The American technological sublime
In aesthetics, the sublime (from the Latin sublimis ([looking up from] under the lintel, high, lofty, elevated, exalted) is the quality of greatness or vast magnitude, whether physical, moral, intellectual, metaphysical, aesthetic, spiritual or artistic. The term especially refers to a greatness with which nothing else can be compared and which is beyond all possibility of calculation, measurement or imitation.
Above: The prototype Manchester computer. The six racks shown are essentially those of the 'baby machine' which ran its first program in June 1948; by June 1949 when this photograph was taken, the machine had roughly doubled in size.

Left: Alan Turing with two Ferranti engineers at the console of the 'Mark I' computer at Manchester, 1951.
The first known study of the sublime is ascribed to Longinus: Peri Hupsous/Hypsous or On the Sublime. This is thought to have been written in the 1st century AD. For Longinus, the sublime is an adjective that describes great, elevated, or lofty thought or language, particularly in the context of rhetoric.
The development of the concept of the sublime as an aesthetic quality in nature distinct from beauty was first brought into prominence in the eighteenth century in the writings of Anthony Ashley Cooper, third earl of Shaftesbury, and John Dennis.

John Dennis was the first to publish his comments in a journal letter published as Miscellanies in 1693, giving an account of crossing the Alps where, contrary to his prior feelings for the beauty of nature as a "delight that is consistent with reason", the experience of the journey was at once a pleasure to the eye as music is to the ear, but "mingled with Horrors, and sometimes almost with despair".

Source wikipedia
Grosser and Kleiner Mythen, Swiss Alps. British writers, taking the Grand Tour in the 17th and 18th centuries, first used the sublime to describe objects of nature.
Edmund Burke's concept of the sublime was developed in *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756). Burke was the first philosopher to argue that the sublime and the beautiful are mutually exclusive. The dichotomy is not as simple as Dennis' opposition, but antithetical to the same degree as light and darkness. Beauty may be accentuated by light, but either intense light or darkness (the absence of light) is sublime to the degree that it can obliterate the sight of an object. The imagination is moved to awe and instilled with a degree of horror by what is "dark, uncertain, and confused."[5] While the relationship of the sublime and the beautiful is one of mutual exclusiveness, either one can produce pleasure. The sublime may inspire horror, but one receives pleasure in knowing that the perception is a fiction...
In his *Critique of Judgment* (1790), Kant investigates the sublime, stating "We call that sublime which is absolutely great" (§ 25). He distinguishes between the "remarkable differences" of the Beautiful and the Sublime, noting that beauty "is connected with the form of the object", having "boundaries", while the sublime "is to be found in a formless object", represented by a "boundlessness" (§ 23).

Kant then further divides the sublime into the mathematical and the dynamical, where in the mathematical "aesthetical comprehension" is not a consciousness of a mere greater unit, but the notion of absolute greatness not inhibited with ideas of limitations (§ 27). The dynamically sublime is "nature considered in an aesthetic judgment as might that has no dominion over us", and an object can create a fearfulness "without being afraid of it" (§ 28).

Source: wikipedia
Kant considers both the beautiful and the sublime as "indefinite" concepts, but where beauty relates to the "Understanding", sublime is a concept belonging to "Reason", and "shows a faculty of the mind surpassing every standard of Sense" (§ 25). For Kant, one's inability to grasp the enormity of a sublime event such as an earthquake demonstrates inadequacy of one's sensibility and imagination. Simultaneously, one's ability to subsequently identify such an event as singular and whole indicates the superiority of one's cognitive, supersensible powers. Ultimately, it is this "supersensible substrate," underlying both nature and thought, on which true sublimity is located.

Source wikipedia
Par23 (S.165)
Uebergang von dem Beurteilungsvermoegen des Schoenen zu dem des Erhabenen

...das Erhabene ist dagegen auch an einem formlosen Gegenstand zu finden, insofern Unbegrenztheit an ihm...hinzugedacht wird...

