Theoretical underpinnings of the mythic metaphor of the void as exemplified in select nineteenth-century paintings

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The void, the abyss, infinite space – an atemporal and aspatial vastness evocative of terror related to the insecurity of precariousness – these descriptors all point equally to reality as well as to myth and metaphor. The void is present in nature and is represented metaphorically and mythically in music, literature, films, architecture and art. The concept of the void has been an existential topic for millennia, discussed and debated by philosophers, scientists and psychologists, whose endeavours to make sense of it have changed over time. What causes insecurity upon encountering the void is that it signifies the threshold between the known, the unknown and the unknowable. Science and technology empower us to push the boundaries of the void ever farther, yet an aspect of the unknowable seems residual. That is where mythic metaphor is useful and is instrumental in both a metaphysical and psychological way. This article examines how, rather than recoiling from the void, engaging or embracing it may result in an enlarging, or transcendent experience. In this article the horizon and luminosity in the sublime paintings of the nineteenth-century Romantic painters Caspar David Freidrich and Joseph Mallord William Turner, potentially leading to a transcendent experience and/or an encounter with the sublime, are positioned as portals to the void.
Keywords: void, abyss, sublime, transcendence, myth, metaphor, Caspar David Friedrich, Joseph Mallord William Turner

Fondements théoriques de la métaphore mythique du vide illustrée dans certaines peintures du XIXe siècle
Le vide, l'abîme, l'espace infini – une immensité intemporelle et aspatiale évoquant la terreur liée à l'insécurité de la précarité – ces descripteurs renvoient tous autant à la réalité qu'au mythe et à la métaphore. Le vide est présent dans la nature et est représenté métaphoriquement et mythiquement dans la musique, la littérature, les films, l'architecture et l'art. Le concept de vide est un sujet existentiel depuis des millénaires, discuté et débattu par des philosophes, des scientifiques et des psychologues, dont les efforts pour lui donner un sens ont évolué au fil du temps. Ce qui provoque l'insécurité face au vide, c'est qu'il représente le seuil entre le connu, l'inconnu et l'inconnaissable. La science et la technologie nous permettent de repousser toujours plus loin les limites du vide, mais un aspect de l'inconnaissable semble résiduel. C'est là que la métaphore mythique est utile et joue un rôle à la fois métaphysique et psychologique. Cet article examine comment, plutôt que de reculer devant le vide, s'y engager ou l'embrasser peut aboutir à une expérience élargie ou transcendante. Dans cet article, l'horizon et la luminosité des peintures sublimes des peintres romantiques du XIXe siècle Caspar David Friedrich et Joseph Mallord William Turner, menant potentiellement à une expérience transcendante et/ou à une rencontre avec le sublime, sont positionnés comme des portails vers le vide.
Mots clés: vide, abîme, sublime, transcendance, mythe, métaphore, Caspar David Friedrich, Joseph Mallord William Turner

In this article the void is a metaphor – an abstract thought structure which, when described in terms of the human condition, points to myth. It is an existential conundrum that has, over time, intrigued philosophers, religious practitioners, scientists and psychologists alike. The void is not only represented in visual artistic works, but also in music, literature, films and architecture. I thus wish to make this obscure concept understandable, more accessible and more easily recognisable to scholars beyond the visual arts alone.

In my ongoing research of the concept of the void in art, especially in the abstract artworks of Kazimir Malevich, Yves Klein, Mark Rothko and Anish Kapoor, I realised that I needed firstly to research its theoretical origins which were richly represented in scholarly and academic philosophical and psychological writing. Having made a thorough study of the theoretical underpinnings of the concept of the void I felt more equipped to read toward the concept of the void in art. However, I could not proceed with my studies of the void and how this concept is exemplified in the above-mentioned artists' artworks until I better understood what the catalysts or precursors to the abstract paintings that intrigued me were. The answer lay in philosophical thinking, literary works and art movements prevalent around the early nineteenth-century. The first half of this article thus focuses on the theoretical underpinnings of the void, especially how such relate to myth and metaphor. The second half is dedicated to how the void is translated into visual communication and how select early nineteenth-century paintings exemplify the concept.

In the first section of this article, "The void and infinity", I recount my first encounter with the void of all voids, namely outer space, and its relationship with infinity. The concept of the void is not the preserve of science alone; thus, I investigate how concepts of the void and transcendence are reflected in the disciplines of philosophy, metaphysics, and psychology. The lure of the void can be regarded as a way out of the closure of knowledge, in which the fall into the abyss inspires one with as much pleasure as fear. The second section of the article, "Encounters with the void" discusses the lure of the void, where the pursuit of pleasure finds fertile ground in the growing popularity of extreme sports that engage the abyss, often to overcoming one's sense of indeterminacy. Literature, music, films, architecture, photography and art can also represent encounters with the void and position us face to face with the unknown and the metaphoric unknowable. The third section, "The void as mythic metaphor" tracks the historical and universal roots of encounters with the void to overcome ignorance, again referring to philosophical, metaphysical and psychological underpinnings thereof. When encounters with the void take one to the limits of sensibility myth and metaphor are useful to persevere through existential chaos. "The void and transcendence", the fourth section, reveals that the concept of the void is paradoxical in that conceptions of the self as ascending towards some kind of higher power when confronted by the metaphoric void are not necessarily broadly accepted and also include descent or a sense of inadequacy, even psychic impotence. In a religiously sceptical world the possibility of transcendence and self-transcendence offer a way to navigate through existential threats or when faced with experiences that are distinctly other. The first half of the article is dedicated to theoretical extrapolations intended to create context and better understanding of this slippery subject.

The second half of the article is structured to offer pointers to identify when and how the void is communicated to the viewer visually. The section that follows next introduces the notion of "Translating a paradoxical notion into visual communication". When representing the void, the surface of artistic representation is considered as a semi-permeable membrane which serves as a boundary between the material earth and dreams of transcendence (both literal and figurative). To this end I discuss three paintings by two nineteenth-century Romantic artists. In the sub-section *The horizon as precursor to the void* the dissolving horizon as well as the significance of the absence of recognisable iconography are discussed in the painting *The Monk by the Sea* by Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840). In the next sub-section, *The sublime and luminosity as a portal to the void,* the significance of the revival of the Greek concept of the sublime by the eighteenth-century philosopher Edmund Burke (1729-97) and the writings of philosopher David Hume (1711-76) on the concept of pleasure and pain, are presented. Their

writings influenced early nineteenth-century thinking as well as attitudes towards aesthetics during a time when effects of the Industrial Revolution were becoming manifest. To this end *Stormy Sea with Blazing Wreck* and *Seascape and Distant Coast* by Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851) are discussed.

These three unsettling paintings have been chosen for this discussion because they succeeded, at the time, in translating a mythic metaphor such as the void into visual communication. Furthermore, they were atypical of landscape painting of the time and served as metaphors for that which lay at the limit of sensibility.[1] The significance of the chosen paintings is that they can be regarded as precursors to twentieth-century post-religious paintings suggestive of the myth of transcendence, introduced in the last section, *Into the void.* That a legitimate function of art can be to produce upsetting or disturbing effects was fundamental in Romantic art and remains fundamental in art today.

The void and infinity

The abyss or the void become manifest in various ways in nature. Following a fascination with outer space for the greater part of my life, I recall the awe of my first telescopic sighting in the 1990s of the *Kappa Crucis Cluster* (The Jewel Box, or NGC 4755), an open cluster located in the southern constellation Crux (or the Southern Cross asterism), some 6,440 light years from Earth (figure 1).

Figure 1
NGC 4755 image was taken on 29 October 2009 with the Wide Field Imager (WFI) on the MPEG/ESO 2.2 meter telescope at ESO's La Silla Observatory
(retrieved from https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/ Wikimedia Commons).

