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“The Sublime” in David Lynch’s Work

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Zásady pro vypracování

Poté, co pojem "vznešeno" (angl. "Sublime") upoutal pozornost antických filosofů, stal se stěžejním pro evropské romantiky. V současnosti je zájem o tuto problematiku znovu na vzestupu, což je patrné z diskusí o tzv. "digitál sublime" či "postmodern sublime". Cílem práce je prozkoumat, jakým způsobem lze "vznešeno" využít pro poznání filmového díla Davida Lynche. Autor nejprve nastíní různorodost konceptualizace této kategorie (Longinus, John Dennis, Joseph Addison, Edmund Burke, aj.). Vzhledem k zaměření na filmovou tvorbu svou pozornost zacílí i na tzv. "cinematic sublime" a osvětlí jeho podstatu. Následně na tomto základu provede detailní analýzu vybraných snímků Davida Lynche (např. *Twin Peaks*, *Mulholland Drive* a *Lost Highway*). Smyslem poznání bude zmapovat, k jakému z tradičních či novějších pojetí jeho díla inklinují a jak s nimi pracují. Vzhledem k důležitosti pragmatického dopadu na diváka může autor využít i poznatky z recepční estetiky (Reader-response theory).

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ANNOTATION

This bachelor thesis deals with the category of the Sublime and explores how the Sublime can be used when analyzing the work of David Lynch. The theoretical chapter outlines various concepts of the Sublime, starting from the traditional concepts such as the rhetoric and the natural Sublime, and continues onto modern concepts, including the postmodern, digital, technological, and cinematic Sublime. The practical part analyzes how Lynch's work utilizes different variants of the Sublime and to which concepts it inclines in specific cases. The analysis is performed on works such as *Twin Peaks*, *Wild at Heart*, *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive*, and *Twin Peaks: The Return*.

KEYWORDS

The Sublime, David Lynch, Edmund Burke, *Twin Peaks*, terror

ANOTACE

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá kategorií vznešena a zkoumá způsoby, jakými lze vznešeno aplikovat při rozboru díla Davida Lynche. Teoretická část nastiňuje rozličné koncepce této kategorie, počínaje od pojetí tradičních, jako je například řečnické či přírodní vznešeno, až po moderní koncepce, mezi které se řadí vznešeno postmoderní, digitální, technologické či kinematografické. Obsahem praktické části je analýza Lynchových děl a metod, jakými tato díla pracují s různými koncepcemi kategorie vznešena a k jakým pojetím v konkrétních případech inklinují. Předmětem analýzy jsou snímky *Městečko Twin Peaks*, *Zběsilost v srdci*, *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive* a *Twin Peaks: The Return*.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

Vznešeno, David Lynch, Edmund Burke, *Městečko Twin Peaks*, zděšení

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Introduction

“If there’s 100 people in the audience, you’re going to get 100 different interpretations, especially when things get abstract. It’s beautiful. Everybody’s a detective and whatever they come up with is valid in my mind.”¹

— David Lynch

In the contemporary world, the term “sublime” represents qualities analogous to “cool,” “wow,” “beautiful,” or “awesome.” However, this was not always the case. Historically, the category of “the Sublime” pointed to an experience of immeasurable qualities – the highest of the high. As many great thinkers opined, to experience the Sublime is something indescribable, consisting of both positive and negative feelings, a certain negative pleasure. This mix of emotions often overwhelms the senses and can be described as a combination of arousal, pleasure, and astonishment mixed with feelings of terror, fear, or even pain. Generally, the Sublime experience arose when one was confronted with an object that exuded a superior power beyond the understanding of the subject, resulting in a sense of smallness and unimportance. As time passed, the word “Sublime” became part of the contemporary language and is now decapitalized to just “sublime.” Preserving its traditional sense, this thesis uses the capitalized variant to distinguish between the sublime meaning mere “wow” and the category of immeasurable qualities.

The category of the Sublime can be described as interdisciplinary. Ranging from aesthetics to literary theory, the Sublime was traditionally used in many different disciplines and currently seems to be on the rise again. To avoid the stereotype of everyday life, people want to experience the Other – something extraordinary, temporarily elevating them from the treadmill of their lives. For this reason, the category of the Sublime could currently apply to an even more comprehensive range of disciplines – politics, advertising, and film.² Hence, this thesis intends to analyze products of contemporary culture, namely the work of the American filmmaker David Lynch, and explore different ways that the Sublime can be applied in the analysis of his cinema.

It is a truism that the Sublime is characteristic of avoiding a unified characterization. While the traditional concepts defined it as a quality arising from nature, each theorist perceived it differently. Some described the Sublime as an effect of infinite beauty, while others insisted

¹ Killian Fox, “David Lynch: ‘It’s important to go out and feel the so-called reality,’” *The Guardian*, January 30, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/jun/30/david-lynch-interview-manchester-international-festival>.

² Kenneth Holmqvist, and Jaroslaw Płuciennik, “A Short Guide to the Theory of the Sublime,” *Style* 36, no. 4 (2002): 726, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/style.36.4.718>.

it is a separate category. In the current times, this lack of agreement remains. In the postmodern sense, the Sublime is perceived as an illusion, although other modern concepts find the category in technology and digital media. This thesis aims to discover how both traditional and modern concepts are utilized in David Lynch's work, identifying overlaps between various concepts of the Sublime. Moreover, while outlining the traditional and modern concepts, the thesis intends to trace the changes in media used to produce the Sublime and provide an insight into its historical development.

The work of David Lynch is known for its specific, Lynchian style. While the worlds presented in his cinema seem familiar and comparable to the real world, there is something uncanny about them, and even the most mundane objects and situations can induce terror. Additionally, Lynch's work frequently features surrealist elements and explores the meaning of dreams, often mystifying the audience. Due to its elaborate sound design, direction, and screenplay, the work of David Lynch is capable of astonishing the audience with sheer terror, making his work suitable for close analysis vis-à-vis the Sublime.

The first chapter of the thesis focuses on the theoretical background of the Sublime. Initially, it presents how the reader-response theory relates to the category of the Sublime. Then, the chapter elaborates on the first known occurrence of this category and how it eventually transformed. Subsequently, the theoretical chapter discusses various approaches to the natural Sublime and finally explores modern concepts of the Sublime relevant to the analysis.

The second chapter analyzes potential Sublime objects presented in the work of David Lynch. The goal of this chapter is to demonstrate that Lynch's work, which is in broad terms progressive due to its specific style, utilizes similar ideas as theorists some three hundred years ago. Furthermore, the chapter explores the importance of sound in relation to the Sublime experience, and lastly, it identifies overlaps between the natural and technological Sublime.

The goal of the third chapter is to analyze selected events in Lynch's work with the intention of identifying modern concepts of the Sublime. The chapter focuses on the elements of immersion and distance in relation to the postmodern Sublime, possibly leading to an approach enabling a different way of analysis. Lastly, the chapter addresses one of the most modern concepts of the Sublime and hints at another potentially ongoing change in the media used to produce the Sublime.

1. Concepts of the Sublime and Its Impact on the Audience

The first specific aim of this chapter is to illustrate the relation between the reader-response theory and the Sublime. Since the second part of this paper focuses on the analysis of films, it is also essential to attempt to apply the reader-response theory, generally used for interpreting literature, to the study of cinematic material. Another vital part of the chapter traces the transformation of the rhetoric Sublime into the natural Sublime in terms of its concepts and the media used to deliver it. The following part intends to illustrate various approaches to the natural Sublime described in the works of theorists such as Thomas Burnet, Joseph Addison, John Dennis, and Edmund Burke. Then, the chapter deals with modern conceptions of the Sublime, including the digital Sublime and the postmodern Sublime, together with another significant shift in the media used to produce the Sublime. The last section of this theoretical chapter focuses on the concept of the cinematic Sublime, illustrating its significance for the analysis.

Before delineating various concepts of the Sublime, it is crucial to focus on its relationship with the reader (or, more suitably for the purposes of this paper, the audience). Initially, one might wonder how and when precisely the audience can experience the Sublime. As Philip Shaw suggests, “whenever experience slips out of conventional understanding, whenever the power of an object or event is such that words fail and points of comparison disappear, then we resort to the feeling of the sublime.”³ The Sublime experience is, therefore, closely associated with the personal reception of the given object or event. At the same time, it may be said that due to the lack of understanding, it reaches somewhere beyond the boundaries of language. This statement directly correlates with the aforementioned reader-response theory (although it should be noted that as it deals with *readers*, validity in its application to films rather than literature is going to be explored in due course). As Jane P. Tompkins examines in *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, the audience is unable to understand a work of art fully; they understand only its results – psychological and other “effects” are vital factors in understanding it, but the meaning exists exclusively in the mind of an audience.⁴ Then, the work of art can be perceived as a plain *medium*, while the audience plays a prominent role which is central in creating the meaning. Tompkins further suggests that meaning “is not something one extracts from a poem, like a nut from its shell, but an experience

³ Philip Shaw, *The Sublime* (Abington, Oxon: Routledge, 2007), 2.

⁴ Jane P. Tompkins, ed., *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), ix.

one has in the course of reading.”⁵ Thus, the experience an audience has while reading a piece of art must evidently consist of a whole plethora of feelings, whether positive or negative. Some of the feelings may even be far beyond human understanding and ability to explain – such as the Sublime experience. Lastly, it should be remarked that an audience craves to be somehow impacted by the piece of art and often does not realize that the meaning is created in the mind – this, however, only adds to the Sublime experience. As Robert Scholes confirms in one of his essays, “[t]he spectator or reader of a narration assumes that he is in the grip of a process controlled outside himself, designed to do things to him which he will be powerless to resist, and that if he struggles will only enmesh him farther in the author’s toils.”⁶ Therefore, while digesting the work of art, the audience gives the author their complete trust to “enmesh them in his toils,” which in certain scenarios makes the audience feel like puppets controlled by a master puppeteer. Thanks to this, the audience can feel absolutely overwhelmed and astonished by the different effects the piece of art has on them, which itself contributes to the feeling of the Sublime. The source of those effects may not be directly in the language used (or in the visual content of films), but it is rather entailed in the overall feeling created while reading or watching. Both the awareness and unawareness of the audience that the meaning exists solely in their mind are equally important. To experience the Sublime, one thinks of it as a force outside of themselves, but to analyze and describe it, the audience should be conscious that it is their own response. Nevertheless, all this is going to unfold in the second part of the paper focused on the analysis of films and the way they impact an audience, especially concerning the Sublime experience, which could be a very subjective matter and where one experiences it, the other may not. Taking every part of this into consideration, from here on out, the Sublime can be perceived as a way of impacting the audience.

As mentioned, the category of the Sublime features a whole host of concepts. The most known of them is concerned with nature – yet, that was not always the case. In fact, as Philip Shaw argues in his study *The Sublime*, the original concept attributed to the ancient philosopher Dionysius Longinus was a “purely rhetorical phenomenon”⁷ and thus very different from the much later concept of the natural Sublime. The rhetoric Sublime (often referred to as the Longinian Sublime) was first described in *On Sublimity*, written around the 1st century CE. According to Shaw, it served mainly as a device of persuasion used in epic verse or the

⁵ Tompkins, *Reader-Response Criticism*, xvi.

⁶ Robert Scholes, “Narration and Narrativity in Film,” *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 1, no. 3 (August 1976): 289.