..denn das eigentliche Erhabene kann in keiner sinnlichen Form enthalten sein, sonder trifft nur Ideen der Vernunft: welche, obgleich keine ihnen angemessende Darstellung moeglich ist, eben durch diese Unangemessenheit, welche sich sinnlich darstellen laesst, rege gemacht und ins Gemuet gerufen werden..

...Zum Schoenen der Natur muessen wir einen Grund ausser uns suchen, zum Erhabenen aber bloss in uns und der Denkart, die in die Vorstellung der ersteren Erhabenheit hineinbringt...die Idee des Erhabenen von der einer Zweckmaessigkeit der Natur ganz anbtrennt..

Par25 (S.172)
Erhaben ist, was auch nur denken zue koennen ein Vermoegen des Gemuets beweist, das jeden Massstab der Sinne uebertrifft.

Par26 (S.175)
..nicht das Erhabene an Kunstprodukten (Gebaeuden, usw), wo ein menschlicher Zweck die Form sowohl sowohl als die Groesse bestimmt, noch an Naturdingen, deren Begriff schon einen bestimmten Zweck bei sich fuehrt..., sondern an der rohen Natur (und an dieser nur, sofern sie fuer sich keinen Reiz, oder Ruehrung aus wirklicher Gefahr, bei sich fuehrt), bloss sofern sie Groesse enthaelt...

Source: Kant: Kritik der Aesthetischen Urteilskraft : Zweites Buch, Analytik des Erhabenen
...Die Einbildungskraft schreitet in der Zusammensetzung, die zur Groessenvorstellung erforderlich ist, von selbst, ohne dass ihr etwas hinderlich ware, ins Unendliche fort; der Verstand aber leitet sie durch Zahlbegriffe, wozu jene das Schema hergeben muss...

...Denn in de Vestandessachaetzung der Groessen (der Arithmetik) kommt man eben so weit, ob man die Zusammenfassung der Einheiten bis zur Zahl 10, oder bis 4 treibt, die weitere Groessenerzeugung aber im Zusammensetzen...bloss progressive (nicht komprehensiv) nach einem angenommenen Progessionsprinzip verrichtet...die logische Groessenschaetzung geht ungehindert ins Unendliche...

... so muss diejenige Groessse eines Naturobjektes, and welcher die Einbildingskraft ihr ganzes Vermoegen der Zusammenfassung fruchtlos verwendet, den Begriff der Natur auf ein uebersinnliches Substrat fuehren, welches ueber allen Massstab der Sinne gross ist, und daher nicht sowohl den Gegenstand, als vielmehr die Gemuetstimmung in Schaetzung desselben, als erhaben beurteilen laesst.

Beispiele vom Mathematisch-Erhabenen der Naturin der blossen Anschauung liefern uns alle die Faelle, wo uns nicht sowohl ein groesserer Zahlbegriff, als vielmehr grosse Einheit als Mass...fuer die Einbildungskraft gegeben wird..

..dieses fuer das der Milchstrasse , und der unemesslichen Menge soclerh Milchstrassensysteme unter den Namen der Nebelsterne, welche vermutlich wiederum ein dergleichen System unter sich ausmachen, lassen uns hier keine Grenzen erwarten. Nun liegt das Erhabene, bei der aesthetischen Beurteilung eines so unermesslichen Ganzen, nicht sowohl in der Groesse der Zahl, als darin, dass wir im Fortschritte immer auf desto groessere Einheiten gelangen;wozu die systematische Abteilung des Weltgebaeudes beitraegt, die uns alles Grosse in der Natur immer wiederum als klein, eigentlich aber unsere Einbildungskraft in ihrer ganzen Grenzlosigkeit, und mit ihr die Natur als gegen die Ideen der Vernunft, wenn sie eine ihnen angemessene Darstellung verschaffen soll, verschwindend vorstellt.
Kaspar David Friedrich, Sea of Ice, 1824
Burke and Kant: sublime a constant. History shows that people seek new objects for the sublime. Kantian sublime required a sense of personal safety (watch the hurricane from afar). Kant: experience of the sublime based on a universal capacity for a certain kind of emotion.

