

# Creating the Sublime

## *The Sublime Nature of Animated Landscape*

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## Declaration of Originality

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Honours) (Animation). It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

Avery Angle



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# Creating the Sublime

## *The Sublime Nature of Animated Landscape*

Aesthetics shape the ways we view and experience the world around us. We respond with admiration to the things of beauty, disgust to the ugly, and an overwhelming sense of power and reverence to the sublime. This aesthetic of the sublime exists in the infinite and unimaginable. From architecture to nature, the sublime can be found in a multitude of environments. It is through these, that artists, poets, and philosopher of the like, take to their work to try and explain or reinterpret the unfathomable. Animation, though often overlooked for this aesthetic, provides the necessary requirements to promote a sublime experience, and it is through this that we connect with the film's narrative. It builds an emotional connection in ways that traditional painting cannot, and ultimately provides a more immersive experience with the sublime.

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# An Introduction

Aesthetics shape the way we experience, inhabit, and exist in this world. They flow throughout our mundane lives, and bring life to that of the ordinary. The constant switch between emotions of pleasure and displeasure, bring contrast to the way we live.<sup>1</sup> Whether through the beauty in delicate flowers, the ugliness of rotting decay, or the grandeur found in the infinite abyss of stars, the aesthetic experience allows for variation. They ignite inspiration for the imagination and allow for creativity to flourish. In addition to the common aesthetics for the likes of beauty or ugliness, there is another aesthetic standpoint that inspires the imagination more than any other, which is that of the sublime.

An experience that has been relinquished by some to the 17<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and has often been disregarded as a valid aesthetic in a modern context.<sup>2</sup> With its affinity for being difficult to pin down into an exact definition, it has become quite an increasingly broad subject, that this

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<sup>1</sup> Hagman, George. *Aesthetic Experience : Beauty, Creativity, and the Search for the Ideal*, BRILL, 2005. Page 1. Print.

<sup>2</sup> Brady, Emily. *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy : Aesthetics, Ethics, and Nature*, Cambridge University Press, 2013. Page 1. Print.

project only scrapes the surface of. However, in more recent years there has been a resurgence in the topic and its validity is being reassessed.

What does the sublime consist of? From the likes of Longinus, to Burke, to Kant, the studies of the sublime have a rich history, and all contribute to that question. In generous terms, this aesthetic is the experience of extreme conflicting emotions of admiration, terror, and awe, and are stimulated in response to overpowering dominance of the unfamiliar that ultimately push the human imagination to its limits.<sup>3</sup> It connects multiple sides of pleasure and displeasure in reaction to an object that is overbearingly powerful.

This aesthetic has been used to inspire and evoke deep emotions that are then reinterpreted through poetry, literature, art, and in a more modern context that will be the focus of this thesis, animation. Much of the sublime experience has been advanced with its reinterpretation through traditional painting, specifically with the muse of landscape and nature. However, this seems to be where the 'sublime' art comes to a halt, and contemporary forms of art such as animation are rarely considered. Deemed to *only* a children's form of entertainment, animation can often be seen as incapable of producing such an intense emotional response. This project aims to take an additional review of the connection between the sublime and the capabilities of animation, specifically in environments and nature, and compare it to its counterpart of traditional painting.

The aim of Chapter 1, *The Origins of the Sublime*, is to distinguish the ultimate source of the sublime. What catalyzes it in the first place and

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<sup>3</sup> Hagman, George. *Aesthetic Experience : Beauty, Creativity, and the Search for the Ideal*, BRILL, 2005. Page 123. Print.

what effect does this have on us? Firstly, examining the ‘sublime object’<sup>4</sup> (the source) and how these can be divided into hierarchies of the most and least powerful. Then delving into Kant’s ‘*Critique of Judgement*’ (1790) and his key elements of the sublime, it looks through the process of the mind. The chapter will continue to look at nature’s immense power and the sublime reaction. This inspires a multitude of artists to take to their canvases, an example being Philip James De Loutherbourg, seeking to convey this power of sublimity. Finally looking to the perspective of animation and its aim to represent this power through the film *Treasure Planet* (2002).

Chapter 2, *The Catalysts for the Imagination*, addresses the difficult task of artistic representation of the sublime, and how specifically can one go about trying to convey it. Particularly looking to Edmund Burke’s work in A ‘*Philosophical Inquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*’ (1756) and his categories of the elements of the sublime. These elements co-align with that of design features for art and animation. From scale, to the variation of light, to the obscure, this chapter looks to artworks from John Martin and animated films like *The Secret of Nimh* (1982), as examples for how these elements are used.

The final chapter, Chapter 3 on *The Paradox of the Emotional Sublime*, distinguishes one of the most important aspects of the sublime, being the emotional response. It delves into the complexities of the opposing emotions that the sublime initiates and why these specific

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<sup>4</sup> Kant, Immanuel, and J H. Bernard. *Kant's Critique of Judgement*. 1790. London: Macmillan, 1914. Page 110. Print.

emotions are evoked. From the initial state of terror, to the breath of admiration, to the finale of awe, how can these responses coexist? This chapter refers to *The Prince of Egypt (1998)*, specifically looking to the climactic scene of the splitting of the Red Sea. It dissects how these emotions can push the emotional narrative of a film and in turn produce the sublime experience.

The aesthetic experience of the sublime expels a powerful response that is difficult to understand or to put into words. But it is this unknowing that makes the sublime so inspiring and such a tangible subject for the creative mind. Its ignition of the imagination only adds to our experience of art, nature, and the world. We are pushed past our own knowledge and are led to somewhere new, and the sublime in turn sparks the soul to life.

