

Edmund Burke Explains The Dark Knight Rises

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From Corey Robin's fantastic book [The Reactionary Mind](#):

Great power, [Burke] suggests in *The Sublime and the Beautiful*, should never aspire to be—and can never actually be—beautiful. What great power needs is sublimity. The sublime is the sensation we experience in the face of extreme pain, danger, or terror. It is something like awe but tinged with fear and dread. Burke calls it “delightful horror.” Great power should aspire to sublimity rather than beauty because sublimity produces “the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.” It is an arresting yet invigorating emotion, which has the simultaneous but contradictory effect of diminishing and magnifying us. We feel annihilated by great power; at the same time, our sense of self “swell[s]” when “we are conversant with terrible objects.” Great power achieves sublimity when it is, among other things, obscure and mysterious, and when it is extreme. “In all things,” writes Burke, the sublime “abhors mediocrity.”¹

In the *Reflections*, Burke suggests that the problem in France is that the old regime is beautiful while the revolution is sublime. The landed interest, the cornerstone of the old regime, is “sluggish, inert, and timid.” It cannot defend itself “from the invasions of ability,” with ability standing in here for the new men of power that the revolution brings forth. Elsewhere in the *Reflections*, Burke says that the moneyed interest, which is allied with the revolution, is stronger than the aristocratic interest because it is “more ready for any adventure” and “more disposed to new enterprises of any kind.” The old regime, in other words, is beautiful, static, and weak; the revolution is ugly, dynamic, and strong. And in the horrors that the revolution perpetrates—the rabble rushing into the bedchamber of the queen, dragging her half-naked into the street, and marching her and her family to Paris—the revolution achieves a kind of sublimity: “We are alarmed into reflexion,” writes Burke of the revolutionaries’ actions. “Our minds ... are purified by terror and pity; our weak unthinking pride is humbled, under the dispensations of a mysterious wisdom.”²

Beyond these simple professions of envy or admiration, the conservative actually copies and learns from the revolution he opposes.

“To destroy that enemy,” Burke wrote of the Jacobins, “by some means or other, the force opposed to it should be made to bear some analogy and resemblance to the force and spirit which that system exerts.”³

Is it not all here, right down to the moneyed interests allying with the revolution and the revolution throwing the aristocrats from their bedchambers?

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1. Burke, *Sublime and the Beautiful*, 86, 96, 121, 165.
 2. Burke, *Reflections*, 207, 243, 275. Also see Burke, *Regicide Peace*, 66, 70, 107, 157, 207, 222.
 3. Burke, *Regicide Peace*, 184.