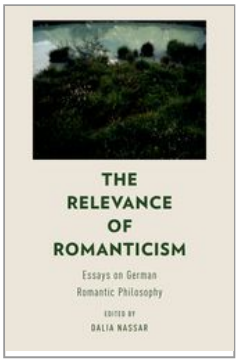
THE RELEVANCE OF ROMANTICISM

Essays on German Romantic Philosophy

EDITED BY

DALIA NASSAR



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The Simplicity of the Sublime

A New Picturing of Nature in Caspar David Friedrich

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Abstract and Keywords

After Hegel’s famous philosophical dismissal of the sublime for its inadequacy, and in a postmodern age deprived of theological doctrines, there is increasing evidence for the relevance of Caspar David Friedrich’s romantic landscape painting for contemporary artists who seek to continue the tradition of the sublime. However, before inquiring into the problem of the current relevance of romanticism, this paper asks an apparently simpler question: Is there such a thing as a Friedrichian sublime, and if yes, what exactly is it? The first difficulty faced by commentators when dealing with his painting is to distinguish the sublime in Friedrich from the Kantian sublime without eliminating the category altogether. In order to answer this question the chapter investigates the role assigned to the sublime by Friedrich himself as stated in his principal text and in relation to his paintings.

Keywords: Caspar David Friedrich, painting, sublime, veiling, Rückenfigur, imagination, Kant, Novalis, Anish Kapoor

> I take my inheritance to be Caspar David Friedrich—you know, that kind of Romantic tradition of the sublime and deep space that is a moment of wonder.
>
> —Anish Kapoor[1]

10.1. Introduction

It has been almost forty years since the art historian Robert Rosenblum in his book *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko* traced the origin of abstract expressionism in post–World War II America to the vast and barren seascape of Caspar David Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea* (1810).[2] Indeed, according to Rosenblum, it is simply a matter of removing the figure of the monk from Friedrich's painting to arrive at the colored rectangles of Rothko's *Green on Blue* (1956), which hover above one another on a monochrome background.[3] Thus, Friedrich's treatment of pictorial space may be seen as an early formulation of what the artist Barnett Newman would later consider to be the newfound dominance of the United States over Europe in art, and which subsequently became known as the "American sublime." More recently, in the early twenty-first century, and with a keen awareness of history, the British sculptor Anish Kapoor has attempted to restore a metaphysical **(p. 187)** function to art with his explorations of space at the intersection of painting, sculpture, and architecture. As we shall see, Kapoor directly situates his work in the artistic tradition of Caspar David Friedrich, reimagining the latter's *Sea of Ice* (1824) in a monumental installation entitled *Svayambh* (2007). In short, from the formal standpoint of art history and artistic creation there is not only a sublime grandeur but something progressive and even visionary about this landscape painting that makes Friedrich one of the most celebrated and studied artists of romantic art today.

From the more philosophical point of view of the content, many commentators think that the romantic sublime is above all embodied in Friedrich's painting *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818). Here a solitary figure, painted with his back to us, stands on a rocky elevation, contemplating a grandiose high mountain landscape extending into the distance. Yet it might be objected that the wanderer's somewhat artificial and theatrical pose should be labeled more "kitsch" than sublime, and served an overtly political agenda. Accordingly, instead of conveying a visionary sublimity Friedrich's art would then partake in the regressive idea of landscape painting as an expression of the "German soul," which pertains to a darker form of patriotic and nationalistic kitsch. Furthermore, the philosophical analysis of his paintings still has not been able to provide a convincing answer to the question whether one can conceptually apply the Kantian distinction between the beautiful and the sublime to Friedrich's landscapes, as well as reconciling the experience of the sublime with the religious vocation of his art. In this regard a number of commentators of Friedrich maintain that the category of the sublime has no relevance at all for his Weltanschauung.[4]

The purpose of this paper is threefold. It proposes to answer this latter theoretical question by reconstructing the painter's own views on the sublime as found in his principal text. Next, it intends to explore the figurative means that enabled Friedrich to produce the sublime in his paintings. After this attempt at a

conceptual and pictorial understanding, conclusions will then be drawn regarding the relevance of Friedrich's artistic practice for contemporary art. I argue that the sublime has a special and critical role for Friedrich, that it cannot be equated with Kant's concept of the sublime, and that its originality is best understood in conjunction with Novalis's definition of "romanticizing."

