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The Sublime and Depictions of Violence in Some Contemporary Artworks

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Abstract

Images of extreme and ever more graphic violence are a part of contemporary culture. Since students cannot avoid them, such images should be addressed by aesthetic educators. But this will require a theory for the analysis and evaluation of the aesthetic properties of violent imagery. The main thesis of this essay is that depiction of violence in certain recent art works can be understood as aiming at aesthetic perception of the sublime. We develop a model for interpreting works in this way by first presenting and then drawing on Kant's analysis of aesthetic perception of the sublime. Our thesis is important for both aesthetic and moral education. According to Kant's remarkably sensitive analysis, aesthetic perception of the sublime plays a large role in developing moral and social awareness. Using Kant's theory as our main source, and drawing on some recent artworks for illustrative purposes, we offer an analysis of how artistic depiction of violence may promote moral and social awareness. We nevertheless consider images of extreme violence morally problematic, and outline a model for educating reflection on the morality of using them.

Introduction

Consider the following passages from Cormac McCarthy's recent best-selling novel, *Blood Meridian* (McCarthy, 2001):

He swung the bottle and the kid ducked and he swung again and the kid stepped back. When the kid hit him the man shattered the bottle against the side of his head. He went off the boards into the mud and the man lunged after him with the jagged bottleneck and tried to stick it in his eye. The kid was fending with his hands and they were slick with blood. He kept trying to reach into his boot for his knife.

Kill your ass, the man said. They slogged about in the dark of the lot, coming out of their boots. The kid had his knife now and they circled crabwise and when the man lurched at him he cut the man's shirt open. The man threw down the bottleneck and unsheathed an immense bowieknife from behind his neck. His hat had come off and his black and ropy locks swung about his head and he had codified his threats to the one word kill like a crazed chant.

That's cut, said one of several men standing along the walkway watching.

Kill kill slobbered the man wading forward.

But someone else was coming down the lot, great steady sucking sounds like a cow. He was carrying a huge shellalegh. He reached the kid first and when he swung with the club the kid went down in the mud. (p. 9)

Later in the same work, there is this description of Indians attacking a company of soldiers:

...they had circled the company and cut their ranks in two and then rising up again like funhouse figures, some with nightmare faces painted on their breasts, riding down the unhorsed Saxons and spearing and clubbing them and leaping from their mounts with knives and running about on the ground with a peculiar bandy-legged trot like creatures driven to alien forms of locomotion and stripping the clothes from the dead and seizing them up by the hair and passing their blades about the skulls of the living and the dead alike and snatching aloft the bloody wigs and hacking and chopping at the naked bodies, ripping off limbs, heads, gutting the strange white torsos and holding up great handfuls of viscera, genitals, some of the savages so slathered up with gore they might have rolled in it like dogs and some who fell upon the dying and sodomized them with loud cries to their fellows (McCarthy, 2001, p. 54).

These scenes are not unusual for this book, but typical and expressive of the violent world it creates, and typical of several other McCarthy novels and of the worlds created by many contemporary films, videogames, musical lyrics, and much internet fare.

Such works do not find their audiences only in a poorly educated underclass; they are well received by sophisticated audiences and critics. Comments on the dust jacket of *Blood Meridian* describe it as "...the major aesthetic achievement of any living American writer..." (Harold Bloom, *New York Observer*), and as "...an extraordinary, breathtaking achievement" (distinguished novelist James Banville, writing in London's *The Independent*). In light of this, it would seem facile to dismiss graphic depictions of violence in this recent work of art and in others like it as an indulgence of "low taste." Nor do we find it plausible that the meaning artists and audiences seek in these works is metaphorical, offering a metaphor for the harshness of life, because metaphorical expression of that theme would be poorly served, if not undercut, by the explicitness these works use.

So it would seem that recent graphic depictions of extreme violence can make a *prima facie* claim to address some valid aesthetic interest, and to offer a genuine aesthetic value to satisfy that interest. Our question is: what is the aesthetic interest that these recent vivid depictions of extreme violence address, and what is the nature of the aesthetic value they offer?

We suggest that the interest is aesthetic interest in the sublime, and that sublimity is the aesthetic value being offered. We advance this claim as a hypothesis able to help explain the use of extreme violence as an aesthetic means, and to explain why representations of violence in some recent art have trended to the increasingly explicit. This should be of interest to art educators who wish to heighten student awareness of aesthetic values and choices shaping contemporary culture. A purpose of education is to provide us with concepts with which to understand and language with which to articulate our experiences. Without concepts and words for communicating our experiences, those experiences remain undifferentiated from other aspects of experience, and, in that sense, confused. It follows that a purpose of aesthetic education is to provide concepts and words through which to give form to and with which to communicate our aesthetic experiences. The concept of the sublime is a concept which is arguably necessary for successfully registering and articulating the content of certain important experiences we have of nature and art (Carson, 2006). With this in mind, we present a detailed exposition of one concept of sublimity (Kant's) and suggest how it is relevant to understanding the aesthetic value of violence in selected recent works of art.

Since our goal is analytical, rather than art-historical, we shall discuss rather few works, which we take to be representative of others. We hope our analyses will encourage further review of the sublime by other educators.

