The English “Convergences” Program, 2012-13: The Technological Sublime

A Brief History Of the “Sublime”: From the Grand to the Gothic to the Technological

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From “sublimis” to “sublime”

*Classical Latin* *sublīmis*: high up (in space or rank); grand; aspiring; majestic; eminent; and (by 1684) “geometry with its potentials expanded by calculus” (on the way to the “mathematical sublime” and more)

*Middle French* *sublime*: highest excellence; attaining great height; (by 1669) “the grand and elevated style of discourse or writing”; and (by 1690) “that quality in nature or art which inspires awe, reverence, or other high emotion”
The *Peri Hupsous* attributed (ca. 1554) to “Longinus” (ca. 1st – 3rd Century AD)

- A treatise on rhetoric defining the “high,” as opposed to the “middle” and “low,” style

- Written to counter perceived decline of both higher morality and true rhetorical elevation

- Focused on oratorical and poetic devices that produce “transport” (the highest possible audience affect)

- *Hupsous* comes from and appeals to “an unconquerable passion” in “our souls” for “all that is great and for all that is more divine than ourselves.”
Claude Lorrain (1605-82) and Salvator Rosa (1650-73)
Edmund Burke (1729-97; 1757) and Immanuel Kant (1724-1804; 1790)

The “Sublime” shifts from being an external quality to being the result of a mental “association of ideas”

---Burke: As opposed to the feminine beautiful, “masculine” sublimity is rooted in terror, even the fear of death (being swallowed by a dark, antiquated vastness), but only if it is *distanced* by aesthetic techniques

---Kant: Both “mathematical” infinitude and “dynamic” flux are “sublime” when Reason knows its ideational mastery and its ultimate comprehension of them through art.

**Hertz**: “Figurative reconstitution” of a threatened “disintegration” where a “reassertion of the subject’s stability” is “bought at some other subject’s expense” (*The End of the Line*)

**Žižek**: The aestheticizing, with ideological constructs, of possible incursions of “the Real” into consciousness and representation – which assumes *Jacques Lacan’s* special sense of “the Real,” where all distinctions are blurred, even life and death, at a level beyond all signifying (*The Sublime Object of Ideology*)
From All These Perspectives, the Issues of the “Technological Sublime” Must Include Those Raised by Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818)

- Victor Frankenstein’s “creation” is contemplated as an opening onto the grand vastness of life, knowledge, and technological achievement.
- But the creature as constructed does not sufficiently distance the blurred-together horrors of “the Real” (individual and cultural) that his form embodies.
- This novel’s most “sublime” scene is thus Victor’s first distant sight of the “monster” from whom he initially fled after making him (Chapter 6).
The Wanderer Over the Sea of Fog
by Caspar David Friedrich (1817-18)
The U of A’s Mars Simulation Project
The September 11 Memorial, New York