

Hirst and the Contemporary Sublime

An Inquiry into the Origins of why Writers might Cart Out the Hoary Old

Concept of the Sublime to account for Hirst, &c.

The word 'sublime', although perhaps not exactly ubiquitous in the body of criticism around Hirst (and certainly not the single concept around which accounts of the work revolve) pops up sporadically, one might even go so far as to say fairly regularly. We find it in sources as diverse as liberal philosopher-critic Arthur Danto's description of Hirst's Physical Impossibility... in his review of the New York incarnation of the 'Sensation' exhibition – an account leaning heavily on Kant: "It is a very philosophical title, which goes perfectly with the work itself [...] Indeed the vision of danger from which we know ourselves to be protected is precisely what Kant meant by sublimity."¹ – and at the other end of the spectrum the casual usage of the notion in the recent catalogue for Sotheby's auction of the remnants of Hirst's Pharmacy restaurant².

It is an exploration of this already-too-familiar usage that I want to embark upon here. The point, then, of this part of my inquiry is to start to make sense of what this concept from the eighteenth century is doing in

¹ Arthur Danto, "'Sensation' in Brooklyn," The Madonna of the Future: Essays in a Pluralistic Art World (Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2001) 394-7.

² Damien Hirst, Damien Hirst's Pharmacy (London: Sotheby's, 2004). See for example page 23 (where we find he is "infusing the everyday with a sense of the sublime and the absurd") and on page 86 where this time he is "Infusing the readymade with a sense of the sublime and the absurd." Though these remarks are somewhat pat, they are perhaps a little more useful than first appearances might suggest. In fact, as we'll see, this commonsense opposition between the 'sublime and the ridiculous' probably underlies the use of the notion of the 'sublime' in writing about Hirst more than the more philosophically respectable one of the difference between sublimity and beauty.

critical writings on a contemporary artist. Why drag it up? And how is it being used?

To answer these questions, I shall be comparing Laura Wixley Brooks's essay from 1995, "Damien Hirst and the Sensibility of Shock", and a recent article by Gene Ray, published in Third Text, entitled "Little Glass House of Horrors".³ These two essays are the ones which bring in a consideration of the sublime to bear most explicitly, and at the most length, in attempting to make an evaluation of Hirst. Furthermore, although both find the need to fall back on some kind of idea of 'the sublime' to articulate their evaluation, they nonetheless take up diametrically opposing positions in doing so. I shall use these two accounts, whose opposing stances I take as indicative of more general tendencies in both the use of the sublime in contemporary theory, and also in the ways critics approach Hirst's work, to tell me more about these two more general fields.

Laura Wixley Brooks - Damien Hirst as exemplar of the Contemporary Sublime

Brooks's essay is a good place to start, since it gives the simplest version of the sublime. Ray criticises Brooks's application of the notion of the sublime to Hirst in an attempt to defend the work, as jejune⁴, and in many ways he is correct. However, as well as being useful as a piece of work which is

³ Danto, "'Sensation' in Brooklyn," 393-400, Laura Wixley Brooks, "Damien Hirst and the Sensibility of Shock," The Contemporary Sublime: Sensibilities of Transcendence and Shock, ed. Paul Crowther, Art and Design; V.10 (London: Academy Editions, 1995) 54-67, Gene Ray, "Little Glass House of Horrors: High Art Lite, the Culture Industry and Damien Hirst," Third Text 18.2 (2004): 119-33.

⁴ Ray criticises Brooks's essay as one in which "the specifics of history are no impediment to a wide-eyed and apolitical boosterism." Ray, "Little Glass House," 130, footnote 38.

indicative of how the notion is used more casually in critical support of Hirst, it is also exactly where the piece is most naïve that it allows us a way in to considering some of the problems with the way that the concept of the sublime is frequently brought into play both within critical writings on Hirst and on contemporary culture in general.

Brooks's essay appeared in a 1995 issue of Art and Design, themed around the notion (and title) of "The Contemporary Sublime," with a subtitle echoing the title of Brooks's own essay: "Sensibilities of Transcendence and Shock." The issue was edited by Paul Crowther, one of the more prolific British writers in the early 1990s on the notion of the sublime. As an element within such an undertaking, Brooks's essay serves as part of an editorial argument attempting to set out the parameters of a 'contemporary sublime.' As the title suggests, Crowther, in his selection of essays, is setting up an argument that there are two ways of understanding the legacy of the sublime in contemporary culture: firstly in terms of the kinds of 'shock' effects that art might impose upon its audience (those effects of awe, horror and terror articulated under the category of the 'sublime' perhaps most prominently and forcefully by Edmund Burke); and secondly in terms of the idealist and Romantic legacies of a Kantian aesthetics of transcendence. The sublime in contemporary art, in this volume, is articulated around these twin poles, and this echoes the structure of Crowther's own theoretical account of the sublime in his book of two years earlier, Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism, where he gives an account first of Edmund Burke's 'existential sublime' (where, according to Crowther, the sublime is consists of

a traumatic but life-enhancing confrontation with its unimaginable limit, death) and then of the ethical import of a Kantian 'transcendental sublime'...⁵ Brooks's essay on Hirst plays the role in the volume of the most forceful articulation of the pole where Burke's version of the sublime is taken as the forerunner of a modernist aesthetic of shock. As we shall see, she unsurprisingly leans heavily on Crowther's own account of an 'existential' (Burkean) sublime.