10.2. A Controversial Question

German romanticism is traditionally considered as providing an "artistic" continuation of the problem of the sublime that had been philosophically elaborated by Kant with regard to the aesthetic experience of nature. Even more **(p.188)** than the ugly, and far from simply being its superlative, the sublime according to Kant is conceptually opposed to the beautiful; and strictly speaking it is not objectively in nature itself. As analyzed in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), the sublime brings to light a limit that is both "mathematical" and "dynamic," that is, theoretical and practical, concerning the capacity of the human being to directly access whatever surpasses the sensible world. More specifically, the Kantian sublime is the designation for that experience of attaining a limit when the imagination as a power of intuitive presentation is confronted with the supersensible or metaphysical—the realm par excellence of reason and the unlimited. Thus, in the aesthetic experience of nature, nature as the idea of the absolute whole surpasses the limits of our degree of comprehension in one intuition, and this surpassing of the idea of the world with respect to the power of representation causes us initially some distress, a feeling of displeasure on account of the inhibition of our vital forces. This conflicting relationship between reason and imagination is what radically separates (in essence and not in degree) the sublime and the beautiful. For the latter is only the source of a feeling of pleasure due to a harmonious accord between the imagination and the understanding when contemplating the sensible forms of nature. If Kant considers the feeling of the sublime negatively from the point of view of sensibility, then its specific positivity (that would make it the dominant category of philosophical aesthetics up until Hegel) is to be found in the fact that the emotion of the sublime enlarges our manner of thinking from sensibility to the ideas of reason. It opens up (aesthetically, i.e., subjectively) the human mind to a consciousness of itself and accustoms us to think our rational nature and moral determination. We perhaps find ourselves thinking the latter even more in the "dynamic sublime," which is defined by Kant as the experience of our physical finitude when faced with the fury of nature as pure force.

Even though the romantic sublime is not a new subject for research, the debate over the sublime in the philosophical reception of Caspar David Friedrich is still far from settled. The controversy about the applicability of the concept of the sublime to his paintings cannot be ignored, since it raises a substantial question of principle. Three main interpretative tendencies may be singled out.

1. First, it is the notion of *infinity* that seems fundamental to many commentators: Friedrich's art of painting visually gives the spectator the impression of this "absolutely large" that constitutes the "mathematical sublime" in Kant and highlights by contrast the smallness of all aesthetic comprehension and (in a more "dynamic" regard) our own existential smallness.[5] An often-cited example here is the *Monk by the Sea*, in which the sky occupies three-quarters of the composition and where the absence of elements framing the **(p.189)** perspective gives in addition the impression of a lateral infinite extension such as that found in a panoramic view. Moreover, the figure of the monk himself is much smaller and virtually vanishes in this space compared to the relatively imposing figure of the wanderer in the foreground of the *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*. Along with this infinity of space Friedrich's paintings exhibit emptiness, that is the surpassing of the form, the *formlessness* of the absolutely large, as opposed to formal perfection in the case of the beautiful. According to these commentators, over and beyond the disappearance of all representation the art of Friedrich also shows the *inadequacy* of all representation, for it has the formal peculiarity of creating some kind of perceptual inconsistency within the representation itself.[6] This internal distortion underlines the limits of the imagination in its attempt to reabsorb the world into an image, and thus is supposed to illustrate the Kantian thesis that the absolute whole as an idea of reason is unpresentable in intuition.
2. To respond to these arguments, a second camp of interpreters points out that one can only speak of the sublime in the Kantian sense provided that there is a reference to *morality*.[7] A feeling or an intuition that implies the idea of the infinite is not in itself sublime. There has to be the thought of my own rationality that overcomes my natural determination. But this rational attitude in the horizon of a social and political community tends to disappear as soon as we enter the religious world of Friedrich's art. For the second camp, the sublime therefore disappears from Friedrich's paintings to become the beautiful. In philosophical terms this is not the Kantian concept of the beautiful but the Platonic or Neoplatonic idea of beauty, that is, a mathematical or geometrical beauty in which the sensible forms take part in the ideality of the pure forms transcending being.
3. Besides this antinomy between the Kantian sublime and Platonic or Neoplatonic beauty dominating the literature, certain specialists of

philosophical romanticism have attempted to follow a third interpretative path. Briefly put, this view employs the concept of chaos in the sense of Friedrich Schlegel and Schelling to propose an immanently romantic reading of the sublime in Caspar David Friedrich.[8]