Also in the Milky Way galaxy and adjoining Crux is The Coalsack Nebula (C99), an interstellar cloud of cosmic dust – an absorption nebula so dense that it obscures the visible wavelengths of light or emissions from celestial objects, possibly detonating powerfully, behind it. It appears like a dense, dark void (figure 2). I was staring into what seemed like infinity.[2] The thrill was in peering into the void – in effect bringing the past into the "here and now", and the infinite into proximity – as cosmologist Marcus Chown (1996: 31) explains – because the speed of light is finite, as we peer farther and deeper into space, we observe objects as they were further and further in the past.

Figure 2
The Coalsack Nebula taken by the Wide Field Imager on the MPG/ESO 2.2-meter telescope (ESO image retrieved from https://www.space.com/30821-inky-coalsack-nebula-telescope-views.html).

What had initially seemed like a fascinating but impenetrable dark void with pinpricks of bright light, was filled with incomprehensibly large spaces in which floated identifiable objects that were themselves at an incomprehensible distance from each other – distanced from everything known, yet related to one Big Bang event some 18 billion years ago.[3] Staring into space can be a life-altering experience that renders one speechless.[4] I was familiar with Big Bang theory, accepted it rationally and knew that there was, in effect, no point of infinity in the voids in outer space. Theoretical physicist Carlo Rovelli (2016: 202) explains that quantum gravity is the discovery that no infinitely small point exists, so infinity becomes a metaphor for

the farthest conception of space, beyond the known Universe. The affect was one of feeling exhilaration, simultaneously feeling inconsequential accompanied with a sense of fusing with an incomprehensibly huge space.[5] From an ontological materialist point of view, peering into the void had become for me, decades ago, not merely a scientific curiosity of practical astronomy in the service of expanding knowledge – the void represented a mythic metaphor of I know not what, exactly. Although I felt empowered by what I had seen, the overriding sentiment was exhilaration at what I was not seeing. I realised that knowledge is not necessarily a systematic expedition of unlocking hidden truths, but rather an endless range of transient possibilities in a finite continuum. Literary theorist Gayatri Spivak (1997: lxxvii) alludes to the lure of the abyss as a way out of the closure of knowledge, in which the fall into the abyss inspires one with as much pleasure as fear – "We are intoxicated with the prospect of never hitting bottom".

In Immanuel Kant's (1783) discussion of space in his *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysic* he asks: "How is it that in this space, here, we can make judgements that we know with apodictic certainty will be valid in that space, there?" (Campbell 2002: 1). Kant's explanation was that the laws of space are known to the mind because they are *of* the mind, an *a priori* knowledge, hard-wired from birth but only brought to the fore by external circumstances. In terms of outer space Kant, of course, could not have anticipated to what extent some empirical knowledge would be *a posteriori*.[6] Philosopher Slavoj Zizek reminds that it was well before Kant that philosophers doubted the ability of humankind to conceive of the infinite and affirmed "that we can only conjecture the Infinite by means of improper metaphors" (Zizek 2008: 157). What, actually, is the void, if even the outer reaches of space disprove any "non-space"? How does one react when having an encounter with a void that challenges the limits of one's comprehension, facing the unknown and the unknowable? Does one recoil and flee, or does one step over a metaphoric threshold and dive into the imagined abyss? Does one hope to transcend from a metaphysical "here" to a mythic "there" in expectation of unlocking hidden truths?

Encarta Concise English Dictionary[7] describes things metaphysical as follows: relating to the philosophical study of the nature of being or beings or a philosophical system resulting from such study; based on speculative reasoning and unexamined assumptions that have not been logically examined or confirmed by observation; extremely abstract or theoretical; without material form or substance; originating not in the physical world but somewhere outside it. The void thus seems to belong in the realm of metaphysics, regardless whether "my" void represents an exhilarating space of the unknown and "yours" one of certainty and salvation with God, for example. Metaphysician Ananda Coomaraswarmy (1977: 6-7) makes the point with respect to the metaphorical language of mythology and metaphysics that "its 'worlds' and 'gods' are levels of reference and symbolic entities which are neither places nor individuals but states of being realizable within you". Thus, these are not thoughts specific to any orthodoxy, the West nor the East, neither are they bound to any specific time-frame – essentially these are notions that relate to how individuals create myths in attempting to make sense of the unknown and the unknowable. Gayatri Spivak (1997: xxi) refers to Jacques Derrida's uses of the word metaphysics very simply as shorthand for any science of presence and quotes Derrida: "The history of metaphysics, like the history of the West, is the history of these metaphors and metonymies. Its matrix … is the determination of being as presence in all the senses of the word. It would be possible to show that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always designated the constant of a presence – *eidos, archè, telos, energeia*, *ousia* (essence, existence, substance, subject) *aletheia*, transcendentality, consciousness, or conscience, God, man, and so forth".

Comparative mythologist Joseph John Campbell (1968: 583) draws attention to important events that converted metaphysics into psychology, in which archetypes of mythology (such as God, angels, incarnations, transcendence) could no longer be referred to a supposed metaphysical sphere, but were rather constructs of the mind. In the early fourteenth century the English philosopher William of Occam stated that there can be no abstractive cognition where there has not first been a perceptive cognition and by doing so, he disqualified the application of concepts to the mystery called "God". Concepts are functions of the mind, Occam stated, and may be derived from and signify perceptions of things in the field of space and time. They may also derive from and signify acts of the mind, however, in no case can they signify entities other than those in the mind or those perceived. Occam used the example of the concept "dog", which cannot be assumed to signify any metaphysical *quidditas* (whatness) as an idea in a "divine" mind elsewhere, of which all the living and dead individuals classified by analogy as "dog" are representations. "God" or "angel", on the other hand, find no referents outside of the mind. "Occam's razor" formulated that beings or essences were not to be multiplied beyond necessity – *"Essentia non sunt multiplicanda praetor necessitatem*", meaning that it was advisable to keep things uncomplicated (parsimonious) and that when solving a problem, it is best to search for explanations constructed with the smallest possible set of elements. Occam thus suggested that one could choose to stand with reason or with Scripture and the Church, but not with both.[8]

Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) could not have known how science and technology would contribute towards making the unknowable more knowable and how the invisible would become more visible when he stated that unknowable things should best be abandoned as an intellectual or scientific problem (Jung 1990: 332-4). Since humans function way beyond the bounds of consciousness, he professes, without our knowledge the life of the unconscious continues within us and communicates things to us, or makes figurative allusions. Mythic traditions and dreams can thus offer hints when one must confess failure at constantly producing proof regarding the unknowable. Immortality is one of such unknowable questions to which Jung (1990: 335) responds: "Naturally, one can contend from the start that myths and dreams concerning continuity of life after death are merely compensating fantasies which are inherent in our natures – all life desires eternity. The only argument that I can adduce in answer to this is the myth itself." So myth and metaphor are at play in both conscious as well as unconscious states when engaging a metaphysical notion such as the void, the abyss, or transcendence.[9]

Encounters with the void

Beyond the metaphoric horizon, an unbidden encounter with an abyss would cause humans to recoil or run in terror thereof (or so one would think) – yet, increasingly popular and even normalised, are adrenaline-fuelled and risky adventures into, or in proximity of an abyss or a void. Climbing the highest peaks, peering into volcanoes, gliding over precipices, or freediving into icy oceanic caves only marginally remain the preserve of risk-averse elite adventurers[10] – high-speed driving, open-water diving, surfing, bungee jumping[11] or paragliding are activities accessible to most. Such death-defying escapades, which become metaphors for freedom, escape and confrontation of our limitations, often occur whilst tethered to a technological "something" which aims to ensure risk-assessed return to a known space (of safety). However, kit failure, dependence on team mates and other factors are anxiety-laden imponderables – it is this self-same anxiety that professor of Digital Media and Culture Richard Coyne (2012) connects with key components of Martin Heidegger's "vertical chase".[12] Coyne suggests that verticality is irresistible and invokes Derrida's referral to the "bottomless chessboard on which Being is put

into play" (Derrida 1982: 22) and whilst hovering over an abyss or void one is confronted by the possibility of one's own death. We are referring to experiences where the object (extreme sport, for example) is responsible for, or orchestrates a stay of execution – that allows the subject to "cheat" death as it were – to observe it (death) via the object from a distance. In reality the aim is to keep the subject and the object separated since should they intersect or collide, death would most likely result. Death-defying escapades are reinforced ubiquitously as virtual reality in film, television and on social media platforms and enable the fainthearted to face death by proxy.[13] Clearly, we are here not reporting on the actual experience of somebody's voyage into the abyss and their return to the world as we know it, even though such experiences have been variously documented.[14] Extreme sports (of both a vertical or horizontal nature) or dangerous adventures are not the only catalysts for confronting the void and transcending our own limitations.

