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What Kind of Tears? 9/11 and the Sublime

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Nearly everyone in the world knows and has some deeply held, personal response to what happened in New York City and Washington, D. C., on September 11, 2001. The extraordinary sight of wide-bodied Boeing airplanes speeding like bullets down Manhattan Island at near the speed of sound, a mere 500-800 feet above the busy streets, then smashing into the city's tallest buildings, eventually reducing them to rubble—these sublime acts of terror stunned the world. In a sense, we witnessed two types of the sublime as defined by Kant, the terrifying and the splendid. The terrifying arises from the great power and speed of these projectiles carrying helpless, unknowing passengers, and the dreadful toll in lost lives; the splendid results from the magnificence of the airplanes and the remarkable, gargantuan architecture of the twin towers. Most of us knew the experience not from being there or from descriptions, but from representation—through the lenses of cameras that captured so much of what happened that day. Those who watched live television witnessed in fearfulness and wonder as the spectacle unfolded. How even to speak of this catastrophe, to write about it? With great care, even reticence, perhaps, as the German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen soon discovered. His comments on the terrorist attacks to reporters for the German press agency DPA were widely reported. The *New York Times* (September 19, 2001) carried the translation: "What happened there is—they all have to rearrange their brains now—is the greatest work of art ever. . . That characters can bring about in one act what we in music cannot dream of, that people practice madly for 10 years, completely, fanatically, for a concert and then died. That is the greatest work of art for the whole cosmos. . . I could not do that. Against that, we composers are nothing." Stockhausen realized immediately the consequence of what he had said and begged his interviewers not to report it. But of course they did. As a result, the composer saw two concerts of his music cancelled "out of feeling for the political culture of the city and the federal republic," according to Christina Weiss, Hamburg commissioner of culture. Stockhausen left Hamburg "in distress." What he voiced was the unspeakable before the indescribable; the sublime element was, in a sense, the unnamable, as in St. Augustine's avowal that god is celestial, ineffable, and unnamable. But this was not god in his sublime *terribilità*; here was the devil as destroyer.

It is interesting and instructive to ponder briefly the difference between Stockhausen's response and that of Osama bin Laden, whose description of the event was broadcast in December of 2001. Bin Laden was almost in a reverie as he explained in serene terms the beauty of the event as it unfolded (he, too, witnessed it on television), how perfectly the towers collapsed. His detachment was largely owing to the fact that he conceived of the occurrence as having a clear, comprehensible end—terror to the infidel.

There can be no sublime in an event so intelligible and, for him, acceptable. Madness, in other words, senses no awe, refuses to be incredulous.

I suspect that Stockhausen never for a minute thought in terms of the “final cause,” the grounds for the attack, or its presumed goals. He may never have thought even of such motivated expressions as “attack”. For him it was a happening brought about by artists of inscrutable imagination and power. He certainly touched a public nerve by falling into an old and classic aesthetic trap—the failure to distinguish between art and life. This “error”—or more likely (given the circumstances) miscalculation—was all the more egregious in the minds of many because it seemed to reveal that intellectuals and artists are locked away in an ivory tower, effete, unconnected to that which is “real,” incapable of recognizing human suffering. Stockhausen’s response could in fact be understood as the contrary of insensitivity and isolation, as we shall see. Nonetheless, many perceived that what the German composer did was unspeakable (in the sense of disgusting and appalling) because he dared to articulate the ineffable and the horrific in the name of art. It probably makes little difference whether he was right or wrong: Speaking in public about the apparent relationship between art and actual tragedy led him into a thicket of controversy.

I would like to comment on how Stockhausen’s provocative (to say the least) reference to the “greatest work of art for the whole cosmos” says something profound about how we understand experience and how it is inevitably filtered through art. I’ll review three related traditions in the philosophies of art: the sublime, aesthetic distance, and the distinction between art and reality.

Let me begin with the last tradition first. In his brilliant reviews of the *Salons* (so named for the *salon carré* in the Louvre where the art exhibitions were held), the French critic Denis de Diderot discoursed at some length on the sensitive subject of “real” vs. artistic experiences.[1] Deep into an embedded narrative on paintings by Claude-Joseph Vernet, Diderot imagined a conversation with a certain (fictional) Abbé on just this topic. In the middle of a long journey through pastoral landscapes (actually paintings by Vernet hung at the exhibition of 1767), Diderot used his fictive setting to enter into a discussion on aesthetic and emotional response to life and art. I’ll quote at length from Diderot’s text, as it bears directly and forcefully on the present discussion. Here Diderot speaks to the Abbé:

> The spectacle of Paris in flames would horrify you; after a certain lapse of time you’d enjoy strolling through the ashes. You’d experience violent anguish on seeing a friend perish; after a certain lapse of time your melancholy would conduct you to his tomb and you’d sit down there. There are simple sensations and compound sensations, and that’s why only objects seen or heard are beautiful. Take all accessory ideas and ethical associations away from a sound, and you’ll remove its beauty. Fix an image on the surface of the eye, such that its impression does not gain access to the mind or heart, and nothing beautiful will be left in it. There’s another distinction to be made, that between an object in nature and the same object in art or imitation. This terrible conflagration, in which men, women, children, fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, friends, strangers, and fellow citizens all perished, overwhelms you; you flee, you avert your gaze, you close your ears to the screams; the desperate witness of a misfortune inflicted upon so many loved ones, perhaps you’d

> risk your life, you'd attempt to save them, or seek to inflict upon yourself the same fiery end. But should you be shown incidents drawn from this calamity depicted on canvas, your eyes would dwell upon them joyfully; you'd say with Aeneas: 'En Priamus Sunt hic etiam praemia ludi.' ['Behold Priam! Here, too, virtue has its due rewards'—Virgil, *Aeneid,* I, v. 461]—And I'd shed tears? [this is the Abbé speaking]—I don't doubt it. –But if I'm experiencing pleasure, what do I have to cry about? And if I'm crying, how can I experience pleasure? –Is it possible, Abbé, that you're not familiar with these kinds of tears?[2]

This then becomes the question of our essay: what kind of tears do we shed when sensing the artfulness of an actual event, undergoing "compound experiences" (that is, connecting the sensations to our own complex feelings)? Diderot quoted from La Rochefoucauld: "'In the greatest misfortunes of those dearest to us, there is always something that does not displease us.'"[3] Diderot didn't say that there is no pain in real tragedy, nor did he insist that the theater of the stage and "the theater of the world" (his phrase) are one and the same. But they are close, and they are apt to be confused with one other, for there is pleasure in actual misfortune, a pleasure dangerously close to the pleasure that arises from the aesthetic experience.

Diderot danced close to the very problem that undid Stockhausen, but he was a more agile critic, one not given to denying the importance of aesthetic distance as articulated by Aristotle, who, in his *Rhetoric* (1382a, 1385b), balanced pity and fear against one another, so that the former draws us in while the latter repels us. The plot must be serious enough not only to prompt these emotions but to keep them in balance. Aristotle warned that too much emphasis upon imagery or spectacle in a tragedy could lead to the horrific. If the psychological relation of the audience to the tragic narrative is overly affective, then there is likely to be no purgation, no cathartic experience of an almost medicinal efficacy. As Aristotle suggested, were we to overbalance just a little in the direction of the spectacle, there would be a collapse in aesthetic distance. What that may lead to is the experience of the sublime.

The sublime as a Latin term defines the lofty and the grand and was, even before Cassius Longinus (3rd c. AD; the supposed author of *On the Sublime*), associated with styles of rhetoric. Yet, the ways in which Longinus used the term evoke the ideas of expressionism and communication ahead of rhetorical value. Perhaps this affective use of the term appealed to Nicolas Boileau, the "Lawgiver of Parnassus," who translated Longinus in the later years of the seventeenth century as part of his pursuit of a new understanding of the French language freed from the fetters of Italian and Latinate rhetoric. The resulting effect of abandoning traditional rhetorical tropes and figures, Boileau believed, would be a renewed and yet courtly French language based purportedly on "natural" sentiment and feeling.

The concept of the sublime took off in the eighteenth century as a new category for the experiencing of both nature and art. Picking up on Boileau's influential translation, Joseph Addison published his *Pleasures of the Imagination* in the *Spectator* in 1712 in which he extolled the joy one experiences when witnessing something astonishing, something that sets

us free from normal limits. His was a sublime of self-transcendence—something that in fact exceeds language and common rhetoric.

The rest is, in a very real sense, history. Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful*, which he read to friends as a 19-year-old undergraduate at Trinity College, became the benchmark for contemporaneous and later discourses on the sublime, and in many ways the basis for Stockhausen's notorious comments. Like Aristotle long before him, Burke understood the connection between pity or pathos and fear and how the two together ameliorate, or indeed sidestep, pain. In his discussion of the sublime, Burke began with the experiences of pain and fear. Because our basic drive for self-preservation is so powerful—much stronger even than the desire for pleasure—fear springs unbidden to our consciousness. Any event or circumstance that can give rise to fear, danger, or pain constitutes the sublime. The source of danger is the fear of death, a fear more powerful even than the terror of pain. Danger and pain when they press too nearly "are simply terrible; they can give no delight, but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we every day experience."[4] In other words, if we don't find ourselves in imminent danger, we're likely to be moved, in an empathetic manner, to delight. The word delight may seem a bit strange to us here, for how could we delight in someone else's suffering? Burke admitted that English, in his opinion better fitted for business than philosophizing, does not always have exact words for the kind of emotion one feels when in sympathy with others. He chose a term that struck him as possessing a lower power than pleasure but one that nonetheless conveys a certain gratification. For Burke, Aristotle's pity wasn't entirely a satisfactory term. But there has to be some connection (as well as some separation) between I and thou: Were we to perceive the pain of others as our own, we couldn't possibly sympathize and empathize anymore. If another's pain hurt us like a toothache or a slap in the face, we'd only turn away. There has to be something besides distance that prompts us to help those in distress. This something becomes the lynchpin, the unifying element that allows us to perceive the sublime.

The step from human emotions to the realm of the aesthetic is quickly taken. The arts of poetry and painting (and other "affecting" arts) transfer sympathy or the passions from one person to another. Art can actually give a certain delight to "wretchedness, misery, and death itself;" that which normally appalls us can in tragedy, for instance, bring satisfaction.[5] We take part of our pleasure from the act of imitation, according to Burke. Just the same, he insisted on a point that Stockhausen may have agreed with as well, and that is that the closer a representation or imitation effaces itself when giving us a calamitous event, the better it is. The more the artist breaks down the distinction between the real and the fictive the better we like it. No matter how wonderful the representation, no matter how moving the spectacle, we'd still rather see the real thing. Burke wrote specifically about the burning of London. Who wouldn't rather watch it than see a play about it or look at it in a painting? Diderot, as we have seen, would've opted for a representation of a burning city, although he was not loath to admit the aesthetic power of an actual horrific event.

In the realm of the sublime, life and art collapse into one another; fear and danger—so long as our impulse to self-preservation isn't threatened—feed the soul. The sublime causes astonishment, a state in which everything in one's horror-filled mind remains in suspension.

The sublime is not formed by reason, although it may anticipate or produce reason. Stockhausen was in the grip of the sublime when he described the "greatest work of art for the whole cosmos"; then, too late, his reason returned.

My point is that Stockhausen had in mind the tradition of the sublime; he was far enough away from the actual events of 9/11 to feel relatively safe. He is a modernist composer, one given to playing with that thin line separating art and life, and a post-modernist as well who not only challenges art/life distinctions but believes in performance art, where such differences are all but obliterated. It can come as no surprise to us that he saw something of such unparalleled horror in terms of the absolute work of art.

Burke wrote that ". . . there is no spectacle we so eagerly pursue, as that of some uncommon and grievous calamity; so that whether the misfortune is before our eyes or whether they are turned back to it in history, it always touches with delight. This is not an unmixed delight, but blended with no small uneasiness. The delight we have in such things hinders us from shunning scenes of misery; and the pain we feel, prompts us to relieve ourselves in relieving those who suffer; and all this antecedent to any reasoning by an instinct that works us to its own purposes, without our concurrence."[6] Stockhausen's sense of the sublime may have originated in that part of the human emotion that needs to sympathize with others, but it was directed in awe as well as envy toward an event with aesthetic implications infinitely beyond his own capacity (or desire, certainly) to emulate.

We can assume that Stockhausen has imbibed the traditions of the sublime, the beautiful, the modern, and the post-modern in his long years as a composer and member in good standing of the avant-garde. Events of such magnitude as those of 9/11 prompted in him an artist's response, one grounded in aesthetics and modes of expression. It also gave rise to fear and astonishment, so that the first thing he thought of was art in terms of the absolute—the greatest (the most fully realized) work of art for the cosmos.

> One of the less recognized aspects of the aesthetics of the sublime, as we have seen, is the acknowledgement that we are drawn to disasters not because of some perverse pleasure in others' pain, but because we cannot be of a caring disposition unless we find something agreeable in astonishment, something satisfying about the horrible. Or to put it differently, we are quite naturally aesthetized—rather than anesthetized—by horrific events of great historic significance. Then there is that paradoxical and bewildering experience of the sublime that Kant wrote about. The vast, powerful, terrifying forces unleashed by ill-used human technology overwhelms our cognitive faculties, revealing to us in gut-wrenching terms our inability to grasp, comprehend, or—and this is particularly challenging for an artist—to accomplish anything of such magnitude.

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[1] *Diderot on Art,* 2 vols, ed. and trans. John Goodman, intro. Thomas Crow New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995.

[2] Diderot, II, 100.
[3] Diderot, II, 101.

[4] Edmund Burke. *A Philosophical enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful and Other Pre-Revolutionary Writings* Ed. David Womersley. London: Penguin Books, 1998: 86.

[5] Burke 91. This pleasure in tragedy was first treated in Aristotle's poetics, then again in Addison's *Spectator* no. 418 (30 June 1712) and Hume's "Of Tragedy," (*Essays,* pp. 216-225). Also see A. D. Nuttall. *Why Does Tragedy Give Pleasure?* Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1996.

[6] Burke 93.