Manfred Frank's work on German romantic philosophy does not specifically address the question of the sublime. Recently, however, Frank published a text on Caspar David Friedrich entitled "'Religionslose Kathedralen im ewigen Winter'—Der Moderne Caspar David Friedrich im frühromantischen **(p.190)** Kontext."[9] Although he does not explicitly examine the artist's conception of the sublime, Frank outlines a continuity between Friedrich's *Sea of Ice* and the series of vast empty evening skies among his paintings and the skepticism of the early German romantics. Accordingly, Frank argues that Friedrich's works convey a loss of the sacred and ultimately underscore the failure of the *Frühromantik* project of a new mythology. If we extend this thesis to the more specific question of the sublime, Frank's interpretation of Friedrich's intentions as skeptical with regard to the reconciliation of art and religion in real history renders the sublime in Friedrich nothing more than the Kantian *negative Darstellung*, that is, the presentation *ex negativo* of the absolute in its transcendence—in an abstract empty sky. Here the presentation of the metaphysical always starts from the infinite gap between the finite and the infinite. In the same vein, and using the language of J.-F. Lyotard, one could say that not only is there disenchantment and loss of belief in Friedrich, but also *nostalgia* or *melancholy*, which bears the weight of the sublime insofar as the artist takes a certain pleasure in the loss and in the absence.[10]

I believe that Manfred Frank is correct in stressing the modernity of Friedrich's art, and his thesis stands in sharp contrast to Reinhard Brandt's interpretation of it in terms of a Neoplatonic anagogy (the extraction of our souls as spectators from this world and their guidance into the next).[11] But the debate will not be able to be settled unless one broadens the discussion beyond the confines of a strictly Kantian reading to consider other interpretative possibilities. Moreover, all the above interpretations either fail to take into account the actual writings and views of Caspar David Friedrich, or if they do take them into account, they do not really take them seriously. In contrast, I maintain that a careful examination of Friedrich's texts can be especially fruitful for the question of the sublime, for the simple reason that they articulate its status and significance for the romantic painter himself.

10.3. The Divine, Natural, and Artistic Sublime

In this section I will principally appeal to Friedrich's main manuscript: *Äußerungen bei Betrachtung einer Sammlung von Gemählden von größtentheils noch lebenden und unlängst verstorbenen Künstlern* [Considerations while contemplating a collection of paintings by artists who are for most part still living or recently deceased].[12] The work is similar to an art salon review insofar

as it is a critical report on an exhibition of contemporary artists from the Dresden *Kunstverein* (the Dresden art association). Friedrich wrote the *Considerations* around 1830, but it was only published in its entirety posthumously, with minor selections from it already appearing one year after his death **(p.191)** in 1840. In it Friedrich revealed his own views on the art of the younger generation of German painters. This was the period of the Nazarenes—a group of artists gathered in Rome—who sought their inspiration in early Renaissance styles and religious subject matters. It was also the time when the colorists of the Düsseldorf school of landscape painting were just starting to emerge, who painted nature or reality devoid of all idealization. Friedrich's *Considerations* is a collection of fragments of one hundred pages in length; if one wanted to draw parallels, its form is similar to Caroline and August Wilhelm Schlegel's dialogue from 1799 *Die Gemählde* [The Paintings], which describes and comments on a number of paintings at the Dresden Art Gallery, or the 1810 *Empfindungen* [Sensations] of Clemens Brentano and Achim von Arnim, a text that imagines the impressions of different spectators passing before Friedrich's own *Monk by the Sea*.

Although the *Considerations* does not provide a systematic exposition of the sublime—the artist was not a theorist—we nevertheless find a brief but key discussion of its specific character. It is found in a passage where Friedrich seeks to partly discredit art critics who demand that true artists should choose "significant" topics. In the context of this reflection, Friedrich asks of a particular artist: "Surely he does not lack a feeling for the sublime in nature?"[13] This question is followed by a definition of what is called the sublime (*das Erhabene*), and where Friedrich states that the traditionally preferred examples of the sublime—on which the Kantian interpretation especially draws—are not the only possible examples:

> Because surely we mean [by "sublime"] that the choice of the subject matter has the ability to more deeply and intimately seize (*ergreifen*) and captivate (*fesseln*) the spectator. Of course, everything in nature is significant and grand, beautiful and noble, but some of it is more significant, appropriate, and evocative for presenting in a picture than others. For depicting the most beautiful and the highest and what seizes us the most would obviously be the task of the true artist. And I do not necessarily mean here towering mountains or endless abysses.[14]

First, far from conveying the notorious philosophical aesthetics of the sublime as opposed to the beautiful in the tradition of Burke and Kant, the term "sublime" in this passage amounts to an appreciative hyperbole, that is, to a superlative of the beautiful. It is also clear from this passage that Friedrich understands the artistic sublime in terms of its aesthetic (pathetic or emotive) impact: the artistic sublime is what produces the most powerful effect. One could call this an extremely banal and limited notion of the sublime, for to produce an effect is of

course the goal of all art. However, as we shall see, it is **(p.192)** precisely this accentuation of the effect that constitutes a true aesthetics here, and *not just* a hyperbolic appreciation. In the academic neoclassical tradition, represented notably by Goethe, the highest aesthetic scope or impact of a work of art depends on the intrinsic dignity of its subject matter. Natural objects do not contain any idea or ideal. Ordinary everyday objects are generally only viewed according to their physical or visual aspect, and occasionally perhaps as objects capable of stimulating an emotion in us, but one that is itself ordinary. In order to become a significant element and to develop the greatest possible aesthetic range (or the highest affective power), the object of an artistic representation must be an ideal object that the artist cannot merely find given in experience.[15]