My empirical exercises of peering into outer space voids through a telescope do not automatically translate into knowledge *per se*, but ontologically speaking, have allowed me to consider life in a novel way. Literature, music, films, architecture, photography and art can also act as proxies for the void and position us face to face with the unknown and the metaphoric unknowable. Spivak turns to Derrida when saying that the "knowledge" of the philosopher places him/her among the dreamers, for knowledge is a dream – by implication knowledge is shifting and unstable. Spivak (1997: lxxviii) states that the abyss, the terrifying and exhilarating vertigo is not mystical or theological: "The abyss appears when Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, Derrida lift the lid of the most familiar and comforting notions about the possibility of knowledge."[15] Encounters with the void thus re-examine the familiar and comforting notions about the possibility of knowledge and encourage a transient or temporary state of chaos during which myth and metaphor are instrumental.

The void as mythic metaphor

Universally, humans endeavour to structure patterns and engage recurring motifs in order to impose understanding upon chaos. Often myth is employed.[16] Campbell identified four ways in which myth, an imagined speculation upon human interaction which he termed "the four orders of mystery", serves human needs (Hollis 1995:13). The four orders are the cosmos (cosmological questions), nature (metaphysical questions), each other (sociological questions) and ourselves (psychological questions). Myth thus serves a function – to assist the individual (or plurals thereof) into the undefinable aspects (or mysteries) of the gods, the world, society and the individual. As Campbell (2002: 27-8) offers: "From the point of view of any orthodoxy, myth might be defined simply as 'other people's religion', to which an equivalent definition of religion would be 'misunderstood mythology', the misunderstanding consisting in the interpretation of mythic metaphors as reference to hard fact… . Every myth, that is to say, whether or not by intention, is psychologically symbolic. Its narratives and images are to be read, therefore, not literally, but as metaphors."

What Campbell implies is that myths, like dreams, are productions of the human imagination (even though some will insist that their orthodoxy is not myth but rather "the truth"). Even though their images may be derived from the material world (and its subjective history), those serve as revelations of the deepest fears and desires of the human condition and are thus physically invisible. Campbell, in explaining the way to access mythology, cautions us to release our minds from the fixation of regarding material things as things-in-themselves. "Hence, the figurations of myth are metaphorical (as dreams normally are not) in *two* senses simultaneously, as bearing

(1) *psychological,* but at the same time (2) *metaphysical* connotations. By way of this dual focus the psychologically significant features of any local social order, environment, or supposed history can become transformed through myth into transparencies revelatory of transcendence" (Campbell 2002: 28-9) – to be discussed below. If myths play a role in imposing order upon chaos, we need to take cognizance of the rapid rate at which information is disseminated in the twenty-first century. Indeed, chaos, or the limits of reason, are constantly changing and that implies that myths and metaphors must, by implication, also change.

How, then, do we devise a way to accommodate, as Campbell suggests, myth within dissimilar orthodoxies? Campbell (2002: 29) turns to Kant who devised a seemingly simple formula for metaphorical interpretations of myth (a is to b as c is to x) to explain how, rather than an imbalance of two things, to consider a perfect resemblance of two *relationships* between dissimilar things. Thus not "*a* somewhat resembles *b*" but "the relationship of *a* to *b* perfectly resembles that of *c* to *x*", where x represents a quantity that is not only unknown but absolutely unknowable (thus metaphysical).[17] Kant offers two examples to demonstrate the formula:

> (1) As the promotion of the happiness of the children (*a*) is related to the parents' love (*b*), so is the welfare of the human race (*c*) to that unknown in God (*x*) which we call God's love; and
> (2) The causality of the highest cause (*x*) is precisely, in respect to the world (*c*), what human reason (*b*) is in respect to the work of human art (*a*).[18]

Without the necessity to explain or adopt specific orthodoxies, the two examples offer (*x*) as a constant to represent the unknown and unknowable, and thus the most germane to myth or metaphor. Playfully, I have constructed the following using Kant's formula: As did my peering through a telescope at outer space (*a*) result in a sense of my fusing with an incomprehensibly huge space (*b*), so is the bungee jumper's death as a result of kit failure (*c*), aligned with his/her wish to transcend to some heavenly realm (*x*).

The notion of descending into the proverbial void in order to transcend or extend our known boundaries or to confront our own ignorance and fears is not new. Educator David Prescott-Steed (2019: 87) situates the concept of the abyss as part of creative cultural thinking which includes creation mythologies of the ancient worlds of Egypt and Mesopotamia which feature the aquatic chaos of *Nun*. The deities *Tiamat* and *Absu* feature in the Sumerian *Eridu Genesis* said to date from the third millennium BCE. The cosmology of pre-Socratic philosopher Anaximander's concept of *apeiron,* which denoted an atemporal and aspatial boundlessness was central to understanding all that could be observed in the spatial and temporal present, however paradoxically. In the above referred-to examples, the abyss seems to mark a beginning, rather than an end and is viewed as a space of potential and change. Art curator Anthony Bond (2004a: 20) suggests that the void is never an absence – on the contrary – it is the potential for everything and as such represents a space for meditation as well as terror. It is potential space and not non-space, Bond states. Visual artist Simon Morley (2010: 6) likens such an experience [encounter with the void] as being on a borderline or edge "where we can no longer codify experience…" and regards such to be "a fundamental prerequisite for a deeper sense of reality, serving to mediate between being and nothingness, and communicating through a condition of absence a heightened awareness of self". Psychoanalyst James Hollis (1996: 14-6) suggests that in the process of individuation, if not willingly, we will be dragged down into uncomfortable regions in the process of enlargement of consciousness, at the expense of the ego. He also cautions that such descent constitutes dilemmas but that those are not problems to be solved, and rather "move below the realm of consciousness even as consciousness seeks to define and control an experience that is larger than the powers of cognition" (Hollis 1995: 22-3).

The New Testament of the Bible, on the other hand, plays on the abyss as a place of damnation and "eternal fire". This is hell – a limbo space for sinners, especially those who do not conform to normalised social guidelines and boundaries, and evil spirits (New Testament, Jude 1:7).[19] The ancient Greek tragedian Aeschylus (c. 525-c. 456 BCE), some 2,500 years ago, suggested that the gods had decreed that through suffering we come to wisdom:

> Zeus, whose will has marked for man
> The sole way where wisdom lies;
> Ordered one eternal plan:
> Man must suffer to be wise.[20]

Thus, not all notions of engaging the abyss promise enlightenment – at least not without suffering. David Prescott-Steed (2019: 87) offers some fundamental lifelines as to how to navigate from a doomed space beyond any adequate grasp by our faculties of determination: "Time and again, whether for metaphysical or philosophical purposes, the abyss has reappeared as an infinitely vast emptiness, a bottomless void that, without any discernible foundation, somehow gives form and resolution to creative cultural thinking relating to space and identity". He cites the Western philosophical tradition in which Friedrich Nietzsche's 146th apophthegm (c. 1886) famously stated: "He who fights with monsters should be careful lest he thereby become a monster. And if thou gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will also gaze into thee" (Nietzsche 1886: 87). Nietzsche's way into the abyss was symbolic of the way to the individual – ultimately, to confront one's own ignorance and stare directly into one's own indeterminacy. Hollis (1996: 131) positions Nietzsche and existentialist writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky, as well as depth psychologists, as testifying to a shadow energy which is outside ego control, which may result in the ego being seduced into collusion – good values may serve dark ends.

