

AZIMUTH

Philosophical Coordinates in Modern and Contemporary Age

VI (2018), nr. 12

Technology and the Sublime

Tecnologia e Sublime

edited by • a cura di

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EDIZIONI DI STORIA
E LETTERATURA

InSCHIBBOLETH

ABSTRACTS

BENJAMIN STEININGER, *Petromodern Petromonster*

The essay presents and discusses the ambivalences of petrochemistry as a possible means of experiencing the industrial sublime. It starts with a short prologue, a drive-by visit of the Österreichische Mineralölverwaltung (OMV) refinery in Schwechat near Vienna. The industries of oil typically deal with superhuman quantities, which since Kant may entail the experience of the sublime. Geology documents fossil timescales and planetary processes, whilst chemistry interacts with molecular and atomic processes. Both practices have effects that blur the frontiers of technology and nature. Furthermore, the oil industries inevitably invoke strong qualitative ambivalences. Fertilizers, fuels, and plastics are insignia of modern progress and wealth, but also of global ecological crisis. The essay argues that industrial humans are deeply entangled with these ambivalences and live with hydrocarbons as a companion substance. This close relationship challenges classical perspectives on nature and culture, on progress and power. However, it remains open whether the classical concept of the sublime matches with this industrial experience. An epilogue on the artwork *Norco Cumulus Cloud* of Richard Misrach, a successful artistic interpretation of man-made petro-landscapes, closes the piece.

DONATELLA GERMANESE, *'An Incomparable Universal Power': Petroleum and the Sublime in Industrial Magazines of the 1950s*

In the early 1950s, the oil industry started publishing illustrated magazines in Italy and in other European countries with the aim of spreading easily accessible knowledge to a non-specialist public, whether customers or personnel. The petroleum periodicals promoted and advertised the activities of an industry that through mass motorization was transforming the way of life of millions of people along with the environment and the landscapes of many regions. The major oil companies did compete with one another in the market but their common goal was: convincing

people to enter the era of automobility whatever it takes. In support of rational reasons, aesthetics was brought into play, especially the aesthetics of the sublime originating in nature and in technology. The widespread use of photographs shot on oil extraction and production sites, the artistic interpretation of petro-landscapes, machinery, and workers in paintings and short stories, all dramatized the human fight for domination – over both nature and huge machines. In the same line of recent scholarship in the environmental humanities on ‘petroculture’, but with a focus on Italian industrial magazines by Eni, Royal Dutch Shell, and Standard Oil N. J., my contribution is centered on the analysis of the artistic language used for evoking the sublime, in words and images.

ANDREA CANDELA, *Nuclear Energy and the Sublime: A Visual History from the Early Italian Anti-Nuclear Movement (1975-1979)*

Between the late 1960s and early 1970s, public concerns over the safety of *civilian reactors* began to grow loud, highlighting the key issue of controlling nuclear technology. Local, national, and later international protests against nuclear stations became particularly relevant after the 1973 economic downturn, when commercial uses of atomic power started being considered as the most reliable option to deal with the looming energy crisis. After a brief introduction to the emergence of public demonstrations against nuclear reactors during the 1970s, the paper will focus on some of the most representative images that anti-nuclear movements shaped as instruments of counter-information in order to support and foster the protest. The emphasis will be laid on Italy, where nuclear matters would not have had any priority without pressures exerted by the environmental mobilisation of the 1970s. Some issues of the ‘atomic controversy’, over the second half of the 20th century, have still received little investigation, such as those about visual history. Grassroots mobilisation against nuclear reactors has shaped many images, narratives, and illustrations that are sometimes neglected primary sources. Activists and protesters – on local, national, and international basis – used them to frame meanings and spread explanations of controversial matters, but also to express feelings, warnings and fears with regard to nuclear technology. They are emblematic examples of what can be considered as an ‘embodiment’ of the thorny relationship between nuclear power and the Sublime.

