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The Political Sublime: An Oxymoron

Ned O’Gorman

The sublime has been a categorical refuge in a number of important ‘postmodern’ critical and theoretical projects, most of which are aimed at retrieving or inventing a more radical, liberating, or progressive politics. Using Kant’s theory of the sublime, an *über*-theory for postmodern thought, this essay argues that the political sublime is self-defeating because it precludes differentiation, a *sine qua non* of politics. Furthermore, I argue that where the sublime takes on *political* purchase it slips into the beautiful – the ‘political sublime’ is a form of the beautiful. The political sublime is a means of pronouncing the limits of one set of political practices and displacing them with another, purportedly stronger, politics. I make this argument through two distinct but interconnected approaches: (1) through a reading of theories of the political sublime in Jean-François Lyotard and Hayden White, and (2) through a reading of CNN’s live US coverage of the 11 September 2001 attacks.

The political sublime has come to represent a secular political piety, but an impossible one. For unlike the not particularly political piety of, say, a Saint Francis, whose visions were possessed by an object, a God who hears and speaks, and a distinct affective orientation, love, and hence had definite political potential, the piety of the sublime, where it remains fixated on the sublime, has neither object nor orientation. The sublime *as* sublime submits to neither predication nor modification. The sublime is a free-floating force, a univocal power, which because of its univocality cannot provide alternatives for change, guide critique, or articulate new horizons. The sublime speaks only unpredicated power.

Of course, the sublime has been predicated and modified in what now seem innumerable ways. And there are particular stories that need to be told about particular articulations of what has been called ‘the sublime’. Nevertheless, the sublime *as* sublime and any given predicate

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or modifier have at best an accidental relationship. To write of the 'technological sublime', the 'Gothic sublime', or the 'sublimity' of the Pentagon's warfare is to write either of the modifier or the modified, but not of a reciprocal, dialectical, or mutually constitutive relationship between two things. Technology, for example, even as a name for cultural formation, is not significantly transformed by or delimited by the sublime; neither is the sublime constituted by or determined by technology. What is significant in stories like these is either the sublime itself or particular articulations of power, ideology, fantasy, or identity which attach themselves to the sublime like a tick. A transformative interaction between the sublime and these articulations is never the story. The reason for this is that the sublime is neither a subject nor a predicate, neither a modifier nor capable of being modified. It is like the 'thing-in-itself', which is beyond such concrete forms of expression. The function of the sublime is precisely to gesture beyond the concrete, ostensive, and relatively determinate (and thus relatively indeterminate). Yet, although the sublime is like the thing-in-itself it is in itself no thing; it is a thing, entity, or force only as an effect of organised discursive manoeuvres, whether in the form of a totalising system, as in Immanuel Kant's analytic of the sublime, or as developed cultural formation, as displayed in Edmund Burke's enquiry into the idea of the sublime.¹ In both cases, the thingness of the sublime is the effect of discourse: it needs to be taught, analysed, reflected upon, theorised, or just plain talked about in order to come into being as 'the sublime'. And what is significant here is not the generation of the sublime as an entity so much as the *function* of this generation: the sublime is a rhetorical gesture, commanding a pious response, which announces through univocal negation the limits of ostension, relative (in)determination, and, as I will stress, differentiation.

Nowhere is the univocal character of the sublime more problematic than in the notion of the political sublime, one of the most pervasive invocations of the sublime in contemporary critical and theoretical discourse. In recent decades, the political sublime, the politics of the

1. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Press, 1951) and Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). By the time Burke wrote his treatise, the sublime was a commonplace of critical discourse in Great Britain and in Europe. Kant's initial engagement with the sublime was in line with Burke's psychological and cultural approach; it included, for example, a section on 'national characteristics' vis-à-vis the sublime. See Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, trans. John T. Goldthwait (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960).

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sublime, the political potential of the sublime, or the sublime within politics – conceptions which do not vary substantially – have been repeatedly presented as offering or opening radical alternatives to the status quo. To be sure, there is something quite radical about the sublime, but nothing that can finally be said to be *politically* radical. For a *sine qua non* of all politics except the totalitarian is differentiation. And the sublime, while it can produce a kind of sheer difference, cannot produce differentiation, for the latter requires predication and modification, which the sublime precludes.

The political sublime is therefore an oxymoron. Nothing inheres in the sublime that is political, as the sublime can only breathe power and force, not words, bodies, or beings, let alone the judgements, actions, and associations necessary to politics. This is not to say that the political sublime is an insignificant concept. Rather, it is to say that its force resides not in a particular political vision or programme it bestows on us, but in its sheer rhetorical lure. In this article I follow the rhetorical role of the sublime in both theoretical and non-theoretical discourse. First, I look at the thought of two of the more influential contemporary apologists for a political sublime, Jean François Lyotard and Hayden White. My reading exposes the insoluble problems the notion of the political sublime presents and suggests that Lyotard and White lead us back to a sublime that, paradoxically, is meaningful only within the field of what might be called the beautiful. The political sublime, I argue, is a form of the beautiful, one which represents a strategy of displacement or overcoming via the introduction of a lack that pronounces the limits of one form of politics so as to succeed it with another, purportedly stronger or more adequate form. The political purchase of the sublime, I further argue, tends not towards the radical but the conservative, in that, as a form of rhetorical power, it is also a factor of rhetorical power – and rhetorical power tends to be consolidated in elite political and economic structures, agents, and institutions. In the second part of this article I consider one instance of the conservative and orderly rhetorical power of the sublime by engaging in a reading of CNN's live coverage (US version) of 11 September 2001.

What links the two parts of this article is the function of the sublime, which I argue is a rhetorical function; the sublime is understood as akin to a gesture rather than a 'concept'. Indeed, what is noteworthy about the history of the sublime dating back to Longinus is the way in which the varieties of conceptual approaches to it significantly differ with respect to object, orientation, or subject, but share the basic function of announcing the limits of the 'ordinary'. Despite all the vexations about what the sublime *is* – its conceptual definition – the sublime has played a remarkably similar *role* across its various iterations; it dramatises the limits of one order by declaring the presence of some greater order or totality beyond articulation,

imagination, and relative (in)determination. As that which passes over limits, the sublime has gained transgressive traction. And yet, I want to echo and help account for Donald Pease's observation that, 'Despite all the revolutionary rhetoric invested in the term, the sublime has, in what we could call the politics of historical formation, always served conservative purposes.'² That is to say, the sublime has repeatedly represented a retreat from politics centred on historical, contingent, and relatively (in)determinant political processes, in favour of ahistorical and radically (in)determinant orientations.

The roots of the sublime, as is well known but too little considered, lie in the ancient text *Peri Hypsous* (or *On Height*), attributed to the fabled 'Longinus'. The text had but a small following until the eighteenth century, when it gained widespread distribution and authoritative status. Nevertheless, even as an ancient text it merits distinction. For prior to *Peri Hypsous*, rhetoric, which had been a principal practical-theoretical strain of democracy and its republican variant, was directed towards common opinion (*doxa*), collective judgement (*krisis*), and political debate (*agon*). *Peri Hypsous* is significant because it represents the first great attempt we know of which robustly theorises rhetoric as an art of *paradoxon* that produces not opinion and judgement, but 'the object of wonder . . . which does not lend itself to debate'.³ Longinus took rhetoric out of the assembly, where it could be figured as the art of the *polis*, and placed it alongside the figure of the Colossus, the magnificent icon of Empire.⁴ Thus in antiquity the introduction of sublimity meant the overcoming of a practical and deliberative orientation towards public discourse. And something even more apolitical than this was expressed in the seventeenth century when Nicholas Boileau-Despréaux wrote, 'The sublime is not strictly speaking something which is proven or demonstrated, but a marvel, which seizes one, strikes one, and makes one feel.'⁵ In the strong theories of the sublime that followed Boileau, most significantly represented by Kant, the sublime

2. Donald Pease, 'Sublime Politics', *Boundary 2*, no. 12 (1984): 275.

3. Longinus, *On the Sublime*, trans. James A. Arieti and John M. Crosssett (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1985), §35.

