

THE RHETORICS OF THE eXtreme

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Abstract

This paper traces the relation between bungee jumping as eXtreme sport and the experience culture that we live in. It is argued that the sublime has been commodified to suit consumers' preferences and choices. The higher the bridge or drop, the more enticing and challenging the jump. The sublime experience of bungee jumping has been reduced to a "drug" that can be induced whenever a quick fix of adrenaline is needed. The difference between the Kantian sublime and the eXtreme sublime, as figured in bungee jumping and other extreme sports, is also considered. Some comparative notes are made between the Romantic sublime as figured in the landscapes of Friedrich and bungee jumping. Where the Romantic sublime still worked with a necessary distance between object and subject the contemporary extreme sublime attempts to momentarily disrupt the distance and become one with the eventfulness of the sublime.

Keywords: Sublime, Experience Economy, Extreme Adventures, Bungee Jumping

One of the most disturbing images of recent times certainly is the one of people jumping from the World Trade Centre trying to escape a death of flames. The fact that they are, nevertheless, jumping to their death, makes the images all the more shocking. In contrast with these brave jumps towards a certain death, is the image of a person standing on a high bridge and after "three, two, bungee!" jumps into the abyss. The difference being that in the last example there is a safety cord (a *bungee*) attached to the feet. This means *bungee jumping* is not an unconditional jump towards the unthinkable and the horrific, but instead it may even ensue in unknown pleasure once realised that death is temporarily held at bay. The former example of the desperate jump from the burning towers may be described as a tragic and fatal accident, while bungee jumping may best be described as a capitalistic flirtation with the sublime.

Although the sublime has once again become fashionable, the image of the person standing on the edge of the cliff confronted with his own mortality and thus the sublime, is, however, not unique to our time. The sublime as specific aesthetic and ethical theme has been raised in the eighteenth century's literature, visual arts and in philosophical texts. The sublime's roots can however, be found in Classic rhetorical tradition, specifically in the texts of Longinus who speculated on the most effective ways of communicating that, which cannot be represented. The sublime announcing itself in postmodern discourses – primarily in aesthetics – deal with the "conceptually inappropriable" (White 1997, 126, 141). In other words, the postmodern sublime refers to the unrepresentable, that which is unsayable and cannot be said. Or as Lyotard (1993, 11), influential interpreter of the postmodern sublime explains; the representation of the sublime must necessarily end in a "negative presentation." What this means is that the only way to provide evidence of the unrepresentable is merely in the negative, by means of the unrepresentability thereof.

But what happens to the sublime today? In the case of bungee jumping and other eXtreme sports an interesting encounter with the sublime comes to the fore. It is here where the sublime is reduced to a commodified "fully immersive experience" (Ward 2003, 121), which can repeatedly be induced as an addiction. It will be argued that the sublime has become a *quick fix*

for a saturated image culture that mistrusts its own boundaries (death, mortality) and the “realness” of its existence. I will put forward a hermeneutics of the eXtreme sublime as it transpires in bungee jumping specifically. This is not an attempt to give a detailed account of all bungee jumpers’ experiences but rather to place it in the historical and contextual framework of the sublime as guiding principle for modern subjectivity. It is the underlying discourses and realities assumed and addressed by the sublime that is rather emphasised and particularly how these are subtly gendered that steer my discussion.

From Rite to Consumption

The earliest recorded forms of bungee jumping¹ differ greatly from the recent pleasure seeking versions thereof as represented in popular media. In fact, the first socially organised jumps from heights rather formed part of a ritualised play between the sexes as documented amongst the Bunlap people of the Pentacost islands in the Pacific Ocean. These jumps are referred to as land dives (Muller 1970),² which are made from high handmade wooden constellations. Land dives have an intriguing gendered history, seeing that the first land dive was made by a woman fleeing from her abusing husband. He followed her into the tree where she was hiding, and when she jumped with *lianas* (vines) tied to her feet – he followed and jumped to his death. Hereafter, the Bunlap men swore never to be deceived by a woman in this manner again and thus the land dive was born. The land dive is far more dangerous than the modern bungee jump, since it is unaided by sophisticated technologies. Furthermore, it is a highly ritualised activity that takes place only once a year, and under specific highly ritualised guidance. On the other hand, bungee jumping in its modern incantation originated from the midnight antics of the Dangerous Sports Club of Oxford on 1 April 1977 that jumped from the Clifton-bridge in Bristol.³

Bungee jumping now forms part of a new generation of extreme or “adrenaline-inducing” (Wikipedia) sports. Extreme sports often combine speed, height, danger and spectacular stunts. Importantly, extreme factors always need to form part of the events. In other words, there should always be the option of real danger, in order for the activity to resort under the eXtreme sports label.⁴ Another trend is to combine extreme sports into adventure packages to strange and exotic places. This is the African adventure swinging from the bungee cord and not the vines.

