

**Title: Representing the sublime in the VIMAP and empirical aesthetics: Reviving Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful***

**Comment on "Title: Move me, astonish me. . . delight my eyes and brain: The Vienna Integrated Model of top-down and bottom-up processes in Art Perception (VIMAP) and corresponding affective, evaluative, and neurophysiological correlates" by Matthew Pelowski et al.**

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This commentary considers the role of the sublime in the Vienna Integrated Model of Art Perception (VIMAP; Pelowski, Markey, Forster, Gerger, & Leder, 2017), and suggest that it is not precisely conceptualised in the model. In part that reflects different views and usages of the sublime in the literature, and here it is recommended that Burke's (1757/1990) view of the sublime is used as a primary framework for empirical research on the sublime.

One of the risks involved in conducting research on a phenomenon as complex and as variously defined as the sublime lies with the difficulty of finding a satisfactory and generally accepted characterisation of the phenomenon. Under-specification of the concept results in confusion, especially when implications of the concept are considered. A concern is that the characterisation of the sublime in VIMAP is overly general, making it difficult to be precise in the way it fits into the model.

The reliance on general characterisations of the sublime is not unusual, as the psychological literature has a poor record in using the term precisely and clearly. Thus, Zentner, Grandjean and Scherer (2008), in a classification of music-evoked emotions, used sublimity to describe a group of emotions related to elation of "near-paradisiac" character. On the other hand, in a more recent work looking at the role of emotional priming on aesthetic evaluation (Era, Candidi and Aglioti, 2015), the sublime is represented as a mixed emotion of general negative and positive emotions. Beyond these examples, the sublime, and particularly its most well-known exposition, Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* of 1757, have been moulded into various usages for various purposes, ranging across such topics as liking of sadness (Peltola & Eerola, 2015), liking of threat (Ortlieb, Fischer, & Carbon, 2016), astonishment and amazement (Eskine, Kacirik, & Prinz, 2012), awe (Keltner & Haidt, 2003; Konecni, 2011), transformation (Pelowski, 2015), and the experience of masculinity and heroism in episodes of being moved (Menninghaus, Wagner, Hanich, Wassiliwizky, Kuehnast, & Jacobsen, 2015). Within empirical aesthetics there is a tendency for the sublime to have become something of a catch-all for everything which is not contained within beauty (prettiness).

Such variability in usage of the concept may reflect the rich history behind theories of the sublime, often rendering it a challenge to summarise the sublime as a singular concept (for an overview, see Ashfield & de Bolla, 1996 and Monk, 1960). In the field of aesthetics, disagreements exist on themes concerning, for example, whether fear is (e.g. Burke) or is not (e.g. Baillie) a part of the sublime, whether the sublime is grounded on the objective world (e.g. Burke) or not (e.g. Kant), or on whether the sublime is a mere result of learnt associations (e.g. Alison). The idea of the sublime, then, by being an umbrella term for varying aesthetic consequences, somewhat justifies the diverse range of meanings mentioned in the aforementioned examples in psychology.

Within VIMAP, the sublime seems to be complex, involving, "great beauty, rarity, or physical grandeur", and a "mixture of joy and fear... [that] requires existential safety". A consequence of such a broad characterisation is a sense that parts of such a very broadly viewed sublime are picked out to satisfy particular outcomes within the model, so that the sublime is suggested to be a part of Outcome 2 (section 4.1.4.4.), Outcome 3 (footnote under section 4.1.4.4.) and even Outcome 5 (Figure 4.). As a result, the border between the sublime and other notable experiences mentioned in VIMAP such as thrills, being moved, and transformation, become blurred.

Each of those three outcomes seems to be associated with differing sub-theories of the sublime; sublime's qualities of novelty (Outcome 2) is linked with Konecni's (2011) approach, whereas the association with harmony and flow (Outcome 3) is reminiscent of the work of Baillie or even of descriptions of sublimity in the

paintings of American Abstract Expressionists (Newman, 1948). Finally, transformational outcomes (Outcome 5) of the sublime have strong Burkean and Kantian contours. By being used so generally, as a term, the sublime ultimately becomes linked with almost all available positive outcomes of aesthetic experiences, and in the process the uniqueness of the sublime risks becoming lost.