Ch2 The American Sublime

P18 - 21
18th century America: wilderness no longer a hostile region to be conquered for some, but for most: still an obstacle to subdue, along with the Indians.

Virginia’s natural bridge – catastroph theory (violent cataclysms of earthquake and flood destroyed many beautiful structures – values those that remain). The bridge is sublime because it is terrifying, pinful, almost intolerable yet delightful.

Niagara Falls: also an object of sublime in the eyes of the educated. In the eyes of the working man: an obstacle to work.

P23-24
Conflation of the technological with the natural sublime – an American amalgamation. As Americans became tourists in their own country, interest in sublime landscapes became not an idle diversion but an act of self-definition. America lacks a royal family, a long history or a national church -> landscape as ersatz.

P27
Usually sublime experienced in solitude – in America often experienced in a crowd -> tourism -> the popular sublime: less clearly articulated (amazing, fabulous).

P30
Women more moved by the sublime (in America) than men – with penchant to the ‘beautiful/picturesque’, influenced by Kant’s idea that men are predisposed to the sublime and women to the beautiful.
P32
Grandest canyon, longest railway – all become publicly celebrated – Europe knew few such wonders in comparison – they became icons of American Greatness.

P33 - 34
By 1830s technological objects assumed active forces in achieving democracy and ‘greatness’
Erie canal (125) the first icons of technological sublime – numerous locks, aqueducts, cuts through solid rock demonstrated control over natural forces – ladder of five locks in Lockport that carried boats up a giant staircase over the Niagara Escarpment. – the opening was a public spectacle of grand order – Lake Erie connected to Atlantic Ocean. – proves capabilities of a free people to create the most splendid works (and proving the current political system effective, powerful and vindicated in leading the world towards universal democracy.)

P33 - 34
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P36
Thomas Jefferson’s ideal was not that of the wild, but the agrarian, the rural agrarian state of steady habits and good morals ->grid system of roads – land appropriated as a natural symbol of a nation but subsequently transformed into a man-made landscape – the project of American self-making
-> Manifest Destiny(a phrase used by leaders and politicians in the 1840s to explain continental expansion by the United States): nature authors in the making of America the script sanctioning its own transformation in the service of an inevitable destiny.

P43
Technological achievements become central to Independence Day, and the American Sublime fuses with religion, nationalism and technology, diverging in practice significantly form European theory – not limited to nature, the American sublime embraced technology.
Ch9: Atomic Bomb and Apollo XI New Forms of the dynamic sublime

P225 - 227
German V2 – Sputnik 1957 – > NASA - space race - Atom bomb terrifying and irresistible –

228 - 229
Most powerful force every activated by humans - accompanied by visual splendor (colors, xrays) beyond the realm of poets – reverence – religious undertone – Oppenheimer quoted Hindu scripture” I am become Death, destroyer of worlds.” – sublime terror and celebration, followed by somberness...”what have we done?” – after effect undermines self-justification of the technological sublime...-> “death worlds”, beyond control of individuals..

231 - 233
- Atom bomb created in secret project (Manhattan Project) – first successful test hidden behind phony “munitions depot explosion” when acknowledged it is a fait accompli. Scientists involved in creation over time removed from administration – out of control loop...
- atomic bomb sublime only from a distance...on the ground shear terror and long after- terror - but a certain public fascination (Sands Hotel in Las Vegas hosted a Miss Atomic Blast beauty contest..)

234
domestication of atomic energy: shift from terror to control – and puts it back into sublime. Atomic power then reaffirms man’s control over awesome powers of nature. Atomic power then seen as a ‘clean’ and abundant source of power..

