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Traumatic Sublime: Genealogy of the Term and Relation to Contemporary Art and Media

Abstract: Prolonging the concept in art theory related to Andy Warhol's art, whose (photo)graphic series are characterized by "traumatic", *id est* repetitive, operation of technique, Hal Foster introduces the term *traumatic sublime* to describe Bill Viola's video works. The term relates not only to themes presented in the videos, but also to the media presenting them. Through his HD installation *Ocean Without Shore* at the 52nd Venice Biennale, Viola emphasised how important technical specifications of media are for his work, defining the colour saturation on the video with water curtains. This paper gives an overview of the technical evolution of Bill Viola's works and of the term *sublime*, from Longinus, over Immanuel Kant, to Hal Foster and Jean-François Lyotard. It concludes that *traumatic sublime* can be related to several forms of new media art, not exclusively to Bill Viola's work.

Keywords: *traumatic sublime*, *sublime*, Lyotard, Bill Viola, video, media

While the aesthetic category *sublime* remains better known in relation to material art then to new technologies, *traumatic* has been rarely correlated to artistic techniques and media. It was firstly used by Hal Foster who noted the contribution of reproducible and repetitive art to the Kantian framework of the sublime. This essay draws together Foster's terms *traumatic real* and *traumatic sublime*, focusing on the technological aspects, rather then on themes in art.

The first part outlines the evolution of the philosophical definition of the sublime, focusing on Jean-François Lyotard's correlation of this term to art influenced by new technologies. The second part analyzes Foster's term *traumatic real* after which he introduced the term *traumatic sublime*. This part of the essay also gives a short review of theoretic approaches to a single frame film, as an introduction to artworks by video artist Bill Viola that are analytically approached in the third part. The final part seeks to locate *traumatic sublime* in contemporary art beside Viola's art practice.

I further argue that Lyotard's understanding of postmodern art in relation to aesthetics of the sublime, since it presents the unpresentable, is also *traumatic*. In the same way the postmodern condition and new media technologies influence the interpretations of material art, they also have influence on aesthetic categories and new directions in aesthetics. As a result, the aesthetics of the sublime created by information technologies are closer to *traumatic sublime.*

The sublime in relation to modern and new media art

What became an aesthetic category, *sublime,* which defines sensitivity of mind, was previously described by the Greek anonymous (Longinus) in the first Century BC, as the culmination and entire excellence of style that, in the sphere of *techne*, depended mostly on treatment of (language) figures. Seen as the perfection of style, the term *sublime* was also a signifier not only for something that is grandiose and majestic, but for majestic representation than can make something to appear as such. This majestic representation, or the excellence of style as Longinus phrased it, may also be said to be high definition of *techne*, *id est* media in contemporary art practices.

Immanuel Kant, to whom aesthetic judgement is reflective judgement, defines two moments of the sublime – the first moment in which the viewer is almost overwhelmed by a sight and/or sound, while the second moment in which s/he comprehends the experience and in that way defines it intellectually, feeling amazement, astonishment and even a rush of power after processing it in mind. Further, the sublime was seen as something in front of which "our physical nature is limited, but our intellect deliberated"[1]. As such, it represented terror without negative consequences, prior to Slavoj Žižek's study on *The Sublime Object of Ideology*.

The sublimity of infinite time and space – which is to say, incomprehensible or immeasurable time and space – has been addressed by commentators on modern and contemporary art. While Alain Badiou described Samuel Beckett's work as *pathos of intermittency*, seeing it as a kind of "abject sublime"[2] that is significant for modern culture in general, Hélène Cixous pointed out that Beckett's plays had been developing toward "an ahistorical sublime"[3]. Infinity is an immanent part of contemporary art and media through hypertext, with its two determinative segments – electric light and the infinity (non-definability) of cyberspace.

The former has been defined by Marshall McLuhan to be a "non-communicative medium"[4], since it has no content. If perceived in that way, electric light is analogue

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[1] Friedrich Schiller, *On the Sublime*, Schiller Institute, http://www.schillerinstitute.org/transl/trans_on_sublime.html, ac. 08. 02. 2016.

[2] Andrew Gibson, *Beckett and Badiou: The Pathos of Intermittency*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007, 108.

[3] Mary Bryden, "Stuck in a Stagger: Beckett and Cixous," in: Erik Tonning et al. (eds.), *Samuel Beckett: Debts and Legacies*, Amsterdam–New York, Rodopi, 2010, 279.

