

Institution: University of Leicester
Unit of Assessment: UoA 29 English Language and Literature
Title of case study: Curating, Creating and Comprehending: Understanding the Sublime in Art, Literature, Theory and Science
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>‘The Sublime Object’ was a major AHRC-funded project of the Tate Britain, which used a range of open access media, free public exhibitions and events to promote new understanding of the ways in which perceptions of the Sublime in the external landscape are shaped by cultural experiences, and which was substantially shaped by Professor Philip Shaw’s work.</p> <p>Shaw worked with Tate Education/Learning to develop initiatives that would engage Tate’s gallery and online audiences closely in an exploration of the concept of the Sublime, a theoretical concept encompassing ideas of the great, the awe-inspiring, and the overpowering. Through the collaboration of the public, artists, and academics, this work articulates ways in which the Sublime is experienced today. Shaw’s research conceptually underpinned the project, helping to shape the ideas of artists, Tate visitors (in person and online), and curators. His thinking for pieces commissioned by the project was, in turn, shaped by this dialogue, demonstrating the enrichment of research via its initial impact.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>The major underpinning research for the project was Philip Shaw’s <i>The Sublime: The New Critical Idiom</i> (2), which offers both a survey and a critique of the development of the Sublime from its origins in the classical period to its emergence in the present day as a key theoretical concept. Research for the book began not long after Shaw, who has been at the University of Leicester since 1991, published <i>Waterloo and the Romantic Imagination</i> (1). Having discovered the centrality of the Sublime to contemporary debates over the significance of the battle, Shaw decided to undertake a more systematic investigation of the concept.</p> <p>This research set up many of the questions posed for a broader audience by the Tate project, considering the significance of the Sublime as concept and cultural practice in western understanding, and its distinctive treatment in different disciplines and media. In July 2008, following the very positive reception of <i>The Sublime</i>, Shaw was invited to join the investigative team of ‘The Sublime Object’. Members of the research team, including the initial Principal Investigator Richard Humphreys (Tate curator), his successor Christine Riding (Tate curator), and the project’s post-doctoral researcher Lydia Hamlett, approached Shaw because they had used his study in the course of their own research.</p> <p>The project’s PI Christine Riding states: ‘Professor Shaw’s approach to the sublime was crucial in representing a clear and concise ‘way in’ for all of us working on the research project, offering relationships between the past and the present, between different disciplines, and furthermore important avenues of inquiry. For example, Professor Shaw’s discussion of the Longinian sublime - the power of the written and spoken word - gave me the idea to approach the artist Douglas Gordon to create a text-based installation at Tate Britain, which was one of the major public-facing outcomes of the whole project.’</p> <p>The project’s post-doctoral fellow, Dr Lydia Hamlett comments further: ‘The project originally had strong biases on the eighteenth century and contemporary periods but, with the arrival of Professor Phil Shaw as co-investigator and [my] early modern expertise, the project expanded in terms of its chronological scope. The examination of the notion of the sublime across periods including its classical origins and Longinus’s <i>Peri Hypsous</i> – although now with a particular focus on its relation to art objects - was inspired by the chronological reach of Phil’s book, <i>The Sublime</i>. The long essays and shorter, object-based, texts, on the project website are arranged according to these</p>

Impact case study (REF3b)

various time periods’.

During the life of the project Shaw completed seven essays on the Sublime for the ‘Art of the Sublime’ open-access website, including a major survey essay ‘Modernism and the Sublime’ (4, below) and six shorter studies of individual works of art (5). In this work he incorporates new thinking generated by the public dialogue arising from the project. He published an additional essay investigating Byron’s treatment of the Sublime (6) and an extract from Shaw’s *The Sublime* (2) appeared in a book edited by the British artist and art historian Simon Morley entitled *The Sublime: Documents of Contemporary Art* (Whitechapel Art Gallery, 2010), pp. 52-6.

3. References to the research

- (1) Philip Shaw, *Waterloo and the Romantic Imagination* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2002)
- (2) Philip Shaw, *The Sublime: The New Critical Idiom* (London: Routledge, 2006)
- (3) Philip Shaw, ‘Derrida and the Sublime’, in *Pazhouhesh Nameh-e Farhangestan-e Honar: Research Journal of the Iranian Academy of Arts*, 5 (October-November 2007), 13-33.
- (4) Philip Shaw, ‘Modernism and the Sublime’ (2013) (<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/philip-shaw-modernism-and-the-sublime-r1109219>)
- (5) Philip Shaw, six studies of the sublime and modern art (2013) (<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/the-modern-sublime-r1109223>)
- (6) Philip Shaw, ‘“Betwixt Life and Death”: Don Juan and the Sublime’, in *Byron’s Ghosts*, ed. Gavin Hopps (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013)

Funding

AHRC Major Research Project, ‘The Sublime Object’, PI Christine Riding, CI Philip Shaw (2007-2010). Value of grant was £570, 283.75 (FEC), with £38,679.20 awarded to the University of Leicester.

4. Details of the impact

The project has fostered understanding of complex concepts amongst a wide international public, helped artists and curators use these ideas in their own practice, and extended the Tate’s display collection through the restoration of two previously unexhibited paintings.

Shaping Displays and Impact on Tate Visitors

A collection of thirty-eight historic works from the Tate Collection was displayed in a free exhibition ‘Art and the Sublime: Terror, Torment and Transcendence’, from April 2009 to November 2010. The selection illustrated the changing historical meanings and possible interpretations of the concept of the Sublime. The display included a brochure published by Tate Publishing (March 2010) and multi-media interpretation in the gallery itself, with wall texts and audio commentary. An accompanying catalogue, drawing substantially on Shaw’s work, has sold over 1,500 copies.