ANNA STORM, *Atomic Fish: Sublime and Non-Sublime Nuclear Nature Imaginaries*

In this article, I articulate a tension between sublime and non-sublime nuclear nature imaginaries through an investigation of four types of atomic fish practices in and around nuclear power plants: fish farms, sports fishing, management of fish in cooling water systems, and finally, test fishing as part of environmental monitoring programs. Nuclear technology is generally understood as exceptional, be it from a utopian or a dystopian point of view. This understanding, combined with the socio-technical imaginary of containment, forms the basis for an (inherently contradictory)

nuclear technological sublime. In contrast to this dominant imaginary, I suggest that there is a partly interrelated, partly parallel, set of nuclear imaginaries characterized by domestication, normality and the non-sublime, discernible through mundane activities such as atomic fish practices. The existence of fish farming at nuclear power plants, along with sports fishing in the surrounding waters, shapes an understanding of atomic fish as a normal, or even slightly improved human diet, to harvest or to hunt, while the controlling practices of managing and testing fish in cooling water systems and environmental monitoring build an imaginary of normality based on everyday routines. Domesticated nuclear natures therefore signify, on the one hand, a containment of the exceptional aspects and, on the other hand, normalizing practices on the household scale. I conclude that domestication of nuclear natures must not only imply the control and containment of something exceptional or wild in a sublime sense, it can also denote normalization without grandeur. The nuclear nature imaginary may be completely non-impressive and non-sublime, still it is highly decisive for local perceptions of the nuclear technology.

NINA WORMBS, *Sublime Satellite Imagery as Enviroing Technology*

This paper argues that remote sensing images are a specific kind of environmental images. Some of them are the only access point to certain kinds of environmental events, like sea-ice minima. They furthermore make possible eventization of things that happen slowly, fitting a media logic of the Twenty-first century. Finally, these images have features that invoke a feeling of the sublime, as they at the same time combine the grand and great of the planet with the terror of climate change. They therefore occupy a certain position in climate change communication.

KSENIA FEDOROVA – MARC BARASCH, *Mission to Earth: Terrestrial Proprioception and the Cyber-Sublime*

Our sense of the self and its relation to its surroundings is being increasingly reshaped by telematic prostheses that expand our felt sense of inhabiting and interacting with the wider environment. Geotagging, Google Earth, biomapping, telepresence, augmented reality (AR), and distributed intelligence are creating new locative sense-perceptions, unprecedented narratives, and new feelings (and praxes) of agency-at-a-distance in the extended environment. The paper considers methods (and effects) of enhancing connectivity and efficacy between a person and his/her surroundings via mapping techniques, storytelling, and social and artistic projects using telecommunication and locative media. Roy Ascott's question *Is there love in the telematic embrace?* (1990) underpins others: How might new media platforms potentiate the creative force of the imaginal to produce a measurable change in the world? Can locative media deepen our sense of embeddedness, recreating those ancient reality-maps where selfhood was co-extensive with community and Nature? Might this spur us to address today's urgent social and ecological challenges? Or will

these media further abstract our actual relatedness to the environment, narrowing it to more quantifiable and qualifiable instrumental operations?

TIMOTHY J. BARKWILL, *Approaching the Sublime: Exploring the Aesthetic Ambitions of Expanded Cinema*

As evidenced by Stan Vanderbeek's moviedrome in the 1960's and latter day works such as Steve Farrer's *The Machine* and Pia Tikka's 'enacted cinema', the idea of expanded cinema has often been considered synonymous with technological advances in the field. However, Heidegger reminds us of the shared foundations of art and technology in the Greek concept of *technē*, which points us toward the notion of bringing into being something that did not exist before. With this in mind, Gene Youngblood's investigation of expanded cinema makes clear the aesthetic concern, or ambition, at its heart. For Youngblood, this ambition is conceived as the creation of a 'synaesthetic cinema' that reaches beyond the possibilities of cinema as we know it. Following the thinking of Burke, Schopenhauer and Kant to a conception of the 'formless', we find Youngblood's ideas echoed in Jean-Francois Lyotard's work on the aesthetic of the sublime. To understand the manifestation of this in cinema and, thereby, the relevancy and significance of expanded cinema's aesthetic ambition (to approach the sublime), we undertake a close reading of Lars Von Trier's *The Element of Crime* which challenges us to grasp at the ungraspable.

