Managing the sublime aesthetic when communicating an assessment regime: The Burkean Pendulum

The importance of understanding students' engagement is prominent in higher education. Assessment is a main driver of student engagement, a phenomenon known as backwash. I argue that students' engagement with learning is often driven by an aesthetic motivation. I establish the connections between Burke's (and Kant's) conceptualisation of aesthetics as a dichotomy of beauty and the sublime (which I label the Burkean pendulum) to motivation. I explore the links between this aesthetic motivation and the assessment regime focusing on the Burkean/Kantian sublime and suggest four communication strategies to manage the sublime when it arises in students' education journeys. My contributions are two-fold: firstly, I introduce the Burkean Pendulum as a means for educators to reflect on the aesthetic aspects of their designed assessment regimes. Secondly, I propose a framework of communication strategy narratives (Thriller, Horror, Exploration, and Action) that could be used to manage the sublime of the assessment regime.

Keywords

Aesthetics, sublime, assessment regime, student engagement, communication strategy

An aesthetic motivation for learning

Death may be the greatest motivator of all.

No… This does not feel right. The aforementioned statement is inaccurate; sensational maybe but not precise.

A more accurate statement would be that the fear of death is an important motivator for people (Sievers, 1986; Greenberg and Arndt, 2011; Forgeard and Mecklenburg, 2013). This fear of death is biologically hard-wired (Clasen, 2012; Asma, 2014). The feelings associated with the fear of death are not a mere philosophical concept (Greenberg and Arndt, 2011; Forgeard and Mecklenburg, 2013), or an aesthetically-informed sensation (Burke, 1970/1759; Frank, 2014), nor a psychoanalytical state of being (Freud, 1930/2002). Fear of death could be viewed as a neurobiological dictate of human nature, a defence mechanism aiming to protect the physical body from death-inducing circumstances (Asma, 2014). Thus this fear of death can be an important, primal motivator. In the context of higher education, if fear of death is part of the motivations of university students then educators in higher education could harness this motivator to facilitate deeper learning. Thus, it becomes important in the context of higher education to investigate when such fear may rise in the

motivational makeup of university students.

But I am letting my enthusiasm get the best of me. Deeper foundations should be dug in this section in order to develop and expand on this particular conceptual argument. I should start from the beginning and seek the origins of this fear; origins which, according to the founders of aesthetic theory, could be found in the state of the sublime. Burke (1970/1759) formulated one of the earliest theories on aesthetics where he suggested that people live their life in a daze of mild indifference accentuated by moments of beauty, governed by the state of love, generating feelings of happiness, and moments of the sublime linked to the state of death, generating feelings of fear and awe. Burke (1970/1759) highlighted that both aesthetic types are attractive, intense, powerful, and arresting; whatever their cause. While for beauty the attraction may be apparent, it is in the sublime that arguably Burke (1970/1759) made the greatest contribution to aesthetics by highlighting the human mind's attraction to the unnameable, the vast, the horrific, and the unknown. For Burke (1970/1759) both the aesthetic state of beauty and the sublime can shake emotionally individuals out of the triteness of everyday life and could be viewed as critical incidents in the individuals' lives. However, Burke's (1970/1759) insight was, that even though the sublime is distinct from beauty as much as death is distinct from life[1], the sublime can be as

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[1] On a side note and underlining Burke's prescience with regards to the physiological difference between the two states, there is substantial evidence emerging from neuro-aesthetics that the state of the

fascinating and attractive as beauty even though the feelings it generates (and their root causes) are qualitatively different to beauty. The sublime for Burke (1970/1759) alludes to the fear of the vast and the unknown, the contact with an astonishingly vast and strangely cold, unsympathetic universe.

For Burke (1970/1759), these swings away from the state of mild indifference and towards these two aesthetically powerful states (of beauty and the sublime) are always temporary and like a pendulum move the person's feelings to a high pitch. However, soon after, their emotions drift back to the centre; back to the central position of mild indifference; an emotional re-calibration. These two aesthetic states advocated by Burke became influential in any subsequent study of the aesthetic, partly because both states were espoused and expanded upon by Immanuel Kant in his theory of the aesthetic. Kant (1997/1781) retained Burke's aesthetic duality, however his pre-occupation was not in understanding the sublime but in the cognitive processes that would support individuals to overcome the exposure to the sublime. Kant (1997/1781) saw the abject fear and terror instilled by the sublime as an unsustainable position which the human cognition would need to conquer, through cognitive subjugation, thus conferring to the experience of the sublime meaning and order. It is this ability of the sublime to motivate people to expand their cognition in their attempts to subjugate their

sublime is biologically hard-wired in a distinct manner from the state of beauty and pleasure (Ishuzu and Zeki, 2014)

fear of death and the unknown that forms in this paper the basis for an aesthetic motivation (Kant, 1997/1781) for learning.

Before I delve deeper into this argument, it is worth noting that fear of death and the sublime state may not necessarily lead to a motivated state of mind. The sublime could be viewed as a negative force; where the sublime stimulus can become the rejected, the repulsive, the other (Rizq, 2013), where the inability or unwillingness of the human mind to comprehend the alien, the other, the sublime, would lead to the absence of learning and a shutdown of cognition. Then the sublime state morphs to the resistance caused by exposure to an antagonist, the "other" who is not "us", the other that is everything "we" are not, the death that is not life.

