Aesthetic Trinity Theory and the Sublime

## I. Introduction

It seems defensible to propose that one of the most important tasks of both philosophical and psychological aesthetics ought to be the delineation of aesthetic responses of different quality and intensity, with particular attention devoted to peak aesthetic experiences.[1] A related goal would presumably be the discovery of commonalities among the responses to man-made objects (works of art, architecture, and engineering) and to those induced by natural wonders.[2] Furthermore, it seems self-evident that the exploration of aesthetic responses would profit from a comparison of their cognitive and emotional attributes with those that characterize non-aesthetic (for example, more explicitly utilitarian) responses.[3] Such a comparison may also facilitate the formulation of hypotheses about the evolutionary origins of aesthetic responses. These are the kinds of concerns that Vladimir Konečni's recently developed Aesthetic

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[1] Regarding peak experiences, see, for example, A. H. Maslow, *Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1964); A. H. Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being* (2nd ed.; New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1968); R. Panzarella, "The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Peak Experiences," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology 20* (1980): 69-85; Alf Gabrielsson, "Emotions in Strong Experiences With Music," in *Music and Emotion: Theory and Research,* ed. Patrik Juslin and John Sloboda (Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 431-452.

[2] As is widely known, in writing about the sublime, Kant's illustrations were mostly from nature, but he did mention certain architectural artifacts; see Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement,* trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Press, 1951); also, Uygar Abaci, "Kant's Justified Dismissal of Artistic Sublimity," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 66* (2008): 237-251, regarding the alleged reasons ("morally oriented ambitions") for Kant's "prioritiz[ing] of nature over art," quotes from p. 237; and Jeanette Bicknell, *Why Music Moves Us* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 32.

[3] For the sake of simplicity, all responses, aesthetic and non-aesthetic, can be assumed to consist of cognitive and emotional components. In this article, the focus is predominantly on the emotional aspect of responses.

Trinity Theory (ATT hereafter) attempts to address.[4]

After presenting the main features of ATT as succinctly as possible, the article will focus on the concept of the sublime and especially on its treatment within ATT. The general point of view throughout the paper is derived from psychological aesthetics and the emerging field of experimental philosophy.[5] While new empirical data regarding ATT and the sublime will not be presented in detail, references will be made to some relevant research findings and to the kind of data that it would be useful and feasible to obtain. One of the key claims will be that it is advantageous for the sublime to be conceptualized in such a way as to become amenable to meaningful operationalization and thus to experimental manipulation and measurement of its effects.

In fact, a field of scholarship that genuinely respects empirical findings – regardless of whether its primary emphasis is philosophical or psychological – must require a definition of the sublime that is sufficiently rigorous and circumscribed to allow the concept to be "testable" or "manipulable" in research. It remains to be seen whether the traditional philosophers-aestheticians will agree that the gain from adopting a less vague and less idiosyncratic definition of the sublime, which makes empirical work

[4] Vladimir J. Konečni, "The Aesthetic Trinity: Awe, Being Moved, Thrills," *Bulletin of Psychology and the Arts 5* (2005): 27-44; see also Vladimir J. Konečni, Amber Brown, and Rebekah A. Wanic, "Comparative Effects of Music and Recalled Life-Events on Emotional State," *Psychology of Music 36* (2008): 289-308; and Vladimir J. Konečni, "Does Music Induce Emotion? A Theoretical and Methodological Analysis," *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts 2* (2008): 115-129.

[5] At this point in its development, data collection in experimental philosophy has been rather limited, typically involving only the survey (by interview or questionnaire) and rating-scale methodologies, rather than experiments proper. The more appropriate term would therefore be "empirical philosophy," which would describe its present research endeavors more accurately, while leaving room for future experimental work. Analogously, the term "empirical aesthetics" would encompass all data collection with "aesthetics in mind," whether inspired primarily by philosophical or psychological concerns. When framed knowledgeably and sufficiently broadly, research problems derived from either discipline can be addressed by research that is relevant to both.

possible, offsets a certain degree of "impoverishment" in the content of this ancient philosophical idea. However, some preliminary results that have already been obtained are such that they would have been unlikely to be correctly predicted by thought experiments.

This paper will not address music, either with regard to the sublime or to aesthetic responses. The reason is that music, especially absolute music, is an exceedingly complex domain in both theoretical and empirical aesthetics, and one that abounds in conceptual and technical peculiarities; this is especially true with regard to the relationship of music and emotion.[6]

## II. Aesthetic Trinity Theory

In ATT, a tripartite hierarchy of responses is proposed: *Aesthetic awe*, as the peak experience; the state of *being-moved* (or *being-touched*), as a less pronounced experience; and *thrills* (or *chills*), as the most common experience. The three responses are conceptualized as levels of experience that differ in terms of intensity, depth, and frequency.[7] In this paper, the discussion of responses of being-moved and thrills is rudimentary. Far more attention is devoted to aesthetic awe, primarily because of its relationship to the sublime.

