Mediating the Sublime: Immersive Encounters with Goya and Munch

*Nikita Mathias**

Abstract

Contributing to ongoing debates surrounding immersive experiences in museums, this essay proposes the aesthetic category of the sublime as a productive framework for immersive mediation and exhibition-making. How can immersive mediation be conceived to reconcile the experiential qualities of immersion with the often challenging demands of meaning-making and ethical reflection?

The potential of the sublime to address this challenge is explored through the example of the art exhibition *Goya and Munch: Modern Prophecies* (MUNCH, 2023-24). Drawing on a wide range of materials, I examine specific aspects of the sublime relevant to the development of the exhibition's mediation. These include the sublime's excessiveness, unpresentability, ethical dimension, and close ties to the ridiculous.

Keywords: immersion; the sublime; museum mediation, cultural heritage, exhibition design

Introduction

This essay proposes the aesthetic category of the sublime as a productive framework for immersive mediation and exhibition-making in museums. As such, the sublime offers a means of reconciling sensory and affective intensity with the often challenging demands of meaning-making and ethical reflection. This potential is demonstrated through the case of immersive mediation developed for the exhibition *Goya and Munch: Modern Prophecies*, shown at the Oslo-based art museum MUNCH in 2023-24.

In the conceptual development of the exhibition's immersive mediation the characteristics of the sublime played a central role. Among these are the sublime's sensory excessiveness; its interplay between unpresentability and an established iconography; its capacity to bridge aesthetic and ethical concerns; and its close ties to the category of the ridiculous. Each of these characteristics is discussed in relation to their contribution to the mediation's aim: to provide an atmospheric and emotional foundation for experiencing the artworks on display and to convey central aspects of the art in a visceral, tangible, and meaningful way. The analysis draws on conceptual documents, written reflections, design sketches, documentary exhibition photographs, sound design files, and insights from visitor research and testing. As part of an interdisciplinary project team, I was responsible for developing the exhibition's mediation in my role as a senior concept developer in the museum's learning department.

Central Concepts

Before proceeding, it is necessary to define a few central concepts. The *sublime* can be approximately described as a mixed aesthetic experience, triggered by a specific external object perceived from a position of safety. In this experience, terror and pleasure become intertwined in a symbiotic relationship. As will be explained in detail below, Immanuel Kant's account of the sublime, in particular, affords an interplay between affect and conscious reflection, as well as between aesthetics and ethics.

Following Oliver Grau (2003: 13) *immersion* is defined as an experiential and technological configuration that offers 'a completely alternative reality' by 'almost wholly visually seal[ing] off the observer'. Furthermore, immersion induces emotional involvement and sensory and affective engagement while reducing critical distance. In a museum context, Jenny Kidd's (2018) definition of immersion as 'story-led, audience and participation centered, multimodal, multisensory and attuned to its environment' is also relevant.

Similar to museum terminologies such as education, learning, interpretation, dissemination, and pedagogy, *mediation* is rooted in the broader notion of museums' responsibility to the public (Roberts 1997: 4). A distinctive feature of mediation is its emphasis on the *mediality* of museums, in accordance with Michelle Henning's (2006) materialist account of the museum as a media form. Thus, mediation draws attention to every component involved in the (re)mediation of museum objects as well as the entire range of visitor experience – from cognitive and language-based aspects to bodily, sensory, and affective dimensions (Henning 2006: 70f.).

The composite term *immersive mediation* refers to the various means and techniques through which museum objects and associated narratives immerse the visitor into a sealed-off, shared world characterized by sensory, emotional, and affective intensity as the primary mode of engagement.

Ambivalent Immersion

In the contemporary experience economy (Pine II and Gilmore 1999), immersive mediation and exhibition design have become widely and regularly employed components in museums (Kidd 2018). Museums engage with immersion as a means to fulfil their societal goals and missions, such as democratising collections by making them more accessible to diverse audiences (Anderson 2019). Immersive museum experiences facilitate these goals through emotional, affective, and atmospheric engagement, effective storytelling, and nurturing empathy and understanding (e.g. Aliano 2025; Shehade and Stylianou-Lambert 2024; Savenije and de Bruijn 2017; Bedford 2014; Griffiths 2008).

At the same time, the implementation of immersive experiences in museums has attracted critique in both academic and public discourse. Common criticisms include the commodification of exhibitions into banal spectacles that lack critical distance; the loss of visitor agency; ethical concerns such as the inappropriate treatment of *difficult heritage* content; and immersion's escapist, technology-obsessed, and addictive potential (Gröppel-Wegener and Kidd 2019; Daugbjerg 2011; MacDonald 2023; Aitamurto et al. 2018, Illsley et al. 2025).

Frameworks for conceptualizing immersive mediation and exhibition-making in museums should consider this ambivalence of immersion. How might one design immersive mediation that capitalises on the experiential strengths of immersion while avoiding its aesthetic, experiential, and ethical pitfalls? Among the available frameworks, Colin Sterling (2019) offers a nuanced account of immersive cultural heritage by subjecting the *immersive turn* (Kidd 2018) to key concerns in critical heritage research. These concerns include the socially constructed nature of museum narratives; the discourses established, reproduced, and circulated through institutional structures; and museums' responsibility and potential to address urgent contemporary and global challenges.