¹ The term bungee refers to a British slang for Indian rubber (<http://www.sabungee.co.za>) and the term is also spelled differently e.g., *bungee*, *bungy*, *bunjee*, *Le Benji* or it is even referred to as “suicide practice” (<http://www.BungeeZone.co.za>).

² The so-called land dive has its origin in the legend of the Bunlap according to which a man who treated his wife badly led ultimately to the land dive. She ran away from him, climbed into a high tree, naturally he followed, upon which she jumped from the high tree. What the evil man did not realise was that the woman had tied *lianas* (plant materials, vines) to her feet and when she made the jump her fall was secured, whereas the man’s ended (fairly one may argue) in death. After this event the other men in the tribe decided not to fall for the same trick so to speak and they started to practise to jump from high wooden constellations with vines *lianas* attached to their ankles. The land dive is also associated with rites of fertility and also serves as a psychological release session for the jumper. Before the man jumps he may inform the whole community about his troubles, these may include his economical hardships and even his marital problems. Therefore, the land dive can almost be described as a therapeutic ritual for the Bunlap.

³ Story of a woman who tried to commit suicide from the bridge but her skirt parashooted her to safety. These mavericks were arrested shortly afterwards because they did not have permission to jump the bridge.

⁴ Other extreme activities are BMX free styling, free diving, free climbing, paragliding, rollerblading, skateboarding, snowboarding, surfing, white-water kayaking, and white-water rafting.

Bungee and Other eXtreme Sports as Tourist Experiences

South Africa has become a popular tourist attraction for the eXtreme sports fanatic who wants to do bungee jumping, kayaking, skydiving, white-water rafting and shark diving all on a sunny afternoon. In fact, South Africa is marketed as a dream destination for eXtreme adventures. As one adventure company states: "Africa leisure offers African adventures for unparalleled adrenalin rushes" (<http://www.africa-at-leisure.com/extreme-safari-adventure.htm>). South Africa has become part of a global market where sublime destinations are marketed and different nationalities compete to advertise "products" such as mountains, cliffs, gorges, and rock formations as being the most "sublime" and "extreme." As Marvell (2002, no pages) explains: "Physical features such as mountains and rivers are described as being "the tallest," "the longest" in order to attract visitors... [T]hrough this process national identity becomes asserted and in so doing the differences between national identity and international consumption become increasingly blurred."

In this regard the South African eXtreme adventure market prides itself in the highest commercial bungee jump in the world from the Bloukrans-bridge in the Tsitsikama. The jump is an amazing 216 meters with a seven seconds free fall before the jumper is pulled back from oblivion. This jump provides an unique "sublime product," which gives South Africa the edge on the global competition.

Extreme sublime adventures are marketed by South African companies such as: *Wildthing Adventures*, *Face Adrenalin*, *Africa Safaris Adventure Sports* and *Xplora Tours* that promise the adventurer to: "Experience the unspoilt Africa of Hemmingway. Sun, wild animals, grandiose landscapes, foreign peoples, adventure – *whatever turns you on*" (<http://www.XploraTours.co.za>). The landscape lies at the service and mercy of the *destination-hopping* tourist, and the experience itself is made compliant to the logic of consumption. The adrenaline-craving adventurer now compiles a package of "sublime experiences"; from the highest bungee jump to the most dangerous animals. No creature too vicious or fierce, no gorge too deep – all must be challenged and overcome.

The aim of the consuming "adventurer tourist" (Marvel 2002, no pages) is to accumulate experiences, for each experience becomes more than a mere memento in the album, it is more a case of accumulating life-altering encounters. Pine and Gilmore (2001, 2) explain the nature of an economy rooted in experiences: "Whether selling to consumers or companies, firms must recognize that goods and services are no longer enough; customers now want experiences." The actual experience is short lived and its meaning momentary. Instead, what has become meaningful is the extend to which the event has changed the life (self) of the consumer.

