

Towards Another Sublime,
Away from the Aesthetics of Destruction

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“We affirm that the world’s magnificence has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed. A racing car whose hood is adorned with great pipes, like serpents of explosive breath—a roaring car that seems to ride on grapeshot is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace.”¹

Filippo Tommaso Marinetti

“For art is perfect only when it looks like nature, and again, nature hits the mark only when she conceals the art that is within her.”²

Pseudo-Longinus

“It is now two minutes to midnight.”

Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, 2018

1. Kant and the atomic bomb

“Macht”—that’s the first word in Kant’s treatment of the “dynamic sublime” in nature: power. Manifestations of nature’s power such as a tempest, the eruption of a volcano, a hurricane, the agitation of a boundless ocean exceed and overwhelm us as natural beings. They awake a terror that

¹ In the original Italian: “Noi affermiamo che la magnificenza del mondo si è arricchita di una bellezza nuova: la bellezza della velocità. Un’automobile da corsa col suo cofano adorno di grossi tubi simili a serpenti dall’alito esplosivo... un’automobile ruggente, che sembra correre sulla mitraglia, è più bella della *Vittoria di Samotraccia*.” Apollonio, Umbro, ed. *Documents of 20th Century Art: Futurist Manifestos*. Trans. R.W. Flint. New York: Viking Press, 1973. 19-24.

² Dorsch, T.S., *Classical Literary Criticism*, Penguin Classics, 2001, 131.

can be transformed into a fearful object of aesthetic contemplation if one only can observe it—or think of it—from a safe distance. Thus, violence (*Gewalt*) can be translated into a *terrible* (*furchtbar*) vision without fear, so long as there is no immediate danger for our existence. Kant presents such a feeling as akin to that of a pious person towards the Almighty:

“Thus the virtuous man fears God without being afraid of him, because he does not think of the case of wishing to resist God and his commands as anything that is worrisome for him.”³

Similarly, at 5:30 pm on July 16, 1945, the virtuous defenders of the Free World from the calamities of the time were witnesses to the birth of the most terrible weapon ever realized up to that point. The Promethean *Trinity Test* took place in a desert area of New Mexico; it ushered mankind into a new era, the Atomic Age. The “Memorandum for the Secretary of War” extolled with millenaristic tones, humans had mastered the “forces heretofore reserved to the Almighty.”⁴ The father of the bomb, theoretical physicist Dr. Julius Robert Oppenheimer, witnessed the *terrible* deflagration *from a safe distance*, in a shelter, together with other scientists and collaborators, and high ranking soldiers. An eyewitness report captures the *sublime* mixture of fear and exaltation:

“In that brief instant in the remote New Mexico desert, the tremendous effort of the brains and brawn of all these people came suddenly and startlingly to the fullest fruition. Dr. Oppenheimer, on whom had rested a very heavy burden, grew tenser as the last seconds ticked off. He scarcely breathed. He held on to a post to steady himself. For the last few seconds, he stared directly ahead and then when the announcer shouted ‘Now!’ and there came this tremendous burst of light followed shortly thereafter by the deep growling roar of the explosion, his face relaxed into an expression of tremendous relief.”⁵

As Oppenheimer later declared, in that moment the verses of the *Bhagavad-Gita* flashed into his mind: “I am become Death, the shatterer of worlds.” A line connected to the earlier passage:

“If the radiance of a thousand suns
were to burst into the sky,
that would be like

³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 144.

⁴ Leslie R. Groves, *Now It Can be Told: The Story of the Manhattan Project* (New York: Harper and Brothers 1962), Appendix VIII, “Memorandum for the Secretary of War” (July 18, 1945), 433-440, 438.

This and following quotations from the Memorandum can also be found in “The Official Report on the Development of the Atomic Bomb Under the Auspices of the United States Government”. http://www.atomicarchive.com/Docs/SmythReport/smyth_appendix_6.shtml (accessed on April 6, 2018).

⁵ These are reportedly the impressions of Brigadier General Thomas F. Farrell. From the above mentioned “Memorandum” in Groves, *Now It Can be Told*, 436-437.

the splendor of the Mighty One.”⁶

A new world of aesthetic feelings seems to have emerged together with the new era, not far from religious anguish without fear.⁷

Mythos and poetry are never far apart. The conclusion of the millenaristic report on the Trinity test of July 1945 took on a poetic bent in order to capture the unsayable:

“The effects could well be called unprecedented, magnificent, beautiful, stupendous and terrifying. No man-made phenomenon of such tremendous power had ever occurred before. The lighting effects beggared description. The whole country was lighted by a searing light with the intensity many times that of the midday sun. It was golden, purple, violet, gray and blue. It lighted every peak, crevasse and ridge of the nearby mountain range with a clarity and beauty that cannot be described but must be seen to be imagined. It was that beauty the great poets dream about but describe most poorly and inadequately.”⁸

The categories of Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* are the most suitable to address the unprecedented picture so vividly impressed in the minds of those who experienced that dreadful moment: the atomic bomb as an object of contemplation. Could we not see it as the object of ‘technological sublime’ *par excellence*?