4. *Ibid.*, §36.

5. Quoted in Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 97.

6. It seems that a primary aspect of the mystique of the sublime is its resistance to conceptualisation or definition. As one relatively recent critic of the sublime has written, 'By its nature the sublime is beyond any absolute definition' (William Bruce Johnson, 'Introduction', *Longinus: On the Sublime* (Delmar, NY: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1975), vii). Here the sublime takes on a 'natural', and indeed ontological, status that purportedly exceeds art, articulation, and understanding altogether.

gained freedom from modification and predication and rose to exceed, transcend, or escape politics.⁶

In Kant, the analytic of the sublime is a means of demonstrating in transcendental terms the legitimacy of the Kantian subject. The sublime generates respect (*Achtung*) for the supersensible destination of the subject and proves the pre-eminence of reason by revealing the faculty's capacity to think 'totality'.⁷ In this way, the sublime reveals the indisputable, absolute, and ahistorical freedom of the Kantian subject. Its political purchase might lie in this revelation, but as the sublime is exclusively restricted to the faculty of reason, it has no extra-subjective or sensible significance. Kant writes, 'We must seek a ground external to ourselves for the beautiful of nature, but seek it for the sublime merely in ourselves and in our attitude of thought.'⁸ Therefore, while Kant argues that the social can help develop moral ideas and in this way create the conditions for the experience of the sublime, the sublime is neither produced by nor directed towards the social; rather it has its root and end in human nature as it exists, in Kant's view, entirely apart from the social.⁹ For Kant, to turn towards the question of the relation of the subject to the social, is to leave the analytic of the sublime and enter into the analytic of the beautiful.

Nevertheless, a Kantian-inspired sublime has been reinvented as a purportedly radical force in postmodern political and critical theory. Postmodernity and sublimity are now so intertwined that it is almost commonplace to conceptualise the former via the latter. Indeed, the sublime has become something like the *über*-theory of postmodern thought, capturing the 'essence' of postmodernism – radical epistemological indeterminacy, interminable signification, extreme affective dislocation, indecipherable social networks, vast technological vistas, and disruptive ruptures. The sublime, however, can be productive only as a way of gesturing towards the complexities and indeterminacies of postmodernity, not as a way of theorising postmodernity. And the sublime is even less adequate as a postmodern *political* mode, for it leads to tautologies and totality and, via its sheer negativity, precludes differentiation. The efforts of Jean François Lyotard and Hayden White to imagine a sublime with radical political potential, while motivated by a desire to overcome totality, end up showing how the political sublime is self-defeating.

The Political Sublime, Rhetoric, and Power: Lyotard and White

Lyotard's works blend Kant's *Critique of Judgement* with Nietzschean

7. Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, §26, §27, and §39.

8. *Ibid.*, §23.

9. *Ibid.*, §29.

metaphysics, Aristotelian philosophy, the Sophistic legacy, and speech-act theory to argue for a postmodern agonistic politics that he believes can be activated through the sublime.¹⁰ White draws upon post-Kantian German philosophy, psychoanalytic theory, rhetorical theory, and post-structuralism to interrogate historiography. His influential essay 'The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-sublimation' invokes Schiller's sublime to imagine a 'visionary' alternative historiography.¹¹ As advocates and theorists of a political sublime, Lyotard and White unwittingly expose some of its basic problems. Here, I will consider three ways in which the political sublime is self-defeating: in its prioritisation of negation, in its attempt to facilitate critique, and in its claim to politics.

Lyotard presents the sublime as a political antidote to the determination of knowledge by power, White to the determination of 'history' vis-à-vis its emergence as a discipline. The sublime, they claim, negates determination by means of its own apparent radical indeterminacy, instability, and in White's view, connection to meaninglessness. For both thinkers, the sublime opens the field of 'legitimate' knowledge by virtue of its sheer negative or negating force. This activity of opening is presented by Lyotard as 'paralogy', which he describes as a form of innovation which is free of 'the command of the system', and by White as 'interpretation'.¹² For the former the key to innovation is not the discovery of some new principle, law, or technique by which knowledge progresses or develops, but rather the advent of a

10. I am concerned here primarily with three of Lyotard's works, namely *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), *Just Gaming*, trans. Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), and *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988). However, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, cited above, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), *The Postmodern Explained*, trans. Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), and *Postmodern Fables*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) are also helpful for understanding Lyotard's conception of the sublime. A recent work that has taken up the theme of the sublime in Lyotard's work is Hugh J. Silverman, ed., *Lyotard: Philosophy, Politics, and the Sublime* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

11. Hayden White, 'The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-sublimation', in his *The Content of Form* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 58–82. The essay was first published in *Critical Inquiry* 9, no. 1 (1982): 113–37.

12. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 61; White, 'The Politics of Historical Interpretation', 58.

move within a language game that destabilises the system, is unlawful with respect to the established rules of the game, and is therefore unrepresentable. Paralogy thus defies 'consensus', a common 'paradigm', or a coherent 'system' by producing strong discontinuities, disruptions, and unexplainable disturbances.¹³ Paralogy is central to what Lyotard calls postmodern scientific pragmatics – that is, a form of scientific practice which excludes overarching scientific systems in favour of an 'open' indeterminate system that has as its primary criterion of success the generation of new ideas, new statements, and new game rules.¹⁴ And this postmodern scientific pragmatics is for Lyotard analogous to a postmodern social pragmatics. In postmodern science and society alike Lyotard sees the multiplication of unexplainable innovations: 'It is producing not the known, but the unknown.'¹⁵

This 'unknown' is called the 'sublime' in the appendix to *The Postmodern Condition*, 'Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?' Against those thinkers – especially Jürgen Habermas – who because of worries about the political impotency of artistic play and experimentation urge 'realism' over modernist or avant-garde forms of art, Lyotard argues that in the latter an artist is able, with radical political consequence, 'to present the fact that the unrepresentable exists' and to offer 'Ideas of which no presentation is possible'.¹⁶ Lyotard traces this presentation of the unrepresentable back to Kant's theme of the sublime:

We can conceive the infinitely great, the infinitely powerful, but every presentation of an object destined to 'make visible' this absolute greatness or power appears to us painfully inadequate. Those are Ideas of which no presentation is possible. Therefore, they impart no knowledge about reality (experience); they also prevent the free union of the faculties which gives rise to the sentiments of the beautiful; and they prevent the formation and stabilization of taste. They can be said to be unrepresentable.¹⁷

Lyotard calls 'modern' the art which makes 'visible that there is something which can be conceived and which can neither be seen nor made visible'.¹⁸ The central theoretical claim of 'Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?' is that in the *postmodern* sublime, as distinguished from the modern sublime, the affective valence of the sublime shifts from that

13. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 61.