### *i. Awe and Aesthetic Awe*

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "[f]rom its use in reference to the Divine Being [the meaning of awe] passes gradually into: Dread mingled with veneration, reverential or respectful fear; the attitude of a mind subdued to profound

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[6] For the treatment of music in ATT, see Konečni, "The Aesthetic Trinity," pp. 36-37; and Konečni, "Does Music Induce Emotion?," pp. 123-125.

[7] The three mentioned dimensions along which aesthetic response differ are positively correlated (in the technical, statistical sense). This is not only a hypothesis that had been derived from the theory, but also a recent empirical finding obtained by the author.

reverence in the presence of supreme authority, moral greatness or sublimity, or mysterious sacredness."[8] In an important article, Keltner and Haidt discuss awe as a moral and spiritual, as well as well as an "aesthetic emotion," but do not pursue the notion of sublimity or the sublime that is offered in the *OED* definition.[9] Moreover, they think of "primordial awe [as] center[ing] upon the emotional reaction of a subordinate to a powerful leader" – which would presumably make it closely related to one of the fundamental emotions, *fear* – and regard aesthetic awe as a culturally-elaborated extension of the primordial version.[10] In contrast, in ATT, aesthetic awe is considered a unique, and fundamental, emotional product of fear *and joy*, a state as primordial from an evolutionary point of view, and as powerful and memorable, as either of these.[11] In this view, aesthetic awe has initially occurred as a response to the unexpectedly encountered natural wonders and later to human artifacts also.[12]

One of the key features of ATT is that it treats aesthetic awe as the prototypical subjective reaction to a *sublime stimulus-in-context*, with the attributes of the sublime independently specified and defined (see section III.). In this view, one aspect of aesthetic awe, which distinguishes it from awe that is induced by fear, is *existential security* of the experiencing person – as is the case, significantly, with socially induced joy. One is

[8] Entry on "Awe," *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 149.

[9] Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt, "Approaching Awe, a Moral, Spiritual, and Aesthetic Emotion," *Cognition and Emotion 17* (2003): 297-314.

[10] Keltner and Haidt, "Approaching Awe," pp. 306, 310.

[11] Konečni, "The Aesthetic Trinity", pp. 30-32. From an adaptationist perspective, the person who experiences aesthetic awe with some regularity may be seen as a desirable sexual mate – through the possession of attributes of reverence (presumed private access to the supernatural), apparent sensitivity (useful in child-rearing), and, in some cases, elite-membership that is demonstrated by the economic and physical means that enable encounters with sublime stimuli.

[12] One possible difference (although probably only of degree) between aesthetic awe and other fundamental emotions, including fear-based awe, needs to be mentioned. The experiencing person can readily "switch off" aesthetic awe by altering the focus of attention to other external and internal domains. This is because the sublime stimulus (see section III.), a non-sentient, non-social, non-interacting, object – unlike the customary causes of human fear, anger, joy, and grief – *does not press*, from existential and evolutionary points of view, to be attended to urgently.

overwhelmed, but controllably so: Niagara is immense, loud, powerful, objectively dangerous, and extraordinarily beautiful, but as I observe it from a nearby rock, I judge that I am safe; and if the rock becomes slippery, I know that I can move farther away.

Aesthetic awe is here regarded as the peak aesthetic response. It shares with both joy and grief the state of being-moved (II.*ii.*), and, with the former, thrills also (section II.*iii*). Its requirement of existential safety differentiates it from – but places on presumably the same continuum as – fear. With joy it shares the experience of thrills, which in fear is felt as chills. With all the fundamental emotions aesthetic awe shares the dramatic perturbation in the level of physiological arousal.

In the phenomenology of daily life, aesthetic awe is a rare, perhaps an exceedingly rare, subjective state – which is a direct consequence of the sublime stimuli being rare.[13] And while it is of limited duration in terms of acute physiological concomitants, the immense sensory-cognitive impact (the flooding of consciousness at the time of the initial occurrence of the sublime) ensures that episodes of aesthetic awe can be readily recalled and are long remembered. However, an important assumption in ATT is that whereas recall of the sublime stimulus can reproduce the subordinate state of being-moved, the *Wow!* of the original aesthetic awe is irreproducible.