For a preliminary sketch of the experience of the sublime, we begin by describing the experience of witnessing the bombing of the World Trade Center in New York City on September 11, 2001. We suggest that, for most people, witnessing that event (whether in person or on television), included the two aspects that have been held to make up aesthetic perception of the sublime. First, there is the experience of being awestruck or overwhelmed by a thing (often fearful) that one cannot quite register in imagination. In this phase, (which may last for a moment or for much longer) one tries to “get one’s mind around” what one is seeing, but the thing eludes, even defies, that effort. Your attempt to “categorize” or understand the thing feels inadequate, incomplete. Reviewing film records of the spontaneous responses of witnesses to the 9/11 attack makes it clear that they experienced this sense of inadequacy to register the immensity of what they were seeing. The second moment in the experience, which may come soon or late, intrude suddenly or dawn gradually, is an affirmation of will, and with a moral flavor. This reaction of will is likely to be complex, including such states of mind as moral condemnation, resolve to demand or seek a just accounting, a strong affirmation of solidarity with the community, urgent motivation to assist victims, and other moral attitudes. These active, moral responses can occur in the subject all at once, in a confused manifold, or in any kind of seriatim. In this illustration of the two-phase structure of our perception of the sublime we have a baseline that can help guide us through Kant’s rather complex theory.

II

Kant’s Theory

We believe that the best theoretical account of the sublime is that given by Kant (2001) in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. So we shall give a brief statement of his view. We then adopt a slightly amended version to analyze the recent artworks we wish to help explain.

Kant’s theory of aesthetic perception distinguishes between perceptions of the beautiful and perceptions of the sublime. This section gives a brief account of Kant’s analysis of both these forms of aesthetic experience. Our aim is to provide a reasonably clear exposition of the relation between the experience of the sublime and what Kant calls “the Ideas of Reason,” because we believe this relation is essential to understanding the artistic use of extreme violence cited above.

The Ideas of Reason are central to Kant’s philosophy. He gives no definite list of the Ideas, but prominent among them he cites the Ideas of God, of the Inner Self and its Freedom, and the Idea of Humanity or Community as a “kingdom of ends.”

Two aspects of these Ideas are important for what follows. First, they have a special place in the scheme of knowledge and education, because they give us a kind of contact (of which more below) with what Kant called the “noumenal” realm. This is the realm, for Kant, of ultimate metaphysical and moral reality. Kant holds that this realm lies beyond all “phenomenal” experience, that is, beyond all perceptual, conceptual, theoretical and scientific knowledge. Whatever awareness we are to have of the metaphysical and/or ethical realm must be conveyed, he holds, through the Ideas of Reason, and our access to those Ideas is mediated by aesthetic awareness of the sublime. A second special aspect of the Ideas of Reason is that they are, in our naïve or unexamined experience, deeply illusory. Specifically, they seem to people, almost irresistibly, to convey theoretical knowledge of what they refer to. For example, we are powerfully inclined to take our Idea of God to describe a factual feature of the world, the existence of a special being (perhaps as the cause of the universe, or as a dispenser of cosmic justice). In the same way we are inclined to take the Idea of the Self and the Idea of the Self’s Freedom as referring to a being (a self, or “I”, as in Descartes’ “I think, therefore I exist”) and to a special power we seem to detect in it, a power to override causal determination to itself make a choice, *free from causal determination by conditions outside itself*. We are powerfully inclined to believe (mistakenly, according to Kant), that we can have factual or truth-based knowledge of this Self and its Freedom by a power of knowledge that goes beyond sense perception and scientific inquiry. This is the “transcendental illusion,” to which we are all naturally prone, and with sad results.

In truth, Kant teaches, the Ideas of Reason are not descriptive of facts or states of affairs, but are instead practical in nature, functioning only to express “maxims” of Practical Reason, that is, normative guides for behavior. We do not and cannot know by Reason that there is as a matter of fact (or that there is not) a cosmic dispenser of justice in the next life. Nor can we know as a fact that there is (or is not) a next life. Nor, (importantly for what follows), can we know by Reason that we are as a matter of fact capable of free agency, which alone would make us worthy of receiving justice in an afterlife. We cannot know these things by Reason as facts because Reason is limited by its nature to *practical* awareness. It is incapable of grasping any fact of experience or any theoretical truth. It simply does not traffic in true propositions, but rather in practical maxims or moral commands (the most famous of which is the “categorical imperative”).

The faculty of the mind that does achieve factual and theoretical knowledge, for Kant, is the understanding. It is this faculty through which we achieve ordinary empirical knowledge (as when I put a sensation together with a category or concept of the understanding to achieve the empirical judgment “This is a stone”), and scientific, theoretical knowledge (as when I put sensation together with categories or concepts of the understanding to make the judgment “every physical thing has a cause”). In the realm of our empirical experience and understanding, the universe is a physico-chemical process, the choices of the human will are

determined by causal conditions, like all things in nature, and our existence ends with the death of the body. In contrast, the Ideas of Reason do not really contain (though they irresistibly *seem* to us to contain) any such factual or truth-oriented content. Instead of revealing or conveying transcendental (i.e. supersensible) facts or truths (none of which are knowable as fact by the human mind), the Ideas command us to *act as if* their suggested contents are true. For example, we cannot know as a fact or truth that our choices are free, or that we will be held accountable for them, but the Ideas of Reason create in us a felt obligation to act as if that is the case (“Act only on that motive that is entirely free of inclination or desire.”) We cannot know as a fact that other people are agents with freedom or autonomy, and therefore worthy of respect. Neither empirical observation nor scientific inquiry can discover such a thing. But we have, through Reason’s Idea of Humanity or Community, a sense of practical obligation to act as if that is true (“Act only so as to treat others as ends-in-themselves, never as a means only”).

