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Painting Wind — On Some Sublime Aspects of Art and Nature

Zoltán Somhegyi

Sublime is not constant.[1] What's more, this observation can be expressed with regards to at least two characteristics of sublime and its history.

First, sublime is not constant in its effect. Its ability of overwhelming the observer does not have a "standard". In other words, we cannot establish a quantity of "how much" of the sublime phenomena we need to "have" or "get" in order to experience sublimity. This is obviously explainable of the incommensurability of sublime: when encountering it, only its immense power is felt, not leaving the possibility of rationally evaluating "how much more" it is overpowering than a "regular" phenomenon. We may remember Immanuel Kant's (1724–1804) renowned definition of the sublime in his 1790 *Critique of Judgement*, when the philosopher claims: "That is sublime in comparison with which everything else is small."[2]

Second — and this is just as much important for us here, in a study focusing on the history of art and aesthetics — also the interest in sublime is not constant. Even if it is a profoundly strong encounter that can often result in life-changing experiences, the interest in investigating and especially in representing sublime phenomena is not constant. It has its peak period, its gradual fading, as well as its rediscoveries and returns. Nevertheless, it is important to see that it is not the personal interest in sublime that is not constant, but its central position in artistic survey and as a subject matter.

In the present study I am not aiming at reconstructing the philosophy and history of the concept of sublime and not even the history of its pictorial representation. Rather, I am interested in surveying some fascinating features of sublime and visual arts and their oscillating history, i.e. how

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1 This paper was supported by the National Research, Development and Innovation Office (OTKA), Project Nr. 143294, "Perspectives in Environmental Aesthetics" (2022–2025).

2 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement* (1790), trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis — Cambridge: Hackett, 1987), 105.

certain themes had been investigated through particular artworks, and what kind of iconographical and aesthetic patterns can we observe in the interest and approach, through actual examples. I am particularly curious of one typical and characteristic form of the manifestation of sublime natural powers, and that is the wind and storm. Needless to say, even this is also an immense field in itself that I necessarily have to narrow further down. Therefore, as mentioned, instead of providing an all-encompassing thematic survey, I am mainly concentrating on the pattern itself, and especially on a period of transition, the mode of change, particularly the decrease of interest. Let's see then some aspects of the fascination with sublime and its representability and irrepresentability, with the help of the iconography of wind and storm.

Artists have started investigating sublime phenomena and modes of its depiction long before the aesthetic category of sublime got in the centre of philosophical and aesthetic discourse in the 18th century. One of the best know examples of this is Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665), for whom, as we know from the precise analyses by Louis Marin, it was crucially important to attempt to represent the unrepresentable.[3]

Poussin's contemporary, the Italian Salvator Rosa (1615–73) has traditionally been considered as being an opposite to the French painter. This is however only partially true. Rosa's vivid, anti-classical, instinctive and often somehow murky pictorial style is definitely different than the carefully composing, well-thought-over classicising modes of expressions by Poussin. However, we shall observe what connects them, despite the stylistic differences, and this is the attempt of representing something that is hard-to-represent or even unrepresentable. Both were interested in widening the pool of their pictorial methods, processes, means and approaches, among others in order to strengthen the expression of emotional content. Of course, the results of this artistic enquiry and experiment will be (visually) completely different, but it does not mean that we can overlook some of the parallels between the painters' intentions.

Poussin and Rosa are also connected by their philosophical inclination with regards to creation, even if, again, this is manifested in different forms. In Poussin's case it is a conscious and extremely methodical approach towards numerous theoretical aspects in the art of painting, many of which we can reconstruct from his letters to collectors and from other texts. And in Rosa's case the philosophical inclination has often resulted in actual subject matters concerning philosophy and philosophers, as well as in his "self-image" as a stoic philosopher-painter, among the best manifestations of which is his self-portrait.