Brooks's stated aim in the essay is to use the notion of the sublime in order not just to explicate Hirst's work, but also to provide it with a kind of theoretical validation, and thus to defend it against the media discourse around it, which tends to treat the work as nothing more than its own self-publicity, and which tends to enact a kind of moral outrage at the more horrible elements of Hirst's oeuvre. Brooks, at the start of her essay thus writes:

[...] if it can be shown that all this disgusting presentation is part of an on-going, well-established creative tradition, and that there is a strong and clear philosophy of the sublime to support this sort of work, then perhaps appreciation can take the place of moral outrage.⁶

Brooks's basic argument legitimising the work of Hirst will be one which argues, in terms of 'sublimity', for the authenticity of the experience that it offers. But before moving on to discuss this further, I would like to pause to note a problem with Brooks's argument that is already implicit in the above introductory passage. Brooks is attempting at one and the same time to validate Hirst's work through two methods, which, throughout the essay (as

⁵ See Paul Crowther, Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). See especially Ch.6, "The Existential Sublime: From Burke's Aesthetics to the Socio-Political," 115-133 and Ch.7, "Moral Insight and Aesthetic Experience: Kant's Theory of the Sublime," 134-152.

⁶ Brooks, "Damien Hirst and the Sensibility of Shock," 55.

we'll see) become entangled and confused. Firstly, she is involving herself in a form of canon building: Hirst's work is part of "an on-going, well established tradition". (For the sake of my broader argument I'll lay to one side the problematics both of canon building in general as a way of validating art, and also the particular oxymorons involved in the notion of a 'tradition' of 'transgressive' art.⁷) At the same time, however, for Brooks, the work is "supported"⁸ by "a strong and clear philosophy." The notion of the sublime, then starts to take on the dual role of naming a particular artistic, avant-gardist tradition, which is to be rooted as a response to the experiences of modernity and postmodernity, and also of naming a trans-historical philosophical truth which might stand as a guarantee for (all?) art's value. It is between these two usages that Brooks repeatedly finds herself slipping. The result of this repeated slippage is an erasure of the historically specific, in favour of a rather vague and depoliticising universalism, as the sublime becomes an ahistorical truth to which art can appeal: "Burke's system of the

⁷ There are, of course, well-discussed problems with the appeal to an already-established canon to fix the value of work. (How was this canon validated in the first place, and by who? What is included and excluded and how?) In this case, it perhaps would mean little more than establishing a kind of 'respectability' for the work, a place for it within the narrative space of a museum. This strategy becomes additionally paradoxical when one is arguing for a 'tradition of shock': to validate such work through such an appeal is to familiarise it in a way which reduces its very capacity for shock. If Hirst and his generation can have any place within a canon of the 'shock of the new,' it can only be in this paradoxical way, which marks our distance from the historical moment of the historical avant-garde... Brooks is not, of course, alone in appealing to the 'well-established tradition' in order to make recent art's reliance on transgression of the boundaries of the body seem more palatable. See for example Cynthia Freeland, *But Is It Art?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). In her introduction (p. xix) she warns us that "I will begin in the rather grisly present-day world of art, dominated by works that speak of sex or sacrilege, made with blood, dead animals, or even urine or faeces [...] My aim is to defuse the shock a little by linking such work with earlier traditions..."

⁸ The vague phrasing she uses (i.e. 'support') is, I think, symptomatic of a more significant confusion between the two strategies which permeates the essay

sublime is still, after all this time, a viable proposition” argues Brooks⁹ because of its appeal to the basics of “human nature,”¹⁰ and to the “complex problems of finite embodied existence”¹¹ which guarantee it not just continued but universal relevance. At the heart of this confusion, then, seem to be the ways that an insistent grounding of the authenticity of the sublime on an ahistorical Burkean physiology¹² serve to undermine each attempt that Brooks makes to argue for the particular relevance of sublimity to contemporary social and cultural conditions.

The question that Brooks begs is that of why it is to the notion of the sublime, in particular to Edmund Burke’s version of this notion – and in particular his attempt to ground the notion of the sublime in a physiology which is now, to say the very least, dated – that we might be turning for a conception of the body as the ground of an artistic experience. Is it perhaps precisely because of a dehistoricisation of the body which happens in Burke? The image of the body as a neutral or passive receptor of phenomena that was so prevalent in the eighteenth century? Burke’s account has a disarming empirical simplicity. It is perhaps the simplicity of Burke’s version of the body that draws Brooks’s account in; Burke’s pared-down physiology contrasting so forcibly with the complex theorisations of bodily experience in much contemporary theory. (Brooks herself in fact indicates that her motives for

⁹ Brooks, "Damien Hirst and the Sensibility of Shock," 65.

¹⁰ Brooks, "Damien Hirst and the Sensibility of Shock," 67.

¹¹ Brooks, "Damien Hirst and the Sensibility of Shock," 58. Brooks is in turn quoting Crowther, Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism 130. Brooks also quotes Mark Quinn’s claim that he deals with “the basic questions one is confronted with just by being alive” as a parallel to Hirst, and only stops short of citing Hirst’s (in)famous phrase, “Life and death and all that stuff.”

¹² see the section “*Brooks’s claim that Hirst provides an ‘existential sublime’...*” below for a more detailed account of the way that Brooks, following Crowther, draws on, and grounds her argument on, Burke’s physiology of the sublime

turning to Burke are to turn away from complexity: she writes, “Burke’s theory can free us from the contemporary tendency to theorise art beyond all emotional impact”¹³). Such a turn is also, however, a turning away from the historically specific in its Enlightenment appeal to an abstract and universal human subject, a move which is, as we noted above, essentially conservative and depoliticising, hiding the socially mediated nature of our experience of embodiment. The sublime thus reveals itself as a figure which can be used very much in line (whether Brooks intends her essay to be so or not) with a general strategy of the conservative supporters of Hirst who praise his return to the ‘universal’ problems of the human condition – to ‘life and death and all that stuff’ as Hirst has put it so nicely – which free art so effectively from the negotiation of the contingent and changeable political present.¹⁴

Having noted this set of weaknesses or contradictions in Brooks’s argument, and before moving on, I would like to suggest that in spite of the naivety of looking to Burke’s physiology for a ‘strong and clear philosophy’ to support anything, that there is nevertheless a value in Brooks’s argument. If we ditch Brooks’s appeal to the mere existence of a ‘well-established tradition’ as grounds for legitimisation of that within it, and if we reject her embrace of a solid ground of ahistorical truth on which she wishes to ‘support’ this appeal, it *does* seem useful to me to see the sublime in terms of a historical ‘project’ (or in Brooks terms a ‘tradition’), a project of which

¹³ Brooks, “Damien Hirst and the Sensibility of Shock,” 67.