While Kant (1997/1781) does not deny that the state of the sublime is appealing; the exposure to the other, the unknown, is also an exposure to the infinitude and enormity of the world and thus becomes an opportunity for expanding and learning, of becoming infused by the other via our cognition. This cosmic horror of the "other", this extreme sublime (Cochrane, 2012; Cavanaugh, 2014) of the unknown that has the potential to threaten our current existence and our state of knowing with its vastness and infinitude of possibilities (Fawver, 2013) has captivated the fantasy of the human psyche for a very long time. The strange attraction that the sublime holds for people has sustained a whole movie and literature genre: Horror. As one of the great Horror writers puts it eloquently in his 'Introduction to the Horror Literature':

The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown (Lovecraft, 2013/1927: 1)

This contact with the sublime, the other, is an implicit, yet important, aspect of Argyris and Schön's (1999) influential theory of learning. Argyris and Schön (1999), in their seminal work on organisational learning, argued that there are two possible ways for learning to occur: one is via positive reinforcement where people learn by being successful in their activity and is called single-loop learning. The second type of learning is based on experiencing and overcoming failure and is labelled double-loop learning. However, the authors noted that it can be challenging to facilitate double-loop learning as when people fail usually they tend to be emotionally defensive and exhibit defensive behaviour. The person who would achieve the deeper, double-loop learning advocated by Argyris and Schön (1999) has to overcome these defensive reactions in order to enter the double-loop learning process. If successful then she would have to question and alter her fundamental ontological and epistemological assumptions, challenging all her pre-conceptions of the world (Argyris and Schön, 1999). This process of overcoming these defences in order to acknowledge the infinitude of possibilities that opens up when deciding to change is akin to the cognitive subjugation suggested by Kant (1997/1781), a moment where the individual experiences a re-birth

by opening themselves to a new understanding of the world, a knowledge and understanding that hitherto was alien.

It should be clear by now that in this work I privilege the sublime component of the aesthetic motivation over that of beauty, even though the latter is included in what I have presented as the aesthetic motivation and the aesthetic experience. That is not because I deem the latter (or any of the other motivational factors that appear in the motivation literature) as less important. It is because beauty has been more thoroughly investigated; for example, the aesthetics of beauty in the classroom have been the subject of some really interesting work (Hallman, 1965; Uhrmacher, 2009; Mack, 2013) with regards to the beauty of learning. More specifically, I privilege the Burkean/Kantian interpretation of the sublime or, as Cavanaugh (2014) would put it, the extreme sublime over the more positive interpretations of the sublime that have dominated the literature in the last few years (Radford, 2001; Carson, 2006; Fawver, 2013; Shapshay, 2013) not because it may be more significant but rather because it is more in tune with my personal pedagogy of teaching and my ontology of life. In short, the extreme sublime speaks to me in a very intimate way; thus hereinafter when I discuss the sublime I mean exclusively the Burkean/Kantian version of the sublime, Cavanaugh (2014)'s extreme sublime. And if I attempt to share and expand on my pedagogic approach to a wider audience it is mainly because I am concerned that in alienating (i.e. othering/dismissing) this particular fear-based and death-informed

interpretation of the sublime educators are missing out on an important motivational aspect of students' learning journeys: the sublime that is triggered in every instance that students face aspects of the academy that appear abject, vast, horrifying, and scary... This acknowledgement of the sublime experience becomes even more salient in the case of management education, because, due to its inherently interdisciplinary nature (Sturdy et al., 2006; Thomas and Wilson, 2011), management as a discipline necessitates exposure to a greater diversity of knowledge communities and norms of practice. This interdisciplinary diversity may appear as disjointed, confusing, and abject to the students; these are the properties that led Hurst (2013) to declare that management is a "mongrel discipline".

In this paper, I focus on an aspect of university students' academic journey that appears to give rise to the emotional state of the sublime: assessments. Assessments seem to distil the emotional, sometimes incapacitating, anxiety, and stress which are the hallmark reactions of students towards assessment even though they are only lightly touched upon in the literature (Stewart and Darwent, 2014; Kivunja, 2015) and with limited acknowledgement of the fear component underlying them. A focus on assessments allows me to explain the relevance of the sublime to the assessment regime and to provide practical advice that may have universalistic properties on a topic that the vast majority of higher education educators would agree is important (that assessments exist and for students they are important).

The next section adopts the aesthetic motivation (with a focus on the sublime) as a lens to examine management students' engagement in a higher education context, especially their engagement with the higher education assessment regime. This paper consists of three interlinked sections:

    i.   The current introductory section where I expanded on aesthetic motivation and considered its relevance to learning theory and assessment.

    ii.   The second section where I explore and delineate the inter-relationships between the aesthetic motivation and the assessment regime, and more particularly one inter-relationship that of the sublime motivator and the summative assessment, and the challenges it posits in management education.

    iii.   The third section where I present an assessment communications framework in order to provide support to educators who wish to reflect on how to manage the sublime as a motivator in their assessment regime.

The sublime nature of summative assessment

Each discipline of knowledge, each community of academic practice, each inner circle, develops a language that enhances the uniqueness and otherness of that particular community thus distinguishing the practitioners from the uninitiated (Kuhn, 1996;

Tomás-Miquel et al., 2016). When a student enters university and chooses to engage with a particular academic community, in effect the student's journey becomes a rite of passage; the student is exposed to a community of knowledge and practice composed of disciples of that particular community where the assessment regime becomes then a powerful expression of that particular epistemic discourse (Biglan, 1973; Pryor and Crossouard, 2008; Iannone and Simpson, 2016). An assessment regime is defined here as the integrated framework of all formative and summative assessment incidents which form the backbone of a teaching module. The concept assessment regime is used here purposefully in lieu of assessment design to denote a particular point in the journey of a unit's assessment after the assessment has been designed, moderated, and communicated to the students, where it becomes much harder to alter assessment processes in any way; the assessment portfolio of the unit rigidifies, it becomes an assessment regime. The learning activities that would form part of such an assessment regime can be summative or formative which are pragmatically defined as: summative assessment is any assessment that is included in the final grade and thus is assessment of learning and is often linked to certification, progress, and accountability; while formative assessment is any assessment for learning, which is not included in the final grade classification (Newton, 2007). The suggested assessment dichotomy can be problematic; many summative assessments can also be assessments for learning; in fact, I would consider most summative assessments as assessments for and of learning.

However, suffice to say that summative assessments are distinguished from formative ones as having a judgement and accountability element in addition to any potentially formative role they may have (Newton, 2007).

