

Everything
Was Beautiful and
Nothing Hurt
Dr Gareth Hudson

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Project Description

This research sought to develop a deeper understanding of sublime experience and its communicability through affect theory, ritual space dynamics and installation techniques. Using autoethnography to document emotion-generating interactions and an intuitive, practice-based approach in fieldwork to examine how the sublime moves us.

The insights were disseminated through the production of three installations that used moving image, projection, light and sound and contextualised through presentation at conference and other public events. The installations were presented in an exhibition that aimed to recreate/ induce/critique the spatio-temporal conditions of sublime experience through utilising sublime 'narratives'.

Project Duration:

The exhibition ran from the 23rd of October 2015 to the 20th of May 2016. It was the longest running exhibition in the Globe Gallery's (Newcastle upon Tyne) 21 year history.

Funder:

The exhibition was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, Engage FMS and NICAP (Newcastle University), and Arts Council England.

Research Partners, consultants, collaborators:

Research Partners: Patient and Public Engagement (Newcastle University).

Collaborators: Phil Begg (audio), Toby Thirling (audio), Zen Buddhists of Ho'onji Temple (Japan), Tibetan Buddhists of Palpung Sherabling/Thikse / Von Ngari Monasteries (India), Newcastle Sacred Harp Choir, Globe Gallery, Church of St Thomas The Martyr, Andy Hanson (EEG Technologist), Prof. Ian Moss (theoretical cosmologist), Prof. Rachel Armstrong (Experimental Architecture).



Still from Work II

Research Aims & Objectives

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Research Aims:

- To ascertain what is meant by sublime feeling and to generate, through practice, a considered account (and experience) of what it does to our sense of time and space.

Research Objectives:

- To explore situations/spaces/concepts (henceforth called narratives) belonging to the classical corpus of the sublime and attempt to find a commonality between objective and subjective stances vis-à-vis contemporary discourse and practice.
- To renew an emphasis of discourse around feeling as the crux for thinking through the sublime which may forego the why-is-the-sublime-felt and focus upon the how-is-the-sublime-felt.
- To begin reflection on the sublime encounter as a 'secular sacred' and how we might understand its function in terms of ritual space.



Field Work in Aokigahara, also known as the Sea of Trees or the Suicide Forest (Japan)



Field Work at the Mahabodhi Temple where Buddha is said to have attained enlightenment (India)



Field Work at Shibuya at the renowned scramble Crossing (Japan)



Field work with Tibetan Buddhists of Palpung Sherabling Monastery (India)



Field work in Leh (India)



Research Aims & Objectives

My research aims to re-establish the specific range of intense feeling which gives shape to the sublime encounter as a primary concern for its discourse; the sublime before aesthetics or philosophy. This practice-based research is aimed at exploring the spectrum of feeling within the sublime, about experiencing the spaces where encounters occur, documenting the interaction and utilising practice to extrapolate on that experience.

Perhaps the single clearest attribute of the sublime is that it defies definition. This is perhaps fitting for a theory (or anti-theory) that aims to describe our encounters with the formless, the infinite, the limitless and the unrepresentable. We might want to think about the sublime, therefore, as fundamentally experiential and focus on research which is both derived from experience and offers up

Field work in Fushimi Inari-taisha Shrine (Japan)

a shape with which to begin collectively calibrating it. Whenever it is discussed it manifests itself as a kind of confusion or coagulation of affect (emotion) which may suggest why the majority of discourse aims to describe why it is felt rather than the often paradoxical task of the how. Yet even this tact has waned in recent discourse and the sublime is commonly used as a prop to describe narratives where there is an 'aesthetic of immensity, excess, and disproportion' such as the technological sublime, the domestic sublime, etc.



The first part of this portfolio comprises of theoretical research which took Brian Massumi's work on affect and applied it, through key canonical contributors, to a theory of the sublime with which to build a shape of sublime experience. The second part of this project aims to describe the conditions of sublime affect using ritual space theory and produce narratives of the sublime through fieldwork and acts of practice. In producing these narratives and developing material for the work I was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. Newcastle Institute for Creative Arts Practice funded my field work through India and Japan. In collecting audio and visual material I collaborated with the Zen Buddhists of Ho'onji Temple (Japan), Tibetan Buddhists of Palpung Sherabling/Thikse / Von Ngari Monasteries (India), Newcastle Sacred Harp Choir and members of the Sage Chamber Choir. In developing ideas and contributing material I worked with Andy Hanson (EEG Technologist), Prof. Ian Moss (theoretical cosmologist) and Prof. Rachel Armstrong (Experimental Architecture). In creating the work I collaborated with sound artists Toby Thirling and Phil Begg. The exhibition was funded by the Arts Council England and was produced in partnership with Globe Gallery. Work III was funded and produced in partnership with Patient and Public Engagement, part of the faculty of Medical Science at Newcastle University.

Field work in Umeda Sky Building (Japan)

Research Context

Throughout the development of the work my focus was on maintaining a kind of phenomenological framework whose bearing came from my own experiences of the sublime. While I attempted to maintain audio and visual documentation of those experiences for recall and inspiration, it is the emotional memories which I allowed to guide the making of the works.

Fieldwork offered opportunities to allow for sublime feeling to occur and the artistic practice acted as the experimentation to define that feeling and generate artefacts which aid in further developing the research process. This holistic and intuitive methodology provided a framework for attempting to document the supersensible and the indescribable. It allowed for the research to move out of the canonical philosophical discourse and into a type of cultural anthropology, exploring the sublime as a secular sacred and how we might describe its mode of reception as ritual space.