Another productive theoretical approach is provided by Ana Luisa Sánchez Laws and Kamilla Bergsnev (2024), who draw on psychological and cognitive scientific perspectives to advocate for a balance between immersive absorption and embodied visitor agency and presence. Presence in immersive exhibition contexts should always involve a certain degree of control and awareness to empower visitors to choose between different levels of absorption. However, if 'presence is produced by processes beyond awareness, agency, and body ownership […], we should design immersive virtual museum experiences in a way in which we can counteract manipulative versions of virtual presence' (Sánchez Laws and Bergsnev 2024: 56).

The Sublime

As a contribution to the ongoing debate around the conceptualization of immersive mediation

in museum exhibitions, I propose the aesthetic category of the sublime as an alternative and, in many ways, more traditional model. The sublime stems from a diverse theoretical tradition reaching back to late antiquity, and has undergone numerous transformations over time, developing a wide range of subtraditions and subcategories.

The definition of the sublime offered at the beginning of this essay is largely based on the accounts of its two most influential theorists: Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. Both are particularly significant for the further development of my framework of immersive mediation and its application in the development of the *Goya and Munch* exhibition.

In his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Burke (2008: 67) examines the mixed aesthetic experience of the sublime – described as 'delightful horror' – and its impact on the physiologic-psychological apparatus of the subject. The dichotomous relationship between beauty and sublimity is applied systematically here for the first time. Beautiful objects are characterized as small, bright, delicate, clear, and smooth, whereas sublime objects are vast, dark, rough, obscure, and boundless. The effects of the sublime are presented as an 'irresistible force', a pre-cognitive and affective overpowering of the subject (Burke 2008: 53).

Within the context of his critical philosophy, particularly in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Immanuel Kant (2001) establishes the sublime as a strictly subjective category by relocating its experience entirely into the mind of the perceiving subject. Accordingly, sublimity is neither an intrinsic quality of objects, nor can its a priori principles be derived from the perception of its objects. The subjective and concrete sensory experience of the sublime remains its irreducible aesthetic foundation.

The participants in the event of the Kantian sublime are *sensibility* (as structured and processed by *imagination*) and *reason*. While imagination and sensibility collapse at the sight of the (merely implicit) sublime object, reason uses this breakdown as an opportunity to demonstrate its superiority over nature to the mind. This alternation of pleasure and displeasure can occur in two distinct forms: the *mathematically sublime* and the *dynamically sublime*. The former arises from the sensation of a seemingly infinite object, whereas the latter emerges from the sensation of overpowering and almighty forces of nature. Kant's two-stage model, which employs an interlocking of sensibility's crisis and the transcendent moment, provides a productive analytical tool for describing points of contact and intersections between the realms of aesthetics and ethics, affect and thought.

The cultural histories of immersion and of the sublime are interwoven. Both categories converge in the realm of affect and emotion, where the spectator – as an embodied and sensory being – is overwhelmed and absorbed. The historical overlap between the sublime and immersion is further grounded in the recurring trope within sublime aesthetics of disregarding artifacts and works of art as capable of provoking its experience, as they merely – and insufficiently – represent and mediate the vastness and force of nature's sublimity (Burke 2008: 58; Kant 2001: 136). However, this presumed inadequacy can be understood as having stimulated the development of new artefacts designed to evoke the sublime by transgressing their frames, expanding their boundaries, and concealing their apparatuses – thereby overcoming their mediality in the act of (immersive) perception (Mathias 2020: 95-172). It is for this reason that sublime artificial objects aim to immerse, absorb, and overwhelm the spectator.

When considering existing research that applies the sublime to museum contexts and the exhibition medium, one prominent area of focus has been *difficult heritage*. Coined by Sharon Macdonald (2009), this term refers to histories and pasts regarded as unsettling, shameful, unheroic, traumatic, or repressed – such as acts of genocide, war, and systemic racism. The sublime becomes relevant here through its capacity to negatively represent that which is essentially unrepresentable and unspeakable. This quality of unrepresentability is closely associated with the work of postmodern philosopher Jean-François Lyotard (1994) and his interpretations of the Kantian sublime.

For example, Bert Olivier (2021) and Andrew S. Gross (2006) both employ the sublime as a mode of negative representation to analyse the architecture and exhibitions of the Jewish Museum in Berlin, which not only represent trauma through objects but also 'act out the trauma of the Holocaust' (Gross 2006: 73). Interestingly, the sublime is also used in critiques of museum narratives and exhibition design within difficult heritage contexts.

One such example is Laura Huey's (2011) analysis of the Vienna Kriminalmuseum, which she frames as a case of *dark tourism*. Drawing on Burke, Kant, and Friedrich Schiller, Huey highlights the museum's combination of the visitor's physical safety – a central precondition of the sublime – with the intense experience of narrative content that evokes fear, horror, and dread. In this sense, the sublime becomes complicit in staging human suffering as a sensationalist spectacle for consumption.