The futurists had already acquainted us with an aesthetic inspired by technological modernity about one hundred years ago. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti praised the roaring speed of a car above the Nike of Samothrace and listed in the *Manifesto* from 1909 several instances of futurist admiration, all of them connected with modern technological society: the agitated working masses, the electric flashes of the arsenals, factories and building sites, stations traversed by trains and locomotives, and airplanes.

Yet, the aesthetics of the atomic bomb appears to be located at a higher level. It lifts the experience of technological beauty to the heights of the technological sublime. The latter experience relates to an overwhelming *destructive* power, actually, to “total destruction”. The atomic bomb

⁶ Robert Jungk, *Brighter than a Thousand Suns: A Personal History of the Atomic Scientists*, trans. James Cleugh (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1958), 201. Cf. James A. Hijiya, “The Gita of Robert Oppenheimer,” in *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 144/2 (2000), 123-167.

⁷ David E. Nye has denied any sublime aesthetic value to the atomic weapon in his fundamental study, *American Technological Sublime*, MIT press, 1994, 253. Instead of this view, we embrace Joseph Masco’s perspective on technoaesthetics. See his essay “Nuclear technoaesthetics: Sensory politics from Trinity to the virtual bomb in Los Alamos,” in *American Ethnologist* 31/3 (2004), 1-25. While he has discussed the sublime experience of war-science scientists, we consider the wider cultural meaning of the phenomenon and delve into its specifically political and aesthetic dimensions.

⁸ Groves, *Now It Can be Told*, 437.

achieved nothing less than a transformation of the mythical visions of apocalypse from messianic and eschatological religions into a concrete horizon of technological self-destruction. The Trinity test, as the bold name suggests, raised man to the divine condition of the distributor of life and death—of *total* life and death—thus giving existential questions an unprecedented urgency.⁹ The *Doomsday Clock*, which measures the proximity to a self-induced catastrophe leading to the end of our—of any—civilization, has never been too far from midnight in the assessment of the committee of *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* founded in 1945 by scientists who previously contributed to the Manhattan project but “could not remain aloof to the consequences of their work.” The countdown came closest to the fatidic hour in 1953—two minutes to midnight—after the United States and Soviet Union *successfully* developed the hydrogen bomb... and again this year, in which the sleeping ghosts of the Cold War have awoken and menace the *ignition* of martial enterprises.¹⁰

A weapon of such threatening proportions, as an object for sublime aesthetics, was not spared the doom of consumerist reproducibility. In a recent art exhibition¹¹, photographer Alberto Sinigaglia pointed out some of the most disturbing features of the US American enthusiasm for the bomb in the 1950s: the commercialization of the spectacle of nuclear tests. In the 1950s, Nevada atomic detonations were sold to Las Vegas tourists as a major attraction. Hotels advertised their rooms and rooftops with a view on to the military tests. Curious visitors could take pictures of atomic mushrooms and keep them as souvenirs.¹² Sinigaglia picked up this story and pointed out the particular aesthetics underlying atomic tourism.



Figure 1 - Sinigaglia, “Ivy King II”, from *Microwave City* (2016)

⁹ Such a line of thought can be brought back to the classic work by Karl Jaspers, *Die Atombombe und die Zukunft des Menschen* (Berlin: Springer, 1957).

¹⁰ *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* “2018 Doomsday Clock Statement” (accessed April 8, 2018).

¹¹ “Microwave City” curated by Elio Grazioli, Galleria d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea R. De Grada, San Gimignano, November 2017.

¹² <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/videos/category/history/how-1950s-las-vegas-sold-atomic-bomb-tests-a-1/> (accessed on March 15, 2018). Cf. Nye, *American Technological Sublime*, 233.

By isolating the objects of atomic tourism from their original context, Sinigaglia (see figures 1 and 2) also removed any habitual (or safely familiar) position a viewer might take in regards to these objects. The accoutrements of commercialization and the instruments of scientific destruction were equally disabused of their relation to culture—in this case, the culture of consumption or technological advance—and laid bare in their pure and impersonal utility. We are left with an artistic commentary on the spectacle itself, as itself, which might have been enthralling or, at the very least, curious, were it not for the sinister absence of any human presence. Further, by doctoring the photographs of atomic blasts to remove their tell-tale mushroom stem, they became in turn either semblances of a real cloud, eerily both familiar and false, or even presentations of a beautifully-remote ascension. This is precisely the problem: once the technological sublime is naturalized through its technical reproducibility, it comes to seem as inevitable as a natural event—almost divine in its posited transcendence. By calling the viewers’ attention to the very artificiality of photographic representation, and therefore to the priority of reflection over consumption, the artist has also evoked the absence of what is specifically human and its ethics, including accountability, responsibility and authorship. Sinigaglia succeeds in re-introducing the shocking novelty of the blasts precisely by emphasizing how they have been harmlessly absorbed into cultural memory, as one event among many. The atomic bomb has entered our everyday life, has become a familiar albeit uncomfortable presence and, as such, forgotten just like the permanent possibility of death. The technological experience of the bomb was thus transformed into a consumerist, reproducible and contemplative one. Its most disturbing feature is that it abstracts away from causes and effects, as well as the motivations and contexts of the testing of the most destructive modern technology.