For Friedrich, in contrast, *all* reality is significant a priori. In his writings the term “significant” (*bedeutsam*) should indeed be taken literally, that is, in its primary meaning as signification (*Bedeutung*): it designates something that is “a sign for something else,” something that refers to another thing that is exterior to itself; in other words, something transcending it. Thus, a thing becomes a sign by having a *relation* to another thing. In metaphysical painting, a concrete and ordinary object of the sensible world may become significant, evocative, or important as soon as it is understood or put into relation with something abstract, invisible, and immaterial—in short, with something *spiritual*. This is the core of Friedrich’s religious conception of the world: the incarnation, the word made flesh, or the New Testament as the epoch of sensible mediation. It should not be forgotten that the romantic painter was brought up in the pietistic faith and imagination; he believed in the Incarnation of God in the body of the Son and in the sacrament of the Eucharist. It is precisely this union of the divine logos and sensible flesh in the incarnation that the *Tetschen Altarpiece* (1808) celebrates, a landmark painting considered to be a manifesto of his pictorial conception.

Therefore, in Friedrich’s view of landscape painting—as the artistic representation of nature as divine creation—it does not matter if the represented object is an “elevated” or “trivial” object. This hierarchy does not hold anymore. What is critical, however, concerns the human relationship to divine creation in the sense where the human being is no longer in a direct relation to the latter and has moved away from the original fullness of its meaning. In Friedrich’s eyes this is where art comes into play, for art is entrusted with the possibility of retrieving the original meaning by furnishing the necessary mediation between man and that transcendent object surpassing man: the natural sublime—the natural world as an infinite cosmic order (e.g., the sky, the sea, and the shore, which in the *Monk by the Sea* cannot be contemplated as totalities)—or, what amounts to the same thing, the divine sublime, because the world is viewed from the perspective of divine creation.

(p.193) “Art serves as a mediator between nature and man. The archetype (*Urbild*) is too large and too sublime to be grasped by the masses. Its reflection (*Abbild*)—the work of man—is much more accessible to the weak.”[16]

Consequently, the artistic sublime is a means for this stated goal of art. Its concrete description in the earlier passage indicates that the artistic sublime is the concept that most directly deals with the *interiority* of the subject. It is not a question of any kind of pathos or sentimentality but of the spiritual strength of the affect that is able to move the soul powerfully, “deeply,” and “intimately.” That is to say, the artistic sublime pertains to art’s active virtue of strengthening the relation between the created and the Creator by means of a more direct feeling, experienced in the interiority as the meeting point of two worlds, the corporal and the spiritual, the sensible and the intelligible. In other words, in the strict sense Friedrich conceives the artistic sublime as the religious *efficacy* of art.

10.4. Scale, Opacity, Transparency: The Sublime in Caspar David Friedrich’s Paintings

Let us now look at the figurative treatment of this rather uncomplicated notion of the sublime. So far we have seen that sublime grandeur is not related to the status of the subjects but to the intensity of effect attached to the subject, and that the intense effect of the painting does not merely rely upon visually impressive hyperbolic grandeur. Indeed, the point that Caspar David Friedrich most emphasizes is the figurative *simplicity* of the sublime: “And I do not necessarily mean here towering mountains or endless abysses”; and a little later in the same text: “This does not imply at all that it must necessarily be some kind of special region, e.g., a large Swiss mountain or the boundless sea; but a simple wheat field would suffice, or even a simpler object, but one that is still dignified.”[17] Hence, in painting his metaphysical landscapes Friedrich accepts the risk of appearing rudimentary. Trees, rocks, deserted seashores, a “simple wheat field,” “or even a simpler object,” such as the sandbanks of the Elbe riverbed northwest of Dresden under evening skies as illustrated in the *Large Enclosure* (1832)—all of these are signifiers available to the artist for a new picturing of nature, and he is humble enough to be content with them.

However, what exactly determines the greater or lesser strength of these paintings? The purely quantitative and geometrical components of the image (that is to say, the spatial structures of size, scale, and plans) cannot be the sole vehicle of the sublime. If the sublime is understood as what pathetically reinforces the significant beauty of nature and makes us become aware of it, then the figuration or image requires an additional qualitative element. This is its **(p.194)** perceptual dimension that is related to both visibility and time. In order to create an ever deeper intensity of feeling in the intimate sphere of the subject (its interiority) and not solely at the physical level of sensation, Friedrich employs two main devices (among others): a sublime of scale where scale is not

merely a quantitative estimation of magnitude; and a sublime that plays on the double modality of visibility—either transparency or opacity. For it should be noted that the topic of vision is twofold in Friedrich: it is outer and inner vision.