# Chapter One:

## *The Origins of the Sublime*

## *The Origins of the Sublime*

*‘The unfathomable sea, a far-reaching plain, the innumerable legions of stars, the eternity of time, every height and depth that is beyond the reach of the eye’<sup>5</sup>*

- Mendelssohn, 1759

For the sublime to come into being, it must arise from a great source of power. One that is as equally impressive as it is overbearing to the individual, and must embody the action of bringing what was once impossible down into a realm of the possible. Like any other aesthetic experience, the sublime must be evoked by something. In this case, it must be awakened with a dominant and insurmountable force that is far greater than that of the experiencer. It fills the soul with an unstable conflict of the most extreme emotional turmoil, that of awe, admiration, anxiety, and terror. Feeling both pain and pleasure simultaneously, this power source of the sublime stuns the viewer into a metaphysical state of being.

This extravagant strength pushes past the abilities and eventually the limits to what our imagination can grasp, and consequently our very

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<sup>5</sup> Brady, Emily. *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Nature*, Cambridge University Press, 2013. Page 49. Print.

being becomes compromised. The sublime relishes in the feeling of smallness and insignificance in comparison to the source of power<sup>6</sup>, thus breaking our bubble of rational and explainable thought with its intensity. This recognition of our limitations is one that is not easily swallowed, but painstakingly absorbed. The mind is filled with nothing but the object and any other source of diversion simply will not compare.<sup>7</sup> Philip Shaw through his surveys on this issue comments on this epiphany –

‘Whenever experience slips out of conventional understanding, whenever the power of an object or event is such that words fail and points of comparison disappear, *then* we resort to the feeling of the sublime. ‘As such, the sublime marks the limits of reason and expression together with a sense of what might lie beyond these limits.’<sup>8</sup>

Our ability to understand the sublime’s strength is immediately shattered. In turn this power ignites a certain power within ourselves through our emotions, imagination, and thought, in such an overwhelming way that we are unable to comprehend or dare put to words what we are experiencing. Our insignificance and smallness are brought violently to our attention, proceeding with a wave of self-realization and power.<sup>9</sup> It is in this experience that we acknowledge that the subject is more powerful than us, but also that we have autonomy from it. Kant’s dynamical sublime

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<sup>6</sup> Merritt, Melissa McBay. “The Moral Source of the Kantian Sublime.” *The Sublime: From Antiquity to the Present*, edited by Timothy M. Costelloe, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012, pp. 37–49. Print.

<sup>7</sup> Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. London: Printed for J. Dodsley. 1756. Page 130. Print.

<sup>8</sup> Day, Henry J. M.. *Lucan and the Sublime : Power, Representation and Aesthetic Experience*, Cambridge University Press, 2013. Page 30.

<sup>9</sup> Kant, Immanuel, and J H. Bernard. *Kant's Critique of Judgement*. 1790. London: Macmillan, 1914. Section 28.: *Of Nature regarded as Might*. Print.

from ‘The Critique of Judgement’ (1790) furthers this acknowledgement of the self in response to the sublime. The source of the sublime’s power inciting fear and awe into the viewer, but also inspiring the uplifting of one’s soul because it is separate from it.<sup>10</sup>

The sources of power in the sublime have been up for debate since the term was coined, and while most agree that nature plays one of the greatest parts, philosopher Archibald Alison takes a wider approach in his published work, ‘*Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste*’ (1790). Categorizing these powers into two groups of human creation and natural phenomena. The former can be devised from war, architecture, and art, while the latter being weather, natural disasters, landscape, and the passing of time (which can affect both human and natural sublimity).<sup>11</sup> These two groups are the objects we experience the sublime from, however not every painting, building or landscape has the power to convey the sublime. Each must meet the criteria as discussed previously, as being more powerful and overwhelming than the viewer.

These two categories often intertwine and fit into both simultaneously, for example, architecture has the ability to cross over this threshold. Human made structures over time begin to erode and crumble into the landscape they were built on, until it is viewed as no different than the trees or other furnishings of nature. A transformation of structural art, that at its initial creation can be used to inspire the sublime through

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<sup>10</sup> Shinkle, Eugénie. ‘*Video Games and the Technological Sublime*’, in Nigel Llewellyn and Christine Riding (eds.), *The Art of the Sublime*, Tate Research Publication, January 2013, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/researchpublications/the-sublime/eugenie-shinkle-video-games-and-the-technological-sublime-r1136830>, accessed 22 November 2021

<sup>11</sup> Brady, Emily. *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy : Aesthetics, Ethics, and Nature*, Cambridge University Press, 2013. Page 32. Print.

vertical height and awe. For John Baillie, architecture while may not being sublime in itself, can become sublime through our mental association of great structures with power and riches.<sup>12</sup> Skyscrapers topped with infinite tiers, intricately detailed gothic cathedrals, and monolithic brutalist architecture dominate over us with their power and scale, as smallness ‘cannot rise to any idea of infinity’<sup>13</sup>. However, architecture being delicate in its build, must at some point surrender to the evermoving landscape of nature and time.<sup>14</sup> These buildings, in comparison to that of infinite mountains, cliffs, and oceans, will fail to compare.

Nature seems to always have the upper hand in landscape, holding more power than anything human made. Man-made structures will always crumble under the sheer size and power of nature, whether that be weather or natural disasters. This is why nature has been considered the ‘original sublime’<sup>15</sup> by many philosophers such as Baillie, Edmund Burke, and Alexander Gerard. Our limitations of what we can make with our own hands, will falter. Which is why the sublime is so present in nature, the unimaginable anatomy and expansion of the universe is incalculable. Friedrich Theodor Vischer gives a Kantian take on our experiences with nature –

“We feel ourselves elevated because we identify ourselves with the powers of nature, ascribing their vast impact to ourselves, because

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<sup>12</sup> Baillie John, *An Essay on the Sublime* printed for R. Dodsley, M. Cooper. London. 1747. Section V. Print.

<sup>13</sup> Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. London: Printed for J. Dodsley. 1756. Section X. Print.

