

Livia Arndal Woods

Edmund Burke's 1757 *A Philosophical Inquiry Into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* defines the sublime as "whatever is in any sort terrible...[and] productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling" (34). The particular strength of this emotion is the result of the sublime's position at the intersection of physical pain and pleasure, at the threat of death and the distance from death that a clear perception of that threat implies. In Burke's sublime, life and death coexist.[i]

Theorizations of the sublime in modernity tend to make room in secular epistemologies for radical uncertainty and transcendence, power and powerlessness; and it's worth noting that – even in our age of historically unprecedented certainty about and power over reproduction – conception, pregnancy, childbirth, and maternity are notably marked by radical uncertainty and transcendence, power and powerlessness. Key eighteenth-century articulations of the sublime locate these powerful and conflicting potentials in the tensions and attractions between seeming opposites: pain and pleasure in Burke or "rapidly alternating repulsion from and attraction to one and the same object" in Kant's 1790 *Critique of Judgment*, for example (88). A psychological sublime of the *fin-de-siècle* imagines the unconscious as the mechanism through which the self struggles for a coherence always already undermined by the threat of incoherence. The "technological sublime" of the twentieth-century allows for nature or psyche as locus and symbol of the sublime to be swapped for, say, vast cityscapes, often in cooperation with a postmodern sublime that prods at a conflicting demand for and impossibility of representation and meaning, a terrified wonder in the face of the self-conscious fraying of belief in wholeness.

There is now some impulse toward theorizing a "twenty-first century sublime." Roanne Kantor's recent post here reflected on some of the particular appeals and dangers of reaching for notions of the sublime in seeking to communicate across methodological scales that range, for example, from individual bodily experiences to global crises. Kantor has particular questions about the degree to which the sublime seems like a "natural symbol" for communicating at and across the limits of our understanding partly in the context of an intellectual tradition shaped by Eurocentric sublimations of Others. Amy Scott's work on the twenty-first century sublime notes that "the sublime has been reconfigured in the postmodern era as a means of *naturalizing* the presence of technology within the contemporary landscape" (29 – emphasis my own). These concerns with the way in which notions of the sublime can be enlisted to help that which is "made or caused by mankind" seem as though it precedes and exceeds us echo the concerns about reproduction that circulate in our age of

“unnatural” control over and intervention in conception, pregnancy, and childbirth (“Definition of Natural in English”).

In Part I of this series, I outlined my sense that a reproductive sublime is a “recurring theme in Anthropocenic literary visions of science fiction, near future, and dystopia.” I am not suggesting that this reproductive sublime is *the* twenty-first century sublime, but it is a conceptual structure that has gained momentum in the twenty-first century. What I call the reproductive sublime, “a desire for and terror in the face of increasing human control over reproduction,” is a sublime in which the co-existence of life and death is literalized in uncanny reproductive bodies and their proxies (Woods). In Part I, I glossed a reading of *Frankenstein* as an archetypal modern myth of the reproductive sublime, but Mina Harker’s gestation of a strangely many-fathered son in *Dracula*, the hatchery of *Brave New World*, the red-cloaked bellies likely to bear “unbabies” of Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and the virus carrying zombies of Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One* are all – and just a few – examples of Anthropocenic drives and terrors narrativized as reproductive crisis. These are nightmares of a future in which desire for reproductive control and terror in the face of such control organizes narrative. The reproductive sublime is an aesthetic and literary category in which the desire to establish ever greater distance from the possibility of fetal and maternal death and ever greater control over the future writ on those bodies threatens to empty individual lives of meaning and meaningful connection and/or to invite death on terrifying scale. Because life and death always coexist in reproduction, because the one draws the other closer, because advances in reproductive technology prompt and reflect a re-negotiation of the room we make for uncertainty and transcendence, power and powerlessness, and because this is a negotiation we explore tellingly in our artistic visions, the reproductive sublime functions not as a seemingly “natural symbol” or means of “naturaliz[ing].” Rather, the reproductive sublime is a category with particular Anthropocenic momentum that insists on the location of the unnatural at the crossroads of the physical facts of life and death that for so long served as the concrete limits of the natural world.

[i] In the context of my interest here in a reproductive sublime, it’s worth noting that Burke explicitly refuses to allow the social passions associated with “propagation” and “generation” into his formula for the sublime. Burke argues for a distinction between the pains and pleasures of society (among which are included the pleasures and pains of romantic feeling and “generation”) and the pains and pleasures of self-preservation. His sublime is associated with this latter and his argument that “it is not fit that the absence of this [generative] pleasure should be attended with any considerable pain” seems like a refusal to consider what generation must be to women during a historical period with particularly high rates of maternal and infant death.

Works Cited

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