14. *Ibid.*, 64.

15. *Ibid.*, 60.

16. *Ibid.*, 78.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

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of nostalgia, where the unrepresentable is put forward as 'missing content', to a more vigorous engagement consisting of a combination of pleasure and pain, with the unrepresentable per se. In the postmodern we have an *event* wherein what is done, performed, or created runs ahead of any formula, form, rule, or regulation. The effect is the impartation of 'a stronger sense of the unrepresentable'.¹⁹ This then leads to Lyotard's central *political* claim: he calls for deploying this postmodern sublime to overcome unity, totality, metanarratives, and metatheories. 'Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name.'²⁰

In this way, the sublime is related to Lyotard's notion of the differend. The differend is, strictly speaking, the event of an irresolvable conflict among two or more parties because of a lack of common rules of judgement; yet, as such, it shares conceptual ground with the sublime.²¹ Lyotard writes,

The differend is the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be. This state includes silence, which is a negative phrase, but it also calls upon phrases which are in principle possible. The state is signaled by what one ordinarily calls a feeling: 'One cannot find the words,' etc. A lot of searching must be done to find new rules for forming and linking phrases that are able to express the differend disclosed by the feeling, unless one wants this differend to be smothered right away in a litigation and for the alarm sounded by the feeling to have been useless. What is at stake in a literature, in a philosophy, in a politics perhaps, is to bear witness to differends by finding idioms for them.²²

As Gary Aylesworth writes, 'This is analogous to the Kantian sublime, since it involves the pain of never being able to phrase or present something absolute, while at the same time there is pleasure in being affected by it in the first place.'²³ More precisely, the differend should not be understood as the sublime, or even as its analogue, but rather the differend may *become* sublime when the event of the differend is used in a way akin to postmodern avant-garde art: to present the fact that the unrepresentable exists. In a case where language fails, but through searching or innovation a new language is created as compensation, the differend is

19. Ibid., 81.

20. Ibid., 82.

21. See Lyotard, *The Differend*, xi.

22. Ibid., §22.

23. Gary Aylesworth, 'Lyotard, Gadamer, and the Relation Between Ethics and Aesthetics,' in *Lyotard: Philosophy, Politics, and the Sublime*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman (New York: Routledge, 2002), 84–99: 94.

not sublime. But in a case where language fails and language is invoked rhetorically to accentuate this failure, the differend *becomes* sublime.

Like Lyotard, White calls upon the sublime to counter narratives which legitimate dominant power. White is concerned with using interpretation as a means towards what he calls a 'visionary politics'; he seeks historical narratives that move people to political actions that have utopian aims in view. In White's account, contemporary historical narratives overwhelmingly serve the interests of dominant power by stylising hegemonic visions of political order and social goods as objective, moderate, realistic, and responsible.²⁴ Here he echoes Lyotard's concern about the conservative political consequences of 'realism'. Thus construed, historical narratives lack a compelling motivation towards substantial political change. Only a radical revision of human discourse – in this case, the rhetoric of history – will produce political actions that are truly visionary. For White, the sublime is uniquely up to this task, since he believes that it cannot conform to narrative form and entails a dramatic and powerful response to 'meaninglessness'. He writes, 'In my view, the theorists of the sublime had correctly divined that whatever dignity and freedom human beings could lay claim to could come only by way of what Freud called a "reaction-formation" to an apperception of history's meaninglessness.'²⁵ The recognition of the sheer indiscriminate chaos of human history, White's 'historical sublime', will produce a strong motive for humans to make, *ex nihilo*, political orders in which human dignity and freedom will be realised. The profound negativity of 'history' will produce a positive human politics.

Lyotard and White rightly discern that the potential of the sublime lay in its power of negation. For the former, the radical impetus of paralogy or the differend resides in the commanding force of negation exemplified in the sublime. Only as paralogy or the differend take on such negative potency do they figure into a radical politics. For the latter, the sublime promises to bring about the failure of contemporary historical narrative and 'compel devotion' to an alternative, visionary politics by introducing the meaninglessness of history in strong form. White would have us see history as a 'sublime spectacle' and pass through 'a feeling of repugnance for and negative judgment of the condition that is to be superseded'.²⁶ Indeed, Kant argued that the force of the sublime depends upon a failure, the failure of the imagination to comprehend the absolutely great. The sublime does 'violence to the

24. White, 'The Politics of Historical Interpretation', 81.

25. *Ibid.*, 72.

26. *Ibid.*, 72–3.

27. Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, §23.

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imagination'.²⁷ However, Kant recognised what Lyotard and White fail to consider fully in their respective invocations of the sublime: the sublime's sheer negative force is but an instantiation of a mode of totality. Kant expressed this by arguing that the supersensible faculty of reason, and not the sensing faculties or the sensible object, is the actual locus of the sublime.

Nothing, therefore, which can be an object of the senses is, considered on this basis, to be called sublime. But because there is in our imagination a striving towards infinite progress and in our reason a claim for absolute totality, regarded as a real idea, therefore this very inadequateness for that idea in our faculty for estimating the magnitude of things of sense [i.e. the failure of the imagination] excites in us the feeling of a supersensible faculty [the faculty of reason].²⁸

Reason supersedes the imagination because the subject can *think* totality even as it cannot imagine it. In this way, Kant asserts that the experience of the sublime amounts to the experience of absolute totality. This is because the sheer negative force of the sublime precludes any means of differentiation, or what I earlier called modification and predication.

Consequently, Lyotard's 'war against totality', as it is derived from a version of Kant's sublime, is self-defeating. The radical epistemic indeterminacy that would emerge from the fervent or forceful production of the unrepresentable could not offer a political alternative to the status quo, for any alternative must be marked by differentiation, and the very possibility of differentiation is superseded in the advent of the sublime. While the sublime possesses a radical *power*, this power is sheerly negative; and if it appears to acquire political utility it is only because sublimity has been sublimated, transfigured, or nullified under the name of a programme. Lyotard seems to recognise this. He states of the differend, 'You can't make a political "program" with it, but you can bear witness to it.'²⁹ And he says of a politics of the sublime, 'As for a politics of the sublime, there is no such thing. It could only be terror. But there is an aesthetic of the sublime in politics.'³⁰ The distinction Lyotard makes is between a politics of the sublime and the sublime in politics, or between making a political programme with the sublime and testifying to it within politics. But the distinction does not address the central problem of the political sublime. How can the sublime be said to work even *in* politics if it cannot offer any particular political vision, but only the sheer fact of the unrepresentable? The unrepresentable per se is not an

28. Ibid., §25.

29. Lyotard, *The Differend*, §264.

30. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained*, 71.

alternative to the status quo; it is at best a disruption of the status quo. But so is a plane crash, an unexpected missile attack, or a labour strike. And these events have political purchase not because they constitute disruptions to the status quo, *per se*, nor because they are unrepresentable (they are not), but because they can become grounds for differentiation and thus meaning-making. The sublime, as the presentation of the unrepresentable, offers no equivalent ground; it can testify only to that which is *without* politics because it is without any means of differentiation.