Summative assessments appear to be the main driver of students' learning and study patterns (Raupach et al., 2013; Taras and Davies, 2013; Kivunja, 2015; Iannone and Simpson, 2016). This students' primary focus when forming study plans on summative assessments is a well-established phenomenon referred to by Biggs (2003) as backwash. Summative assessments motivate students to cover the relevant content and syllabus of a particular unit and to delve into the process of trial and error that is the foundation for the reiterative reflective process of deeper learning and ultimately knowledge acquisition (Lu et al., 2003; Kolb and Kolb, 2005; Pashler et al., 2008). In contrast, formative assessments do not seem to fill students with the same level of urgency even though formative assessments should be designed to enhance students' performance in summative assessment (Trotter, 2006; López-Pastor et al., 2013). This lack of engagement with formative assessment may be due to the fact that it is the summative assessments that determine students' final grade classification. Investing time and effort in completing a summative assessment may be viewed as a good investment as it may have impact on a student's future and can provides substantive feedback and learning opportunities (Trotter, 2006; Taras and Davies, 2013), while investing time and effort in completing a formative assessment could be construed as a

waste of resources. It is not helpful that academics who design formative assessments that will form components of a particular assessment regime do not always have clarity of vision with regards to what they require from their students (Yorke, 2003; Gulikers et al., 2013; Taras and Davies, 2013). Thus the design of an assessment regime has to be a deliberate and careful process; a well-designed assessment regime would align tightly formative assessments to the summative taking advantage of the backwash phenomenon and thus ensuring that the completion of the former enhance the results on the latter; i.e. a tight constructive alignment of formative activities to summative activities (Biggs, 2003; Pereira et al., 2015).

In the literature, student planning and engagement with assessment is often seen as strategic (Yorke, 2006), and academic work seems accentuated by moments of high intensity usually linked to a rapidly approaching deadline for a summative assessment (Biggs, 2003; Gulikers et al., 2013), each summative assessment a critical incident, a high risk incident, where students' performance is judged in a relatively permanent manner (Newton, 2007). Thus each summative assessment becomes a stressful experience (Kahu, 2013) and thus in each consecutive assessment students may fleetingly experience the vast unknown, the sublime of new knowledge; each summative assessment propelling the student further into the unknown (for the student) known (for the academic of the discipline). Thus the student's academic engagement could be interpreted as an experience remarkably similar to Burke's conceptualisation

of the aesthetic experience: a daze of everyday mild indifference accentuated by intense moments of the aesthetic experience. This experience of the senses retains the duality of the aesthetic; the beauty of learning as part of the process of learning (Heiland, 2011) and the sublime of the unknown when facing new knowledge. And yet, the curriculum design process often dismisses these emotive, intimate, and personal aspects of learning (Ward and Shortt, 2013; Blasco, 2015), an omission that is only exacerbated by a dearth of research on student voice, in particular with regards to the emotive aspects of learning (Trowler, 2010).

We could visualise this aesthetic experience as a pendulum-like motion between the two aesthetic states: a conceptual pendulum where the students hover in a dynamic equilibrium state of mild indifference (see Figure 1) only to swing emotionally towards the sublime or beauty depending on the kind of experience (and reactions) generated along their learning journey.

Figure 1. Equilibrium state of indifference.

This dynamic state of indifference may be disturbed when for example a new summative assessment is introduced hurtling towards the student's immediate life horizon. Students experience stress, fear of failure, and anxiety when facing the sublime elements of the summative assessment. At such moments of stress, the Burkean Pendulum would swing towards a new but unstable equilibrium of the sublime as shown in Figure 2.
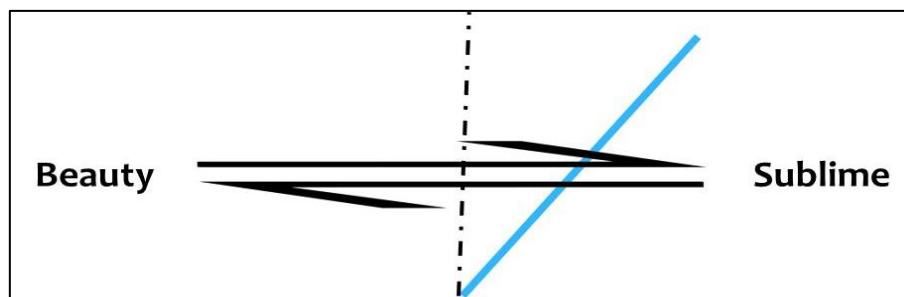

Figure 2. The equilibrium swings to the sublime due to assessment anxiety and fear of failure.

Being in the state of the sublime is unsustainable; Kant's cognitive subjugation is usually encapsulated by the students' study plans as a means to respond to the anxiety and fear caused by a summative assessment. It would be a cognitive reaction to the sublime; Kant would have been proud... However, paraphrasing Barnett's maxim (1963): no study plan survives contact with assessment; assessments affect students and students' plans of tackling assessments are fraught with danger.

If the student experiences and successfully overcomes the sublime experience then s/he would return to an equilibrium of indifference. Or we may witness a swing of the equilibrium to the side of beauty (as seen in Figure 3) if the students enter a stage

where learning becomes a joy only (possibly) interrupted by the inevitability of the deadline. In a sense the summative assessment is a moment in the student's journey where the two aesthetic states may blur and fleetingly induce aesthetically-informed feelings to the students. From a distance the assessment may have the aura of the sublime, but as the student engages with the assessment the learning process could transform to a positive aesthetic experience, a beautiful experience (see Figure 3) only to flip back to the sublime as the deadline rapidly approaches, the possibility of failure is looming, and the stakes are rising higher.
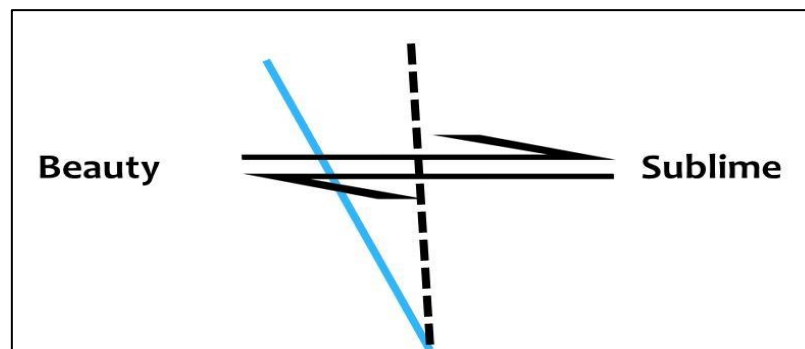

Figure 3. Swing to beauty caused by engaging fully with learning.