Still from Work II



Research Methods & Process

Fluidity, intuition and chance were essential to my methodology as they acted as a counterpoint to the inevitable measure of control being exerted throughout the process. The sublime describes a specific encounter with the formless, the infinite, the limitless and the unrepresentable, states which we seek to commune with yet hold no control over. The only control I could exert in the fieldwork was ensuring I had access to certain situations and spaces, and so chance was something which had to be accounted for in occurrence and development. Attempting to exert complete control through the arts practice would defy the variables which lead to such encounters so relinquishing control in both collaboration with the sound artists and in part of the making processes was as equally essential. It is difficult to propose that the sublime can be collectively experienced which means the variable of chance in generating work which speaks to the qualities of sublimity in a subject needs to be addressed. All these factors worked towards creating the conditions and environment to engender/emulate an experience of the sublime.

Experimentation filming protocell production with Prof. Rachel Armstrong



The intended outcome of this practice-based research was for the work to embody that intangible, ineffable experience of sublime feeling and make it accessible, to make it available to be felt, which could arguably only be achievable through practice-based means. My initial processes were to engage with theoretical discourse and build a shape of experience which held some measure to what I felt I may have already experienced. I then constructed a methodology which included autoethnography and my own artistic approach of fluidity, intuition and phenomenology.

1. Electroencephalogram recording to apply custom script which emulates cardiac arrest and brain death

3. Projection and haze experimentation to test animating light

2. Cloud tank experimentation to produce analogue FX for cosmos scenes

4. Light metering and safety check for filming in Wind tunnel



Research Outcomes & Dissemination



Work I documentation at Globe Gallery

Work I

Work I, a collaboration between Gareth Hudson and sound artist Toby Thirling, takes four possible moments of sublime transcendence and then abstracts them through light and sound to reduce, refine and deliver an immersive installation.

From four field recordings recorded by Hudson in various situations, Thirling employs a variety of techniques in sound design and sound synthesis to re-imagine the moments. The resulting soundscape is re-constructed through an environment of projection, light and surround sound.



Work I documentation at Globe Gallery



Work I documentation at Church of St Thomas the Martyr



Work II

Work II, a video installation/non-narrative film shot across Asia and Europe, is an attempt to find a dialogue that speaks of universals in scenes of Buddhists in prayer, sprawling Japanese Metropolises, makeshift cosmos and German airports. Accompanying these images is a score arranged by Phil Begg; an ode to Blind Willie Johnson's 'Dark was the night', re-imagined by a plethora of musicians. A song that has now traveled further than anyone, or anything, into interstellar space aboard NASA's Voyager I.

Work II documentation at Globe Gallery



Still from Work II



Still from Work II

WORK III

Work III began as a collaboration with Andy Hanson, an EEG Technologist at Newcastle University's Institute of Neuroscience. An EEG recording of Gareth Hudson's brain was filtered through a custom piece of software that was used to simulate what would happen to these brain waves during a fatal cardiac arrest. The results were used by Phil Begg who translated the data for a string quartet as part of a soundscape which formed the basis for a five screen, video-mapped installation emulating a modern Danse Macabre. The work aims to evoke aspects of Martin Heidegger's *"Being-Towards-Death"* and the sublime, both experiences which allow us to confront our finitude.



Still from Work III

In terms of embodying and communicating the spatio-temporal conditions of sublime experience the work was quantifiably successful in terms of audience feedback and public coverage. From the methodology and practice I developed a model of sublime ritual space as a liminoid nonlocal effervescence: the ritual space of sublime organises affect and makes something sacred but does so briefly and without the requirement for social cohesion (liminoid). While the ritual situates its participant within a 'place' it sacrifices the feeling of those immediate spatio-temporal conditions to provide a feeling of a dimensional span so vast, it is unrepresentable (nonlocal). The feeling (effervescence) of spatio-temporal conditions, alongside the subject's emotions and logic, all vacillate in an experience which speaks of a multivalence which is autotelic; a secular sacred experience in the sublime affect of place and time.



Still from Work III

Publicity: ChronicleLive (8/12/2015) "The mesmerising Newcastle art work that has had people in tears".
The Journal (30/03/2016) "Second Gareth Hudson work genuinely enthralling".
NCL Press Office (18/04/2016) "Brain death gives birth to sublime artwork".
Northern Correspondent issue #8 "Brain Waves" .
Dr Joanne Clement (20/3/2016) "Everything was Beautiful and Nothing Hurt".
Dr Joanne Clement (15/08/2016) "Everything was Beautiful and Nothing Hurt: Work III".

Exhibition: Oct 2015 – May 2016 - Work I, II, III – Globe Gallery, Newcastle, UK.
May 2016 – Work I - Church of St. Thomas the Martyr, Newcastle, UK.
Aug 2016 – Excerpts from Work I, II, III – Resonance FM, London (DAB), UK (Radioplayer), internationally (livestream).
May 2020 – Work II, Forma 'What you up to?', London, UK.
Aug – Sept 2020 Work II, Bogotá Experimental Film Festival, Bogotá, Colombia.

Collection: British Library, World and Traditional Music.

Awards: Journal Culture Awards 2016 "visual artist of the year".

Events, Presentations, Conferences: Artist talk, Tyneside Cinema, October 2015.
Artist talk, Globe Gallery, April 2016.
Sacred Heart choir performance, Globe Gallery, February 2016.
Death Café meeting, Globe Gallery, May 2016.
Death & Culture III (conference), University of York, September 2020.

Output Type:

Original artistic works, creative body of enquiry,
solo exhibitions, contribution to collaborative
group exhibitions, conference contribution