“Abstraction” is probably not the best word to express the technological aesthetics of the fatal bomb. Its anesthetization seems to be inserted in its cultural-political contexts more deeply than it appears at first glance. Even Kant, in the philosophical dryness of his third critique, hinted at the specifically military dimension of the political entanglements of the sublime. Between the grey politician and the captain on the battlefield, as he claimed, aesthetic judgement assigns primacy to the latter:

“Even war, if it is conducted with order and reverence for the rights of civilians, has something sublime about it, and at the same time makes the mentality of the people who conduct it in this way all the more sublime, the more dangers it has been exposed to and before which it has been able to assert its

courage; whereas a long peace causes the spirit of mere commerce to predominate, along with base selfishness, cowardice and weakness, and usually debases the mentality of the populace.”¹³

If there is something to be learned from the dynamic sublime, Kant suggested, it is a sort of Prussian pedagogy of war. Peace is unaesthetic—and has bad consequences for the people’s moral. The technological sublimity of the atomic bomb advances this line of thought—actually of experience—to its extreme consequence. In fact, we can regard the technological sublimity of the bomb as an aesthetic of destruction, in which the powers of nature and war have been fused into one unique instance.

2. *The politics behind techne*

When Pietro Omodeo visited the National Museum of American History of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC in 2010, he was caught by surprise by the narrative of the “American” bomb in an area that was devoted to the technological achievements of the nation. That museum is a reconversion of an earlier one on history and technology, therefore it has inherited a large collection of objects and memorabilia stemming from earlier scientific-technological themes. The *admirabilia* include locomotives and airplanes as well as a wonderful collection of rare books, the Dibner Library of the History of Science and Technology, in which Pietro conducted his research on early modern science as a visiting fellow. In the Summer of 2010 he and the other visitors could enter an exhibition space that celebrated the scientific achievements of the United States. The story of the invention of the atomic bomb was linked to the issue of the European scientific legacy—particularly, the German training of American scientists—and the attainment of a world scientific-technological leadership at the end of WWII.

A video documentary was supposed to introduce the public to the main warfare technology of Cold War geopolitics. It started with dreadful images of Adolf Hitler bellowing to a dark crowd marching to war. The reassuring figure of Albert Einstein followed. The scientist was presented as the main petitioner of an American intervention aimed at stopping the Nazi deluge and at anticipating the German race towards the discovery of a “useful” application of atomic energy. The Americans could not decline the exhortation of such a scientific ambassador, hence they took upon themselves the mission to free Europe and the world. The video then presents the scientific-technological and industrial endeavor of the Manhattan project—Enrico Fermi and other scientists were shown as well

¹³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Cambridge University Press, 2000, 146.

as laboratories and factories. The endeavor eventually resulted in the invention of the bomb. In short: a great success, and just in time.

This was the end of the story, as it was presented to visitors of the Smithsonian museum. No mention was made of Hiroshima or Nagasaki—the *test* on the field that took place less than a month after the invention of the weapon. The splendor of the scientific achievement should not be stained with any suspicion that *we* committed war crimes. Entry to Smithsonian museums is free owing to their pedagogical relevance. Some alien visitor might conceive of no small measure of perplexity about the happy end.¹⁴ However, the imperative remained that the citizen, visiting the capital and the museum memorials of the nation’s great past and bright future, should be educated in the shared values. Skepticism would be out of place here.

The exhibition, just like the Nevada souvenirs of the Fifties, obliterates destruction which, however, constitutes the implicit but real object of sublime admiration as an overwhelming power. What remains is the beauty of a mushroom-like cloud in the distance, captured by pictures and videos. The powers of nature are unleashed through atomic technology, awaking in the spectator a Kantian experience of the dynamic sublime. The background to this experience can be seen as a mythological projection of aesthetics of humanity-as-a-geological-agent, routinized through mass tourism.

Certainly, while the detonation is a spectacle of power, to be fully enjoyable as an aesthetic event this power must be separated from its antecedents (such as the *techne* or learning that created it) as well as its consequences (pulverized and contaminated territories, charred bodies and genetic defects). As Adorno contended, the Kantian narrative of the sublime involves *dominion* over nature after the human being has been made to feel small: “Towering mountains are eloquent not as what crushes overwhelmingly but as images of a space liberated from fetters and strictures, a liberation in which it is possible to participate. The legacy of the sublime is unassuaged negativity, as stark and illusionless as was once promised by the semblance of the sublime.”¹⁵ Attention to the subjectivity implied by the Kantian aesthetics reveals the negative ground of the technological sublime. For Kant the sublime is essentially linked to subjectivity. The dynamic sublime is that in the face of which we are small, and this experience leads to a reflection upon, and exaltation before, our own reason and therefore the ideas of human reason in general which are evoked by the magnitude of nature even though they cannot be adequately exhibited to the senses.¹⁶ The counter-product of the exaltation of reason, based upon the sublime diminishment of the human spectator, is not grounded positively, but

¹⁴ As has been argued, a red thread connects the employment of scientific methods and tests for making war more efficient in the years in which chemical warfare was first ‘experimented’ in the trenches of the first world war and the field test of the Manhattan Project in Japan. Cf. Jürgen Renn et al. (eds), *One Hundred Years of Chemical Warfare: Research, Deployment, Consequences* (Cham: Springer, 2017).

