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Washington University in St. Louis
Graduate School of Art

Artificial Infinite

By

Brandon Daniels

A thesis presented to the Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts of
Washington University in St. Louis in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirement for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

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Abstract

This thesis examines the complex history of the sublime, specifically the sublime Void of the Romantics and the newer concept of the technological sublime. From there, I examine the genre of science fiction and its relationship to the sublime, the Void and the grotesque. I use specific examples such as Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker*, and a few others to better understand and apply these concepts. Beginning with these examples, I start to posit what role special effects play in how these films embody these philosophical concepts.

Building on this foundation of research, I go on to explain how my own work brings into real space a physical embodiment of the aesthetic and philosophical ideas central to the science fiction genre, and how this disruption between the boundaries of digital space and physical space offers new ways to understand their relationship. I detail the unique process of creating an individual piece, and I reveal how the titles of some works concretize their link to the science fiction genre. Additionally, I place my work within the Romantic tradition of painting, and compare and contrast my work with other artists, both historical and contemporary.

What raises a man above other creatures is that he is conscious of his finitude; the prospect of death brings with it the conceivability of nothingness, the shock on nonbeing. If my own self, the microcosm, is ontologically precarious, so perhaps is the macrocosm, the universe as a whole. - Jim Holt¹

Intro

My current body of work explores the relationship between the sublime and the grotesque. Within the genre of science fiction, these two concepts are utilized in ways that suggest that the boundaries between the two can be blurred. My paintings evoke both reactions, the sublime and the grotesque, through a handling of surface that mimics forms created through special effects in science fiction films.

The Sublime

Because it has been applied to both written and aesthetic forms of expression, the concept of the sublime is one of the most dense and historically rich subjects in the field of art and philosophy. The concept is ancient and has been the topic of contemplation by some of the most historically notable philosophers in history. Interest in the subject has perhaps only gained popularity throughout time, and it is a crucial element of the contemporary conversation within art and most recently film and new media. The sublime has also been

¹ Holt, Jim. *Why Does the World Exist?: An Existential Detective Story*. New York: Liveright Pub., 2012. p. 18

heavily codified into different fields of thought. Philosophers and historians have far extended its original meaning into various sub categories. My own work deals with various versions of the sublime posited through history, but in this thesis, I am going to attempt to focus on only two, the image of the sublime Void and the technological sublime.

The sublime, from the Latin *sublimas*, is classically defined as a quality of greatness beyond calculation, measurement, or imitation. The first known classification of the sublime is attributed to the ancient Greek philosopher Longinus (his real name is unknown, hence his common title: "Pseudo-Longinus"). Longinus's view of the sublime primarily applied to writing or the reading of speeches or writings such as those by Homer or the book of Genesis for he himself was a teacher of ways of speaking. Longinus viewed the very prose and word choices of certain works as being able to inspire spiritual emotions in the same way the content itself can.

Longinus's writing, *On the Sublime*, was lost and then rediscovered in the 17th century. Edmund Burke, and 18th century Irish philosopher is one of the most notable authors to have written and theorized about the sublime. In *A philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* from 1756, Burke tried to make the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime. The two concepts had, up until then, been debated as varying degrees of the same experience. In addition to this distinction, Burke focused on the complex emotions that one experienced when encountering something that possessed sublime qualities. Burke rooted the sublime in nature and he placed specific importance on the sensation of terror as a prominent aspect of the sublime. Of the terrible he writes: "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the

mind is capable of feeling...." In Part II, Section II, Burke wrote: "...terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently, the ruling principle of the sublime." ²

Burke was also the first to speculate that a painting could somehow capture the qualities of the sublime that is found in nature and in the written word. Although he could not point to existing examples he had hope that it was possible for a painter to achieve more than illusion in their works. Milton's *Paradise Lost* was the main example Burke used to describe the sublime. Milton's novel, already hugely popular by the time of Burke's exaltation, was even further popularized by Burke's writing, which led to an immense rise in the popularity of gothic fiction.