Hopefully, the journey ends up in a satisfying conclusion where a successful assessment submission would allow for a return back to the dynamic equilibrium of mild indifference (as Figure 1).

This encounter with the unknown of the summative assessment is exacerbated in the management discipline which by its very nature tends to be highly interdisciplinary (Thomas and Wilson, 2011). The business and management students not only have to

contend with the exposure to the higher education context, which is a cultural shock in its own right (Fox, 2005; Hu and McCormick, 2012; Kahu, 2013; Zaitseva et al., 2014), but also with a range of disciplines and sub-disciplines within management, each sub-discipline carrying its own history, language, and scholarship. The management discipline should deserve fully Bourdieu and Wacquant's (1999) accolade of a "mongrel discipline". Alas, the authors never did bestow this accolade to the management discipline reserving their vitriol for the discipline of cultural studies.

Thus when students experience management education they are exposed to all the disciplinary strands that are blended in this management mongrel (Hurst, 2013): accounting, operations management, strategy, human resource management, finance, business law, just to mention some. Management students, whenever they start a new module and are preparing for assessments, are often attempting to translate a new discipline into the familiar, into meaningful knowledge; they are continuously embroiled in a liminal space of uncomfortable knowledge (Meyer and Land, 2003), a continuous process of translating the unknown (Hawkins and Edwards, 2013), perennially exposed to the potential experience of the sublime. The stress, fear, and anxiety caused by continuously crafting assessments that relate to different disciplines are further exacerbated by the recent demands for curriculum condensation where students encounter each extensive body of knowledge and scholarship in a sanitised, and severely compressed form in order to fit within the academic calendar (Blasco,

2015). For university students such summarised and distilled academic knowledge could be seen as a disengaging, complex, and unrealistic experience (Dennis and Al-Obaidi, 2010; Margaryan et al., 2011; Williams et al., 2012). As educators we should acknowledge the fear and stress students experience when engaging with the content of what we teach as management educators as a first step in understanding the level of disengagement observed in university students (Soilemetzidis et al., 2014).

From the perspective of the UK academic the previously restricted membership in the disciplinary epistemic communities has been relaxed, and the role of educators has morphed from mere transmitters of knowledge to facilitators and enablers of student engagement and performance (Kahu, 2013). Thus the educators cannot rely solely on students' intrinsic motivations to carry them through their educational experience and thus it is becoming important to support students in overcoming any sublime swings of Burkean Pendulum when experienced. There is a need to manage the sublime of the learning experience and help students convert it to something meaningful within their learning journey (Evans et al., 2014). The alternative is to risk having students who indulge in procrastination and avoid spending the energy and emotional investment required for converting the unknown into something familiar and known (Stewart and Darwent, 2014), students who do not attempt to conquer the sublime (and liminal) monsters of doubt and uncertainty (Hawkins and Edwards, 2013).

Attempts to manage the introduction of new knowledge in the academic context may focus on making the syllabus simpler or more comprehensible, the process more transparent, the content simpler; i.e. an attempt to convert the unknown into the mild indifference of the everyday. The emphasis on making a subject approachable and easier for students can be problematic; knowledge needs time, space, and engagement with the unknown in order to absorb it and thus overcome the stress caused by its language (Masui et al., 2014; Blasco, 2015). Educators could utilise the dynamics of Burkean Pendulum to reflect on their practice and to facilitate in the students the development of tenacity and resilience required to overcome the defences triggered when facing the unknown and to support students in engaging with the sublime aspects of the learning process and discovering the joys of learning (Price et al., 2015). As Argyris (1976) would have it, if applied in higher education context, learning should be about giving opportunities to students for experiencing reiterative cycles of failure and success, enabling thus double-loop and single-loop learning, or what Kapur (2016) argued to be instances of productive failure and productive success. A sublime interpretation would suggest that we need to provide students with opportunities for cognitively subjugating the sublime and overcoming the feelings of fear and stress that arise as a consequence.

In the next section I attempt to illustrate the communication strategies that could be used to manage the sublime of the aesthetic motivation in relation to the assessment

regime. Indirectly, I provide a critique of the dominant approach in managing the sublime, the constructive alignment model, and I provide a typology that allows educators to consider other narratives when communicating the sublime to their students; this typology should broaden academics' understanding of the importance of the aesthetic and should provide options for managing the sublime aesthetic beyond the orthodoxy of constructive alignment.

Communicating the sublime in an assessment regime

The previous two sections established firstly the existence of an aesthetic motivation composed of the beauty and the sublime and secondly that the sublime may rise when students are dealing with summative assessment. The prominence of the assessment regime in students' minds has first been noted in Biggs' (2003) constructive alignment conceptualisation (a very influential framework in the UK higher education context) and is dubbed the backwash phenomenon. Backwash is effectively the fixation students exhibit on summative assessment (Biggs, 2003) which leads to students starting from the assessment and working backwards to decide what they need to learn in order to meet the objectives of the assessment. This contradicts the educator's perspective which starts from the intentions of learning behind a particular module, moving on to activities and finally, the assessment (Biggs, 2003). The key in successful assessment strategy is continuous communications with the students which would be

frequent, clear, and consistent and would communicate clearly how the formative activities would lead to learning that meets the learning outcomes that the summative assessment is testing.