In the context of the experience economy bungee jumping does indeed induce life-altering experiences. SA Bungee Jumping's (2002) website mentions that, "Many people undergo an astounding transformation just after they take that leap of faith." It is not so much a product that is consumed, therefore, as a self-transforming experience. Such transformative experiences are stapled together, collected, compiled and accelerated. According to Bell and Lyall (2002, 4): "Almost all facets of life are accelerating. This is particularly evident in the tourism industry, where consumers want maximum pleasure in minimum time." According to the logic of the experience economy, we can only consume and experience at an accelerated pace, otherwise, we stand at risk of not experiencing at all. The tragic irony of the accelerated pace is naturally that it leads to a "growing inertia" (Virilio 1997, 20) and, in fact, a slowing down. The drive towards acceleration actually ends in the opposite, for it seems the faster we move, the less we move. Or as Virilio (1997, 20) explains: "Instantaneous transmission tools ... no longer requir[e] people to be mobile, but merely to be mobile on the spot." In the context of the

experience tourist it is no longer important whether he jumps from a crane in San Francisco or from a bridge in Africa, but merely the speed at which these events take place, one after the other. Lewis (2003, 103) cynically remarks: “[W]hile the duration from the bungy-jump to the purchasing of a T-shirt with one’s image emblazone[d] on it ... has become a matter of seconds. From consuming the extreme experience to consuming the representation of the extreme experience is all in an afternoon’s itinerary for the modern tourist.” All these accelerated sublime experiences are strung together until they form part of one extended and, yet, static moment of consumption. How does this link with the concept of the sublime as understood in modern philosophical probings on the topic?

One Hot Moment: Philosophical Reflections

The Kantian Perspective

The two main interpreters of the sublime in the modern western tradition responsible for the revival of the concept in the eighteenth century are Burke’s (1992) *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* and Kant’s (1982) *Critique of Judgement*.⁵ My discussion will veer towards Kant’s conception of the sublime, which I will then compare with the sublime of the eXtreme and particularly how these are subtly gendered.

Kant (1982, 110-111) describes the following as sublime: “Bold, overhanging ... threatening rocks, thunderclouds piled up ... volcanoes in all their violence ... hurricanes leaving desolation in their track, the boundless ocean ... the high waterfall of some mighty river.” What is important for my analysis is that in his theorising on the sublime Kant sustains the supremacy and sovereignty of Reason and Ideas or the subject’s affinity with these super sensible categories. The threatening object (nature – traditionally viewed as female) that evokes the sublime experience does not truly threaten the subject. The initial terror subsides as the subject realises his superiority to physical nature and he awakens to “the sublimity of the human mind” (Lokke 1981, 423). As Lokke (1981, 423) explains: “Kant’s theory is based upon a profound dualism. It is only the natural, physical self which the sublime threatens in order to evoke an awareness of the unfathomable depth of the super sensible, the moral and the eternal within the self.” In Kant’s analysis the encounter with the sublime is in fact a triumphant confirmation of the subject (White 1997, 127). A split occurs between the victorious subject and the terrifying object, for: “Sublimity, does not reside in any of the things of nature, but only in our mind, in so far as we may become conscious of our superiority over nature within, and thus also over nature without us” (Kant 1982, 114). The threatening object, the hostile feminine, merely evokes the sublime experience, because the sublime can only be experienced in and through the (male) subject. A healthy and necessary distance exists between subject and threat, which affords the subject the luxury of the sublime experience. If the subject is truly in danger the experience can no longer be considered to be sublime. Therefore, the Kantian sublime is a self-empowering experience for the subject, because it confirms his relation to the super sensible sphere. Furthermore, Mellor (1993, 85) shows the gendered nature of the sublime: “The sublime is associated with an experience of masculine empowerment; its contrasting term, the beautiful, is associated with an experience of feminine nurturance, love and sensuous relaxation.” The self-empowering nature of the modern sublime is also perpetuated in the experience economy and the extreme sublime, except that now it is inverted as a form of self-annihilation.

⁵ Although Kant also addressed the topic of the sublime in other texts such as *Observations on the Feelings of the Beautiful and Sublime* (ca. 1764, 1960), the *Critique of Judgement* (ca. 1765, 1982) is the source most often accepted as the founding document on the topic.

The modern (or Kantian) sublime also deals with transcendence. It shows how hostile nature is transcended in order to affirm the subject's timeless and eternal link with the super sensible. That which threatens is left behind, conquered, cannibalised and according to Mellor (1993) in *Romanticism and Gender* silenced or colonised. The subject affirms himself as "heroic" (Larrissy 1999, 5) and a "steadily self-aggrandising ego" (Csicsery-Ronay 2002, No pages) that even in the face of the infinite, the vast and the incomprehensible stands his ground.