First, and although it is initially a quantitative component, it is clear that scale is crucial for landscape painting, for it has to re-establish the original distance between things, the proportion between the infinite and the finite, the large and the small, the divine and the human. But true grandeur, in Friedrich's eyes, is not modeled on the character of bodies that can be quantitatively measured. Nor is it a question of perspectival order, that is, of a physical-optical translation of the world onto the canvas. True grandeur resides rather in a certain emotional upswing or uplift of a mind that is troubled by perceptual confinement and hence seeks to enlarge its horizon. Far from consigning landscape painting to the reproduction of a given space, Friedrich defines it as the *creation of space* in a work. In his *Considerations* the romantic painter criticizes contemporary naturalistic landscape painting precisely because of its tendency to compress space onto the canvas. This manner of painting fails to grasp the cosmic scale of the world (its infinite space), with the result that one of the greatest examples of the sublime—the unlimited and unbounded sea—becomes distorted and turned into its opposite:

> What modern landscape painters have seen in an arc of 100 degrees in nature, they pitilessly compress together into an angle of 45 degrees. Hence, what was separated in nature in large spatial intervals becomes presented here in compact spaces; the eye is overcrowded and oversaturated, and it makes an adverse and alarming impression on the spectator. And it is always the element of water that loses out—the sea becomes a puddle.[18]

In contrast, the successful artist gives us the impression of unlimited space within the limited surface of the canvas:

> This painting is large; and yet we wish it were larger still. For the sublimity in the conception of the subject matter has been experienced in all its greatness and requires an even larger extension in space. Therefore, it is always praiseworthy for a painting to say we wish it were even larger.[19]

Thus, Friedrich's use of the sublime of scale as creation of space on the canvas breaks with the oversaturation of the gaze caused by naturalistic landscapes. It seeks to *liberate both space and the gaze* of the spectator to allow her **(p.195)** to *experience the distance* between things. This explains the dilation and the emptiness in many of Friedrich's landscapes, which were rarely painted in large formats.

The second method is more concerned with the two modalities of visibility: transparency and opacity. A number of the romantic artist's paintings admit us into the presence of an inner, spiritual, and dreamlike vision—one could say, into the transparency of the sublime. We immediately enter into the fictive space of the image, for it creates an effect of direct confrontation with nature by suspending the illusion of distance found in classical forms of representation due to an unobstructed foreground. Nevertheless, opacity still remains the general rule of the sublime, and this is necessary for it to play the full role assigned to it, that is, to capture our attention and penetrate ever deeper into the living sphere of our interiority. There are numerous modalities of this opacity for outer physical sight in Friedrich's paintings. But the most sublime of all these deployments of opacity is the veiling principle of mist or fog. Let us quote again the words of the romantic painter in his *Considerations*:

> When a region is covered with fog it seems larger and more sublime; like the appearance of a young woman covered with a veil, it heightens the imagination and raises expectations. The eye and the imagination are more attracted by misty distances than by what is closely and clearly seen.[20]

These lines might be read in light of the problem of the veiling and unveiling of nature. From antiquity up to the Enlightenment, Mother Nature was frequently personified under the guise of the goddess Isis-Artemis. Allegorically represented as hidden behind a veil covering her face, she was inaccessible to the gaze of mere mortals. In Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, the image of the veiled Isis goes hand in hand with a respect for the mysteries of nature, inspired by that "most sublime" inscription on the goddess's temple prohibiting the lifting of her veil.[21] In *The Disciples of Sais*, the romantic poet Novalis also prefers the Orphic poet's respectful attitude towards nature over the Promethean attitude of modern science, yet advocates surmounting the interdiction on lifting her veil. One can only do this by going beyond the limits set by Kantian criticism, that is to say, by overcoming the limits of human finitude: "According to that inscription, if it is true that no mortal has lifted the veil, then we will just have to try to become immortal. Whoever does not wish to lift it, is no true disciple of Sais."[22] In the paintings of Friedrich, fog is a natural or material veil that is no longer merely an allegory of the secrets of nature and their inaccessibility to mortals. Fog, moreover, does not simply impede our sight and generate respect that keeps us at a distance from nature. It *attracts* our sight. In the same way as the veiled body of a woman might excite the desire to see it unveiled, fog stirs our imagination and the wish to see more by penetrating the opacity.