¹⁴ The Sotheby’s catalogue for the sale of the Pharmacy work repeatedly alludes to Hirst’s work as dealing with “the fragility and ambiguity that lies at the core of human existence” (20), with “the big issues of existence” (48) and “the existential dilemma facing us all” (49). This inflation of the ‘universal’ in Hirst’s work might function both to seem to ensure its lasting value for an investor, and also to appeal to those whose stake in the current system of things would ask for that which might place them within an unchanging order...

Burke is one of the early and, for a time, highly influential theorists. (Even if his work is in fact no such solid ground, it has certainly been used as such in this tradition...) This would be a project which has taken a form something very like the forging of a Bourdieuan 'habitus', a sensibility and taste for the sublime, habitual ways of engaging affectively and intellectually with images, ideas and with the world, of positioning oneself with relation to these, ways of enjoying one's body and one's experiences, a project which involves, perhaps, the very production and reproduction of 'modern' forms of subjectivity. It would be well to note, however, that this is not as coherent a genealogy as my use of the term 'project' – or Brooks's essay with its universalism – might suggest: it would be a plural project, with multiple and often contradictory or competing strands, discontinuous and sporadic in its appearance, and certainly not always aware of itself as a project. If this project does in fact have any more existence than in my own gathering of it into a figure, it would be a project within which both art and philosophy have been important discursive practices (amongst others) and in which, with a sporadic insistence which might be the marker of Freudian repetition, the notion of the 'sublime' crops up again and again. There also seems to be some logic in placing Hirst's appeal to a thematics of death, violence, menace and bodily horror within such a genealogy, whether or not it is a 'good' or 'bad' incarnation of this thematic, and whether or not this thematic itself might be thought to ensure any kind of artistic value. (It does not.)

Brooks's claim that Hirst provides an 'existential sublime' ; her attempt to suggest a historical relevance for this.

Brooks, we have so far established, uses the ahistorical Burkean body as a ground to attempt to guarantee a judgement as to the authenticity of the experience that Hirst's work offers. I shall now go on to elaborate her attempts to set up the authenticity of this experience in opposition to the inauthenticity of contemporary (or modern?) mass culture, and thus to propose a historically contextual dimension to the importance of the Burkean sublime today.

Her argument follows closely that of Paul Crowther.¹⁵ Crowther's version of the Burkean aesthetic of the sublime centres on the moment where Burke articulates its psycho-physiological function. For Burke, the sublime supplies (mildly) violent shocks to the nervous system, which serve to stimulate it, and guard against the mental atrophy caused by the languor to which we will entropically tend (and which Burke diagnoses as a cause of "Melancholy, dejection, despair, and often self-murder"¹⁶). Crowther goes on to argue that this aesthetic is one that has become central to a modern sensibility. He connects the Burkean sublime to Benjamin's accounts¹⁷ of the psychology of the modern urban individual who, due to the constant and repetitive shocks of modern life and labour, undergoes a defensive closing and deadening of the self to outside stimuli. (Crowther is in particular

¹⁵ Crowther, Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism 115-33.

¹⁶ Edmund Burke, A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1958) Part IV, section VI, "How Pain Can be a Cause of Delight," 135 [page reference is from the Routledge 1987 revised edition].

¹⁷ See in particular Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," Illuminations (London: Fontana, 1992) 83-107, Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," Illuminations (London: Fontana, 1992) 152-97.

interested in the ‘grinding’, ‘paralysing’, ‘stifling’ and ‘suffocating’ effects of monotony and repetition, figured as a violence against the individual.¹⁸⁾

According to Crowther, though now imposed from without rather than stemming from the natural tendency to entropy of an organic system, this closing off of the self amounts to just the kind of atrophying languor which Burke was concerned with. The Burkean ‘existential sublime’, then, becomes increasingly important as a counter to the deadening experience of modern life.

Taking Crowther’s schema, Brooks applies it to the characteristics of ‘postmodern’ instead of modern culture – to the fast pace and deadening repetition of the “ersatz experiences” of the mass-media:

Postmodern life, with all its manically intrusive, infinite variety of administered experience and ideologies, ironically becomes a tedious continuum of monotony, where choosing how to divert oneself from one’s actual life is in danger of becoming a greater task than actually living it. This enforced lassitude of course deadens our sense of being alive.¹⁹⁾

For Brooks, the genuine terror she posits as the proper experience of a Hirst (an experience of the Crowtherian / Burkean “existential sublime”) serves as an antidote to all this simulated, repetitive, administered stimulation. It entails that true confrontation with death and ‘embodied existence’ which can return to us a genuine sense of our being alive. At the centre of Brooks’s account of Hirst, is a claim as to the ‘authenticity’ of the existential experience which he provides. In contrast to the superficial, predictable offerings of the mass media, she claims that the works confront us with our mortality and with the ‘complex problems of finite embodied

¹⁸ Crowther, *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism* 126.

¹⁹ Brooks, "Damien Hirst and the Sensibility of Shock," 57.

existence.” According to Brooks, the works are quite unproblematically “terrifying to behold” and “capable of producing strong nausea or deep fear.”

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It would seem to be this kind of claim that is the crunch point for accounts of Hirst: it is around this question of whether the works do indeed produce this response, do open up to such a genuine confrontation, that the line is drawn between those who wish to defend or attack Hirst. For his defenders, like Brooks, Hirst’s work is life-affirming in returning us to its reality²¹; for his detractors (for example Stallabrass or Ray) the fault of Hirst’s work is precisely that it only pretends to do this, that it offers only simulations, second-hand and clichéd representations of the real, which can in no way be differentiated from all the simulacra and stereotypes of the media. It is around just this issue that the notion of the sublime is introduced as a term either to affirm or to mark a shortcoming in Hirst.