¹⁵ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. and ed. Robert Hullot-Kentnor, London: Continuum, 1997, 198.

¹⁶ See Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, California: Stanford, 150-151.

relies upon the negation of the terrifying powers of nature for its supremacy. Once power and dominion have become the central aesthetic event then they supersede and replace all others. Reflexivity ceases to be an ethical exaltation of the power of reason but becomes the exaltation of technical power in the form of destructive geological action, inside a space liberated of any “fetters and strictures”, including accountability. In the end, reflexivity reveals the technological sublime as an anti-ethical but active subject that is contemplated in its alienated objectivity. Thus the question arises: How could the reflexivity stimulated by aesthetics be elevating rather than alienating?

While Kant considers the contemplating subject, Hellenistic theory of art pointed to the creative subjectivity of the artist as the place and source of sublimity. According to the classical theorist of the sublime, (pseudo-)Longinus, “sublimity is the echo of a noble mind.”¹⁷ The verse as a product of art (*a techne*) is revealing of the greatness of its author, the artist. If we look at the atomic explosion as a product of art, in the original Greek sense of technical skillfulness, what can be said about both its *objective* artistic value and its author? If, according to the Baconian scriptural dictum “*Iustificata est sapientia a filis suis*” (Matthew 11:19),¹⁸ wisdom is to be judged by its children (according to King James’ Bible: “But wisdom is justified of her children”), what kind of humanity is the atomic bomb revealing of? Politics and art/technology, “*praxis*” and “*poiesis*”, are closely connected. The political dimension of art did not escape Longinus, writing in the 1st century AD. He was alive to the ways that politics and society influence the sublimity of a culture. His essay in literary criticism, *On the Sublime*, which has only survived to the present in a fragmentary form, ends with a powerful appeal for his interlocutor—and by extension his reader—to see how the twin vices of imperialism and war, on the one hand, and materialism and pleasure seeking, on the other, result in a decadent culture without hope of producing something great and lasting¹⁹. It is the “passion for gain” which will overwhelm any words that possess “grandeur and enduring life”, and cultural apathy is produced by decadence and the desire for individual fame. However, an alternative is embedded within his criticism of the current fall—“the eager and honourable desire to serve our fellows”, and the freedom which previously existed in democratic Athens. Neither of these alternatives were possible within his culture as it currently stood because, as he lamented, “endless war holds our desires in its grasp” and “corrupts great natures.” Even if his fellow citizens were to be given complete liberty, they would only experience “consuming greed for their neighbor’s possessions.” The parallels with our own culture are superficially obvious; what is more interesting is how the ethics of Longinus’s sublime, which was originally intended as a treatise on literary criticism, can integrate

¹⁷ T.S. Dorsch, *Classical Literary Criticism*, Penguin Classics, 2001, 109.

¹⁸ Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, in *The Oxford Francis Bacon IV*, ed. by Michael Kiernan (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), p. 54.

¹⁹ The following quotes from Pseudo-Longinus are taken from T.S. Dorsch, *Classical Literary Criticism*, Penguin Classics, 2001, 156-8.

the neo-Kantian contemplative subjectivity of sublime experience by reviving a discourse on the crafting of subjectivity behind the work of art.

3. *Aesthetic of technological destruction*

From whatever angle we look at atomic technological sublime—whether from that of its spectator or that of its designer—the aesthetic experience stems from one common root: the technological sublime of the bomb is revealing of an *aesthetics of destruction*. Again, we can refer to Futurist aesthetics to detect the germs of a theory of art that begins with an exaltation of technology and results in a positive evaluation of dominion in its various forms, private and political, and its violent means, sublimated by art.

“7. Except in struggle, there is no more beauty. No work without an aggressive character can be a masterpiece. Poetry must be conceived as a violent attack on unknown forces, to reduce and prostrate them before man.

[...]

9. We will glorify war—the world’s only hygiene—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for woman.”²⁰

Technology, war and misogyny are bound together in Futurist aesthetics. Walter Benjamin famously denounced it as an aesthetic of war, which sublimates irreconcilable tensions of our societies just as Fascisms artificially solve them in the form of nationalist rhetoric that prepares the masses for war. Benjamin argued that the “aesthetics of war” (*Aesthetik des Krieges*) was the real goal towards which the aesthetization of modern technological society aimed at. The “Nachwort” (afterword) of a preliminary version of *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility* contained a passage making the political point clear:

“Decadence gained a foothold in politics with d’Annunzio, Futurism with Marinetti, and the Schwabinger Tradition with Hitler.”²¹

²⁰ In the original: “7. Non v’è più bellezza, se non nella lotta. Nessuna opera che non abbia un carattere aggressivo può essere un capolavoro. La poesia deve essere concepita come un violento assalto contro le forze ignote, per ridurle a prostrarsi davanti all’uomo” and “9. Noi vogliamo glorificare la guerra—sola igiene del mondo—il militarismo, il patriottismo, il gesto distruttore dei libertari, le belle idee per cui si muore e il disprezzo della donna.” Apollonio, Umbro, ed. *Documents of 20th Century Art: Futurist Manifestos*. Trans. R.W. Flint, New York: Viking Press, 1973. 19-24.