Prescott-Steed (2019: 87), in citing the modern and secular West, refers to Martin Heidegger's ontology which places the abyss (*der Abgrund*) as synonymous with "Being". The implication is that there is a correspondence between external and internal events and experiences – the void outside of ourselves corresponds with the void within. Hollis (1996: 139) suggests that in the service of individuation the regressive powers of fear and lethargy that may hold one back are often set aside by hero figures such as explorers, discoverers and pioneers in the physical world, but especially those that push back the limits of mind and aesthetic expression (implying artists). "When an outer hero exemplifies such action, we find a resonant energy within ourselves to similarly push back the limitations of the known. This is what Nietzsche meant by crossing the abyss on the tightrope of ourselves. The energy is there, the task is to risk walking further out into space. In that space is more freedom, a greater amplitude of soul; it is where we are meant to be" (Hollis 1996: 139). Recall that myth and metaphor are at play in both conscious (outer) as well as unconscious (inner) states when engaging a metaphysical notion such as the void. This makes manifest the notion of transcendence – going from a metaphysical or psychological state of "here" to "there".

The void and transcendence

As does the void, transcendence means different things to different people. Jungian analytical psychologist Joseph Henderson (1978: 146) explains that symbols in dreams that activate transcendence point to a person's need for liberation from any state of being that is "too immature, too fixed or final. In other words, they concern man's release from – or transcendence

of – any confining pattern of existence, as he moves toward a superior or more mature stage in his development". Moreover, Henderson (1978: 147-51) avers that such symbols provide the means by which the contents of the unconscious can enter the conscious mind, and they also are themselves an active expression of those contents. If we were to extend dream symbols to include what Campbell refers to as the figurations of myth, the pilgrimage could be regarded as a person's encounter with the void as an acquaintance with the nature of death, as a journey of release, renunciation, and atonement, rather than a death as a last judgement. Such symbolic experiences may include catharsis, of which the catalyst could be an encounter with nature, a text read, an artwork beheld, or an event experienced that is so dramatic and/or overwhelming that one experiences a sense of relief (that one has remained alive) and possibly could gain new insights thereafter.

Campbell (1968: 582-3) offers that in theology the word "transcendence" generally is read to refer to the relation of God to the universe of physical things "and finite spirits, as being, in his essential nature, prior to it, exalted above it, and having real being apart from it; – opposite to '*immanence*'". In a philosophical sense, continues Campbell (1968: 582), specifically a Kantian sense, the term means something beyond knowledge and the limits of all experience. Such forms and categories of experience and knowledge include space and time; quantity; quality; relation; or modality, all of which represent preconditions or presuppositions of human experience and thought.[21]

It is not always horror or fear that elicit transcendence – our encounter with the void may elicit a thrill – a sense of exaltation and release, or expansion and fortitude, bracing us to step beyond the known. This suggests that, rather than a non-space, the transcendent space is one of potential. Academic Amanda du Preez (2013: 92), in unpacking the fundamental ontology of transcendence, notes that a sense of upwardness is inscribed in the etymology of "transcendence". The Latin *trans* denotes "beyond" and *scandere* is linked to "climb" and "surpassing". As said Campbell, the opposite of transcendence is "immanence", which Du Preez notes, is that which remains subject to the limitations of the material universe. "On this account, transcendence becomes a uniquely human preoccupation. For neither animal (soulless embodiment) nor god (disembodied soul) is transcendence an option. It is the in-between being, the embodied soul, who dreams of escaping corporeal incarceration in an upward journey towards the spiritual light of the eternal Divine. The desiring being dreams of freedom from desire; the self dreams of selflessness" (Du Preez 2013: 92).

Philosophical anthropologist Annemie Halsema (2012: 121) suggests that transcendence and immanence should not be considered as opposition, which suggests horizontal transcendence – this partly based on psycholinguist and cultural theorist Luce Irigaray's rethinking of transcendence of God as an object entity and rather including a relationship to the alterity of the other. This is an ethical notion "that refers to the possibilities for self and the other to develop fully in themselves and to relate to each other in respect of difference".[22] Conceptions of the self as ascending towards some kind of higher power when confronted by the metaphoric void are not necessarily broadly accepted and also include descent or a sense of inadequacy, even psychic impotence. In a religiously sceptical world the possibility of transcendence and self-transcendence, "not-quite-religion", offers a way to navigate through existential threats or when faced with experiences that are distinctly other. Morley (2010: 4-5) offers that immanent transcendence is related to the contemporary sublime and reflects as transformative experiences understood as occurring within the here and now. At the sublime's core are experiences of self-transcendence that go beyond the narrow philosophical theories provided by a scientific and

rationalist world-view. Morley adds that discussions of the sublime in contemporary art can be covert or camouflaged ways of talking about matters that previously had been addressed by religious discourses. "It [the sublime] addresses our emotional, cognitive, social and political failure when we are faced with all that so blatantly exceeds us. As a consequence, it offers a kind of strength through stoic resignation" (Morley 2010: 4). Although not to be used synonymously, transcendence and sublime both denote notions of "upward and beyond". Translating notions such as upwards and beyond, as well as the sublime and transcendence into visual communication, follow below – firstly the horizon is discussed as a precursor, followed by the sublime and luminosity which all serve as portals to the void.

Translating a paradoxical notion into visual communication

It is challenging to translate the language of a paradoxical complex notion into visual communication. Bond (2008: 251) offers that the surface of artistic representation be considered as a semi-permeable membrane which serves as a boundary between the material earth and dreams of transcendence (both literal and figurative). It follows that such a membrane, or portal, separates material things from so-called infinity and thus the (potentially transcending) void.

> Our perception and understanding is always contingent and partial, knowledge lies alongside the world more or less closely, but it can never be the thing itself. …This phenomenological dilemma may sometimes be taken to suggest a kind of separation from the divine or from some oceanic state in which such boundaries would be dissolved. This fundamental experience of separation between consciousness and its object may be experienced as a loss (Bond 2008: 253).

It is in repairing such loss that a transference to the inanimate by the visual artist through his/her work (the object) overlaps with the experience of the viewer (the subject). For both the artist as well as the viewer it implies some loss of consciousness (Bond 2004b: 12). Such a passage from the conscious world during reverie this side of the canvas, to an imaginary space beyond, is a form of transcendence. Apparent loss of consciousness may in effect translate into an exhilarating and compelling projection into the unknown.

Artists' methods, whether consciously (or not) employed to guide the viewer through such a portal may include, inter alia, concept; subject matter; iconography; formal pictorial considerations such as composition, scale; the facture of an artwork's surface; dimensionality (whether two-, three- or multi-dimensional); whether singular or multiple senses of the viewer are engaged (embodiment), and so forth. As will become clear in the paintings discussed henceforth, the absence of recognisable methods is employed to engage the subject, rather than the converse. A transcendent experience is not only the preserve of the artist in making the artwork – the viewer, during and even after engaging with the artwork may transcend from a known here to an unknown there, thus extending personal boundaries. It follows that whether that void is a metaphoric object of venerable and trapped horror or conversely a coveted space of potential for transcendence, is dependent on the viewer's interaction.

Before projecting oneself into the unknown one has a space, or place of departure – the knowable, material world which is accessible to our senses. I have selected paintings by nineteenth-century Romantic artists Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840) and Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851) as representing Bond's semi permeable membrane which serves as a boundary between the material earth and dreams of transcendence. I proceed by positioning the quintessentially recognizable horizon (as well as a dissolving horizon) as the metaphorical threshold or portal to the void.