Ray’s “Little Glass House of Horrors”

An example of such an argument which sets out to condemn Hirst as offering only a false sublime is Gene Ray’s recent essay on Hirst’s A Hundred Years, published in the journal Third Text and entitled “Little Glass House of Horrors”. Although Brooks’s only presence is in a brief and dismissive footnote, Ray’s essay could be seen as primarily a response to her use of the sublime to affirm Hirst’s work. The sublime again operates as a central

²⁰ Brooks, “Damien Hirst and the Sensibility of Shock,” 55.

²¹ See for example Sarah Kent, Shark Infested Waters: The Saatchi Collection of British Art in the 90s (London: Zwemmer, 1994) 35. Kent writes: “By looking death in the face its terror is diminished.” This is also the central argument of Jerry Saltz, “More Life: The Work of Damien Hirst,” Art in America June 1995: 82-7.

concept in the essay, only now Ray is setting out to ask of the experience of the work: “Was this the hit of the sublime or the *frisson* of the ridiculous?”²²

Ray’s essay brings into play a somewhat more complex theorisation of the experience of viewing a Damien Hirst, as well as a more critical reflexivity about what this viewing experience might signify. The essay leans on Stallabrass’s analysis of the social conditions which produce ‘high art lite’ in order to place Hirst’s work within the movement of an art which is increasingly both dependent on subject matter from the mass media and also dissolved into its mechanisms of spectacularisation.

It is perhaps interesting that Ray, like Brooks, seems to describe a strong experience (of “horror, disgust, indignation, anger, sadness”²³) in front of Hirst’s work, and finds that indifference is not an option with regard to it²⁴, although the significance of this strong affect now becomes questioned: Ray is concerned with contextualising these experiences, and with discussing the political and ethical possibilities which open up from the encounter. Ray’s conclusion is (of course?) that Hirst’s work, in its aestheticisation and spectacularisation of real violence, leaves the viewer passive and unreflective towards the links between the work or the social conditions it may reflect and their own lives.²⁵ Furthermore, for Ray, Hirst’s work, although it may act as a powerful allegory of the barbarism and inhumanity of contemporary conditions of life, it may run the risk of naturalising this violence, universalising it as a ‘human condition’ by conflating natural life-cycles and

²² Ray, “Little Glass House,” 130.

²³ Ray, “Little Glass House,” 130.

²⁴ Ray, “Little Glass House,” 131.

²⁵ Ray, “Little Glass House,” 131.

images of the technical domination of society. This would be to replace the critical function of art's ability to represent the negative conditions of contemporary life with an ironic and detached acceptance of these as inevitable.²⁶

Ray frames his diagnosis of these problems in terms of the notion of the sublime, his notion of this being drawn this time not from Crowther but directly from Lyotard's seminal essay, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde." On the first page of his essay, Ray sets out the aim of his analysis as a reassessment (in the light of the role of terror and horror within recent political discourse) of "Hirst's work and its sensational effects." His concern is to differentiate the sublime from the cheap thrill:

The sublime hits but the cheap thrill merely bothers. If the difference between the two can be clarified by a close look at what seems to be his strongest installation [...] then Hirst will have justified the effort of a critical response.²⁷

Ray returns to this in the final part of his essay, where he directly quotes the following passage from Lyotard's essay in order to distinguish between the two: "The occurrence, the *Ereignis*, has nothing to do with the *petit frisson*, the cheap thrill, the profitable pathos, that accompanies innovation."²⁸

His frame of reference, then, is essentially that difference laid out by Lyotard between the 'new' and the 'now'. For Lyotard, the '**now**' characterises the work of Barnett Newman and other 'experimental' or 'avant-garde' artists, and involves a genuine existential terror, the fear or

²⁶ Ray, "Little Glass House," 128.

²⁷ Ray, "Little Glass House," 119.

²⁸ Jean-François Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde," trans. Lisa Liebmann, Geoffrey Bennington and Marian Hobson, *The Inhuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991) 106. cited in Ray, "Little Glass House," 133.

anxiety that ‘nothing might happen,’ produced by a foregrounding of the experience of the ‘event’ or ‘occurrence’ (*Ereignis*) of the appearance of the fact that there is something rather than nothing, as opposed to the subsequent appearance of that something as something-in-particular. In contrast to this, the ‘**new**’ characterizes the functioning of capital, and is a logic of (false) ‘innovation,’ a production of difference which belongs not to the moment of the ‘is it happening?’ but – away from this moment of a pure (indeterminate) question – to the point at which the event finds a (determinate) place within an already-constituted discursive order: to that moment when the question ‘is it happening?’ gives way to an answer, to the ability to give a proper name to the event, to say ‘what’ is happening even, rather than just ‘that’ there is a happening at all.

In his return to this question of the sublime at the end of the essay, then, Ray is mobilising this opposition between the now and the new in order to understand the failure of Hirst’s work to question the spectacular in terms of its imprisonment within the ‘new’ rather than the ‘now’ - the thrill of the frisson which leaves everything in its place, rather than the sublime which erupts into discourse in such a way as to disturb and relativise all of its terms:

The hit of the sublime, to redescribe Lyotard’s distinction in a more explicitly psychoanalytic register, is a trauma that disturbs our immersion in noise and instantaneity. It is the disturbance of real questions, in which everything – who we are and how we live together – is still at stake. Anything less is the illusion of disturbance.²⁹

The point that is salient to our current argument is that the same line between the inauthentic life (pre-programmed by a culture industry) and the

²⁹ Ray, "Little Glass House," 133.