Episodes of aesthetic awe may lead the experiencing person to feel as a member of an elite that is able to encounter the sublime – and to do so safely and often in an exclusive manner. The view that a sense of elitism or "specialness" may accompany lofty sentiments is quite realistic from an adaptationist perspective.[14] Besides, thinking of oneself as a deep and sensitive person may serve to motivate philanthropic actions, in part because one may feel guilty, rightly or wrongly, that one has not arrived at that status through a democratic process.

[13] By defining aesthetic awe as a prototypical response to an *objectively existing* sublime stimulus, ATT has little to say about drug-induced hallucinations and trance states that are sometimes counted among peak life experiences by both commentators and experiencing persons.
[14] Vladimir J. Kone ni, "Review of *Music and Emotion*," *Music Perception 20* (2003): pp. 332-341. See p. 339.

*ii. Being-Moved*

In ATT, aesthetic awe is considered to be always accompanied by the less intense and more frequent state of being-moved. (In many languages, the term being-moved has a substantive form: an example is *Rührung* in German.) However, it is hypothesized, and has been shown empirically, that there are numerous instances of being-moved – by aesthetic stimuli in poetry, theatre, film, and opera – that fall short of aesthetic awe.[15] In many of these instances, the crucial ingredients producing the being-moved state, albeit masterfully treated by the artist, are the same ones that move people in everyday life: witnessing certain acts of forgiveness, and non-kin sacrifice and generosity.[16]

In sum, it is assumed in ATT that being-moved is a response to a far greater range of stimuli than is the case with aesthetic awe, even when only the eminently aesthetically-relevant instances of being-moved are considered. For this reason, among others, ATT proposes that the individual associative network plays a greater role in being-moved than it does in aesthetic awe. In other words, a sublime stimulus-in-context that induces aesthetic awe – by virtue of being more powerful and therefore more universally overwhelming to humans – is less subject to personal interpretation than is the case for stimuli that give rise to the being-moved state. For these same reasons, being-moved should be more removed from the *fundamental* emotions, both conceptually and phenomenologically, than is the case with aesthetic awe.

[15] Very recent data obtained by the authors, using both experimental simulations and survey methods, show that participants recognize being-moved as a genuine and independent subjective state and can reliably distinguish between instances of aesthetic awe and being-moved, with the latter being less intense and occurring with less frequency – both as a base-rate estimate and in reference to the participants' own aesthetic and other (especially social) life experiences.

[16] See Vladimir J. Konečni, Rebekah A. Wanic, and Amber Brown, "Emotional and aesthetic antecedents and consequences of music-induced thrills," *American Journal of Psychology 120* (2007): 619-643, especially pp. 627-630; Table 1, p. 625; and Table 2, p. 626.

Components of ATT can be usefully applied in an analysis of various peak experiences in human life and their portrayal in a variety of art forms, including the experiences and descriptions of: epiphany; victory over mortality fears; *eureka* moments in problem-solving; and boundless love and falling in love. The analysis can be readily extended to second-order instances, notably a person's (e.g., research participant's) being-moved by reading about a character's experience of being-moved.[17]

*iii. Thrills*

The term "thrills" (or "chills" or *frisson*) refers to the archaic physiological response of short duration to aesthetic and other stimuli: Pilo-erection on the back of the neck; shivers down the spine that can spread to arms and other parts of the body, sometimes accompanied by a lump in the throat or tears. Thrills can be accurately reported by the experiencing person with a high degree of reliability; their occurrence and intensity can be influenced pharmacologically; and they can be measured both peripherally, in terms of skin conductance, and at the central level, by brain scanning techniques (such as positron emission tomography).[18] In the past 30 years, there has been a considerable amount of empirical work on this rather curious phenomenon but almost all of it has addressed the response to music.[19] Only one empirical project was concerned with the effect of stories (with positive and negative poignant endings) and various types

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[17] Konečni, "The Aesthetic Trinity," pp. 33-34.

[18] The pioneering study was carried out by Avram Goldstein, "Thrills in Response to Music and Other Stimuli," *Physiological Psychology 8* (1980): 126-129 (Goldstein consistently used the term "thrills"); see also Jaak Panksepp, *Affective Neuroscience: The Foundations of Human and Animal Emotions* (Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 278-279; Anne J. Blood and Robert J. Zatorre, "Intensely Pleasurable Responses to Music Correlate With Activity in Brain Regions Implicated in Reward and Emotion," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences 98* (2001): 11818-11823; and Oliver Grewe, Reinhard Kopiez, and Eckart Altenmüller, "The Chill Parameter: Goose Bumps and Shivers as Promising Measures in Emotion Research," *Music Perception 27* (2009): 61-74.