Thus, the sublime engages with phenomena of difficult heritage in two seemingly opposing ways: on the one hand, through its capacity to evoke intense sensory, emotional, and affective experiences by (positively) representing excessively grand, terrible, or powerful objects; on the other, through its void-like, negative mode of representation. Although these functions are often neatly divided between modern and postmodern traditions of the sublime, the broader cultural and intellectual histories of the sublime reveal that these traditions are inextricably intertwined (Mathias 2020). The dynamic interplay between sensory intensity and unpresentability, characteristic of the sublime, is addressed in the forthcoming analysis.

Goya and Munch: Modern Prophecies

The exhibition *Goya and Munch: Modern Prophecies* was shown at the Oslo-based art museum MUNCH from 28 October 2023 to 11 February 2024. Located in the museum's largest exhibition space (1095 m2) on the third floor, the show featured nine paintings, 171 prints, and 11 drawings by the Spanish artist Francisco de Goya (1746-1828), as well as 12 paintings, 18 prints, and ten drawings by the Norwegian artist Edvard Munch (1863-1944), after whom the museum is named. Rather than suggesting direct links between the two artists, the exhibition's curatorial concept explored a number of thematic parallels, as well as Goya's reception during Munch's time.

Apart from an introductory section that addressed potential intersections between Goya and Munch in a more scholarly manner, the exhibition was divided into three main chapters, each centred on a key theme: Society, War, and Faith. The section on Society focused on the artists' depictions of poverty, hardship, and the fate of beggars, workers, and the mentally ill. The War chapter addressed the horrors, bloodshed, and tragedies brought about by devastating conflicts. Finally, the section on Faith offered critical perspectives on religion and superstition, references to Christian iconography, and portrayals of supernatural figures and events.

The project team conceived the exhibition's three main themes as monumental and timeless, as they address fundamental aspects of the human condition. Moreover, the artworks on display may be experienced as intense, dark, and unsettling. From a mediation perspective the visitor experience was therefore envisioned primarily as an atmospheric journey into the darker dimensions of Goya's and Munch's artistries (punctuated occasionally by moments of light). This journey was intended to form a cohesive narrative in which the themes unfold organically.

In line with this central experiential objective, the three immersive transitions between the exhibition's main chapters were conceived to fulfil the following functions, as outlined in the mediation concept description:

> The immersive transition spaces are the connecting links between the exhibition's individual sections. They are crucial components in the exhibition's overall concept of an atmospheric and sensory journey. They introduce upcoming sections in an embodied, emotional, and atmospheric manner. They create expectations, clean the slate, and establish meaningful (though abstract) relations to the upcoming artworks and the design elements in the next section.[1]

Architecturally, the transitions take the form of narrow passages linking the monumental, monolithic exhibition spaces dedicated to the themes of Society, War, and Faith (fig 1).

Development Process

The exhibition was developed through an interdisciplinary process. At the core of the

project was the *concept team*, comprising a curator, a concept developer (from the learning department), and a project manager. As a concept developer, I was primarily responsible for the exhibition's mediation. This core team realized the exhibition in dialogue with an extended network of collaborators, including architects and designers, technicians, registrars, text editors, security personnel, and others.[2] In addition to ensuring art historical and aesthetic integrity, the project aimed to engage a broad, non-expert audience. The development process was informed and supported by user insights gathered through prototyping, testing, and data from previous projects.

Elements tested on museum visitors during the development phase included different options for the exhibition's main title as well as text narratives. Additionally, a comprehensive round of prototyping was conducted for the three immersive transition spaces and other architectural elements (fig 2). These prototypes were constructed at full scale, enabling the team to experiment with various technical solutions, effects, and interrelations between components. Prototype testing was carried out with a limited group of users, primarily comprising the extended exhibition team and other museum staff.

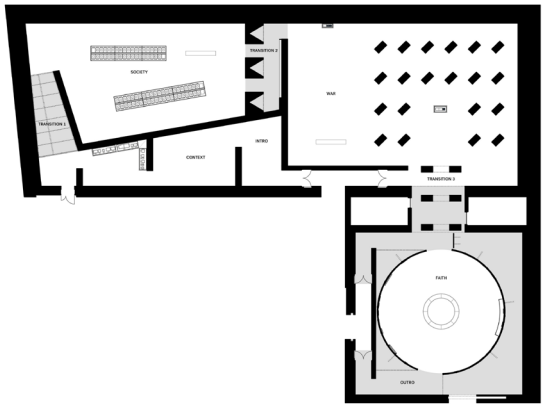

Fig 1: Overview design sketch for Goya and Munch. Modern Prophecies. © Nissen Richards Studio.

Overall, these testing measures generated insights that reassured the team that they were moving in the right direction. Both visitors and museum employees responded positively to the concept, themes, and the exhibition's atmospheric, architectural, and mediation approaches. At the same time, these tests – especially the physical prototypes – highlighted concerns regarding the respectful presentation of the artworks and their narratives, as well as the visitor's contemplation of these works. To address these concerns, whether raised collectively or individually by team members, mitigations and alternative solutions were considered and implemented.

In terms of post-opening evaluations of the visitor experience, observations were conducted during opening hours alongside unstructured, sporadic interviews with visitors and a survey. Visitors could access the digital survey via a QR code placed near the exhibition exit. During certain periods front-of-house staff actively encouraged visitors to complete the survey to increase response rates. The survey received a total of 261 responses, revealing that 85.7% of non-Norwegian-speaking rated the exhibition's architecture and design very positively (8-10 out of 10), with slightly lower scores among Norwegian-speaking visitors. These findings were further corroborated by insights gathered from the observations and interviews.