On the other end, the sublime experience sought in the eXtreme adventure (such as bungee jumping) turns in the opposite direction to self-annihilation that seemingly contrasts sharply with the modern sublime's self-empowering nature. How does the modern and extreme sublime differ then? Not much I will argue, and by exploring themes such as death and the strive towards complete presence the relation between the two will be unravelled. The founding premise of both self-affirmation and self-annihilation is the complex modern subject and they are but flip sides of the same coin.

The Sublime and Death

The mortal condition and the moment of perishing are always at stake when the sublime appears (Deguy 1993, 9).

The sublime experience is described by White (1997, 136) as an encounter with the "wholly other." Death, as ultimate border experience, can arguably be described as wholly other, since death escapes language and form. Therefore, when bungee jumping is sometimes playfully referred to as suicide practice – although clad in a capitalist guise – can it not be interpreted as a spectacular attempt to meet with death? Romanticism referred to this longing to meet with death as a "*Todeswunsch*" and "*Sehnsucht nach dem Unendlichen*" (Lokke 1981, 422). Virilio (2003, 58) refers to the contemporary death drive as exemplified in eXtreme sports as a "thanatophilia" and "necro-technology." In other words, the contemporary sublime's death drive differs from the modern one in that it is aided and sustained by new technologies.

However, each attempt by the bungee jumper to meet death has to fail (hopefully) or else the jumper will miss the exit towards life as Deguy (1993, 224-229) humoristically states. Bungee jumping can accordingly be described as a jump towards death (seeming self-annihilation), while making a u-turn or sharp exit back to life again. If the jump is fatal it would not be sublime in Kant's terms but it would rather be an awful accident. Bungee jumping is not intended to be fatal, but to simulate the experience of death as a consumer option. In fact, so truthful is the simulation that both the mind and body are temporarily seduced into believing that the jump is indeed going to be fatal. Therefore physical symptoms such as accelerated heartbeat, perspiration, and nausea occur while the mind is pondering its final moment. Vetter (1990, 125) describes the experience as: "[what] made bungee jumping seem almost perfect: A chance to drum up the rush that probably goes with a suicidal plunge except that you're attached to a piece of technology that says 'Just kidding' at the last moment." In other words, bungee jumping is a type of dress rehearsal for death sponsored by technology. While the jumper hangs suspended between life and death, he is still connected to the umbelical cord of life which is the safety cord. Bungee jumping is thus a virtual death, real in effect but not in fact.

In this regard DeLillo's (1985) *White Noise* is meaningful, for it voices postmodern man's treacherous relation with death, since the desire exist to experience death and life to tell the tale. Death is described in *White Noise* as a necessary boundary or limitation. As a character remarks: "Isn't death the boundary we need? Doesn't it give a precious texture to life, a sense of definition?" (DeLillo 1985, 228). This means that death provides definition to life, but it is

also the one boundary we fear most. Naturally our fears are legitimate and justifiable: “Never having experienced it [death] – even in simulation – we are in awe, literally in the constant presence of the sublime” (Barrett 2001-2002, 111).

Bungee jumping is thus an attempt to experience death without paying the final penalty. In other words, it is an attempt at self-annihilation without the real effect. As the pilot character in *White Noise* states during a fatal flight: “It [death] is worse than we’d ever imagined. They didn’t prepare us for this at the death simulator in Denver. Our fear is pure...” (DeLillo 1985, 90). No simulation of death can fully prepare one for the eventfulness of death. Bungee jumping may well be a terrible and pleasurable flirtation with death, but there is always the cord to ensure that the experience remains sublime in the Kantian sense and does not become fatal. What makes the extreme sublime perhaps more thrilling is the fact that the distance between subject and terrifying object has almost, but not quite, been imploded.

The Sublime and the Strive towards eXtreme Presence

In a short comparison of how the strive towards complete presence is portrayed in Romanticism versus the eXtreme adrenaline surging version, I will briefly look at the German Romantic artist, Caspar David Friedrich’s (1774-1840) “Traveller watching the mist over the sea,” 1817-1818. Friedrich’s work is drenched with devotional contemplation where awesome nature induces a sublime experience in the subject, which in turn confirms Divinity. Friedrich’s Landscapes voice a deep religiosity and interiority. As he (Borsch-Supan 1990, 10) explains: “The artists should paint not only what he sees before him; but also what he sees within him.” Hereby Friedrich makes a definite bow towards Kant’s interpretation of the sublime wherein the emphasis is shifted back to the inner world of the subject as the one and only locus of representation (Prager 2002, 75).