²¹ Our translation. In the original: “Mit d’Annunzio hat die Dekadence in die Politik ihren Eizug gehalten, mit Marinetti der Futurismus und mit Hitler die Schwabinger Tradition.“

The quotation continues as follows:

“Every attempt to aestheticize politics culminates in one point. This one point is war.”²²

Aesthetization here refers to the disconnected insulation of a phenomenon from its causes and effects and the passive aesthetic fruition of an abstract projection of reality. As rapture is a relevant aspect of art theory in general, particularly in the reflection on the sublime, we are invited to reflect on the specific ecstasy induced by the technological sublime and its political import. Benjamin already posited the relevant distinction in his *Reproducibility* essay by opposing the aestheticization of politics (used by fascism) and the politicization of aesthetics (as a communitarian task). He wrote that “Mankind, which in Homer’s time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, is now one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.”²³ The alleged destiny of the technological sublime seems inescapable, but Benjamin’s dialectics show how, when aesthetics is politicized, an alternative to alienation is possible. These considerations urge us to consider what another aesthetics, another sublime, could look like, so that our aesthetic categories do not fall prey to an “immanent-transcendent” logic of destruction—“immanent” because it is in our hands, “transcendent” because it is perceived as guided by processes we cannot stop or redirect.

Yet, since the technological sublime is rooted in human technological power, it is subjectivity—in its reflective and creative dimensions—that has to be restored on a different ground. Objectively—with Longinus—technological destruction is revealing of no elevated spirit, but of a violent one, the spirit of homicide and war. Subjectively—with Kant—the enchanted spectator of technological apocalypses is the worshipper of destruction. Another sublime is needed as the aesthetics of an emancipated humanity capable of acting collectively while upholding the “life-affirming red thread about science” and not its dialectical opposite.²⁴ Such collective action would reflect the human dignity and nobility innate to the sublime of Longinus. However, as Longinus was writing in the classical world far removed from modern technological supremacy and mass society, the question becomes how this other sublime can be updated to modern, politically democratic conditions. How can art (*techne*) utilize modern technology to elevate the dignity of subjects, rather than overwhelming them and removing their reflective capacities?

²² Our translation. In the original: “Alle Bemühungen um die Aesthetisierung der Politik gipfeln in einem Punkt. Dieser eine Punkt ist der Krieg.”

²³ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, Harvard University Press, 2008, 42.

²⁴ Darko Suvin, “On the Horizons of Epistemology and Science,” in *Critical Quarterly* 52/1 (2010): pp. 68–101.

4. *Creating an alternative political-artistic subjectivity*

Through his association with the Avtonomi Akadimia—an adisciplinary, democratic arts University in Athens—Lindsay has been involved in artistic projects that aimed to create such a political-artistic subjectivity. One example he learned from in Athens was the ‘walking’ performance *No Man’s Land*, directed by the Dutch artist and director Dries Verhoeven, which took place in 2014.²⁵ In the piece participants were guided through the city of Athens by a stateless person who was themselves living in the city. The guide did not communicate to the participant directly, but interacted with them and led them on an organized walk while they listened on headphones to a script that described the experience of forced displacement and the challenges in the new city. Despite criticism of the essentializing nature²⁶ of such a script—where, although it was based on oral history from refugees themselves, there was only one story for every different stateless person—the artwork nevertheless managed to use new media to completely reorder the relationship between spectator and protagonist. The artwork was not an ‘enjoyable’ or consumable spectacle but rather one that forced the participant to reflect upon their own perceptive biases towards a marginalized community with which they would, most likely, have had no direct communication. It both metaphorically and literally placed the participant in the shoes of the guide, and by using the city (*polis*) as the platform for this performance, it also imbued the action with a necessary political dimension. The city is the collective space per se, even if it is also one in which lives are usually atomized within their own routine. Returning an agonistic dimension to public space and enlivening it by emphasizing, rather than concealing, social tensions, which this artwork did in the most tangible of ways, is an aesthetic precondition to *any* democratic discussion about the legitimate use of this space or its resources.

Whether the subaltern guides were more included in representational politics by being able to narrate their story in public, and indeed whether this is even a desirable political aim, is questionable. Far more relevant is how art and technology can be combined to reveal a relation between subjects that does not always fall back into discriminatory binaries, in this case, the binary of the citizen and the stateless. One way in which *No Man’s Land* achieved this is by using virtual media to displace the groups away from their usual subjective positions and towards their mutual embodiment. Although the participant and the guide could not communicate discursively, they still consciously

²⁵ *NML* was produced by the Onassis Cultural Centre in the context of the *Fast Forward Festival* that explored the relations between new theatre forms and intermediality.