Fig 2: Prototyping session at MUNCH's concert hall, 10 October 2023.

Finally, the interdisciplinary development process involved a shared understanding and negotiation of the project's curatorial, narrative, design, and experiential goals. This also encompassed the mediation objectives that the theoretical framework of the sublime aimed to support. The concept developer responsible for the exhibition's mediation communicated the underlying theoretical and conceptual ideas to the core team and exhibition architects. However, during day-to-day collaboration, this theoretical framework was not explicitly discussed but rather translated and conveyed through less specialized language, as reflected in the conceptual documents presented in this essay.

Analysis

Sublime Intensities

Kant (2001: 141-2, 144-5, 148, 151-2) describes the first stage of his model as a violent agitation and eventual breakdown of sensibility (as structured by imagination). Similarly, but in greater detail, Burke emphasizes how various sensory agitations provoke the experience of the sublime. The excessive and affective nature of the Burkean sublime recurs throughout his typology of sublime phenomena. A central characteristic of '[t]o make any thing very terrible' is obscurity, which Burke illustrates through examples from architecture and sites of religious rites and worship:

> Almost all the heathen temples were dark. Even in the barbarous temples of the Americans at this day, they keep their idol in a dark part of the hut, which is consecrated to his worship. For this purpose too the druids performed all their ceremonies in the bosom of the darkest woods, and in the shade of the oldest and most spreading oaks (Burke 2008: 54-5).

Burke continues to reference architectural objects and environments in other sections. In the section on 'Light in Building', he points out 'that all edifices calculated to produce an idea of the sublime, ought rather to be dark and gloomy' (Burke 2008: 74). Darkness and obscurity are central features of sublime objects, alongside strong contrasts between light and dark, greatness of dimension, and what Burke terms the *artificial infinite*. The latter refers to the subjective impression of infinity achieved, for instance, through the succession and uniformity of parts, the magnitude of a building, and the darkness that obscures an object's boundaries (Burke 2008: 68-70). Sounds – explicitly distinguished from words – also play an important

role for Burke. He considers '[e]xcessive loudness […, the] noise of vast cataracts, raging storms, thunder, or artillery […, as well as the] shouting of multitudes' (Burke 2008: 75), sudden sounds, and 'low, tremulous, intermitting sound' (Burke 2008: 76) as potent characteristics of sublime objects.

Alluding to the excessive nature of the sublime, the architects translated the monumental thematic scope of the exhibition's three main chapters – Society, War, and Faith – into architectural forms and structures intended to be experienced as both vast in scale and timeless. At the same time these ambitions had to be realized within the constraints of a 1095 m2 exhibition space, which imposed clear limitations on the dimensions of the individual rooms. The strategies used to address this challenge broadly aligned with Burke's descriptions of the sublime. Darkness was treated as a key design principle, employed to evoke the impression of moving through obscure and mysterious spaces of imposing scale.

To accentuate the monumentality of the thematic spaces further, each featured elements that were excessive in scale, uniformity, or sequence (fig 1). In the Society room, two long display cases were used to exhibit Goya's print series *Los caprichos*, drawing attention to the room's extended diagonal axis (fig 3).

Fig 3: Design sketch of the Society section. © Nissen Richards Studio.

The War room presented Goya's series *The Disasters of War* on 20 freestanding, monumental monoliths, each three meters high (fig 4). This graveyard-like structure was intended not only to make the theme of War immediately tangible, but also to create, through the density, quantity, and scale of the monoliths, an impression of a space that appears almost infinite. A similar evocation of the artificial infinite may be experienced in the final Faith section, where curved walls formed a monumental and nearly uninterrupted circle (fig 5).

While these broader architectural elements already sought to form a total spatial experience reminiscent of the Burkean sublime, it was the transition spaces between the main chapters that aimed to provoke a more profound sensory agitation (figs 6-12). Common to all three transitions were darkness, narrowness, and multimedia interplay. The exhibition followed a rhythmic alternation between dark, narrow transitions and monumental, slightly brighter spaces in which the artworks were displayed.

Importantly, the darkness within the transitions was never absolute but appeared in contrast to dim lighting and light effects. This moderation was guided by the Museum's

principles of accessibility and security. The intensity generated by the transition's dark and narrow design was further amplified by abstract, eerie, and unsettling soundscapes created by sound designer Carolyn Downing.[3] Played through loudspeakers, each transition featured its own soundscape, aligned with the themes of Society, War, and Faith. These layered sensory elements were simultaneously unleashed on the visitor and intended to provoke powerful experiences of sublime architecture, while also relating to the artworks in a meaningful, tangible, and accessible way.

Fig 4: The War section. Photo: Ove Kvavik © Munchmuseet.

Fig 5: The Faith section. Photo: Ove Kvavik © Munchmuseet.