In his books *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764) and *Critique of Judgment* (1790) Immanuel Kant responded and added to Burke's ideas. Kant divided the sublime into classifications. First in *Observations...* he divided the sublime into three kinds of experience: the noble, the splendid, and the terrifying. Later in *Critique* he would change these divisions into two: the mathematical, which relates to size and scale, and the dynamic which relates to the power or might of a spectacle. Kant deduced that in both instances the feeling of the sublime arose from a fault in perception; where the mind was unable to grasp something in its entirety. Kant framed the sublime as a philosophy of boundaries: "What is sublime, in the proper meaning of the term, cannot be contained in any sensible form but concerns only ideas of reason, which, though they cannot be exhibited adequately, are aroused and called to mind by this very inadequacy, which can be exhibited in sensibility." ³

² Part I, Section VII, for first quote. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15043/15043-h/15043-h.htm>
Edmund Burke. 2014

³ Immanuel Kant *Critique of Judgement*, trans. By Werner S. Pluhar, Indianapolis, 1987, p 99.

Kant's ideas about the sublime were deeply rooted in a spiritual view of the "omnipotence" of nature. However, his argument had a decidedly humanist component as well. He writes, "Sublime is what even to be able to think proves that the mind has a power surpassing any standard of sense."⁴ Kant is proposing that though an individual or their own work could never hope to equal the grandeur of nature, the mind of an individual enabled one to, "assert independence of natural influence."⁵ That is to say that one could assert their superiority to the natural world as something outside of it. This view championed the power of human intellect and imagination. He speaks further of the ability of an encounter with the sublime to expand one's imagination and the simultaneously terrifying and pleasurable experience that occurs as a result:

The feeling of the sublime is, therefore, at once a feeling of displeasure, arising from the inadequacy of imagination in the aesthetic estimation of magnitude to attain to its estimation by reason, and a simultaneously awakened pleasure, arising from this very judgment of the inadequacy of the greatest faculty of sense being in accord with ideas and reason, so far as the effort to attain to these is for us law.⁶

A strong response arose to the ideas of Burke and Kant in the form of poetry and painting, which is tied directly to the movement of Romanticism and the notion of the Void. The work of Thomas Cole, JMW Turner, and Caspar David Friedrich are now seen as at least direct outcomes of the ideas presented in the previous century and they are now seen as precursors to abstract paintings such as those of Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman as well as pre-cinematic visualization.⁷

⁴ Ibid p.106

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid p.113

⁷See Figures 1, 3, and 4

The Sublime Void

As with the concept of the sublime, the history of Void is a long and complex one. Various cultures throughout time have had a wide variety of ideas concerning the Void, and many have rejected the concept altogether. Some of the greatest philosophers have spent countless years suffering over the concept. It has been examined and complicated through math, religion, and physics. It has, in the past, referred a primordial moment in time, one preceding the existence of all matter, and in other contexts it is referred to as a state of mind, one that may or may not be linked to the idea of a larger physical plane of existence.

Eastern religions often believed in a divine ground or spiritual plane of existence and enlightenment out of which creation spawned or was held within. This Void is called the Dharmakaya in Buddhism, Tao in Taoism, and Brahman in Hinduism. Interpretations of the concept of the Void differ between the three religions and also within each religion. Tibetan Buddhist philosophy alone has sixteen types of greater or lesser voids.⁸ Within these traditions the Void believed to exist as both a physical dimension and as a state of mind. Meditation practices, including painting, served as exercises to attain these states of consciousness. The paintings themselves are often quite empty and are created using a limited amount of subtle marks.⁹ What is vital about these paintings is that they were not exactly representation of the “true Void,” as it would not be possible to represent. Instead they were representations of landscapes done in a way that both illustrated the idea that the Void permeated all of reality and, through their creation, allowed the artists to achieve a state of meditation that would enter or mirror the Void in its emptiness.

