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Capitalism and the Symptom of the Sublime

Sublimity is no longer in art, but in speculation on art...there is a kind of collusion between Capital and the avant-garde. There is something of the Sublime in Capitalist economy.

Jean-Francois Lyotard, from ‘The Sublime and the Avant-Garde’, 1983

Introduction

This statement by Lyotard formulates my argument in this paper, which will examine the relationship between the aesthetic concept of the sublime and its historical and contemporary relationship to capitalism.

The relationship between the aesthetic concept of the sublime and capitalism was identified by Francois Lyotard in The Post Modern Condition (Lyotard, 1984) and in his above-mentioned essay, ‘The Sublime and the Avant-Garde’, (Lyotard, 1983). These writings appeared in the context of a widely perceived cultural and political turn toward neo-conservatism in the early nineteen eighties. Governments of the political right in the UK and USA pursued neo-liberal economic policies, resulting in the de-regulation of markets. Later in the decade an art-boom was given impetus by the critical/institutional support for traditional ‘commodity’ art forms like Painting, which manifested themselves in the movement known as the Transavantgarde. It was perhaps the nineteen eighties new-found enthusiasm for acquisition that prompted Lyotard to remark (1982, pp.64-9):‘Capitalist economy is in a sense an economy regulated by an idea- that of infinite wealth or power.’
The fixation with absolutes whether in economic or aesthetic terms bears hall marks of the Sublime, but such a superficial comparison belies the fundamental antagonisms that separate these two concepts, but also the complexity of the relationship shared by the concepts of capitalism and the sublime. In addressing the question of whether there is a place for Sublime art in Capitalism and what that place might be, this paper will argue that the Sublime image (which may include the religious image) far from being a Romantic obstacle to the Capitalist mentality has, since the emergence of theoretical economics and mercantile capitalism in the mid 18th century, occupied what I will define as both a symptomatic and symbiotic relationship with Western capitalism.4

The arguments in this paper expand and develop upon research, discussed in two recent papers. White (2009,p.162) conjectures that ‘the natural sublime of Romanticism and its successors is itself a displaced and reassuring projection of a relation of the modern subject to capital’ and Reiber (2009,pp.77-91) identifies the loss of meaning as a defining feature of post-modern society, which she argues the sublime addresses in its contemporary form.5

I will illustrate my argument with examples of work by the German Romantic artist Caspar David Friedrich and the contemporary artists, Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst.

The Sublime and Capitalism

The sublime is not an undifferentiated concept. It is, I would suggest a conceptual model, which is articulated aesthetically, through history according to the social,
economic and political conditions prevailing within capitalist society at a given time.

In other words-its identity is transitive, rather than monolithic.

Paul Crowther in his essay 'Beyond Art and Philosophy: Deconstruction and the post-Modern Sublime' (Crowther, 1988) describes the sublime as follows:

If an object exceeds or threatens our perceptual and imaginative capacities, through its totality of size or complexity, or potentially destructive character, this can nevertheless still cause us pleasure, insofar as we are able to present it as excessive or threatening- in thought writing or visual representation.6

The above definition is a conflation of the two canonical 18th century formulations, - Kant’s Third Critique of Judgment (Kant, 1790) and Edmund Burke’s Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Beautiful and the Sublime. (Burke.1757). In this paper, I wish to examine that part of The Kantian Sublime, which Kant himself termed the mathematical sublime. This concerns ideas of quantity or magnitude and connects to notions of boundlessness and infinitude, which I would argue constitute a contemporary sublime.7

Kant’s theory of the transcendental, Mathematical sublime should be distinguished from the Dynamic sublime, deriving from Edmund Burke.8 His theory of the sublime, based on the notion of physiological shock and terror caused by the forces of Nature, which provokes sentiments of the sublime in the individual, was applied, with varying degrees of licence, to the so-called ‘Young British Artists’ movement of the 1990’s, in particular the work of Damien Hirst.9
The aesthetic of the Sublime is actually an Enlightenment concept, which came to be adopted by the Romantic Movement initially in literature and then visual art. Romantic interpretations of the sublime, especially within Northern Romanticism, and the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840), represented Kantian notions of boundlessness in the face of Nature. This de-limitation is a property of the mathematical sublime, which has been defined by Lyotard in the following terms (Lyotard.1994):

The modality of the mathematical sublime relates to magnitude and formlessness of what appears before us that is paramount, conveying a perceptually intractable impression of unlimited extent and absence of boundaries.  