This exhibition was accompanied by a newly commissioned text piece by Douglas Gordon, ‘Pretty much every word written, spoken, heard, overheard from 1989...’ in Gallery 9 and the adjoining Octagon space, 16 February - 23 May 2010. Tate Britain receives in excess of 1.5 million visitors (source: Tate Annual Report) per year. Feedback on the exhibition (on independent blogs) shows that it had encouraged visitors to think anew about their experiences of the Sublime, to compare these with the historical examples documented, considering why particular scenes and places evoke intense responses, and to re-discover the art of the Sublime: ‘this synoptic hang whose sole common denominator is the sublime as announced by the organizers provides the chance to retrieve certain forgotten paintings “previously considered devoid of interest”’.

Two unexpected outcomes of the project were: the 'rediscovery' and subsequent restoration of the painting 'The Raising of Lazarus' (1822) by B. R. Haydon, which initiated proposals for a display and a short documentary film (included on the project website); and a conservation project involving the painting 'Beyond Man's Footsteps' (1894) by Briton Riviere. Diana Donald, an acknowledged expert on nineteenth-century art and culture, wrote an in-focus text to accompany the work on the Sublime website, and the painting itself was the subject of an in-focus display, curated by Christine Riding, which opened at Tate Britain in May 2011.

New Appreciations of the Sublime, Online

The official project website went live in January 2013. It includes seven films commissioned and produced by the project team in collaboration with Tate Media and Tate curators: one on the 'Art and the Sublime' display and Douglas Gordon commission, three on site-specific contemporary art commissions (Douglas Gordon at Tate Britain, Bill Viola at St Paul's Cathedral and Mark Wallinger at the White Horse) and three art and location films (on John Constable/Salisbury, J M W Turner/The Highlands, James Ward/Gordale Scar), on which Shaw advised. See <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/films-r1141202>.

Qualitative responses from members of the public to the project's activities are documented in these short films. Reactions include an enhanced awareness of the gallery as a space, an awareness of nature as something that can overcome human agency, and the ways in which the curated paintings combined with the Gordon's installation created a new sense of paintings' soundscapes. Since January 2013 the website has generated 26,000 page views.

Engaging New Audiences

- The research team staged four Sublime events at 'Late at Tate' (the Gallery's free public programme, designed to attract new audiences): 'Sublime Environments' in collaboration with Cape Farewell (6 February 2009), 'Beyond Scale' (2 October 2009), 'The Real Thing' (3 September 2010) and 'Sublimity' (3rd December 2010). These events attracted over 5,000 visitors.

- Tate Conferences and Seminars: 'The Baroque Sublime' (9 May 2008), 'The Sublime in Crisis: New Perspectives on the Sublime in British Visual Culture, 1760-1900' (14-15 September 2009), 'Modernism and the Sublime: "Wrong from the Start"' (30 November 2009) and 'The Contemporary Sublime' (20 February 2010). The average attendance for each of these events, attended by curators, artists, post-graduate students, and young museum professionals as well as academics, was 140.

Impact on Practitioners

Representative evidence:

Recognising the significance of Shaw's work in mediating the concept of the Sublime to non-academic audiences the British artist Simon Morley included an extract from Shaw's book in his critical anthology *The Sublime* (see section 2). The painter and photographer John Timberlake summarises the impact of the project on his creative practice thus:

Professor Phil Shaw's work on the sublime has been of pivotal significance in the further development of my own fine art practice and research in the past few years. His book *The Sublime* published by Routledge was very helpful in my thinking through of the visual tropes and representations of the sublime, and thinking through the implications for landscape art. The conference 'Wrong from the Start' which he organised at Tate Britain late in 2009, was immensely helpful in allowing me to begin thinking through those subsumed elements and traces of the romantic sublime- whether acknowledged at the time or not - that infused Modernist aesthetics.

The artist Daniel Iles comments: '[the Sublime Object] provided me with ways into thinking about my own practice that avoid any sense that mere visual attractiveness is a relevant critical approach to it'. These testimonials demonstrate the project's impact on practitioners, and the potential of its temporal reach for future generations of art-lovers and artists alike.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

Tate, 'The Sublime Object'

Tate blogs: [www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/search?f\[\]=im_vid_50:2120&solrsort=is_end_date_asc.is_start_date_asc.is_published_date_desc](http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/search?f[]=im_vid_50:2120&solrsort=is_end_date_asc.is_start_date_asc.is_published_date_desc)

The 405: <http://thefourohfive.com/news/article/art-and-the-sublime-tate-britain>

'Art and the Sublime' Exhibition

The Art Tribune: <http://www.thearttribune.com/Art-and-the-Sublime.html>

Urbanomic: <http://www.urbanomic.com/event-uf12-details.php>

Zani: <http://zani.co.uk/culture/94-tate-britain-fighter-jets-the-haywain-a-alan-measles>

References to Philip Shaw's work on the Sublime

Aesthetics (blog): <http://aestheticsrhodesfall09.blogspot.co.uk/2009/11/longinus-burke-and-kant-origins-of.html>

A.I.R. Gallery:

http://www.airgallery.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=main.page&pagename=Past_Exhibits_2011&pageid=276

Maarten Van Der Heijden (blog): <http://www.maartenvanderheijden.nl/words-words-words>

For reviews of Shaw's work, the project, practitioners' responses, and blog engagement see https://swww2.le.ac.uk/departments/english/ref-impact-data/ref-impact-data-page-4*