⁸ Levy, Mark. *Void -- in Art*. North Bergen, NJ: Bramble Books, 2006. p. 7

⁹ See Figure 2

Early scholars of Christianity debated about the properties of the Void, about the religious implications of the potential existence of nothing. It was eventually decided that God created the world *ex nihilo*, out of nothing.¹⁰ After this revelation, a strong fascination with this infinite nothingness developed among writers, artists, and mystics. For most of history following, Western ideas of the Void differed from Eastern concepts. In the East, God is a formless field that permeates everything thus making the Void full. In the West, God is often confined to the form of a man, leaving the Void empty.¹¹ More importantly, throughout the later history of Judeo-Christian art, the Void was believed to hold opposing qualities to God. Artists such as Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio and Francisco de Zurbarán associated the Void, the darkness, as being the place of death, of despair, and of evil.

The Romantic painters rejected many of the dogmas of Christianity. Their conception of God was much more in line with Eastern beliefs. Their paintings reflect this similarity as well. Painters such as Caspar David Friedrich and J.M.W Turner created vast landscapes devoid of iconography. They focused on the awe and wonder imbued in man by nature. They sought to understand the sublime as it was described by poets and philosophers of the time, and they took upon the challenge offered up by Burke and Kant to capture it in an image, to create a representation that could hold some of the power as the true experience. To achieve this level of sublimity, many of them found themselves interested in a more primitive form of nature, some of them even depicting scenes potentially from the first days of creation. One critic described Turner's paintings as follows:

We here allude particularly to Turner, the ablest landscape painter now living, whose pictures are however too much abstraction or aerial perspective, and representing not properly the objects of nature as the medium to which they were seen. They are a

¹⁰ Ibid p.67

¹¹ Ibid p.1

triumph of the knowledge of the artist and of the power of the barrenness of the subject. They are pictures of the elements of air, earth and water. The artist delights to go back to the first chaos of the world, or to the state of things when the water were separated from dry land, and the light from darkness, but as yet no living thing nor tree bearing fruit was seen on the face of the earth. All is without form and void. Someone said of his landscapes that they were pictures of nothing and the very like.¹²

In the 20th century, Modernist painters gained access to increasingly popular art and philosophy from the East. Artists such as Yves Klein and Ad Reinhardt created work that explored the Eastern concept of the Void. Other abstract painters of the same time period, such as Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko, continued the Romantic tradition of painting, taking the concept of the Void away from any metaphysical belief system.¹³ Both of these approaches to the Void melded together in the arena of abstract art, influencing the current generation of artists with a much more complex idea of the Void.

The idea of the sublime was resurrected and brought into the forefront of the conversation of art by artist and writer Barnett Newman. His 1948 essay *The Sublime is Now* suggested that the whole of modern art was a movement away from the focus on beauty to an interest in the sublime, and that he and some fellow American painters had finally achieved this transition. He also spoke of the potential paradox that some may raise of art such as his that seeks to achieve the sublime in a such a secular time. Anticipating such a response he writes,

¹² Gowing, Lawrence. *Turner: Imagination and Reality*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966. p. 13

¹³ See Figures 3 and 4

We do not need the obsolete props of an outmoded and antiquated legend... The image we produce is the self-evident one of revelation, real and concrete, that can be understood by anyone who will look at it without the nostalgic glasses of history.¹⁴

Two prominent American critics substantiated and built upon Newman's views in the years after him. In his 1961 Essay from ARTnews, *The Abstract Sublime*, Robert Rosenblum declared that the painters Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still, and Jackson Pollock were continuing the tradition of the Romantic's interest and search for the sublime. He says, "Indeed, a quartet of the largest canvases by Newman, Still, Rothko, and Pollock might well be interpreted as a post-World War-II myth of Genesis."¹⁵