White's case for the birth of a visionary politics out of the historical sublime is less easily stalled, for White does not claim that the sublime constitutes a political force so much as it is a prerequisite to a concrete, visionary political programme. Yet, White faces the same basic problem as Lyotard, but merely in a different way. With White the problem is not the political impossibility of the sheer negative force of the sublime, but his assumptions about the relation of negativity to positivity and the way his 'metaphysics of narrativity' undermines the possibility of the substantial critique of the status quo. In 'The Politics of Historical Interpretation' White argues that the historical sublime can authorise a visionary politics that centres on the liberation of the individual will. The individual will, which he, following Schiller, equates with human dignity and freedom, has by White's account been repressed by the aesthetic of the beautiful. The beautiful, he claims, is by nature conservative – even when invoked by the Left – because 'it permits the historian to see some beauty, if not good, in everything human and to assume an Olympian calm in the face of any current social situation, however terrifying it may appear to anyone who lacks a historical perspective'.³¹ In Marx, for example, social catastrophes are given an overarching meaning as they are put into the frame of a dialectical materialism. For White, such a narrative, despite Marx's radical intentions, undercuts a radical politics because it endows history with a meaning and order where White presumes there are none, and because it 'aestheticizes' historiography, making it a matter of genial taste and style.³² White advocates a historiography based upon a 'refusal to attempt a narrativist mode' and argues that this historical sublime could motivate people to achieve a visionary politics.³³

There are several perplexities one faces when trying to make sense of White's thesis. For example, if he aims to critique bourgeois modes of

31. White, 'The Politics of Historical Interpretation', 71.

32. *Ibid.*, 70–1.

33. *Ibid.*, 81.

history writing, why does he so willingly embrace as stable the binary of the sublime and the beautiful, a binary that would be, by White's reading, as much a product of genial taste as the form of historiography he deplors? Similarly, given the distinct theoretical questions that have historically accompanied the aesthetic of the beautiful, particularly questions about distinctions among types of beauty, why does he so easily speak of the beautiful as if it were a univocal entity and pronounce all beauty repressive? (Later in this article, I will use the binary of the sublime and the beautiful, but in a way that renders it unstable and flexible.) But most perplexing is his assumption – for it is really not a claim – that 'whatever dignity and freedom human beings could lay claim to' can only emerge out of a deep sense of the meaninglessness of history. While this Romantic vision has a long-standing lineage, it would seem, in light of the implicit audience within White's essay, that it should not so easily go uninterrogated. For White does not write as if speaking to the choir. That he nevertheless assumes so much may be the most revealing aspect of his essay.

In what sense? Despite White's ready use of the binary beautiful/sublime, the two notions do not function in the same manner in his argument. The beautiful is an aesthetic category, or, going back to his earlier work, a *trope*—a way of turning a subject matter within discourse.³⁴ As White presents it, the beautiful takes 'the sublimity of the historical process' and turns it in ways that give it an orderly shape, meaning, and purpose.³⁵ The beautiful is thus a rhetorical imposition on the sublime spectacle of history, one that is, according to White, politically motivated and ideologically laden. In his view, however, the sublime functions differently. It does not *turn* (and thus discipline) the disorderly data of history; rather it *expresses* them. The discourse of the sublime, in other words, entails a sort of channelling of disorderly historical data, and not only of historical data, but also the chaotic state of things in what seems to be a metaphysical sense.

Clearly, White does not present himself as a metaphysician; however, he does take up the question of metaphysics as it relates to historiography in his essay 'Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory'. There he describes Paul Ricoeur's contribution to historical

34. Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 2; see also White's *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 48.

35. White, 'The Politics of Historical Interpretation', 75.

theory as an attempt at a 'metaphysics of narrativity'. Of Ricoeur, White writes,

A narrative, for him, is neither an icon of the events of which it speaks, an explanation of those events, nor a rhetorical refashioning of 'facts' for a specifically persuasive effect. It is a symbol mediating between different universes of meaning by 'configuring' the dialectic of their relationship in an image. This image is nothing other than the narrative itself, that 'configuration' of events reported in the chronicle by the revelation of their 'plot-like' nature.³⁶

To put the matter a bit differently, Ricoeur makes the ultimate referent of historical narrative metaphysical, the structure of temporality itself. Historical narrative is a 'mediating' enterprise, mediating between the structure of temporality and 'historical' events.³⁷ And this, I suggest, is near to what White does in imagining the sublime vis-à-vis historiography. For it is repeatedly apparent in White's *oeuvre* that history, in its most naked and unadulterated state, is sublime. Discourse, particularly historical discourse, as we read in *Tropics of Discourse*, entails the moving "to and fro" between received encodings of experience and the clutter of phenomena which refuses incorporation into conventionalized notions of "reality," "truth," or "possibility". Discourse, in a word, is quintessentially a *mediative* enterprise.³⁸ While White is not making exact same claim as Ricoeur with respect to the *way* in which discourse is mediative, he does, like Ricoeur, advocate a history writing that in some sense refers to the metaphysical state of things, a state which White describes variously as 'chaotic', 'meaningless', 'anarchic', and 'sublime'. Hence, the sublime for White is not a trope; it is a mode expressive of the real condition of historical existence as such.³⁹

The metaphysical aspect of White's sublime is not itself a problem. It is, in the end, a matter of taste, albeit a grave one. What is problematic is his appeal to the sublime as a ground for the *critique* of dominant power/knowledge. For the basic appeal of White's invocation of the sublime is that it uniquely can propel human beings into the authentic realisation of their freedom and dignity. Modern ideologies of the

36. White, 'Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory', in *The Content of the Form*, 52.

37. *Ibid.*

38. White, *Tropics of Discourse*, 4.

39. Here White follows the general pattern established by Kant, who claims that the sublime is really not an aspect of the aesthetic at all; 'the theory of the sublime', he states, is 'a mere appendix to the aesthetical' (Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, §23). See footnote 34.

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beautiful, he argues, 'deprive history of the kind of meaninglessness that alone can goad living human beings to make their lives different for themselves and their children, which is to say, to endow their lives with a meaning for which they alone are fully responsible'.⁴⁰ This deprivation, however, would seem to be the lot of history even under a 'visionary politics' that grants humans full freedom, dignity, and responsibility. For it is not possible to conceive of a visionary politics – which is, after all, the most *meaningful* of political possibilities for White – that does not end up subordinating the sublime meaninglessness of history to its own meaningfulness, thereby moving us from the sublime to the beautiful. The sublime, even for White, is only a means of negative critique on the way towards a visionary politics that is beautiful. But this means that White's indictment of the beautiful is off the mark, and that the sublime *as* sublime is at best an apolitical passage on the way to a political order. Politics traverses the field of the beautiful, never to touch a sublime object that is not already transfigured to fit within the boundaries of the beautiful. The pervasiveness of the beautiful within politics may, in light of White's metaphysical sublime, render all politics inauthentic, and hence provide a basis for the critique of politics as such, but the sublime cannot provide a basis for the critique of one mode of politics against another, which is what White aims to do by pitting visionary politics over and against other forms of politics.⁴¹

40. White, *The Content of the Form*, 72, emphasis added.

41. The problem I present here is one that White recognises even in Schiller, who is the inspiration for his historical sublime. White notes that in Schiller the beautiful end up taking precedence over the sublime; the beautiful is 'constantly returning us to "our spiritual mission" which has its sphere in "the world of sense" and "action to which we are after all committed"' ('the Politics of Historical Interpretation' 69). Similarly, White points out that both Kant and Hegel subordinated the sublime to the beautiful with respect to their respective political visions (70). At a couple of points in his essay, White gestures towards Nietzsche as a theorist of the historical sublime. He says, for example, that Schiller's description of 'the pathetic spectacle of mankind wrestling with fate' could well have been composed by Nietzsche (69). To be sure, of all theorists (implicit or explicit) of the sublime, Nietzsche comes nearest to a strong theory of the sublime that does not end up being subordinated to the beautiful. However, when Nietzsche's sublime begins to take on political purchase, it too leads to a hierarchy of value where some sociopolitical orders are represented as coming nearer to the sublime ground of being than others, and thus a kind of beauty and order is superimposed over the sublime. This is most apparent in Nietzsche's early work, especially *The Birth of Tragedy*, and it is questionable whether Nietzsche ever overcomes this. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* and *The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1956).