[19] For example, John A. Sloboda, "Musical Structure and Emotional Response: Some Empirical Findings," *Psychology of Music 19* (1991): pp. 110-120; Jaak Panksepp, "The Emotional Sources of "Chills" Induced by Music," *Music Perception 13* (1995): 171-207;

of visual aesthetic stimuli, in addition to instrumental classical music.[20] The results for visual stimuli are the most relevant for this paper and will be discussed in more detail in section III.

Since so much of the work has been on music, and music largely lies beyond the scope of this paper, only a brief summary of the findings regarding thrills that directly concern ATT will suffice here, in order to complete the overview of the theory. Thrills or chills sometimes accompany the fundamental emotions, such as joy and terror (or, rather, the sense of imminence of joy and terror), but far more frequently occur in their absence. In ATT, thrills are conceptualized as the most frequent, and lowest-level, response to aesthetic stimuli (admittedly mostly those involving music, both vocal and instrumental). It is postulated that they are necessary to provide a physiological underpinning to most experiences of aesthetic awe and being-moved. Music with certain structural elements, but devoid of personal associations and heard in an ordinary (as opposed to a sublime) performance space, is a frequent cause of thrills – without the more profound responses of being-moved and aesthetic awe being present.[21] Then, of course, there are "tear-jerker" and "horror" movies, in which neither aesthetic awe nor being-moved is typically experienced but tears and chills, respectively, are likely (in the latter case, in large part, apparently, because of the sound track.) The superficiality of these responses from an aesthetic point of view, despite their appeal to many, is readily demonstrated by the ease with which the experiencing person can terminate the response.

## III. The Sublime in ATT

### *i. The Sublime as Stimulus-in-Context*

The concept of the sublime cannot be of much use in an empirical aesthetics or experimental philosophy if its status and components are defined loosely or

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[20] Konečni, Wanic, and Brown, "Emotional and Aesthetic Antecedents," pp. 625-630.
[21] Konečni, "The Aesthetic Trinity," pp. 36-37; Vladimir J. Konečni, "A Skeptical Position on 'Musical Emotions' and an Alternative Proposal," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences 31* (2008): 582-584.

psychoanalytically, in a manner that precludes operationalization. One example, among many possible ones, will suffice. Julian Young claims that Heidegger's approach of "magic (or 'poetic') realism" to the treatment of the sublime "completes a two-centuries-old attempt to understand the nature" of this concept and is the only one that correctly interprets all the complexities, including the key one: according to Young, "in reality, the feeling of the sublime is, as Freud aptly called it, an 'oceanic' feeling… a flowing out of the ego and into the totality of things."[22] There is not much that a data-seeking and data–respecting scholar can do with this type of assertions.

Similarly, an empiricist is at a loss as to what to make of the many examples in the philosophical literature on the sublime, from the treatise, now no longer extant, by Caecilius of Calacte (referred to by the first-century Longinus, or a later pseudo-Longinus, in *Peri Hupsous* or *De Sublimitate*),[23] to a contemporary book, by M. Tarozzi Goldsmith[24] – with texts by a great many illustrious philosophers, including Kant, in between and since – in which the sublime is alternately (and sometimes simultaneously) treated as an object and a subjective state: that is, as either an object (or its attributes) external to the experiencing person, or as the subjective, internally felt consequence of a person's exposure to some spectacle, or both.[25] Young, for example, in order to compare the sublime and the beautiful, discusses *both concepts* in terms of attributes "on the side

[22] Julian Young, "Death and Transfiguration: Kant, Schopenhauer and Heidegger on the Sublime," *Inquiry 48* (2005): pp. 131-144; quotes from pp. 140 and 142.
[23] See Daniel E. Berlyne, *Aesthetics and Psychobiology* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts,1971), p. 93.
[24] Marcella Tarozzi Goldsmith, *The Future of Art: An Aesthetics of the New and the Sublime* (Albany, NY: State University of New York at Albany Press, 1999).
[25] Jerome Carroll ["The Limits of the Sublime, the Sublime of Limits: Hermeneutics as a Critique of the Postmodern Sublime," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 66* (2008): 171-181; p. 171] pithily describes philosophy's Gordian knot: "[T]he sublime appears to be at the interstices of some of philosophy age-old and most intractable problems. It evinces the difficulty of separating man as a subject from the surrounding world as object, *but also the impossibility of not doing so.*" [Italics added.]