<sup>14</sup> *Conversations with Landscape*, edited by Karl Benediktsson, and Katrín Anna Lund, Taylor & Francis Group, 2010. Page 59-82. Print.

<sup>15</sup> Brady, Emily. *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Nature*, Cambridge University Press, 2013. Page 19. Print.

our fantasy rests on the wings of the storm as we roar into the heights and wander into the depths of infinity. Thus, we ourselves expand into a boundless natural power.”<sup>16</sup>

Our relationship with our environment is intertwined with many different aspects of our lives, and we always interpret it through our individual perspective. Some fear the deep forests or oceans while others thrive in the isolation, this however is a question of taste rather than an inbuilt reaction to the sublime. This corresponds through every aesthetic experience. Ugliness, beauty, the picturesque, all will have an aspect of taste to them, where depending on the person and what century they are in, they will have different opinions and beliefs. Voltaire said it best, ‘Ask a toad what is beauty, he will answer it is a female with two round eyes coming out of her little head, a large flat mouth, a yellow belly, and a brown back.’<sup>17</sup> Context is key in distinguishing the difference between nature versus taste. There is an inbuilt understanding of aesthetics that is commonly shared in our human nature. The sublime operates on the expansion of the imagination and the breaking of the limits of reason. Our mind works to decipher and categorize nature, yet it finds difficulty in interpreting the chaos. To quote Raffaele Milani in their text ‘*Art of the Landscape*’ –

‘Our gaze modifies our consciousness and sensibility in conformity with the criteria of taste. We are always agents of aesthetic reception and aesthetic qualification, even when we find ourselves

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<sup>16</sup> Hoffmann, Roald, and Whyte, Iain Boyd. *Beyond the Finite: The Sublime in Art and Science*, Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2011. Page 9. Print.

<sup>17</sup> Eco, Umberto. *Lecture On Beauty and Ugliness*. Available from : <https://www.scribd.com/listen/podcast/417964435> Web.

in completely unexplored forests. What we observe is the undeniable product of the human capacity to feel and to organize objects. We are artists, creators of the vision that appears before us.’<sup>18</sup>

Even with the new discoveries of this world, there is a constant reinterpretation through the combination of the past knowledge that we carry and the ways we interpret the present vision before us. This process is highly inspiring for the creative mind and for producing art. Addison’s work, specifically in ‘*The Spectator*’ (1711), takes the stance that this combination of nature and art, ultimately becomes the most powerful version of the sublime using both secondary and primary sources.<sup>19</sup>

The representation of the sublime through art had its peak during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century during the Romantic period. Philip James De



Figure 1.1 *An Avalanche in the Alps* (1803)

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<sup>18</sup> Milani, Raffaele. *Art of the Landscape*, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009. Page 87. Print.

<sup>19</sup> Brady, Emily. *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Nature*, Cambridge University Press, 2013. Page 17. Print.

Loutherbourg was a landscape painter throughout the late 1700s who took a specific interest in the powers of nature and the powers of the sublime. In works such as *An Avalanche in the Alps* (1803) (Fig. 1.1) depicting a striking landslide of snow that provides a perfect contrast to the dark rocks of the mountain. Miniscule figures shown running in terror only amplify the sublimity of the scene. This power of nature is captured in a violent yet awe inspiring way, producing the conflicting emotions that the sublime is known for.

Loutherbourg also took his art one step further into the animated sphere by creating the '*Eidophusikon*' (Fig. 1.2).<sup>20</sup> A miniature diorama of intense scenes of nature, similar to that of his still paintings. He separated each individual element of the scene such as hills and plains in order to give the illusion of a 3D effect. Then, alongside lighting, music, and some

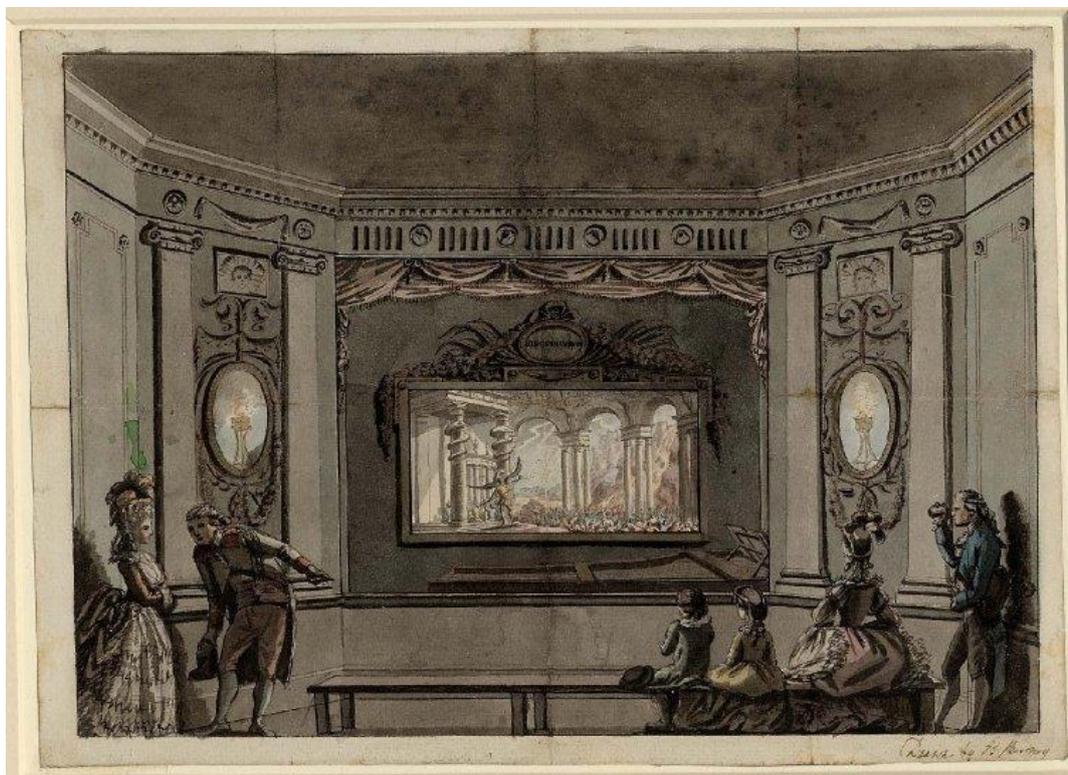


Figure 1.2 *Eidophusikon*

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<sup>20</sup> Innes, Christopher, and Maria Shevtsova. *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Directing*, Cambridge University Press, 2013. Page 23 - 25. Print.