In the specific work a traveller stands on a height looking out towards the unfolding drama in the landscape. The traveller looks on, he does not become one with the scene. There exists a healthy distance between onlooker and landscape which ensures that the experience remains sublime in Kantian terms. As Kant (1982, 110-111) explains: “Provided our position is secure ... we readily call these objects sublime, because they raise the forces of the soul above the height of vulgar commonplace ... which gives us courage to be able to measure ourselves against the seeming omnipotence of nature.” Distance is a necessary ingredient of the modern sublime project otherwise it becomes a tragic event. The sublime experience is, therefore, a mediated experience; and even though the subject suffers to fully grasp the incomprehensible sphere of the super sensible, his intimate bond with the sphere of Ideas is nevertheless confirmed.

The bungee jumper on the other hand, does not have the luxury of experiencing the threatening and yet delightful event from a distance. The jumper is temporarily immersed in the event. The distance between viewer (subject) and experience (object) has narrowed to the extreme. Nevertheless, there is still a necessary distance, in the sense that the event is not completely transcended, because the safety cord intervenes. As Ward (2003, 121) remarks: “The ultimate experience is measured by the length and perdurance of an adrenalin rush. Self-transcendence is the cost of a ride; and the excellence of the ride is calculated in terms of how close to experiencing raw violence one can come ... in safety... The transcendence of the self has become the transportation of the self, at the highest speed possible, approximating the instantaneous.”

In eXtreme sport/adventures an attempt is made to discard the gap between subject and object, due to the contemporary obsession to be “absolutely present” (Virilio 2003, 47). “One

hot moment” becomes the focal point for “endless intensities and excitements” (Ward 2003, 121), there is no time to waste and literally no time left over. But as Virilio (2003, 43) shows immediacy is a perplexing concept, for it is always again mediated and represented and there always remains “an irreducible gap” (Virilio 1997, 38). Thus the more the bungee jumper is frozen into immediate fully immersive experiences; the more he is arrested in the inertia of immediacy (Virilio 2003, 47).

How does the experience of the sublime in the eXtreme link with the super sensible or the sphere of ideas? Previously I stated that the contemporary sublime could be likened more to self-annihilation than self-affirmation, as was the case in the modern sublime. Some authors even speculate that the contemporary sublime, whether termed techno-sublime, postmodern sublime or the post-human sublime (Csicsery-Ronay 2002, no pages), rather introduces a break with the tradition for it calls the subject into question. In this regard Vaughn (2000, 4) introduces the concept of “sublime immanence,” which refers to the experience of a subject that dissolves into a greater whole. According to the immanent version of the sublime, in contrast to the transcendent sublime, the subject loses himself or immerses himself in an experience that dissolves the boundaries between self and others. This description correlates with bungee jumping’s immersive plunge into the unknown. It is not a question of the self that affirms his intimate bonds with the supersensible, but rather a self that dissolves into a hyper sensible instantaneousness where no boundaries are left.

On some level the act of plunging into the “oceanic feeling” may be gendered in the feminine. This is also true for the modern sublime where the self is momentarily overwhelmed and subdued (thus feminised) by the terrible, but who in a new synthesis returns as a victorious hero. In the case of the immanent sublime the self that returns is in fact the negative image, the inverted image of the transcendent sublime. It is the nihilistic shadow of the heroic modern subject. It is what happens to the subject when he decides to commit theoretical “suicide.” He is still in control of his destiny, even though it is in the negative. Since the sublime that operates in this case is emptied and reduced to consumer item. In the extreme adventure the sublime has become kitsch, a special effect, it “has been sublated and we have arrived at the extremities of the superficial (that are packaged as profundities)” (Ward 2003, 121). The bungee jumper is a consumer of so-called sublime experiences, which never satisfies and only leads to the need to consume another. In the place of revelation, acceleration has come.

Immersed in an experience economy with an over supply of eXtreme experiences the ordinary, the small and the slow (the analogous, the representative, the poetical) do not seem to entice anymore. Bungee jumping is symptomatic of a culture that paradoxically lacks experiences. The subject is now experiencing the “degree zero ... the numbness ... the paralysis of futility” (Ward 2003, 119) of his existence. Nevertheless, there is still a subject at work – a hyper-consumerist subject that induces the sublime as a *cheap thrill* to fill the empty experience horizon. But as with all addictions the higher you jump the higher you need to jump, and in the process the experience loses its impact until the dose is increased again.

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