

Science fiction is often described as producing “a sense of wonder, a powerful expansion of quotidian awareness to the insight that the physical universe involves far more than anyone can imagine.” “Readers of SF expect it to provide an intense experience of being translated from the mundane to imaginary worlds and ideas that exceed the familiar.”

“This sense of liberation from the mundane has an established pedigree in art, in two related ways of feeling and expression: the sublime and the grotesque.”

The focus of this lecture is the sublime. “Just as each work of sf...is expected to introduce a novum in a way that has not been depicted before, it must also deliver experiences that have not been represented before.” These experiences often take the form of the sublime.

The sublime is the “sense of wonder” readers and viewers of SF feel upon beholding the almost incomprehensible spectacle SF authors and film directors have set before them. Vast space fleets. Infinite spaces. Huge gulfs of time. Radical bodily transformations. “The sublime is a response to a shock of imaginative expansion, a complex recoil and recuperation of self-consciousness coping with phenomena suddenly perceived to be too great to be comprehended.” “The perceiver enjoys a sudden dislocation” from what she is used to perceiving. This attitude, rooted in humanity’s response to awesome, intense experiences, is shared by science and science fiction. It is “concerned with the states of mind that science and art have in common: acute responsiveness to the objects of the world, the testing of the categories conventionally used to interpret the world, and the desire to articulate what consciousness finds inarticulable.”

The intense emotional response of the sublime is one of both awe and terror before things that are so impressive they defy human comprehension. The emotion of the sublime is produced in

SF by special effects—all that technological and spatial imagery and scientific prattle that SF authors use, and the visual tricks that filmmakers use. We find the spectacle of the sublime in science fiction movies in particular. “The genre of SF film has evolved into an apparatus for rendering *affects* (emotions) through special-effects technology.” “Works of sf are as easily catalogued by their sublime effects as by their novums.”

The sublime was first described by Romantic authors and philosophers from the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries such as Immanuel Kant, Edmund Burke, and Mary and Percy Shelley. For the romantics, the sublime is found in nature. Kant describes the sublime as the mind’s response to things that dwarf it: infinity, hurricanes, huge mountains, great waterfalls. The mind initially recoils from these things in awe and terror, sensing the powerlessness of humanity before such immensity, but then it rallies to match this thing through the powers of reason and art. Burke calls the sublime “the idea of vast power.” We experience the sublime when we stand before things that threaten to annihilate us, mentally and/or physically; before such things, we feel an admixture of awe and terror, which is the sensation of the sublime. The romantic sublime is, ultimately, “the rush of life after being on the brink of losing it.”

Something interesting happened to the natural, romantic sublime in America in the 19 and 20th centuries. It became a technological sublime (or technosublime). It shifted onto our technology and engineering. Instead of being awed and terrified by natural things such as giant waterfalls and huge cliffs, we modern humans became awed and terrified by the great things we made: our huge dams, skyscrapers, bridges, railroads, ships, rockets, and bombs. Instead of being awed and

terrified by things that defied reason, we became awed and terrified by the most immense, complex products of our own faculty of reason.

Here is how Csicery-Ronay sums up the technological sublime: “With the technosublime, the function of an obstructing puissant nature passes over to human technoscience, which has attained such complexity, speed, and analytic and synthetic power that it can actually decompose and recompose it in new forms more compatible with the technosphere.”

The science fiction sublime is a playful, imaginary expression of the technological sublime. Science fiction dramatizes—makes stories out of—our collective sense of the technological sublime. It presents vast, almost unthinkable tales about things that we may really make or encounter.

Science fiction movies trade in technological sublime spectacles: huge matrixes, giant spacecraft, epic battles. There are often moments in science fiction movies when the viewer’s perspective is shifted to a whole new scale designed to elicit the sense of the sublime, often involving a “zoom out”: from one giant space ship, revealing another huge space ship that dwarfs it (*Star Wars*); from one human being in a strange capsule to a whole city made entirely of people trapped in capsules (*The Matrix*). The music swells. You are, hopefully, overwhelmed—awed, terrified—by the sublime spectacle of these novums, these vast works of science and engineering.