authentic moment which cuts across this (and to which art should aspire) is being drawn by both Brooks and Ray through their very different appeals to the notion of the sublime. The two merely disagree about which side of this dividing line Hirst belongs. There is little intrinsic to their theories of the sublime, however, which might actually help us decide whether or not Hirst does achieve any real penetration of the everyday discourses of media culture or not, (whether he offers us the sublime or merely the frisson) beyond the writers' appeals to their own 'experiences' of the piece.³⁰ These

³⁰ Though it must be said that Ray also attempts to weave his account of the 'experience' of Hirst through an observation of other viewers in the gallery, and it is their responses that for a significant chunk of the evidence of his claim that the work provides the frisson rather than the sublime. It is the cheering of a group of these other spectators at the moment of the execution of a fly by the insectocutor in A Hundred Years, and his own consequent revulsion that suggests to him that the piece offers a choice between either fascination or refusal, a choice which either propels us into the spectacular or pushes us away from engagement in a way which forecloses the possibility of a critical and reflective aesthetic experience of the piece. To take issue with Ray, who takes this cheering as evidence of a simple and unreflective collusion with the violence of the work, the inward mental processes behind the outward behaviour of the viewers, mediated as they are by the social norms of behaviour in a public space, could be interpreted in a number of ways. For example, could it be interpreted – rather than as the displaced expression of a general hostility to culture which Ray sees – as a defensive response to an uncomfortable or even mildly traumatic situation? We will, of course, never know anything about what passes through the minds of these characters about their experience as they walk home that evening, or how they may reflect on their behaviour as they lie in bed that night; whether they have a conversation about it afterwards; or whether it has any echoes in their minds as they arrive in their offices the next day (perhaps offices which, in their minimalist design, echo the aesthetic surfaces of the works' vitrine...); whether they remember the work the next time they swat a fly or see an insectocutor at a kebab house. Ray may, of course, be right: they may never think about the work again, they may lose interest and move on to the next distraction which presents itself to them – no link to the daily practices of their lives may be forged – but I'm not sure that his observations are a sound basis for a full conclusion as to the possibilities inherent in the work, even for this very particular audience.

There may also be a defence that could be mounted of Brooks's appeal to the 'existential sublime.' This argument might go that it is precisely in Hirst's very appeal to a thematics of death and violence that it must surely offer us an existential confrontation with our mortality; but it would seem a rather weak argument: does *all* mention of death bring us to confront our mortality? Furthermore, it is precisely at the point of division of the authentic and the inauthentic where one of Brooks's many conceptual slippages seems to occur: why, we might ask, is Hirst's work a 'genuine' and 'life-enhancing' confrontation with death, whereas the many representations of death repeated in the media (in particular, for example, in violent

appeals have the pretension to take on the status of Kantian 'subjective universal' judgements, with all their normative force.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that this appeal to the sublime in order to make (and validate) a distinction between the authentic and the manufactured is by far from a new one; in fact, as we shall see later in the dissertation, the distinction was one of the basic problems around which the notion was first articulated in late seventeenth and early eighteenth century rhetorical theory, which similarly abounds in the distinction between true and false sublimines. It shall be my contention that the notion of the sublime forms historically as a means of articulating a set of new issues in the discussion of art in which this (new) kind of distinction is very much at stake. It is, then, hardly incidental that it is to the notion of the sublime that Ray and Brooks turn for this purpose.

The Experience of a Hirst

It seems to me that both responses which affirm or disaffirm Hirst tend to do so in a way which takes for granted just what the 'experience' of a Hirst is, and it is my contention that this is an area which needs further consideration:

movies) remain part of the 'monotony' of 'administered' experience? At the point when this question is raised in Brooks's essay, it is simultaneously erased: the basic "need" for the experience of life-affirming confrontation with negation both "forms the basis of a multi-trillion dollar industry, and, in terms of art, can be employed as a contemplative exercise" (Brooks, "Damien Hirst and the Sensibility of Shock," 58.) This seems to offer us little with which to perform the differentiation between the two which stands at the heart of Brooks's appeal to the sublime. The difference, Brooks's argument suggests, is that the (genuine) 'art' confrontation with mortality is 'contemplative,' whereas its cinematic cousins are not. But this does not take us much further: how is this contemplation guaranteed? By institutional positioning, rituals of viewing? Some (here undefined) quality in the work itself? (its viscerality perhaps?) Is it, once more, left to the reflection of the viewer on their own experience to decide whether they have had an contemplative and thus authentic or an administered experience (and how might this viewer know which they have had?)

the problem of experience and affect, of true or false sublimes, will become very much at the heart of my investigation of the idea.

On the one hand, descriptions, such as Brooks's, of an author's experience of terror and horror in front of a Damien Hirst remind me, in the history of the notion of the sublime, above all of Addison's overblown description of his feelings in the Coliseum in Rome: "an amphitheatre's amazing height, / How fills my eye with terror and delight." Has anyone truly been filled with terror at the height of the Coliseum? It seems unlikely to me. Samuel Holt Monk, for one, suggests that Addison's hyperbole is "rather ludicrous."³¹ Such accounts of unmediated sublimity are suspect inasmuch as they might well be produced as much from an imperative of the terms and conventions of the critical discourse itself as from the experience it claims to describe (I am reminded of the Wittgensteinian maxim that what someone says is not so much a 'testimony' of their experience as merely evidence of what they are prompted to say³²). However, it would seem to me that the equally simple disavowal of the possibility of such an experience by other critics may hardly penetrate any further, and may equally be determined by the terms of their discourse. For an extreme example of this, we might take Stallabrass's book-length study of the '90s British art he terms 'high art lite,' where we are told repeatedly that this body of work fails to address serious

³¹ Addison, "A Letter from Italy," Works, I, (London: Bohn Standard Library, 1903) 33, cited in Samuel Holt Monk, The Sublime. A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England, (Ann Arbor Paperbacks. No. Aa40.) (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960) 56.