The horizon as precursor to the void

Things aspatial and atemporal such as outer space (or heaven and hell) are potentially bewildering yet exciting notions. A stabilising existential reference is the horizon which acts as a point of reference. This can be a metaphor for a horizontal movement into the unknown, a vertical ascent towards what lies above (typically referred to as the [mythic] heavens), or below. Thus, without a horizon, points of reference are as proximate and pragmatic as a reflection of the moon in a pool of shallow water or may transcend their pragmatic meaning suggesting that beyond the horizon lies the unknowable – personal, inter-personal, earthly or cosmic events of cataclysmic or even apocalyptic proportion.

An existential understanding of the void points to a demarcation or threshold between what is known and the unknown. This could be the space, or visual plane, where the land meets the sky, or an ever-shifting horizon which becomes more pronounced when one is at sea. Even outer space has a horizon. Because of the finite speed of light, there is a limit or horizon beyond which we cannot see receding stars. "An analogous horizon exists around a ship at sea. It is not the end of the Universe as far as the ship's captain is concerned: it is simply as far as he or she can see" (Chown 1996: 32). The horizon suggests the limit of sensibility and a threshold for the "imaginary". As academic and artist Andrew Brewerton (2017: 182-3) offers: "The horizon is the site of appearance and disappearance, exchange and possibility. It is the horizon that separates, physically and metaphorically, what you see and know from what you can't see and don't know. The horizon is thus forever that place of imminent encounter – a position we rehearse in English every time we remind ourselves that you never know what's coming towards you over the horizon." This suggests a separation between what is known and unknown. I concur with Bond (2004b: 11) who positions the horizon as the precursor to the void: "From the earliest times humans have lifted their eyes to the horizon where the knowable world ends and the void begins. The Earth beneath their feet however has provided a shelter from the vastness of the void…The horizon is the point of disappearance at the outer limit of human sensibility," beyond which is the void, the abyss, infinite space, primordial chaos. These descriptors all point to an indeterminate vastness evocative of, at worst, unbridled terror – at best as a self-sufficient reality that depends upon nothing, but certainly heralds change.

In 1810 Caspar David Friedrich exhibited his *Der Mönch am Meer* (*The Monk by the Sea*) at the Academy in Berlin (figure 3), which depicts a monk standing on a shore, assumed to be Rügen, an island off the north-east coast of Germany. In front of the lone, diminutive figure on a strongly emphasised horizontally-divided picture plane is a lead-black, immeasurably huge ocean which he faces. It is as if the person is gazing into an abyss which has no boundaries and it is easy to imagine an intended apocalyptic undertow in which the natural environment is evocative of divine authority. Ben Pollitt (2015: 5) notes that Friedrich maintained that a painter should not only paint what he sees before him, but also what he sees within. One is reminded that Napoleon's army was occupying Prussia at the time of the exhibition and that Friedrich may have subtly encoded as criticism the defeat and occupation by the French. By positioning the figure of the resolute monk in the overwhelming landscape as one of spiritual and defiant strength against the foreign military rule, the painting is also symbolic of the individual inevitably facing mortality.

Figure 3
Caspar David Friedrich, *The Monk by the Sea*, 1808 or 1810, oil on canvas, 110 x 171.5 cm, Alte Nationalgalerie, Straatliche Muzeum zu Berlin (retrieved from the public domain https://id.smb.museum/object/965511/).

However, it is not Friedrich's painting alone that is significant in terms of evoking the void, but also due to a narrative by Heinrich Von Kleist – his 1810 "*Empfindungen vor Friedrichs Seelandschaft*" (*Sensations before Friedrich's Seascape*)[23] – which was prescient of that which was to follow some hundred years later in a lineage of nonrepresentational art.[24] As Andrea Meyertholen (2013: 3) notes: "what Friedrich anticipates with his visual image, Kleist describes in written text".

During a time when audiences expected painting to conform to normative precepts of landscape painting,[25] for example conventional compositional structure, groupings of recognizable figures and predictive linear perspective, *The Monk by the Sea* is extraordinary in that it deviates from such norms by emptying the canvas of objects. One is left with sand, sea and sky, in which the bland horizontality becomes the focus of the painting. Conspicuously absent are vessels on the ocean.[26] The one lone figure becomes almost incidental and merges with the low horizon line, where the natural boundary between sea and sky is diffused.[27] Friedrich does not attempt to offer any comfort in an ominous, near-monochromatic wasteland of natural elements that does not lead to any vanishing point or particular focus. He demands of the viewer to walk in the monk's footprints[28] – to become the monk – and to face "not wind or water, but a limitless expanse, too dark to discern forms and too inscrutable to fathom" (Meyertholen 2013: 8). The viewer is trapped in emptiness – turning back seems not to be an option and to proceed is to encounter the uncertainty and exhilaration of the void. It is interesting to note that Von Kleist's narrative proceeds with a description that excludes the monk, as if one is already standing in the monk's footprints and contemplating the void beyond the horizon. What is expected of the monk and what does the viewer expect? Is the expectation one of unlocking hidden truths? "Faced with a limitless expanse, we demand to place within the bounds of human understanding what

lies beyond its limits. We want to comprehend the incomprehensible, to acquire knowledge of the unknowable. In essence, we want to make the infinite finite by imposing our own framework upon it" (Meyertholen 2013: 11).

It is important to note that Von Kleist realises a discrepancy between the aesthetic response to imitated reality and reality itself. Thus, contemplating Friedrich's painted representation of the ocean differs from gazing into the ocean itself, suggesting a dynamic occurring between the viewer and the painting. But this embodiment that Von Kleist alludes to, elicits a rather visceral response when he suggests that staring into the void is as if somebody has cut off your eyelids. Meyertholen (2013: 13) reckons that this is the moment in which abstract art is envisioned: "The void elicits an aesthetic response akin to having one's eyelids sliced off, an affect with metaphorical dimensions but real implications. Unable to close, lidless eyes are compelled to look but have no means to limit or distance themselves from the object of perception." The eye is thus defenceless and cannot exercise control over that which it encounters. By implication it is not possible to edit information in the visual field as one often does and short of recoiling completely, one is thus compelled to take in the entirety of what one sees. This results in a boundless aesthetic experience due to the loss of scale, perspective, measurability, proportion and strongly suggests an encounter with the sublime (further discussed below), when anything exceeds comprehension and the power of rational thought. The painting thus exercises power over those who dare to view it. Recall that Bond suggests that both the artist as well as the viewer experience some loss of consciousness and that a passage from the conscious world during reverie this side of the canvas to an imaginary space beyond, is an experience of transcendence. Mark Levy (2006: 93), who regards *Monk by the Sea* as an image wholly engaged in expressing the void, adds that it is representative of a death of the ego since the subject submits him/herself fully to the infinite. Apparent loss may in effect translate into an exhilarating and compelling projection into the unknown.

In Friedrich's *The Monk by the Sea* the human figure is the link between the material and the immaterial, the horizon becomes a metaphor for the limits of human reasoning and the vast darkness becomes the portal to the void and potential transcendence. Bond (2008: 36) notes that the wilder and grander the view and the more the scale belittled the human observer, the greater the sublime effect. I suggest that paintings devoid of any human or human-made structure, where the horizon dissolves into limitless space and there is light rather than darkness, may equally become a portal to the void and potential transcendence. Like *The Monk by the Sea*, such paintings point to the myth of the sublime. In art historical terms, usage and understanding of the word sublime have changed over time. Morley (2010: 1-2) points to the Romantic artists of the nineteenth century, Caspar David Friedrich and Joseph Mallord William Turner, as exponents of the sublime who depicted extreme aspects of nature intended to elicited irrational and excessive emotions with the viewer – "emotions seemingly aimed at evicting the human mind from its secure residence inside the House of Reason and throwing it into a boundless situation that was often frightening" (Morley 2010: 3). The notion that a legitimate function of visual art can be to produce upsetting or disturbing effects was fundamental in Romantic painting and remains fundamental for artists today.