(p.196) Friedrich's painting entitled *Fog* (1807) perfectly illustrates this point: in its extreme figurative simplicity it awakens our desire to see the fog-enshrouded three-masted sailboat that is behind the rowing boat in the foreground, then to see the distant shore behind the sailboat, and then again

perhaps to glimpse the horizon behind the distant shore. Of course, this desire is not awakened in “those whose imagination is too poor to see in fog anything other than gray.”[23] This accentuation of desire defines the Friedrichian sublime; it requires a certain attitude or state of mind on the part of the spectator, and stimulates an inner dynamic response to the painting. Here Friedrich is strongly opposed to an art of illusion, because the latter merely passively dazzles the viewer, and precludes her from actively exercising this intimate activity or appropriation of what the painting shows.

10.5. Anish Kapoor: Doing Away with the Mediation in the Friedrichian Sublime?

In this concluding section I would like to draw attention to Anish Kapoor’s reinterpretation of Friedrich’s *Sea of Ice* (1824), which, along with the *Monk by the Sea* and the *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, is considered by commentators to be one of the best examples of the sublime in Friedrich. The Kantian concept of a “dynamic” and terrifying sublime is frequently applied to the *Sea of Ice*, though it is precisely this painting that provides the clearest illustration of what makes Friedrich’s art of the sublime radically different from the Kantian analysis.

At first glance this painting, also known as *The Wreck of Hope*, seems to be a narrative motif—a shipwreck—inspired by a real-life expedition to the North Pole in 1819–1820. Yet an image emerges here in which the sublime experience no longer resides in the tension of Kant’s “dynamic sublime” that is characteristic of catastrophe paintings. From a Kantian perspective the resolution of this tension involves human practical rationality. In contrast to this, Friedrich’s painting carries out a kind of refocusing on nature. Swallowed by ice, the ship itself is barely visible, whereas the stacked blocks of ice physically dominate the center of the composition. Or more precisely, the image shows the fragmentation of a ship whose debris mingles with natural forms. But this painting is even more unique and troubling if one recalls that all human landmarks do not in fact entirely disappear. The work involves the presence of a perceptive subject, yet one that is not depicted. The image unfolds under this gaze and gives it a more intimate nuance. For what strikes one above all in this painting is the impression of silence and stillness—it almost emanates a sense of tranquility. The sublime experience resides in a quiet and oneiric vision of a natural time, a cosmic and archaic time that is opposed to the time of history and action, a **(p.197)** natural time in its fundamental processes: the solidification of water into ice, or the petrifaction of the ice in the foreground that gradually takes on the color of stone. This elementary matter is marked and borne by the temporality of its becoming. Yet it is a slow, infinitesimal movement that borders upon immobility, if not upon eternity—the movement of a sea of ice.

Anish Kapoor has perceptively grasped all of this. The British sculptor freely admits that his work draws its fundamental inspiration from the intrinsic aspect of a dreamlike sublime in the landscape paintings of Caspar David Friedrich. Kapoor declares he is “a painter working as a sculptor.” For he creates “mental sculptures” that are no longer simply the embodiment of a real, tangible space, but presuppose and demand an act of inhabiting a space through one’s viewing, similar to Friedrich’s sublime of scale as a magnified space. Kapoor has made architectural scale into a principle of his sculptures, often creating site-specific work that acquires its own dimensions by developing in the site. This is the case of the gigantic installation *Svayambh*, first conceived for the Musée des Beaux-Arts of Nantes in France in 2007, and then exhibited at Munich’s Haus der Kunst, which is in part a reinterpretation of the sublime vision of an archaic nature in Friedrich’s *Sea of Ice*. *Svayambh*—a Sanskrit word meaning “born by itself”—is a massive block of red wax moving almost imperceptibly on hidden rails through the museum building along its west-east axis. The coming and going of the block with the slowness of an infinitesimal movement that is almost reduced to immobility, like the movement of a sea of ice, generates an impression of primal and potentially infinite extension. The matter of the sculpture is shaped through infinite duration and space itself; the original object is seemingly endlessly reworked, carved, planed down by passing through the arched door frames, leaving red traces on their immaculate white color as if the block were slightly larger than the frames—or, as if the building were, so to speak, swallowing the block. Viewed as a self-generating system, as an uncreated or autonomous form that creates itself and whose origin is immemorial, it is no longer historical.

Kapoor’s work, however, gives a different treatment of the sublime: “I think the real subject for me, if there is one, is the sublime....It’s this whole notion of somehow trying to shorten the distance of sublime experience....If one is looking at a Friedrich painting of a figure looking at the sunset, then one is having one’s reverie in terms of their experience....It is my wish to make that distance shorter so that the reverie is direct. You’re not watching someone else do it; you’re compelled to do it yourself.”[24] That is to say, Kapoor aims at doing away with one of the very emblems of Caspar David Friedrich’s art: the *Rückenfigur*—the figure with its back turned to the viewer—like in the *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*.