There is no such thing as a proper *political* sublime that is still properly sublime. Politics may invoke the idea of the sublime, but where it does the sublime is made to fit within a political order of one kind or another, and thus ceases to be properly sublime. From a view of the sublime that relates it to a fundamental state of things, the impossibility of the political sublime is seen as deprivation, loss, or lack. Indeed, Longinus brought his treatise to a close by announcing the utter lack of the sublime in his day. 'Great natures' had succumbed to 'evil parasites'.⁴² From the standpoint of a metaphysical sublime, beauty and politics (or the beautiful form of politics) can only appear parasitic, and since beauty always dominates the field of political discourse, the sublime can be understood therein only in terms of a lack. In his essay 'Unbeknownst', Lyotard again admits as much. Politics, he states, must be unfaithful to the unrepresentable which unconsciously resides in political community. Lyotard thus asks, 'are there other politics – other than revolutionary – that would make it possible not to be unfaithful to the thing that inhabits the *polis* unconsciously?'⁴³ The answer is no, for 'politics is already devoted to the scene of representation from which the unrepresentable presumably must be eliminated'. Hence, Lyotard is left with 'a sense of melancholy'. He writes, 'Politics will never be anything but the art of the possible.'⁴⁴

One wonders, then, if the iterations of the political sublime from Longinus to Lyotard might best be understood as belonging to the genre of what in ancient times was called *epideictic*, the fanciful discourse of loss and mourning or, on the other hand, praise and celebration. This formulation would make the appearance of the political sublime in critical and theoretical discourse far less puzzling, for it suggests that the function of the political sublime is to pronounce a lack within the *polis*, and thereby to declare, or even impose, a limit on extant political processes. This, then, can give rise to a sense of melancholy; but it just as well could give rise to a more optimistic and positive sense that Longinus and his latter-day adherents called *ekstasis*. Indeed, I think something very much like this is at work when the sublime is made the subject of political discourse. Not only in Longinus, Lyotard, and White do we see the sublime emerge as a lack that pronounces the limits of politics, but also in the idioms of the sublime within more popular political discourses of politicians, bureaucrats, and broadcasters we see this same function. The political sublime in theoretical and non-theoretical discourse alike is a rhetoric which would declare the limits of one set of purportedly 'weak' political

42. Longinus, *On the Sublime*, trans. W. Hamilton Fyfe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), §44.

43. Lyotard, 'Unbeknownst', in *Postmodern Fables*, 192.

44. *Ibid.*, 193.

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practices to overcome them with another purportedly stronger set of political practices. The political sublime, in this sense, entails a rhetorical strategy of displacement or overcoming. There are two questions which follow, bringing the sublime into rhetorical focus: how is this strategy deployed, and what are the political valences of this strategy?

How is this strategy deployed? Not through the sublime but through the beautiful. Importantly, if we return to Kant, we find that the ineffable is not restricted to the domain of the sublime; it extends to the beautiful. According to Kant, we call that object beautiful whose form brings us pleasure by virtue of its apparent harmony with the play of our cognitive faculties.⁴⁵ But in the aesthetic judgement of this form we have no knowledge of the beautiful object as such, nor of the principle or law responsible for the apparent harmony. Thus, in the experience of the beautiful we still confront the unknown. As Terry Eagleton writes of Kant's analytic of the beautiful,

If the aesthetic yields us no knowledge, then, it proffers us something arguably deeper: the consciousness, beyond all theoretical demonstration, that we are at home in the world because the world is somehow mysteriously designed to suit our capacities. Whether this is actually true or not we cannot say, since we can know nothing of what reality is like in itself. That things are conveniently fashioned for our purposes must remain a hypothesis; but it is the kind of heuristic fiction which permits us a sense of purposiveness, centredness and significance, and thus one which is of the very essence of the ideological.⁴⁶

In Kant, both the beautiful and the sublime address the ineffable; the difference is that the beautiful entails the experience of form and thus suggests a kind of imagined worldly order that is yet unknown, whereas the sublime is purely subjective and beyond form, imagination, and world. This pure subjectivity leads to solipsism, not to politics. On the other hand, the experience of the beautiful, because one 'sees' in the ineffable an order, has political purchase. A rhetoric of the sublime fits within the logic of Kant's beautiful, not his sublime. It declares and transcends limits to affirm a broader, 'ineffable' order.

What are the political valences of this rhetoric of the sublime? The answer to this question depends upon particular usage. However, in general we can say that the political power of the sublime (as an aspect of the beautiful or political order) is derived from rhetorical power more generally. As the ineffable or unrepresentable which yet falls into a broader

45. Kant, 'Introduction', *Critique of Judgement*, 26–7.

46. Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 85.

order, the political impetus of the sublime assumes a shape that is congruent with the broader order, and that order is itself often a factor of power, hegemony, or ideology. Dominant narratives of political order are as likely to invoke the sublime as alternative narratives. In fact, because the sublime renders the meaning of the event beyond even modest forms of determination and defers political meaning to broader narratives, it strongly tends to grant political power to the owners and managers of rhetorical power. The sublime thus often helps reify rather than challenge dominant power. This would help explain why, as Pease has observed, the sublime has historically served conservative purposes.

Indeed, in the United States the sublime has been part and parcel of a discourse of national destiny and a politics of displacement, from 'manifest destiny' in nineteenth-century America to the more recent episode of 'Shock and Awe' offered by the Pentagon. Here the sublime has been a perennial means of overriding democratic political practices and interpretative frames. Via sublimity, America would transcend democratic politics by exposing the limits of such politics vis-à-vis the absolute unmodified largeness of America. This American sublime is a form of beauty in the Kantian sense: for in it we see a meaningful confrontation with the ineffable vis-à-vis an imagined worldly order. This way of approaching 'America' is so commonplace in the United States that it does not require scripting or rehearsal, let alone a theory of the sublime, to remain vital. In the next section, I approach the reifying rhetorical power of a political sublime through a reading of CNN's live broadcast in the United States on 11 September 2001.

The Sublime on CNN: 11 September 2001

Understanding the sublime neither as a thing nor even as an experience, but as the rhetorical construction has implications for where and how we 'read' the sublime. Discerning the sublime becomes neither a strictly matter of terminology (e.g. finding words like 'sublime' or 'ineffable'), nor subjectivity (e.g. ecstasy and terror), nor of aesthetic form per se (e.g. magnitude and movement), but of identifying rhetorical manoeuvres which declare the limits of one order through the vigorous assertion of another 'greater' order. These manoeuvres institute a hierarchical structure of meaning which is constructed along a scale of magnitude where that which is more 'total' is rendered more real, true, and

47. 'The sublime', Jean-Luc Nancy reminds us, 'will always invoke . . . an aesthetics of movement as opposed to an aesthetics of the static or the state.' See Jean-Luc Nancy, 'The Sublime Offering', in *Of the Sublime: Presence in Question*, trans. Jeffery S. Librett (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), 25–53.