But what has this brief outline of the Ideas of Reason have to do with the sublime, and with violence?

Most people associate the sublime with the vast or awesome in the physical world, taking sublimity as a property of things, events, or processes in nature, and Kant does so as well. Nevertheless, in his analysis of the sublime, this is a secondary, derivative version, a projection from the more basic experience of a certain complex subjective feeling. That complex state of mind (of which, much more below) includes, as one of its aspects, a *practical* awareness (that is, an awareness of our readiness for willing and acting, as opposed to our readiness for theoretical truth-seeking) of a sublime aspect of ourselves. It is when natural objects stir this feeling about ourselves in us that we call those objects, by extension, sublime. The complex state of mind at issue, which is aesthetic awareness of the sublime, is what the present authors believe is aimed at in the recent style of representing violence, which is our topic. So we now turn to Kant’s very sensitive analysis of that complex mental state.

Aesthetic perception of a sublime object is, in one aspect, an unsettling or uncomfortable (Kant says “painful”) awareness that we are incapable of representing to ourselves the immensity of something. Examples are the incapacity of our imagination to encompass the limitless depths of the starry heavens, the formless immensity of the ocean or of towering mountains, and, as we have seen, violent destruction of a huge, iconic building. Our apprehension of the moral law also occasions this feeling. In experiencing its unconditional demand upon us, we are aware that fully complying with it is beyond our capability. Whether in our awareness of an aesthetically formless, immense natural thing which imagination cannot encompass, or in our awareness of our incapacity to comply with the demands of the moral law, the recognition of our incapacity is disquieting or “painful.”

Yet the same experiences are also richly elevating, and precisely because they bring us into relation with what is infinitely beyond our human capacities. They bring enhancement of our self-regard by making us in some sense commensurate with the unlimited, that is, with the supersensible, unknowable, transcendent dimension of the cosmic noumenon. Our awareness of this aspect of our situation, our having a place beyond or “above” nature in the scheme of being, is pleasant.

Kant holds that there is a reason why the imagination cannot comprehend the content of a sublime thing. It is because our aesthetic perception of such a thing can only be formed into an experience by use of, by being “grounded on,” the Ideas of Reason. This part of his analysis is very relevant to our examination of the aesthetic use of violence, so we must examine it.

As already noted, our aesthetic judgments, for Kant, may be judgments of the beautiful or judgments of the sublime. Kant’s own simple examples can do much to guide us steadily through the maze of his complex but remarkably sensitive account. A rose is beautiful; the starry vault above is sublime. The proportions of the body are beautiful; the power of a raging storm at sea is sublime.

In judgments of the beautiful, a sensation of, say, a rose, is, as it were, taken up by the imagination and brought by it to the understanding, in search of a concept, such as “stone,” “cat,” or “rose,” that can complete the cognition of the object in a “determinative” judgment. Determinative judgments are those in which the imagination brings sensation and a concept together successfully to elicit a judgment like “this red thing is a rose.” Ordinary empirical, non-aesthetic judgments are “determinative” in this sense. But we are considering the formation of an *aesthetic* judgment of the beautiful, not an ordinary empirical judgment. In the formation of an aesthetic judgment that a thing is beautiful, a sensation is taken up by the imagination, as with the first moment of ordinary empirical judgment. Imagination looks to the understanding, as it were, for a concept under which to “determine” the intuition, but in this case without success. The concept “rose” does not capture what the imagination is offering in this special kind of sensory awareness. Nor is any other definite concept at the understanding’s disposal adequate to capture what we are aware of when regarding a rose in this way. As this process of non-consummation happens in us, we are aware that the imagination and the understanding are not in conflict, but “in harmony with” each other. Each is, as it were, willing to complete the process of joining sensation with concept as usual, yet they cannot. Since in this case they cannot match sensation and concept, they remain in a state of continuing but inconclusive effort to bring intuition and concept together. Kant calls this the state of “free play” between the faculties of the mind. This activity of harmonious free play is felt as a pleasure, and that pleasure, he holds, is the experience of the beautiful. This is

what we experience when we are in a state of inexpressible aesthetic enjoyment of the rose. We call those objects “beautiful” the perception of which occasions this pleasure. The judgment that something is beautiful is “reflective,” as opposed to “determinative,” because in it the sensation of intuition and the concepts of the understanding do not make a completed match, so the state of free play between these faculties goes on indefinitely.