The Unpresentable

Since its approximate theoretical inception in late Antiquity, the sublime has carried the aura of being essentially unpresentable and formless.[4] This tendency is also evident in the accounts of Burke and Kant. For Kant, the object's *non-purposiveness* – that is, its inadequacy to our cognitive and sensory faculties by virtue of its sheer magnitude and/or force – is crucial in triggering the sublime in the spectator. This is why the particular forms of the object remain indistinct. As Kant (2001:129) puts it: 'we can say no more than that the object serves for the presentation that can be found in the mind'. Similarly, Burke, who, unlike Kant, accepts

the premise of sublime objects with specific characteristics, employs an abstract descriptive tone, focusing on excessive formal features (darkness, uniformity, succession, loudness, etc), rather than on content or motifs.

Fig 6: Design sketch of Transition 1 (Society). © Nissen Richards Studio.

Fig 7: Transition 1 (Society). Photo: Ove Kvavik © Munchmuseet.

At the same time, Burke's and Kant's theories – as well as the broader cultural history of the sublime – are replete with specific motifs and content matter. This *iconography of the sublime* stands in contradiction to its very notion of being categorically unpresentable (Mathias 2020: 65-94, 283-93). Following Christine Pries' (1989: 12) understanding of the sublime as a liminal category, oscillating between sensibility and reason, immanence and transcendence, affect and understanding, this tension between unpresentability and iconography remains ultimately irresolvable.

The exhibition's immersive mediation spaces employed a negative aesthetic that

emphasized darkness, obscurity, and abstraction, playing on the sublime's irresolvable tension between sensory presence and unpresentability. The first transition (figs 6 and 7) into the Society section consisted of an 8.45 metre-long, narrow, and enclosed corridor. Apart from abstract light patterns (based on a Munch print) projected onto one of the side walls, the corridor was shrouded in darkness. A soundscape of visceral sound intervals accentuated the dark and unsettling atmosphere of the space and the sense of descending into the abyss of history.

Fig 8: Design sketch of Transition 2 (War). © Nissen Richards Studio.

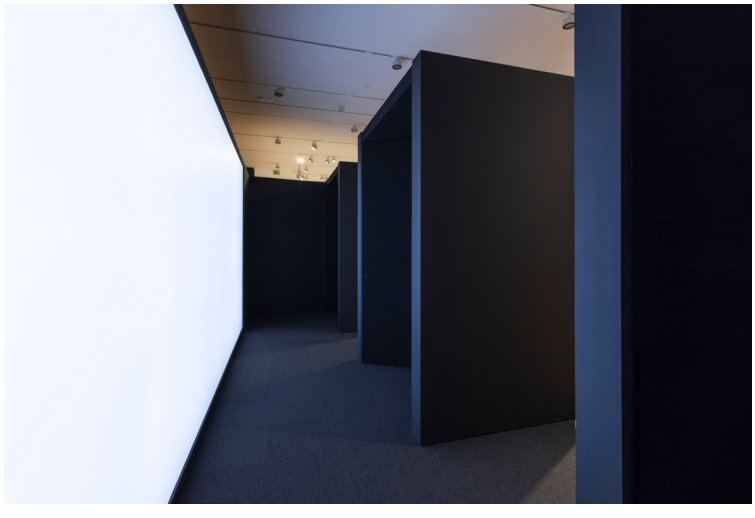

Fig 9: Transition 2 (War). Photo: Ove Kvavik © Munchmuseet.

The second transition (figs 4, 8, and 9) comprised two parts: first, visitors moved towards a faintly glowing wall of light situated in a darkened area. After passing through a narrow passage beside this wall, they encountered three black niches containing sound – and nothing else. As this space transitioned into the War section, the accompanying soundscapes alluded in abstract ways to war as an experience of unspeakable (and unpresentable) horror. Finally, the

third transition (figs 10-12) introduced the theme of Faith through three freestanding portals that gradually shifted in colour from the blackness of War to the light grey tone of Faith. Only the central portal contained light in an otherwise darkened space, and the accompanying soundscape – a waxing and waning form of white noise resembling the sound of an unearthly ocean – may evoke associations with transcendence and spirituality.

Fig 10: Design sketch of the vista from the War section towards Transition 3. © Nissen Richards Studio.

Fig 11: Vista from Faith section toward Transition 3. Photo: Ove Kvavik © Munchmuseet.

The use of an aesthetic of the unpresentable in the transition spaces was grounded in the themes and content of the artworks by Goya and Munch. More specifically, the relationship between the transitions and the thematic representations in the artworks was articulated in the following concept sketch:

> There is something unspeakable about the exhibition's three monumental themes. Goya and Munch attempt to visualize and represent the horrors of war, desperate poverty, dehumanizing insanity, and the experience of the sacred. It is not our job to add other attempts of expression to the exhibited art. All we can do is to hint at what is essentially unpresentable by means of darkness (negative space),

> absence, atmospheres and abstract traces, hoping to make the visitor more perceptive towards the unspeakable truths the artists try to depict.[5]

Thus, the characteristics of the sublime were used to define the boundaries and functions of immersive art mediation in relation to the original artworks – namely, to allude to their content in an abstract manner without interfering with it, and to immerse and affect the spectator in ways that facilitate an engaging and meaningful encounter with the art. Simply put, the sublime as a mode of mediation was employed to open visitors up to the exhibited works; to activate their senses, bodies, emotions, and intellects; and to guide their attention (Sivertsen et al. 2023)

