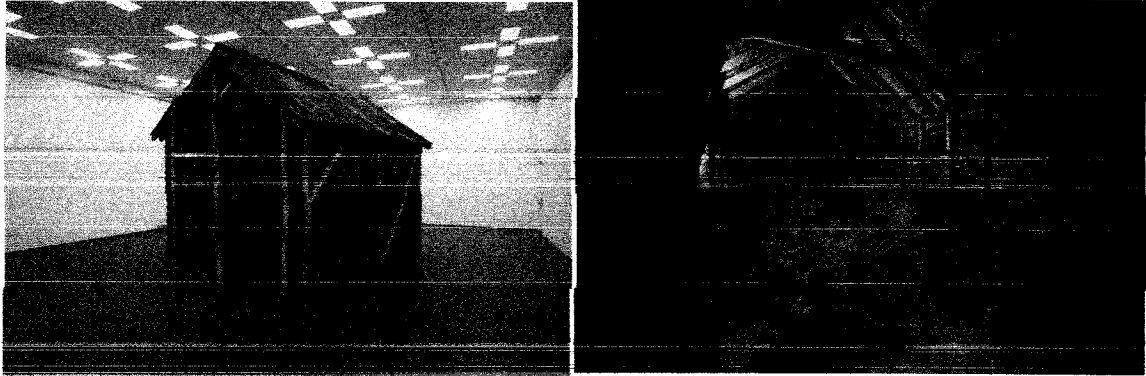


*Science Fiction Theology: Beauty and the Transformation of the Sublime* (Alan P. R. Gregory)



Richard Rigg, *A Clearing* (2012)

It is dwarfed beside human imaginative capacity. In itself, the mountain is undistinguished; its sublime distinction comes from the viewer. (13)

The sublime is a cultural construct, a formation in and of the cultural imaginary. As such, it has a history.(13)

The sublime entered the culture as both theologically informed and theologically influential, and certainly not just through explicitly religious works. (14)

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, though, sublimity was democratized and its delights and benefits extended via Gothic novels, ghost stories, the traveling shows of sublime painters, tourism, mechanical wonders, railway stations, public museums and art galleries, the popular press, urban photography, movies, skyscrapers—and science fiction.

To the extent that science fiction embraced the sublime, it became theologically haunted. Space, for instance, which is the stage for so much science fiction, is imagined not only as a theater for the astonishing but as, in itself, a medium of ultimacy.

Humanity appears in this sublime wrenching and release because sublimity is the experiential medium of human freedom understood as boundless expansion, a distinctively modern rendering of our relationship to the infinite. (15)

They[human beings] realize how the mind hates confinement, and the freedom of movement and expansion toward far-off horizons realizes our calling. (17)

Experience of the sublime, the capacity for it, discloses the freedom that is essential to humanity. (17)

The deference accorded sight is, though, coordinate with that particular understanding of

human freedom of which seeing is the principal sensory medium. (19)

This sublime imagination is ceaselessly acquisitive but acquires its objects in order to have them evaporate in a desire that passes beyond them. (19)

If it is the devouring, horizonless freedom of capitalist consumption, then the problematic character of that freedom belongs also to any reality configured and represented in terms of the sublime, from a literary text, to a landscape, to God.

Donald Wollheim to the young science fiction readers of 1930s:

“We lived in an atmosphere of infinite horizons that could not be communicated to most of the grim and haunted world of the Depression around.” Unlike “mainstream” literature, science fiction refuses the limits of a mundane, and generally melancholy, realism, and stakes its place in “the domains of time (especially the distant future) and space, the infinite possibilities out there, just at the moment when the last locations of awe and mystery have disappeared from our planet. (20)

In the sublime, the greatness of God and of humanity are correlate, the elevation of the latter unmediated by the divine kenosis and condescension that forms Christianity’s narrative. (24)

### **From Nature to New Mexico**

Science fiction’s famous “sense of wonder” has one root in the “natural” sublime of the eighteenth century, both in the evocation of awe and astonishment over nature’s magnitudes and power, and in the delights of sinister forces and dungeon mazes fostered by Gothic novels. ... The second main historical mediator of the science fiction sublime is the subliming of the machine in the nineteenth century, the “technological sublime.” (26)

America... offered that sublime wilderness as possibility, a land recovered on a path back to Eden, with the machine as means of reversing the fall. (27)

Uncoupled from visions of an agricultural Arcadia, the technological sublime migrated into the urban imagination as America’s cities expanded during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. (28)

As Joseph Stella discovered, contemplating the Brooklyn Bridge, technology breeds gods: “I felt... as if on the threshold of a new religion or in the presence of new DIVINITY.” (28)

The reversal of humanity and divinity within the event structure of the sublime is complete... (29)

The staying power of technology as sublime has less to do with the particular object than with an encompassing intimation of the limitless trajectory of human power and ingenuity.

Machines suffer obsolescence, but the cultural imagination construes them as tokens of an endless promise of productivity and progress. (29)

The technological sublime provided an imaginative structure whereby God might either become a genially superannuated bystander or be replaced with a purely humanistic sublime. (30)

...And That Most Sublime Object of Theology

For much of the eighteenth century, natural science, which meant Newtonian science, was intimate with both theology and the sublime. (32)

Science and theology collaborated against atheism, but they were married in the sublime. Sublimity brought the God who was “clear to the intellect but unrelated to sense and imagination” into the nearness of feeling.

This pattern of ascent [like astronomy] is theologically and not just rhetorically motivated: *it appropriates for the path of scientific knowing the “way of ascent,” which takes so many forms in Christian mysticism.* (33)

Space is thus theologized, and infinite space blurs into the infinity of God.

Omnipotence has become human power with the limits removed, losing the radical difference between the power that gives being and all powers within the created order exercised upon existing beings.

The sublime intersected with the new science and its mechanical order in a mutual exchange of cultural authority. Newtonianism unveiled a universe perfect for creatures designed to experience sublimity; in its turn, the sublime gave the science the authority of its passion and its configuration of the human calling. (37)

... human beings may find their vocation as the image of God in the disturbance, recovery, and exaltation of sublime experience. (38)

... we measure our worth according to the objects we contemplate. The larger the expanse of our view, the more objects, or the bigger the objects, that are present to our minds, the “higher Conceptions” we have of our “own Excellency.” (39)