Judgments of the sublime are also reflective. That is, they try to, but do not succeed in joining raw sensation with an interpretation to make a determinate object of experience. But this failure occurs for a very different reason than in the case of the beautiful. In a judgment of the sublime, the sensation or “sensory intuition” is addressed by the imagination, but it develops that the imagination itself has a problem with it. The imagination cannot grasp what sensation is offering. That is because the object in question (the vast starry heavens, the power of an ocean wave) is experienced by the imagination as limitless or unbounded. It does not form a sufficiently ordered or determinate “manifold” even to be *imagined*. The problem here is not an inadequacy of the understanding to supply a concept able to capture the beauty of a rose, but an even more fundamental inadequacy of the mind even to imagine something so formless, so inchoate, as what sensation in this case is offering. This indeterminateness in the aesthetic intuition of the sublime, according to Kant, “puts us in mind of” the Ideas of Reason, because the Ideas of Reason have a similar indeterminateness. (These, again, include the transcendental Ideas of God, Self, Community, and Nature, each regarded as “supersensible,” that is, as beyond all modes of factual knowing.) This parallel limitlessness (between the formless intuition and the similarly formless noumenal unknowables intimated by the Ideas of Reason) makes us take the presentation of the seemingly indeterminate, limitless thing offered by aesthetic sense as a presentation of Reason’s Idea of the indeterminate, unlimited supersensible world. In contrast to the pleasure accompanying the free play of imagination and the understanding in their harmonious but unconsummated “free play” around the beautiful object, here the complete inadequacy of imagination to grasp the inchoate thing is painful, bespeaking a disharmony between the imagination and the inchoate sensory something it strives to encompass. Nevertheless, the imagination’s encounter with a limitless something that surpasses its power awakens within us Reason’s Idea of a supersensible power within ourselves. This awareness of ourselves as encountering the unlimited supersensible realm suggested by Reason enables us to realize that we are beings that are not subordinate to nature, not limited by the world of sense. This realization of our transcendent status is filled with a compelling pleasure. The feeling of the sublime, then, is a complex feeling both of an unsettling inadequacy on the one hand and yet of our natural kinship with supersensible transcendence that is pleasant to contemplate, on the other. This pleasant feeling, inspired by contemplation of the unbounded aspect of ourselves, is the only thing that is “really” sublime. Though Kant develops much of his exposition in terms of sublime things in nature, they are so

only by extension; in the end such “sublime” things outside us are simply those things which stir sublime feeling in us.

And who would want to call sublime shapeless mountain masses towering above one another in wild disorder with their pyramids of ice, or the dark raging sea, etc.? But the mind feels itself elevated in its own judging if, in consideration of such things, without regard to their form, abandoning itself to the imagination and to a reason which, although it is associated with it entirely without any determinate end, merely extends it, it nevertheless finds the entire power of the imagination inadequate to its ideas (Kant, p. 139).

It will be useful in what follows to recognize a distinction Kant makes between the mathematical and dynamic sublime. It is important that these different forms of the sublime refer sensory intuition to different Ideas of Reason. The mathematical sublime makes us aware of the Idea of Nature as a *totality*. It refers us, on the side of the object, to the immeasurable vastness of nature, and, on the side of our own subjectivity, to that dimension of the self that is equal to or matches the universe’s transcendence of the sensible world. The starry heavens are sublime in this way. The dynamical sublime makes us aware, on the side of the object, of nature’s awesome power which we cannot hope to physically match, and, on the side of our subjectivity, it stimulates awareness of the Idea of Freedom, and so refers us to that transcendent aspect of the self which is the equal of nature in the sense that it cannot be subjugated even by nature’s unlimited forces, that is, to the autonomy of our will. The power of a storm at sea is sublime in this way.

Although natural objects or processes are experienced as sublime only by extension, they are nevertheless crucial to moral education and development. Without them, we could not achieve awareness of the Ideas, and so could not achieve awareness of our moral dimension – the Self, its Freedom, and Humanity as a Community of persons. It is precisely here that Kant asserts that the development of ethical competency depends on aesthetic “culture,” that is, aesthetic education.

In experiencing the objects we call sublime, then, we become aware of Ideas of Reason. Now a central teaching of Kant’s philosophy is that we are almost irresistibly prone to extend these Ideas inappropriately, thereby falling into what he calls the “transcendental illusion” cited above. This illusion consists in supposing that the Ideas give us *theoretical* knowledge of the unknowable supersensible things they intimate or put us in mind of. These include: (1) the first cause of the universe, which lies beyond all empirically knowable items in nature; (2) the supersensible aspect of self, including its freedom from or transcendence of causality; (3) humanity, conceived as a “kingdom” or community of “ends,” or beings deserving of moral respect. At this point we find Kant’s explanation of the special partnership between aesthetic

awareness of the sublime and moral awareness. In experience of the sublime we are aware of the Ideas of Reason, but in this special case the seductive illusion that they give us theoretical knowledge of the supersensible realm does not arise. Why not? Why, in this one domain of our experience, the aesthetic perception of the sublime, are we delivered from the transcendental illusion? It is because, Kant says, it is distinctive of the experience of sublimity to refer sensory intuition directly to the Ideas, bypassing the concepts of the understanding altogether. We become aware of the realities of the supersensible dimensions cited above, but in a non-theoretical, practical way, as maxims or motivations for guidance of life. Since they are engaged here, in the second stage of our response to the sublime, precisely as practical maxims, we experience no temptation in this case to experience the Ideas as conveyors of truth or representations of fact.

Nye (1992) has made two observations about the sublime which we think make useful amendments to Kant's theory. First, he notes that the aesthetic experience of the sublime is "inflected" by culture, and by historical period. We take this to mean that a form of the sublime (say, the mathematical sublime in human works like awesomely tall buildings or vast, out spanning railroads) may be prominent in the aesthetic of one period or culture while another form of it may be ascendant in another period or culture (p. 9). Nye argues that from its early history, American culture has always gravitated to an aesthetic of the sublime. In art, this can be seen in early landscapes like those of the Hudson River School, the transcendentalist painters of the nineteenth century, modern skyscraper architects, in more recent artists like Barnett Newman, and in contemporary painters. Danto (2003) has argued that Newman was vigorous in advocating an American aesthetic of the sublime in opposition to what he saw as an exhausted European aesthetic of the beautiful, and Frizzel (2008) has pointed to a continuing interest in the sublime among painters. Our thesis, then, is consistent with a longstanding gravitation to the sublime in American art.