It is important to understand that this specific motif, which is stereotypically associated with romanticism, and even with kitsch, is itself related to the **(p. 198)** figurative treatment of the sublime in Friedrich. On the one hand, the immobile *Rückenfigur* highlights an attitude of contemplation. But on the other hand, it is just one more mode of opacity, in addition to fog and other techniques that we have already listed above. For not only is the figure of the wanderer preventing us as spectators from seeing a part of the landscape, but he is also anonymous: the *Rückenfigur* does away with the face. As for its effect, the *Rückenfigur* is therefore disconcerting. But it is precisely through this effect that

the figure deploys its positive function. It institutes a form of reflexivity in which we oscillate between two modes of contemplation, between the outer eye and the inner eye. We are forced to “go back” in ourselves, to use our “inner eye” to imagine the entire landscape that we wish we could see, because we are unable to externally project ourselves into the view.

Thus, when Kapoor intends to “shorten the distance of sublime experience” “so that the reverie is direct” and “you’re compelled to do it yourself,” he is perhaps unaware that Friedrich has constructed this mediation precisely to compel us to do it ourselves. For the natural (or divine) sublime is what we absolutely cannot experience without an artistic mediation. Or to put it in Novalis’s words: the Friedrichian sublime resides in a “qualitative potentialization,”[25] in which our sight is elevated to an inner vision, a vision of the purely spiritual and transcendent principle of nature. And in line with Novalis’s definition of romanticism, the “qualitative potentialization” of sight by means of a veiling principle may also be inverted. Here the mystical becomes known through a process of lowering or “logarhythmizing,” and the imagination concentrates on the finite or the ordinary, such as a “simple wheat field.” For Friedrich and the romantics at least, this is the only possible way to “shorten the distance of sublime experience.”[26]

10.6. Conclusion

As we have seen, there is a threefold sublime in Caspar David Friedrich: a divine, natural, and artistic sublime. To be sure, his art of landscape painting strives to make the excess of the cosmic and divine sublime become perceptible within the framed space of a canvas. And certainly, it aims at uplifting the spirit of the spectator. But if one remains at an interpretation of Friedrich’s painting in terms of the Kantian sublime, one fails to understand how his view of the sublime cannot be reduced to one of hyperbolic grandeur exceeding the form. Furthermore, if one only emphasizes the transcendence, the distance and incommensurability between the divine cosmic order and the human order, one overlooks the goal of the artistic sublime. The latter seeks to stir the spectator’s emotive and imaginative participation and to reduce the distance between **(p. 199)** these two orders. While the Kantian sublime expresses a radical dualism and tension between the sensible and the intelligible, in the religious perspective of Friedrich’s art the material and the spiritual differ but are not opposed. They are complementary rather than antagonistic, and the whole point of his painting is to make us associate and not separate them. Hence, claims that the experience of the sublime cannot be reconciled with the religious vocation of Friedrich’s paintings, or that only the beautiful is at stake in his work, fail to grasp that their religious vocation actually depends on the sublime.

Why should we care about Friedrich’s views? It might be argued that an art that addresses the soul and aims at a recognition of the sacred is now historically dated. But without seeking to abolish the historical distance between his epoch

and ours, Friedrich's views offer artistic perspectives that are still relevant for contemporary artists and theoreticians of art: a use of scale to liberate space, perceptual opacity to stimulate both our outer and inner sight, and, above all, as Anish Kapoor has attempted to do in the wake of minimalism, a simplification of the work of art. All of which constitutes the simplicity of the sublime in the works of that "metaphysician with the brush,"[27] Caspar David Friedrich.

Notes:

(1) . Anish Kapoor, "'I Don't Know Where I'm Going,'"interview with Alastair Sooke, *The Telegraph*, September 26, 2006, online: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/3655568/I-dont-know-where-Im-going.html.

(2) . I am grateful to Dalia Nassar for her helpful comments on an earlier version of this text.

(3) . See Robert Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 10f.

(4) . See especially Werner Busch, *Caspar David Friedrich. Ästhetik und Religion* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2003), 64f. Busch dismisses all interpretation of Friedrich's paintings as being in line with an aesthetics of the sublime by proclaiming the sublime as "postreligious." See too Johannes Grave, *Caspar David Friedrich und die Theorie des Erhabenen* (Weimar: VDG-Verlag, 2001); Grave focuses his analysis on the *Sea of Ice* and maintains that in this painting Friedrich is ironically working against the philosophical conception of the sublime elaborated by Kant and Schiller.