In determining whether such a definition is applicable to the contemporary aesthetics of the sublime it is instructive to consider the work of two artists, Jeff Koons (born 1955) and Damien Hirst (born 1965) as prominent examples of a particular type of art practice under Anglo-American free-market Capitalism. The work of these artists, I would suggest, represents certain ideas about the fetishization of the art object as a commodity form and theforegrounding of the notion of excess as being instrumentally meaningful in readings of both artists’ work. This paper will examine the processes by which such themes in their work refer to a quality of magnitude and suggest therefore affects of the mathematical sublime, but ones derived from the functions of culture rather than nature. This distinction between these two notions of the mathematical sublime - one predicated on the magnitude and boundlessness of nature, - the other on the boundlessness of culture and cultural consumption is, this paper will suggest, not exclusively an aesthetic, but, also a socio-economic distinction that points to the way modern capitalism and aesthetics mutually function.
Capitalism as understood in its modern sense (i.e. pertaining since mid-18th century) is seen as the accumulation of the means of production (materials, land, tools) as property into the hands of a few (Capitalists) and the production of goods, products and services (wage labour) for economic growth known as Productive Labour. However, a feature of late Anglo-American Capitalism in its post–WW2 high phase was mass-market consumer culture, whereby the majority in society do not produce the goods they consume. Instead, their socio-economic function within society becomes defined as consumers.\(^{11}\) The economic system of consumerism produced the commodity form and as Joseph Lough (Lough, 2010) explains the movement of the commodity form is to abstract immaterial value.\(^{12}\) This movement finds a powerful expression in the economics of surplus value as represented in the fine art object, which, over the last decade in the contemporary art market, has seen a growth of investment from what has been described as the ‘new bourgeoisie’.

In the mature economies of the West, Capitalism, being an order of economics, carries a different cultural weight than the aesthetic concept of the sublime, the origins of which are older, but in its modern incarnation, surfaced at roughly the same time as modern economic theory in mid 18th century.\(^{13}\)

In the next section of this paper I will argue that the sublime in its modern form was given a new lease of life by the dynamics of the system of capitalist economics and has historically tended to surface at moments of crisis or transition in the capitalist order.
The Sublime as Symptom of Capitalism