Nye's (1992) second amendment to Kant is that our interest in the sublime seeks out new objects.

For Burke and Kant the sublime was a constant, but history has shown that it seeks new objects. Yesterdays...wonder is today's banality. And (we) are ever on the lookout for novelties (p. 237).

Nye's insight applies to seeking the sublime in violence. It is often remarked that violence in earlier films (*Dirty Harry*, *Godfather*, *Wild Bunch*), was hailed (accurately) as "taboo-breaking" at the time of their releases, but today seems mild. We look for novelty in violence as in other things, wanting to see the existing iconic barrier irreverently smashed at whatever point it now stands, at least partly because (our thesis says) only if a scene of violence makes

previous depictions seem small can we perceive it as “blow your mind” awesome, or sublime. In popular film we have perhaps not seen such explicit portrayals of violated viscera and genitals as cited above from McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*, (though the theme of exposed live viscera has long been available in video game and internet fare, and has had a cult-like audience among some teens). These motifs may yet be “too explicit” for main line film audiences. Still, we can expect it to appear there at some point, just as it has in recent widely read novels, because it will be useful in achieving the “awesome” aspect of the sublime when the “shock value” of currently cutting-edge violence in film has lost its special force to familiarity.

III

Representations of Violence in Contemporary Art

Following Kant, as amended by Nye, we suggest that representations of violence in art works can be experienced as sublime. This is possible because representations of violence in art works can be experienced as having one or more of the following characteristics.

1. Violence can be represented as boundless or formless, without boundaries or limits. It can also be experienced as boundless, as being without restraint or limit. On the subjective side of violence, the term “rage” denotes a form of anger that is without restraint or limitation in degree. We can ask: “How angry is she?” but not “How outraged is she?” On the side of the object, any degree of force or violence can be experienced as boundless if we are experiencing it as so superior to our own strength that our consciousness of it can find no intimation of its limit. I will perceive the power of an automobile as limitless if I experience it as being in contention with my muscular power to resist it. It is important to note that we can perceive the power of a thing as unlimited in this way in aesthetic awareness, while conceptually recognizing that the thing’s power has physical limits. That conceptual awareness belongs to the realm of understanding, not to aesthetic awareness. Chaos or disorder can also be experienced as unlimited for aesthetic awareness, as helter-skelter, or having no inner limit or form giving it a shape or contour that can be represented in imagination.

Vivid depiction of violence fosters our perception of it as formless. The exit wound caused by a bullet may have a roundish form, but a vividly explicit representation of it will bring to attention lumps of flesh and splotches of blood experienced precisely as having lost form. The same point could be made by contrasting the style of depicting blows to the face in popular movies of the Bogart and John Wayne era with the way they are depicted in such recent films as *Wanted* or *Dark Knight*. The former are shown from a distance and executed with a grace approaching ballet, while the latter are seen close up, delivered not glancing but full force, with realistic sound and close-up focus on profuse bleeding from the nose and mouth.

Violence is made formless in the film *No Country for Old Men* by coming from an unknown source with no discernible motive; one cannot find in it any legible contour or direction. Since one can tell no understandable story about it, the violence presents itself as uncontainable. As the aging and defeated law enforcement officer of the film says: "I don't understand this any more." Burke (1998) listed darkness as having sublimity, precisely because in the dark one cannot tell from where harm may come (p.102-103), and Taylor (1994) credits the novelist Thomas Harris with creating sublimity in the character Hannibal Lecter by making the latter's motives opaque, undecipherable.

In addition to a force without restraint (Kant's "dynamic" sublime), an aesthetic image of limitless violence can be imparted by giving violence an unimaginably vast quantitative scale. An example is the violence depicted in Jake Chapman's and Dinos Chapman's sculpture *Fucking Hell* (Chapman and Chapman, 2008). Consisting of some five thousand tiny but detailed human figures in desolate surroundings, the viewer at first takes in the general scene, without noticing what is happening there. On a second look, there comes to view a panorama of uncurbed depravity in which torture, mutilation and death is being inflicted on an unimaginably large number of people, over an unimaginably extended scene. The sheer number of victims evokes an awareness of violence without limit. Kleeblat (2002) has noted that the work further deprives the viewer of form by erasing the line between Nazis as perpetrators and others as their victims, (in it Nazi soldiers are as often victims as perpetrators), affording the viewer not even this minimal organizing principle of interpretation. The world of this work is a world of universal violence, each instance of which is explicitly depicted.

2. Another mark of the sublime is that it is overwhelming. Experience of the sublime elicits such superlatives as: "unbelievable!" or "awesome!" This quality of being overwhelming exists on a comparative, not absolute, scale. One of Kant's characterizations of the sublime is that it is *that in comparison with which* all others of its kind seem insignificant. Thus, a landscape expanse, a degree of cold or intensity of violence will be aesthetically experienced as sublime if it is experienced as so surpassing others of its kind as to make those others seem small or insignificant. In art, representations of violence can and often do aim at and achieve this quality. These are the representations of violence that can be said to be "awesome," to "break old taboos," and the like. The artist's intent to be on the "cutting edge" or intractably *avant garde* regarding violence is evident in all the works we have cited above and seems also to be part of what is attractive in them to their audiences and critics.