236
extensive above ground explosions... tests and excavation methods (cratering experiments) – as a ‘clean’ way of excavate harbors, canals - planetary engineering. Later becomes unacceptable due to fall out and long term radiation. Accident at 3Mile Island (1979) make atomic energy almost unacceptable.

238 - 239
- Launches of space craft: new state in historical shift from man to machine – all supporting engineers remain in background while celebrities shine in spotlight – astronaut star.. – technological sublime generates enthusiasm politicians seek to tap.
- 1 million watch ApolloXI lift off in 1969 - 1/2 million people watch Columbia launch in 1981 – immediate intense experience with deep ripples – pilgrimage to technological miracle.. sheer size of crowd becomes part of meaning of event.

245 - 246
lift-off more than a visual experience – shakes your body intensely even miles away – many people cry. Here are the characteristics of the sublime: irresistible power, magnificence, complexity, and a journey to the infinite reaches of space..
Burke before noticed that “excessive loudness alone is sufficient to overpower the soul and fill it with terror” – Apollo launch confirms this.

248
-Norman Mailer describes Apollo liftoff – neutral and then in enthusiastic, metaphysical terms, even envoking GOD – uses technical terms (not just jargon) to lift the reader out of ignorance into a certain (simulation) of understanding – as if they had worked on the project.
-For the insider (as Mailer early realized) language is merely functional; only the machine is sublime. Artist’s task is to find a language adequate to describe the technician’s understanding.

252
American imagination of super weapons -> Star wars program (Strategic Defense Initiative SDI) – fascination with weapons of mass destruction, imagination of super weapons and desire to be safe from them (in the hands of others) – moral good seen in benign super weapon – argument for offensive war (as opposed to defensive war)

253
The classic form of the technological sublime breaks down because terror becomes the principle characteristic. The natural sublime impressed with man’s insignificance and weakness. The older technological sublime (railroad, lightbulb) becomes commonplace. The newest form can never be experienced in safety. The potential terror overshadows any sublime -> postmodern sublime (Rob Wilson)
The atom bomb was first tested on July 16, 1945 in the New Mexico desert. Atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan the next month. The virtual destruction of the two Japanese cities shocked the world and hastened the end of World War II.
THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW
IN THEATRES WORLDWIDE 28 MAY 2004
WHERE WILL YOU BE?
Mobile Production Facilities For Biological Agents

- Active Material Tanks
- Spray Dryers
- Filling Machine
- Fermentation
- Control Panel
ADDENDUM

Greek Revival Architecture – Waterworks in Philadelphia

Water Works conjoin the pastoral with the technological sublime. In doing so, the site gave Philadelphians access to both the pleasant qualities associated with the country and the urban version of the sublime found in American wilderness. The complex presents a pastoral scene-- idyllic river, landscaped gardens, charming neoclassic or country style buildings--at the same time it contains a version of the Locomotive, the massive machinery of the wheels and gears
"The days of Greece may be revived in the woods of America, and Philadelphia become the Athens of the Western World." Even as the District of Columbia began to sprout neoclassical and Greek revival buildings, Philadelphians sought to expand their intellectual, cultural, and financial capital. The Water Works' new Greek additions speak to this timelessness, their solidity a bulwark against rapid change, both linking America to, and freeing it from, its European past. Nicholas Biddle (a Philadelphia banker around 1810) was quick to proclaim the ascendancy of his country: "There is not a more picturesque or poetic region than our own--Arcadia itself is no more beautiful, nor yet more sonorous than Pennsylvania."

Biddle viewed the United States as "more civilized, more moral, more enlightened, and better than any whose exploits have been transmitted by history". America was better especially than the rival England, who for the past century associated itself more with imperial Rome than democratic Athens.
“Humankind’s technical prowess has etched itself into nature’s grandeur,”

Mitch Epstein, Hover Dam 2009
Mitch Epstein, Exit Glacier, Kenai Fjords National Park, Alaska 2007
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