Professor James Elkins, (Elkins, 2010), writing recently, argues that the sublime is not well used as a trans-historical category and is limited to particular, (mainly 19th century) categories of visual art. However, it may be observed that discourses around the concept of the Sublime, when looked at historically have not been limited, either by category or time to a particular period. Instead, it has been argued that there has been a tendency for the discourses of the sublime to surface, either at times of crisis or at the threshold of new eras in the development of Western Capitalism. The economic theory of free market capitalism developed by Adam Smith (1776) and the formulation of a concept of modern aesthetics in the form of the sublime as developed by Kant (1790) and Burke (1757) were both products of the development of individualism in thought and socio-economic relations that occurred in the Enlightenment. The freedom of thought and feeling which bourgeois individualism represented produced the cult of sensibility, which the early Romantics adopted across the art forms. The Romantic vision of the Sublime in Nature coincided with the rise of early industrialism in England. This can be seen in such works as de Loutherbourg’s Coalbrookdale by Night (1801) and the works of Wilson, Martin, Blake and Turner. In Europe political emancipation and revolutionary conflict in France, the growth of the bourgeoisie and the economics of investment and mercantile capitalism in the 18th century presaged a period of rapid social, economic and political change. The German Romantic painter, Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840) lived at the outset of this modern order and thus may be said his interest in the sublime reflected the particular anxiety of his period whereby the cult of sentiment and personal feeling in the face of Nature provided an anodyne against the uncertainties of socio-economic and later industrial change. This may be seen in a work such as his
**Monk by the Sea** (c.1809). For the first half of the nineteenth century the sublime in visual art appears almost as a cultural counter-weight to the impending dominance of industrial capitalism. This concept of progress crystallises in the neo-religious belief of ‘Manifest Destiny’ as played out in the sublime landscapes of the American wilderness by the painters of the Hudson River School, (Cole, Church, Bierstadt *et al*) who see the great unease and ambivalence that the effects of industrial capitalism provoke in the cultural mind. The rise of Parisian Modernism however and the new metropolitan cultures in Europe and America in the second half of the nineteenth century renounced the discourses of the Natural Sublime in favour of the discourses of Materialism reflected in the great confidence and positivism that the new age of industrial monopoly capitalism brought (witness the Great Exhibitions in Hyde Park and the World Fairs in America and France). Subsequently, the twentieth century, and the immediate aftermath of World War Two, saw a cultural emphasis on the moral responsibility of the individual in Europe and America. Discourses on the sublime in visual and literary culture reflected a tension between the individual and the social under the nascent culture of consumer capitalism. One thinks of the discourses of the sublime in Abstract Expressionism (particularly Barnett Newman) in America and the exploration of the unrepresentable in the literary works of writers like George Bataille (Bataille, 1962) and Maurice Blanchot (Blanchot, 1955) in France. In the contemporary period, a reassessment of aesthetics in critical theory, including the concept of the sublime, and the work of artists like Damien Hirst,(born 1965) Bill Viola and Jeff Koons,(born 1955) are found to occur during a historical period which has seen the Gulf and Kosovan Wars of the early nineties, the events of September 11th and the ‘rupture of the symbolic order’ which they putatively implied, the subsequent ‘War on Terror’ and the near collapse of global
financial markets and sovereign economies at the end of the decade. I am not suggesting here a causal relationship but in these circumstances, I would argue that discourses around the sublime manifest themselves as a ‘neurotic symptom’ displayed by the capitalist mentality at times of anxiety or uncertainty in its future. By the term ‘neurotic symptom’, I mean a perceptible indication of the presence of a disorder of anxiety within the logic of the capitalist mentality. I would argue that the Capitalist mentality, as a collective form of consciousness possesses a dynamic parallel to individual psychology in that, in order to maintain equilibrium the capitalist mentality balances opposing, conflicting and repressed forces within its dynamic - even forces which may contradict its logic- as in the concept of the sublime. In cultural influence capitalism is very large, and the sublime is very small, but it acts as a counter-weight to the larger economic narrative of capitalism. With the emergence of modern capitalism, it could be put crudely that the sublime acquired a new role, like ‘saving us from capitalism’, or making us feel better about our situation within capitalism, by providing, in cultural terms, quite literally a process of cultural ‘sublimation’, whereby the basic drives of the capitalist mentality are converted into activity regarded as higher in cultural or moral value. It is within this role that I would suggest the contemporary sublime has been functionalised by Capitalism. The process by which the Capitalist mentality functionalised for socio-economic purposes the notion of the Protestant ‘work ethic’ and the ‘specialist calling’ was famously documented by Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber, 1905). I suggest that the mentality of the capitalist enterprise has similarly functionalised aesthetics in the form of the concept of the sublime.
Implicit in Lyotard’s statement (cited earlier) is the notion that Capitalism is teleological. It is concerned only with the future, and with the new which it collapses into a continual present of ‘innovation’ - the past is of no relevance to its purposes. In this sense Capitalism shares a similar phenomenon with Modernism - the idea that the cultural present is discontinuous with the past lies at the origins of Modernism. The visual cultures of late capitalism tend to situate the historical image so that it can only be understood aesthetically. In that sense the image is removed from time, since it cannot have a place in history or the dialectical process of historical evolution. The fundamental ambivalence at the heart of capitalism’s relationship to the history of the visual image is that whilst seeking to preserve a false mystique of timelessness and permanence to historical images, capitalism, in order to continue and function, must create a discontinuity with the historical past and of memory. The historicity it denies is its materialist basis - its relationship to property and to exchange value and in short to the commodity, of which the tradition of oil painting is one.¹⁹ According to Berger (1972, pp.7-34) it enacts this denial by constructing a false mystification of the image.²⁰ Ranciere, (2007) says something very similar in relation to recent images-in The Future of the Image.²¹ In this classic materialist view of the image, bourgeois culture ascribes to the painted image spiritual values, despite the fact that since mid 17th century the main motivation for the practice has been market-led, which Berger(1972, pp.83-112) argues for the majority of the tradition produced hack, cynical work or work that was produced for a commercial purpose. According to Berger (1972, pp.7-34) the construction of this mystique permitted the ruling class to justify its own privileged position. He goes on to say that the art of any period tends to serve the ideological interests of the ruling class and by creating a mystique about the art of the past Berger (1972, pp.7-34) believes this created an incomprehension
amongst the working class for these images of the past and by extension their understanding of their own past. Adopting Walter Benjamin’s (1970.auth.1936) argument, Berger (1972,pp7-34) argues that the mass mechanical reproduction of images has meant that images of the past can now be seen by anybody anywhere and this liberation of the art of the past allows people to experience the past and in doing so construct an understanding of their relationship to their own past.  

Consumer Capitalism places the object (Materialism) at the heart of its system of subjective relations and in capitalist societies materialism finds its expression in the consumer object whereby people are socially and economically defined by what they consume as an indicator of identity. This is of course a post-Modern, post-Marxist argument, but I would suggest, it is against this background of socio-economic relations that the sublime may be seen to operate in the work of artists like Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst. Capitalist value (i.e. surplus–value) is a key meaning within interpretations of the sublime in their work.