Where this paper expands and augments the orthodoxy in pedagogic research is in the origins of the backwash phenomenon. Where for Biggs (2003) and other authors (Newton, 2007; Gioka, 2009; Fernandes et al., 2012; Hernández, 2012; Kivunja, 2015; Iannone and Simpson, 2016) the students' focus on summative assessment tends to be a relatively rational, strategic decision, my proposition is that there is an aesthetic dimension rooted in primal feelings which contributes to the backwash phenomenon. My student's account below regarding the introduction of the assessment regime to his business research skills module is far from unique:

> *"it was like when you don't know how to swim and then they put you in a 100-meter deep water… uh… that's exactly how I feel at the beginning. And I was disappointed like ok… so… what is expected from me…"*

The pedagogic philosophy espoused in this work is alluded to in an eclectic body of scholarship that highlights the importance of emotions and the aesthetic in higher education (Cavanaugh, 2014; Blasco, 2015). For example, in Scager et al. (2014)'s empirical study the students were feeling strong emotions, they were overwhelmed by the assessment, they were worried, frustrated, paralysed as the assessment deadline was approaching… In fact, in Scager et al. (2014) the educators

purposefully generated an assessment regime that heightened the aspects that would generate a sublime feeling in the students. The assessment was vaguely described, the formative assessments were challenging, the supporting structures were minimised and the instructions provided were broad and open-ended (Scager et al., 2014). The students were encouraged to find their own ways to cope with the anxiety of the unknowable known of the module. Even though Scager et al. (2014) did not use the vocabulary of the sublime aesthetic, nevertheless it is clear that he harnessed the dynamics of the sublime in order to facilitate deep learning to the students. Cavanaugh (2014) attempted a more explicit harnessing of the sublime by heightening students' experience with the content noting, with some surprise, how effective the Burkean/Kantian sublime was in facilitating learning. Blasco (2015) in her study of conceptual/physical space and its impact of aesthetics advocated a mindful, contemplative approach towards assessment, teaching and learning, with less content, less structure while emphasising the beautiful state of the aesthetic experience and a move away from the sublime, leading to a reduction of anxiety and stress caused by the sublime of the assessment.

These examples highlight the importance of managing the sublime when teaching and learning. At the same time the examples provide insight into how educators could use different approaches in expressing the sublime in order to harness its motivational power when delivering on their assessment regime. The emphasis is often on the way the assessment regime is communicated to the students and when

considering these examples I envisage two dimensions that are important to consider when communicating an assessment regime. The first dimension relates to the relationship the educator has with the sublime; would they heighten the sublime in their communications and thus use it as a motivational force for engaging the students or downplay the sublime and thus treat it as something that needs to be controlled and reduced when communicating their assessment regime to the students. The second dimension to consider is the level of structure and guidance the academic wishes to provide about the inner workings of the assessment regime. If the educator decides to communicate the assessment regime in relatively implicit, unstructured terms then the supportive role of the various activities of the regime may be unclear to the students' imagination and understanding; as Kapur (2008) would have it, students would have to form their own solutions, their own approach in solving the learning activity. If the assessment regime is explicitly communicated then its supportive role is clear and the scaffolding of all components would appear to be tightly aligned to the summative assessment.

The learning journey intended by the educator would be aligned to the communication strategy used when presenting the assessment regime to the student. The two communication dimensions discussed earlier allude to a quartet of communication strategies that could be used by the educator to communicate the assessment regime and blend the sublime into the learning journey s/he intends the

students to undertake. Figure 4 illustrates the four communication strategies available to an educator in order to communicate this assessment regime to the students during the first teaching session.
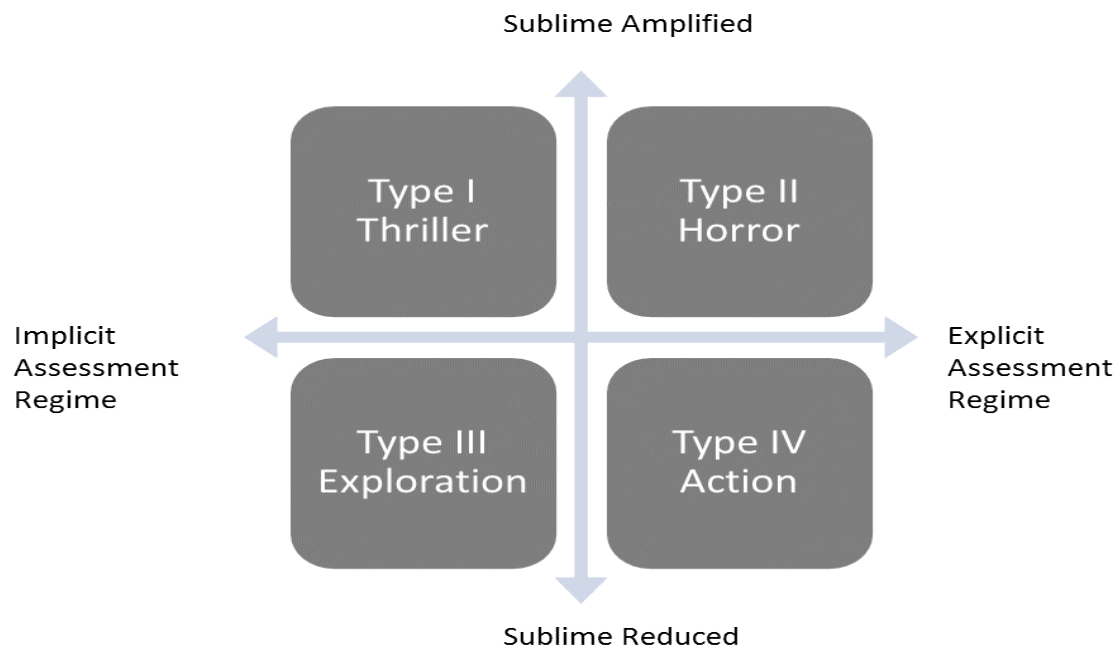
Sublime Amplified

| Type I Thriller | Type II Horror |

Implicit Assessment Regime — Explicit Assessment Regime

| Type III Exploration | Type IV Action |

Sublime Reduced

Figure 4: A typology of communication strategies of the assessment regime

These four types of communication strategy would exist regardless of the actual assessment regime. In other words, the assessment could be technically the same (with regards to its formative and summative components) but would be a totally different emotional experience depending on the communication strategy chosen. With each communication strategy, the learning journey the students would undertake would be aesthetically different.