Approaching our main field of current research, in the work of both artists we can find land-

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3 See more on this in: Louis Marin, *Sublime Poussin*, trans. Catherine Porter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), especially Chapters 2, 3 and 5.

scapes with harsh weather conditions, storms and wind, for example Poussin's *Stormy Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe* (1651, Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt) or Rosa's *Bandits on a Rocky Coast* [Fig. 1]. And these are typical manifestations of the power of Nature, extreme, challenging meteorological situations that soon were categorised as sublime phenomena, i.e. possible modes of experiencing something sublime.[4] They became of primary interest in the 18th century. However, naturally they are not the only examples of sublime, and, since we are observing landscapes, we also need to add the novel appreciation of the unclassical, "non-Mediterranean" and sublime landscape formation. It is thus not surprising that such landscapes representing non-harmonious, austere features of the natural scenery got a central role in Romanticism, especially in Northern and Nordic Romanticism. As I analysed in an earlier paper, the rapidly growing value of the Northern landscapes – just like of the Alps – that were previously considered either as frightening or simply as useless obstacles now became not only sublime phenomena, but all this process can also be interpreted as a kind of compensation for the lack of the classical and "harmonious" Mediterranean forms and sights, something that can serve as a basis for cultural identity and even for national pride.[5]

This also helps us understand the continued interest in and appreciation of Salvator Rosa's work, and that why he was a regularly seen as "forerunner" and reference point for 18th and 19th century artists and theoreticians regarding sublime features. In other words, his works were thus considered as pictorial antecedents for the sublime, since Rosa himself was focusing on certain landscape formations that have some sort of "wild beauty" (*orrida bellezza*), just to recall his own words from a letter sent to G. B. Ricciardi (1623–86).[6] As Chris Fischer summarised the painter's style: "He (*Salvator Rosa – Z. S.*) let himself be carried away by his feelings, without inhibition, and his drawings seemingly became a tempest of successive mental images. In direct opposition to the prevailing ideal of striving for beauty and perfection, Rosa cultivated the ugly and expressive. He was always seeking out something new or surprising, and in his later days he found motifs in the most obscure literary texts."[7]

What Fischer describes as the cultivation of the "ugly and expressive" is what had become

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4 See more on the history of sublime in, for example: Emily Brady, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy. Aesthetics, Ethics and Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), and Cian Duffy, *The Landscapes of the Sublime 1700–1830* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

5 Zoltán Somhegyi, "Mother Nature's Exhibition: On the Origins of the Aesthetics of Contemporary Northern Landscapes," *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* 52 (2016): 28–50.

6 Quoted in: Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 456.

7 Chris Fischer, *Art in the Making* (Copenhagen: Statens Museum for Kunst, National Gallery of Denmark, 2018), 30.

essential. Needless to say however, that ugly here is not intended in the sense of aesthetically unattractive, much more like having an aesthetic quality that in its complex operating is inviting but not describable by applying the classical category of beautiful. Rosa's harsh landscape formations are obviously not ugly, but they go against the classical, harmonious beauty, just like the newly discovered Northern and Nordic landscapes that, as we have seen above, got a central role in the 18th century, and that were often seen as par excellence examples of sublime.

Therefore, in the 18th and 19th century peak period of representations of sublime landscape formations, we often have two diverse sorts of phenomena combined together. On the one hand, we have the un-classical and un-harmonious forms: e.g. immensely high peaks, vast oceans, endless snowfields, bewildering fjords, irregular chain of mountains, massive glaciers etc. On the other hand, we also have the "working" of sublime powers, like harsh winds, thunderous storms, frightening and awe-inspiring lightening, robust floods, giant waves and heavy avalanches etc. These kind of artworks could also be read as ones showing both types of the Kantian sublime. As the philosopher famously distinguished, we have the mathematically and dynamically sublime, one that impresses us due to its sheer size, while the other through it effect.