(5) . See among others Hilmar Frank, *Aussichten ins Unermessliche* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2004), 99–100; Eliane Escoubas, "La tragédie du paysage: Caspar David Friedrich," in *L'espace pictural* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2011, 1st ed. 1995), 69–90. Elsewhere Escoubas has argued for the "simplicity" of the Kantian sublime, drawing on a quotation from the "General Remark" to § 29 of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* where Kant writes "Simplicity (purposiveness without art) is so to speak the style of nature in the sublime," meaning that the context of the sublime is nature in its primitive purity devoid of all artifice. See Eliane Escoubas, "Kant or the Simplicity of the Sublime," in *Of the Sublime: Presence in Question*, ed. Jean-François Courtine, trans. Jeffrey S. Librett (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 55–70. Here I will try to show that the notion of "simplicity" is even more present in the Friedrichian sublime.

(6) . See for example Brad Prager, "Kant in Caspar David Friedrich's Frames," *Art History* 25 (2002): 68–86.

(7) . See in particular Reinhard Brandt, “Zur Metamorphose der Kantischen Philosophie in der Romantik. Rhapsodische Anmerkungen,” in *Kunst und Wissen. Beziehungen zwischen Ästhetik und Erkenntnistheorie im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert*, ed. Astrid Bauereisen, Stephan Pabst, and Achim Vesper (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2009), 85–101; and “Caspar David Friedrich. Landschaftsmalerei als Seelenführung,” in *Kunst und Religion. Ein kontroverses Verhältnis*, ed. Markus Kleinert (Mainz: Chorus, 2010), 31–55.

(8) . See for example Olivier Schefer, *Résonances du romantisme* (Brussels: La Lettre volée, 2005), 74f.

(9) . Manfred Frank, “‘Religionslose Kathedralen im ewigen Winter’—Der Moderne Caspar David Friedrich im frühromantischen Kontext,” in *Szenen des Heiligen*, ed. Cai Werntgen (Berlin: Insel Verlag, 2011), 112–60. I am thankful to Manfred Frank for providing me with a manuscript version of his talk prior to its publication.

(10) . Cf. Judith Norman, “The Work of Art in German Romanticism,” in *Internationales Jahrbuch des Deutschen Idealismus/International Yearbook of German Idealism* 6 (2008): 72.

(11) . See note 6 above.

(12) . Caspar David Friedrich, “Äußerungen bei Betrachtung einer Sammlung von Gemählden von größtentheils noch lebenden und unlängst verstorbenen Künstlern,” *Kritische Edition der Schriften des Künstlers und seiner Zeitzeugen*, ed. Gerhard Eimer in collaboration with Günther Rath (Frankfurt am Main: Kunstgeschichtliches Institut der Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität, 1999).

(13) . Friedrich, *Äußerungen,* 53. In the original German: “Ein Gefühl für das Erhabene in der Natur fehlt es ihm doch wohl gewiß nicht?”

(14) . Friedrich, *Äußerungen,* 54.

(15) . Cf. Goethe, *Über die Gegenstände der bildenden Kunst* (Zurich: Artemis Verlag, 1961–66), vol. 13, 122–25. According to Goethe, the inherent dignity of the subject matter is what we absolutely cannot know without the artistic idealization that reveals it or brings it to light. This dignity relates to the timeless essence of the object, an idea that the artist forms through an intimate knowledge of nature. He should not regress into the fantastic, but move beyond the given sensible phenomena to the timeless idea.

(16) . Friedrich, *Äußerungen*, 32.

(17) . Friedrich, *Äußerungen*, 79.

(18) . Friedrich, *Äußerungen*, 70.

(19) . Friedrich, *Äußerungen*, 47.

(20) . Friedrich, *Äußerungen*, 126.

(21) . Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, § 49, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 194.

(22) . Novalis, *Die Lehrlinge zu Sais*, NS 1, 82.

(23) . Friedrich, *Äußerungen,* 126.

(24) . Rainer Crone and Alexandra Von Stosch, *Anish Kapoor* (London: Prestel, 2008), 27–28.

(25) . Novalis, *Vorarbeiten* (1798), NS 2, 545.

(26) . For a more detailed analysis of the romantic notion of potentialization and the relationship between Caspar David Friedrich and Novalis, see my *L'art de romantiser le monde. Caspar David Friedrich et la philosophie romantique*, PhD thesis, Universität München/Université Paris IV, October 2013.

(27) . According to an expression of Per Daniel Atterbom, in *Reisebilder aus dem romantischen Deutschland. Jugenderinnerungen eines romantischen Dichters und Kunstgelehrten aus den Jahren 1817 bis 1819* (Berlin, 1867; reprint Stuttgart: Steingrüben, 1970), 102.