The rise of the 1990’s bourgeois interest in contemporary art, the new money of hedge-fund billionaires and Russian oligarchs, led the art critic J.J. Charlesworth (Charlesworth,2007) in a recent article, ‘The Bonfire of the Vanities’ to compare the situation to that described by Bataille (Bataille,1946) in The Accursed Share as the ‘squandering of the surplus’. The superabundance of corporate profits in the earlier part of this decade, led to a reckless profligacy by new money in the art market rather than its diligent re-investment in the expansion of productive activity. Two events in the U.K. within the past 5 years serve as a useful illustration to this phenomenon. The first was the exhibition,’Beyond Belief’– which included the media-hyped
presentation of a diamond encrusted platinum cast of a human skull made under the
direction of Damien Hirst.\textsuperscript{24} The work, entitled: \textit{For the Love of God} came with a
reported price tag of £50million. This spectacle was followed by what the \textit{Art
Newspaper} termed the ‘unprecedented’ event of ‘Beautiful Inside My Head Forever’
when the same artist consigned 223 lots to Sotheby’s direct from the studio, realizing
record profits of £111 million as the Dow dropped 500 points and the day Lehman
Brothers filed for Bankruptcy, announcing the current global financial crisis.\textsuperscript{25} The
irony was probably not lost on Hirst, but what do these events signify in the context of
Lyotard’s (Lyotard, 1983) observation that ‘sublimity is no longer in art, but in
speculation on art’? \textsuperscript{26}

In a recent research paper, ‘Damien Hirst’s Diamond Skull and the Capitalist,
Sublime’ (White, 2009), \textsuperscript{27} Luke White refers to an observation of Guy Debord
(Debord, 1967) from the \textit{Society of the Spectacle} that the spectacle is capital to such a
degree of accumulation that it becomes image.\textsuperscript{28} Similarly, I would argue, surplus
value, amassed to such a degree of accumulation, unrestrained by regulation, (whether
governmental, religious or ethical) produces a problem of ‘adequation’. In other
words it challenges language, comprehension or representation (a characteristic of the
mathematical Sublime). It is at this point, Debord argues, that ‘capital becomes
image.’ Damien Hirst’s skull, (and I would add Jeff Koons chromium stainless steel
\textit{Hanging Heart} from the \textit{Celebration} series) now achieve that condition which attends
the spectral position of Late Capitalist art- between an aesthetic object, apprehendable
by the senses and the abstract, quasi-mystical status of Kant’s (1790) ‘super-sensible’
thing’ and Marx’ (1867) ‘capitalist unpresentable object of desire’. This kind of
apotheosis of the cultural ‘commodity’ object through the mathematical sublime
represents the ecstatic moment when the movement between aesthetics and economics becomes one and capital becomes image.

However, whilst works such as *Celebration* (1994-2006) and *For the Love of God* (2007) demonstrate the ecstatic moment of the capitalist spirit, the exhilaration these works generate through affects of excess and infinitude belies a strange slippage of meaning. Despite the theatrical presence these works undoubtedly possess the viewer standing before them experiences a strange sense of evasion or absence in attempting to assimilate what these works propose They manifestly proclaim the ‘new’ and the ‘innovative’ but somehow fall into the limbo state between the ‘new’ of capitalism and what Lyotard (Lyotard, 1983) describes as the ‘now’ of the sublime- (i.e. a meaningful event/occurrence). It is this ambivalence between the conceptual and the aesthetic cognition, which renders art works of this nature dislocated from their capacity to mediate experience between the art object and the viewer.

The above may suggest a process of functionalisation of the Sublime by Capitalism, in the form of the art market, but I do not think the sublime has been successfully colonized by capitalism yet. In ‘The Sublime and the Avant Garde’ Lyotard (1991,pp.89-107, auth.1982) argues that capitalism (the market) is in fact inimical to the real meaning of the contemporary sublime, because of a conflict in the understanding of temporalities between the ‘new’ of capitalism and the ‘now’ of the sublime, which he cites as the 'Ereignis'- the ‘Now’, the ‘Event’, the 'Is it happening?’ question, which, he argues is found in the work of Modernist artists such as Barnett Newman. The ‘Now’ of the sublime is in opposition to the temporalities of capitalism (i.e. ‘the new’ and ‘the innovative’). He argues, the metaphysics of
capital is a technology of time and innovation and since innovation assumes there will be a continuum of events and more innovations, capitalism, by its own logic must discount the challenge to temporality – the ‘Will anything further happen?’ question- which the Sublime in its pure, dynamic form presents. For this reason the sublime will always evade total absorption, assimilation or normalization by the mechanisms of capitalism.