3. As noted above, awareness of the sublime is two-stage, with a specifically perceptual stage, followed by a stage of specifically moral awareness. All of the works we have cited can be very naturally experienced in this two-stage way. Few would argue that the vividness of the

violence cited from *Blood Meridian*, and the sculpture *Hell* is not arresting. Also clear is that it has the effect on the perceiver of moving the mind to concern with moral ideals. It would be odd to encounter these works on the aesthetic plane which registers in awareness the unlimited amount and intensity of their human violence, and yet move on, obliviously, without moral response, to the next paragraph of the novel or to the next item in the gallery exhibit. One would be inclined to say of such an observer that she may have perceived the work empirically or (however implausibly) in the aesthetic mode of the beautiful, but had not really perceived it in the aesthetic mode of the sublime.

This implies that one who achieves aesthetic awareness of the sublime in such works must, as part of that aesthetic experience, move from the sensory to engagement with the moral content of such transcendental Ideas as Self, Freedom, and Community. It does not imply that every successful aesthetic perception of sublimity in a work will engage those Ideas in the same way. McCarthy (2001) himself seems to find a celebration of Freedom and Community in scenes of violence. “The kid,” protagonist of *Blood Meridian*, is described:

He lives in a room behind a courtyard behind a tavern and he comes down at night like some fairybook beast to fight with the sailors.... They fight with fists, with feet, with bottles or knives. All races, all breeds. Men whose speech sounds like the grunting of apes. Men from lands so far and queer that standing over them where they lie bleeding in the mud he feels mankind itself vindicated (p. 4).

Late in the novel the character Judge Holden philosophizes about war:

Suppose two men at cards with nothing to wager save their lives...What more certain validation of a man's worth could there be? ...This enhancement of the game to its ultimate state admits no argument concerning the notion of fate. The selection of one man over another is a preference absolute and irrevocable and it is a dull man indeed who could reckon so profound a decision without agency or significance either one. In such games as have for their stake the annihilation of the defeated the decisions are quite clear. The man holding this particular arrangement of cards in his hand is thereby removed from existence. This is the nature of war, whose stake is at once the game and the authority and the justification. Seen so, war is the truest form of divination. It is the testing of one's will and the will of another within that larger will which because it binds them is therefore forced to select. War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence. War is god (p. 249).

Many readers might find a reference to such moral ideas of Freedom, Community and God in the same scenes in an entirely different or even opposite way from what seems implied here.

Many could be expected to find defeat of those transcendental values in the violent, war-is-bottom-line philosophy McCarthy seems to endorse, and they may be right. Our point is that all readers must engage with these Ideas as part of the aesthetic awareness of the extreme violence represented to them in the world of this art work.

It should be noted that beauty or being beautiful is not an aspect of the sublime. A thing can clearly be aesthetically experienced as ugly and also as sublime. On the other hand, both beauty and ugliness are sublime when experienced as unimaginably intense and without limit. Such things may be said to be unimaginably, and so sublimely, beautiful or ugly. A thing (e.g. an ocean wave) can be both beautiful and sublime, either in equal measure or with one of these aesthetic values waxing stronger in an aesthetic experience of it than the other.

4. Experiencing the sublime is safe. This can be made clear by considering the dangerous sublime. What is sublime often includes a threatening, or dangerously violent aspect. A threatening storm at sea, a vast landscape in which we seem lost, and the awesome force of a great waterfall like Niagara are examples. The aesthetic perception of these objects, and the distinctive quality of the danger we sense in them, is undermined if we *conceive*, that is, *understand* the threatening thing as immanently threatening to us. In the aesthetic experience of the dangerous sublime, one simultaneously *perceives* the danger in the thing's awesome power or violence and *understands* that one is presently safe from that threat. If I am aesthetically aware of an ocean wave as sublimely powerful and threatening, that mode of awareness of the thing normally requires that at that moment I believe I am safe from that threat. The works we cite above, as works of art, naturally have this aspect of safe distance from the threat, and so are in that respect apt for expression of the sublime.

It should also be noted that violence in art can be used to express aspects of experience that have nothing to do with the Ideas of Reason, and therefore nothing to do with the sublime. It can be used, for example, to express frustration and anger. Imagine a man who lives in a densely populated city, and has much of that certain pent-up frustration which sociologists associate with overcrowding. Our man sees notice of a film promising the kind of "barrier-breaking" violence we are discussing (violence in comparison with which that of all other films are said to be insignificant), and enters the theatre with anticipation.

Such a man, as described so far, may not be in readiness for aesthetic perception. If his need to vent frustration is great, he may lack the composure of mind needed to achieve aesthetic awareness of the film as he watches it. Perceiving the violence in the film for such a person may be meaningful primarily on the psychological level, serving for surrogate venting of frustration. Kant distinguishes our emotional responses to the sublime from emotions or feelings which are caused by (are the natural effects of) our perception of things (including

our perceptions of violence) in the world. The latter include sympathy, anger, frustration, relief from frustration, and others. He calls these “laconic” feelings. They are “interested” in that they have to do with our pursuit of our natural purposes in the world, such as maintenance of comfort and of life itself. He distinguishes these from emotions or feelings that are disinterested. These are unlike the laconic feelings in subserving no natural purposes or goals. They are “independent of all sensible interest.” He calls these “robust” feelings or emotions. An aesthetic response to the beautiful is disinterested in this way, serving no economic, political, social or any other worldly interest. Finally, some of our aesthetic emotions are “grounded in” the Ideas of Reason. These latter are the “robust” feelings that alone can be called sublime.