⁷ Shaw, *The Sublime*, 5.

discipline of oratory.⁸ Nevertheless, the question of what exactly made it Sublime and how it eventually transformed into the natural Sublime remains. As Philip Shaw further suggests, rhetoric which was in concordance with Longinus' concept literally swept the listeners or readers away with its force – more precisely and quite distressingly, they were “raped by the power of words.”⁹ It is apparent from this statement that there is a hint of a certain indescribable element, which acts toward the goal of persuasion, and that some power takes control of the recipient. Therefore, at this point, the presence of the Sublime as something that cannot be grasped or even explained can already be identified. However, it may still seem that it is far from having to do with nature. For instance, Longinus describes the use of various figures of speech, such as a hyperbole, in order to achieve rhetorical sublimity, but he also believes that “nature is on the whole a law unto herself in matters of emotion and elevation, she [nature] is not a random force and does not work altogether without method.”¹⁰ He then proceeds to describe five distinct sources of the Sublime. As Robert Doran explains in *The Theory of the Sublime from Longinus to Kant*, the first two sources are seen by Longinus as natural – “grand conceptions” and “strong emotion” – while the other three are derived from art or skill.¹¹ Hence, in the case of the rhetoric Sublime, nature may not be a direct source of the Sublime; rather it is a force by which, with the help of different devices, the Sublime emerges.

While the rhetoric Sublime was described as a phenomenon that deals mainly with language, the natural Sublime instead focuses on visual perceptions and feelings arising from them. Shaw describes the major distinctions between these two concepts as follows: “[w]here the ‘rhetorical Sublime’ focuses on the grand or elevated as an aspect of language, the ‘natural Sublime’ regards sublimity as a quality inherent in the external world.”¹² Therefore, with the natural Sublime, the focus moves away from exploring the Sublime impact of language used in oratory and closer to finding the sources of the Sublime in the surrounding world, specifically in nature, and describing them best via poetry. This change was also recognized by Thomas Stackhouse in his *Reflections on the Nature and Property of Languages* (1731), where he states that “the imitation of nature constitutes the sublime of orators; and the imitation of what is above nature, the sublime of poets.”¹³ Consequently, rather than describing and imitating nature

⁸ Shaw, *The Sublime*, 4.

⁹ Shaw, *The Sublime*, 5.

¹⁰ Longinus, *On Sublimity*, ed. and trans. D. A. Russell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 2.

¹¹ Robert Doran, *The Theory of the Sublime from Longinus to Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 58.

¹² Shaw, *The Sublime*, 28.

¹³ Andrew Ashfield and Peter De Bolla, eds., *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 43–44.

itself, those poets try to analyze its effects in a written form, which is a giant leap forward, as opposed to Longinus' oral discourse taking place face-to-face with a live audience. As will soon be illustrated, sources of the Sublime impact of nature can be various – ranging from still objects, such as a starry sky, through vast spaces, including mountains, deserts, or oceans, to eventful and even dangerous entities like an earthquake.

It is important to note at this juncture that it took almost seventeen centuries until the concept of the rhetoric Sublime was finally reshaped into the natural Sublime. It was not until 1554 that Longinus' *On Sublimity* was made available in Latin, and thanks to its 1674 French translation by Nicolas Boileau, it could come to the attention of at least some readers. Among those influenced by this early translation may have quite possibly been a well-known English theologian, Thomas Burnet. In his work *The Sacred Theory of the Earth*, written between 1684 and 1689, he extolls mountains, vast seas, or starry sky to conclude that there is something majestic and noble in them; something so beautiful it is above his abilities to understand, best described as “shadow and appearance of the INFINITE” – which is, in the end, all perceived as a work of God.¹⁴ As can be seen, in this early example of the natural Sublime, there are no clear boundaries between the beautiful and the Sublime. Instead, when beauty is infinite – exceeds the limit of one's ability to understand and describe – it becomes a Sublime experience. Moreover, the indescribable feeling is rightfully said to be a work of God, whose actions are generally not understood. Taking Burnet's descriptions into account, his view of the Sublime can be summarized as an impact of infinite, indescribable beauty created by God.

Burnet and his new idea of the Sublime sparked an interest in many thinkers of the time. One of them was an English dramatist and critic John Dennis, who presented his own perspective of the Sublime in *The Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry* (1701). According to Shaw, since Dennis was a man of the Enlightenment, he recognized nature as a “rational system” with certain rules and regularity – the irregular, characterized by Dennis as “extravagancies,” is the aspect that initiates the Sublime experience, which he defines as full of horror and terror.¹⁵ It can be seen that due to its Neoclassicist approach and emphasis on reason, this description is relatively similar to Burnet's account. Nevertheless, Dennis attempts to go beyond reason and elaborates on the thought processes behind the natural Sublime. In *The Advancement*, he writes: “[s]o that take the Cause and the Effects together, and you have the

¹⁴ Thomas Burnet, *The Sacred Theory of the Earth* (London: Roger Norton, 1691; Global Grey, 2018), 132, accessed December 27, 2022, <https://www.globalgreybooks.com/sacred-theory-of-the-earth-ebook.html>. Emphasis original.

¹⁵ Shaw, *The Sublime*, 31.

Sublime.”¹⁶ Based on this, it could be assumed that Dennis believes the Sublime experience cannot emerge without the mutual cooperation of subject and object. Thus, when one is astonished by the vastness of mountains, neither the subject nor object is dominant in creating the Sublime experience – they both play an equal part; they complement each other. Dennis further explores this theme in his study *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry* (1704), where the Sublime is compared to passion. Dennis distinguishes between “ordinary passion,” initiated by the objects themselves, and “enthusiasm,” which emerges when subjects start thinking thoroughly about a particular object.¹⁷ While the former arises from everyday objects and can be understood by the subject without any issues, the latter is to be found outside of ordinary life and could likely be beyond the possibilities to understand. Therefore, according to Dennis, the subject and object play an equal role, but for the Sublime to emerge and have an impact, the subject must contemplate an object outside of their everyday life. However, as will be shown in the analysis, this is not always the case. Besides, as Robert Doran concurs,¹⁸ due to the emphasis Dennis puts on the Sublime as full of horror and terror, he shifts from Burnet’s theory of the Sublime as beautiful and gives way to a new stage in which the Sublime and beautiful become separated.

Before exploring a significant treatise on the topic of the Sublime and beautiful, however, it is vital to delve into the work of another early eighteenth-century theorist. In a series of essays by Joseph Addison, published periodically in *The Spectator* (1711–12) and known as “The Pleasure of the Imagination,” he states that among the sources of the Sublime could be, for example, a vast desert, huge mountains, or wide sea, and besides that, every object, “where we are not struck with the Novelty or Beauty of the Sight, but with that rude kind of Magnificence which appears in [them].”¹⁹ Through this statement, Addison makes an essential distinction between the Sublime (which he calls “Magnificence”) and the beautiful. He continues by suggesting that one’s imagination “loves to be filled with an Object” that is above their abilities to understand and that, as a result, one is not only astonished but also feels “a delightful Stillness and Amazement in the Soul.”²⁰ This statement, due to the said “love,” comes together with the

¹⁶ John Dennis, *The Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry* (London: Rich. Parker, 1701; Ann Arbor: Text Creation Partnership, 2011), 47, accessed December 21, 2022, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/004890743.0001.000>.

¹⁷ John Dennis, *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry* (London: Geo. Strahan and Bernard Lintott, 1704; Ann Arbor: Text Creation Partnership, 2011), 15–20, accessed December 21, 2022, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/004844084.0001.000>.

¹⁸ Doran, *The Theory of the Sublime*, 139.

¹⁹ Joseph Addison, *The Spectator* 412 (June 23, 1712), accessed December 26, 2022, <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/12030>.

²⁰ Addison, *The Spectator* 412.

beforementioned craving of the audience to be impacted and reaffirms the claim that the Sublime can be perceived as a way of impacting the audience. Furthermore, Addison categorizes the more disastrous sources of the Sublime, such as storms or earthquakes, as being subject to a “Reflection.” In such cases, the Sublime experience is initiated not only by the objects themselves but also by the pleasure “we receive from the Sense of our own Safety.”²¹ Therefore, when the subject watches something terrifying from a distance, they can experience the Sublime in the form of a certain negative pleasure. This distance between the subject and the object is a crucial element in the Sublime experience – without it, the experience directly involves the subject, and the Sublime is apt to change into mere fear. Lastly, it should be noted that the element of distance is not limited to spatial distance; it includes emotional distance and distance created by fiction, which will be explored in the second part of the paper.

At this stage, it is evident that the Sublime is starting to be associated with increasingly negative connotations. To that perception contributed the famous pamphleteer and philosopher Edmund Burke with his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) – arguably one of the most influential works on the topic of the Sublime. Burke states that the Sublime appears in anything that is “in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror” and explains that the Sublime is the “strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.”²² Similarly to Addison and Dennis, whose endeavors somewhat illustrated the negative feeling connected with the Sublime and constituted a shift in the Sublime regarded as beautiful, Burke elaborates on this thought and separates the former from the latter. For him, the Sublime is “terrible” and “founded on pain,” while beautiful is founded “on pleasure.”²³ Hence, he contradicts Burnet’s theory of the Sublime as the infinite, indescribable beauty created by God – not only by distinguishing between sublimity and beauty but also by his secular view of the Sublime. As Shaw confirms, Burke’s treatise is almost entirely secular and shows that there is no need for God to explain the unknown, immeasurable or indescribable; the feeling of the Sublime is a product of the mind.²⁴ Nonetheless, this leads to another significant distinction Burke has made as opposed to his predecessors. With his detailed investigations into the thought processes behind the Sublime experience, Burke expounds on Dennis’s observation that both the subject and object play an

²¹ Joseph Addison, *The Spectator* 418 (June 30, 1712), accessed December 26, 2022, <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/12030>.

²² Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. Adam Phillips, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 36.

²³ Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 113.

²⁴ Shaw, *The Sublime*, 49.

equal role in creating the Sublime and discovers that one of them is, after all, dominant. When describing the Sublime, Burke uses the word “Astonishment,” which he defines as an emotion that encompasses the soul with horror – he states that in these cases, one’s mind is completely filled with the given object so that they cannot think of anything else, which causes “terror” or fear, and therefore produces the Sublime.²⁵ From this account, it can be concluded that because “terror” is what, according to Burke, produces the Sublime, it is the subject that is dominant. Hence, the object initiates the Sublime experience, but the subject’s mind must subsequently resort to the feeling of “terror,” which only then creates the feeling of the Sublime. In principle, this corresponds with the before-described reader-response theory, in which the subject (i.e., the audience) always plays a central role. Furthermore, Burke’s treatise offers various instances of when exactly the Sublime can emerge – including light conditions, sounds, or the element of obscurity, which will be explored in the following chapter focused on the analysis of Lynch’s films.

As illustrated, traditional concepts of the Sublime, ranging from the rhetoric Sublime to the natural Sublime, are vastly different. Shaw further highlights this belief by stating that “an object is sublime if it can be described as such.”²⁶ Therefore, one might readily identify the heterogeneous characteristics of the Sublime and its stress on subjectivity. Nonetheless, for the purposes of the analysis, it is now imperative to explore what Burke’s followers transformed the Sublime into and what can be described as the modern concepts of the Sublime.

Among the most discussed concepts in the current times is the postmodern Sublime, which differs from traditional concepts in many aspects. As Shaw suggests, in the postmodern sense, the Sublime is perceived as an illusion caused by the human distortion of reality.²⁷ Hence, similarly to Burke, it treats the subject as dominant in producing the Sublime experience, but it no longer emphasizes the subject’s genuine emotions of terror and horror; instead, it considers the subject as somehow bewildered by his own feelings. Moreover, according to John Milbank, the Sublime experience does not point to something beyond human reason but rather to “that [quality] *within* representation which nonetheless *exceeds* the possibility of representation.”²⁸ So, in other words, something within a work of art becomes a source of the Sublime and initiates it, but this source of the Sublime experience itself defies visual representation. The source is

²⁵ Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 53.

²⁶ Shaw, *The Sublime*, 47.

²⁷ Shaw, *The Sublime*, 3.