²⁶ See Chatziprokopiou, Marios. “Hosting the Laments of Others? Tensions and antinomies in Dries Verhoeven’s *No Man’s Land*” *Journal of Greek Media and Culture* Volume 3, Number 2 (2017): 161-173.

inhabited the same space by walking together and communicated using gestures and dancing (for instance, to Purcell's *Farewell to Dido*, the canonical "refugee" story of Aeneas, as well as to their own songs). Through being displaced from discourse, from speech, and its inevitable dominant positions, a new relation was opened up in the interactive scene, one based upon the contingent, vulnerable and pre-legal fact of having a body in the world. In fact, the philosopher Adriana Cavareno views exactly this corporeal relation as a foundation for a democratic politics. She writes:

"Existing consists in disclosing oneself within a scene of plurality where everyone, by appearing to one another, is shown to be unique. They appear to each other reciprocally—first of all in their corporeal materiality and as creatures endowed with sensory organs."²⁷

Without the accompanying necessary political and legal frameworks, aesthetics can only hope to point to, rather than institute, such a pluralistic relation between subjects. But the fact that art is able to expose the limitations and obstacles within one reality while pointing to the idea of a new one is exactly its power. We do not need the sublimity of the atom bomb, or the 'enjoyable' distractions of its spectacle, in order to feel our own (destructive) potential. Rather, sublimity can descend onto an Athenian street corner by evoking the potential for democratic change.

The sublimity of art consists in exactly this: isolating the irreducible dignity of the subject, and exemplifying it. Individual dignity, which in the terms of the performance *No Man's Land* would mean temporarily affording the stateless the same representational rights as the citizens, is not enough. Instead, it the dignity of subjects in the pluralistic sense of Cavareno—subjects who depend upon their exposure to others as the condition for their own appearance in the interactive scene called politics—that matters. Just as Longinus could write that "a well-timed stroke of sublimity scatters everything before it like a thunderbolt"²⁸, employing the classical moniker of Zeus' thunderbolt in order to legitimize his humanistic sublime, so can we, living more than two hundred years after the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, evoke the democratic sovereignty²⁹ that replaced the divine right of kings as the sign under which our humanistic sublime should emerge. Within the idea of democratic sovereignty is a paradox in which the subject is both the universal legislator (replacing God or the King as sovereign), and the one subject to the law. It is this paradox that, when it emerges aesthetically, we call sublime, because no categorization or collective identity can fully

²⁷ Adriana Cavareno, *Relating Narratives*, Routledge, 2000, 20.

²⁸ T.S. Dorsch, *Classical Literary Criticism*, Penguin Classics, 2001, 100.

²⁹ Democratic sovereignty, and its connection to equality, is identified by Etienne Balibar as a paradox in his article *Citizen Subject*. He writes that a dissymmetry "is introduced into the idea of sovereignty from the moment that it has devolved to the "citizens": until then the idea of sovereignty had always been inseparable from a hierarchy, from an eminence; from this point forward the paradox of a sovereign equality, something radically new, must be thought." In *Who Comes After the Subject?*, edited by Cadava, Connor, and Nancy, Routledge, 1991, 45.

encapsulate it. It is also—and not coincidentally—the antithesis of fascism, which according to the Nazi ideologue Alfred Bauemler, inherently pushes one into “‘taking sides’ by virtue of a mandate of destiny, by virtue of ‘one’s own right’.”³⁰ The paradox is facilely resolved by separating human beings into exclusive groups based on nation, race, and the like.

5. *Mythopoesis: transcendence as a political problem*

As Benjamin pointed out in his *Reproducibility* essay, the advent of new technological media can either extend participation in socially-minded art, or serve to further cement and increase divisions or hierarchies. The collective identity of a civilization, as well as the art that it produces, has an inescapable mythopoetic dimension. How do myths, and their aesthetic children, order our life together? In order to address such a question we need to turn to the theorist of symbolic representation and philosopher of history Giambattista Vico. Drawing on *De sublime*, Vico took into consideration the most sublime of all poets, Homer, as the starting point for a new reflection of civilization in general and its mythical roots in particular. Just like Longinus, he sought for the “high mind” behind the verses of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* but, unlike his predecessors, he did not find an individual poet behind the Homeric sublime, but rather a collectivity, the primal Greek civilization. This discovery led him to a *civil theogony*, a cultural-historical investigation of the roots of poetry and mythology. For Vico, myths are revealing of a humanity of the origins, which he posited as humble, raw, and savage, and driven by fantasy instead of reason. Human institutions and rationality slowly emerged from the darkness of blind sensitivity and emotive fantasy in the childhood of civilization. The process began with a poetic response to the powers of nature, as it was the thunder that especially awoke an emotional (not yet rationalized) awareness of the fragility of the self of savage humans. The most powerful poetic act of our ancestors thus transformed their own fantasy into a sublime reality, in fact, a pantheon of divinities communicating with men through the signs of nature. Vico assumed that the first steps of civilization were guided by poet-theologians, whose poetry was creative in the deepest sense of the Greek term *poiesis* (i.e., creation, production) as it created a transcendent essence to be worshipped in accordance with a proto-Feuerbachian understanding of religion. Humans bent in front of idols that were the product of their own mind—thus, religion began simultaneous with associated life. According to Vico, the sublime poetic experience consists in the projection of such a transcendent essence—or, to put it in the Kantian parlance, an idea of reason

³⁰ From Alfred Bauemler, quoted in Koepnick, Lutz Peter, *Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetics of Power*, University of Nebraska Press, 1999, 202.

which exceeds our understanding. The human origin of such an object of aesthetic alienation should be recognized and, in this manner, it could be transformed into the object of the most accomplished form of knowledge according to the principle of “*verum ipsum factum*” [truth corresponds to deed]. We can best know what we created, that is, culture, mythology and language, by concentrating on our inner world rather than nature.