primitive effects, these elements would be moved by hand so the audience would be immersed in a 'moving picture'. Becoming entirely captivated by the senses and not just limited to the strictly visual medium of painting, this challenged the idea of how the sublime could be represented in art.

The medium of animation can often be overlooked for its ability to promote the sublime experience. Frequently recognized and restricted to an art form mainly for young children, the sublime in animation often will not be considered with the same scrutiny that traditional painting is. However, just as Louthembourg combined his paintings with movement and sound, animation does the same in adding these more immersive qualities for the viewer. Qualities that are more similar to real life than that of a still painting. Though still confined to a frame, we are given more than one dimension of the environment and the experience than a flat unmoving frame.

The illusion of animation provides a scape for the impossibilities that are unattainable in our reality. For new environments to be discovered and created. A film that reimagines the ever-expanding universe and its infinite power, is *Treasure Planet* (2002). This film illustrates an intergalactic treasure hunt where the main character, a troubled Jim Hawkins, finds a map leading to the most sought-after treasure trove in the galaxy – 'Treasure Planet'. He yearns to flee the nest and wander the open plains of space. This dream rings true, but with unexpected company of a band of pirates who seek this planet where 'the loot of a thousand worlds'<sup>21</sup> has been stowed away, until it had become mere myth. A man-

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<sup>21</sup> Clements, Ron. *Treasure Planet*. USA : Walt Disney Pictures. 2002. DVD.



*Figure 1.3 Treasure Planet*

made planet locked by time (Fig. 1.3), created from metal and explosives to keep any trespassers from stealing the treasure, shows us the power that this planet has over anyone who enters – an imminent and violent death. Additionally, its impossible structure of a planet sized creation, a seemingly unimaginable and unexplainable endeavor brings nothing but questions to both the character and the viewer. Its sublime power resides in its sheer scale and its purposeful quality of being made to erupt, killing every living thing residing on the planet.

The infinite landscape of space, a promise of freedom for the confined Hawkins, leads to the discovery of its unforgiving and dangerous power. Whether that be black holes or exploding stars (Fig. 1.4), the character's limits of their own power will constantly be overshadowed with that of nature's.<sup>22</sup> Uncontrollable and unruly, these acts of nature spring fear and awe into both the characters on screen and the viewers who watch the film. The scale of each environment exceeding the next, it becomes a

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<sup>22</sup> Hagman, George. *Aesthetic Experience : Beauty, Creativity, and the Search for the Ideal*, BRILL, 2005. Page 126. Print.



Figure 1.4 Black Hole

constant reminder for us of the sublime elements in art, but also the sublimity of our own world and universe. There is an instinctive connection between the experience we get from watching these animated landscapes and our own previous personal experiences that we embed onto watching animated these landscapes.<sup>23</sup>

Animation has the ability to surpass traditional painting with its more immersive quality of being able to change in a split second. Much of the power that is experienced in the sublime comes from this element of motion, which traditional painting lacks. It crosses this barrier between still image and real life, and ultimately convinces the audience even for a moment, that what is in front of them, whatever world it may be, is real. It is free to bring to life the impossibilities of the sublime, and can extend to any scale, time, or place beyond the limits of our imagination.

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<sup>23</sup> *Film Landscapes : Cinema, Environment and Visual Culture*, edited by Jonathan Rayner, and Graham Harper, Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2013. Page 64. Print.

# Chapter Two:

## *The Catalysts for the Imagination*

## *Catalysts for the Imagination*

It has been established that the sublime is produced from a great source of power, but how can artists specifically capture and reproduce it through animated film? Edmund Burke's writings of the sublime in '*A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*' (1756) was one of the main pillars for how we decipher and identify this aesthetic experience. It is broken down into categories of visual cues that also happen to coincide with visual design elements in animation and art.<sup>24</sup>

While being somewhat hard to pin down into an exact definition, Burke manages to classify different visual elements such as lighting, colour, scale, vastness, obscurity and many others as being potential catalysts for a sublime experience.<sup>25</sup> These elements also have been used as a basis for design in both painting and animation in order to convey powerful emotions. Light and colour have the important role of expressing the atmosphere of each scene while scale and vastness bring context between a character and its environment. In the context of animation,

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<sup>24</sup> Hagman, George. *Aesthetic Experience : Beauty, Creativity, and the Search for the Ideal*, BRILL, 2005. Print.

<sup>25</sup> Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. London: Printed for J. Dodsley. 1756. Page 208-244. Print.

movement is what separates it from its counterpart of traditional painting, and brings art to life while also setting the pace for the narrative. These critical elements of design are necessary for the reproduction of the sublime in animation; however, they must be utilized in a suitable way or else another aesthetic will be produced.

Lighting in both art and animation greatly influences the viewer's experience of the sublime, and since colour is dependent on light, this chapter will look to light as the leading factor for this aesthetic. Burke lays out lighting in a hierarchal system of what can produce something as so powerful as the sublime. Pure light, pure darkness, and the repetitious fluctuation between the two, lay at the forefront of the most intense experience.<sup>26</sup>

Concentrated pure light overpowers the senses to an extreme extent and cleanses all notion of life.<sup>27</sup> The sun being the main culprit for this source of power encapsulates mystery, for looking at it comes with a price of sight. Cubitt comments on the cost of sublime light -

Source of light though it is, the sun itself cannot be seen, cannot be looked at, without loss of sight. Even a brief glimpse produces an image not of the sun but of its retinal afterimage, as the overloaded rods in the retina shut down and allow the cones to take over, giving the effect of the color draining out of vision.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. London: Printed for J. Dodsley. 1756. Section XIV Light. Print.