²⁸ John Milbank, “Sublimity: The Modern Transcendent,” in *Transcendence: Philosophy, Literature, and Theology Approach the Beyond*, ed. Regina Schwartz (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 212. Emphasis original.

implicit, a feeling arising from the overall atmosphere or the progression of the plot. Therefore, it may be argued that the postmodern Sublime works with larger units of the work of art, such as various events leading to revelations and realizations of the audience, rather than the explicitly displayed objects.

Alongside the modern concepts of the Sublime also came a change in the objects and media used to deliver it. The objects which initiate the Sublime experience would now include man-made structures or digital content that allow the representation of the unrepresentable. Among the types of media used to deliver the Sublime would be photographs, televised footage, and cinematic material. This transformation represents another significant shift in the media – the focus now moves from written works of art to technological advancements such as photography or film.

This change in objects and media can be illustrated by the technological Sublime, which focuses on finding Sublime qualities in scientific advancement and structures created by humans. In *American Technological Sublime*, David Nye asserts that Golden Gate Bridge can be described as Sublime, and even though everyone knows it from photographs and postcards, the experience of visiting it cannot be described by words or images and can lead to astonishment.²⁹ Therefore, similarly to vast mountains, the Sublime experience can be produced by vast man-made objects that astonish the subject. As Nye continues, the technological Sublime also encompasses objects like skyscrapers, railroads, and even atomic bombs.³⁰ Hence, it can be said that this modern concept deals mainly with the Sublime experience produced by the results of technological advancement – various man-made objects. As will be shown in the next chapter, objects of the technological Sublime often utilize elements known from other concepts of the Sublime, resulting in an amalgam of both.

Nonetheless, the Sublime seems to be constantly changing and can currently appear in digital media. As Yi-Hui Huang states, the concept of the digital Sublime focuses mainly on photography and involves combining images together using a computer to represent the “unrepresentable.”³¹ Consequently, thanks to technological advancements, it is now possible to represent qualities once unrepresentable. In this sense, the digital Sublime ensues from the postmodern Sublime, which deemed the source of Sublime qualities as exceeding the possibility of representation. As Huang continues, this normally unrepresentable, “stunning” content enables

²⁹ David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), xi.

³⁰ Nye, *American Technological Sublime*, xv.

³¹ Yi-Hui Huang, “The Digital Sublime: Lessons from Kelli Connell’s *Double Life*,” *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 46, no. 4 (2012): 70, <https://doi.org/10.5406/jaesteduc.46.4.0070>.

the author to create their own world and share it with others.³² Hence, it functions as a way of impacting the audience. In an ideal scenario, the audience becomes immersed in an unfamiliar world, which leads to a sense of the unknown and subsequently causes an astonishing Sublime experience on the verge of terror. Additionally, it should be mentioned that the digital Sublime may also apply to films, in which the “unpresentable” can also be presented and often works towards the feeling of the Sublime. For instance, the author can use different visual effects or audio engineering to help them create their own version of the world capable of immersing the audience, which may lead to the Sublime experience.

Now that the focus of this paper has moved to explore the relationship between the Sublime and cinematic material, it is essential to attempt to apply the reader-response theory to films and subsequently explore the concept of the cinematic Sublime. As described earlier in this chapter, each meaning exists solely in the mind of the audience. Although the reader-response theory is traditionally used for the interpretation of literature, it can be applied to films, which was also affirmed by Carole Berger.³³ The differences between the media are evident; literature, maybe more than cinema, relies on the subject’s imagination, while films may seem rather expressive due to the visual content they present. Nevertheless, the processes behind creating the meaning in one’s mind are very similar, regardless of the media. The audience first engages in the content and then makes a certain sense of it – once again, it is their mind that creates the meaning. In literature, the author uses words that may be more precise in creating the meaning, which can lead individual recipients towards similar responses. Regarding cinema, however, this subjectivity becomes especially important and can lead to more discrepancies in the audience’s response. As opposed to the precision of words used in literature, cinema utilizes camera work, lighting, sound, and many other devices that the audience interprets differently – where one perceives darkness as scary or Sublime, the other may find it ridiculous. Hence, the reader-response theory is a valid model for the study of cinematic material and could be transformed into the *viewer-response* without major difficulties. As the renowned director Alain Resnais once stated, “[t]he only character is the spectator.”³⁴ Thus, despite the differences in the media format, subjectivity is crucial when interpreting literature and no less when interpreting cinematic material.

³² Huang, “The Digital Sublime,” 70–71.

³³ Carole Berger, “Viewing as Action: Film and Reader Response Criticism,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (1978): 144–151, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43795669>.

³⁴ Berger, “Viewing as Action,” 144.

While watching a film, the audience can experience a whole range of different emotions, including the feeling of the Sublime. As Nathan Carroll confirms in *The Cinematic Sublime: Negative Pleasures, Structuring Absences*, cinema has generally adopted the category of the Sublime, and currently, “[f]ilm industries (and/or filmmakers) create spectacles, meant to be passively consumed in elaborate structures with giant screens, maximizing effects of sublimity.”³⁵ Therefore, it seems evident that the Sublime is present in modern cinematic media and that the filmmakers work with this category to impact the audience. It may seem that the Sublime is overly intricate to appear in popular Hollywood films, but as Carroll asserts, it can be found not only in “art-house or avant-garde films” but also in mainstream cinema.³⁶ Hence, this makes it possible to study the Sublime in a wide range of material, including films by David Lynch – the Sublime experience does not have to be initiated by content specifically created to do so; it can emerge from any work of art, given that the audience experiences it. Lastly, as defined by Carroll, the cinematic Sublime employs various concepts ranging from the “pre-filmic” to the modern and explores their use in cinema.³⁷ It is then apparent that even “pre-filmic” concepts, such as the natural Sublime, are to be found in the products of cinema. Consequently, this allows for a close analysis of Lynch’s films in the context of both traditional and modern concepts of the Sublime.

To conclude, this chapter has illustrated differences and similarities between the various concepts of the Sublime. In addition to the Sublime objects ranging from mountains to man-made structures, the media used to deliver the Sublime have also changed – from oratory through literature to film. Furthermore, the study of the reader-response theory and its relevance to the topic of the paper has shown that the Sublime can be perceived as a way of impacting the audience. Moreover, the theory proved valid for the study of cinematic material, and the Sublime can therefore be explored as a way of impacting the audience in films. Lastly, both modern and traditional concepts of the Sublime appear to be relevant for exploring present cinema, including the work of David Lynch.

³⁵ Nathan Carroll, ed., *The Cinematic Sublime: Negative Pleasures, Structuring Absences*, (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect Ltd., 2020), “Introduction,” para. 7, <https://www.scribd.com/read/464341545>.

³⁶ Carroll, *The Cinematic Sublime*, “Introduction,” para. 12.

³⁷ Carroll, *The Cinematic Sublime*, “Introduction,” para. 12.

2. The Sublime Arising from Objects in David Lynch's Work

As described in the "Introduction," the work of David Lynch is known for its specific style, apt to induce the Sublime experience vis-à-vis the amalgam of terror and astonishment. The goal of this chapter is to closely analyze selected passages from *Twin Peaks* (1990) and support the findings with examples from *Wild at Heart* (1990), *Lost Highway* (1997), and *Mulholland Drive* (2001). The analysis aims to explore the way and degree to which Lynch relies upon the traditional or modern Sublime concepts, focusing on the presented objects. Initially, the chapter discusses the importance of sound in Lynch's work and intends to illustrate its relationship with the Sublime experience. Then, other Sublime objects involving the elements of obscurity, suddenness, intermitting, light, or darkness are explored, observing various ways they influence the Sublime experience. Lastly, the chapter aims to identify contrasts and overlaps between the technological and natural Sublime presented in the work of David Lynch.

In Lynch's films, sound design is an essential component that helps the Sublime to emerge. Typically, scenes initiating the Sublime experience show an object acting as the primary trigger, while the sound accompanying a scene makes the experience complete. This often overwhelms or astonishes the audience. Referring to Shaw cited in the first chapter; the Sublime experience generally emerges when "words fail and points of comparison disappear."³⁸ As will soon be illustrated, such occurrences are not rare in Lynch's work. Nevertheless, the relationship between sound and the Sublime was already recognized by Edmund Burke. He asserts that "[t]he eye is not the only organ of sensation, by which a sublime passion may be produced. Sounds have a great power in these as in most other passions."³⁹ Then, in a section of his treatise called "Suddenness," Burke observes that:

[a] sudden beginning, or sudden cessation of sound of any considerable force, has the same power [of producing the Sublime]. The attention is roused by this; and the faculties driven forward, as it were, on their guard. [...] In every thing [*sic*] sudden and unexpected, we are apt to start; that is, we have a perception of danger, and our nature rouses us to guard against it.⁴⁰

Thus, according to Burke, any sudden sound (or anything sudden in general) can produce a Sublime experience. However, in Lynch's work, the sound often does not act on its own and cooperates with a Sublime object showing a different aspect of sublimity. For example, in the first episode of *Twin Peaks* (directed by Lynch himself), a dissonant piece of music starts

³⁸ Shaw, *The Sublime*, 2.

³⁹ Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 75.

⁴⁰ Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 76.

playing while Pete Martell goes fishing in the morning and notices something strange lying on the sandbank of the river. Then, a sudden sound of a foghorn and some unspecified clinking starts repeating in a loop, joining the music. As Pete approaches the unknown object, the audience can identify that it is a plastic-wrapped dead body of a woman; the corpse is in a prone position, its head is facing the ground, covered by its long, brown hair.⁴¹ At this precise moment, the audience may start perceiving the corpse as a Sublime object. As illustrated above via Burke's statement, the sudden sounds create an atmosphere that may lead to experiencing the Sublime. Secondly, due to their encounter with death in a piece of fiction, the audience will likely feel terror combined with astonishment. As Burke states, "astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended [...]. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it."⁴² Hence, the minds of the audience should be so "entirely filled" with the thought of the corpse that they cannot ponder anything else. The vision of the corpse itself may instill terror, while the circumstances of its finding can result in astonishment. In a section called "Obscurity," Burke adds that: "[t]o make any thing [*sic*] very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary. When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes."⁴³ The scene from *Twin Peaks* described above does precisely that – the face of the corpse and its identity is obscured from the audience, which may result in the Sublime experience par excellence. While horrified, the audience can also be in the grip of a power outside of themselves, wanting them to uncover the plastic wrap and look the corpse straight in the face.

In the following scene, Pete calls the police and informs them of the dead body. When the police arrive at the crime scene, the same unsettling music starts playing – often interrupted by a sudden sound of a foghorn and unspecified clinking. The dead body is still in the same position, its identity unrevealed, and three policemen, together with Pete Martell, are standing over it. The policemen first take pictures of the dead body.⁴⁴ At this moment, the Sublime experience produced by the corpse strengthens; the audience is likely horrified but desperately wants to know its obscured identity. Then, after more than a minute of watch time, the coroner instructs the sheriff to help him roll the body over. As they both hesitantly do so, the music intensifies, and the camera shows a close-up shot of the victim's face – but even now, it is

⁴¹ David Lynch and Mark Frost, creators, *Twin Peaks*, (CBS Television Distribution, 1990; Criterion, 2015), Blu-ray, S01E01, 0:03:09–0:04:37.

⁴² Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 53.

⁴³ Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 54.

⁴⁴ Lynch and Frost, *Twin Peaks*, S01E01, 0:06:15–0:06:30.

obscured from view, covered by plastic. Afterward, the coroner slowly uncovers the face and identifies the body as Laura Palmer, finally revealing its identity to the audience.⁴⁵ As the scene ends, the potential Sublime experience initiated by the object also stops. The terror arising from the dead body ceases, and the outside force, likely causing a literal desire of the audience to uncover the body, fades away. Nonetheless, as intensive as this scene may seem, the audience is soon confronted with another object capable of producing the Sublime.