Some technical errors in the text also hinder progression to a feasible conceptualization of the sublime. Thus, although the footnote of section 4.1.4.4. states that “Pre-Kantian conceptions considered the sublime as in fact lacking discrepancy”, that is clearly not true, as Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry* precedes Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* – by more than 30 years, and Kant himself acknowledges Burke in the *Critique*. Certainly Burke’s seminal work on threat-rooted delight points to the direction of discrepancy more than harmony. Even if one overlooks Burke and the British contemporaries of the time who wrote extensively on fear-related sublime, to claim Longinus’ *On the Sublime (Peri Hypsous)* as a perfectly harmonious type of sublimity may be a risky business. In this ancient treatise, all but two of the example texts used to demonstrate the effects of the sublime on the mind refer to varying forms of fantastical violence, depicting rage, blood, battles, and mutilation, themes that are difficult to be claimed as purely harmonious. Finally, when the section on a two-stage process of sublime experiences quotes Burke, the authors appear to assume a trajectory from beauty to sublimity, which is misleading. In Burke’s theory, beauty and sublimity are considered exclusive and as opposites, deriving from opposite poles of nature; interactions between the two categories are not considered by Burke.

Overall, the insights that VIMAP undoubtedly provides on the sublime overlook the inherent contradictions within theories of the sublime itself. This leads to complexities in generalising the concept as a unique aesthetic outlet, the concept becoming overly inclusive. That is a shame, as VIMAP, for the first time, to our knowledge, incorporates the sublime within a stream of general aesthetic processing.

That the sublime deserves attention deservedly merits emphasis. Going beyond existing models of ‘sad joy’ (e.g. being moved; Menninghaus et al., 2015) or physiological thrills (Goldstein, 1980) the sublime offers much promise in empirical aesthetics. Little is understood of how delight derives from concepts of force, fear, scale, height, and veneration, themes that reappear often within the sublime. The sublime branches out into painting, architecture, landscape design, music, film and literature (e.g. Monk, 1960; Morley, 2010), and certain ideas of the sublime (e.g. fearful delight) are found in various cultures (Konecni, 2011), strengthening the potential for the sublime as a universal aesthetic phenomenon deserving of research.

How can one then conceptualise the sublime for empirical research? A beginning may be in identifying elements of the sublime that are less often expressed in other noteworthy aesthetic experiences. Alternatively, a more positive stance would be to focus conceptualizations based on individual seminal works emphasising the sublime, which would help to reduce the variance in ideas that exists between various philosophers. A key process should be to identify works that touch upon core elements of the sublime.

A central and key work is surely Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. There are good reasons how Burke’s text can be helpful in the conceptualisation of the sublime for empirical frameworks. As many commentators notice (Hipple, 1957), including Kant, Burke’s text on the sublime is largely empirical. There are not only descriptions of how the sublime may manifest in the physical world (e.g. scale, darkness, etc.), but Burke also takes great care in understanding how these physical features influence emotions (Burke even extends his theory to physiology). Burke’s reliance on simple rules and their effect on the mind makes his text an ideal basic framework for psychological investigation.

Crucially, if one were to adopt Burke’s views, VIMAP would point to the direction of locating the sublime as part of Outcome 5. The reason why Burke’s views are not congruent with Outcome 3 has already been established. On their relation to Outcome 2, Burke makes it clear that novelty in itself is unrelated to the sublime. On the contrary, not only is the sublime the “strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling”, the sublime is the progress from “the pain we feel” to its relief. In Burke’s view, the sublime ultimately is linked with self-preservation, for which our very sense of existence is itself intensified.

At the core of conducting empirical research on the sublime, as indeed with aesthetics and psychology more generally, lies the issue of operationalization of concepts, so that theories of sublimity can be narrowed down into a form that can be objectively discussed, especially in relation to other related aesthetic phenomena. Basing empirical works on a concept that is overly expansive, as may be occurring with the sublime in VIMAP, can pose serious problems for empirical testing. The task of the empirical researcher is to delineate actual experiences and separate them from, while still taking cognisance of, speculation and introspection. For that to happen, empirical work must be based in firm yet adequately limited theory. VIMAP must be welcomed, but it must avoid being so inclusive that it explains everything, for a theory that explains everything risks explaining nothing and predicting nothing.

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