“The first men of the pagan nations, as children of the rising human species [...], created things out of their mind [*idea*] but with an infinite difference relative to God’s creative act. In fact, God, in his most pure intellection, knows the things and, by the act of knowing, creates them. By contrast, they [created things] by virtue of a very bodily phantasy [*corpulentissima fantasia*] as a consequence of their strong ignorance. Since it was very corporeal, they did that with marvelous sublimity, such that what they were excessively moved by that which they had themselves imagined. Accordingly, they were called ‘poets’, which in Greek means ‘creators’. These are the three functions of great poetry, that is to say, to invent sublime tales [*favole*] according to the popular way of understanding, which move them in an excessive manner in order to reach the intended goal to teach to the vulgar to behave virtuously.”³¹

Vico’s theogony reveals the collective origin of such an immanent-transcendent object, pointing at the mythopoietic dimension of a collective aesthetics of the sublime.

It is the capacity to reflect on collective mythopoiesis that we see as a crucial element for the “politicization of aesthetics”, also in Benjamin’s sense. It is so needed in the face of impersonal destruction and abnegated responsibility of the technological age. Whereas authoritarian and corporate aesthetics, which is hierarchized under an idealized (and unattainable) subjectivity mediated by the fascist cult-leader³², seeks to subsume the individual into the group or experience, an aesthetics that constitutively involves reflection also distinguishes between the individual as an entity *for* and also *distinct from* the group or experience. We argue that this distinction is decisive for a more humanistic politics because it necessitates democratic debate and consensus for group formation and action, rather than mass manipulation and anti-democratic theatrics.

³¹ Giambattista Vico, *La scienza nuova* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1997), p. 263 (own translation): “I primi uomini delle nazioni gentili, come fanciulli del nascente genere umano [...] dalla lor idea criavan essi le cose, ma con infinita differenza però dal creare che fa Iddio: perocché Iddio nel suo purissimo intendimento, conosce e, conoscendolo, cria le cose; essi, per la lor robusta ignoranza, il facevano in forza d’una corpulentissima fantasia, e, perch’era corpulentissima, il facevano con una maravigliosa sublimità, tal e tanta che perturbava all’eccesso essi medesimi che fingendo le si creavano, onde furon detti ‘poeti’, che lo stesso in greco suona che ‘creatori’. Che sono gli tre lavori che deve fare la poesia grande, cioè di ritrovare favole sublimi confacenti all’intendimento popolare, e che perturbi all’eccesso per conseguir il fine, ch’ella si ha proposto, d’insegnar al volgo a virtuosamente operare [...]”

³² For an in-depth discussion of fascist aesthetics, particularly in relation to Leni Riefenstahl and Nazi Germany, see Susan Sontag’s article “Fascinating Fascism” (February 6, 1975) in *The New York Review of Books*, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1975/02/06/fascinating-fascism/>, accessed 16.05.2018.

6. Reflection versus tacit complicity: an exercise in aesthetics and politics

Sinigaglia's photographs of atomic tourism penetrate to the heart of the matter: a tacit political-aesthetic complicity within the collective drives toward destruction. By representing—both subtly and directly—the manipulation of consumerist events, they suggest an uneasy reflection upon the viewer's own visual complicity. A mythical technological imagery is so overwhelmingly present in contemporary society, and so intimately connected to consumption, that it is easy to overlook agency; or, to put it simply, become a cog in the machine. It was Hannah Arendt who, in the wake of the *Eichmann* trial, re-introduced the concepts of imagination, reflection and judgment as the basis for a collective response to these totalitarian tendencies of modern societies.

Arendt showed how aesthetics can compel us to take on a mentality which is larger than ourselves, but is still grounded in the agency of the subject and not a subject-dissolving fascist mentality. Her novel reading of Kant, in which she finds his *political* philosophy in his *aesthetic* writings, she sketched out just how the imagination and reflection result in judgments based on the collectivity of responsible individuals rather than mass subservience. Building upon Kant's work in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* in §40, where he develops the idea of a "communal sense" as the sense that takes into account the way that every person may judge an object, Arendt shows how the imagination is crucial to take on "an enlarged mentality" (*eine erweiterte Denkungsart*) that is the source for judgements based on common humanity. She goes on to elaborate how this "enlarged mentality" is the result of first "abstracting from the limitations which contingently attach to our own judgment," of disregarding its "subjective private conditions [...], by which so many are limited."³³ To remind the viewer of art of such subjective limitations, and then provide the aesthetic means to move beyond them, should be a rallying cry for artists in the technological society — *contra* Marinetti.

A reappraisal of the *other sublime*, which Longinus regarded as the echo of a noble mind, is likely to open up a renewed reflection on the *kalon*,³⁴ what was regarded as simultaneously noble, good and true. In the age of post-truth, a return to a ground which involves truths that cannot be changed at will has direct political connotations just as in the classical world.³⁵ Reading Longinus all these centuries later, one is struck by how he can quite easily identify what is *not* elevated or sublime, and list the literary products that fail to measure up. What is much harder—and it is this point that

³³ See Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, University of Chicago Press, 1992, 44.