³² "I cannot accept his testimony because it is not *testimony*. It only tells me what he is *inclined* to say." Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations 3rd ed., (London: MacMillan, 1958) 386.

issues, and offers only ersatz experiences. Stallabrass's description of the experience of a Hirst is thus very different from Brooks's (and even Ray's!):

Every weekend, one autumn at the Tate Gallery, long queues of pretty young, pretty cool people would form between two tall glass cases, arranged to form either side of a narrow corridor. Each case contained one half of a cow that had been split lengthways along its body, and the queue was for the privilege of walking between the two of them to examine the innards [...] If the point of the work was to make people behave in this way, then it would have been a good joke³³.

Stallabrass's description, which exaggerates further the tendency in Ray's work on Hirst, presents the work in terms of an affectless and empty ritual performed in the name of fashion. For the people in Stallabrass's description, there is no question of a response to the work; they form a parade as much as they do an audience. And yet this conclusion is already determined by the terms of Stallabrass's own discourse, which posits the work as functioning entirely within the terms of a "seductive but manipulative"³⁴ culture industry which has swallowed art's artistic function to put it to work as commodity and as spectacle. As a result, further sustained attention to the work is foreclosed, and the conclusion that the work offers nothing more than a flat, inauthentic experience is predetermined.³⁵

³³ Julian Stallabrass, High Art Lite : British Art in the 1990s (London: Verso, 1999) 18-19.

³⁴ Stallabrass, High Art Lite 295. Later on the same page, Stallabrass goes on to write, citing Stendhal, that "An essential question is [...] whether it takes as its task to stir 'hearts and to prevent them falling asleep in that false and wholly material happiness which is given by monarchies.' The majority of artists purveying high art lite have been content to play the role of court dwarf."

³⁵ In many respects, I am not at issue with Stallabrass. His book provides a useful critical account of the historical circumstances which form the characteristics of the dominant British art of the nineties, and I am not arguing against the basic argument that during this period, art becomes more drawn in to the mechanisms of the art market and the entertainment industries, losing something of its 'autonomy' from these dominant forms of our society's ideological reproduction – nor that a worrying depoliticisation of art is the result of this. However, Stallabrass champions a reductive version of the function of art: it is to be the conscious and critical act of a critical subject, or it is worthless. It seems to me that art may function – and be worth discussing – in other ways than this; also that the 'culture industry,' though administered and running to the logic of the commodity, is also still a more heterogeneous (and heteronomous) space than critics such as Stallabrass would

Any account of ‘experience’ or ‘affect’ is, of course, notoriously slippery. (Ray notes as much in his essay, and it has to be said that his account is a brave attempt to deal with his own experience). Such accounts are always mediated by discourse (discourses, moreover that, as well as providing a filter through which a flow from experience to description must pass, may also act as a template lying between the world and our experience of it)³⁶. Such accounts are, furthermore, (again, as Ray notes in relation to his own grapple with Hirst) complicated further by the fact that ‘experience’ is necessarily not entirely present to consciousness, and that consciousness, discourse, can only grasp it through a retrospective process of reconstruction or rationalisation.

Taking these observations into account, it is hardly surprising that artworks elicit from critics quite varied responses; but above and beyond this ‘ordinary’ level of the unreliability of our access to experience, the claims made about Hirst’s work are interesting exactly in that they *are* quite so strongly polarised about the kinds of experience that they posit around the work. What kind of an account of the work might be able to explain these polarised responses? Is some kind of synthesis possible? Is there something

admit, a space in which various ‘symptoms’ may occur. If Hirst is something like a ‘hack’ churning out a commodity for the market, then it is precisely here that we might expect to find such a symptom expressed. It is in such a sense that Hirst’s work is worthy of further attention and analysis, rather than as the work of a critical agent; and this, rather than Stallabrass’s will be my approach. Put more simply, my ‘beef’ with Stallabrass is that in some senses, his approach, in foreclosing any detailed engagement with the experience of Hirst’s work, short-circuits any such an analysis.

³⁶ Might we understand this ‘template’, in slightly Kantian terminology, as something standing between our ‘apprehensions’ and how we might synthesise these into a ‘comprehension,’ producing the appearance of ‘phenomena’? Or might it be better understood in terms of a ‘screen’ which sits between the organs of sense and the apprehensions we draw from them...?

in the work, which might cause such different accounts of experiences to be constructed?

At this point, objections may be raised: maybe the issue is simpler than this; maybe no such complex account of the work is necessary. If the work, to take a Stallabrassian line, simply offers an empty spectacle, the hollowed out after-image of once-upon-a-time genuine thought, then Hirst's supporters are simply dupes, who have been taken in by its mystifications, mistaking its simulacral presence for the real – in Ray's Lyotardian terms, mistaking the '*petit frisson*, the cheap thrill' for the 'shock-effect' of the sublime³⁷. Problem solved. But similarly, we might seem to resolve the problem by taking the opposite line: that Hirst's critics have simply been blinded, by their own political or theoretical commitments, to the possibility of an authentic (sublime?) experience offered by the work. There is a certain symmetry between these two arguments,³⁸ and whilst they might each serve to raise questions about the other, neither in themselves convinces me of their own position; neither would seem to me to do justice to the complexity (or the evasiveness) of my own experience of Hirst's work. It is thus, briefly, to my own experience of Hirst that I shall now turn in order to attempt to offer

³⁷ Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde." p.202 and p.210 respectively.

³⁸ A further elaboration might be that to take up either one of these positions is to situate oneself politically: to argue that Hirst's work is simply banal, marking the ways in which it functions in the terms of late twentieth-century commodity capitalism, is to take up a socially critical stance; to argue for its 'eternal' value, essentially a conservative act, is to reject the political function of criticism, and to enter into a mystification of its social, political and cultural function. Again, however, this kind of dichotomy will not do. It is quite possible that work like Hirst's may be the product of the forces of capital, but there is no reason why this work might not be riven with the contradictions of contemporary society, and for this very reason aesthetically complex.

an alternative version to these two opposing accounts which Hirst's work seems to sustain.