The man we are imagining perceives the violence onscreen, but his perception of it does not take the aesthetic form (either of perception of the beautiful or of the sublime) because, as we have imagined him, he has distracting psychological business with the film that overrides his potential aesthetic involvement with it; namely, relief of his “laconic” emotion of anger or frustration. He has come to the film in search of this pleasant relief state through viewing violence, much as one might seek it by consuming alcohol or taking a walk. He is looking for a cause whose effect will be restoration of his comfort or *joie de vivre*. Given this purely psychological interest in the film we have imagined as his, he does not and is not likely to achieve aesthetic awareness of the film.

It may clarify these points to note Kant’s distinction between the empirical self and the transcendent self. The empirical self is a series of perceptions, feelings, memories and other mental states, each of which exists as an event in nature’s nexus of cause and effect. It is the “natural” or “psychological” self. It is a natural being, that is, part of nature, and is entirely subject to nature’s causal laws. It is feelings that occur in this sequence that Kant calls “laconic.” The transcendental self, on the other hand, is beyond nature and its causal laws. It is not knowable empirically, but only through Practical Reason, that is, as an affirmation of the will to live as if we are accountable for our actions in a way that nature does not hold us accountable; namely, for the performance of our *morally right* and *morally wrong* actions. Awareness of this “imperative” aspect of life has as one of its features certain distinctive and powerful emotional content or feelings. These feelings Kant terms “robust.”

“Freedom” may refer both to a certain laconic and to a robust emotion. The feeling of freedom is laconic when it consists in a sense of freedom from interference with what one wants to do or wants to read, see, or hear. This is a feeling of relief from actual or possible social constraint. It is the satisfaction of a personal desire. This experience of freedom would have no moral content for Kant, and no connection with the sublime. It is just another mental state appearing in the cause-effect sequence of natural (i.e. physiological and psychological) life, and includes no transcendence of that natural level of existence. On the other hand, Freedom

as assertion of a transcendent Idea has as one of its aspects “robust” feeling, meaning that it is experienced as not dependent on cause-effect, but as expressing Reason’s creative ability to act independently of, and even in opposition to, causal influence.

In real life, things are more complicated. Our man attending the violent film may experience it on multiple levels. We can suppose, for example, that he begins the film on the level of venting frustration by enjoying the chaotic and deafening gunplay it contains. Later, he may come to share in the protagonist’s assertion of transcendent moral freedom, an assertion brought forth by the protagonist’s facing a sublimely (i.e. unimaginably) violent death. If our man’s need for psychological satisfaction fades as he “gets into” the film, he may begin to perceive it (especially if the artist is skillful) aesthetically. The extremity of the violence, being beyond imaginable form, in comparison with which earlier artistic representations of violence seem tame, is apt for transforming the man’s experience of it from the level of psychological satisfaction to the level of the sublime, when and if he is ready for that shift. Awareness of the sublime aspect of the violence puts our man, Kant says, “in mind of” the transcendental ideas such as those of Self, Freedom, and Community. These are aspects of the protagonist’s personal existence that transcend all worldly interest (“transcend all sensory interest”) and which the viewer vicariously shares. In the film *3:10 to Yuma*, for example, the hero must forsake not only his own safety, but also that of his family (i.e. he sets aside all motivation from “sensory interest”) in order to do his duty. In addition, he must face what he knows to be extremely violent annihilation at the hands of a number of highly armed and unimaginably evil men. How is he capable of facing all this? This is a question Kant means to answer. His answer is that we must suppose that the protagonist perceives the sublimity of the danger and violence he faces, and this “puts him in mind of” the transcendent values of Self, Freedom, and Community. He rises out of the realm of experience as a cause-effect nexus in which “the organism” seeks sensory satisfaction according to the physical and psychological laws of our existence, to a moral awareness in which he is capable of asserting his will in transcendence of such physical necessity. To the extent that our viewer in the theatre becomes engaged in these transcendent moral ideals in response to the violence he perceives on the screen, and by empathetic identification with the protagonist, he has entered into aesthetic awareness of the film’s action on the level of the sublime.

It seems likely that many viewers of such a film will experience it at times as venting, at times on the aesthetic level of the beautiful (“red blood against a green vest – excellent!”), and in other passages as sublime. Such “mixed” experience of an art work may be the norm. One can imagine a skillful director who opens a film with scenes apt for psychological relief (“get ‘em relaxed”) with a view to fostering readiness for aesthetic perception, followed by aesthetically beautiful people, action, and scenes, and these followed by violence aimed at inducing awareness of the transcendent or moral Idea of the Self and its Freedom.

IV

Morality and Images of Extreme Violence

We have proposed that representations of extreme violence can be understood as aiming at affirmation of transcendent values like community, freedom of the self, and social justice. This might suggest that violent images are morally unproblematic. But they are not. First, images of extreme violence are open to lurid and sadistic enjoyment. Second, it cannot reasonably be argued that every representation of extreme violence fosters moral affirmation. Claims to purification or moral advance through violence can be spurious, as they are when made, for example, on behalf of gangland ritual murder or radical Islamic jihad. So there is need to cultivate the ability for moral, as well as aesthetic, judgment about extreme violence in art. We offer next an outline of one way this can be approached.

