

The sublime between appearance and disappearance. A reflection on Quayola's art

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Deep thought (*batheías phrontidos*) is certainly needed to save us:
the eye, like that of a diver, must scan right to the bottom.

Aeschylus, *Suppliants*, vv. 407-409¹

Ou des idées intéressantes, un sujet original, ou un faire étonnant.
Le mieux serait de réunir les deux, et la pensée piquante et l'exécution heureuse.
Si le sublime du technique n'y était pas, l'idéal de Chardin serait misérable,

Diderot, *Salon de 1765*²

Quayola's work can undeniably be regarded as a tribute to the sublime, which is celebrated not only by means of its most representative iconography (the great natural phenomena, the masterpieces of painting and sculpture) but also through the capability to spur a dynamic, aporetic and galvanizing mindset that defines itself only through the creation process and the gesture through which it is realised. In such a way, it generates a dimension of *infinity* that is never satisfied with its infinitude. Like a lightning struck, the imagination supplants logic, in which it finds a starting point. Thus, the tautology: the sublime is nothing but what generates the sublime. It is the cause and, at the same time, the effect, the principle, and the consequence. Each time, the sublime identifies itself with its mediums, but it also goes beyond those mediums. Hence the difficulty of studying it. Everything is intimately blurred: the activated principles, the mediums chosen, the results that immediately dissolve and those that, in spite of everything, are substantially consistent.

We should not forget that Longinus's treatise *On the Sublime*, the first ancient testimony on this subject (1st century AD), begins by attributing to the sublime "the strength to lead our natures to some increase of greatness"³. On a closer inspection, art and politics exchange values and share the same problem: where to find images and words that can redeem and empower human beings so that they can eliminate horror or at least reduce it and make it less threatening?

Our aim will be to elaborate these questions and to show their relevance, following the paths traced by Quayola in his work.

How it is possible to merge and connect algorithms with the sublime (whether already generated or on the brink of its inception)? What's the meeting point between the efficacy of ciphers and the ever-active sensation of the sublime, which confronts us with the limits of our own intellectual and sentient potential, and simultaneously forces us to acknowledge our finitude, ultimately pushing us towards self-overcoming?

On the one hand, there are calculation systems that may have unexpected developments and which stem from analytical methods (such as infinitesimal calculus) symptomatically called

¹ Transl. by Alan H. Sommerstein, in: Aeschylus, *Persians, Seven against Thebes, Suppliants, Prometheus Bound*, ed. by A. H. Sommerstein, Loeb, Cambridge (MA), 2009, p. 343.

² "There's no middle ground: either interesting ideas, an original subject, or astonishing technique. The best would be to unite them, combining a piquant idea with delectable execution. Without his sublime technique, Chardin's ideal would be an impoverished one." D. Diderot, *Salons of 1765*, in *Diderot on Art : The Salon of 1765 and Notes on Painting* translated into English by John Goodman, Yale University Press, 1995.

³ Longinus, *On the Sublime*, translated with a Commentary by James A. Arieti & John M. Corossett, Mellen Press, New York and Toronto 1985, 1.1, p. 5.

“sublime”: we benefit without risk from their precision, their rapidity, their easy storage, but also their ability to continuously re-program themselves. On the other hand, there is the sublime, that is the incalculable or better, a concept that transcends as Longinus puts it “useful or even necessary, always accessible to men.”⁴ The sublime removes us from our ordinary concerns but, while freeing us from them, captures us in our most authentic interiority and, indeed, “sublimates” us by transporting us to depths and heights as yet unknown. The sublime is the climax of discourse, as Longinus points out; it privileges a vertical axis in which the values of *high* and *low* are exchanged.

Under these conditions, should we still maintain the alternative between an ‘ideal’ that remains problematic and a more accessible ‘doing’? Or should we rather uphold their paradoxical union, favouring the ‘sublime of technique’, as Denis Diderot did in 1765? Extensively idealising the sublime and liberating it from sensible perception, would weaken its mode of operation, thus make it abstract. Conversely, describing the sublime in a way that is exceedingly technical, one can forget that, unlike the beautiful, the sublime is unstable, it has no autonomous substance because it does not arise from itself. The sublime is always in motion and depends on a human subject that is wounded and at the same time healed, prostrated and at the same time uplifted by it. The sublime always ‘passes’ in three senses: 1. it passes, because it appears fleetingly. 2. it passes, because it overcomes every obstacle. 3. it passes, because it lends itself to being accepted. And it must always *pass* through a subject that makes itself responsible for it and attests to its reception, transforming it into the sign of a sign: a signifier whose power is experienced by the subject.

Longinus keenly illustrates the contrasts characterising the sources of the sublime, depicting it as a great river, nourished and expanded by various tributaries that flow into it before vanishing and dissolving into the great sea of *logos*. The first opposition delineated by the critic concerns the relationship between talent and technique, that is to say between innate abilities and acquired skills, work that focuses on the idea and work that concentrates on the material, the highest form of art and art conceived as mere manner or simple procedure. This is the problem outlined by Diderot while refusing to give in to the uncertain facilities of technophobia, revaluing what he calls ‘doing’.