In his *Presenting the Unrepresentable: The Sublime* in 1982 and his 1984 follow up essay, *The Sublime and the Avant-Garde*, Jean-Francois Lyotard focuses primarily on the work on Newman. Of Newman's work, Lyotard theorizes the sublime as a modernist idea that was being realized in a postmodern landscape. The importance of the postmodern sublime, Lyotard says, was the "here-and-now" quality of the sublime it achieved. He writes, "When (Newman) seeks the sublimity of the here-and-now he breaks with the eloquence of Romantic art but he does not reject its fundamental task, that of bearing pictorial witness to the inexpressible,"¹⁶ Newman's paintings, along with some of his counterparts, presented a different form of the Void than those of Chinese landscape paintings and the Romantics. While other artists of the time such as Yves Klein and Ad Reinhardt were rediscovering the Void of Eastern tradition, Newman was suggesting that the Void could be separated away from metaphysics entirely. Though the titles of his paintings made reference to various

¹⁴ Newman, Barnett. *The Sublime is Now*, Tigers Eye 1948

¹⁵ Rosenblum, Robert. *The Abstract Sublime*, ARTnews, vol. 59, no.10 (February 1961)

¹⁶ Lyotard Jean-Francois. *L'inhumain: Causeries sur le temps* (Paris: Editions Galilee, 1988); trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991) 89-107. First published in Artforum (April, 1984)

religious and mystic concepts, Newman himself was pointing to a new more existential Void, one left in the wake of an increasingly secular and modernized society.

The Technological Sublime

Author David Nye points to an evolution towards a technological sublime during turn of the century in his book, *American Technological Sublime*. He posits that the sublime had entered the lives of those who had settled and where exploring and transforming America into a country. He suggests the building of bridges and the farming of land had become a new form of the sublime.¹⁷ In this increasingly secular time, the divinity of nature was being replaced by the power of man's technology and Manifest Destiny. Nye writes of this time as, "an expansion of human power and yet simultaneously evoking the sense of individual insignificance and powerlessness."¹⁸ This idea of the technological sublime is now a part of how landscape painting from that time, which itself often illustrated colonization, agriculture, and man warring with the elements is discussed. These ideas have also become prevalent in contemporary conversation about digital technologies.

Artist and a theorist, Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, a prominent figure in the contemporary discussion on the sublime, has written much on the topic. In his book, *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime*, he builds upon the ideas about the technological sublime of David Nye and the ideas about postmodern sublime of Lyotard. As he puts it, "the limitlessness of that once found in nature gives way, in technology, to a limitlessness produced out of an idea which is not interested in being an idea of nature, but one which replaces the idea of nature."¹⁹

¹⁷ Friedrich Schiller, in his 1793 book *On the Sublime*, made very similar statements about the sublime entering daily life through agriculture and construction.

¹⁸ Nye, David *American Technological Sublime*, Boston 1996

¹⁹ Gilbert-Rolfe, Jeremy *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime* (New York: Allworth Press, 1999) p.67

Of this technological sublime, he states that it is, “about a present rather than a potentiality.”²⁰ Gilbert-Rolfe’s description of the technological sublime begins to point to more than just the power of man to alter his landscape, it starts alluding to the potential psychological effects that result from living in such a technological landscape. Others have applied these notions of the technological sublime on many works of science fiction, such as *Blade Runner*, *The Matrix*, and *Ghost in the Shell*.

Science Fiction and the Sublime

In his essay, *The Artificial Infinite: On Special Effects and the Sublime*, Scott Bukatman offers perhaps the best investigation into the sublime in science fiction films. Bukatman's focus is primarily on the special effect sequences created by Douglas Trumbull, and how those sequences that he played some part in making, often times embody ideas of the sublime that would fall in line with those of Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant.²¹ Also of notable interest, is his focus on the technological sublime.

Expounding upon Nye’s ideas of the technological sublime, Bukatman goes through some of the history of the discussion of optics, how we cognize visual input, and how the rise of technology, notably the advent of rail travel, has had an effect on the human experience of vision and spatial understanding. He says of this change: “Representation begins to have less to do with the world “out there” than with the physiological conditions of vision, conditions that can now be simulated. Thus the experience of a three-dimensional image is no longer any guarantor of “reality,” but is more a physiological sleight-of-hand.”²²

²⁰ Ibid, p.68

²¹ See Figure 5

²² Bukatman, Scott. *The Artificial Infinite: On Special Effects and the Sublime*. In *Post-war Cinema and Modernity: A Film Reader*. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2001. 258.