<sup>27</sup> Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. London: Printed for J. Dodsley. 1756. Section XIV Light. Print.

<sup>28</sup> Cubitt Sean, *The Sound of Sunlight*, Screen: The Journal of the Society for Education in Film and Television 51, no. 2 (June 11, 2010): Page 118. In McKim, Kristi. *Cinema As Weather : Stylistic Screens and Atmospheric Change*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2013. Page 163. Print.

Though it has the ability to produce an overwhelming and dominant power source, it has more difficulty than that of pure darkness. The absence of light sparks the imagination with the possible terrors that reside within, rather than the action of pure light that expels it. This invites the viewer into a more immersive experience of curiosity as well as fear.

The endeavors of artists trying to capture the intensity of light and darkness had a peak in 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century art. Many philosophers did not consider traditional painting to have the capabilities to produce the sublime experience, as it did not check these boxes of emotional confusion and terror, but mainly resided in the picturesque and the beautiful. Art during this period tended to be quite rendered and tight, to focus on the detailed beauty of a person or environment. It did not provide any room for the imagination to flourish and for the sublime experience to be agitated.<sup>29</sup> However, there were exceptions. For landscape paintings of the sublime, they looked to Turner and for that of the apocalyptic sublime they relied on John Martin.

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<sup>29</sup> Brady, Emily. *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Nature*, Cambridge University Press, 2013. Part 1. Print.

One of Martin's most powerful and influential paintings, *The Great Day of His Wrath* (1851) (Fig. 2.1) consists of mainly darkness. It promotes the sublime experience not only through its grand size as a painting but specifically through its introduction of a black abyss that



Figure 2.1 *The Great Day of His Wrath*

takes up most of the frame. We are not provided any knowledge of what could be lurking in its depths, but it is nothing short of terror. Tiny figures lay at its edges seeking to distance themselves from it. Burke states that ‘It is our ignorance of things that causes all our admiration, and chiefly excites our passions. Knowledge and acquaintance make the most striking causes affect but little.’<sup>30</sup> Knowledge and clarity in the case of the sublime, is a deterrent for producing it. If one has the ability to understand what they are seeing fully, then there is no room for confusion or to catalyse the imagination.

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<sup>30</sup> Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. London: Printed for J. Dodsley. 1756. Section IV. Print.

Darkness has a clear effect on the way we experience the sublime, however Burke explains that a contrast of darkness and light is even greater.

‘But light now appearing, and now leaving us, and so off and on, is even more terrible than total darkness; and a sort of uncertain sounds are, when the necessary dispositions concur, more alarming than a total silence.’<sup>31</sup>

This combination of both light and darkness, causes confusion for the viewer as some things will be clear and readable then suddenly, they disappear. This back and forth between visual appearance, combines both the intensity of light as well as the unknown of the darkness.

Through an animation perspective, *The Secret of Nimh* (1982) explores contrast in lighting to show the complexity of the animal kingdom. This film surrounds a mother mouse, Mrs. Brisby, who seeks help to try to move her sick son out of the field before the farmer ploughs it all down. She must seek help from her predators to save her family. Firstly, by entering the rat hovel located in a rose bush to get help from the rats. However, what she discovers is not a lowly habitat, but the infinite and complex depths that this kingdom expands in to. The landscape transforms through light (Fig 2.2) and darkness (Fig. 2.3), from moments of terror to moments of beauty, and then finally combining the two for moments of intensity (Fig 2.4). With it these moments also bring the ‘obscure’<sup>32</sup>, with painted backgrounds washed with in. Not providing any

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<sup>31</sup> Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. London: Printed for J. Dodsley. 1756. Page 161. Print

<sup>32</sup> Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. London: Printed for J. Dodsley. 1756. Page 132. Print.



Figure 2.2 Light



Figure 2.2 Darkness

distinction to what resides there, but allowing the emotions of the characters to feed into the landscape. This allows the audience to feel extremely tense, unknowing of what could come next, and for the mind to be ‘crowded and confused’.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. London: Printed for J. Dodsley. 1756. Page 148. Print.



Figure 2.4 Moments of Intensity

One of the most essential elements of the sublime is its immense scale. The previous chapter explained that the sublime experience comes from feeling small and insignificant, meaning the sublime catalyst must be larger than that of the experiencer. Great mountains, vast horizons, infinite oceans, all create the sublime experience from their intense size.

For the viewing experience of the sublime in animated film and in traditional art, it should be prefaced that one must also view it on a large scale, via cinema screen or like John Martin's work, in a giant frame.<sup>34</sup> Anything smaller than the viewer, such as a phone, would not produce the immersive experience or overbearing power that one must feel to experience the sublime.

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<sup>34</sup> Brady, Emily. *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy : Aesthetics, Ethics, and Nature*, Cambridge University Press, 2013. Page 119. Print.

A large sense of scale is not enough by itself to produce the sublime, it must reach further than that, past horizons into a sense of infinity. Similar to darkness, nothing can produce this greatness of the sublime and the imagination if it does not push past its own limits into the land of obscurity and the unknown. George Hagman in his text '*Aesthetic Experience*' (2005), comments with a Kantian perspective that, 'Human reason is thus confronted by its own limits, even as it comprehends those limits by recognizing the existence of an unimaginable infinity.'<sup>35</sup> Our mind has an extraordinarily difficult time processing the concept of infinity. Our eyes try to make sense of it by filling in the gaps, condensing the image, and even then, our imagination is forced to the edge of its comprehensive ability and into a state of paralysis. The sublime scale is not only the ignition of the imagination but the *failure* of the imagination. Hoffmann supports this idea in their book '*Beyond the Finite: The Sublime in Art and Science*' (2011) that:

'Bohm's description of the holomovement evokes a conception of the sublime in which the field of the finite, tangible to the senses, is suspended within the field of the infinite, beyond space and time and the current conceptual grasp of physics.'<sup>36</sup>

A point at which something familiar become unexplainably impossible in its size and scale and can't be comprehended with that of words or the imagination.