of the object" and "on the side of the subject."[26] Meanwhile, Bicknell, in her recent historical overview of the treatment of the sublime in aesthetics, commendably criticizes Young's philosophical essentialism, but not the vagueness of the view to which he subscribes or the circularity in the definitions of subject and object.[27] Instead, Bicknell, a (non-empirical) philosopher-aesthetician, writes as follows:

> "Despite the differences between us, I see my own project as complementary to Konečni's. I am interested in the full range of aesthetic responses that he describes – from being moved or touched all the way to the most rarefied states of aesthetic awe. However, while a philosopher can only applaud attempts to introduce conceptual and terminological clarity where it is lacking, I fear that some of Konečni's efforts here may be in vain. As I mentioned earlier, 'sublime' has described both certain external objects and the internal states that they provoke from the earliest uses of the term through contemporary practice. *Clearly, those who have thought deeply about these issues see continuity between sublime objects and the sublime mental states they induce."*[28] [Italics added.]

In the process of trying to be inclusive, Bicknell arrives at a seemingly attractive and careful, but, in fact, an epistemologically and methodologically untenable position. First, many of the past philosophical treatments of the sublime have not involved "continuity" between subject and object, but rather a dichotomy of sorts, with two identically labeled concepts and circularity in their definitions. Second, one does not need to subscribe to an extreme positivist and operationist position in order to conclude that if one were to accept Bicknell's view, no experiment regarding the sublime could ever be carried out. In fact, disregarding for the moment the present-day psychology and cognitive science, there have certainly been, in the history of philosophy itself, many empirically-minded scholars, including aestheticians (and some of them writing about the

[26] Young, "Death and Transfiguration," p. 132.
[27] Bicknell, *Why Music Moves Us*, p. 18.
[28] Bicknell, *Why Music Moves Us*, p. 19.

sublime, as Edmund Burke did[29]). If they were to work on the sublime, many such scholars would be unlikely to submit to the yoke of authority and "received wisdom" that originated in the armchair.[30] They, as well as the philosophers-methodologists, and the present-day empirical scientists in other disciplines interested in the sublime, have thought as deeply as those that Bicknell has in mind about epistemological issues. It would seem that one would want to avoid a reification and marginalization of the sublime, which is inevitable unless the conceptual problems alluded to above are resolved.

In ATT, the sublime *stimulus-in-context*[31] is considered to be external to the observer and is defined and specified independently. It goes without saying that the observer engages with the sublime stimulus through a constructive process of perception and interpretation[32] (taking into account past experiences and the context in which the

[29] Edmund Burke, *A philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Oxford University Press, 1757/1990).
[30] A hypothetical Japanese empirically-minded scholar would have to contend with quite different, but as authoritatively subscribed to, wisdom (received in this case from the tatami mat), such as the Zen Buddhist idea of *muga*, which stands for "so close an identification of subject and object that 'self' disappears." See Lucien Stryk, Takashi Ikemoto, Taigan Takayama, *Zen Poems of China and Japan: The Crane's Bill* (Garden City, NJ: Anchor Press, 1973), p. xlv.
[31] The term stimulus-in-context emphasizes that (for example, the spatial) context is often an essential component of a sublime stimulus. The Great Wall of China needs rolling hills to be sublime, and so did, ephemerally, the Running Fence (in Marin, Napa, and Sonoma Counties, California) by Christo (Javacheff).
[32] The view of the sublime within ATT – as an array of external stimuli that is perceived and interpreted by an observer – can be contrasted with the positions (preceding and including Kant's) that insist on the subjective nature of the sublime. See, for example, Samuel H. Monk, *The Sublime: The Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England* (University of Michigan Press, 1935/1960). With regard to the observer's processing of the sublime, there has been a lively debate centering on the probability and extent of the human "cognitive failure" in grasping the sublime and the infinite. See Guy Sircello, "How is a Theory of the Sublime Possible?" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 41* (1993): 541-550; Malcolm Budd, "Delight in the Natural World: Kant on the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature. Part III. The Sublime in Nature," *British Journal of Aesthetics 38*

sublime stimulus occurs), although the location of the sublime at extreme ends of various relevant continua is likely to have as a consequence a sharp increase in the probability of occurrence of a powerful aesthetic response in any given observer and a sharp decrease in the variability of responses across multiple observers.