FLAVIO D'ABRAMO, *An Appraisal of the Biological Sublime between Eugenics, Epigenetics and the Political Economy of Life Sciences*

In this paper I consider the inception of molecular biology as a way of illustrating how institutions developed in the twentieth century in reaction to the sublime, horrific terror elicited by the finitude and unpredictability of our bodies and will. The molecular biology program of the Rockefeller Foundation, which drew on D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson's work, provided a basis for eugenic policies which required the compulsory sterilization of those individuals who showed behaviours not aligned with the rhythms of industrial production. Processes of living organisms were reduced to the laws of physics and chemistry. At the same time, a group of scholars in Cambridge, including Joseph Needham and Conrad Waddington, who were committed to both dialectical materialism and the Soviet program of scientific research espoused by Boris Zavadovsky at the Second Congress on the History of Science in London in 1931, proposed that the science of epigenetics offered a viable alternative to a capitalistic and mechanistic vision of life. In the last part of the paper I highlight the need to analyse the political economy of the life sciences in our own time so as to recover that part of the biological sublime which allow us, collectively, to proactively imagine our futures and, at the same time, to welcome the finitude and unpredictability of our bodies and agency.

PIETRO D. OMODEO – LINDSAY PARKHOWELL, *Towards Another Sublime: Away from the Aesthetics of Destruction*

In this essay we argue that the tradition of the sublime inaugurated by Kant in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment* is implicitly bound up with an aesthetic of destruction. Although Kant viewed the sublime as a response to the overwhelming power of nature, we understand the technological sublime to represent a subsequent but related shift whereby man-made technology assumes the forces once reserved for natural events. The problem we identify and address involves how this shift is politically and culturally mediated: whether through democratic deliberation and consensus, or through mass consumption or fascism. We discuss how the legacy of the sublime is found in both the technological progress glorified by the Italian futurists and the apocalyptic awe generated by the atomic bomb. We especially focus on the instance of ‘atomic tourism’ in the 1950s in Nevada, which is an example of the way in which consumerism transforms the destructive tendencies of modern technology into a spectacle for the masses. Walter Benjamin’s distinction between fascist and communitarian aesthetics is a crucial point of departure for our essay: against the aesthetics of war – which requires the unthinking complicity of the citizenry – we advance a democratic aesthetics, oriented around transforming the spectator into political actor through the key category of reflection. Finally, we advance another tradition of the sublime, that of Pseudo-Longinus, and show how art in its ancient sense (of *technē*) is connected to both science and a collective mythopoesis. How can art utilize modern technology to elevate the dignity of subjects rather than overwhelming them by removing their reflective capacities?

DAVID E. NYE, *What Comes After the Technological Sublime?*

Humanities research during the last quarter century dealing with the technological sublime falls into four distinct areas. First, histories of spectacular dams, canals, skyscrapers, and other classic examples of the technological sublime remain common. In addition, entirely new technologies such as IMAX theaters, holograms, ultrasound scanning, bio-tourism, and drone photography have also attracted scholarly attention. Third, are studies of immersion in virtual landscapes. This digital sublime emerged when human beings created forms of representation that seemed to overcome the limitations of the body and to create a forum that linked together billions of minds. In this non-space, consensual hallucinations became normalized. Finally, there are many analyses of disasters and apocalyptic landscapes in art, film, literature, and popular culture, including sites of dark tourism such as Chernobyl. Such dark visions of ecological crisis are a symptom of the age of humans as a planetary force, and it suggests it will be necessary to rethink the technological sublime, which now seems to be a historical artefact from the nineteenth-century, a part of the social construction of a false dualism between Nature and Culture.