The sublime and luminosity as a portal to the void

A revival of the first century Greek term "sublime" is attributed to philosopher and statesman Edmund Burke (1729-97) who in 1757 published a treatise of aesthetics which served as a systematic analysis and theoretical foundation of what constitutes the sublime. He describes the sublime, *inter alia*, as "[W]hatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. I say the strongest emotion, because I am satisfied the ideas of pain are much more powerful than those that enter on the part of pleasure" (Burke 1757: 36). Burke, an empiricist, observed and documented that the emotion of pain may be more powerful than pleasure: "In short, pleasure (I mean anything either in the inward sensation, or in the outward appearance, like pleasure from a positive cause) has never, I imagine, its origin from the removal of pain or danger" (Burke 1887: 106). Yet another British philosophical empiricist David Hume (1711-76), in an essay on tragedy, quotes Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle (1657-1757): "Pleasure and pain", says he, "which are two sentiments so different in themselves, differ not so much in their cause… it appears, that the movement of pleasure, pushed a little too far, becomes pain; and that the movement of pain, a little moderated, becomes pleasure. Hence it proceeds, that there is such a thing as a sorrow, soft and agreeable" (Hume 1987: 218-9).[29] This is the borderline between pleasure and pain.

The sublime was central to the artwork of the Romantics. In a similar fashion so would the sublime become associated with rational thought being overwhelmed by passion and replaced by astonishment and awe. When astonishment runs in tandem with the unknown (or to Burke, obscurity), the experience of the sublime is heightened even more so, especially when landscape paintings display exaggerated scales of vastness, darkness, blinding lightness, excessive heights and suggestions of infinity (Court 2015: 4-6).[30] These pictorial elements are intended to depict nature as powerful, thereby eliciting a mixture of fear, awe and even enlightenment in the viewer.

Herein lies the suggestion of deriving negative pleasure, or delightful horror from dramatic scenes of overwhelming proportion that create uncertainty. Burke (1887: 149) affirms this:

> Infinity has a tendency to fill the mind with the sort of delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect, and truest test of the sublime. There are scarce any things which can become the objects of our senses, that are really and in their own nature infinite. But the eye not being able to perceive the bounds of many things, they seem to be infinite, and they produce the same effects as if they were really so. We are deceived in the like manner, if the parts of some large object are so continued to any indefinite number, that the imagination meets no check which may hinder its extending them at pleasure.

Corresponding to Burke's definition are representations of nature that became metaphors for infinity and spirituality, furthermore associated with catharsis and negative pleasure when observing overwhelming or catastrophic events beyond the range of its effect. Immanuel Kant expanded on Burke's sublime but rejected its reliance on external, objective factors. In his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant (1790) suggested that even though elements in nature could elicit thoughts on the sublime, it depends on how the individual's mind can transcend its own limitations that the sublime is to be found. To that end he developed two separate but related modes of the sublime: "The mathematical sublime – which is concerned with boundlessness and anything that is beyond our ability to comprehend such as infinity or the sheer size of the ocean; and the dynamical sublime – which is associated when the force and power of nature renders

man insignificant by comparison" (Farley 2014: 3). Thus, openness to experience by the viewer seems to be germane to the sublime experience.

Morley (2010: 1), in introducing the word sublime when discussing the abyss, notes that the word is just an empty signifier, one to which one might attach any prefix or meaning, depending on what is needed (for example feminine-sublime, negative-, digital- and so forth). In relation to the philosophy of art it has a significantly different meaning than when used ordinarily (such as in "heavenly", lost-for-words-perfect). "Etymologically, sublime comes from the Latin *sublimis* (elevated; lofty) derived from the preposition *sub*, meaning 'up to', and *limen*, the lintel of a doorway, or also perhaps from *limes*, meaning a boundary or limit". Morley notes that within the two main contexts, namely nature and technology, there prevail rather confusing uses of the word sublime and distinguishes five different ways in which the word is currently used: In relation to the problem of the unpresentable in art; to the experiences of transcendence; terror; the uncanny; and altered states of consciousness. What any permutations have in common is that the sublime defines a moment when social and psychological codes and structures no longer bind us, "where we reach a sort of borderline at which rational thought comes to an end and we suddenly encounter something wholly and perturbingly 'other'…At the core are experiences of self-transcendence that are beyond the narrow epistemologies provided by a scientific and rationalist world-view" (Morley 2010: 3). Contemporary perspectives of the sublime reject traditional conceptions of the self or soul or spirit that is moving (only) upwards towards some ineffable and essential thing or power, and instead they tend to follow downward or deflationary curves – as discussed earlier, this is immanent transcendence – a transformative experience understood as happening within the here and now.

Words often fail when actual events of a horrific or incomprehensible nature (sometimes narrowly escaped) are viewed at a safe distance.[31] "At its root, the sublime refers to an experience in which words fail, when we find ourselves beyond the limits of reason…It is this distance that permits the potential of a sublime experience, the beauty in the terrible" (Clarke 2020: 178). I suggest that what Von Kleist was referring to when he suggested that one should cut off one's eyelids, is seeing beauty in the terrible. In a previous article (Van Heerden 2020: 250) I referred to Clarke's reaction when she had her first sight of the destruction around the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant – when apocalyptic images are seen from a safe distance we experience the sublime, which she described as "a terrible beauty". This understanding came to her in a singular moment, within the here and now. Du Preez (2009: 204), recalling Lyotard's definition, succinctly suggests that "the sublime is an occurrence or event during which the correlation between what is meaningful (representable) and that which escapes meaning (unrepresentable) is irreparably shaken". This is exemplified in the paintings of William Turner where the ominous and often indescribable sublime looms as a dark force of nature juxtaposed over things human.

The British Industrial Revolution lasted from around 1760-1830. Cognizant of the implications thereof, British Romantic painter William Turner was famous for his land- and seascapes in which he depicted the power of nature during a time when the Industrial Revolution emphasised humankind's power as made manifest in technological advancement that threatened the sovereignty of nature. Turner dramatised scenes in nature in which no doubt remained as to the converse – the power of nature over humans which has initiated terms "industrial sublime" and "Turner sublime".[32]

In *Stormy Sea with Blazing Wreck* (figure 4), a manufactured object (the wreck) is hardly discernible in the process of being engulfed by the power of the ocean. Likewise, the small group

of onlookers gathered on the shore become rather incidental to the sublime drama taking place at sea – in Kantian terms *Stormy Sea with Blazing Wreck* conforms to both the mathematical sublime (the boundless size of the ocean) and the dynamical sublime (the force and power of nature that renders humans insignificant by comparison).

Figure 4
Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Stormy Sea with Blazing Wreck,* c. 1834-40, oil on canvas, 141.6 x 99.4 cm, Tate Gallery, London
(retrieved from the public domain https://www.tate-images.com).

The absence of recognizable demarcated planes or forms in which the angry glow of the sun and the water (at turns bizarrely resembling flames engulfing the wreck) merge, are set off against black clouds and abstracted dark depressions (suggestive of more than one void). Despite a dark horizontal bar left midfield, the viewer is compulsively drawn to the illuminated central drama which in itself is a void – if one harboured any hope of unlocking the unknowable such hopes are dashed since that flash of luminosity offers no escape or salvation. Bond (2008: 42) notes that in Turner's work the sun not only navigates the divide between the living world and the void but often "seems to dissolve the boundary in a unifying glow or a flash of light. J.M. Turner is particularly well known for this effect". In this painting there is, in effect, no horizon or ground. The viewer is set adrift in an abstracted space in which obscurity becomes manifest. Due to obscurity one is unsure of the extent of the danger and thus the effect of the sublime becomes more intense.