After identifying the body as a girl named Laura Palmer, the camera cuts to a shot that shows an older woman smoking a cigarette in the kitchen. The woman begins: “Laura, sweetheart, I’m not gonna tell you again.” This scene is apt to make the audience realize that this woman must be the victim’s mother, and the situation abruptly leads to another Sublime experience driven by the obscurity described by Burke. After a few unsuccessful shouts intended to get Laura downstairs and eat breakfast, the girl still does not respond. Consequently, the woman puts down her cigarette, approaches the staircase, and as the camera cuts to a shot from below the stairs, the same unsettling music suddenly starts playing, only this time without the foghorn and clinking.⁴⁶ At this point, the staircase becomes another object capable of producing the Sublime. Laura’s mother walks up the stairs, still calling her daughter. The camera stays below the stairs and does not follow the mother upstairs. The shot is low-angle, relatively still, and well-lit; Laura’s mother can be seen only partially, walking from room to room, trying to find Laura. The only moving object is a spinning ceiling fan above the staircase.⁴⁷ In this case, the Burkean obscurity inducing terror and subsequently the Sublime experience works differently than in the previous instance. As the audience peripherally observes Laura’s mother’s fruitless endeavor to find her deceased daughter, the staircase will likely become their only point of interest – their minds can get entirely filled with it, and its ominous qualities could reach beyond their understanding. Therefore, in this instance, the object that obscures (i.e., the staircase) rather than the obscured (the mother’s actions upstairs) can initiate the Sublime experience. Analogously, in comparison with the previous example, the obscurity functions oppositely here – as if the plastic wrap covering the body was a Sublime object, as opposed to the dead body itself.

Nevertheless, this shot also shows elements of the technological Sublime. As Laura’s mother walks back down the stairs, the camera cuts to a close-up shot of the spinning ceiling fan situated just outside Laura’s bedroom, and the hum of the fan drowns out the unsettling

⁴⁵ Lynch and Frost, *Twin Peaks*, S01E01, 0:07:33–0:08:05.

⁴⁶ Lynch and Frost, *Twin Peaks*, S01E01, 0:08:06–0:08:30.

⁴⁷ Lynch and Frost, *Twin Peaks*, S01E01, 0:08:35–0:09:10.

music.⁴⁸ At this moment, the audience may start feeling overwhelmed by the sense of the unknown emerging from the ceiling fan and its foreboding hum. The Sublime experience initiated by the staircase escalates, and the audience may perceive the fan as something beyond their understanding. In a sense, both these objects evoke the Sublime described by John Dennis (see the first chapter) and contradict his theory that the Sublime experience may arise only from objects outside of everyday life. The ceiling fan and the staircase are mundane objects, yet Lynch's work utilizes them in a way capable of producing the Sublime. Subsequently, the audience is apt to contemplate the importance of the ceiling fan, as if it were a mute witness or even a culprit of the crime, due to its proximity to Laura's room. However, this lasts only briefly – no answer is given, and the camera cuts to a shot displaying Laura's mother calling her boyfriend's parents, which ends the potential Sublime experience arising from these objects.

Nevertheless, the ominous staircase proves to be a recurring theme. When Laura's mother finds out that the girl is neither with her boyfriend nor at school, she calls her husband, Leland. During the call, the foreboding music emerges once again, and as Leland reassures his wife that their daughter is undoubtedly safe and sound, the local sheriff appears and informs him of Laura's demise – the mother concurrently realizing what had happened, screaming in despair.⁴⁹ Later, the police arrive at the Palmer home to interrogate Laura's mother and investigate the house. When Mrs. Palmer regains her composure, the sheriff asks her when she last saw Laura. Mrs. Palmer replies: "It would have been about nine p.m. She came home from Bobby's, and she was going up the stairs." Terrified, Mrs. Palmer looks towards the stairs and continues: "Those stairs right there." At this precise moment, the camera suddenly cuts to the identical shot of the ominous staircase, accompanied by a sudden, foreboding sound – the low camera angle and the spinning ceiling fan both present.⁵⁰ Due to its suddenness and recurrence, this scene may be capable of producing a Sublime experience, and moreover, it deepens the obscurity arising from the staircase. At this point, the audience is apt to ask themselves what the staircase (or the ceiling fan itself) has to do with the death of Laura Palmer and what exactly makes it so unsettling. However, these questions remain unresolved, the specific cause of terror inexplicable, and the audience's minds will presumably resort to the feeling of the Sublime. In this instance, the Sublime experience is mainly driven by the obscurity described by Burke, which brings in the sense of the unknown, resulting in the amalgam of terror and astonishment. On that account, the audience should experience terror due to the unknown capabilities of the

⁴⁸ Lynch and Frost, *Twin Peaks*, S01E01, 0:09:11–0:09:15.

⁴⁹ Lynch and Frost, *Twin Peaks*, S01E01, 0:13:03–0:15:30.

⁵⁰ Lynch and Frost, *Twin Peaks*, S01E01, 0:27:30–0:28:48.

object, while their mind is astonished and cannot entertain anything else. Furthermore, in this case, the Sublime experience arising from obscurity is accompanied by suddenness, involving rapid cuts, various unexpected sounds, and abruptly emerging eerie music. Lastly, this example of the Sublime proved to be likely co-initiated by a man-made object (i.e., the ceiling fan), which can hint at the use of some aspects of the technological Sublime.

However, the shot of the ominous staircase appears again, utilizing other Sublime elements. At the end of the first episode, which also marks the end of the first day after the tragic events in the town of Twin Peaks, Mrs. Palmer is lying on the sofa in her living room, smoking a cigarette, seemingly devastated by the death of her daughter. A lamp is lit on a small table behind her, illuminating a photo of Laura. As the scene progresses, low unsettling music starts playing, and Mrs. Palmer seems gradually more distressed. Then, the audience is presented with something which appears to be an insight into Mrs. Palmer's mind. The scene rapidly cuts to a shot of the ominous staircase, but this time, it is almost pitch-black upstairs; the only light comes from downstairs, and the spinning ceiling fan is faintly noticeable.⁵¹ As Burke states, "darkness is more productive of sublime ideas than light,"⁵² and that

all edifices calculated to produce an idea of the sublime, ought rather to be dark and gloomy, and this for two reasons; the first is, that darkness itself on other occasions is known by experience to have a greater effect on the passions than light. The second is, that to make an object very striking, we should make it as different as possible from the objects with which we have been immediately conversant [...].⁵³

Hence, as this scene currently employs darkness instead of the previously well-lit shot of the ominous staircase, it can produce an even more intense Sublime experience. Furthermore, the rapid cut from a bright living room to a gloomy staircase is apt to startle and subsequently astonish the audience while being terrified of the recurring ominous staircase. Nevertheless, the amalgam of terror and astonishment has yet to climax in this scene. As the camera cuts back to a shot of Mrs. Palmer lying on the sofa, her face seems to wrinkle in horror, and the following rapid cut appears to show an insight into her mind once more. This time, the audience is presented with a shot displaying a first-person perspective of an unknown person somewhere in the woods – the scene is almost entirely dark, employs shaky camera techniques, and is illuminated only by a flashlight. The unsettling music remains faint while the camera cuts to a close-up shot of a stone under which two characters had hidden a certain necklace earlier in the episode. It should be noted that no one apart from them knows about the hiding place. Yet, this

⁵¹ Lynch and Frost, *Twin Peaks*, S01E01, 01:32:35–01:32:44.

⁵² Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 73.

⁵³ Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 74.

becomes an object of Mrs. Palmer's visions, and as the unknown person gets closer to the rock and shines the flashlight on it, Mrs. Palmer suddenly leaps off the sofa and gasps. Unlike the low unsettling music, the gasp is loud and echoes back and forth, which possibly creates a ringing in the ears and instills terror. Then, the unknown person lifts the rock and takes the necklace. At this point, Mrs. Palmer's gasps become a loud scream that echoes as the closing credits roll in.⁵⁴ It seems evident that elements capable of producing the Sublime experience are present in the sequence. Apart from the sense of the unknown arising from obscurity shrouding the mysterious, unidentified person in the woods, the scene is almost entirely dark. Both these elements are likely to contribute to the feeling of terror. However, this scene introduced another essential component. As Burke observes, "[e]xcessive loudness alone is sufficient to overpower the soul, to suspend its action, and to fill it with terror."⁵⁵ It follows that the echoing gasps and loud screams of Mrs. Palmer should also induce terror in the audience, mainly owing to their loudness, as opposed to the faint foreboding music accompanying the scene. Besides, the assumption that the above-described scenes are Mrs. Palmer's visions can turn the audience's terror into astonishment. Thus, the audience may feel in the grasp of something beyond their abilities to understand, questioning the mysterious connection between Mrs. Palmer and her daughter's death, possibly leading to a Sublime experience. As usual, no answers are given, and the episode unexpectedly ends.

It can be said that light conditions also contribute to the feeling of the Sublime in other instances. In the film *Lost Highway* (1997) by David Lynch, the main character Fred is imprisoned for allegedly killing his wife. As the following sequence leads to a Sublime event which will be analyzed in the next chapter, it is unnecessary to go into great detail when describing the scene. During the first night, Fred complains of a headache. The prison cell is relatively dark, and an unspecified faint sound in the background resembles a woman singing. Subsequently, Fred seems increasingly distressed and starts having visions. When the camera cuts back to Fred, a loud sound abruptly emerges from the background, and a bright blue light suddenly appears around him, possibly dazzling the audience. At that moment, the scene is apt to initiate the Sublime experience. Then, Fred looks upwards, and the camera cuts to a shot displaying a ceiling light above his prison cell. Subsequently, the light goes out, resulting in a few seconds of complete darkness, possibly terrifying the audience and strengthening the potential Sublime experience.⁵⁶ According to Burke, "[e]xtreme light, by overcoming the

⁵⁴ Lynch and Frost, *Twin Peaks*, S01E01, 01:32:45–01:33:10.

⁵⁵ Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 75.

⁵⁶ David Lynch, dir., *Lost Highway* (October Films, 1997; Kino Lorber, 2019), Blu-ray, 00:47:35–00:49:40.

organs of sight, obliterates all objects, so as in its effect exactly to resemble darkness. [...] Thus are two [opposite] ideas [...] reconciled in the extremes of both; and both in spite of their opposite nature brought to concur in producing the sublime.”⁵⁷ Hence, similarly to darkness, dazzling light can also produce the Sublime. Moreover, in the scene described above, the blinding flash of light abruptly transforms into complete darkness, which indicates the use of both these elements. In cooperation with the elements of light and darkness, the previously described excessive loudness is also employed, possibly startling the audience. Thus, in this case, the terror is first instilled by a sudden loud sound followed by a dazzling flash of light, which turns into complete darkness, likely further terrifying the audience. After this sequence, a vital revelation comes, which is apt to transform the terror into astonishment and will be explored in the next chapter.

Thus far, the potential Sublime objects analyzed in Lynch’s work have been of various kinds but never purely natural. Nonetheless, his work also seems to employ traditional objects of nature. At this juncture, a point should be made that cinematic material can produce the natural Sublime in its traditional form. As Danny Roy Jennings confirms,

[...] it is plausible to argue that cinematic representations of sublime nature can work together with other formal cinematographic, editing and sound techniques to express an aesthetic of nature’s self-transcending tendencies and, therefore, an aesthetic of the natural sublime. The window of cinema (representations of nature) and the surface of cinema (film form) can both work together towards the same goal.⁵⁸

Therefore, even without utilizing unconventional objects such as the corpse or the staircase described earlier, films can produce a Sublime experience using traditional objects of nature. As was illustrated in the first chapter, traditional objects, according to Addison, include not only “the Bulk of any single Object, but the Largeness of a whole View, considered as one entire Piece. Such are the Prospects of an open Champain Country, a vast uncultivated Desert [*sic*], of huge Heaps of Mountains, high Rocks and Precipices, or a wide Expanse of Waters [...]”⁵⁹ For instance, a scene displaying a traditional Sublime scenery can be found in Lynch’s film *Wild at Heart* (1990), which is known for its explicit depiction of violence – as Matthew Flisfeder puts it, “in postmodern cinema, [...] [e]verything can be expressed, we can see ‘it’ all – obscenities, violence, and so on.”⁶⁰ Nevertheless, as was already illustrated by referring to

⁵⁷ Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 74.