³⁴ This is the word Aristotle uses when he discusses how the goal of politics, which is the highest goal, is to make citizens good and elevated (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1099b30).

³⁵ Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," in *The New Yorker* (25 February 1967).

makes his work of literary criticism immediately relevant for politics today —is to say what it *is*. In this doxic age of fake news³⁶, the difficulty in reaching nobility and sublimity should be admired rather than avoided, and the minutely-fine distinctions between aesthetic events, what William Faulkner poetically called “the human heart in conflict with itself” respected—instead of their forceful ability to overwhelm us.

In a famous speech that Faulkner delivered in 1950 in Stockholm, at the Nobel Banquet, he stressed the need for reflective sensitivity as an apparently feeble, but actually powerful, antidote against the threat of technological self-annihilation:

“Our tragedy today is a general and universal physical fear so long sustained by now that we can even bear it. There are no longer problems of the spirit. There is only the question: When will I be blown up? Because of this, the young man or woman writing today has forgotten the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing because only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat.”³⁷



Figure 2 - Sinigaglia, "Dominic Nambe", from *Microwave City* (2017)

In a way, Faulker is alluding to the effects of the kind of mythopoesis discussed by Vico. Despite the fact that our society produces, sells and consummates myths, we do not recognize them as such; and although we live in a scientific society, that does not mean we live in a rational society.

³⁶ The philosopher Luca Di Blasi has identified the times we are living in as “doxic”, in the sense that information increasingly relies upon opinion (*doxa*) rather than relying upon scientific distinctions, such as the one between truth and opinion. Fake News is an example of this change.

³⁷ Cf. https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1949/faulkner-speech.html (accessed on April 23, 2018).

Consciously or not, the public produces art as a collectivity, and exposing this fact results in the subsequent question of *what kind of art* best serves this public. We argue that it is certainly not the aesthetics of destruction packaged as collective power. As Benjamin observed, when new forms of technology such as cinema emerge, they can be instrumentalized in the service of the market or other principles that transcend the people or they can tend towards radically democratic aims.

7. *In summary*

In his fundamental study on the American path to technological sublime, David E. Nye analyses the sublime as an experience of an essentially religious nature which has the power to “weld society together” and does not derive from “economic and political forces”.³⁸ At the same time, however, he states that it is not an immutable aesthetic category but is instead expressive of changing social and political systems. In our article we have gone much further than Nye’s insight by critiquing the apparently spontaneous, ‘religious’ nature of sublime feeling and exposing how the immediate upswell of feeling indicative of changing social conditions—where, for instance, the once-sublime electricity became banal and was replaced by things like the atom bomb—is *always* culturally mediated. Therefore, like any cultural phenomenon, it is subject to debate and we have the power to change or to affirm it. In short: although we are bowled over by the technological sublime, we have created it.

It is the negative ground of the technological sublime—which results in looking at technology as nature and therefore as something that happens *to* rather than *because of* us—that leads to the idea that we have no power to resist it. The feeling of powerlessness, and the subsequent achievement of what Kant called human *dominion* over this powerlessness, is the legacy of his “dynamic sublime” within the technological sublime. However, twentieth-century technological experience has forever put paid to the notion that human beings are merely subjected to overwhelming natural events, because it has clarified that we have ourselves created the conditions for events at a geological scale to occur. An illusion of necessity is contained in the idea that our resistance to these events must be founded in our supremacy over them, rather than their modification or our creation of other events. Following Vico, we identified this illusion of necessity as a “mythopoetic theogony”, or the creation of a transcendent essence that dominates the minds of those who created it. So long as the technological sublime remains an object of contemplation, even exaltation, for us, we are all complicit in its implicit but hidden destructive consequences. Benjamin’s denunciation of the aesthetic of war

³⁸ David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime*, MIT Press, 1994, xiii.

embedded within the Futurists' exaltation of technological beauty helped us to reflect on the dangers of such contemplation of atomic sublimity.

As an alternative, we proposed that, following Longinus, we enquire from the perspective of the artistic (technological) mind behind created events, and view *ourselves* as the source of the technological sublime. Following Arendt's interpretation of Kant's political theory within his aesthetic works, as well as Faulkner's appeal to his and later generations to defy the immensity of overwhelming technological power and return to humanistic proportions, we proposed that *reflection* should be reinstated as a crucial aesthetic category. The collective and individual re-appropriation and re-direction of politics and aesthetics should emerge from reflection as it is a necessary precondition for a correct understanding of the roots of technological-sublime transcendence. Although we do not have the power to resist the natural effects of the atomic bomb or any other massive geo-technological effect, we have the power to resist and redirect the human will and imagination behind it. Following Arendt, who shows how aesthetics can provide the enlarged mentality necessary for judgements in the name of humanity and not individual interest, we called for a politicization of aesthetics in line with such a collective project. Finally, based on the general insight that changing our ways of living together also involved transforming the feelings induced by the dominant aesthetic models, we sketched out what a *democratic* aesthetic subject, rather than a fascist or consumerist one, would look like.

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