When observing further examples in our focus area of wind and storm, we can thus of course see a great variety even within that, i.e. what, or which aspect, manifestation and "consequence" of these sublime phenomena, or which moment was the most important for the artist to emphasise on the particular artwork. One of the most obvious type is the fully blowing wind, the strongest moment of tempest that really puts in existential danger those in land, shore and sea. Philip Jacques de Loutherbourg's (1740–1812) *Rocky Coastal Landscape in Storm* from 1771 (private collection) is a good example of this. Alexander Nasmyth's (1758–1840) *View of Tantallon Castle* from ca. 1816 (National Galleries of Scotland) however goes one step further, i.e. adding another layer: Besides the strong wind and the large waves that push the boat in a dangerous vicinity to the rocks, we also have the magnificent ruins on the cliff. This brings in another perspective and refers to a "less material" sublime, i.e. time. The slowly decaying ruin — a typical motif in Romantic painting on its own merit — provides the observer with the opportunity to compare her own given time, the human life-span — that is potentially being arbitrarily shortened due to the dangerous though impressive storm — and the sublime amount of time required by Nature to convert the former castle into a picturesque and aesthetically pleasing ruin. This ruination however happened among others precisely through such harsh actions of Nature, the great construction having difficulties in withstanding weathering. Hence diverse forms of sublime are "listed" in this painting.

Compared to the above examples, when we see the sublime elements in their "full" operation, we can find another approach in Caspar David Friedrich's (1774–1840) work. It often seems that he was less interested in the actual working of the sublime, more in its "result". Just think of images

like the *Wreck in the Sea of Ice* (1798, Hamburger Kunsthalle), the renowned *The Sea of Ice* from 1824 (Hamburger Kunsthalle), or, especially close to our present investigation of wind is the one titled *After the Storm* [Fig. 2]. In the first two we can see broken ships amidst a sea of ice, while in the third one a ship went off course due to a particularly heavy storm that brought it too close to the rocks. In all three cases however, we cannot see the most dramatic moments of the event, much more the result. Not the actual action and acting of the ice and storm, but the consequence. We could also say that these paintings are not like "exclamations", more like "statements". Also in *After the Storm*, the waves are still threatening, but the storm is already moving away, and the Sun is coming back, providing the artist with the opportunity to depict a broad variety of atmospheric conditions and their impressive visuality.

Through the above examples we could observe some classical instances from around the "peak time" of the the interest in sublime. It is however just as noteworthy to see a sort of fading of the interest in sublime and in its manifestations. What's more, parallel to this, we can also trace the signs of a certain form of weakening of the sublime phenomena. Naturally, violent natural forces in themselves did not become less powerful, but the representation of their frightening nature started to get worn out and sometimes even banal. From the previous attempts of rendering and the "cult" of the elemental forces of sublime, its life-threatening character and its quality as one providing us with life-changing experiences, it occasionally sunk into a kind of accustomed iconographical type, a sort of aesthetic commonplace, with significantly less of its former elemental strength. The Romantic enquiry into the subject's existential condition in our world, hence the philosophical or gnoseological investigation of human existence through art has later then often turned into a shallow artistic cliché.

We can however assume that it is just the consequence of a broader shift of interest and of taste happening on a larger scale. Since storm and wind are obviously connected to landscape and landscape representation, the change in the rendering of the sublime aspects of wind and storm, the mutation in the iconography of tempest are parallel to how the interpretation of Nature, landscape and environment changed, and, in certain cases, their centrality weakened. Here I am less interested in direct formal questions and analyses, more on the altering approaches to and interpretation of Nature that we can learn from these very modifications in form and iconography.

As a matter of fact, we can see a double tendency. On the one hand, we can observe a weakening of the cult of Nature, including its sublime phenomena. It will, also have important consequences in aesthetics too: as we can learn from Ronald Hepburn's seminal essay from 1966, from the 19th century onwards philosophy of art focused almost exclusively on the aesthetic qualities that one can gain from artworks themselves, almost entirely forgetting Nature and the

environment as sources of such experiences.[8] In fact, it had its return only in the late 20th century, with environmental aesthetics and other sub-fields, including everyday aesthetics growing out of it.

On the other hand — and, in fact, it has also connections to the above interest in diverse forms of environments and their aesthetic qualities — there is another tendency from the late 18th century onwards: some sublime features, previously observable or "experienceable" in Nature were transported, or "appeared" in non-natural environments, and became particularly manifest in certain aspects of the rapidly growing cities. In other words, some frightening and thrilling aspects of the "wild" Nature now happened to be in urban environment, foundries, factories etc., just think of for example the visual parallels in the representation of volcanoes and industrial zones, as it was analysed by Oskar Bätschmann.[9]

Let's again see some actual examples illustrating the broad varieties within the aforementioned two major tendencies that both show how the former focus on showing the elemental forces of Nature changed to, for example, milder form of expression, a certain kind of "taming" of the motif, sometimes with anecdotical additions, or, their effect was weakened precisely because the sublime powers were not shown for their own sake, but merely served to "dramatize" the view.