For illustration purposes, let us consider a 15 weeks university module where the assessment regime is communicated in the first session, 8 formative learning activities are conducted in the duration of the module, capped at the end with the summative assessment. I have used genres from the cinema genres to illustrate the different narrative that each type of communication could potentially lead to. Before I delve further into these narratives, I would like to stress that the use of genres from the cinema is superficial; their usage is intended only to plant seeds into the reader's mind of the various possibilities that exist when presenting an assessment regime to the student body. The genres are used as over-simplifications and indicative labels of the potential communication strategies of the sublime in the assessment regime and not definitive, absolute labels of objective, or "real" types of communication strategies.

Type I communication strategy could be seen as a Thriller feature movie, a narrative of an assessment regime full of mystery, subtle clues and plot twists which culminates in a conclusion with the submission of the final assessment. A good example from feature films would be *Oldboy* (Park, 2003) or *Seven* (Fincher, 1995) where in both the protagonist goes through the cinematic journey in a daze of confusion and parts of the story unfold slowly throughout the movie towards the big reveal at the end. The sublime is continuously heightened but this crescendo is subtle, the student is confused because of the plot's twists and turns and the mounting tensions as confusion slowly

gives way to the sublime feeling of a final reveal and the assessment deadline finally reaches our "hero" and then it all makes sense…

If an educator chose the Thriller approach in their communication strategy they would stress the sublime nature of the assessment, the difficulty of the task ahead and then would provide relatively limited help. The students would feel relatively unsupported and confused as the activities would appear unstructured. There would be moments of calm, and even beauty as the students make sense of some parts of the puzzle but then the ante is raised again with every subsequent communication. It is this approach that Scager et al. (2014) purposefully utilised in their empirical study. Figure 5 attempts to translate visually this communication strategy using the Burkean pendulum to indicate the relevant aesthetic swings in the passage of the assessment regime.
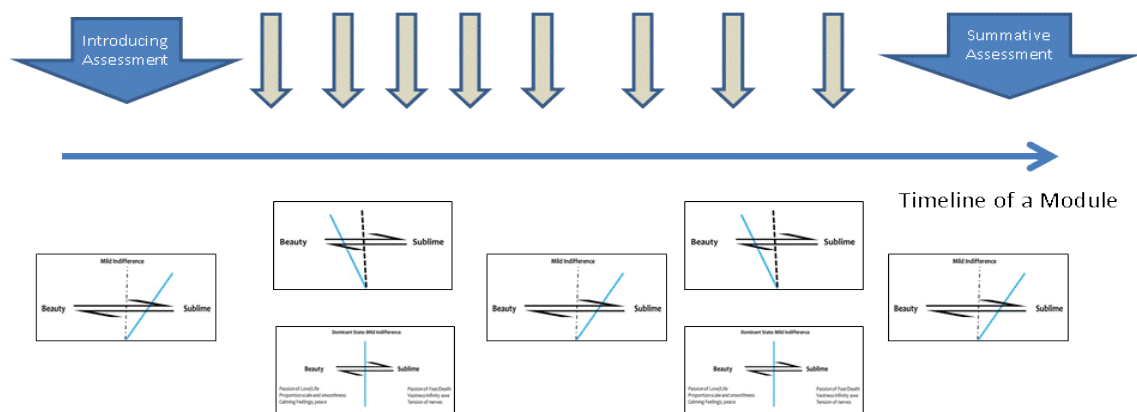

Figure 5: Type I Communication Strategy

The sublime is introduced early on together with the assessment regime followed by a series of tasks and activities where the constructive alignment is implicitly communicated. The resulting explorations allow for opportunities of failure (opportunities for double-loop learning) as well as instances of success (single-loop learning) as the students cover formative activity after formative activity trying to figure out how to deliver on the final summative assessment. Such a communication strategy is the polar opposite of the orthodoxy (constructive alignment) when communicating assessments; it actually increases the stakes of engagement and heightens the sublime but more important it does not provide continuous scaffolding or explicit support structures for the students to lean on. According to Kapur (2008), such unstructured opportunities for learning can lead to cycles of productive failure and success. The aim of such a communication strategy is to encourage the students to become proactive, independent learners as they discover by themselves means and tools that would enable them to deal with the stress caused by the summative assessment.

Type II communication strategy could be seen as a mainstream Horror feature film, where the narrative of the assessment regime focuses on the summative assessment as the scary monster, the gruesome villain, the Grendel which the students have to fight by going through a series of trials and tribulations that would lead to the final "battle", the submission of that summative assessment. A good example from feature films would be *Alien (Scott, 1979)* or the visually arresting *28 Days Later*

(Boyle, 2002) where the structure of the plot is quite linear and predictable even as the sublime horror mounts. Both films culminate with a final battle and the slaying the monster in the case of *Alien (Scott, 1979)* or reaching safe harbour in the case of *28 Days Later* (Boyle, 2002). The sublime is heightened, its presence is menacing and oppressive but the plot is clear, the structure predictable, and the "hero" is aware of what s/he has to do.

The communications are different in this case; the sublime is amplified early on and then reinforced throughout the module's journey as students move from one learning activity to the next, to the point where the actual summative assessment becomes less and less fearful. Cavanaugh (2014) seems to work on that assumption when she concludes in her work that by teaching to the extreme sublime she has helped the students to accustom their minds to the sublime nature of the subject matter. This communication strategy is presented in Figure 6.