*ii. The Sublime: Physical Grandeur, Rarity, and Novelty*

It has been accepted by many generations of philosophers and in dictionary definitions that one of the main aspects of the "greatness" of the sublime is vast physical magnitude. This can be taken to imply "infinity," as in the number of stars in the night sky or the expanse of an ocean or desert. In addition, enormous physical size can be an attribute of obviously *finite* sublime objects that, however, surpass all or most of the other members of the same reference class: the Himalayas compared to other mountains; the Cheops (Khufu) pyramid compared to other pyramids at El Gizeh (although Chephren, or Khafra, comes close in height, but not bulk); and, especially, to other man-made objects (for some 3,800 years, the Khufu pyramid was the tallest man-made structure in the world); or the 8th-century Giant (seated, Maitreya) Buddha in Leshan (Sichuan), at 71 m. the tallest carved Buddha in the world, and spectacularly situated in the cliff above the confluence of three rivers.

In psychological aesthetics, physical size is an important member of the class of *psychophysical stimulus properties*, one of three classes of stimulus properties that Daniel Berlyne regarded as important to the description of aesthetically relevant objects.[33] Another of the classes was labeled *collative* by Berlyne, but the designation *statistical*

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(1998): 233-251; and Jane Forsey, "Is a Theory of the Sublime Possible?" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 65* (2007): 381-389. Such accounts typically ignore the contemporary research on human cognitive limitations in cognitive psychology and cognitive neuroscience.

[33] Berlyne, *Aesthetics and Psychobiology*, pp. 68-69.

*stimulus properties* is perhaps more to the point.[34] A member of this class (along with complexity and incongruity, among others) is *frequency* – in terms of both existence and occurrence – and therefore related to both *rarity* and *novelty.* It is self-evident that rarity is statistically positively correlated with the physical size of *finite* sublime objects, both natural and man-made. In contrast, Kant's favorite, starry sky, is certainly not rare, nor is an ocean view. Furthermore, because an observer cannot possibly remember his first view of a starry sky, it is not, on any given occasion, and by itself, novel either. In fact, sights of horizons and starry skies are so common that in ATT these objects of infinite size are not on their own considered sufficiently compelling to be sublime. Much more is needed for these stimuli to induce aesthetic awe or even the being-moved state; the "much more" refers to the additional aspects of the viewing situation and the cognitive-emotional "content" that the observer brings to a particular encounter with the stars or the sunset. But recognizing these interpretive and personal-associative contributions of the observer to her aesthetic responses – which, importantly, can be empirically measured and verified – does not mean (to use poetic kitsch) that the sublime has moved from the sky into the observer's soul. However, as was pointed out earlier in reference to ATT, the personal contributions of the observers are measurably[35] smaller when their encounters are with natural and man-made objects of finite, but colossal, physical size.

Physical size, absolute and relative, also contributes to the sublime stimulus with regard to its relationship to the third, *ecological*, class of stimulus properties, "which involve association with biologically noxious or beneficial conditions,"[36] usually by means of the learning mechanism of classical (or Pavlovian) conditioning. The

[34] Berlyne, *Aesthetics and Psychobiology*, pp. 69-70.
[35] For example, by means of carefully controlled interviews with participants.
[36] Berlyne, *Aesthetics and Psychobiology*, pp. 69.

relationship between very large objects and ecological stimulus properties has been established in part, presumably, by the frequent status of such objects as "dwellings of the gods."[37] Gods lived from primeval times in vast (and scary) forests and mountains. Later on, King-God Khufu's resting place was built, with the edifice that eventually first surpassed it in height (reputedly), Lincoln Cathedral (completed in 1311), also devoted to religious reverence. Insofar as gods induce in people both a degree of avoidance (because of a certain mild fear or anxiety) and approach (for reasons of love, respect, and the expectation of favors), one would expect that very large religious objects would acquire additional sublimity by being temporally associated with the positive and mildly negative emotional states that an observer experiences when (safely) encountering such objects as places of worship.

With regard to the presentation of (finite, visual) sublime objects in the laboratory, by means of film, slides, or textual description, it is clear that the participants' prior knowledge about an object and its natural "habitat", the experience of having personally encountered it in the past, and the proximity, immediacy, and salience of the portrayal that is used in the experiment, all influence the participants' ratings of the sublime stimulus, as well as their self-reports of aesthetic awe and their objectively recorded physiological responses.[38]

*iii. The Sublime and the Beautiful*

In the history of philosophy, the relationship between the sublime and the beautiful is at one end anchored by the Burkean view that these concepts are mutually exclusive or antithetical, but there has been a profusion of other views from the time of

[37] Konečni, "The Aesthetic Trinity," p. 29.
[38] Konečni, Wanic, and Brown, "Emotional and Aesthetic Antecedents."