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<sup>35</sup> Hagman, George. *Aesthetic Experience : Beauty, Creativity, and the Search for the Ideal*, BRILL, 2005. Page 126. Print.

<sup>36</sup> Hoffmann, Roald, and Whyte, Iain Boyd. *Beyond the Finite : The Sublime in Art and Science*, Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2011. Page 119. Print.

The scale in *The Secret of Nimh* takes a unique approach by being in the perspective of a tiny animal – a mouse. It plays to the hierarchal structure of the food chain and their accompanying environments. It allows for a strong visual contrast in the environments and the main character, showing her small, helpless, and fearful nature. In the residence of the Great Owl, located in an ancient spider web covered tree (Fig. 2.5), Mrs. Brisby once again tries to look for help for her son. The camera makes use of extreme high and low angles to show the immense contrast between her and her environment.



Figure 2.5 The Owl's Den

The space easily dominates over her, adding to the list of other powerful things that she cannot control. She is out of her depth both physically and mentally. The scale of the environment has the ability to simply strike fear instead of the sublime into the viewer, but there is also a sense of awe and wonder that lies there. An unknown power and knowledge that the Owl and its residence has that goes beyond mere size. Immense scale is a constant factor in the case of the sublime, it allows for

the source of the power to overshadow and easily have control over the viewer thus causing the imagination to falter.

Lighting, obscurity, and scale only scratch the surface of the elements that the sublime consists of. However, they stand as the backbone for this aesthetic experience, but also as important design elements for art. Without them the imagination is left stagnant and tranquil. Animation brings forth these elements in many diverse ways, and adapts them to push a narrative structure that emotionally moves the audience. This medium has the ability to portray complex visual, philosophical, and emotional ideas that form the moments we remember and that truly move and inspire us.

# Chapter Three:

## *The Paradox of the Emotional Sublime*

## *The Paradox of the Emotional Sublime*

*“Between these ends is created a vitalizing third element that gives life, balance or rhythm.”<sup>37</sup>*

- Edgar Payne, 1941

A concoction of emotions, fighting in their efforts to win dominance over the individual, are all at the core of the sublime experience. Of both pleasure and displeasure, this aesthetic takes emotions of seemingly opposing poles and forces them to inhabit the same space. Those of terror, anxiety, admiration, and awe, all make up the same sublime encounter, and it is this conflict that lends itself to the overwhelming nature one feels.

Aesthetics are made from the ways in which we respond to the world, and most often lend themselves to being either of pleasing or displeasing quality. For example, ugliness resides in that of pure displeasure, and derives from disgust and often times terror. It is the response from things that are unsightly, mismatched, and disconnected<sup>38</sup>, and often remind us of our own mortality, thus triggering the disgust and

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<sup>37</sup> Payne, Edgar. *Composition of Outdoor Painting*. Seward, 1941. Page 10. Print.

<sup>38</sup> Brady, Emily. *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy : Aesthetics, Ethics, and Nature*, Cambridge University Press, 2013. Page 175. Print.

fear.<sup>39</sup> Beauty on the contrary, delves into that of only pleasure and delight. Admiration for the small, smooth, and things of perfect nature. This is where the sublime is unique. Taking a combination of each stance of pleasure and displeasure, it creates an unstable compound.<sup>40</sup>

In the context of animation, why would one include scenes and objects that produce a sublime response, and what can this emotional conflict contribute to a film? The answer lies in one of the greatest examples of animated film, *The Prince of Egypt* (1998). This film follows the life of Moses as he discovers his background of being born a Jewish slave, though being raised as an Egyptian royal. He embarks upon a journey of faith to free his people from the cruel clutches of Pharaoh. With its expansive narrative and the divine subject matter, the sublime seems to be the only fitting aesthetic experience that could connect these powerful scenes to the emotions of the audience. The film draws no limits to the design in order to create a soul lifting, heart wrenching experience that could only be constituted, at the very least, as sublime.

The Prince of Egypt's most critical scene, the splitting of the Red Sea,<sup>41</sup> (Fig. 3.1 – Fig. 3.5) encompasses the complexity and multiplicity of the sublime's accompanying emotional response. At the height of the sequence, where Moses and his people are ambushed by Pharaoh, Moses' roads to safety come to an impasse. Between the untrodden dark ocean and the wrath of Pharaoh, Moses chooses to put his trust in something

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<sup>39</sup> Menninghaus, Winfried. *Disgust : Theory and History of a Strong Sensation*, State University of New York Press, 2003. Page 18. Print.

<sup>40</sup> Hoffmann, Roald, and Whyte, Iain Boyd. *Beyond the Finite : The Sublime in Art and Science*, Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2011. Page 5. Print.

<sup>41</sup> *The Prince of Egypt (1998) - Parting the Red Sea Scene (9/10) | Movieclips*. YouTube. Uploaded by Movie Clips, 18 April 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TzRrEgkfhG8>

greater, and takes a leap of faith. Striking down his staff into the shallow waters which cause an eruption to form, splitting the Red Sea right down the middle, and carving out a path for the Israelites to walk to safety. It fulfils the requirements of both Burke's and Kant's sublime and easily forms the emotional turmoil of terror, admiration, and awe.