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significant. Thus the sublime is grounded in *movement* in that it is brought into being as an 'ordinary order of meaning' is overridden to establish an 'extraordinary order.'⁴⁷ This structure came to be in CNN's live US coverage of the 11 September 2001 attacks, where despite the disruptive, transgressive, and unprecedented character of the day's events, a rhetoric of the extremes of national experience emerged that served to renew, reinforce, and reify a political discourse of American power.

During the two o'clock hour on the afternoon of 11 September 2001, CNN's 'breaking news' anchor Aaron Brown interviewed George Schultz, who had been US Secretary of State under Ronald Reagan.

BROWN: We mentioned a moment ago, there were 50,000 people who come to work each day at the World Trade Center. There are literally tens of thousands more who come into the city, each of them affected. But the effect of this, we suspect, is much broader than that, that it will affect everyone in the country. Former Secretary of State George Schultz, to say American life been changed forever seems a bit farther than I want to go, but has American life been changed today?

SCHULTZ: American life will pick up. We have to look to our security, obviously, and be careful about it. But we're not going to allow these terrible people to change our way of life. They just aren't going to be able to do it. We'll defend ourselves adequately, we will find out who they are. We will get rid of them and we'll learn how to preempt these attacks. But we're not going to change our way of life because of these people. I reject that entirely.⁴⁸

There is in this exchange a clear construal of 'America' at a limit situation, and Brown's question seems to want to lead the interviewee to probe what philosopher Tsang Lap-cheun refers to as the bottom-limit of the sublime, the borders of non-existence.⁴⁹ Brown's question is both expansive and deep. Formally, it starts with the smallest number – 50,000 – and then takes two steps outward, through 'tens of thousands more' to 'everyone in the country'. But its tone probes depths. Brown asks Schultz to articulate the ways in which American life might fundamentally be changed with intonations that suggest decline. Schultz, however, insists that it will not be changed. He promises adequate defence and decisive triumph. In this way, Schultz invokes a rhetoric of the top-limit, emphasising the nation's inevitable victory and

48. CNN television broadcast, US Edition, 11 September 2001. Anchors Aaron Brown and Judy Woodruff.

49. Tsang Lap-cheun, *The Sublime: Groundwork Towards a Theory* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 1998), 41. From here on, I will refrain from enclosing 'America' in quotation marks; but I mean, of course, to retain the imaginary and ideological senses of America that the quotation marks suggest.

ability to transcend historical contingencies themselves.

This short, highly formulaic exchange is significant because it captures the form of a movement which was repeated throughout CNN's coverage of 'September 11'. The movement is from two polar ends, cataclysmic fall to imminent ultimate triumph. For Americans, watching CNN's coverage was on the one hand to watch the spectacular denouement of America (a fantasy of the Left?). On the other hand, however, it was to watch America elevated like a phoenix to new military-won heights (a fantasy of the Right?). Yet, what these two visions share is the assumption of the limits of a kind of politics vis-à-vis September 11. Neither cast a picture of a future where democratic political processes would be in play. Both represent the meaning of September 11 as falling outside such political arts of possibility, contingency, and collective debate and negotiation. CNN shuns the significant, but not radical, indeterminacy built into democratic politics in favour of a totalising narrative. As such the coverage both declares the limit of a kind of politics and establishes a more totalising and intensely ideological political order.

Integral to this dynamic was 'war'. War functioned in CNN's narrative as a bridge from the extremes of national apocalypse to that of triumphant nationalism. The word itself was used 234 times in the first 12 hours of the coverage.⁵⁰ Most of these uses came in interviews with officials representing the US government. For example, in an interview with CNN's Wolf Blitzer in the early afternoon, Senator John McCain announced, 'This is obviously an act of war that has been committed on the United States of America.' US Representative Curt Weldon said, 'We're at war. We're absolutely at war.' (Earlier, just after the first tower collapsed, Tom Brokaw announced on NBC, 'There's been a declaration of war by terrorists.') A drastic example of the use of 'war' came in the ten-o'clock hour, when Brown asked correspondent John King to describe what the government's national security apparatus was doing. King described the White House situation room, where, he said, 'a President or a Vice President can direct a war, can direct a full scale world war . . . The White House situation room is prepared just for a situation like this.' A subtler example of the way war filled the reportage of the terrorist attacks was seen in its more metaphorical use. For example, in a mid-morning interview with Howard Safer, the former New York City Police Commissioner, Brown asked, 'Mr. Safer, what do you see?' Scenes of destruction played on the television screen as Safer replied, 'I see

50. Amy Reynolds and Brooke Barnett, "'America Under Attack": CNN's Verbal and Visual Framing of September 11', in *Media Representations of September 11*, ed. Steven Chermak, Frankie Y. Bailey and Michelle Brown (Westport, CN: Praeger, 2003), 92.

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something that is unimaginable.' Brown asked, 'Does the [city's emergency] plan cover the scope of what appears to have happened here?' 'No,' Safer continued, 'nobody ever would contemplate that we would lose the two World Trade Centers and in this manner.' Brown then asked Safer to describe what is happening at the scene of the towers' collapse. Safer answered, '[I]t's like a war zone, and you have to logistically treat it like a war zone.' Here and elsewhere, war functioned as a metaphor, a way of seeing the disaster. It functioned as a central logistical symbol to bring order to the day's events. At important moments in CNN's coverage like this, war seemed to be the only way both to make sense out of the day's devastations and to get out of those same devastations.

Amidst the rhetoric of war, a particular ideologically inflected image of war dominated the coverage. Primarily through a host of official interviewees, CNN presented an ultimately triumphant construction of American war. Congressmen and former congressmen, ambassadors and former ambassadors, security experts, retired generals, and international leaders all promised American triumph over enemies. They spoke in terms of revitalisation, rebuilding, retaliation, and an ultimate military-led victory. The rhetorical authority of these promises depended upon a symbolic performance of upward, transcendent movements by America. The claims of American conquest depended upon signs of pre-eminent US power. Two signs functioned as warrants for the ideologically inflected triumphal image of war that dominated the coverage. First, there were persistent references to Pearl Harbor. Official interviewees especially invoked the memory of Pearl Harbor, often in response to Brown, who frequently asked these guests for 'historical perspective'. For example, James Kallstrom, former Assistant Director of the FBI, claimed that the terrorist attacks were 'everything that Pearl Harbor was and more'. Senator Christopher Dodd claimed that the attack 'rivals if not exceeds' Pearl Harbor. Anchors, dignitaries, and a few survivors interviewed on the streets of New York City each recalled Pearl Harbor. No doubt, Pearl Harbor was, in a certain sense, a fitting analogy – like September 11, it was a surprise attack with devastating consequences. However, embedded, as almost all of the references were, in the discourse of figures representing the US government, Pearl Harbor came to mean something more than this:

51. A different historical frame that might have been invoked is Hiroshima. In the days after September 11 a few comparisons to Hiroshima were drawn in the media, as it clearly had distinct visual parallels with the Trade Center attacks; and the term 'ground zero' was consistent with the vocabulary of atomic warfare. However, the collective memory of Hiroshima in the United States is one of last-resort means and bears a sense of shame. Moreover, it lacks the phoenix-like form of Pearl Harbor. Thus, despite its vivid visual resemblance, Hiroshima was not invoked as a frame for historical perspective in CNN's coverage.

it suggested a vertical movement, moving from America at its bottom-limit (America attacked unexpectedly and vulnerably exposed) to the country at its top-limit (imminent and heroic victory over the enemy).⁵¹

This movement was facilitated and energised by the sense of scale constructed by the news coverage. Indeed, the most prominent focus of CNN's reportage was not *what* happened but its talk about *how big* the event was. The coverage was preoccupied with judging and presenting the size and scale of the event; in this way CNN produced a sentiment reflecting Kant's comment, 'the sublime is that in comparison with which everything else is small'.⁵² Brown in New York and Judy Woodruff in Washington, DC, with their guests, repeatedly tried to describe the scale of the event: 'enormous', 'massive', 'extraordinary', 'phenomenal', 'horrific'. In the late morning, about two hours after the first tower collapsed, Woodruff declared, 'clearly the United States has never experienced anything of this magnitude'. 'Untold numbers', it was reported, had been injured or had died. Beneath the repeated video footage of the towers collapsing, CNN's crawl announced, '10,000 emergency personnel scrambled to Trade Center fires, [the towers] eventually collapsed ... More than 150,000 people visit the Trade Center on an average day.' One survivor interviewed on the street said, 'I believe tens of thousands of people are dead.' 'We are in the middle of an extraordinary catastrophe', Brown declared near the noon hour. The United States faced 'chaos'. Though the footer on the television screen read 'America Under Attack', the attacks were framed as being against not only America but also the 'free world' and 'civilization' more generally. As Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres said in his interview with Brown, 'It was not only an attack on America but an attack on civilization.' New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani stated on CNN, 'It's one of the most heinous acts certainly in world history.' Former US Ambassador to the United Nations Richard Holbrooke told Brown, 'This is the most skillful, murderous attack ever.' In a recap of the day's events during the one o'clock hour, Brown invoked exponential language to characterise the day's events: 'What has happened is not simply a series of moments, but something much larger.'

One important exception to this narrative of American disaster came in vernacular, common voices. The network's anchors interviewed a number of witnesses or survivors throughout the day. Significantly, none of these voices adopted the official, top-limit rhetoric that was heard in the voice of Schultz. Yet, neither did they invoke a rhetoric that mirrored the apocalyptic imagery that CNN ran throughout the day. Vernacular voices hovered near the depths of despair and conveyed

52. Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, §25.

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confusion, but in a way less structured according to the magnitude of the event and more according to personal trauma. Illustrative is Brown's phone interview during the one o'clock hour with William Rodriguez, a Trade Center maintenance worker, who spoke with a thick Latino accent.

BROWN: Tell me what happened.

RODRIGUEZ: I was in the basement, which is the support floor for the maintenance company, and we hear like a big rumble. Not like an impact, like a rumble, like moving furniture in a massive way. And all of sudden we hear another rumble, and a guy comes running, running into our office, and all of the skin was off his body. All of the skin. We went crazy, we started screaming, we told him to get out. We took everybody out of the office outside to the loading dock area. Then I went back in, and when I went back in I saw people – I heard people that were stuck on the elevator, on a freight elevator because all of the elevators went down. And water was going in, and they were probably getting drowned. And we get a couple of pipes and opened the elevator and we got the people out. I went back up and saw one of the officers from the Port Authority Police, I been working there for 20 years so I knew him very well. My routine on the World Trade Center is in charge of the staircase, and since there was no elevator service, I have the master keys for all the staircase doors. So, I went up with the police officer and a group of firemen. As we went up, there was a lot of people coming up, and while we got up, it was very difficult to get up.

BROWN: Mr. Rodriguez, how much time has taken – has elapsed here in this, as you recount the events? Did it seem like hours, minutes, seconds?

RODRIGUEZ: No, it wasn't hours.

BROWN: What did it seem like?

RODRIGUEZ: Well there was a big time, like a gap. There was a gap of time. I won't be able to tell you if it was 15 or 20 minutes.

BROWN: Okay.

RODRIGUEZ: But there was a gap of time. We heard, while we were on the 33rd floor, I'm sorry on the 23rd floor, because we stopped there with the fire department because their equipment was very heavy and they were breathing very hard. They took a break because they couldn't continue going up. So they wanted to take a break. And we had a person on a wheelchair that we were going to bring down on a gurney, and a lady that was having problems with a heart attack, and some other guy that was bleeding hard. And we went a couple of floors up. While they were putting the person in the gurney, got up to the 39th floor, and we heard on the radio that the 65th floor collapsed. It collapsed.

Rodriguez's narrative of his experience in one of the Twin Towers gives but limited place to the language of scale: 'a big rumble', 'like moving furniture in a massive way', 'All of the skin', 'a big time, like a gap'.

Much more evident than scale are the shifts in Rodriguez's account: from an experience of hysteria, to efforts to help, to the recognition of a fellow worker, to a difficult climb up stairs. Rodriguez's story highlights the incongruities of the experience of the disaster; the elevator rescue and his cooperation with the firemen are narrated as haphazard incidents wherein Rodriguez tries to help out. His story does not evoke in the least the transcendence of all limitations and contradictions, as heard in official voices. Rather, it entails an acknowledgement of those limitations. His voice is best characterised as traumatised, confused, concerned, and perplexed.

Rodriguez's voice – shaped by his first-hand experience in one of the Twin Towers and by his social status as a labourer and immigrant—produces a sense of the confusion and incongruity of a disastrous and disruptive event. CNN's news anchors and official guests, on the contrary, persistently reassert a national order with regard to the event. What makes Rodriguez's narrative distinct from official idioms, however, is not restricted to the historical sensibility conveyed. Rather, the power of Rodriguez's voice, accentuated by its contrast with official voices, inheres in its personal and sensible style. It is precisely Rodriguez's presentation of the particular sights and sounds and persons in his midst that makes it different from official voices. Rodriguez's narrative of haphazard and discontinuous episodes resists totalities and abstractions as well as a fascination with the 'unpresentable' or 'chaos' as such. In Rodriguez's voice we find an expression of the extremes of experience that, contra the sublime, attends to sensible objects and concrete particulars. His is an immanent, responsive, yet perplexed perspective. Rodriguez's voice was not unique in CNN's September 11 coverage. There were others like it; but these sorts of voices were the province of the person on the street, and thus were rhetorically colonised and marginalised. While apocalyptic or triumphant images saturated the coverage and were repeatedly expressed in the voices of officials and news anchors, the intense perplexity and confusion of September 11 was restricted to more colloquial, and implicitly less 'legitimate', 'ordinary' voices.

