

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: ON THE DIGITAL SUBLIME

August de los Reyes and Kostas Terzidis, PhD
Harvard University Graduate School of Design

Abstract. This paper describes research in progress on the digital sublime and architecture. Written in three parts, the paper surveys the history of the sublime, offers current examples of the digital sublime, and concludes with the next path of exploration: genetic algorithms created from and of the new numeric sublime.

“Beauty is terror. Whatever we call beautiful, we quiver before it. And what could be more terrifying or beautiful to souls like the Greeks or our own than to lose control completely? To throw off the chains of being for an instant, to shatter the accident of our mortal selves?”

—*The Secret History*, by Donna Tartt

The objective of this research is to understand frameworks of the sublime from history and use them to recognize and leverage subliminal phenomena in the digital realm. While the research is in progress, the first phase consists of a historical survey of the sublime in its relation to cultural movements that influence design. The second begins to recognize contemporary sublime phenomena.

With Y2K as an example of the new dynamic sublime, the new geometric sublime can be represented by a truly never-ending story: the hypertext blog. Tracing its roots to before the advent of hypertext transfer protocols within the newsgroups, the blog—derived from contracting “Web log”—transformed from being a flavor of communal bulletin board into a living, organic record of entire social networks. While blogs have entered the main stream, they have been repurposed from personal journals to other platforms

of communication including political campaigning, advertising, and tools for generating opinion and myth.

Just as the observation of the sublime evolved from the textual of Longinus to the physical and natural, so has it evolved in the digital. New landscapes and environments are emerging from simulations such as SimCity, Second Life, and the World of Warcraft. As Marx states in *The Machine in the Garden* that our ideas of the American landscape developed in the Old World, we also try to assert our yearning of the Pastoral in the digital representation of a *natural space*. While the visual representations range from the comic (Sims) to the uncanny (Azeroth) there is a collective struggle to find a balance between the familiar and the alien.

In the essay, *The Digerati Worship the Burning Man*, Vincent Mosco talks about the sublime nature of the Burning Man Festival's evolution as having been catalyzed through the digital. The most notable aspect of this event is not the actual festival itself, but the continuation of the spirit of Burning Man the rest of the year through the digital realm. The characteristic that Mosco attributes to the Burning Man's growth is one that forms the thesis of the rest of his work *The Digital Sublime*—the digital's capacity to create myth.

One arena that the *bricolage* behavior has emerged is in the formation of identity on various social networking Web sites. In these sites—such as Facebook, Friendster, and LinkedIn—users employ various random data objects that exist within each of these realms to craft a personal identity to share with others. This behavior links back to the sublime according to Lévi-Strauss' notion of authenticity though the use of metonyms—what social network observers call implied trust. There is a calm sublimity and an unusual sense of belonging that comes from being part of this constant flow of *bricolage*. “Jacques Derrida extends this notion to any discourse. ‘If one calls *bricolage* the necessity of borrowing one's concept from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined, it must be said that every discourse is *bricoleur*.’”

While the digital presents a platform for old and new configurations of the sublime, perhaps it will bear a new sort of sublime, a sublime that harnesses the tremendous power of digital communications to create myth—through genetic/evolutionary algorithms—and imbue the object and architecture of this myth machine with a novel sublimity. We have already witnessed several popular myths borne from this arena: the Nigerian banker, the miraculous male potency drugs, and phantom email-based lottery winnings; but also myths of our own identities, our own environments, and our own future. It is only a matter of time before we can, as Tarrt states, throw off the chains of being and shatter the accident of our mortal selves.