A series of tough Formative Activities reaching a crescendo as the students approach the summative assessment deadline
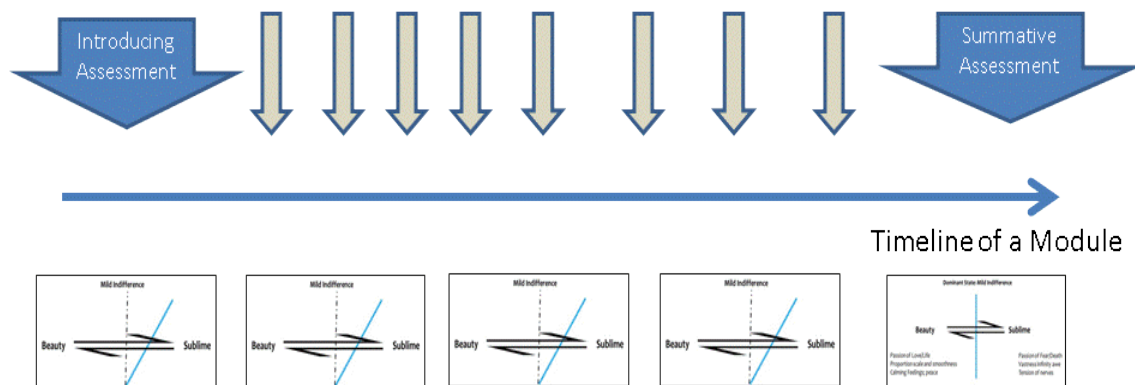
Introducing Assessment

Summative Assessment

Timeline of a Module

Figure 6: Type II Communication Strategy

In this communication strategy, from session 1 the menacing shadow of the summative assessment is introduced and presented to the students. The educator makes clear and precise in all communications the link of all activities in the module to the learning relevant to the summative assessment at the end. Each activity becomes progressively more challenging and there is much opportunity for double-loop learning. As the students deal with each activity mindful of the final assessment at some point they should reach the point where the summative activity holds no more mysteries, no terror, little stress… They have grown accustomed to the summative assessment which used to be sublime; the unknown has become known.

Type III communication strategy is akin to an Exploration, a feature film that focuses predominantly on exploring a new setting, a new culture, or a new world. In the context of communicating an assessment regime the educator would focus on the beauty

of exploration and purposefully downplay the sublime of the assessment regime to the point where students may not even realise they have been exposed to alien content and context, absorbed as they are in playfully exploring the new world they found themselves embroiled in, as can be seen in Figure 7. A good example from feature films could be *Avatar* (Cameron, 2009), although my personal favourite would be *Lost in Translation* (Coppola, 2003) where the protagonists of the narrative are aimless, exploring the space they found themselves in, and exhibiting a unique kind of displacement. In this narrative of exploration the sublime is subdued, the structure is perfunctory and the activities are not clearly explicated. The pleasure of exploration is the purpose of the "hero's" journey.

This type of communication strategy would promote the beauty of the aesthetic experience of learning. Blasco (2015) appears to offer that model of approaching learning in her descriptions of space in a module where students are afforded space and time to explore and discover the pleasure of learning as a means to enriching their life.

A series of Formative Activities encouraging exploration and the beauty of learning reverting to the sublime as summative assessment deadline approaches
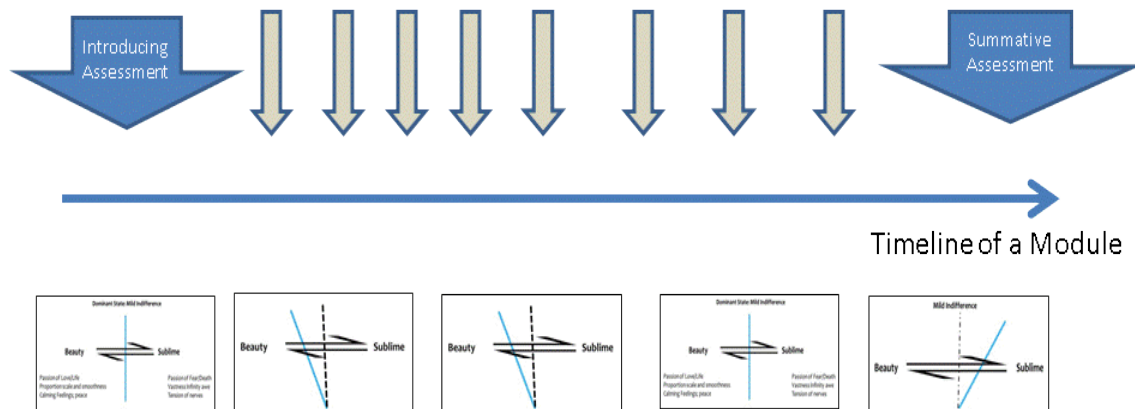
Figure 7: Type III Communication Strategy

This type of communication strategy does not highlight the sublime state of the assessment; instead it presents the positive aspects of the module and attempts to provide opportunities for beauty and reflection as the means of facilitating students' learning. When the summative assessment approaches the students, the earlier explorations should help them bring everything together and perform.

Type IV communication strategy could be perceived as the equivalent of a mainstream Action feature film, a narrative of an assessment regime full of obstacles that the student has to overcome on the learning journey towards triumph and the summative assessment. The quintessential example would be *Rocky* (Avildsen, 1976) and a more contemporary example would be *Taken* (Morel, 2008) where effectively the protagonist embarks on a journey with clear aim and objectives, and a reasonably

obvious structure for how to achieve them. The sublime is subdued, lost in the

systematic structure of the student's journey and the overcoming of each predictable

obstacle. The final submission of the summative assessment appears to be the logical

conclusion of that journey and its sublime nature is mollified by the learning journey the

"hero" undertook, which is structured, predictable, and action-packed.