*Figure 3.1 Dark Ocean*



*Figure 3.2 Tornado of Fire*



*Figure 3.3 The Leap of Faith*



*Figure 3.4 Splitting of the Red Sea*



*Figure 3.5 Moses and His People*

Pain and terror are the initiating sensations for both Burke's and Kant's sublime, and are no different for this scene. For Burke, pain and fear are the 'ruling principles'<sup>42</sup> of the sublime and are considered the most powerful emotion one can feel. Spawned from the power and great scale of the sublime object, our fight or flight instincts are triggered.<sup>43</sup> In the beginning of this scene in the Prince of Egypt, as the Israelites are being hunted down by Pharaoh, all emotions except terror are outcasted. The visuals do nothing but assist this distress. Increasingly dark clouds congest most of the screen, dotted with lightning and reflect onto an even darker ocean. Light from the tornado of fire highlight the panic on everyone's faces. Burke's theories of this contrast between darkness and light are displayed here.<sup>44</sup> With darkness' ability to spark the imagination of all the terrors that could reside within, alongside light's ability to temporarily reveal and confirm these terrors, we are given immense contrast.

Trapped in paralyzed adrenaline, the wave rises and the next emotion emerges. Surpassing any natural gravitational pull, the once blockade of sea gives way down the middle to reveal a path. Admiration twists alongside fear of the unearthed passage to safety, while still gripping to the unpredictable nature of the wave's physical form. The unexpected scale and power of the ocean easily overpowers any human's capability. Any control that was left in the hands of the Israelites, which had already

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<sup>42</sup> Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. London: Printed for J. Dodsley. 1756. Section II. Print.

<sup>43</sup> John Onians relates this back to Charles Darwin's Natural Selection in Hoffmann, Roald, and Whyte, Iain Boyd. *Beyond the Finite : The Sublime in Art and Science*, Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2011. Page 97. Print.

<sup>44</sup> Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. London: Printed for J. Dodsley. 1756. Section XIV. Print.

become slim, has dissolved. Kant's studies of the 'transcendental principal'<sup>45</sup> of the mind are applicable here. And though the object itself can be deemed as 'sublime', for Kant it is the experience and the *state of mind* that is truly sublime.<sup>46</sup> It is that 'One can describe the sublime so: it is an object (of nature), whose representation determines the mind to think of the unattainability of nature as an exhibition of ideas'<sup>47</sup> Nature, in this case the wave of the Red Sea, provides not only the Israelites and Moses, but also the audience, an experience of a conflict of the mind. Fear of death and overwhelming power, as well as mixed admiration of the divine beauty, and of hope that they might live to see another day.

This contrast, power, and mind-altering emotion we see in *The Prince of Egypt* can only be compared to the imaginative landscape painters of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Specifically, J. M. W. Turner, who's paintings seized the attention of the masses. His work consisted of roaring seas, storms, or mythological and historical events from the past. As travel to Egypt became more common in the early 1800's, though incredibly expensive, knowledge was more widely available for artists to use in their paintings if they could not afford to go in person. One of Turner's most recognisable pieces is a painting based on the Biblical event of Moses and the plagues of Egypt. '*The Fifth Plague of Egypt*' (Fig. 3.6) painted in 1800 by a young Turner that, despite the title, depicts the 7<sup>th</sup> plague. Dark storm clouds wash over half of the piece, while illuminated pyramids shine from

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<sup>45</sup> Kant, Immanuel, and J H. Bernard. *Kant's Critique of Judgement*. London: Macmillan, 1914. Page 17. Print.

<sup>46</sup> Kant, Immanuel, and J H. Bernard. *Kant's Critique of Judgement*. London: Macmillan, 1914. Page 257 – 264. Print.

<sup>47</sup> Rayman, Joshua W. *Kant on Sublimity and Morality*, University of Wales Press, 2012. Page 56. Print.

below. The contradicting emotions of the sublime are present throughout the whole piece because of Turner's use of light, scale, and subject.



*Figure 3.6 The Fifth Plague of Egypt*

The lighting allows for an overall contrast of the piece, expressing both deep black abysses and white glowing pyramids, both of which express something beyond that of the natural. Emotional terror is emanated from the figures in the foreground who exude death, and are accompanied by broken violent trees. The white eerie light also provokes fear as it is a sign of pure death weaving through the city below. The scale and composition of the painting promotes awe and astonishment, with the overbearing clouds that roam in the upper half of the frame, as well as the minute figure of Moses in the foreground is almost hidden in the darkness. Turner simplifies down the complexity of the sublime without losing the emotional impact. He is able to convey terror and admiration through

different design techniques and each hold their own unique place in the painting.<sup>48</sup>

Winfried Menninghaus comments of the cross point between the aesthetic standpoints of the sublime,

‘Beauty and laughter are life’s elixirs; disgust an apotropaic response to death. (The feeling of the sublime offers a third possibility, taking on the defeat, the virtual death of our sensory capacities, and compensating for it by “stirring” the powers of our “super sensuous character.”)’<sup>49</sup>

The sublime then furthers the limits of the mind by igniting a third emotional standpoint, one of astonishment and awe. The mind becomes filled with the sublime object<sup>50</sup> and becomes a ‘state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended’<sup>51</sup> due to its scale, power, and other qualities expressed in Chapter 2.

*The Prince of Egypt* uses this element to create an overwhelming reverence for not only the source of power in the sublime, but also the creator of that power, in this case being the God of the Israelite people. Numbness from the infinite horizons that has been constructed, the choice is created to face fear and journey towards the unknown, and like Moses it is now the Israelite’s turn to take a step forward in faith. The supernatural

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<sup>48</sup> For more on Turner’s work and the Sublime see - Smith Alison, ‘The Sublime in Crisis: Landscape Painting after Turner’, in Nigel Llewellyn and Christine Riding (eds.), *The Art of the Sublime*, Tate Research Publication, January 2013, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/alison-smith-the-sublime-in-crisis-landscape-painting-after-turner-r1109220>, accessed 18 December 2021.