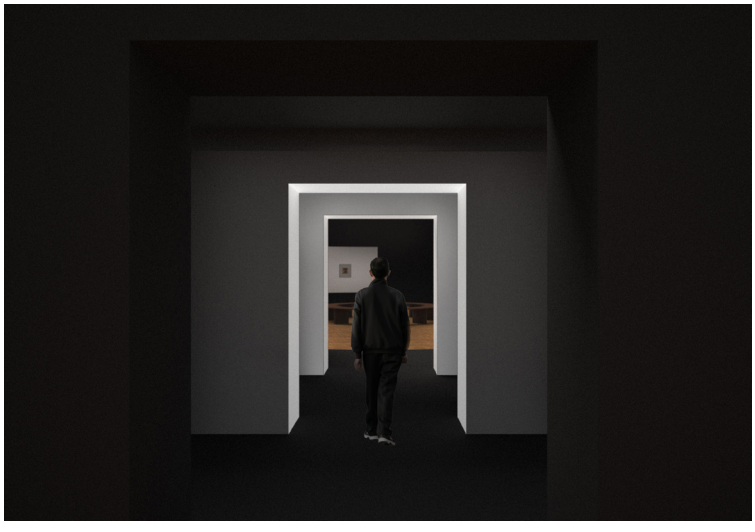

Fig 12: Design sketch of Transition 3 (Faith). © Nissen Richards Studio..

Moral Feelings

Among our classical aesthetic categories, the sublime may be said to have the closest ties to ethics. While Burke (2008: 62) occasionally points to the sublime's potential to 'raise a man in his own opinion, produc[ing] a sort of swelling and triumph that is extremely grateful to the human mind', and while the sublime may even convey the 'idea of God', it is Kant in particular who systematically establishes the sublime as an aesthetic experience that brings into contact sensibility and reason, and moves from immanence (first stage) to transcendence (second stage).

The pleasure associated with the experience of the sublime arises in response to the displeasure caused by sensibility's breakdown. It emerges because reason demonstrates to the mind that none of its concepts (e.g. God, immortality, freedom, infinity) can ever be presented within perception, no matter how vast or powerful the perceived object may be. Even though the sublime object confronts the perceiving subject with their physical limitations, 'the humanity in our person remains undemeaned' (Kant 2001: 145), because the faculty of reason renders (to some extent) any perceived object small and powerless.

At the same time, it remains unclear which of the Kantian ideas of (practical) reason – God, immortality, freedom – are evoked by the sublime object. This ambiguity stems from what Kant (2001: 141) calls 'a certain subreption (substitution of a respect for the [sublime] object instead of for the idea of humanity in our subject)'. Rather than being consciously experienced, the respect for humanity's ethical potential and reason is felt only as an indistinct pleasure – a moral feeling – projected onto an object. In other words, the sublime object initiates an emotional opening towards ethical matters and perspectives in the subject.

How can the evocation of moral feelings through the experience of sublime phenomena

be productively harnessed in the context of an art exhibition? The rationale behind the exhibition's use of darkness, obscurity, lighting contrasts, alternating narrow and expansive spaces, and unsettling soundscapes was to emotionally attune visitors to the art on display, drawing them into a state in which it feels natural to spend time with the artworks and engage more deeply with their ethical dimensions. The immersive transitions were conceived to foster moral feelings in the visitor's encounter with the artworks.

Fig 13: Edvard Munch, Women in Hospital, 1897, oil and crayon on canvas, 110 x 100 cm, MUNCH. © Munchmuseet, photo: Halvor Bjørngård.

In front of Goya's and Munch's pictures visitors might engage with ethical questions related to the exhibition's main themes of Society, War, and Faith. Connecting these to today's social and political conditions, they may reflect on how perceptions of the mentally ill (fig 13), beggars, and social outcasts have changed – or remained the same – and consider how societies treat these groups. Visitors might also contemplate the human capacity for atrocities during war, and why such horrors are so easily forgotten amid ongoing conflicts in Europe and beyond. Regarding Faith, they may explore the boundaries between true belief and superstition, and consider how crimes against humanity can be committed in the name of religion. These are just some of the questions that the interplay between Goya's and Munch's works and their immersive and textual mediation encourages visitors to explore (fig 14).

Risking Ridiculousness

Traditionally there is a close kinship between the aesthetic categories of the sublime and the ridiculous; they appear as friendly neighbours, mutual beneficiaries, antagonists, and sworn enemies (Mathias 2020: 302-10). The ridiculous challenges the sublime by threatening to puncture its terrifying and awe-inspiring aura. The tragic height and sincerity of sublime objects are so excessive that their corruption by ordinary, low, or vulgar elements can lead to their collapse – and thus to their becoming objects of ridicule. The ridiculous may also

test the sublime by exposing its shallow or pretentious manifestations. At the same time it can enhance the sublimity of a truly grand object. These various relationships between the neighbouring categories of the sublime and the ridiculous have been debated in Western aesthetics and cultural history for centuries (Brittnacher et al. 2010).

Fig 14: Intro wall text, War section. © Munchmuseet, photo: Halvor Bjørngård.