In contrast to these accounts of Hirst, it seems to me that what is interesting in the work – and what allows it to produce such opposing readings – is precisely that it plays a strange game of 'peekaboo' (*fort / da?*) with us. Hirst's work is emphatically built of clichés piled up upon each other, images which are always already so mediated that as we stand in front of the work we are faced with something of an eerie feeling, either that we have seen this all before or that we are still not actually quite in its *presence* as such, here, now, in front of this work (in spite of its excessive and emphatic physicality). One is never sure, it would seem to me, if one is to be honest, whether one has ever 'felt' something in front of a Hirst, or merely *read*, in its over-determined language, so packed as it is with the exaggerated semiotics of conventional pathos, that the 'feeling' is present to the work (it's almost as if the work had a sign above it telling us what it is appropriate to feel in front of it). In the confrontation with a Hirst (if it can be called a confrontation: it seems to me that I rarely ever come to a point where I am face-to-face enough with one to call this a confrontation, or even an encounter), we are suspended between a kind of *deja-vu* and its opposite – perhaps we might term this a *jamias-vu*; what we have is a *missed encounter with the real* (with all the implications that this phrase might conjure up) which might in turn reflect, in Zizekian terminology, an 'unbearable closure of being' in the contemporary, symbolically-saturated world.

For this reason, perhaps, I find it hard to exactly remember my first experience of The Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living (1991), which was the first Hirst I saw in the flesh in the first of the 'Young British Artists' Saatchi shows, a work which I saw down for the day in London as an art student from Canterbury on a gallery-touring trip.

I remember - what? Perhaps the following: surprise at the scale of the tank; the sensation that this was the 'wrong' kind of shark (its face was not as pointed as a shark's should be, too flat and vertical); a shudder at the profile of the shark's face which started, due to its snub verticality, to resemble a caricature of the human (should such a monster exist, at once so unimaginably inhuman and also so reminiscent of the human?); the sense that the shark, as ugly man-fish, isn't actually frightening at all, at which point it becomes somewhat pathetic, a victim, a freak enclosed in the harsh geometry of its tank (would the tank alone, with its weight of blue liquid be just as much a threatening presence?); the moment, remarked on by so many of the critics I have subsequently read, when one moves around to the front of the tank and the face of the shark leaps towards you, which I do remember caught me off guard and – for that fraction of a second before rational thought takes over – did give me sensation that the shark had come to life and was about to burst the tank in pursuit of me: a rush of adrenaline, but (I would have wondered) does this accident of optics make the piece *art*?; the vibration between picturing the shark as an equivalent for my own self, and the sense that it might figure as a menacing other, each of which identifications offers both an anxiety and a relief from the anxiety offered by

the other identification; complacency, interest, scepticism, boredom; a sullen rejection of its irrelevance to my concerns of the moment; that indifference which both Ray and Brooks are so adamant it is impossible to feel in front of Hirst's provocations. Whether I actually thought or felt of any of this at the time, and whether I only imagined that I had thought these things on later reflection, I am not sure.

It is hard to say whether I felt a kind of a shock in front of it, whether I felt terror, or disappointment; whether the piece offered me a kind of satisfaction in confirming my feelings that such sensationalist and gimmicky art left me cold or whether in fact my suppositions at were undermined by the immediacy of the physical experience of the work; whether I resisted the delivery of genuine shocks and surprises that the work offered, and pretended that I felt nothing when I really did, or if on the contrary I was already welcoming in the thrills and chills of terror and disgust that the work signalled that it might offer, but which perhaps only I had the power to give to myself.

And if I say I am not sure what happened, this is not, I think, just an accident of my poor memory. 'Missing' an encounter with the work has been the pattern for me ever since; not that kind of absolute 'missing' that would leave me with a lack of any sensation, without being aware of having missed something, but precisely this positive sensation of having missed something. Rather, than an arbitrary event, the missed encounter is intrinsic to the nature of the work itself, and the discourses around it, which already structure an expectation of these possibilities, and make it easy to project any of these

things (either retrospectively or in advance) into that moment in which one stands in front of the tank of formaldehyde. It is not, after all, accidental that I had already heard of Hirst's work, nor of this particular sculpture, which came to the work's audience (not just to me, I'm sure) first off as a rumour (about the guy who's pickled an enormous shark and called it art), then as an image in newspapers, art magazines and even on the television, before one had ever stepped into the gallery. The 'conceptual' form of the work³⁹, which allows it to be summed up in so few words and still to carry a complex of connotations ensured this, as did the calculatedly photogenic simplicity of its iconic form, the anecdotal charm of the stories and rumours of its cost, commissioning and process of production, and the careful manipulation of a media whose concerns and myths the work echoed, and whose punchy visual language it seemed to speak to.

The work, then, structurally, cannot simply be located in the gallery; this is not where it 'takes place'. Rather it occurs for us (if it occurs at all) in the non-space of the relation between the gallery and the other sites of its representation: the newspaper, the magazine and the television screen. (Perhaps this is what Jon Thompson meant in his perceptive observation that Hirst's vitrines do not really function as sculptures at all, but rather, their glassy surfaces are the equivalent of a cibachrome transparency⁴⁰...) The work thus seems oddly absent to us in our physical confrontation with it in the white cube of the gallery; it is experienced, I would suggest, as a peculiar

³⁹ By 'conceptual' I mean to refer to the way that a brand is marketed through a 'concept' rather than to the way that the term is used to refer to a late twentieth-century art movement

⁴⁰ See his essay in Juliet Steyn (ed.), *Endgames*, A.C.T. No. 3, (London: Pluto, 1997)

spatial and temporal disjunction from its own image, a moment in which we might also feel at least a very mild vertigo of absence and dislocation from ourselves. The piling up of clichés (like the debris which Benjamin's angel of history finds piled up in front of it) in Hirst's work, a condensation of the all-too-familiar, stock-in-trade images of media culture, serves to exacerbate this; the 'meaning' of the work is similarly always prior to it, and comes to us only as an uncanny return. And the emphatic, visceral physicality of the work, the way it engages our body in its space and demands from us an imaginary identification between our body and its dead flesh, also only serves to make the work more absent to us: this physicality is so much in excess of the work's 'message' – just as that message presents such an excess of the overdetermination of easy meaning in relation to the physical presence of the work – that the two registers seem always to slip past each other, to never quite meet, to be always at odds, and always present the other with a remainder that disturbs its smooth function.