<sup>49</sup> Menninghaus, Winfried. *Disgust : Theory and History of a Strong Sensation*, State University of New York Press, 2003. Page 111. Print.

<sup>50</sup> Addison Joseph, ‘*On the Pleasures of the Imagination*’, in Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, *The Spectator*. London, 1712. No. 412. Print.

<sup>51</sup> Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. London: Printed for J. Dodsley. 1756. Section I. Print.

state of this miracle inspires the mind past anything that could be realized in the ordinary, and must push past into a state of the unfamiliar and of the 'other'. An incomparable greatness in scale and one that is of no control in human hands, there is an overwhelming calm of safety. Though experiencing fear, the sublime is far greater than *just* fear, and provides an all-encompassing experience of something unfamiliar where the soul is sparked to life.

To truly feel these contradicting emotions, one must be 'convinced of the reality'<sup>52</sup> that we see before us. Immersed in the world of animation to where there is momentarily no difference from our experiences from the real world, to the experiences we feel in animated film. Hume notes that 'Neither is the sorrow here softened by the fiction: For the audience were convinced of the reality of every circumstance.'<sup>53</sup> Even though animation is an illusion of moving frames, it still manages to convince us that it is alive. And thus, we are transported into the moment of the Red Sea splitting down the centre and revealing the path to the possibility of safety. We are among the Israelite people, we feel alongside them the terror of death, and the admiration of a safe passage, and the sheer impossible awe of the divine. We in turn, experience the sublime.

Animation's capabilities of displaying the impossible and unfamiliar only extend the range of the sublime aesthetic. Where anything can be imagined and simplified to portray the condensed and reinterpreted emotions we feel from nature. The intricacies of the emotional sublime are

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<sup>52</sup> Brady, Emily. *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy : Aesthetics, Ethics, and Nature*, Cambridge University Press, 2013. Page 158. Print.

<sup>53</sup> Hume, David. 'Of Tragedy', in Eugene F. Miller, ed., *Essays Moral Political and Literary*, rev. ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1987 [1889]), Page 219. Print.

difficult to recreate without losing their power, but just as Turner allowed for both pleasing and displeasing emotions to run throughout their work, animation allows for that work to move and take a new form through movement. A new immersive experience that convinces the mind that it is truly real, and where the sublime takes shape through the unpredictable emotions of terror, awe, and admiration.

# Conclusion

Confronting the sublime through means of expression, whether through art or animation, one is challenged with a variety of obstacles. Managing the balances and intricacies of this aesthetic is a difficulty in itself, but creating something that provokes extreme emotional turmoil is the true test of whether or not something can be considered sublime. Though it is through great forms of power, immense scale, and various degrees of other design elements that the sublime can be produced, what is most important like any other aesthetic, is the response we have to it. Without disgust there would be no ugliness, without beauty there would be a lack of admiration, and without this conglomerate of intense emotions, there would be no sublime. To evoke the aesthetic of the sublime through animation is to evoke true emotion within ourselves, and to share that experience with others.

Chapter 1 sought out the origins of the sublime through a source of power. From human-made like architecture, to those of natural occurrence

through storms or natural disasters, the sublime seems to be found in a variety of objects. Even with these diverse catalysts, there is a hierarchal system where nature sits at the top and is crowned ‘the original sublime’.<sup>54</sup> However, no matter what the sublime is provoked by, it must always be from an overwhelming force that stuns the viewer into the metaphysical. Where Kant’s sublime proved differently to Burke’s, is through the metamorphosis of the mind. To where our imagination and our means of understanding are challenged and pushed into unknown territory of the impossible. It is here where animation continues to expand our definition of ‘the impossible’ because there is a never-ending realm of creativity to be found, and where new places can be created. The film *Treasure Planet* takes hold of this by expressing what the infinite confines of space could look like. From planet-sized treasure troves made by hand, or to the unknown of black holes, the sublime response is triggered by the parts of this world that we will never set foot in.

Throughout the second chapter, *Catalysts for the Imagination*, Burke’s work and studies of the sublime are compared to design elements in traditional painting and modern animation. From pure light that extinguishes life, to pure blackness that ignites the mind of terror, and then to the contrast between the two, lighting is shown to be an incredible implement for the sublime. The second pillar of design being an immense sense of scale which promotes the overwhelming nature of the sublime object and reduces the viewer into insignificance. Through art and animation, we are shown how these elements can be brought to life, and

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<sup>54</sup> Brady, Emily. *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Nature*, Cambridge University Press, 2013. Page 19. Print.

with animation specifically, through movement. Animated films like *The Secret of Nimh* further this by using these design elements to push a narrative structure and to ultimately provoke the sublime.

Finally, Chapter 3 expressed the importance of the emotional turmoil that the sublime creates and how animation has taken art to a new level by inviting the audience into a new reality. Where the consistency of traditional painting begins to act as a hinderance for provoking the sublime response because we are still in the position as just the voyeur. Through the combination of both sides of pleasure and displeasure, the sublime creates something rare and unquantifiable through its emotions. With terror, admiration, and awe being at the emotional forefront of this aesthetic, the sublime object must meet these requirements. *The Prince of Egypt* shows how animation takes divine action to a tangible visual medium where we experience the unimaginable. From winds of fire to columns of sea water, the sublime continues to change its shape, and in turn it changes how we view the world.

The sublime is awakened by a predominant sense of fear, but ends with an overwhelming impression of appreciation and wonder. Though untameable and uncontrollable, the sublime sparks something within our terror-stricken bodies, something that wasn't there before – a new perspective. Whether that be a new perspective of the self or that of nature, a change ultimately occurs and inspires the soul to create. The imagination hastens to capture that moment and transfer it to a creative outlet in hopes that it can re-kindle the same feeling - of the sublime.

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