⁵⁸ Danny Roy Jennings, “The Aesthetics of Nature and the Cinematic Sublime: A Creative Investigation into an Organic Transcendental Film Style,” (Ph.D. diss., Curtin University, 2017), 32.

⁵⁹ Addison, *The Spectator*, no. 412.

⁶⁰ Matthew Flisfeder, *The Symbolic, the Sublime, and Slavoj Žižek’s Theory of Film*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 154.

Burke in this chapter, even postmodern cinema seems to employ ideas known from traditional concepts of the Sublime. Near the first half of the film, the main characters, Lula and Sailor, drive their car, running away from Lula's mother and the criminals hired to kill Sailor. While Sailor is resting in the backseat of the car, Lola steers, switching the radio channels back and forth, trying to find some music. However, the channels she can find all offer the same – various disturbing reports on murders and other particularly violent acts. Subsequently, she loses her temper, stops the car, and tells Sailor to find some music. When he manages to do so, they both start dancing wildly beside the car. As the camera moves upwards, the music changes into a soft melody, and Sailor embraces Lula. Then, the camera cuts to a scene showing a scenery capable of producing the Sublime experience – the sun sets in the distance, and the audience is presented with a view of a “vast uncultivated” wasteland⁶¹ (evoking Addison discussed earlier). As Anne Jerslev concurs in her study *David Lynch: Blurred Boundaries*,

[this] fragment offers a vision of sublime boundlessness, of freedom and vigorous youthfulness. The final sublime image [...] and the violins' other-worldliness in a sense release Sailor and Lula from their material existence and transport them into a kind of peaceful transcendence where no evil can reach them.⁶²

Therefore, in this case, the Sublime functions in two ways – firstly, according to Jerslev, the scene displays the characters experiencing the Sublime (or a similar feeling of transcendence), which makes them forget about the ever-present violence. Secondly, it can be argued that from the audience's point of view, the vastness of the landscape is likely to induce feelings of one's smallness and unimportance, which can lead to emotions analogous to terror. Then, the music accompanying the final image gives the atmosphere a touch of optimism. When at last combined with the majestic sunset, which is quite indescribable and elevates beyond the limits of beauty, this scene may lead the audience towards experiencing the Sublime, arising from traditional objects of nature depicted in an example of Lynch's postmodern cinema.

Moreover, it follows that cinematic representations of traditional Sublime objects employ film forms that can help the Sublime arise and widen its scope. Hence, a scene can simultaneously show an object of the natural Sublime with an object of the technological Sublime in juxtaposition, allowing one to find contrasts between the traditional and modern concepts in one specific shot. For example, the television series *Twin Peaks* seems to offer multiple instances showing a contrast between the natural and technological Sublime. A case

⁶¹ David Lynch, dir., *Wild at Heart*, (The Samuel Goldwyn Company, 1990; Twilight Time, 2014), Blu-ray, 00:50:03–00:52:16.

⁶² Anne Jerslev, *David Lynch: Blurred Boundaries*, (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 193.

in point could be the opening credits sequence, which should initially be explored from a general perspective since it appears as an essential starting point in every episode of the *Twin Peaks* series. The music accompanying the opening credits could be described as ambient and suspenseful. Due to its ineffable qualities, it may even be capable of initiating the Sublime experience on its own. To put it concisely, when one gets familiar with the television series, the opening credits sequence sets the mood, and the first tones of the opening theme arouses the viewer. Thus, the sequence helps create a particular atmosphere that allows the audience to fully immerse, consequently facilitating the emergence of the Sublime experience in the given episode.

The opening credits start with a close shot showing a bird sitting on a branch, which slowly dissolves into a shot of smoking chimneys of a sawmill, subsequently presenting the machines inside, followed by shots of a waterfall, flowing water, and a road leading to the town of Twin Peaks.⁶³ Nonetheless, while the entirety of the opening credits displays various objects of nature and technology that could, under certain circumstances, initiate the Sublime experience, one shot suggests a direct contrast between the traditional and modern concepts of the Sublime. In the scene, the audience is presented with a sign saying “Welcome to Twin Peaks” with a river on its right (the same river where Laura’s body was found), a road on the left, and two mountains, known as the “twin peaks,” shown in the distance.⁶⁴ The first object capable of producing the Sublime is the mountains. The mountain closer to the camera is partially obscured by mist, while the second mountain behind it is shrouded in mist almost entirely, possibly creating a sense of the unknown. As Jennings asserts in his analysis of a comparable shot of mountains in Werner Herzog’s *Nosferatu the Vampyre* (1979),

[t]hese physical frontiers of distance and obstruction emerge both from the immensity of the actual natural phenomena (the emergent totality of the mountain and space it fills) and from the limits of the camera as it emulates human perception. The representation of mist also evokes the Burkean sublime in that it obscures the form of the mountain revealing another frontier of visual perception.⁶⁵

A similar approach can be applied when analyzing the scene from *Twin Peaks*. Apart from the Sublime experience arising from the vastness and immensity of the mountains, the earlier described Burkean obscurity also plays a role here, shrouding the mountains in the mist. As a result, this scene likely creates a sense of the unknown, which induces a feeling of terror. Combined with the vastness of the mountains, this could lead to the feeling of astonishment and

⁶³ Lynch and Frost, *Twin Peaks*, S01E01, 0:00:00–0:02:40.

⁶⁴ Lynch and Frost, *Twin Peaks*, S01E01, 0:01:10–0:01:45.

⁶⁵ Jennings, “The Aesthetics of Nature,” 83.

thus initiate the Sublime experience. Then, the second object apt to produce the Sublime is the road, which may be used to show a contrast between traditional and modern concepts. The road in the foreground is juxtaposed with the mountains in the background. As it bends to the left out of the view of the camera, it leads somewhere into a forest of Douglas firs – trees that incidentally appear to have a certain symbolism in the television series. Although the mountains and the road seem to have nothing in common, the obscurity described by Burke functions similarly in both of them and can potentially lead the audience to experience the Sublime. While the mountains are objects of nature obscured by mist, the road is a man-made object obscured from the audience's view due to its curve, so the audience is unaware of what lies ahead. Thus, the sense of the unknown arising from obscurity can be found in both these objects – the mountains can be described as traditional objects of the natural Sublime, while the road as an object of the technological Sublime utilizing ideas from a much older Burke's concept. Lastly, it should also be noted that this "Welcome to Twin Peaks" scene does not appear only in the opening credits, but repeatedly throughout the whole series, and the two peaks are placed in juxtaposition with man-made Sublime objects also in other instances.

One of those instances showing a contrast between the natural and technological Sublime also involves the element of suddenness, as described by Burke, together with a different and equally important component. Shortly after the interrogation of Laura's mother, a worker from the local sawmill reports that his daughter also went missing. Then, the camera cuts to a scene showing the current happenings at the sawmill. The sawmill supervisor is in dispute with the owner, who wants to shut the facility down for the day due to the recent events. The owner makes an announcement over the loudspeaker, the missing girl's father is taken away by the police for questioning, and the sawmill shuts down.⁶⁶ At this moment, the camera cuts to a shot of a saw blade gradually slowing down, followed by a sudden cut to a seemingly still scene, showing a railway bridge in the foreground, juxtaposed with two mountains in the background; the two peaks are visible through the individual pillars of the bridge. In this example, the ominous music is not present, and the audience can only hear a faint, occasional howling of the wind.⁶⁷ In another section of his treatise called "Intermitting," Burke states that: "[a] low, tremulous, intermitting sound [...] is productive of the sublime."⁶⁸ Thus, as opposed to the suddenly emerging ominous music described in the previous instances, a soft and quiet sound varying in intensity can also produce the Sublime. Therefore, the wind can act as a trigger for

⁶⁶ Lynch and Frost, *Twin Peaks*, S01E01, 0:31:07–0:33:48.

⁶⁷ Lynch and Frost, *Twin Peaks*, S01E01, 0:33:50–0:34:15.

⁶⁸ Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 76.

the Sublime experience, while the audience may get astonished by the presented objects – the two mountains in the background, acting as traditional Sublime objects of nature, and the juxtaposed man-made railway bridge, which can indicate a contrast between the natural and technological Sublime. Regarding both these objects, the main element triggering sublimity could be their immensity and vastness, which can result in astonishment.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that this seemingly motionless shot does not show any traces of terror at first glance. After a brief moment, however, the audience can notice an unidentified figure walking on the bridge, possibly creating a sense of the unknown. As the figure slowly gets into a better view of the camera, the astonishment arising from the scenery is likely joined by a feeling of terror. The audience's attention may shift toward the unknown figure, and they can identify a visibly distressed woman dressed in a torn nightgown. Subsequently, this finding is apt to jolt the audience into a sudden realization that the unknown figure must be the missing girl, which can also change the source of the astonishment. Instead of the mountains and the railway bridge, the audience may be astonished by the girl's suddenly exposed identity while being terrified of what had happened to her. To conclude, this instance features three objects capable of producing the Sublime experience. The mountains and the bridge are likely to initiate a feeling of astonishment, while the missing girl instills terror (or later also astonishment) and makes the Sublime experience complete. Moreover, the whole experience seems to show a contrast between the technological and natural Sublime, driven by the elements of Burkean suddenness and intermitting.

Furthermore, intermitting as an element productive of the Sublime can relate not only to sound but also to light conditions. In another example from the television series *Twin Peaks*, special agent Dale Cooper meets the local sheriff in a hospital, intending to examine Laura Palmer's dead body. In the next scene, they reach the morgue, and as they prepare to search the body, the audience can notice that the light above the dead body is flickering. The morgue attendant says: "I have to apologize again for the fluorescent lights. I think it's a bad transformer."⁶⁹ As agent Cooper continues to examine the body, the only sound accompanying the scene is the humming and constant rattling of the fluorescent light. At this moment, the light may be perceived as an object that can initiate the Sublime experience. As explained via Burke earlier in this chapter, darkness is a crucial component that can initiate the Sublime experience – when compared to light, darkness is more capable of producing sublimity. However, as Burke also observes, "a light now appearing, and now leaving us, and so off and on, is even more

⁶⁹ Lynch and Frost, *Twin Peaks*, S01E01, 0:42:30–0:42:40.

terrible than total darkness; and a sort of uncertain sounds are, when the necessary dispositions concur, more alarming than a total silence.”⁷⁰ Therefore, the flickering fluorescent light can be identified as an object that triggers the element of Burkean intermitting, potentially leading the audience to experience the Sublime. Moreover, the constant rattling noises make the scene somewhat more disturbing than if it were completely silent.

After a while, special agent Cooper seems to have found something and asks the attendant to leave the room. Subsequently, the feeling of terror arising from the flickering light and the rattling noises is apt to intensify due to the presence of the corpse. As agent Cooper proceeds to examine the body, the camera cuts to a close-up shot showing its stiff blue fingers, potentially even strengthening the terror felt by the audience. Then, in a still and silent scene accompanied only by the flickering and rattling, Cooper reaches under the nail of the dead body and finds a clue identified as a piece of paper with the letter “R.”⁷¹ Due to the obscurity of the clue, this scene will likely astonish the audience, while the intermittent light, disturbing noises, and the presence of the dead body can lead to the feeling of terror. When combined, this amalgam of terror and astonishment should initiate the Sublime experience. Like in the previous instance, no ominous music suddenly emerges from the background; on the contrary, the scene is quite calm, and the sounds in the background are relatively faint. In this scene, the feeling of terror initially arises from the flickering fluorescent light and its constant rattling, which is later complemented by the unsettling close-up shot of the stiff fingers. Furthermore, it should be noted that both these objects are reminiscent of some previously analyzed Sublime objects. Firstly, the fluorescent light functions similarly to the spinning ceiling fan above the ominous staircase – both are objects of technology that induce terror for reasons beyond the audience’s understanding; there is almost nothing explicitly terrifying about them, yet they are capable of instilling terror. Additionally, the stiff blue fingers resemble a close-up shot of the victim’s face from the beginning of the episode, just after the police rolled the body over. In this instance, the source of terror seems evident and explicitly displayed – the audience encounters death, which generally leads to the feeling of terror. To conclude, it should be mentioned that intermitting, one of the elements productive of the Sublime as described by Burke, utilizes a man-made object in this scene, which can indicate the use of the technological Sublime vis-à-vis the Burkean natural Sublime, resulting in a combination of both.