Into the void

In both *The Monk by the Sea* with its lone figure gazing into the void, as well as *Stormy Sea with Blazing Wreck* with its dissolving evidence of anything recognizably human, we identified how the sublime can be associated with transcendence due to an encounter with the void presented as a metaphoric limitless space. In *Stormy Sea with Blazing Wreck*, the crafted human object (the wreck) is hardly discernible in the process of being engulfed by the power of the ocean, thus the precarious presence of only one small object is implied rather than represented. In Turner's *Seascape with Distant Coast* (1840), with no human reference as such, abstraction is near-complete (figure 5) and we can enter the void.

Figure 5
Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Seascape with Distant Coast*, ca.1840, oil on canvas, 914 x 1219 mm, Tate Gallery, London (retrieved from the public domain https://www.tate-images.com).

Despite the benign title of this painting, this is a dystopian vision where one is adrift in a blinding luminosity that bleaches out the suggested distant coast. It is highly unlikely that one will ever reach that dissolved destination. Through the parsimony of figuration, we have entered the space that the painting represents. The diffused luminosity suggests metaphysical power rather than sunlight and dissolves the boundary between heaven and Earth. The inference is that light itself is powerful, transcendent, unknowable, limitless. We are gazing at what is not there in the partly-represented void. Moreover, Du Preez (2009: 207) notes that the sublime is an occurrence of limitlessness and quotes Kant (1982 section 23: 201) in this regard: "The sublime is to be found in an object even devoid of form, so far as it immediately involves, or else by its presence provokes, a representation of limitlessness." Whereas Friedrich uses presentation to take us to the portals of the void, by invoking limitlessness, Turner has taken us to the boundary of presentation to take us to the portals of the void and transcendence. But this move towards abstraction, initiated in the nineteenth century, had only started.

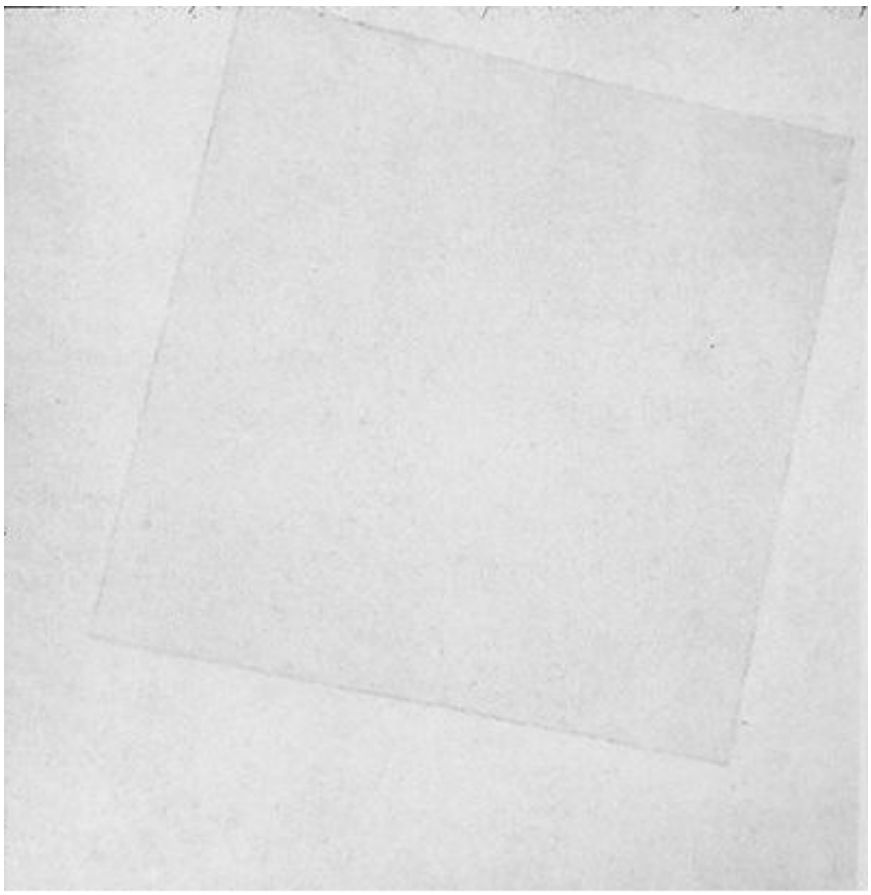

Figure 6
Kazimir Malevich, *White Square on White,* 1918, oil on canvas, 79 cm x 79 cm
Museum of Modern Art, New York City (retrieved from the public domain https://kazimirmalevich.org/white-on-white/).

When asking the question as to what it looks like when we pass through the permeable membrane and enter the imaginary space beyond the void, Bond (2008: 257) points to Malevich's *Black Square* (1915). A negation of representation or figuration, it was also "a portal onto the infinite and as such a space for contemplation of the void" (Bond 2004a: 4). This was the start of a Modernist approach to an aesthetic of transcendence. Whereas I concur with Bond, I suggest that Malevich's *White Square on White* (1918, figure 6) best exemplifies that the white (or light) beyond the void is seen not as "nothingness" but rather as potentiality – the viewer is seeing what is not there. As Morley (2010: 6) suggests: "As the sublime [the void] deals with what lies on the other side of a cognitive and experiential borderline, it depends on art that can convey the impression of almost not being art at all – that is, of something pushed beyond categories and structures." It is this which allows one, as Heidegger suggested, to allow the void outside of ourselves to correspond with the void within.

Conclusion

The philosophical, psychological and scientific contributions towards better understanding the mythical and metaphoric void are not only useful to art practice and art appreciation – indeed parallels can be drawn with music, film, literature and architecture. What causes insecurity upon

encountering the void is that it signifies the threshold between the known, the unknown and the unknowable. Science and technology empower us to push the boundaries of the void ever farther, yet an aspect of the unknowable seems residual. The lure of the void is a way out of the closure of knowledge. Encounters with the void thus re-examine the familiar and comforting notions about the possibility of knowledge and encourage a transient or temporary state of chaos during which myth and metaphor are instrumental. Even though mythic images may be derived from the material world (and its subjective history), those serve as revelations of the deepest fears and desires of the human condition and are thus physically invisible. The void lies beyond knowledge and the limits of all experience. The metaphorical language of mythology and metaphysics refer to levels of reference and symbolic entities which are neither places nor individuals but states of being realizable within the individual.

In terms of how to translate metaphysical notions into visual communication, the surface of artistic representation could be considered as a semi permeable membrane which serves as a boundary between the material earth and dreams of transcendence (both literal and figurative). Paintings discussed in this article are extraordinary in that they deviate from conventional norms by emptying the canvas of objects. The moment of truth becomes manifest when staring into the void is as if somebody has cut off one's eyelids. That is the sublime – an experience in which words fail, when we find ourselves beyond the limits of reason. It is this distance that permits the potential of a sublime experience, when we understand that there can be beauty in the terrible and that perhaps the void cannot and needs not be filled.

The significance of the representation of the void in the paintings discussed in this article is that they acted as precursors for Modern art of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Bond (2004a: 4) notes that Malevich's *White on White* painting (1918) initiated a genre of utopian painting in Europe and later in America from the Polish Unists in the 1940s, The German Zero group, and Robert Ryman and Agnes Martin in the post war period. Louise Hardiman and Nicola Kozicharow (2017: 13) offer that the notion of the spiritual, broadly defined – whether drawn from conventional religious art or from esoteric ideas – helped shape modernism in Russian art and underpinned some of its most radical experiments. Russia's pioneering exponents of non-objective painting – Kandinsky, Kazimir Malevich, Natalia Goncharova, and Mikhail Larinov – were especially instrumental in this regard.