Longinus to the present. One reason for the disagreements may lie in the previously noted subject-object confusion that has engulfed both concepts; another may be associated with the proclivity to “under-specify” (under-define) the sublime while over-specifying the beautiful – in innumerable one- and two-factor theoretical models. These rather impoverished, even if authoritatively stated, Western theories of beauty – often lacking contextual information and any reference to higher-order interactions of the relevant factors – can be compared, for example, to Zen aesthetics, with its seven major attributes and descriptions that are highly contextual (leading to more accurate predictions).[39]

In the current version of ATT, all sublime stimuli-in-context are considered to be beautiful, with the Great Sphynx and the Khufu pyramid as prototypes: this makes theoretical sense (the explanation of which is beyond the scope of this paper) and is in agreement with the research participants’ intuitive, commonsensical ratings. Of course, many beautiful objects are not sublime.[40] In addition, pre-testing with North American university participants has revealed the existence of complex, but interpretable, interactions of the physical size of objects and their being perceived as (a) beautiful, (b) beautiful and sublime, or (c) neither.[41] Not all large aesthetically-relevant objects are beautiful, let alone sublime: an example is *Colossus of Rhodes* that Longinus described as massive, but disproportionate[42] – as do contemporary sophomores. (Antiquity, in general, and all else equal, clearly contributes to the extremeness of the ratings of the sublime, but

[39] Shinichi Hisamatsu, *Zen and the Fine Arts*, trans. Gishin Tokiwa (Tokyo, Kodansha International, 1958/1971); Vladimir J. Konečni, “On the Golden Section,” *Visual Arts Research 31* (2005): 76-87; see p. 85.
[40] Note that these statements about the relationship between the sublime and the beautiful are somewhat different than the earlier ones in Konečni, “The Aesthetic Trinity,” p. 28.
[41] Konečni, Wanic, and Brown, “Emotional and Aesthetic Antecedents,” pp. 625-630.
[42] See, for example, the comment in Bicknell, *Why Music Moves Us*, p. 26.

so does the very new, provided that it satisfies other criteria.[43]) Many small objects are, of course, rated as very beautiful, but virtually never as sublime (except casually, by connoisseurs and art critics, and, more importantly, when they are physically placed into a contrasting, especially a vast, setting that highlights their precious fragility: gilt-framed *Mona Lisa* with an iceberg as a backdrop).

In empirical research inspired by ATT,[44] participants rate objects of theoretical interest on the dimensions of "pleasingness" and "interestingness," in addition to "beauty" and, sometimes, "aesthetic appeal." Ratings on these dimensions are positively correlated, of course, but pleasingness and interestingness have been statistically shown to capture different aspects of beauty, and to be related in a different manner to other important rating dimensions characterizing aesthetically relevant objects, such as their objective and subjective complexity.

*iv. The Sublime: Further Considerations*

*iv.A. Dangerousness of the Sublime*. Much has been written about "terror" and its controllability in the sublime, which is addressed in ATT, as has been discussed in section II.*i.*, in terms of the (rather Kantian) feelings of existential security,[45] which are indispensable for aesthetic awe to occur.

*iv.B. Seeking the Sublime*. The psychological component of an informed empirical

[43] Konečni, "The Aesthetic Trinity," p. 29.
[44] With regard to the previously mentioned issues of a meaningful operationalization of (finite, visual) sublime objects in laboratory settings, it is obvious that one can obtain various degrees of approximation and simulation of both the stimulus and the context (manipulating the size and vividness of the display, the sound effects, and the participants' proximity), while falling well short of "the real thing." See Konečni, Wanic, and Brown, "Emotional and Aesthetic Antecedents," pp. 631- 633.
[45] Eventually, such an analysis must also address the *economic* security of the observer: the Sphynx may not be sublime to the desperately poor living under its gaze; see Konečni, "The Aesthetic Trinity," p. 29.

aesthetics must also address *motivational factors* in human dealings with sublime objects, both natural and man-made. People who do not live near a particular sublime object may spend a lifetime hoping and planning to experience it. To do so, they often travel far and experience great inconvenience, expense, and danger. (Sublime objects have always been associated with inaccessibility and this continues into the present: contemporary fast travel, for example, is offset by the "terrorist threat.") When the sublime object has a religious significance, travel is sometimes formalized as pilgrimage (including, for example, the compulsory Muslim hajj to the 10.5 x 12 x 15-meter Ka'ba in Mecca), but voyages to religious sublime objects are, of course, far from being the sole occasions for exhausting, expensive, and dangerous visits to the sublime. The actual (physical) approach to the sublime object "may involve a gradual buildup of expectations… and be spread over hours, days, or much longer periods. There is typically also an increase in thoughts and activities that contribute to the eventual state of aesthetic awe. In the final stage of the approach, even though one may factually know that the sublime is 'just around the corner,' there is the shock, the 'Wow!,' when it is suddenly revealed, or revealed in full."[46]

