The Sublime and the Self

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Outline


Self and Object: The Sublime as a Comparative Aesthetic Experience

Three self-sublime relations:
- self as exalted mind
- ‘insignificant self’ and the moral domain
- embodied self
Self and Object: The Sublime as a Comparative Aesthetic Experience

• Human self placed in relation of comparative scale to something much greater in size or power

• Comparative feature sets up a contrast between the sublime and the beautiful
The Self as Exalted Mind
The Self as Exalted Mind

‘from this sense of immensity, [the mind] feels a noble pride, and entertains a lofty conception of its own capacity’
(Gerard, 1759)

‘the sublime in nature is only improperly so called, and should properly be ascribed only to the manner of thinking, or rather its foundation in human nature’ (Kant, 1790)
The Insignificant Self and the Moral Domain

Calvin and Hobbes (Watterson, 2012)
‘an exaltation beyond our own individuality’

‘[I]f we lose ourselves in contemplation of the infinite greatness of the universe in space and time, meditate on the past millennia and on those to come; or if the heavens at night actually bring innumerable worlds before our eyes, and so impress on our consciousness the immensity of the universe, we feel ourselves reduced to nothing...’ (Schopenhauer, WWI, 1, 1859 ).
‘feels in the object the presence of something that transcends the object. The mountain peak is a phenomenon that indicates that it is also more than a phenomenon.’

Lyotard, 2006

‘with the occurrence the will is defeated’

‘ontological dislocation’

Lyotard, 1989
The ‘small self’ and awe

‘Following others, we reason that the experience of awe is self-diminishing vis-a-vis something vaster than the individual, and reduces emphasis on the desires and concerns of the self’

The study predicts that ‘the experience of awe will increase prosocial behavior, and that these effects will be driven by what we refer to as the “small self”

(Piff et al, 2015)
The Embodied Self and the Sublime
‘One thing that I am involved in about painting is that the painting should give a man a sense of place: that he knows he’s there, so he’s aware of himself. ...Standing in front of my paintings you had a sense of your own scale. The onlooker in front of my painting knows he’s there. To me, the sense of place has a mystery but has that sense of metaphysical fact.’

(quoted in Danto, 2002)
‘When I think of art I think of beauty. Beauty is the mystery of life. It is not just in the eye. It is in the mind. It is our positive response to life.’

‘I think that personal feelings, sentimentality and those sorts of emotions, are not art but that universal emotions like happiness are art. I am particularly interested in the abstract emotions that we feel when we listen to music.’

(Agnes Martin, quoted in Serpentine Gallery 1993)

A ‘joyous sublime’?

The Embodied Self and the Sublime

‘dizziness’
‘trembling sensation’, ‘sweet shudder’
‘an awesome shudder’
‘delightful stillness’, ‘tranquility’

(18th c. descriptions)
‘for the feeling of the sublime it is absolutely requisite that we see ourselves with absolutely no physical means of resistance and look to our nonphysical self for help.’ (Schiller, 1793)