The second contrast concerns the two natural sources of sublime: the greatness of thoughts and the intensity of emotions. Longinus insists on the primacy of intellectual greatness and makes it the inescapable source of the sublime. But this does not prevent him from recognising that *pathos* – even when it does not seem indispensable – drives the sublime to its highest point. We must pay particular attention to this aspect, as Longinus’ treatise presents some gaps that can mislead its interpretation. What can the sublime do in the face of brutality, in the face of violence, in the face of barbarity? Could it at least ban them, contrast them, tame them? No matter how one wants to understand the scope of the artistic subject and the ‘art of nature’, it seems that, quoting Nietzsche, one can define the sublime as the ‘artistic repression of atrocity’ (*die künstlerische Bändigung des Entsetzlichen*)⁵.

The fact remains that it is difficult or even impossible to explain what the sublime is to someone who has never perceived its presence as that of a driving force, of a thought that imposes itself in such a way that can change us as we receive it. Let’s focus on what the sublime is not. The sublime is not a simple idea that presents itself unforeseen to the mind, with a faint perceptive or imaginative profile, to vanish very soon without inscribing itself in reflection and memory. Nor is the sublime a form of technical, conceptual, or moral perfection. “Ah! Your defect is perfection. Divine Galatea, if you were less perfect, you would lack nothing” – these are the words that Rousseau puts on the lips of his Pygmalion, in the act of sadly contemplating that statue of his eternally immobilised in the same pose⁶. Why is the sublime ‘missed’ or even mocked just when it seems to have all the requirements to manifest itself? The fact is that it needs the presence of life: of a life that is necessarily vulnerable and struggling for its preservation.

⁴ Longinus, *On the Sublime*, cit., p. 180.

⁵ Fr. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, in *The Birth of Tragedy or Hellenism and Pessimism*, Translated by Wm. A. Haussmann, Ph.D. Volume One T.N. Foulis 13 & 15 Frederick Street Edinburgh: And London 1910.

⁶ J.-J. Rousseau, *Pygmalion*, in Id., *Œuvres*, II, Paris, 1959, p. 1227.

Every example of the sublime proves to be doubtful and fleeting, as it is subject to the fragile dynamics of appearance and disappearance. However, this process does not weaken the sublime, nor diminishes its galvanising effect while listening, contemplating, and examining fragments of works whose power suddenly spreads and generates an engaging and tenacious memory. We eventually come to construct icons both from the effects of our emotion and from the images that quickly stimulate our eye and ear. Thus, natural and artificial interpenetrate each other mysteriously.

On February 25th, 2022, Kiev airport had just been bombed and the first Russian tanks were entering the city. As the grievous exodus of refugees began to spread, President Volodymyr Zelensky, his Prime Minister, the Head of Cabinet and one of their officials made their appearance on television screens. Gathered in the streets of the capital, with bare hands and in a total absence of *decorum*, they were wearing the military-green t-shirts that would become the uniform of the Ukrainian resistance. “We are all here. Our soldiers are here. The citizens are here. We are all here to defend our independence and our Country. Long live Ukraine!”. Nothing was more valuable than everyone being in the same place, defending their sacred ground.

That video had nothing sublime *per se*, nor any possible connection to the sublime seemed to be carefully pre-constructed. And yet that simple video, with its barely discernible artifice, made it possible to give visibility to the courage of these putative heroes, caught in that most adverse of circumstances. One essential trait emerged: the irrevocable decision not to flee, to resist, to remain ‘here’: unconditionally present and unconditionally committed. A decision that everyone witnessed and could not help but take note of, in front of their screens. In their city, with their resolute looks, those men embodied the whole of Ukraine: so that, without chatter, without any propension to the pathetic, the victims of state terrorism were abruptly transformed into leaders, into champions of vilified rights and into restorers of their homeland’s future. The image presented on that crucial evening by Zelensky and his right-hand men would later lose much of its initial splendour, due to the influence of egocentricity, laziness, and prudence. But it was instrumental in enhancing the awareness of the scandal and barbarity of the Russian invasion. And the original image then fostered the production other material and mental images: the creative imagination showed itself in all its imaginative power.

In this scene, the sublime is certainly limited to an initial and evanescent state: necessarily problematic. However, what it is interesting is precisely the difficulty - or even impossibility - of affirming the presence of the sublime without hesitation. What sense, then, should we give to our reservation, to that kind of *non possumus* that we come to formulate? While there is a dogmatism of the beautiful, there is no dogmatism of the sublime. Because of the sublime, none of us can ultimately be the judge. The sublime appeals directly to our subjectivity in what is most crucial and most mysterious about it.

So, where is the sublime? It can be found in the close link between a sensitivity that discovers the difficulty of certain problems and genuine creativity – be it verbal, musical or figurative. Aporetics (in the sense of studying everything that presents itself as problematic) and poetics (based on dynamic imagination) are intertwined with each other. But a kind of poetic solution is emerging. Indeed, the pitfall will always come from the separation of philosophy from poetics, as if the power of thought and the power of creation could become independent of each other. Too often we leave not only the path traced by Aristotle but also that indicated by Lucretius who, as Jackie Pigeaud underlined, “was a great poet because Epicurus, his teacher, was a great philosopher.”⁷

⁷ Jackie Pigeaud. See *Savoir et création. Autour de l’œuvre de Jackie Pigeaud*, dir. B. Saint Girons et A. Pigeaud, Rennes 2022, with particular attention to articles by Fr. Le Blay, p. 341, and Ph. Heuzé, pp. 437-441.