There are many more proponents of the aesthetic of transcendence and interpretations of the void, the most noteworthy being the work of Kazimir Malevich (*Black Square, 1915*); Yves Klein*, (Monochrome IKB48*, 1958); Mark Rothko (Rothko Chapel, 19604-1970); Anish Kapoor *(Descension: Brooklyn Bridge, 2017)*; Nikolai Suetin (*Black Square,* 1920s); Francois Salle (*The Anatomy Class at the Ecole des Beaux Arts,* 1888); Lucio Fontana (*Concetto Spaziale 'Attesa',* 1960); Ad Reinhardt (*Abstract painting, black,* 1954); Mark Rothko (*Earth and green,* 1955); Yves Klein (*Leap into the void,* 1961); Anish Kapoor (*Void field,* 1989); James Turrell (*Arcus,* 1989 and *Light House at Echigo Tsumari,* 2000), and so forth. But that will be reserved for a subsequent discussion.

Notes

1 These artists have art-historical legacies that extend beyond engaging or summoning the void but will not be the focus of this article.

2 This I say because the fact that the sky is dark at night contradicts the notion of an infinite Universe. Marcus Chown (1996, 29-32) explains that in a Universe like ours that has undergone a Big Bang, two things explain why the night sky is not bright: Firstly, because the Universe is expanding, the light emanating from ever more distant galaxies is progressively more red-shifted. Red light carries less energy than blue light, ergo, the energy of light from distant galaxies is reduced. If the Universe were static, the night sky would be brighter; secondly, a Big Bang Universe had a beginning and thus has not existed forever – thus not every line of sight ends in a star. We only see a distant star or galaxy if enough time has passed since the Big Bang for the light to have reached us. If there hasn't we don't see it and enjoy a dark sky as a result. The secret lies in the speed of light – which is not infinite.

3 That is if we were to adopt the notion that the universe is not finite but possibly iterative.

4 I adopt Derrida's referral to experience as belonging to the history of metaphysics, since it has always designated a relationship with a presence "whether that relationship had the form of consciousness or not" (Spivak 1997 : xvii).

5 I need to clarify that I was not "spaced-out", even though Richard Dawkins (2006: 88) humourously quips that the human brain runs first-class simulation software – I was actually looking at outer space. I would learn much later that I was most probably experiencing transient hypofrontality. This is when one is, inter alia, so focused on the task at hand that the prefrontal and frontal cortex downregulate analytical thinking and brain activity shifts to parietal areas of the brain. This brain state is popularly referred to as being in the zone or experiencing "flow". Aesthetic experience shares attributes of flow, so could also explain the sensation of a subject "merging" with the object as did I. Such feelings of transcendence are typical of hypofrontality. This article will not explain such notions neuroscientifically, but will rather focus on the role of myth.

6 Numerous examples of recent images from the James-Webb telescope are available for viewing, for example: James Webb telescope's observations of "impossible" galaxies at the dawn of time may finally have an explanation, *Live Science*, 4 October, 2023 – https://www.livescience.com/space/cosmology/james-webb-telescopes-observations-of-impossible-galaxies-at-the-dawn-of-time-may-finally-have-an-explanation.

7 Encarta Concise English Dictionary. 2001. Edited by Kathy Rooney. London: Bloomsbury Publishing: 909.

8 Curiously, though, scripture, as a record of historical events, was accepted as recorded facts and thus "proved" that God and miracles exist. If such constructs referred to anything outside the mind (such as the crucifixion of Jesus, the crossing of the Red Sea) those needed to be related to historical events that actually had been perceived in the field of space and time. By this formula, scholastic realism, wherein substantial "reality" had been attributed to ideas, had been closed (Campbell 1968: 583-4). Due to the proclamation that general ideas are mere names without any corresponding reality, on September 25, 1339 William of Occam received special censure by the Paris Faculty of Arts.

9 The void and the abyss will be used interchangeably where myth and metaphor are applicable.

10 It is not unusual to learn of "traffic jams" on Mount Everest as climbers queue for hours to reach the next camp, let alone the summit.

11 Which du Preez (2005: 651) refers to as "capitalistic flirtation with the sublime".

12 Heidegger 1962.

13 With the sophistication of AI, reality might prove to be disappointing for some who live "virtually".

14 Jon Krakauer's (1997) *Into thin air*, which recounts a disastrous human drama at 26,000 feet on Mount Everest, is one of many examples.

15 Knowledge is transient, at best temporary, since it shifts continuously. In his "*Translator's Preface*" to Derrida's "*Of Grammatology*" Spivak (1997) discusses philosophical exigency that drives philosophers like Derrida, Heidegger

and Nietzsche to employ "sous rapture", or "under erasure", where words/concepts like "thing", "Being" are crossed out but not replaced, since "To make a new word is to run the risk of forgetting the problem or believing it solved…(Spivak 1997: xv)".

16 Myth has been defined and redefined variously and may be approached from, inter alia, an antiquarian, sociological, historical, proto-scientific, anthropological, linguistic, psychological, archetypal, phenomenological, or symbolic position (James Hollis 1995).

17 Kant (1783: 57-8).

18 The first of the two is mythological (addressed to the heart); the second philosophical (engaging the head).

19 New Testament. 1963. United States of America: National Publishing Company : 471.

20 From *The Oresteian Trilogy: Agamemnon:*
Zeus, whose will has marked for man
The sole way where wisdom lies;
Ordered one eternal plan:
Man must suffer to be wise.
Head-winds heavy with past ill
Stray his course and cloud his heart:
Sorrow takes the blind soul's part –
Man grows wise against his will.
For powers who rule from thrones above
By ruthlessness commend their love.

21 Categories of experience and knowledge in more detail: *space and time*; *quantity* (unity, plurality, or universality); *quality* (reality, negation, or limitation); *relation* (substantiality, causality, or reciprocity), or *modality* (possibility, actuality, or necessity) (Campbell 1968: 582).

22 Halsema (2012: 126) explains that Irigaray's God refers to a projection or perfection of the (sexed) subject, an ideal for the self, a horizon. Within the masculine Christian tradition, Irigaray states that women especially need to develop a divine. Halsema also notes Ricoeur's concern that, when imagining God, the figure of the father is more privileged than the mother and that Freud states that there is an intimate connection between the father complex and belief in God.

23 I am grateful to Andrea Meyertholen who first made me aware of this text. Meyertholen (2013: 22) notes that von Kleist first published his response to *Der Mönch am Meer* in the *Berliner Abendblätter* (October 13, 1810) which he later amended.

24 Whereas Meyertholen (2013) centres her research on abstract and nonrepresentational art as pioneered by Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), I regard *The Monk and the Sea* as a precursor to abstraction that would lead to significant later works of the void as exemplified by monochromatic nonrepresentational, avant-garde art by Kazimir Malevich, Yves Klein, Mark Rothko and Anish Kapoor, which I aim to discuss in a separate article.

25 Pollit (2015) posits that typical German landscape painting of the time followed the principles of a style imported from England known as the picturesque which tended to employ compositional and perspectival methods employed to draw the viewer into the painting.

26 This is possibly the first painting that does not feature a vessel (Miller 1974: 207). Meyertholen (2013: 4) notes that through eyewitness accounts as well as xrays Friedrich had originally included sailing ships and astral bodies in the heavens.

27 Pollitt (2015: 4) notes that, even though Friedrich often made use of the technique of positioning the figure with their back towards the viewer (*rügenfigur*) assuming a heroic stance "overseeing" the landscape, in this painting the figure is atypical.

28 Friedrich's various written thoughts can be found in Helmut Börsch-Supan's works – see Works Cited.

29 Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle (1657-1757) from his *Reflections on the Poetic*, section 36, *Oeuvres*, 3:34.

30 Simon Court (2015: 4) points to Burke's reference to poetry – for example John Milton (1608-74) and Samuel Coleridge (1772-1834). Add Edgar Allan Poe (1809-49); William Blake (1757-1827) and others.

31 The "safe distance" shrinks daily as lives in general are lived rather dangerously, need to be lived vigilantly, and the norm becomes a continuum of risks – in other words, perceived and real risk and danger become blurred.

32 See Simon Schama – "The Industrial Sublime": How J.M/W. Turner Explored Science through Art.

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