This latter can we see in an otherwise really beautiful watercolour by Carl Rottmann (1797–1850) in the Winterstein collection depicting Marathon (c. 1848), that is one of the preparatory works for an encaustic painting in Munich, from Rottmann's series of Greek landscapes, commissioned by Ludwig I of Bavaria (1786–1868). As Hinrich Sieveking claimed, Rottman interpreted Marathon "as a place of profound historical importance by making dramatic use of natural forces such as a thunderstorm."[10] Therefore, the depicting of sublime phenomena here has been subordinated to this political theme that also had references to actual political issues in the mid-19th century.

While in Rottman's work a solitary, riderless horse may be seen as an allusion to independence, or, if we agree with Sieveking, to the Marathon run (again both are historical references), in a work that is almost contemporary to Rottman's, in the painting by Willem Roelofs (1822–97),

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8 Ronald Hepburn, "Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty," in *British Analytical Philosophy*, eds. Bernard Williams and Alan Montefier (London: Routledge, 1966), 285–310. See more on this question also in: Allen Carlson, *Nature & Landscape. An Introduction to Environmental Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), especially Chapter 1.

9 Oskar Bätschmann, *Entfernung der Natur. Landschaftsmalerei 1750–1920* (Cologne: DuMont, 1989). See also a recent chapter of mine: Zoltán Somhegyi, "Aesthetics and Environmental Dereliction. The Ambiguous Sublimity of Destroyed Environments," in *Everydayness. Contemporary Aesthetic Approaches*, eds. Lisa Giombini and Adrián Kvokačka (Rome: Roma Tre Press, 2021), 43–52.

10 Hinrich Sieveking, *Fuseli to Menzel. Drawing and Watercolours in the Age of Goethe from a German Private Collection* (Munich: Prestel, 1998), 178.

Landscape with Approaching Storm [Fig. 3] we see a horse rider running away from the quickly approaching tempest. The chiaroscuro in the depiction of the thickly accumulating clouds hiding the Sun is really fine, we nevertheless feel that Roelofs is not fully paying homage to the sublimity in Nature. For example, as it was pointed out by Josephina de Fouw, there is a notably "discrepancy" in the painting: the horseman is almost blown off the horse, but the trees are standing still, as if they were not affected by the harsh wind.[11] This is why, we may see the work — that is otherwise technically really well-executed — as one that somehow "collects" sublime elements and Romantic features (vast fields, threatening storm, solitary rider etc.), but these elements of the earlier pictorial repertoire are not anymore resulting in a fully "organic" ensemble.

Something similar may be our impression also with regards to, for example, the piece by Peter De Wint (1784–1849), *Landscape with Lighting and a Hermit* (1812–16, Victoria and Albert Museum, London), even despite its earlier date, i.e. that it is "closer" to the former peak time of interest in sublime, compared to Roelofs. The piece "lists" many of the typical elements of a strong and convincing Romantic work attempting to represent sublimity: lighting, dramatic effect of light and darkness, ruined castle, hefty clouds, strong wind, the feeling of the need to shelter against the approaching natural power that overwhelms us. It also includes a solitary hermit, referring to Romanticism's increased interest not only in a life "close to Nature" but also in religion, at least indirectly, in the spirit and spirituality of the Middle Ages. Nevertheless from certain point of view, the work is less convincing: for example its carefully, almost meticulously arranged opposing blocks of light and dark result in a bit too theatrical appearance, and this staged aspect can be somewhat less compatible with the lively handling of the forms that reminds us of the instinctiveness of, for example, Salvator Rosa's brushstrokes, who, as Jan Cox also noted, provided inspiration for De Wint.[12]

As mentioned above, we can also find different appearances of sublimity in non-natural environment, again offering a broad variety in its manifestation. Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg's (1783–1853) piece *Street Scene in Windy and Rainy Weather* [Fig. 4] transports the strong natural elements in the city, showing the unpleasant aspects it creates, but we do not really worry anymore for the actual safety or life of the figures shown in the painting.