⁷⁰ Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 77.

⁷¹ Lynch and Frost, *Twin Peaks*, S01E01, 0:42:50–0:44:12.

A similar object capable of producing the Sublime is to be found in Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001). In the film, a director called Adam Keshner calls his assistant, who informs him that someone left a message advising Adam to see "the Cowboy."⁷² When he reaches the destination, ominous music starts playing. As Adam's car approaches the camera, he turns the headlights off, which results in a rather dark scene. Adam gets out of the car, and the camera cuts to a shot of a bison skull with a switched-off light hanging below it. As Adam approaches the meeting place, low, ominous music plays in the background, and the scene is almost entirely dark. Suddenly, the camera cuts to the same shot of the bison skull, and the light below it starts rapidly flickering and buzzing until it finally turns on and stays lit.⁷³ As opposed to the previous instance, the potential Sublime experience is first initiated by the suddenly emerging ominous music, which is apt to keep the audience in suspense while Adam is still peacefully driving the car, laughing about meeting the mysterious Cowboy. Then, the element which transforms mere suspense into terror is darkness. As Adam steps off the street and approaches the meeting place, the sequence gets increasingly darker, possibly instilling terror in the audience. Additionally, the feeling of terror may be complemented by the foreboding intermittent light, creating a terrifying atmosphere similar to the previous example. Moreover, the element of obscurity producing a sense of the unknown can also be identified in this sequence – the eerie Cowboy is an unknown character, and the audience will likely ponder his identity. Therefore, as indicated, this example seems to employ all the previously mentioned Burkean elements simultaneously, resulting in an atmosphere that may produce a Sublime experience due to the use of elements described by Edmund Burke.

In conclusion, Lynch's work offers numerous objects apt to produce a Sublime experience. The close analysis of *Twin Peaks* indicated that elements described by Burke in *A Philosophical Enquiry* (1757) could be found in the work of David Lynch, which was further highlighted by the analysis of scenes from his other films. In a few instances, the natural Sublime was identified in its traditional form, utilizing immense objects and vast spaces. Furthermore, the analysis has shown that objects of the natural Sublime are often placed in juxtaposition with objects of the technological Sublime, showing overlaps between the two concepts, both relying on similar elements of sublimity. Besides, the Burkean elements frequently employ modern man-made objects, which results in a combination of both concepts – the natural Sublime utilizing objects of technology.

⁷² David Lynch, dir., *Mulholland Drive*, (Universal Pictures, 2001; Criterion, 2015), Blu-ray, 00:58:40–01:02:20.

⁷³ Lynch, *Mulholland Drive*, 01:05:20–01:06:32.

3. The Sublime Produced by Events in David Lynch's Work

Initially, this chapter aims to elaborate on the concept of the postmodern Sublime and the way of its application in the analysis of films by David Lynch. Then, it focuses on the role of immersion with the intent to explore how it influences the audience's reception in relation to the Sublime experience and how it correlates with the element of distance described by Joseph Addison. Additionally, the goal of this chapter is to analyze selected events in Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*, *Lost Highway*, and *Twin Peaks: The Return* (2017) and observe the methods used to create the Sublime. Lastly, the analysis intends to find the digital Sublime in Lynch's work, hinting at another shift in the media used to produce the Sublime experience.

As indicated in the theoretical chapter, the concept of the postmodern Sublime focuses on those qualities within a work of art that avoid representation. In that sense, as opposed to the natural Sublime, it might be argued that the postmodern Sublime arises from something implicit rather than explicitly presented objects. As Philip Shaw states, in the postmodern view, "the highest of the high is nothing more than an illusion brought about through our misperception of reality."⁷⁴ Therefore, the postmodern concept perceives the Sublime experience as something caused by one's distorted view of reality. As previously described, this misperception of reality is likely a consequence of some visually unrepresentable event. To effectively apply this claim to cinematic material, it is crucial to focus on the role of immersion. As Marie-Laure Ryan asserts in *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, "[f]or immersion to take place, the text must offer an expanse to be immersed within, and this expanse, in a blatantly mixed metaphor, is not an ocean but a textual world."⁷⁵ Although Ryan focuses on literature, this statement is equally essential when analyzing films. In other words, the audience can be immersed in a fictional world when it offers a whole expanse of situations, characters, and other elements, which is not rare in Lynch's films. Anne Jerslev confirms that

[i]n Lynch's work, worlds are spaces of otherness into which the viewer can be immersed affectively and go dreaming. [...] The unsharp, enigmatic images scattered throughout his work and intertwined everywhere with the ever-present sound and noise create this feeling of blurred boundaries and being surrounded by a different, strange world, one often frightening but also compelling.⁷⁶

Therefore, it can be said that Lynch's fictional worlds allow the audience to be fully immersed in them. To put this in context with the previous claim about the postmodern Sublime, a full immersion into a film can be associated with the misperception of reality. The film immerses

⁷⁴ Shaw, *The Sublime*, 3.

⁷⁵ Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 90.

⁷⁶ Jerslev, *David Lynch*, 256. Emphasis omitted.

the audience to the extent that they are likely to disregard that the meaning is created in the mind (see the reader-response theory passage in the first chapter). Therefore, the audience may feel intrigued by the content and consequently overwhelmed, resulting in a feeling that some outside force takes control of their minds and that they are powerless to resist it. Due to its ineffable and immeasurable qualities, as if the audience were in the grasp of something beyond their understanding, this illusion may be described as a Sublime experience arising from the misperception of reality caused by a full immersion. In a sense, this claim corresponds with the concept of the postmodern Sublime and could be labeled as the immersive Sublime, which will be applicable for the due analysis. As will soon be illustrated, thanks to Lynch's elaborate screenplay and direction, the Sublime can arise not only from objects but also from the visually unrepresentable – plot twists, revelations, and subsequent realizations.

To put this claim to use, it is vital to briefly focus on Lynch's *Wild at Heart*. As was previously mentioned, the film is known for its explicit depiction of violence – the world Lula and Sailor live in is fierce, and violence is an ever-present factor. Throughout the film, the audience may notice increasingly apparent parallels with *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). There is, for example, the Wicked Witch following the pair on her broom.⁷⁷ However, the audience will likely perceive these as insignificant references until the end of the film, which brings a revelation capable of producing the Sublime. After Sailor is released from prison and meets Lula and their son for the first time, he rapidly changes his mind and decides to pursue a different life. As Sailor walks away, he is confronted by a group of criminals and gets beaten unconscious. At this moment, the Good Witch suddenly appears, inspiring Sailor to return to Lula. When Sailor regains consciousness, he apologizes to the criminals, thanks them for a “valuable lesson in life,” and runs off, trying to find Lula. Then, the camera cuts to a shot of Lula's mother screaming in despair as she melts,⁷⁸ referring to the melting of the Wicked Witch in *The Wizard of Oz*. This revelation is apt to make the audience realize that the parallel between the two films is crucial to the plot. As Nathan Carroll puts it, this moment “offers the sublime (and exclusively cinematic) realization that the entire movie, with its extremes of body horror and sensory dislocation, has been taking place inside *The Wizard of Oz*.”⁷⁹ Therefore, it can be argued that the plot twist and subsequent realization of the audience may lead to the Sublime experience caused by the before-described immersive Sublime. The audience, fully immersed in the violent world of *Wild at Heart*, should get overwhelmed by this sudden revelation, as if

⁷⁷ Lynch, *Wild at Heart*, 0:56:50–0:57:05.

⁷⁸ Lynch, *Wild at Heart*, 1:54:10–1:59:44.

⁷⁹ Carroll, *The Cinematic Sublime*, “Introduction,” para. 10. Emphasis original.

there is some outside force taking control of their minds, urging them to rethink and comprehend the film differently. To highlight a claim presented in the first chapter; the audience is apt to momentarily disregard their central role in creating the meaning, and they may consequently feel like puppets controlled by a master puppeteer – an overwhelming feeling capable of initiating the Sublime experience.

Nonetheless, plot twists and revelations with a similar effect can be identified in other previously mentioned Lynch's films. A case in point is *Mulholland Drive*, which shows multiple possibly Sublime events that ultimately lead to a sudden revelation. The first potentially Sublime event is set in daylight in a restaurant called Winkie's. The audience is presented with two men talking about a dream one of them had about the place. The man explains to his friend that the dream looks precisely like the present moment, except they are both terrified, and his friend is standing by the counter. At this moment, the atmosphere of the scene becomes terrifying and ominous music emerges from the background. He proceeds to describe that the source of terror in the dream is some man behind the restaurant, and his friend suggests that he should go and see if the man is truly out there. The friend stands up and pays at the counter, and as the man turns around and looks at him, he realizes that this is exactly how his dream begins – they are both terrified, and his friend is standing by the counter.⁸⁰ At this point, the audience may start perceiving the event as Sublime; for a reason beyond their understanding, the *reality* in the scene seamlessly transforms into the man's worst nightmare. While the source of terror seems evident in this case, other emotions leading to the Sublime experience evoke an element described by Addison. As he states, "the more frightful Appearance they [terrifying objects or events] make, the greater is the Pleasure we receive from the Sense of our own Safety."⁸¹ Hence, while the audience will likely share the feeling of terror with the man, there is also a degree of pleasure caused by the distance between the audience and the event, which is an essential component in producing the Sublime – without it, the feeling would turn into mere fear. When combined, this amalgam of positive and negative emotions should initiate the Sublime experience. Although the before-analyzed scene has yet to climax, it is needless to describe it further – the terror induced by the man's nightmare and the pleasure caused by the sense of safety remain present and only intensify. Therefore, it is advisable to watch it and get immersed in Lynch's elaborate world capable of inducing sheer terror (and possibly the Sublime) through a scene set in broad daylight.

⁸⁰ Lynch, *Mulholland Drive*, 0:12:15–0:15:35.

⁸¹ Addison, *The Spectator* 412.

Concerning the above example, it is essential to highlight a claim made in the first chapter. While the word “distance” usually makes one think of spatial distance, there is also emotional distance and, more importantly, distance caused by fiction. As Thomas Pavel proves,

[f]ictional worlds do use plausibility as props that attract us, entice us, persuade us to get immersed, but immersion is only one side of the game. Fiction’s [...] way of suggesting the distance between our actual world and the fictional one, the out-of-the-ordinary character of the “transport” that takes us there provide the other, equally essential, side of our involvement with fiction.⁸²

Therefore, when producing the Sublime experience, the distance could be an equally important component as immersion. While the former functions as a prerequisite step between mere fear and the possibility of experiencing the Sublime, the latter enables the audience to fully engage in the film, which can lead to the immersive Sublime, as indicated previously in the chapter.

