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**“A delightful stillness and amazement  
in the soul” - The Tragic Sublime and  
Commoditised Communication**

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*1. Introduction*

The sublime in speech Longinus writes about is one of the most powerful ways of forging a community, and yet breaks the rules of rhetoric and remains largely beyond the reach of praxis as rational action; in Kant the experience of the sublime points towards the indeterminate or incommensurate aspects of the relation between reason and imagination (the contrary of beauty); in Adorno and Lyotard, the sublime re-emerges, not as a form or experience of transcendent domination or power but on the contrary as a *limes* notion, a happening rupturing a totalising, reifying rationality, an "unconstructable question" (Bloch). The sublime becomes associated to "truthfulness to metaphysics in its moment of collapse", with the infinity and individuality of personal existence, of the other – perhaps, in a way, combining the Kantian sublime with the Kantian categorical imperative after Schiller – or combining a notion of the tragic with that of the sublime, not unlike Schelling, for whom the sublime is the infinite in the finite, and tragedy its mediated representation.

An ethical sense of the sublime can be traced in Levinas and in Buber's philosophy of the dialogic encounter. Ideology as discursive appropriation of an unnameable sublime experience defining inclusion and exclusion and

thus playing a formative role in the formation of a community by giving it a desire, an orientation – an unreachable real beyond symbolisation - finally becomes important in Žižek's retrieval of Hegel's Absolute via Lacan – a movement in which the links between the sublime, the utopian or even messianic, and the structure of identification and desire become clear.

Throughout the history of philosophy, the notion of the sublime has played a complex and subtle role mediating disruption and unification, in art (including rhetoric) as well as in ethics, philosophical anthropology, and metaphysics – a shibboleth for incommensurability. The importance of the sublime in the emergence of communities can, for the modern public sphere, be illustrated by reference to the emergence of an aesthetic of the sublime in *The Spectator* (1711), from which the title of this paper is chosen.

But also systematically, the question what the sublime and communication as the process lying at the basis of community have to do with each other is important, for it can help us gain a deeper sense of the paradoxical nature of both communication and community, and thus show us a way out of their commoditised representations in many areas of philosophy, communication theory and cultural policy today.

2.

The experience of the sublime has been identified in rhetoric as well as in philosophy as both ensuring, or incorporating, communicability, and as putting a limit to it or even placing it fundamentally in question. What is the role of the sublime in communication?

Do we have to speak of the sublime at all? As a category of rhetoric, it refers to elated speech. As a category of aesthetics it refers to an experience of shiver or awe in the

face of that which exceeds us, the other of harmonious – or for that matter upsetting – beauty. The sublime means chaos, not so much the de(con)struction or interruption of order, as a “*Durcheinander*” (a tangle, a muddle). The sublime presence of the face, the sublime character of the body, the sublime beauty of the mountains, the sky or the ocean, excites everything together and at once. The sublime is related to the oceanic feeling Romain Roland confessed to Freud (but it is not quite the same). We are *filled* with awe.

A ground motif of elevation, excess, lifting up, being confronted with or transported to a different order, an incommensurability – in a word, transcendence, is present in the idea of the sublime. [Pierre Bourdieu: “The negation of a transcendent reality in the current media and technological society is a perfect crime that involves the destruction of reality.”] Where the content of what transcends has been made available, the sublime acquires the traits of the grandiose, the overpowering, the pornographic, violating or intimidating. Can these things be still sublime? The sublime as the necessarily subtle or slight offers perhaps a more fruitful avenue for thought – even in the Alps or in a storm, where a stillness has to pervade me and the ‘forces of nature’ for the sublime to arrive – or I arrest with a stillness when a sight of the sublime catches hold of me. I am *speechless*, because I am being spoken to. The sublime is not only an aspect of our relation with the world or with nature, it is also an aspect of our relations with each other. A communicative dimension is opened up, in dialogical terms: in the sublime we experience a *Gegenüber*, an over-against.

The sublime, as that which is, as Kant said, absolutely, not comparatively, great, can be experienced only in an attunement of the tragic. The confrontation of finitude with infinity is not that of a not-yet, or a progression, but of an incommensurability (Schelling). Only when infinity

is found back within the subject, as in Schiller's text on the sublime, can the feeling that accompanies the sublime be understood as one of "both pain and joy", as Schiller says. Our freedom, the freedom of our will, is commensurate to the sublime, it is the moral version of the natural sublime, and the basis of respect, or awe for humanity (Kant). The sublime is, and remains, tragic however, because in showing this commensurability, it opens up another incommensurability, that between these two versions of it: nature and freedom; both are sublime but appear to move in different directions.

When Derrida says the sublime is dependent on the colossal<sup>1</sup>, he ignores the ontological difference between the finite and the infinite – establishing a possible connection, a Kantian might say, between the beautiful and the sublime – the ground motif of commoditisation or fetishisation. And perhaps this is a basic trait of his thinking – difference moves within a single plain, it receives its force from a reduction of the transcendent to the force of the text – and that is the rhetorical, or what once went under that name. Longinus already explained that the sublime does not depend on force as a colossal effect, but on the carefully chosen and awaited movement which interrupts a normal flow, the sublime is not the grandiose; the space of perversion is opened up by the sublime – in its inverted image, the sublime shows our liability to grandiosity and kitsch (and perhaps this is the form in which it has been operative in post-modernism, as philosophical and existential kitsch, an inverted jargon of authenticity). Kitsch is a perversion of the sublime, not of the beautiful – hence kitsch can be quite beautiful and likeable.