[4] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1996, 9.

to Jacque Derrida's highlighting of Kant's comprehension of indefinite errance, pure, vague beauty as "[t]he judgment of taste relates to a purely formal finality, without concept and without end, without a conceptual and determinant representation of an end"[5]. Reflecting on Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, Derrida raises a question: Why does the exposition begin with two mathematical categories – quantity and quality – and why not with dynamic categories – relation and modality? Turning to the immeasurability of the sublime, 'neither large nor largeness, but absolutely large', Derrida also asks: Why can magnitude, which is not a quantity, and not a comparable quantity in the order of phenomena, let itself be represented under the category of quantity rather than some other category?

Arguing that technologies have decisively altered our experience of time and space, and as such the experience of reality, reducing, just like capitalism, life to efficiency, Jean-François Lyotard points out that passiblity during confronting new technologies enables their growing hegemony and results in, what he calls, the postmodern condition. However, he also presents "the crisis of space and time [. . .] as the very condition for an aesthetic of the sublime"[6]. Woodward's reading of Lyotard, who was also active as curator, "points towards a direction in which art produced with the new technologies of information and communication – far from being disqualified *as* art – would be precisely the locus of the most significant postmodern, avant-garde art, which works on the crisis of sensibility and evokes sublime feelings"[7]. Lyotard concluded that the contribution of modern technologies to sensibility of the postmodern condition became critical questioning the nature of information itself, but, nevertheless, in 2008 Rodney Gilbert published a study *Sublime Communicational Technologies*.

This view of communicational technologies draws attention to the notion of the passivity of a postmodern subject who is under influence of hegemony. According to Jacques Ranciere, this passive spectator has the capacity to become *the emancipated spectator*. Ranciere firstly argued against aesthetics' role in critical revealing of social structures hidden by ideology and in creation of new societies, since for him "the aesthetic era brought a sort of paradoxical thinking to Western thought, the principal characteristic of which consists of a suspension of the dichotomies of traditional philosophical thinking. This mode of thinking permits a junction of contradictory elements within itself, synthesizing the *active* and the *passive*, the *logos* and the *pathos*"[8].

Nevertheless, Ranciere acknowledged the role of 19th century aesthetics and art in establishing "a type of emancipation that differed from the model at work in

[5] Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1987, 76.

[6] Ashley Woodward, "New Technologies and Lyotard's Aesthetics," *Litteraria Pragensia*, Vol. 16, Issue 32, December 2006, 27.

[7] Ibid, 30.

[8] Pedro Hussak van Velthen Ramos, "The Politics of Aesthetics and the Hatred of Democracy According to Jacques Rancière," *AM Journal of Art and Media Studies*, Issue No. 7, April 2015, 27.

Marxist-influenced social struggles that aimed to create a sort of 'class consciousness'"[9]. As such, the 19th century 'aesthetic revolution' preceded the political one, but it is questionable whether the same can be said of contemporary aesthetic in relation to new media technologies. Nevertheless, Aneta Stojnić, sees "the liminality [*being-in-between*] of cyberspace as a possibility for taking an active engagement in reality (which includes cyber-reality)"[10].

In the history and theory of contemporary art, the sublime had reached the highest technical definition with Bill Viola's video and sound installation *Ocean Without Shore* at the 52nd Venice Biennale. This work represents more than the evolution of Viola's video diptychs; it is a symptom that the definitions of the sublime are also evolving with media's feasibilities. The realisation of the video took place after Foster's coining the term *traumatic sublime*, and being structured as frame within a frame, which is both a surface within a surface, it is an exemplary *mise en abyme* achievement of the 21st century *techne*. From this point, Foster's *traumatic sublime* stands also for the HD digital mode and substance of artistic materialisation of the image that enables its redemptive moment.

Traumatic real and *traumatic sublime*

Modern art has a strong technological tendency, as an aftermath of the Industrial Revolution. From Futurism over Vladimir Tatlin's and Le Corbusier's constructivism and functionalism, to seriality of Fluxux, Oulipo, John Cage (the Black Mountain Colleague) and Andy Warhol, modern art has been reminiscent of Fordism through repetitions and variations. Warhol's (photo)graphic series, characterized by *traumatic*, *id est* repetitive, operation of technique, Hal Foster describes by term *traumatic real*: "In Warhol's *Disaster* series (in which photographic images of electric chairs, automobile accidents, police brutality and so on, are repeated ad nauseam like some sort of tabloid nightmare), the 'traumatic" is not so much attached to the images presented, but to the operation of technique [...] which punctuates the discontinuous 'serial space' of representation itself. These operations, according to Foster, 'seem accidental, but they also appear repetitive, automatic, even technological' (or we might say, *grammatical*), to the point that they exhibit their calculations in a way that is virtually menacing (and more so since the images themselves succumb to the violence of the repetition process)."[11]

Foster also relates the term to Warhol's split-screen videos. Two stories consisting of 195 minutes runtime, *The Chelsea Girls* (1966) are simultaneously projected as

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[9] Ibidem.