The potential immersive Sublime can also be identified in other passages from *Mulholland Drive*. Initially, the film presents a story of an unknown woman who loses her memory and dubs herself Rita.⁸³ Afterward, she is discovered by an actress Betty, and they find out that Rita’s purse is full of money and contains a mysterious blue key. Near the half of the film, Rita remembers the name Diane Selwyn, but it proves useless. Meanwhile, after meeting the Cowboy (see the second chapter), the director Adam Keshner is forced to cast a certain Camilla Rhodes as the lead actress. By three-quarters of the film, Betty and Rita visit a club called Silencio, where a plot twist comes. There is a portent of this twist in a scene showing the pair from a distance as they enter the club; ominous ambient music plays, and the camera starts getting closer to the door. Simultaneously, the music gets almost deafening, and the camera stops just as the pair closes the door behind them.⁸⁴ It can be argued that this scene will likely raise suspense and make the audience sense the upcoming twist. In the club, Betty and Rita watch a magician’s performance – the performer keeps telling the audience that everything is fake, an illusion. As David Roche points out, “this ‘power of the fake’ also produces an emotion in the spectator bordering on the sublime.”⁸⁵ Although the audience and both the characters are aware that the whole performance is fake, it somehow makes it even more powerful. While the audience watches Betty and Rita’s astonishment and terror as they get frightened by the illusion

⁸² Thomas Pavel, “Immersion and Distance in Fictional Worlds,” *Itinéraires* 3, no. 1 (2010): 107, <https://doi.org/10.4000/itineraires.2183>.

⁸³ Lynch, *Mulholland Drive*, 0:05:00–0:12:15.

⁸⁴ Lynch, *Mulholland Drive*, 1:45:10–1:45:30.

⁸⁵ David Roche, “The Death of the Subject in David Lynch’s *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive*,” *E-rea* 2, no. 2 (October 15, 2004): 49, <https://doi.org/10.4000/erea.432>. Emphasis omitted.

of thunder conjured by the magician,⁸⁶ they may start experiencing the Sublime, which should soon turn into the immersive Sublime due to a sudden realization.

At the end of the performance, Rita reaches into her purse and finds a blue box. Then, the pair rushes back to their apartment, and as Rita turns away, looking for the blue key, Betty suddenly vanishes. Unable to find her, Rita opens the blue box, and the camera descends into the darkness of the box. Subsequently, Rita also vanishes, and the box falls to the ground.⁸⁷ It should be noted that the following analysis vastly depends on the personal interpretation of the film, but the consensus is that the first three-quarters of the film was only a dream. The audience may realize this when the Cowboy appears and says: “Hey pretty girl, time to wake up,”⁸⁸ which is followed by many other clues presented in the film’s *reality* (e.g., Betty is called Diane Selwyn, and Rita is Camilla Rhodes). At this point, the Sublime experience potentially arises from the misperception of reality caused by a full immersion. The dream part of the film immerses the audience to the extent that they are apt to believe the seemingly natural story, and they do not attempt to question the linearity of the plot. However, this is crushed by the sudden realization that it was all a dream – the audience’s minds should get overwhelmed and feel in the grasp of an inexplicable force that somehow planned it altogether, urging them to rethink the whole film. Although the dream part seems natural, it contains some implicit hints – one of them could be, for example, the previously described scene from the restaurant and its seamless transition from *reality* to the man’s nightmare. To conclude, for reasons beyond the possibilities to understand, this inexplicable force will likely feel as if it took control over the audience’s minds. As a result, they are apt to feel small and insignificant, and they forget about their central role in creating the meaning. Once again, the most apparent analogy is that the audience feels like puppets controlled by a master puppeteer. Consequently, due to the indescribable feeling of smallness, their minds may resort to the feeling of the Sublime, specifically resulting from what may be labeled as the immersive Sublime.

Similar effects of the immersive Sublime can be found in Lynch’s *Lost Highway*. Initially, the film presents a jazz saxophonist Fred, who finds a mysterious message recorded on the intercom of his house. It says: “Dick Laurant is dead.”⁸⁹ The next morning, Fred’s wife finds a videotape on the stairs in front of their house. They watch it and find out it shows footage of their house from the outside, which seems unimportant. It should be noted that there is a weird

⁸⁶ Lynch, *Mulholland Drive*, 1:45:00–1:52:00.

⁸⁷ Lynch, *Mulholland Drive*, 1:53:15–1:56:00.

⁸⁸ Lynch, *Mulholland Drive*, 1:56:58–1:57:15.

⁸⁹ Lynch, *Lost Highway*, 0:02:50–0:04:06.

tension between Fred and his wife, and he seems to distrust her. Fred also tells his wife about a dream he had; it shows Fred looking his wife in the face, but the face is not hers – it belongs to an unknown man.⁹⁰ The following day, Fred’s wife finds another videotape, but this time it shows the inside of the house and the pair sleeping in their bed. They call the police, but they find nothing. Then, an important plot twist comes, capable of producing the immersive Sublime. The pair attend a house party, and after a while, Fred notices one of the guests approaching him – he is a pale older man, ominously smiling. As Slavoj Žižek argues, this Mystery Man is “the ultimate embodiment of Evil.”⁹¹ Suddenly, the commotion of the party fades out, and foreboding music starts playing. The Mystery Man says: “We’ve met before, haven’t we?” Although Fred does not seem to remember, the audience can notice a resemblance between this man and the unknown face which Fred previously saw instead of his wife. Then, the Mystery Man tells Fred that, as a matter of fact, he is inside his house right now (although he is standing right next to him). The Mystery Man takes out a mobile phone, Fred dials his home, and the man, ominously smiling in front of him, picks up the phone at Fred’s house, and they have a conversation.⁹² At this point, the audience is likely to be terrified, and at the same time, they possibly come to a Sublime realization that this man, incomprehensibly being in two places at the same time, is the author of the enigmatic videotapes. Therefore, similarly to the scene from the restaurant in *Mulholland Drive*, Fred confronts the Evil of his worst nightmare, which seamlessly transitions to the film’s *reality*, possibly leaving an immeasurable feeling of smallness in the audience, which can lead to the Sublime experience.

However, the potential immersive Sublime only begins with this scene. The morning after the party, Fred finds another videotape; this time, the content is rather shocking. It shows Fred killing his wife, which he watches in disbelief and subsequently calls his wife, but to no avail – she is truly dead, and Fred is imprisoned for her alleged murder. Following the prison scene described in the second chapter, Fred inexplicably transforms into a different person named Pete Dayton. This scene intends to overwhelm the audience with an unfathomable event beyond the possibilities to understand – the audience is likely to believe that Fred is capable of metamorphosis. However, similarly to *Mulholland Drive*, the consensus is that Fred starts dreaming, and Pete Dayton is a product of his imagination. Yet, the audience is apt to realize this much later in the film, when Pete murders Dick Laurant, transforms into Fred, and finally

⁹⁰ Lynch, *Lost Highway*, 0:16:50–0:18:40.

⁹¹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch’s Lost Highway*, (Seattle: The University of Washington Press, 2000), 23.

⁹² Lynch, *Lost Highway*, 0:29:00–0:31:40.

visits his own house and delivers the cryptic message on the intercom – “Dick Laurant is dead.”⁹³ The audience should realize that the plot of the whole film is a vicious circle, and as a result, they should experience the immersive Sublime. As Roche points out, “[t]he spectator has no other choice but to accept David Lynch’s invitation and ‘enjoy the ride on’ *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive*, letting narration carry him along.”⁹⁴ Thus, despite their central role in creating the meaning, the plot is somehow much stronger and capable of immersing the audience to the extent that they feel in the grasp of the highest of the high – the Sublime.

Lastly and briefly, although Lynch does not work with digital media often, his newer work seems to show hints of the digital Sublime. In *Twin Peaks: The Return* (2017), there is a scene showing the 1945 White Sands atomic bomb explosion.⁹⁵ After the bomb explodes, a drone-like shot approaches the mushroom cloud. The scene is accompanied by loud and foreboding music, intensifying as the camera gets closer. The audience is apt to believe the camera will eventually stop, but it continues until it reaches the cloud and enters into it. As Jerslev argues, “[t]he imagery of the blast reiterates a historical incident, but it is more like a re-enactment of the explosion as a digitized sublime spectacle.”⁹⁶ Therefore, thanks to digital technology, Lynch presents the unrepresentable and offers the audience a possibly exceptional Sublime experience of being unstopably drawn towards an exploding atomic bomb. Although such a singular example does not prove the presence of the digital Sublime in Lynch’s work, it may indicate another shift in the media used to produce the Sublime – from mere cinematic material to digitally created scenes, worlds, or whole metaverses.

This chapter has shown that the Sublime is closely associated with immersion and distance. Moreover, when put in context with the postmodern view of the Sublime, the two elements will likely result in a misperception of reality caused by a full immersion, which may be labeled as the immersive Sublime. The subsequent analysis of selected events from Lynch’s work indicated that the immersive Sublime might be applicable and stems mainly from plot twists, revelations, and realizations rather than separate objects. Additionally, the audience’s experience resulting from the immersive Sublime was described primarily as a sense of smallness and insignificance caused by the potential sudden realizations. Lastly, the chapter has illustrated that the digital Sublime may constitute another shift in the media used to produce the Sublime, which could be a point of further research.

⁹³ Lynch, *Lost Highway*, 2:07:40–2:08:30.

⁹⁴ Roche, “The Death of the Subject,” 43. Emphasis original.

⁹⁵ David Lynch and Mark Frost, creators, *Twin Peaks: The Return*, (Showtime Networks, 2017; Paramount Pictures, 2017), Blu-ray, S01E08, 0:16:39–0:18:30.

⁹⁶ Jerslev, *David Lynch*, 246.

Conclusion

Initially, the theoretical chapter established that the audience plays a central role in creating the meaning of any work of art and that the Sublime can be perceived as a way of impacting the audience. As the chapter illustrated, the traditional concepts of the Sublime are based on Longinus' *On Sublimity* dated to the 1st century CE, described as a rhetorical concept focused mainly on the discipline of oratory. Longinus' concept later transformed into the natural Sublime, which focused rather on visual perceptions and the qualities arising from the objects of nature. This transformation also altered the media used to produce the Sublime. As observed, the rhetoric Sublime was aimed at a live audience, while the natural Sublime constituted a significant shift in the media, utilizing written narratives and poetry to produce the Sublime experience. The subsequent study of the modern concepts of the Sublime has proved that this phenomenon is still discussed in the current times and that it presently focuses on man-made objects and digitally created content. Moreover, the examined concept of the cinematic Sublime indicated that both modern and traditional concepts are relevant to the study of the present cinema, which represents another shift in the media used to produce the Sublime – from literature to film.

The work of David Lynch proved to feature numerous objects capable of producing the Sublime experience. The close analysis of selected passages from *Twin Peaks* demonstrated that objects presented in Lynch's work utilize elements of the natural Sublime described in Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry*, written in 1757. In the analyzed scenes, the Burkean element of obscurity seemed to prevail, possibly producing a sense of the unknown in the audience. In combination with other Burkean elements apt to produce the Sublime experience, such as suddenness, excessive light, or darkness, it became apparent that objects presented in Lynch's work incline to Burke's variant of the natural Sublime. This claim was further highlighted by identifying objects utilizing the same elements in other Lynch's works, namely *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive*. In a few instances, including a scene from *Wild at Heart*, the natural Sublime was identified in its traditional form, employing immense or vast objects of nature, involving mountains or wastelands. Even when presented via a film, these instances seemed likely to provoke the sense of one's smallness, triggered by the immensity of the presented objects. Other Burkean elements, such as intermitting, appeared to utilize ideas from the natural Sublime applied to various objects of technology, including a ceiling fan presented in *Twin Peaks*. This results in a combination of both modern and traditional concepts – the natural Sublime utilizing different man-made objects of technology. The close analysis of other

scenes from *Twin Peaks* indicated that Lynch's work also juxtaposes objects of the natural Sublime with objects of the technological Sublime. In some cases, both presented objects functioned to achieve the same effect, such as the railway bridge in juxtaposition with the mountains – both immense enough to overwhelm the audience and potentially initiate the Sublime experience. Moreover, sound in Lynch's work proved to be an essential component that either sets the atmosphere, raises suspense, or startles the audience with its suddenness and thus helps the Sublime experience arise in many ways.

