

## **The Sublime: Kevin Jones**

In the film *Independence Day* (Emmerich, 1996), hundreds of gigantic spaceships invaded the earth, their shadows slowly blocked out the light in the cities over which they flew and filled the cinema screen with darkness. A group of humans gathered on top of a skyscraper over which one of the space ships hovered, in the hope that contact with an alien civilisation would promote the dawn of a new age. An immense bolt of light from the space ship pulverises the skyscraper and the city is demolished.

McEvelley described how Longinus, in the first century AD, suggested that confrontation with an immense power and a thunder bolt tearing the self and world apart were sublime images (McEvelley, 2001). Longinus's treatise, the first surviving text for the sublime, also described a text by Sappho in which she is psychologically devastated by the loss of her female lover. The massive and overwhelming external event and the internal event annihilating the sense of self defined two possible versions of the sublime.

Surprisingly for such a big concept, Shaw described how the sublime disappeared from view for several centuries and reappeared to describe those moments when the limits of reason seemed to be baffled or reached (Shaw, 2006). The sublime erupted again in the seventeenth century when Burnet (1635-1715) linked the sublime with the divine and the biblical apocalypse and explained, like the dancers on the skyscraper, a transcendent urge to reach for what might lie beyond (Shaw, 2004).

In the eighteenth century, the sublime came down to earth in the idea that the outer grandeur of the natural landscape reflected the inner grandeur of the human (McEvelley, 2001). In contrast, Burke (1756), focused on the capacity of precipitous mountain landscapes or vast ocean spaces to dwarf and overwhelm human perception causing a sensation of awe and terror. In this sublime, a key relationship was that between pleasure and pain and an object could only become sublime when contemplated from a safe distance. Similarly Kant (1724-1804) emphasised the negative pleasures of the sublime, produced by the power of reason to comprehend and thus distance the mind from that which appeared as initially painfully incomprehensible (Shaw, 2006).

In *Independence Day*, the outer reaches of the universe are brought to earth and rather than the threat of a natural landscape, the invading space ships suggest a limitless technological sublime threatening humanity as an alien and destructive presence.

The question of the object, its relation to language and the sublime as a representing a problem within rather than beyond representation has preoccupied post-modern theories (Shaw, 2006). Where for Burke and Kant the French Revolution had been a sublime political event, for McEvelley, Burke's 'Terror Sublime' was evoked by the effect of uncontrollable

capitalist globalisation with its subsuming of the nation state and threat to local identities, public fear and astonishment following the 9/11 attacks and 'Operation Shock and Awe', the invasion of Iraq (McEvelley, 2001). In the film, the aliens were revealed as locusts that travelled the universe stripping planets bare of all natural resources and evoked fears of both invasion by an unknowable other and the ecological crisis in the face of unrestricted economic growth.

Throughout this historical development, beauty, identified with bounded form, unity and harmony, was contrasted with the unlimited, indeterminate forms of the sublime. The contrast was gendered so that the feminine was beautiful, charming and pleasing while the masculine was dark, powerful, and sublime. McEvelley criticises contemporary theorists for confusing the beautiful and the sublime (McEvelley, 2001) while feminists have criticised the sublime as a masculine theory and sought different forms of transcendence (Shaw, 2006).

Surprisingly for such a big concept, in art therapy it was not until the second edition of Case and Dalley's handbook that the sublime and the beautiful are discussed in relation to Winnicott's object mother and environment mother respectively (Case and Dalley, 2006). Maclagan further discussed the sublime in the work of Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko and in the general relationship between symbol and referent (Maclagan, 2001). *Independence Day* ended when two male heroes captured and flew a small alien spacecraft inside the colossal body of the alien mother ship and escaped after causing a cataclysmic explosion which saved the earth. Psychoanalytic and Art Therapy theory suggest a bridge between the sublime as an aesthetic and philosophical concept and the sublime as it might erupt into clinical experience.

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