[10] Aneta Stojnić, "The Problem of the Political in Cyberspace," *AM Journal of Art and Media Studies*, Issue No. 7, April 2015, 105.

[11] Louis Armand, "*Romantic Ecologies*: John Kinsella and the Art of Traumatic Realism," *Westerly*, 44.4, 1999, 38.

background black and white film with sound, and as colour film without. They seem to have nothing in common, but at the same time, they can be example for what Gerard Genet defined as external *analepsis*, presenting the second mode of anachronism, when "retroversion happens completely out of temporal frame of the primary narrative"[12]. In this case, the retroversion happens both out of temporal frame and that of the projection, creating insight into a superficial reality that is repeated over and over and, as such, is traumatic.

The impossibility to determine connection between these stories, even in action that exists as automatic repetition, makes this film referential to Warhol's pictorial graphic abstractions that exist only as surfaces in composed colours. Repetition of actions and motives characterises an earlier Warhol's film, *Eat* (1963, 54'), as well as Wim Wenders' short *Some Player Shoots Again*, produced a year after *Chelsea Girls*. Wenders' film is a three minute long shot that repeats five times,[13] and provides, instead of an impression of an error alluded by Warhol's art, one *exercice de style*, as Raymond Quenau used to write *Polyptotis*. Nevertheless, the resulting effect of repetition is one that immanently contains an allusion to trauma.

If we look further into theory of film and video art, a repeating shot is a strong stylistic method if related to *traumatic real*. In an effort to distinguish film of the image (which is, partly, film of Wenders), Therese Giraud in *Cinema et Technologie* defines single-frame film to be "a fragment of raw reality, and, therefore, only a fragment to be used for further artistic composing"[14]. But it was exactly this limitation that prompted many directors to create an image, achieving the action with the movement of camera and not with actors.[15] Single-frame-film was further seen as "subgenre of short movie"[16] wherein the camera makes the primary statement. And it is this form that led to looped video projections and forms related to cyberspace, such as animated graphic interchange format (GIF). The repetition, if related to reality, gains a wider cultural and historic aspect that turns to repeated aftermaths of crises in economy, war-influenced migrations, and growing poverty, to name just a few. It was not a single time when historians noted that one government might have learnt from mistakes of another one, but overlooked the errors and repeated them.

That repetition itself can be seen as trauma, shows stylistic analysis of Samuel Beckett's works. The play *Breath* lasts approxiamatley thirty seconds, presenting directly the poetics of minimalism. While directing it into film, Damien Hirst used camera movement as narrative. Being amazed by Beckett's sense for humour, Hirst kept the pause between two *cries* from the manuscript and held them for five seconds. The entire narrative is thus one action image made by the camera. Its rotations, even during such a short time period, provide at first an indefinite image of a misplaced

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[12] Mike Bal, *Naratologija: teorija priče i pripovedanja*, Beograd, Narodna knjiga–Alfa, 2000, 72.

[13] Similar composition has David Lynch's experimental 1966 film *Six Men Getting Sick (Six Times)*.

[14] Tereza Žiro, *Film i tehnologija*, Beograd, Clio, 2003, 38.

[15] See Gilles Deleuze's case-studies on *time image* and *movement image*.

[16] Merek Hendrykowski, *Sztuka krotkiego metrazu / The Art of Short Film*, Poznan, Ars Nova, 1998, 49.

scene appearing from the top of the screen that causes viewers to look forward to the end of the movie. It appears sooner than could have been expected. After the shortly prolonged second part of the *breathing* sound, Hirst's film ends, as Beckett's scenario. Indirectly, the repetitive breathing, life itself, is presented by Beckett as *traumatic real*.

Moving from *traumatic real*, Foster used the term *traumatic sublime* to correlate videos by contemporary artist Bill Viola to Warhol's split-screen films.[17] The oxymoronic term implies that the sublime can be traumatic to the same extent as the real, within the crisis of time and space Lyotard spoke of. It relates to both repetitive appearance of one action, such as looped projection, and, recalling Immanuel Kant's philosophy, the impossibility of something being critically comprehended, because of the psychological intensity it initially produces in conscience of the viewer. The era of de-territorialisation is signified by increased use of digital technology and algorithms in re-shaping the dimensions of reality, which in turn impacts the process of thinking. It affected art to an extent that algorithmic architecture is already part of art history, transferring even *traumatic sublime*, that appeared in relation to video practice, to the sphere of cyberspace.