The subsequent close analysis of selected events from Lynch's work demonstrated that the Sublime experience might arise not only from objects but also from the plot. As illustrated, the Sublime is closely related to the elements of immersion and distance, which both influence the audience's reception. When put in context with the postmodern approach to the Sublime, full immersion and distance created by a piece of fiction may result in a misperception of reality. This effect may be labeled as the immersive Sublime – the feeling of Sublime caused by a full immersion. The analysis of *Wild at Heart* indicated that the immersive Sublime might apply to Lynch's work and that it may arise from plot twists, revelations, and realizations. Subsequently, in *Mulholland Drive*, a major plot twist revealed near the end of the film likely urged the audience to rethink the whole plot and comprehend it differently, which may result in the sense of smallness and insignificance, and thus possibly initiate the Sublime experience. The analysis of Lynch's *Lost Highway* highlighted the same point and recognized that due to sudden realizations caused by elaborate plot twists, the audience is apt to disregard their central role in creating the meaning, and as a result, they may feel like puppets controlled by a master puppeteer. Lastly, *Twin Peaks: The Return* offered one example capable of producing the digital Sublime. By itself, this cannot determine the concept as a theme present in Lynch's work. However, this finding can indicate another (and already ongoing) significant shift in the media used to produce the Sublime, which could be a point of further research.

To conclude, the work of David Lynch seems to employ different variants of the Sublime. The close analysis of numerous objects capable of producing the Sublime experience proved that Lynch utilizes similar ideas as Edmund Burke some three hundred years ago. Additionally, Lynch often applies those ideas to modern objects, which results in an amalgam of the traditional and modern Sublime. Lastly, the potential Sublime events presented in Lynch's work seem to incline to the modern concepts, namely to the postmodern Sublime and the possible immersive Sublime arising from the plot. Some cases also evoked the element of distance described by Joseph Addison, which further highlights the relevance of traditional concepts for the study of Lynch's cinema.

Resumé

Tématem této bakalářské práce je kategorie vznešena (angl. Sublime) a možné uplatnění této kategorie pro poznání díla amerického režiséra Davida Lynche. Práce se zabývá nejrůznějšími pojetími kategorie vznešena, od tradičních koncepcí včetně vznešena řečnického a přírodního, až po ta nejmodernější, mezi které se řadí vznešeno postmoderní, technologické, digitální či kinematografické. Cílem práce je prozkoumat, s jakými koncepcemi Lynchova díla pracují a ve kterých případech inklinují k tradičním či moderním pojetím. Cíle je dosaženo detailní analýzou vybraných příkladů ze snímků jako je *Městečko Twin Peaks* (1990), *Zběsilost v srdci* (1990), *Lost Highway* (1997), *Mulholland Drive* (2001) a *Twin Peaks: The Return* (2017). Bakalářská práce je rozdělena celkem do tří kapitol, z nichž první obsahuje teoretický základ a ve zbylých dvou je proveden rozbor vybraných děl.

Kategorie vznešena je specifická svou různorodostí, jelikož autoři se svými přístupy značně liší i v rámci jedné koncepce. Teoretická kapitola nejprve demonstruje, že kategorii vznešena lze chápat jako prostředek, který autor využívá pro ovlivnění publika. Tohoto cíle je dosaženo nastíněním základních poznatků z recepční estetiky (angl. reader-response theory), které čtenáře (potažmo publikum) stanovují jako ústředního tvůrce významu jakéhokoli díla. Poznanky z recepční estetiky tak vyzdvihují důležitost subjektivity, která při tvorbě pocitu vznešena zastává klíčovou roli. Je zjevné, že publikum vznešeno pociťuje odlišně v závislosti na vlastní interpretaci daného díla. Teoretická část práce se poté zabývá důležitým historickým vývojem kategorie vznešena. Za původce této kategorie bývá totiž označován antický filosof Longinus, jenž ji dal za vznik v prvním století našeho letopočtu. Longinova koncepce bývá označována za řečnické vznešeno (angl. rhetoric Sublime), jelikož se zabývala převážně kvalitami v oblasti jazyka, které poté řečníci uplatňovali na živé publikum. Bakalářská práce dokládá, že řečnické vznešeno mělo na publikum působit takovou silou, že je doslova smetlo. Z tohoto tvrzení poté práce vyvozuje, že přestože předmětem řečnického vznešena byla intenzita jazykových prostředků, publikum při něm pociťovalo efekt stejné nezměrné síly, jež zaujala představitele pozdějších koncepcí.

Jak je v práci podotknuto, v 17. století došlo k znovuobjevení kategorie vznešena a spolu s ním i ke značné přeměně. Zdrojem pocitu vznešena již není pouze jazyk, ale různé přírodní úkazy, jako hvězdy, hory, poušť, moře či třeba zemětřesení, čímž vznikla nová koncepce označována jako přírodní vznešeno (angl. natural Sublime). Jak práce naznačuje, spolu se zdroji vznešena se změnila i média, která byla pro vyvolání pocitu vznešena využívána; od řečnictví praktikovaného na živém publiku směrem k psaným narativům a poezii. Práce následně na

dílech několika britských autorů dokládá různorodost koncepce přírodního vznešena. Zatímco Thomas Burnet kategorii vznešena označoval za nekonečnou krásu stvořenou Bohem, pojetí Johna Dennise bylo v práci identifikováno jako více sekulární a skýtá zásadní snahu oddělit vznešeno od krásna. Následné probádání díla Josepha Addisona odhalilo další distinkce mezi těmito dvěma kategoriemi a přineslo důležitý prvek vzdálenosti (nejen prostorové), bez kterého by se pocit vznešena často změnil v běžný strach. Diskuse díla Edmunda Burka poté poukazuje na definitivní oddělení vznešena od krásna a přináší další prvky vhodné pro analýzu filmového díla Davida Lynche v dalších kapitolách, čímž se práce posouvá k průzkumu moderních pojetí vznešena. Pozornost je nejprve věnována postmodernímu pojetí, které vznešeno shrnuje jako kvalitu, již nelze vyobrazit. U technologického vznešena práce poukazuje především na změnu ve zdrojích pocitu vznešena a následně usuzuje, že toto pojetí nalézá vznešené kvality nikoli v přírodě, ale ve strukturách vytvořených člověkem. Bádání v oblasti digitálního vznešena přineslo zjištění, že pomocí digitálních technologií je dnes možné vyobrazit i to, co dříve vyobrazit nešlo, a že zdrojem vznešena může být i digitální obsah. Pomocí koncepce kinematografického vznešena (angl. cinematic Sublime) je poté v práci doloženo, že kategorii vznešena lze nalézt ve filmovém materiálu a že pro jeho poznání lze využít jak konceptů moderních, tak i tradičních. Teoretická kapitola tak dochází ke zjištění, že moderní pojetí díky dalšímu posunu v médiích objevují vznešeno i ve filmovém díle či digitálním obsahu.

Druhá kapitola se zabývá analýzou díla Davida Lynche a zaměřuje se na předměty, které v publiku mohou vyvolávat pocit vznešena. Předmětem analýzy je nejprve televizní seriál *Městečko Twin Peaks*, pomocí kterého je na různých příkladech doložena důležitost zvuku při vyvolání pocitu vznešena, a to především analýzou scén, ve kterých se nachází prvek náhlosti popsany Edmundem Burkem. Dalším prvkem popsany v Burkově díle a vhodným pro analýzu se stalo tzv. zastření, které se v *Twin Peaks* objevuje například při nálezu těla Laury Palmerové – její tělo je po dlouhou dobu zastřeno plastovou fólií, což v publiku může vyvolávat pocit neznáma a potažmo i vznešena. Práce dále dochází ke zjištění, že Lynchova díla pracují i s tradičními přírodními objekty, jako jsou ohromné hory a rozlehlé krajiny, což je podloženo konkrétními příklady z *Twin Peaks* a filmu *Zběsilost v srdci*. V některých případech jsou tradiční přírodní objekty v juxtapozici se strukturami vytvořenými člověkem, přičemž oba předměty využívají stejné prvky vznešena, například ohromnost či zmiňované zastření. Při jednotlivých analýzách dalších scén z *Twin Peaks* se jeví jako relevantní i jiné prvky popsané v Burkově díle, například temnota či přerušované světlo, které jsou v práci aplikovány na příklady z Lynchových děl *Mulholland Drive* a *Lost Highway*. U některých konkrétních případů práce zjišťuje, že Lynchova díla sice využívají prvky přírodního vznešena popsané Edmundem

Burkem, ale někdy jsou tyto prvky aplikovány na předměty vytvořené člověkem – například na schodiště či stropní ventilátor. To má za následek kombinaci tradičního a moderního pojetí vznešena, což lze popsat jako přírodní vznešeno využívající předměty z oblasti technologie. Hlavním zjištěním této kapitoly je, že předměty schopné vyvolat pocit vznešena, které jsou v Lynchově díle vyobrazeny, inklinují ke koncepci přírodního vznešena popsané Edmundem Burkem v roce 1757. Zároveň lze říci, že tyto předměty jeví známky technologického vznešena.

Třetí kapitola bakalářské práce rozebírá události v Lynchových dílech, které v publiku mohou vyvolávat pocit vznešena. Kapitola se nejprve zabývá prvky imerze a vzdálenosti, přičemž dochází ke zjištění, že oba prvky s kategorií vznešena úzce souvisí. Bez vzdálenosti tvořené fikcí by se vznešeno přeměnilo ve strach, zatímco naprostá imerze publika může vést k takovému pojetí vznešena, které pramení z událostí spíše než z objektů. Práce se proto snaží najít souvislosti mezi těmito prvky a postmoderním pojetím vznešena, přičemž dochází ke zjištění, že naprostá imerze publika může vyústit v odlišné vnímání reality, jehož účinky lze označit jako imerzní vznešeno (angl. *immersive Sublime*). Práce poté na příkladu z filmu *Zběsilost v srdci* názorně ukazuje, že imerzní vznešeno se jeví jako vhodné pro poznání díla Davida Lynche. Oproti přírodnímu vznešenu analyzovanému ve druhé kapitole se nezaměřuje na vyobrazené objekty, ale spíše vzniká z neočekávaných zápletek, různých odhalení a následných uvědomění publika. Analýza vybraných událostí ze snímku *Mulholland Drive* objevuje, že publikum možným vlivem naprosté imerze pravděpodobně věří prvním dvěma třetinám filmu, které se ale následně ukáží jako pouhý sen. To může mít za následek, že publikum je nuceno si celý děj filmu interpretovat jiným způsobem, což v nich může vyvolávat pocit malosti a bezvýznamnosti, přičemž zapomenou, že význam díla je tvořen v jejich myslích. Tento vliv nezměrné síly, která pramení z naprosté imerze může vyvolávat pocit, že mysl publika ovládla jakási vnější moc, což jsou charakteristiky shodné s pocitem vznešena. Obdobné účinky imerzního vznešena práce nalézá ve snímku *Lost Highway*, ve kterém je zápleтка pravděpodobně tvořena jakýmsi bludným kruhem. To může publikum ve výsledku zcela zachvátit pocity a vlivem naprosté imerze se mohou cítit jako pouhé loutky, které jsou ale ovládány mistrným loutkařem. V závěru třetí kapitoly se práce zabývá scénou ze snímku *Twin Peaks: The Return*, ve které lze identifikovat prvky digitálního vznešena. Jedná se ale spíše o ojedinělý případ, který nelze definovat jako prostředek typický pro Lynchovo dílo. Práce proto dochází k závěru, že případný výskyt digitálního vznešena v Lynchově díle může poukazovat na další posun v médiích využívaných pro vyvolání pocitu vznešena – z filmového materiálu na digitálně vytvořené světy, či dokonce celá metaversa.

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