In developing an art exhibition for a fairly new museum building (opened in 2021) the potential clash between sublime atmospheres and ordinary infrastructural elements posed a challenge. Such a building must not only accommodate the display of artworks but also support a wide range of operational functions and visitor services. Emergency exit and wayfinding signs, ventilation valves, access points to art elevators, door terminals, and the extensive infrastructure for lighting, climate control, audio, and IT systems are all present within MUNCH's exhibition spaces. Although the extended exhibition team made efforts to conceal these elements – or at least to divert visitors' attention from them – this could never be achieved completely. One moment visitors might be immersed in a Goya print or wandering through an immersive mediation space; the next, they may encounter a glowing door-release button or a fire extinguisher.

German philosopher K.W.F Solger considers the contamination of the sublime's purity and integrity to be inevitable. The reason for this is that the sublime must manifest as sensation within the realm of the finite. 'Nothing is ridiculous and comic that is not mixed with a blending of dignity or encouragement of melancholy; nothing is sublime and tragic that does not turn insignificant or ridiculous through its finite and even ordinary depiction' (Solger 1907: 354).[6]

Friedrich Theodor Vischer takes this argument even further, asserting that the truly sublime can withstand any confrontation with the comic (which he equates with the ridiculous). A sublime object that invites ridicule – and thereby acknowledges its own limitations – is not diminished. On the contrary, 'its value grows through this freedom and liberty' (Vischer 1837: 165).[7]

In this sense, the accidental – yet inevitable – clash between the sublime aesthetic

of the exhibition's mediation and architecture and the presence of ordinary components (exit signs, ventilation valves, and so forth) can be understood as a kind of test of aesthetic judgment: does the (potentially) sublime aura collapse into the ridiculous, or does it withstand the challenge posed by these intrusions? One might even ask whether this clash between the sublime and the ordinary could itself become a source of aesthetic pleasure. Might the irreconcilable tension between the two be perceived as intriguing, or even amusing? Such frictions might open the door to moments of cheekiness and irony – qualities not entirely absent from the works of Goya and Munch themselves.

Conclusion (or, the Fragility of the Sublime)

The aim of this article has been to demonstrate the productivity of the sublime as a framework for immersive mediation and exhibition-making in museums. This potential was explored through the development of the exhibition *Goya and Munch. Modern Prophecies*, with particular attention to its immersive mediation. One question this essay did not attend to answer is whether the exhibition succeeded in creating the visitor experiences it set out to achieve. Yet this uncertainty in terms of reception is itself an inherent feature of the sublime.

Especially for Kant, the particularities of the relationship between the perceived object and the perceiving subject are of central importance. How is the spectator positioned in relation to the object? What is their mindset, background, or level of education? These factors all shape the experience of the Kantian sublime (Kant, 2001: 125, 135-6, 148-9, 152).

While the idea of individual requirements based on education may seem at odds with the Kantian sublime – typically associated with universal sensory and affective intensity – Kant's emphasis on its subjectivity productively complicates how such experiences are understood and achieved. The team who developed the exhibition's immersive mediation could not be certain that they had succeeded in guiding visitors on an immersive journey into the artistic worlds of Goya and Munch, nor that visitors had intense and meaningful experiences of the sublime in relation to the exhibited works. As described earlier, prototyping and user testing during development offered some approximate insight into these questions. However, such feedback can never fully capture the full experiential range of an exhibition conceived as a holistic, coherent whole, in which all elements—especially atmospheric and immersive ones—must work together seamlessly.

Thus, while the aesthetic category of the sublime provided a fruitful theoretical framework developing the exhibition's immersive mediation, the quantitative and qualitative evaluation of the visitor experience remains an essential and irreplaceable task – not only for the *Goya and Munch* exhibition, but for any museum exhibition project.

Disclosure of Interest

The author reports no conflict of interest.

Notes

1 Mathias, N., mediation concept description, 16 February 2023.

2 The exhibition architects commissioned by MUNCH were the London-based studio Nissen Richards.

3 The soundtracks can be accessed via the following link: https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/bswxbsbgyzfwj7rntpw5y/AP60EHmo9f2hdlglgVK9WoY?rlkey=0vwmfupbijmr0bs867shaxq9r&e=3&st=0mv7lf21&dl=0. The password to access the files is 'SWF?munch041023'.

4 In his treatise *Peri Hypsous*, Pseudo-Longinus cites the silence of the warrior Aias from Homer's *Odyssey* as a potentially sublime object. In doing so, he envisions a sublime speech – or, more broadly, a sublime work of art – that is entirely bare and formless (Longinus 1995: 185).

[5] Mathias, N., 'Goya Immersive Spaces' concept sketch, 25 May 2023.

[6] Translated from German by the author.

[7] Translated from German by the author.

References

Aitamurto, T, Boin, J., Chen, K., Cherif, A. And Shridar, S. (2018) 'The Impact of Augmented Reality on Art Engagement: Liking, Impression of Learning, and Distraction', in Jessie Y.C. Chen and Gino Fragomeni (eds) *Virtual, Augmented and Mixed Reality: Applications in Health, Cultural Heritage, and Industry*, 10th International Conference, VAMR 2018, Berlin: Springer, 153-171.