The *sublime* is related to the *deep* as Longinus says when he asks whether or not there is an art pertaining to these things [*ei estin hupsous tis he bathous techne* (Longinus 2.1) – to which the answer is a highly qualified yes – 'yes,

but...'], in the manner in which we can call the blue of the sky "deep", or indeed a joke, or philosophy. It has no end, its identity is yet to appear. A contradictory pattern of movement is present, uniting the endless with the idea of arriving into one's being: dare we say – essence? The relation between finitude and infinity is that of a belonging together without being able to specify exactly how and why – a having and not-having at the same time, or to use another platonic expression, the desire and pursuit of the whole. A not-knowing and not-yet being, oriented, directed, yet without form. The sublime is placed in the rupture between silence and the word, between wonder and the question, between address and response, causality and freedom, permanently dislodging and linking them. The sublime is a category of the moment, a momentary event – and here again we encounter a motif of classical metaphysics: the moment does not belong to time. Longinus is aware of this – the sublime works like a 'sudden flash of lightning', and is not so much persuasive as irresistible (1.3). *Augenblick, verweile doch, du bist so schön.*

Insofar as the sublime is an experience or apprehension, it refers to, and is possible on the basis of, what I would like to call (following Coreth) the ground-freedom in being, by or in which we are given into a freedom in which experience, knowledge, mediation (and hence communication) is possible. The mediation of the sublime, that between finitude and the infinite is the core of the mediation of immediacy – it is the place of encounter in which there is always more to meet, the symbolic intention. The sublime is a category of mediation.

This structure is the ground structure of metaphysics (and pervades even its methodology), in distinction to Heidegger's view of metaphysics as onto-theology or presence, or the postmodern view of the metaphysical tradition as presence and phallo-logo-centrism. Both

views of metaphysics make it impossible to see the human sublime; both readings of metaphysics make it impossible to understand communication, communicability, community. The encounter between people shares in the phenomenology of the sublime, think, for example, of Levinas' remarks about the face as that which is always already beyond our representations of it, or Buber's description of the encounter with the particular other, in which the other is not experienced but becomes the conduit for the appearance of the world, someone I stand over-against. A polyphony of voices shares in these dimensions of the sublime, each incommensurably referring to the others as the possible response to being-heard.

Here it is necessary to refer to the historical emergence of the discourse of the sublime, which coincides with the emergence of the public sphere as described by Habermas. Longinus' essay is one of the few texts from antiquity which are never referred to by other classical authors whose texts have come to us, and it is the only one dealing with the sublime. Only in the 17<sup>th</sup> century did it start to fully exercise its influence. An aesthetic of the sublime has been traced in the texts of the Spectator and the Tatler; the treatise by Longinus started to influence European aesthetics and philosophy in a French translation by Boileau-Despréaux which was received in England (Burke) and in Germany (Kant). Interest in the sublime, the emergence of the public sphere and – differential calculus share a common ideational space. The constitution of an open commonality as much transcending each free individual exercise of the will as dependent upon it and its freedom is a feature of the public sphere, no less than of the aesthetic of the sublime. We see the paradox of communication, the mediation of immediacy, in both. With the rupture of the chain of being, infinity had been set free to commerce with the finite in an entirely different way than had been the case

in the ordered universe of the Aristotelian-thomist world view, in which mediation is participation (realism), hence a form of non-being, or abstraction (nominalism), hence also a non-communicability. *Individuum est ineffabile* – the entire metaphysical tradition can agree on that, but now the sublime is the individual communicating. The sublime at the heart of the emergence of the constellation of the enlightened public and the romantic private establishes the tensions in the idea of community in modernity; if we fail to see it our theories of modernisation remain caught up in the dilemma of systemic differentiation versus legitimising discourse. The need, which has in my view become pressing, to find new ways to integrate an existential dimension in our theories of communication, media and modernisation, refers and depends on a rethinking of the sublime, beyond its classical rhetorical instrumentalisation, and equally beyond its facile implementation in a post-modern rhetoric of the terror of totality. That terror is with us, as the commoditisation of communication, but the post-modern authors have done more to install it than to undermine it. Such is the liability to perversion inherent in the sublime.

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## Notes

### *The sublime of ideology (Zizek)*

In the context of the sublime we encounter the idea of dignity. Longinus says (9.3) it is unthinkable that those who live smallish and slavish lives will ever produce anything that is worth to last forever and that the language of those who live and think significantly, will be significant. A sense of the colossal may be perceived, we would have to interpret it to show what it is capable of – perhaps it is more a sense of the excellent, the [aretas].

Schiller starts his essay on the sublime with Nathan's word "kein Mensch muss müssen", "no man should must". "All things must, man is the creature which wills". Violence or coercion are the most indignifying things human beings can be exposed to, "for violence annihilates them". The sublime confronts us with the possibility of violence but also the fundamental sense in which we are free from violence, namely in the exercise of our will; ultimately, for Schiller, dignity is in our own hands. Almost a premonition of a "Sartrean sublime". The sublime, dignity – not categories for a bourgeois mind but sign-posts for a rediscovery of humanity.

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<sup>i</sup> In *Truth in Painting*