*iv.C. Commonalities in the Sublime Across Cultures*. An underlying, and empirically verifiable, assumption of ATT is that *aesthetic wisdom* involves similar, broad features in many, or most, cultures. After all,

> "all living humans are products of the fundamentally similar selective evolutionary pressures and the same broad laws of supply and demand in the context of finite resources, which has shaped the neuro-mental (brain-mind) apparatus of the *homo sapiens* (including his aesthetic responsiveness). These pressures continue in our time and it is therefore not surprising that there are common elements across time and cultures in both the intuitive definition of the sublime and the authentic responses to it -- the primordial responses of aesthetic awe,

[46] Konečni, "The Aesthetic Trinity," p. 32.

of being deeply moved, and of experiencing thrills."[47]

An appropriate analysis of the sublime in various cultures should not only be concerned with the features of objects perceived as sublime (especially in terms of the commonalities between the views held by the "visitors" and the "locals"), but also with the depth of knowledge and experience that the visitors have of the local aesthetic codes. Of course, this is a truism, but one worth repeating, because when it is taken seriously, many discrepancies in both the description of the sublime and in the nature and intensity of aesthetic responses tend to disappear or be dramatically reduced. For example, many Western casual visitors find the previously mentioned Giant Buddha in Leshan awkward and ungainly, rather than sublime – despite its enormous size, antiquity, and glorious natural location. But careful, non-directive interviews conducted by the author have revealed that such judgments are made almost exclusively by the first-time visitors to Asia who are largely unfamiliar with representations of the Buddha in terms of poses, proportions, and facial expressions.

In contrast, first-time visitors to areas from which Mount Fuji is visible, even if only most superficially aware of its sacred status to all Japanese and of the significance of the various temples and shrines located on its slopes, have no conceptual problem in perceiving the beautiful solitary conic section – a work of nature but with a geometrically regular shape, often snow-capped, or ringed by clouds – as a sublime object. These visitors experience aesthetic awe that is presumably not different from that allegedly felt in about 1605 by the samurai Miyamoto Musashi, as described in a semi-fictional biography of this austere (historical) master swordsman: "There, floating on a sea of clouds, was the red cone of Mount Fuji, still wearing its winter mantle of snow. The sight brought a childish cry of delight to his lips. He had seen paintings of the famous mountain and had a mental image of it, but this was the first time he had actually seen it… 'Magnificent,' he sighed, making no effort to wipe the tears from his unblinking

[47] Konečni, "The Aesthetic Trinity," pp. 29-30.

eyes."[48] Whether the passage describes Yoshikawa's recall of his own aesthetic encounter, or what he imagines to be a prototypic and inescapable human response to Mount Fuji, is secondary: various elements of the episode are clearly within the purview of ATT.

IV. Instead of a Conclusion: The Sublime and Aesthetic Awe versus "Destructive Deconstruction"

A sizable proportion of 20th-century Western visual art (but not architecture) can be classified as bluff, shock, and decay ephemera that have collectively attempted a *destructive deconstruction* of the ancient and classical sublime, while largely shunning any cumulative linkage.[49] (Human multiplication and economic activity have of course had an analogously destructive effect on many natural sublime objects and their habitats.) Especially in the final decades of the previous millennium, the destructive deconstruction of the traditional sublime as a weapon of patriarchal oppression and reactionary illusion has been forcefully promoted by the new art hyper-elite, the politicized museum curators, and the directors of international mega-exhibitions, with the aid of governmental culture-bureaucracies.

Somewhat paradoxically, the effort has largely not been directed at the exploitative, the wasteful, and the militaristic forces in Western societies; instead, through the deconstruction of the sublime, an assault has been organized by many postmodern artists against what can be legitimately claimed to be the "primordial core of the human aesthetic-emotional response – that is, the perceptual, cognitive, and especially emotional apparatus that our species has gradually developed, over 100,000 years, to deal with the sublime and the deeply moving."[50]

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[48] Eiji Yoshikawa, *Musashi*, trans. Charles S. Terry (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1971/1981), p. 583.

[49] Konečni, "The Aesthetic Trinity," pp. 38-40.

[50] Konečni, "The Aesthetic Trinity," p. 39.

In contrast, the constellation of the fundamental aesthetic responses described in ATT emphasizes the continuity and indeed the timelessness of human interactions with the sublime – the sublime that is represented in the pinnacles of human and natural creativity in their respective milieux. One therefore suspects that the current, aggressive, curatorial political agendas and the crass fads in the arts and in cultural policy will eventually, mercifully, fail.