Traumatic sublime of Bill Viola

When it comes to the history of film, screened American landscapes were correlated to 19th century grand paintings, where the sublime was presented/invoked by nature.[18] Landscape is indirectly also present within the work of Bill Viola since his first video works. Nature, via landscape, appears here firstly as a motive, while later, moving towards minimalist expression, Viola utilized the reflecting surface of water as one of the most crucial tools for the creation of images. Water was as important as lens for these images. Closeups of water drops or water curtains falling slowly, along with strong sound, are the basics of dynamism that gradually forms Viola's later videos. The variations of these visual characteristics include change in the amount of water, or they include a person's movement through waterfalls. But water firstly entered his videos as a matter of technique, not much different than other semi-transparent layers such as nylon/polyester sheets or lexan makrolon polycarbonate sheets upon/through which the videos were projected.

Viola's work is characterised by multiple-channel installations, as much as by multiple layers/surfaces upon which the images are projected. While describing the concept of thirty-foot wide screen complement of the stage design for performance *Tristan and Isolde*, Viola pointed out that: "moving images live in a domain somewhere between the temporal urgency of music and the material creativity of painting"[19]. Vid-

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[17] Hal Foster, et all, *Art Since 1900*, London, Themes and Hudson, 2004, 656.

[18] Maurizia Natali, "*The Course of the Empire:* Sublime Landscapes in America Cinema", in: Martin Lefebvre (ed.), *Landscape and Film*, Boca Raton, CRC Press, 2006, 93, 94.

[19] Bill Viola, "Moving Image World", James Cohan Gallery, http://www.jamescohan.com/exhibitions/2007-04-28_bill-viola, ac. 23. 12. 2008.

eos created after the year 2000 present diptychs – *Union, Purification, Dissolution* and *Hatsu-Yume (First Dream)* – that are composed as two versions of one video narrative, being different in minimal proportions. These works, described as "striking, not only in pushing the actual physical boundaries of the genre but also in shifting its status and reception"[20], have similarities to Warhol's combination of coloured and black and white movies. But in contrast to Warhol, Viola combined inside one frame both film narratives, even within the same shot, without montage. Both in his earlier and later works, image is always in the centre of creation, accompanied with high-definition sound, since his "critical works never use text or even language"[21].

Since the *Station*, first projected in 1994 as a five-channel audiovisual installation, surfaces used for realisation of images were multiplied. They were used in *The Veiling*, centralised round nine semi-transparent surfaces upon which the image was projected, while this multiplication resulted in a more delicate appearance of the image. Viola's installation *Ocean Without Shore* for the 52nd Venice Biennale represents another example of reshaping new technology devices. This time it was achieved with quality of water. The three-channel video installation was emitted from plasma screens placed upon three altars of the small, intimate 15th century Venetian Church of San Gallo. At the beginning of each segment of video, a character approaches from the depth of the scene. The figures are blurred by transparent veils of water, the saturation of images is low, but it becomes abruptly transformed into highly contrasted and intensively coloured images when the characters pass trough waterfalls.

Using only water drapery to achieve resurfacing effect, Viola also invoked the sublime through this segment of nature/landscape. He created a unique style using the newest digital video technologies, which only makes water/nature appear more sublime then ever. The high-definition sound of his large video installations makes water draperies additionally overwhelming to visitors who may be already impressed by the high resolution of digital images. According to Foster, Viola had in mind Kant's analysis of the aesthetic category of the sublime and he "privileged the second, redemptive moment"[22]. This is visible from choice of themes that Viola addresses within his works and that are related to metaphysics, life, spirit, infinity of space and time. But in the installation *Ocean Without Shore*, the feeling of the sublime is achieved not only by choice of metaphysical themes, but by using water/nature. Viola applied this technique in his 2014 video *Inverted Birth*.

An indefinite amount of water that is passing by, as rivers or an ocean, is comprehended as potential terror, and, therefore, as a sublime sight. Apart from the symbolism of water, relating to purification, birth and spiritual matters, water in this video has also technological importance. It is a tool for editing the quality of images that are addressing sublime themes. The *traumatic sublime* within this video installation, *id est* the water curtains that de-saturate a scene that is repeating but with different

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[20] "Bill Viola's x-ray vision", an interview, *The Art Newspaper*, June 22, 2006.

[21] Ibidem.