That is why in late capitalism, I would argue the image of the sublime and its challenge to temporality-to the endless succession of ‘new’ events which capitalism promises- is death itself. In psychoanalysis the defectiveness of perfect systems underlies Freud’s theory of the ‘Death Instinct’ and much has been written about oceanic feeling and the death drive of the sublime. Baudrillard,(1988, pp.119-148) writing on the libidinal economy of capitalism. In ‘Symbolic Exchange and Death’ referring to Lyotard asserts:

It becomes impossible to distinguish the libidinal economy from the system’s economy (exchange value). The process of value is irreversible. Any reversibility is fatal to the system. 30

The dynamic of finality haunts the capitalist unconscious-or mentality. Hirst’s skulls and sharks, Warhol’s electric chairs and Koons’ promise of an eternal ‘new’ in the commodity form represent for capitalism both a vision of its sublime obsession-Death and through visual representation, the symbolic, ritual vanquishing of its ultimate terror.
The sublime may also evade colonization by capitalism in another way. In a recent paper, ‘The Sublime and the Possibility of Meaning’, Bettina Reiber,(2009,pp.77-91) identifies the ‘loss of meaning’ as being a central condition of post-modern experience for the individual. Analysing Kant’s ‘Third Critique of Judgment’ (Kant,1790), her paper proposes that Aesthetic Reason, provides a third way of ‘knowing truth’ which is neither objectively provable or an arbitrary opinion. Because Aesthetic Judgment is an Idea of Reason, it possesses a ‘subjective validity’ as knowledge because a statement about an aesthetic response to a sublime feeling can legitimately be expected to demand assent from another if it acknowledges a universal truth in aesthetic judgment. As Reiber states:

(Aesthetic) truth becomes a question of inter-subjectivity and by offering a rational grounding for the quest for meaning, the judgment on the sublime offers help out of the seeming impasse deplored as the post modern condition.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the sublime as an aesthetic response to the world grew out of the self same Enlightenment project of individual and economic freedom as modern capitalism and that the sublime has tended both historically and in the contemporary period to surface at times of crisis or transition in the development of modern capitalism. As such it is therefore a symptom of capitalism, which has functionalised its meaning. The contemporary sublime may now be read as much in terms of cultural socio-economics as well as an aesthetic category. Under this reading of the capitalist sublime, vision reaches its ecstatic moment when ‘capital becomes image’. Capitalism and the sublime share a different metaphysics of time. The perpetual ‘new’ of capitalism is structurally different from the ‘Now’ of the sublime
and while the sublime image may have been functionalised by capitalism it can never be totally colonised because of this temporal distinction. Both capitalism and the sublime share a ‘Death Drive’, but In the case of capitalism infinite increase in surplus exchange value to the point of mathematical sublimity exposes the defectiveness of a system, whose logic if reversed would destroy itself. By contrast, the sublime since it is not a closed economic system but a subjective idea of reason, provides a form of subjective knowledge and because the sublime is a category loaded with subjective meaning, it may enable methods of visualizing imaginative experience through such discourses of the Sublime as the Religious, or Rapture or Divinity, which, lie outside the temporal and functional constraints of capitalism. These alternative discourses are inscribed within the sublime image and it is these alternative discourses, I would suggest, which offer the possibility of a re-visioning of the Romantic concept of the sublime image from the perspective of late capitalism.

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Endnotes:


3 *Ibid*. Endnote 1

4 In this paper, ‘religious image’ means Catholic and Protestant iconography or their generic secularizations.

variation of this paper was given at *The Sublime Object* conference, Tate Britain 2010).


Hooker, Richard. 'The European Enlightenment Glossary: Capitalism’
[www.wsu.edu:8080/](http://www.wsu.edu:8080/)


Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* was published in 1776 and Immanuel Kant’s *Third Critique of Judgment* was published in 1790


This proposition is discussed in *The Sublime Now* (2009) cited *ibid*. Endnote 5.

Romanticism adopted concepts and philosophies from the Enlightenment, such as the sublime and the belief in individualism.

To suggest Modernism was exclusively metropolitan is an over-simplification—witness the various movements adopting primitivism within Modernism, e.g. Pont Aven group, Fauvism, Expressionism

I am referring here to such works as George Bataille’s *The Impossible* (1962) and Maurice Blanchot’s *The Space of Literature* (1955)

This is a Materialist argument, which the critical Left have adopted through the writings of, *inter alia*, Walter Benjamin, *(The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical*


22 Ibid. Endnote 20


26 Ibid. Endnote 1


29 Ibid. Endnote 1


31 Ibid. Footnote 5

32 Ibid. Footnote 5

Bibliography