Modern cities during and after the first Industrial Revolution provided many examples of frightening aspects, dangerous though impressive spaces, spectacular visions. However, in many cases it was their positive aspects that were highlighted, including growing industry, technical and

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11 See the description of the image by Josephina de Fouw in: David Jackson, Andreas Blühm and Ruud Schenk, eds., *Romanticism in the North – from Friedrich to Turner* (Zwolle: WBOOKS, 2017), 180.

12 See the description of the image by Joan Cox in ibid., 102.

technological progress, wealth (at least for some...) etc. This is what we can see in a very curious watercolour from 1837 by Karl Friedrich Schinkel (1781–1841), created for and representing the statesmen Christian Peter Wilhelm Beuth (1781–1853), showing a female figure as a kind of an allegory of the politician hovering on a Pegasus horse above an industrial city he founded, while blowing soap bubbles, in which Schinkel — dedicating the work to Beuth — wrote some unrealised (or not-yet-realised) dreams of his friend [Fig. 5]. They are flying away in the mild wind just like the smoke from the factory chimneys...

Schinkel's work may mark the beginning of a period of the modern, industrial cities, with its planners, builders and governors still full of hopes towards the future, e.g. how modernisation, organisation, production may bring benefits for larger and larger segments of the society. We are however definitely over these initial optimistic ambitions, and have long started to see the drawbacks of the endless expansion of industrial growth, as well as its negative effects on our environment, both natural and artificial environment. In the last part of my presentation, I would like to quote an interesting example of an artistic intervention that confronts the observer with the ambiguities of industrial development in a subtle and aesthetically inspiring way. The contemporary Hungarian artist Endre Koronczi (born 1968) started his project titled Ploubuter Park, with the intention of investigating questions of environmental destruction in a series of land-art works and installations, with the help of wind and plastic bags [Fig. 6]. In one of the last events in this series of projects, he asked the inhabitants of a few villages around the Lake Balaton in Hungary to collect plastic bags, that were then applied on a 3 x 5 metre metal structure. The wind has moved the multi-coloured installation of the hundreds of plastic bags in such a way that it started to look like a living organism. In certain ways, and despite the many obvious differences, the project may nevertheless remind us of some aspects in the complex and interwoven history of sublime, wind and art. Though it can seem frightening when the plastic waste becomes an overwhelming and living entity overgrowing human scale, still, through its particular aesthetics it can also fascinate the viewer. And the participatory nature of the artwork's creation (the people collecting the bags) will then not only provide them with a special experience of contemporary art, but will have, at least on a small scale, actual benefits by cleaning the given area. However, the artist is aware that the aestheticization of the trash is not a definite solution, and especially that it will not be enough — unfortunately in our world today the trash is what starts to have overwhelming, "sublime" scales, and, as we have learnt from Kant, compared to the (size) of sublime, everything else is small.

[Fig. 1] Salvator Rosa, *Bandits on a Rocky Coast,* 1655–60, oil on canvas, 74.9 x 100 cm, Metropolitan Museum, New York.

[Fig. 2] Caspar David Friedrich, *After the Storm*, 1817, oil on canvas, 22.2 x 30.8 cm, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen.

[Fig. 3] Willem Roelofs, *Landscape with Approaching Storm*, 1850, oil on canvas, 90.2 x 139.8 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

[Fig. 4] Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg, *Street Scene in Windy and Rainy Weather*, 1846, oil on canvas, 34.8 x 26.6 cm, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen.

[Fig. 5] Karl Friedrich Schinkel, *A female figure as a kind of an allegory of the politician Christian Peter Wilhelm Beuth hovering on a Pegasus horse above an industrial city (A blower of soap bubbles)*, 1837, water colour, pencil (underdrawings), vellum, 37.4 x 35.9 cm, Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin.

[Fig. 6] Endre Koronczi, *Ploubuter Park project,* outdoor installation, 2021. www.koronczi.hu/ploubuterpark

Zoltán Somhegyi

Associate Professor, Art History, Aesthetics and philosophy of art

Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary