The Contemporary Sublime

Saturday 20 February 2010

Clore Auditorium, Tate Britain

The sublime is generally understood to refer to something breathtaking, overpowering or absolutely great, yet its meaning has been debated through the ages. This symposium investigates the relevance of the sublime to contemporary art and society. Under consideration are recent art practices, such as those of Bill Viola, Damien Hirst and Anselm Kiefer, as well as topics from minimalism to new media to environmental art.

Schedule

11.00–11.15 Introduction

Rikke Hansen (PhD candidate, London Consortium and Tate Britain)

11.15–11.45 Anselm Kiefer and the Sublime

Rod Mengham (Reader in Modern English Literature, Jesus College, Cambridge University)

11.45–12.15 Minimalism and the Mathematical Sublime

Sas Mays (Lecturer in Critical Studies, Department of English and Linguistics, University of Westminster)

12.15–12.30 Round-up of first part of the day

12.30–2.00 Break

2.00–2.30 The Environmental Sublime

Emily Brady (Senior Lecturer in Human Geography, Institute of Geography, University of Edinburgh)

2.30–3.00 The Future Sublime

David Buckland (artist, Cape Farewell)

3.00–3.30 Break

3.30–4.00 Bill Viola and the Sublime

Rina Arya (Senior Lecturer in Critical and Contextual Studies, Department of Art and Design, University of Chester)

4.00–4.30 Damien Hirst’s Shark: Nature, Capitalism and the Sublime

Luke White (Lecturer in Visual Culture and History of Art and Design, Middlesex University)

4.30–5.00 Round-up of second part of the day

Abstracts

Bill Viola and the Sublime

(Senior Lecturer in Critical and Contextual Studies, Department of Art and Design, University of Chester)

The sublime has been of key importance within the visual arts since the late eighteenth century. A shift in thinking about the sublime was brought about by the intervention of new technologies in new media art of the 1970s and 1980s. Technology widened the possibilities for creating transformative environments that were totally immersive, largely because they involved other senses, such as the aural. New media art also increased the scope for a greater interaction between art and viewer. In this paper I will examine selected works of the video artist Bill Viola and will show how his work gives rise to an experience of the sublime. I argue that Viola’s notion and execution of the sublime is an update of the Romantic experience.

The Environmental Sublime

Emily Brady (Senior Lecturer in Human Geography, Institute of Geography, University of Edinburgh)

In this talk, I defend the sublime against possible objections to its place in contemporary environmental thought. I argue that the sublime is not an outmoded concept, and that we should resist the temptation to trade it in for less contested concepts such as awe or ‘terrible beauty’. As it has in the past – especially in the eighteenth century – sublimity functions to identify and characterise the challenging, humbling experiences humans still have with nature. In relation to recent debates in environmental aesthetics, the sublime moves us beyond the tranquil, scenic and cute to pin down a set of potentially negative qualities, where natural phenomena are frightening, huge, powerful, tumultuous, raging and so on. A renewed understanding of the sublime supports a clearer characterisation of our responses to such qualities, which involve an expanded imagination and mixed emotional response. These forms of aesthetic engagement, often experienced as quasi-metaphysical, present a distinctive type of relationship with nature lying at the intersection of aesthetics and ethics.

The Future Sublime

David Buckland (artist, Cape Farewell)

Humanity is in a place of unknown territory, climate scientists have proven that we have to address our actions now to prevent a future environmental disaster; we are in the process of living a future truth. Never before have our politicians, planners and culture been in a position where we have to address problems that exist in the future, we have always struggled with problems in the present and have tried to make sense of the past, it is now demanded that we address this future truth as a matter of urgency. To avoid the reality of the physical precipice that climate change envisages we are at a point in time that demands a re-assessment of our core values – economic, politically and culturally.

Is the Enlightenment the opposite of sublime or should they run in parallel inhabiting the same territory? It has long been held that pure reason, if applied long and hard enough, will lead to a comprehension and command of all obstacles and mysteries that may lie ahead. Are we culturally locked into observing ‘nature’, away from its rhythms and forces, assuming that it is governable? Is it this delusion that has led us to a place where human action is responsible for something as unimaginable as the melting of the northern ice cap with all the catastrophic consequences this will unfold? Are we now at that place where we have to culturally inhabit the same space as nature, to become not the observer but the participant? Is this a demand to craft a new notion of the sublime, to arrive at a place where rational and emotional ‘knowledge’ has a symbiotic partnership with nature?

The Cape Farewell project has literally sailed and travelled into the maelstrom of the natural wild, the front line of the unimaginable consequences of the footprint of human action. Many times during these expeditions have I experienced the wonder and the power of nature, a force so great that to survive and ‘be in awe of’ was the only human response possible. This has led to the making of many artworks, texts, music and ideas by the over 70 artists who have become part of the Cape Farewell project. It has inspired me to make video works, photographs and engage in collaborations with other artists and disciplines. In this presentation I will attempt to bring into being notions and emotions at the edge of the rational world and into the sublime.

Minimalism and the Mathematical Sublime

Sas Mays (Lecturer in Critical Studies, Department of English and Linguistics, University of Westminster)

This paper suggests a necessary re-assessment of the traditional privilege of the dynamical or positive sublime, and the comparative lack of interest in or the denigration of the mathematical sublime, by arguing for the latter’s relevance for understanding canonical American minimalist artworks and texts in their relation to capitalist industrialisation. By doing so, the paper brings into question the typology of the sublime as a division between positive and negative forms, and further raises the question concerning the conceptualisation of capitalism through such a division.

Anselm Kiefer and the Sublime

Rod Mengham (Reader in Modern English Literature, Jesus College, Cambridge University)

Damien Hirst’s Shark: Nature, Capitalism and the Sublime

Luke White (Lecturer in Visual Culture and History of Art and Design, Middlesex University)

This paper sets out to think an aspect of the ‘contemporary’ sublime in terms of its longer histories. Using Hirst’s (in)famous sculpture *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* 1991 as a starting point, it explores the longer cultural resonance of the figure of the shark as an exemplar of the ‘natural’ sublime. The return, with current environmental fears, of the sense that nature might be a terrible power set in opposition to human purposes may be a key reason why the sublime is enjoying such a resurgence as a critical term today. However, the hypothesis of the paper is that the natural sublime itself, as an aesthetic of terrible nature, was forged through a re-envisioning of the universe produced in the early modern transformation of social relations by the growth of capital. Such representations of nature – today just as in the eighteenth century – thus overcode their vision of nature with fantasies of capital and its empires. The shark, in Hirst and elsewhere, is a figure where such an intertwining of the natural sublime with the capitalist sublime is played out particularly clearly.

Part of *The Sublime Object: Nature, Art and Language* research project

 