[22] Hal Foster, op. cit., 657.

people, fully justified Foster's term introduced in relation to Viola's art. The traumatic repetition of technique – looped video of repeated scenes – is as effective as Warhol's repetitive prints and, later, films. It is for that reason that Viola's highly defined, yet minimalistic, videos required the new term, which found its place in history of art (techniques). The *traumatic sublime*, however, does not remain related to Viola's works only.

Traumatic sublime after Bill Viola

The contemporary approach to the sublime cannot be made without taking into account art produced with the new technologies of information, which Lyotard spoke of. At a time when information flows via social media if not via media houses, any information can became material for artistic creation. It can also affect subjective feelings visitors have while seeing specific artwork. Before returning to art produced by new technologies of information, we will focus on Anselm Kiefer's installation *The Seven Heavenly Places*.

Keifer's permanent *site-specific* installation has been placed at Hangar Bicocca in Milan since 2004. It is composed of large-scale paintings and seven "towers", each weighing 90 tons and rising up to 14 to 18 metres. These "towers" are "large architectural constructions of the past as man's attempt to ascend to the divine"[23]. The "towers" are constructed out of concrete blocks and, although presenting history of man's ascending to superior, divine like state, they seem as ruins of abandoned buildings. Furthermore, each of the storeys is made using angular construction models for shipping containers, which makes these "towers" look like self-made economic buildings.

The installation itself is sublime, both by its scale and the theme represented. Each "tower" presents a path of man's elevation to God, but the rough concrete constructions, along with cardboard, dust and several broken windows on the ground, point towards different contexts than to a history of sanctuaries only. The installation might be also seen as a post-apocalyptic scenery, or a long-gone civilisation that left behind decaying buildings, being in that way *forensic architecture*, or forensic installation art. Giving the overload of images and information we are facing today, it is impossible for a common visitor not to think of postwar imagery when viewing these "towers". In the constellation of Syrian cities destroyed in recent and ongoing wars, the deserted homes of man's spirit can be an allegory of contemporaneity as much it is to ancient Hebrew writings. Today, even material art is seen with the context of new technologies and copious numerous information they transmit.

The contemporary, postmodern condition, as Lyotard called it, reshapes human comprehension of time and space with the help of new information technologies. De-territorialisation and cyberspace enabled new forms, such as hypertext and

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[23] Alessandro Cane, *Anselm Kiefer: The Seven Heavenly Places 2004–2015*, Milan, Fondazione HangarBicocca, 2015, 2.

animated graphic interchange format (GIF), a widely popular type of visual communication. In contrast to HD video format, GIF is intended for cyberspace only, having the capacity to compress high-quality images into small files, than can easily transfer. In the sphere of art, it serves mainly for the announcement of events, but it also became an art form, since "despite the changes and developments through different media, a common thread links all art: the image"[24].

Similarly, rhizomatic hyperlink structure resulted in new written forms, such as Lawrence Weiner's *Tracce/Traces* (1970), now in hypertextual form at the Ubuweb's Anthology of Conceptual Writing.[25] On the web page, each time in there is only one word expressing the passive voice. This word is linked to another word, also being a passive participle and so on. Using these modes of verbs, Weiner touched upon what many critics of new information technologies have noted as the passivity of the perceiver. Confronted with a text whose end cannot be anticipated or predicted, the reader is also confronted with *traumatic sublime* infinity of cyberspace and hypertext.

Nevertheless, *traumatic sublime* did not cease to exist within video installations. The *Octfalls* audiovisual installation by Ryoichi Kurokawa for the 54th Venice Biennale (2011) presented in Arsenale Novissimo feature eight waterfalls emitted from large plasma screens. Looped videos are among the most recent examples of the sublime presented in the *traumatic* technique that enables video's innumerable repetition. In the end, if we perceive the sublime as terror without negative consequences, the capacity of media to present nature may be as such seen as *traumatic sublime*. Becoming easily substituted for real nature, HD simulacrum of waterfalls and their displacement enabled by new media technology are *traumatic sublime*. They are not only technological sublime, but they are also traumatic when one processes them as technological substitute for the sublime feeling experienced in confrontation with an astonishing sight such as the real waterfalls. In a smaller scale, popular digital representation of fire had already made their way into homes, through simulations of fireplaces on plasma screens. These digital copies of nature are *traumatic*, repetitive, but they are also result of trauma caused by sublime and terrifying nature.

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[24] Bill Viola, "Technology, Creativity and Passion", in: Jérome Bindé (ed.), *Keys to the 21st Century*, New York, Berghahn Books, 2001, 190.

[25] Lawrence Weiner, "Tracce/Traces," in: *Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, Ubuweb, http://www.ubu.com/concept/weiner_tracce.html, ac. 12. 03. 2009.