Aliano, K. (2025) *Immersive Storytelling and Spectatorship in Theatre, Museums, and Video Games*, Abingdon: Routledge.

Anderson, G. (2019) *Mission Matters: Relevance and Museums in the 21st Century*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

Bedford, L. (2014) *The Art of Museum Exhibitions: How Story and Imagination Create Aesthetic Experiences*, Abingdon: Routledge.

Brittnacher, R. and Koebner, T. (eds.) (2010) *Vom Erhabenen und vom Komischen; Über eine prekäre Konstellation*, Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann.

Burke, E. (2008) *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Daugbjerg, Mads (2011) 'Playing with fire: struggling with 'experience' and 'play' in war tourism', *Museum and Society*, 9 (1) 17-33.

Grau, O. (2003) *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*, Cambridge: MIT Press.

Griffiths, A. (2008) *Shivers Down Your Spine: Cinema, Museums, and the Immersive View*, New York: Columbia University Press.

Gröppel-Wegener, A. and Kidd, J. (2019) *Critical Encounters with Immersive Storytelling*, Abingdon: Routledge.

Gross, A. (2006) 'Holocaust Tourism in Berlin: Global Memory, Trauma and the "Negative Sublime"', *Journeys*, 7 (2) 73-100.

Henning, M. (2006) *Museums, Media and Cultural Theory*, Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Huey, L. (2011) 'Crime behind the glass: Exploring the sublime in crime at the Vienna Kriminalmuseum', *Theoretical Criminology*, 15 (4) 381-399.

Illsley, W., Almevik, G., Westin, J., Aavaranta Hansén, J., Fornander, E., Hallgren, E., Lagercrantz, W. and Vasileiou, P. (2025) 'The edutainment scan: immersive media and its deployment in museums', *Museum, Management and Curatorship*, 40 (1) 18-35.

Kant, I. (2001) *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kidd, J. (2018) '"Immersive" heritage encounters', *The Museum Review*, 3 (1) https://themuseumreviewjournal.wordpress.com/2018/04/16/tmr_vol3no1_kidd/.

Longinus (1995) 'On the Sublime', in William Hamilton Fyfe (ed) *Aristotle XXIII*, 143-307, Cambridge: Havard University Press.

Lyotard, J. (1994) *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

MacDonald, S. (2023) 'Difficult heritage and immersive experiences: Immersion, impersonation and engagement in dangerous pasts', in Agiatis Benardou and Anna Maria Droumpouki (eds) *Difficult Heritage and Immersive Experiences*, 10-22, Abingdon: Routledge.

MacDonald, S. (2009) *Difficult Heritage: Negotiating the Nazi Past in Nuremberg and Beyond*, Abingdon: Routledge.

Mathias, N. (2020) *Disaster Cinema in Historical Perspective. Mediations of the Sublime*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Olivier, B. (2021) 'The Libeskind Jewish Museum in Berlin, the unpresentable and experience', *Acta Academic*, 53 (1) 23-43.

Pine, J. and Gilmore, J. (1999), *The Experience Economy: Work Is Theatre & Every Business a Stage*, Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Pries, C. (1989) 'Einleitung', in Christine Pries (ed) *Das Erhabene: Zwischen Grenzerfahrung und Größenwahn*, 1-30, Weinheim: VCH 1989.

Roberts, L. (1997) *From Knowledge to Narrative: Educators and the Changing Museum*, Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press.

Savenije, G. and de Bruijn, P. (2017) 'Historical empathy in a museum: uniting contextualisation and emotional engagement', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 23 (9) 832-845.

Sánchez Laws, A. and Bergsnev, K. (2024) 'Presence in Immersive Museum Exhibitions: The Role of Agency, Body-Ownership, and Awareness', in Maria Shehade and Theopisti Stylianou-Lambert (eds) *Museums and Technologies of Presence*, 55-73, Abingdon: Routledge.

Shehade, M., Stylianou-Lambert, T. (eds) (2024) *Museums and Technologies of Presence*, Abingdon: Routledge.

Sivertsen, C., Smith, M. and Zwan, S. (2023) 'Art Critique by Other Means', DIS '23: Proceedings of the 2023 ACM Designing Interactive Systems Conference, 343-352.

Solger, K. (1907) *Erwin: Vier Gespräche über das Schöne und die Kunst*, Berlin: Wiegandt und Grieben.

Sterling, C. (2019) 'Designing "Critical" Heritage Experiences: Immersion, Enchantment and Autonomy', *Archeology International*, 22 (1) 100-113.

Vischer, F. (1837) *Ueber das Erhabene und Komische: Ein Beitrag zu der Philosophie des Schönen*, Stuttgart: Imle & Krauß.

***Nikita Mathias** is Senior Concept Developer at the museum MUNCH in Oslo, Norway. His primary research interests lie at the intersection of art history, museology, media studies, and aesthetics. His publications include the monograph *Disaster Cinema in Historical Perspective: Mediations of the Sublime* (2020) as well as articles on immersive exhibitions, museum mediation, and the art and media histories of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. At the museum, he develops art exhibitions, immersive visitor experiences, and innovation projects. He is also a Research Fellow in the Department of Art History and Image Studies at the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein, South Africa.

Contact information: Nikita.mathias@munchmuseet.no / +47 90833120