the wild nature is being conquered by the white civilization, and progress is represented by the newly constructed railroad, viaduct, canal, and steam from various ships, trains, and factories. In other words, the notion of progress is based on exploitation of nature and the natives, and is linked to Western naturalism. The sublime in nature, illustrated in Durand's painting, is based on this western ontology, juxtaposing the sublime nature as an object that lacks interiority with a human subject as its observer.

Following Durand's paintings, the next pages in the passport focus on the technological sublime and the awe that is produced by modern technology such as trains, and engineering feats such as the Brooklyn Bridge that symbolized rational mastery over nature. The video includes short excerpts of *Manhatta*, a film by Pauls

¹² Sandro Marpillero. (2020). Lecture: *Technological Sublime*. <https://columbia.hosted.panopto.com/Panopto/Pages/Viewer.aspx?id=4c9c222a-70d5-45e1-98bc-af0e001c32e5>

¹³ <https://journalpanorama.org/article/durands-progress/>

¹⁴ Leo Marx (1989). *The American Ideology of Space*. Denatured Visions, NY: The Museum of Modern Art. 66

Strand and Charles Sheeler that documents Manhattan in the early 20th century.¹⁵ It is considered the first American avant-garde film and it celebrates modern industry.¹⁶

Manhatta embodies the desire to capture the dynamism of modern life and the industrial society, and I wanted to include this in my narrative. Moreover, the use of scale in the film is interesting. It de-emphasizes the individual by presenting the human in a small scale juxtaposed with outsized urban buildings that render the sublime through large shadows cast by the metropolis.

One of the skyscrapers captured in *Manhatta* is strikingly similar to one of Ferriss' renderings and I make this connection very clear by swapping out the skyscraper with Ferriss'. His skyscraper represents the metropolitan sublime and is depicted as a "disenchanted mountain."¹⁷ In addition to being a symbol of the domestication of nature, Ferriss' skyscraper depicts the city as a collection of objects, transitioning us to the Empire State Plaza in Albany. The Empire State Plaza is the ultimate embodiment of the collection of architectural and sculptural objects, and is meant to be a symbol of American greatness. However, the metropolis is a lot more than a collection of objects, and Hopper's subject does not feel that her identity fits in with the trajectory of the American sublime and its construction of the American identity. She believes that she needs to look into the relationship between the human and the environment.

The introduction of Hanna Hoch's figure is meant to represent how Hopper's subject resists being defined by the American sublime and its construction of a common American identity. Instead, she is influenced by Hanna Hoch who's figure critiques the stereotypical representation of femininity. The hybrid figure made out of an African head

¹⁵ Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler (1921), *Manhatta*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qduvk4zu_hs

¹⁶ Sandro Marpillero. (2020). Lecture: *Technological Sublime*. <https://columbia.hosted.panopto.com/Panopto/Pages/Viewer.aspx?id=4c9c222a-70d5-45e1-98bc-af0e001c32e5>

¹⁷ Manfredo Tafuri (1983), *The Disenchanted Mountain: The Skyscraper and the City*. The American City: Cambridge. MIT Press.

with female parts question who she is and how one can become a subject.¹⁸ Likewise, Hopper's subject challenges the Western construct of the American sublime and national identity. By doing so, she understands that the American identity is a myth. She realized that it is a construct that is based on categorization, and that the real sublime is not about anything material or rational. Rather, the real sublime is an understanding of oneself and ones own complex identity. In other words, the sublime is not limited to the sublime in nature, in technology, or the metropolis. Instead, it is about ones own interiority, devoid of binary categorization. It can be found in the banal and the suspension of time, rather than the extreme. When Hopper's subject finally realizes this, her identity emerges, and there is a co-presence of her own interiority and how she is in the world.

Storyboard:



¹⁸ Sandro Marpillero. (2020). Lecture: *Nature / Culture*. <https://columbia.hosted.panopto.com/Panopto/Pages/Viewer.aspx?id=3444aea1-174e-4439-8af2-af0e00221beb>