Overwhelmingly, to see 'America Under Attack' on CNN was to see a movement from the imaginary of national annihilation to an imaginary of national power and destiny. It was to get caught up in this violent movement, to be transported by the text into the extremes of national experience, and to be constantly met with reassertions of ultimate American triumph. The political significance of this movement is located in its representation of the American 'way of life', to use Schultz's phrase. An American 'way of life' is constructed that is fundamentally triumphant in its destiny and basically militaristic in its means. As such, political democracy is overcome, even forgotten. The absence of any strong official expression of the relative indeterminacy of

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future events and the rhetorical colonisation of the voices of the perplexed to the 'person on the street' was a de facto declaration of the smallness, the inadequacy, and the limits of democratic politics vis-à-vis September 11. CNN ennobled, elevated, and helped establish a different kind of politics – an unqualified politics rooted in the ideology of American destiny. Through this disaster a piety for an America beyond deliberation, representation, and the contingent and complex art of the possible is re-engendered. To quote Nicholas Boileau-Despréaux on the sublime, 'America Under Attack' became on CNN a phenomenon beyond deliberation and demonstration; it became 'a marvel, which seizes one, strikes one, and makes one feel'.⁵³

Conclusion

September 11 was 'quintessentially sublime' – so writes Hugh Silverman in his introduction to *Lyotard: Philosophy, Politics, and the Sublime*. 'It had no place in everyday life. It interrupted the continuity of American experience.'⁵⁴ September 11, he continues, epitomised the fundamental political and philosophical problem addressed in the postmodern sublime: 'This place of juxtaposition, this place of alterity, this place of interruption . . . grotesque, enormous, awe-inspiring, beyond dimension, beyond belief'.⁵⁵ Silverman's amplification of a great disruption into a totalising, absolute, awesome power mirrors the elevation enacted on CNN with respect to the United States. Indeed, we have between Silverman and CNN a congruent form, *interruption*, and congruent subjectivities, *pious awe*. Such congruities tell us, at the very least, that the postmodern sublime and CNN's sublime speak similar languages.

Kant, in his *Critique of Judgement*, does not stop with an account of the sublime, but describes its counterfeit, 'fanaticism', which, he argues, entails 'a belief in our capacity of seeing something beyond all bounds of sensibility'. It gives positive meaning to what Kant says is 'merely negative'. Fanaticism, he concludes 'is ridiculous'.⁵⁶ However, as the American critic Kenneth Burke has argued, the distinction between the sublime and the ridiculous need not be merely that between legitimate and illegitimate forms of judgement. Sublimity entails 'a strategy for confronting or encompassing'.⁵⁷ In the sublime, 'we equip ourselves to

53. See footnote 5.

54. Hugh J. Silverman, 'Introduction: Jean-François Lyotard – Between Politics and Aesthetics', in *Lyotard: Philosophy, Politics, and the Sublime*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman (New York: Routledge, 2002), 1–19: 1.

55. *Ibid.*, 2–3.

56. Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, §29.

57. Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (New York: Vintage, 1957), 54.

confront it [the object or event] by piety, by stylistic medicine, and by structural assertion'. 'The ridiculous, on the contrary, ' he continues, 'equips us by impiety, as we refuse to allow the threat its authority.'⁵⁸ In this way, Burke conceives of the sublime and ridiculous as modes of engagement rather than strictly as forms of aesthetic judgement. And these modes of engagement, when they assume symbolic form, become rhetorics. Fanaticism may be seen not as a failure, but as a refusal. And indeed the more one resists dominant forms and dominant subjectivities, the more likely she or he is to be labelled a fanatic, or just plain ridiculous.

After September 11, many in the United States who have pleaded for democratic engagements with international problems have looked ridiculous. And this social fact demonstrates that we have been riveted by the sublime; the sublime requires us to look for extraordinary events, profound ruptures in experience, and irresolvable incommensurabilities. To ask that September 11 be confronted democratically, however, is to ask that a basic continuity be preserved through the rupturous event. Indeed, it may be that the fundamental problem of any politics is not discontinuity, but continuity. The claim of democracy, like all political structures, rests upon its capacity to address not just the ordinary, but the extraordinary. Democracy's adequacy is tested and displayed not in the routine moment, but in the unexpected and extraordinary one. This truth, however, has meant little in the face of the political piety engendered by the sublime. Advocates for democracy in the face of terror have come to look fanatical in their devotion to deliberation, dispersed responsibility, and governmental transparency.

However, this epithet is only one of the challenges democracy faces in the wake of September 11. An overdeveloped interest in sublime experiences has had a second, and more ironic, consequence: the strong connection of the rupturous event of September 11 to a continuous narrative of American power has been neglected. As CNN's coverage shows, September 11, for all the talk of its unprecedented quality, was on an ideological level rapidly folded into a persistent and continuous narrative, perhaps as old as the War of 1812, of American destiny and triumph. Similarly, with respect to international relations, so many of the crises the United States is creating, facilitating, or reluctantly engaging predate September 11. But the continuous form of September 11 has been largely forgotten, consumed as we have been with the mystique of a 'post-9/11 world'.

To see September 11 as sublime is to participate in a malign fiction. Through an appeal to the 'unknown', an absolute limit is imposed upon

58. *Ibid.*, 52.

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any political processes prioritising articulation, transparency, and accountability. This is the illocutionary force of the 'political sublime' and by virtue of this declaration a broad, 'ineffable' political ideology and order – a political beauty – has remained intact. It should be quite clear by now that I believe that the antidote to this particular form of political beauty is not more sublimity. Rather, in these sublime times, democratic hope and truly alternative political visions depends upon another form of political beauty. The source of this political beauty may be found in a constructive version of Kenneth Burke's 'ridiculous', what has been called in Burke's pragmatic tradition 'perplexity'. The sublime would engender a piety for the ineffable; perplexity, however, entails an impious affective orientation that struggles to articulate even the most unthinkable experiences.

John Dewey writes in *How We Think*, 'In cases of striking novelty or unusual perplexity, the difficulty . . . is likely to present itself as a shock, as emotional disturbance, as a more or less vague feeling of the unexpected.'⁵⁹ Such shock, he argues, however, should not freeze one in melancholic or ecstatic stupor, but stimulate the mind from within, and send it on a journey of enquiry. Charlene Haddock Seigfried has argued that Dewey's notion of perplexity is derived from the work of Jane Addams. For Addams, Seigfried writes, perplexity

refers to someone's personal involvement in a situation that baffles and confuses her, because her usual understanding and responses are inadequate to explain or transform a troubling situation . . . [I]n order to resolve the problematic situation in fact and not just subjectively, she must first undergo a painful process of rethinking her presuppositions and values.⁶⁰

Perplexity, like the sublime, is a stance peculiar to the experience of the shocking, novel, unexpected, or horrific, but, unlike the sublime, it is an impious stance. It is not that the impiety of perplexity alone is a guarantor of positive political effects, nor do I want to present impiety as an inherent political virtue. What I want to highlight about perplexity is its orientation towards the invention of new orders that would be relatively known rather than absolutely unknown. Perplexity presumes the possibility of an understandable order, but must seek it, even create it. In other words, perplexity leads to the beginning of politics, rather than to its end. Perplexity is akin to Lyotard's paralogy, but only as it refuses, rather than embraces, the sublime. Perplexity might lead to

59. Quoted in Charlene Haddock Seigfried's 'Introduction' to Jane Addams, *Democracy and Social Ethics* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2002), xxiv.

60. *Ibid.*, xxxvi.

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White's visionary politics, but without appealing to the sublime mystique of 'chaos' and 'meaningless'. As an impious act, perplexity refuses to grant ultimate significance to a shocking event in itself, but it does not therefore refuse the event any significance at all. Rather, it could grant the event political meanings that, in democratic fashion, are articulated variously, contestably, and even confusedly, but articulated nonetheless.

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