Now, I am aware that my own account here is starting to be brought back within the gravity of the notion of the sublime and its many versions. It is being drawn implacably to an alternative formulation of the sublime to Brooks's and Ray's. My claim is that Hirst's work is not valuable (or to be condemned) for its success (or failure) in producing a genuine, life-enhancing experience of 'sublimity' as intense, authentic affect or confrontation. Rather, I am suggesting that the work is interesting for its staging of the impossibility of such for a heavily mediated culture such as our own. It's as such that I become drawn back to the figure of sublimity: we have something like the

presentation of the unrepresentable, though this unrepresentable now might also be imagined as the experience of the (Burkean, existential) 'sublime' itself... The significance of this seemingly inevitable re-capture of my argument by the discourse of the sublime may only be clear to me further into my project; one thing for now is that to an extent I would like to resist this draw as far as I can, and so I only offer these last thoughts on the sublime '*sous rature*', crossed out as it were, and with the proviso that even if something may be functioning through a notion of the sublime, this isn't necessarily 'a good thing'...

If I attempt to make this more clear, the first way that my account might be starting to be drawn back to the notion of the sublime would be as a kind of reworking of a Lyotardian 'now' that might be at stake even in Hirst's recuperated capitalist work. What I am describing as my experience in front of Hirst's Physical Impossibility is something like the anxiety of the 'privation' involved in the pure 'event', the 'is it happening?' of the sublime, the existential, Burkean anxiety that *nothing* may happen. Hirst's work, just like Newman's may find us in this state, though I wonder if quite the same kind of contemplation is at stake in each case. If this would be a repudiation of Gene Ray's position that there is only the *frisson* on offer in Hirst's work, it would have to be one which constructed the 'now' at stake as one which is directly historical in its nature: it is the 'now' at the edge of the occlusion of the 'Real', the eclipse of experience performed by the 'mass-media' culture of

late capitalism, by the increasing totalisation of its capture of reality in representation.

This opens into a further reading of Hirst's themes and iconographies and their relation to the sublime, a further reading of his fascination with *flesh and death*, with metaphoric and metonymic substitutes for the human body. I'm drawn towards the kind of account that Jay Bernstein gives of Cindy Sherman's work⁴¹. For Bernstein, there is not so much a sudden swerve in Sherman's work between firstly her interest in image, code and surface in the Film Stills series and secondly the 'horror' pieces which followed the Film Stills and in which we see a return of the body as abject, dead matter. For Bernstein the one is merely the flip-side of the other. It is precisely the increasingly total control of the body and our inner nature, the increasing construction of the self by cultural codes in a rational, commodified culture (a fear shared by Adorno's situation of aesthetics in relation to the 'dialectic of Enlightenment' and also Lyotard's own figuration of the sublime as the other of capitalism's colonisation of all life, seen in terms of its reproduction of the 'received' of the established ordering of discourse) that means that the desires of the body can only return in the horrific guise of increasingly dead, abject, matter. In putting forward this argument, Bernstein plots the romantic sublime as an early stage in the development of the escalation of this process, towards more extreme contemporary manifestations in body art and horror movies...⁴²

⁴¹ Jay M. Bernstein, "The Horror of Non-Identity: Cindy Sherman's Tragic Modernism," *From an Aesthetic Point of View: Philosophy, Art and the Senses*, ed. Peter Osborne (London: Serpent's Tail, 2000) 107-44.

⁴² Bernstein, "The Horror of Non-Identity," 126.

In this sense, there is a Burkean sublime-as-horror which might be encountered in Hirst's work which is less ahistorical than the picture that Brooks draws, a no-longer-quite-existential sublime that precisely mirrors the production of the self in the ecstasies of commodification and symbolisation that characterise late-capitalist culture. Death and the body in Hirst serve as ciphers or sites of an unrepresentability of the Real in contemporary mediated culture, and an alienation from our bodily 'needs'. Gone is the ground of an account of Hirst's 'sublimity' in an eternal physiology; instead in Bernstein's account we have a root of horror in the historically constructed body of late capitalist culturalised economic relations, and commodified culture. If Hirst's work does have something interesting to say about 'life and death and all that stuff' (about the 'big questions') it is not in the form of a statement about or confrontation with a universal human condition. Rather, (as some of Hirst's better conservative critics, such as Gordon Burns have suggested) where there is something to learn from Hirst's work about an experience of death, it is something about the nature of the particular guise that death takes on in the contemporary world, where any such experience (in the Benjaminian sense of the term) has been foreclosed by its incessant mediation. In precisely the lack of affect we face in front of the work lies its power to disturb. In front of Hirst, I am thus often reminded of Barthes 'flat death': as Barthes writes: "With the photograph we enter into *flat Death*. One day, leaving one of my classes, someone said to me with disdain: 'you talk about death very flatly.' – As if the horror of death were not precisely its platitude!"⁴³

Barthes description of the transformation of death with the photograph is not

⁴³ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage, 1993) 92.

just that death is increasingly mediated with the mechanical and reproducible image, and the literalism of the photograph⁴⁴, but it also lies in a kind of temporal dislocation, perhaps not that different from that at stake in the dislocation of reality and representation in Hirst's vitrines. For Barthes, we never quite meet death now its location is in the photograph; the moment photographed is always both presented to us, but also irredeemably lost.

⁴⁴ We find this literalism of the photograph echoed again in the literalism of Hirst's refusal even to represent something rather than to bring it physically into the gallery

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