# THE BLUE, THE PINK, THE IMMATERIAL, THE VOID

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This publication accompanies *THE BLUE, THE PINK, THE IMMATERIAL, THE VOID*, an exhibition by 14 early-career artists at the Austrian Cultural Forum London. Unlike an exhibition, a book is a mobile object, and this one hovers spiritually somewhere between London, home to both the exhibition and ourselves (the curators, Rosa & Krishna), and Vienna, where we were lucky enough to do a ten-day residency at the Academy of Fine Arts: a near-fortnight of extensive exhibition-viewing, reading, research, idea-generating and long conversations over glasses of gemischter satz which continue to shape and inform our thinking and processes. Each of the artists and writers in this book are, likewise, based in either London or Vienna — and yet we are all connected through sophisticated communications networks, email threads, social media platforms, cloud filesharing, daily flight routes and DHL freight shipments; an endlessly expanding and complex web of systems so overwhelming that we might call it the technological sublime.

This notion of the *technological sublime* forms the conceptual framework for *THE BLUE, THE PINK, THE IMMATERIAL, THE VOID*, the exhibition this book accompanies. The concept is explained and elaborated upon further by three wonderful texts published here: Axel Stockburger outlines a history of the concept of sublime, from the 1st century to the present day, culminating in a glittering impressionistic sketch of our exhibition; Georgina Voss articulates some of these conceptual shifts with an alarming and intriguing piece of fiction about a woman who falls in love with a liquid bulk carrier; and Betti Marenko gives a vivid, compelling argument for reclaiming egalitarian aspects of the sublime via magic, bodily contractions, and "the balm of not-knowing".

We hope that these texts, alongside the images of the exhibition and artist profiles gathered here, will not only enhance understanding of the artworks and concepts in *THE BLUE, THE PINK, THE IMMATERIAL, THE VOID* but carry forward their ideas: working towards building knowledge and pathways that will extend beyond London and Vienna, and beyond the life of the exhibition, much as the time we spent in Vienna has continued to enrich us long after we flew home.

We'd like to thank all the artists and writers that contributed to this project, and who have been so wonderful to work with; the Federal Ministry for Arts, Culture, the Civil Service and Sport for funding this publication; the brilliant and patient team at the Austrian Cultural Forum London (especially Vanessa Fewster & Waltraud Dennhardt-Herzog); Christine Rogi and Johan Hartle from the Academy, who extended us a warm welcome in Vienna; and our cherished mentor Alison Green, under whose expert tutelage we studied at Central Saint Martins in 2019.

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**Rosa Abbott + Krishna Shanthi**, Curators

# IN PRAISE OF THE *SUBLIME-PHARMAKON*

## Betti Marenko

While once the sublime could be experienced as what exceeded the ordinary, we can no longer rely on such a straightforward dyad. Do we even know what counts as ordinary and extra-ordinary today? Etymologically, sublime comes from the Latin *sub-limen*: what reaches the *limen*, the highest threshold, the border, the very limit of something (from which: 'liminal', and 'liminality'). Not only does the word 'sublime' take us straight to a threshold, but to its uppermost limit, to its peak dimension. Crucially, this 'highest reach' implies already a statement of value, one that embodies a hierarchical order based on exclusivity and exceptionalism.

Therefore, we must ask whether our current experience of the sublime — a 21st-century *techno-sublime* both unhinged from a no longer divine-able or tame-able nature, while terminally pooled in the infinite recursivities of machinic thinking — can be finally decoupled from this entrenched value escalation, and from the taxonomic compulsion to frame it as a more sophisticated (greater? better? superior?) aesthetic experience.

Once we begin examining the realm of sensorial perceptions circulating within the technological ecosystem we inhabit, we are sucked in by the void at the core of today's neo-feudal techno-enterprises spinning the 'statistical hallucination'[1] of the algorithmic reassembling of reality — a predatory ghost in the machine indifferently sipping atoms or bits.

On one hand, the techno-sublime is already embedded in the sense of awe and enchanted wonder that any technological innovation seeks to inspire, from ancient Greek war machines to 18th-century marvellous automata, to today's Metaverse. Taken as a signifier of such awe and wonder, the sublime is solidly woven throughout technology, finding expression in narratives that are both seductive *and* insidious, mystifying *and* enchanting. Indeed, there is a profound (but often obfuscated) connection between technology and magic. Both are craft (and *crafty*) activities that aspire to change and control the natural environment by artificial means. Both operationalise (*and* can weaponise) human intervention wishing to turn nature into artifice. For anthropologist Alfred Gell magic is 'the ideal technology'[2] and, conversely, technology is nothing but magic by other means.[3] Magic 'haunts technical activity like a shadow'. [4]

1. Matteo Pasquinelli and Vladan Joler (2020) "The Nooscope Manifested: Artificial Intelligence as Instrument of Knowledge Extractivism", *AI and Society*

2. Alfred Gell (1988). Technology and Magic. *Anthropology Today*, 4:2, pp. 6-9, p. 9

3. French philosopher of technology Gilbert Simondon makes a similar argument. Technicity, he argues, emerges from, and is the heir of, magic — together with religion. Gilbert Simondon (2017). *On the mode of existence of technical objects*. Minneapolis, Univocal.

4. Alfred Gell (1992). The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology. *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics*. J. Coote and A. Shelton, eds. pp. 40–66. Oxford: Clarendon, p 59

But, then, the other side of this story (and perhaps of the sublime itself) is the unbridled terror of what any given technology might be capable of.[5] From EM Forster's *The Machine Stops*, to Kubrick's HAL 9000, to the terrifying forecasts of AI taking over the human world,[6] this is the pure abject of Technology haunting us: the irrational fear of machinic revenge, robot uprising, dystopian annihilation.

We can begin to sense how, seen through the lens of technologies, the sublime implodes into multifaceted mimetic excess, as the new (*ouroboros*) norm.[7] What makes, for instance, anthropologist Michael Taussig's notion of the 'metamorphic sublime' so perversely appealing is that it contains an inescapable negativity, frenziedly expressed in our present, whether in our terminally tainted environment or in the histrionic sleight of hand of planetary politics.

Could it be that what the sublime needs is to be accosted obliquely, so to evince its deep-seated destructive power to detonate? Some thinkers have mused on the *negative sublime*: the utter horror of malevolent, unseen, threatening forces, be they the anticipation of violence of much-dreaded terroristic attacks, or the inert witnessing of the slow-moving ecocide.[8] What these interpretations of the sublime have in common is that they acknowledge forces hitting the human sense-scape, trespassing it, surpassing it. And while there is violence, surely, in being exposed to intensities ricocheting beyond human control, a micro-strength can emerge from the vulnerability of surrender. Gilles Deleuze evokes the image of being swept by forces that are unrecognised and unrecognisable by the human cognitive and perceptual faculties; forces that can only be felt, and un-mediately (that is, with no mediation) sensed. And although Deleuze does not mention the 'sublime' directly, his take (vis-à-vis Francis Bacon)[9] is an exhortation to view the sublime as an unremitting pulsation feeding directly into our nervous system, our fleshy casings plugged in through our epidermis, orifices, and senses, invested by, and resonating through, pre-cognitive ripples. From this standpoint, our oh-so-convenient techno-prosthetics are nothing but sensorial innervations producing continually refreshed alternate states of elation, mania, paralysis, aphasia. A *ready-to-install sublime*.

5. Even the advent of electricity in the late 19th century was seen by some as a conduit for the voices of the dead, somehow reprised today by digital haunting: the traces of the departed in recorded voices and social media updates that our devices hold on to indefinitely. Simone Natale (2016). *Supernatural Entertainments. Victorian Spiritualism and the Rise of Modern Media Culture*. Penn State University Press.

6. See for instance the notorious 'paperclip' argument describing how a single-minded robot would constitute an Existential Threat to Humanity. Stuart Russell (2019) *Human Compatible: AI and the Problem of Control*. London, Allen Lane.

7. Michael Taussig evokes the sublime as a metamorphic force that tears across human and nonhuman domains to re-enchant nature. Michael Taussig (2020) *Mastery of Non-Mastery in the Age of Meltdown*. Chicago and London, Chicago University Press.

8. Sandra Escobar (2015) The Experience of the Negative Sublime: A Terror Heuristic of the Anthropic Action Effects on the Environment. In *Facing Our Darkness: Manifestations of Fear, Horror and Terror*, Laura Colmenero-Chilberg and Ferenc Mújdricza (ed). Oxford, Inter-disciplinary press, pp. 173-182

9. Deleuze writes about the primacy of sensation in particular in relation to Bacon's art. Gilles Deleuze, Gilles (2003). *Francis Bacon: Logic of Sensation*. London and New York, Bloomsbury Continuum

The potentially hysterical sweeping force of the sublime (and its latent, unexpressed, but so close-to-the surface violence) is described by Fredric Jameson as entrenched within the logic of late capitalism.[10] For Jameson and other PoMo thinkers,[11] the postmodern compulsion to a cynical disanchoring of signifier and signified meant that everything became exhausted in a loopy envelope of regurgitation and pastiche — a condition for which the only appropriate response had to be a meta-mix of self-sedation, hyperactivity and ennui, tinged with cynical dread.

But that was then. We are no longer seduced by PoMo frothiness, and we couldn't care less about its end-of-millennium numinous ruses. We sneer at PoMo's naïve take on surface as the terminal exhaustion of meaning — whilst still lounging in the nostalgic trappings of a long-gone depth. We now inhabit a drastically different landscape.

Not only has the preposterous distinction between depth and surface ceased to mean anything; the very idea of meaning as something contained and containable (in things, events, stuff, my brain, this machine) has been exposed as the wistful simulation of a yearned-for (Enlightened, fictional) universe. The radical disaggregation of spatial and temporal coordinates, initiated by the new ecologies of the human traversed by the nonhumanity of machines, in variable below-cognition entanglements of carbon and silicon, demands of us increasingly subtler (approaching the nano, the molecular, the

imperceptible) perceptive capacities, those that can only be found through new sense-making organs. It is there, in the antennae, vibrissae, psycho-tentacles, probe-heads; in the algorithmic washes of recursive updates that our screens compellingly capture us with, that we may be able to detect a hint of what the sublime stands for, right now, in all its mighty technological banality.

Far from a collapse of signification — concocted by postmodern accounts unable to parse the superficial extension from the discreteness of judgement — what the wired acceleration of flows and technological instrumentality have produced is an embodied autonomic response, at once emetic and hysteric. Our prolapsed, compressed, de-individuated body is the new techno-sublime. Its disturbed innervations are servo-mechanisms conditioned to the impatience of Pavlovian response with no respite, a feverish, moribund, anesthetised feeling, the only possible response to the techno-un-mediation that we inhabit, we live by, and which moulds us.

When technology is diffused and distributed throughout organic and inorganic matter, the only way for the sublime to be expressed is through bodily contractions: the new distributed parameters of the *spasmodic sublime*.

It is not a coincidence, then, that for the other great commentator of late capitalism, Jean-Francois Lyotard,[12] the sublime is a

10.  Fredric Jameson (1991) *Postmodernism, or, the cultural logic of late capitalism*. Duke University Press

11.  Jean Baudrillard (1993) *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. London, Sage; Mark C. Taylor (1997) Hiding. London and Chicago, The University of Chicago Press

12.  Jean-Francois Lyotard (1982) Presenting the Unpresentable: the Sublime. *Artforum*, pp. 64-69

category that describes the unthinkable, the unrepresentable and their surreptitious manoeuvres to become real, embodied and impactful — whether in parametric utopias that spin into neurotic and self-cannibalising architectures, or in the voracious rapacity of algorithmic financial trading. And yet, as we are taken hostage by the sublime's new incarnation — the *statistical sublime* with its inescapable computing prowess — we are still, as ever, at the mercy of (and, as ever, hankering for) what we sense as remaining perpetually out-of-reach, the unknowable, the unrepresentable, *the indeterminate sublime*.

The allure of the un-decipherable in a grid of exact binary coding speaks of the balm of not-knowing, simmering in the awareness that the sublime can manifest itself at any moment — negative, technological, statistical, indeterminate, spasmodic, ready-to-install, orificial — as a phantasmagoria that carries our senses into a tapestry of techno-entanglements, disowning the belief of the sublime as a higher form of experience, destined only for some (elite), in some exclusive (and elusive) circumstances.[13] It is in such *indeterminate techno-sublime* that we can individuate a way to reclaim a mode of staying tuned to the potentiation — that is, the shaping of potential under conditions of uncertainty — of all the *techno-sublime-to-come*. The wager, then, is to take (literally, as vital nourishment) such uncertain dynamic as what is required to foment resistance against the instrumentalism baked into technology. Here's to the *sublime-pharmakon*, just not one that will heal you or kill you. Rather, one that will make you shiver and howl until your 'self' is terminally turned inside out.

13.  James Williams (2021) *The Egalitarian Sublime. A Process Philosophy*. Edinburgh University Press.

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