An important step is to accept and become comfortable with the often inconclusive nature of moral debate. Ongoing debates thrive in every field, as reasonable people disagree about basic definitions and principles, and about how principles apply to individual cases. There is inconclusive debate about the nature of light in physics, the cause(s) of inflation in economics, criteria of authenticity in connoisseurship, and accurate valuation of assets in accounting, to cite just a few examples. The first appropriate goal of moral education about extreme violence in art is not to produce consensus, but to foster mastery of ideas that can help articulate and analyze the otherwise inchoate sense of a moral problematic we often feel on encountering such images. The unsettled, debatable character of moral judgment about artworks does not imply that those judgments are capricious. Developing understanding of this is part of art education. Ethical theory offers a well-developed body of principles for guiding deliberation about moral questions, including those related to art. Drawing on this literature, we next offer a set of guidelines for shaping orderly consideration of the morality of representations of extreme violence in art.

1. Aesthetic values are different in nature from moral values. Art educators should be cognizant of the difference between moral values like equality, the dignity of persons, justice, and happiness, on the one hand, and aesthetic values like truth, expression, beauty, and sublimity, on the other. Moral values and aesthetic values can interact and, as we have seen in Kant, aesthetic experience can support the realization of moral awareness. But the two realms of value remain distinct.

2. The means of achieving aesthetic value in art works are not independent of, but subject to, moral evaluation. This is denied by “aestheticism,” a view championed by Nietzsche, Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, and others, which holds that art is independent of moral assessment. Aestheticism cannot be assumed as a default position in aesthetics, because it is just what has

been challenged by students and others who raise moral objection to violent images in the first place. For these students bringing moral and aesthetic values into relation cannot be avoided.

3. If aestheticism is set aside, so aesthetic means are subject to moral evaluation, how can one make such an evaluation?

In ethical theory an act is called “*prima facie* wrong” if it violates a basic duty, but can nevertheless be justified by being necessary for honoring a still more important moral duty (Stratton-Lake, 2002, p. xvii – xxxviii, and p. 14-16; Dancy, 1990, p. 219 - 229). For example, breaking a promise violates a basic duty to keep one’s promises, and so is *prima facie* wrong. But breaking a promise will be redeemed if it is necessary to honor a more basic duty, or to produce an overriding moral good. I break my promise to come to your party in order to take an injured person to the hospital, thus honoring an overriding duty to protect a life. It is important to note that being *prima facie* wrong (or right) is not a way of being wrong (or right). For this reason, in spite of its being established usage in ethical theory, the phrase (*prima facie* wrong) is misleading. It means, not that an action is wrong, or a little bit wrong, but only that one who contemplates that action has a special burden of circumspect regard for the considerations that weigh against it. By the same token, to deem an action *prima facie* right, means only that one who would limit that action has a duty to be circumspect in considering the moral case against it.

We suggest that representations of extreme violence in works of art are *prima facie* wrong because they violate at least two basic moral duties. The first is the duty to respect, protect, and promote human dignity. The second is the duty to nurture abhorrence of gratuitous suffering.

Here we must address a complication. One may admit that images of extreme violence are *prima facie* wrong, but note that curbs on freedom in artistic expression are also *prima facie* wrong. So we reach stalemate: each *prima facie* wrong blocks the other. But this possibility is a distraction in the present context. We have not been describing a cultural environment in which the use of very violent imagery is repressed, but one very open to them. Our question is not what duties face a putative censor of extremely violent imagery. It concerns instead the duties of a putative user of such imagery, working in an environment that permits it. And we are proposing one way to think about those duties in an orderly way. Our suggestion is that, in a cultural environment in which the moral justification for presenting extremely violent imagery cannot reasonably be construed as a morally purposeful non-compliance, the *prima facie* wrong of such imagery outweighs the *prima facie* wrong in an artist’s voluntary rejection of *that* aesthetic tool. This does not mean that such imagery cannot be justified by a value that overrides its *prima facie* wrong. It means that advocates of a violent image in art

have the moral burden of identifying its overriding value, much as the burden is on a promise-breaker to identify the more important duty that overrides the duty to honor a promise.

4. A representation of violence in an art work should be no more graphic than is necessary to achieve the redeeming value. If graphic violence is *prima facie* wrong, its use, like any other *prima facie* wrong, should be minimized to the extent necessary to achieve the overriding good it aims at. This suggests a moral obstacle for recent hyper-violence in artworks. If previous generations have achieved expression of the moral values of community and freedom through less graphic violence than is now *au courant*, why is today's hyper-violence needed? Is there a transcendent value, or a higher degree of value, that is achieved by the extreme violence that is not achievable through the more limited violence? If so, the ethical burden of showing this lies with the proponent of the violence.

Once again, framing the issue as suggested by the above principles cannot be expected to yield consensus about the morality of using extremely violent images. Its value is in offering one way to articulate and discuss the amorphous feeling of moral apprehension we often have about the use of such images.

V

Conclusion

We have presented an interpretation of an aesthetic meaning of extreme violence in certain contemporary art works, based on Kant's theory of the sublime. We believe the interpretation will be useful to art educators and students in articulating aesthetic meanings contained in many representations of extreme violence. By "extreme violence" we have meant violence that aims to make previous artistic presentations of violence seem less forceful in comparison. We have argued that in those art works the use of extreme violence can be understood as an artistic effort to enhance the viewer's experience of such transcendent values as personal freedom, community, and others. We have also argued that the use of extremely violent imagery to achieve artistic ends is morally problematic, because of its potential effects on our perceptions of human dignity and gratuitous suffering. Education of moral judgment of that imagery is also needed. To that end educators can use the theory, familiar in the literature of ethics, of *prima facie* duties.

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