Thus this communication strategy attempts to reassure the students that because

all formative assessment is aligned to the summative provided, the activities are

systematic and well-aligned, and the students will go through the activities in a

systematic manner, they will do well in the final assessment (see Figure 8). That is the

approach that is implicitly advocated by much of the constructive alignment literature

with their focus on providing a very clearly communicated path to success on

summative assessment (Biggs, 2003; Gulikers et al., 2013).
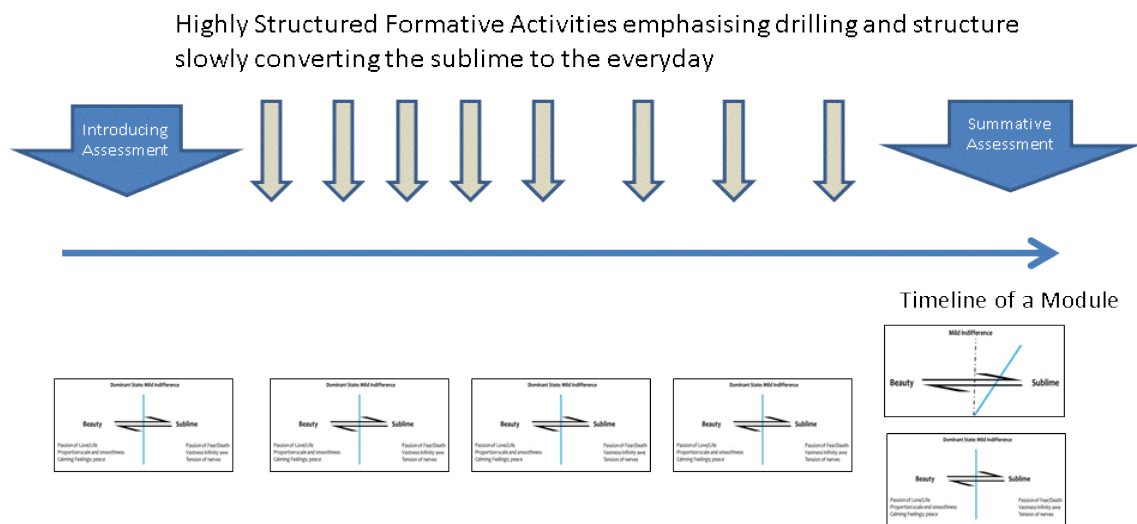

Figure 8: Type IV Communication Strategy

Each of the steps towards the summative is explicitly communicated and aligned, formative activities are seen as part of the everyday mild indifference and the hope is that structure and routine will prepare the students for that final moment of submitting the summative assessment. A bit like a professional athlete training, the students have done all the learning activities and have reached the point where the summative assessment itself feels as a mildly indifferent affair.

The communication strategies typology and the possible swings of the Burkean Pendulum each type of strategy may give rise to are not intended to be exhaustive, restrictive, or definitive. These communication strategies are suggestive and indicative rather than prescriptive and absolute. For the delivery of a successful assessment regime there are many more factors (such as the nature of the assessment, the types of students involved or the preferences of the educators) to consider beyond the communication strategy of the assessment regime and its implied management of the sublime experience. This typology is only offered as a means for academics to reflect and juxtapose their own communication strategies vis-à-vis the four types and make clearer to themselves first, and to the students second, the way they will manage the sublime if it arises.

Conclusion

The most important contribution of this paper is in highlighting the salience and relevance of the Burkean/Kantian sublime as a primal motivator. This insight can have wide-reaching implications beyond the higher education context of this paper into the wider worlds of management, politics, and social science. The use of fear (fear of organisational death) in as an important ingredient of most change management frameworks in management (Sievers, 1986; Thompson and O′Connell Davidson, 1995; Beabout, 2012; Al-Haddad et al., 2015), while the political arena routinely utilises the aesthetics of hope and fear for the purposes of winning an election, or a policy implementation campaign, of which the recent US elections and the Brexit referendum are both prime examples.

Thus the motivation generated by the extreme sublime experience would be relevant to all fields of social life and more research needs to be done on the empirical validity of its impact. In this article I focussed on management education in university settings, because of two personal disquiets: firstly, that the extreme sublime has largely been ignored in education and its relevance to the learning journey of students is absent even though students often experience it and secondly, that management students are disproportionately exposed to the extreme sublime throughout their education due to management education's complex and interdisciplinary nature and that is something that may be ignored by management academics.

I make two contributions towards the operationalization and harnessing of the sublime. The first contribution is what I labelled as Burkean Pendulum, the incorporation of both types of aesthetic in a pendulum-like equilibrium as a means to map out the aesthetic swings that may happen during an event; an event which in the context of higher education could be the unfolding of an assessment regime. The second contribution relates to the way academics communicate assessments and I suggest in this paper that the educator should consider the narrative they provide to the students in terms of the sublime. I suggest four narratives based on feature film genres: Thriller, Horror, Exploration, and Action, but these are only indicative. Constructive alignment, which is one of the dominant narratives of assessment communication, is covered only by one of these genres. I hope future empirical research will investigate the actual narratives educators use when they communicate their assessment regimes and the points where students may experience the sublime.

Finally, this work offers insights into the aesthetic considerations the academics should embrace when communicating the assessment regime to students. Clear, rational, well-thought out communications may lead to failure of learning (Argyris, 1994) and that is the approach advocated by the orthodoxy in pedagogic philosophy. This work highlights the importance of aesthetics, in particular the sublime, and suggests that there are alternative communication strategies that can be used in order to manage an assessment regime. These alternative communication strategies do not always aim to

ease and simplify the learning journeys of the students; in contrast, sometimes learning may need to be scary, uncomfortable (Meyer and Land, 2003) and the communications may actually need to accentuate the more sublime aspects of the assessment regime to enhance the students' learning journey (Carson, 2006; Cavanaugh, 2014). Sometimes the students' experiences need to be sublime, sometimes the assessment regime needs to appear unstructured and unsupportive and be implicitly communicated by design, and that can be okay.

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