Building on the concepts related to visual cognition in the industrial age by writers such Jonathan Crary and Susan Buck-Morse and applying them to the visual experience of watching a film, he speculates how special effects are perceived by a spectator and how they function within a narrative. Speaking specifically of science fiction films he says, "Science fiction participates in the presentational mode through the prevalence of optical effects that in fact reintegrate the virtual space of the spectacle with the physical space of the theater. Special effects redirect the spectator to the visual (and auditory and even kinesthetic) conditions of the cinema, and thus bring the principles of the perception to the foreground of consciousness."²³ He later concludes that,

The precise function of science fiction, in many ways, is to create the boundless and infinite stuff of the sublime experience, and thus to produce a sense of transcendence beyond human finitudes (true to the form of the sublime, most works produce transcendence of, and acknowledgment of, human limits).²⁴

This quote from Bukatman is key. This attributing of the quality of the sublime to the entire genre serves as an important shift in the understanding of the ways the term can be applied. The first is how special effects (whether used in a painting or a film) function to create or simulate an aesthetic sublime experience. The second relates to the very concepts often found within science fiction, to the narrative events described within them, and ideas they suggest. This is not unlike the original way in which ideas of the sublime were conceived by Longinus, Burke, and Kant. The sublime was first attributed to the written word, and the feelings words or ideas could illicit within a reader or listener. . Up onto his conclusion, Bukatman had focused on the construction of an image, and the way in which the image

²³ Ibid 265.

²⁴ Ibid 267.

could hold qualities of the sublime through its construction. This last quotation suggests a more complicated relationship between the sublime and science fiction.

It is a common belief that science fiction has become our contemporary mythology. Beyond just borrowing from and assimilating many of the themes and motifs found in historical mythologies, science fiction serves the same function mythology has throughout history. Frederick A. Kreuziger describes myth as, “nothing more than a communal story told to help people make sense of their lives,” and adds, “It provides order in the midst of chaos, meaning in the face of absurdity.”²⁵ Through narratives, it helps us understand our place in the universe, in many cases by referencing the general consensuses of the scientific community on a topic. It is a way for us to grapple with the ideas implicit in the technologies we are creating. As Larry McCafferty puts it, “science fiction has become the pre-eminent literary genre of the postmodern era, since it alone has the generic protocols and thesaurus of themes to cope with the drastic transformations that technology has wrought on life in the post-industrial West.”²⁶ Kreuziger too, points out the way in which we increasingly talk about ideas that have long been part of science fiction’s territory of exploration, effectively bringing these ideas into real life, rendering the narratives into myth: “More and more, people are talking of the search for extraterrestrial intelligent life, the exploration of the solar system, the increasing longevity of life, the breakthrough to new systems of energy, and so on--and more often than not in terms and symbols and images long used in stories in science fiction.”²⁷

²⁵ Kreuziger, Frederick A. *The Religion of Science Fiction*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1986. 28

²⁶ McCafferty, Larry from “Postmodernism’s SF/SF’s Postmodernism” *Science Fiction Studies*. #55, Volume 18, Part 3. Web. Nov. 1991 and Istan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. “Postmodernism’s SF Fiction and Postmodernism”. *Fiction Studies*, #55, Volume 18, Part Web. Nov. 1991. <<http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/backissues/55/intro55.html>>

²⁷ Kreuziger 6

In his book, *The Religion of Science Fiction*, Kreuziger lays out an argument for this throughout the rest of the text, drawing several comparisons between works of science fiction and works of apocalyptic literature. He gives a detailed history of the apocalyptic text and how it has functioned throughout history. His main point is that apocalyptic literature, while having a narrative that deals with the future, a coming event, it is, in reality, about the present. As he says in the previous quote, it is about a “disillusionment” of the present. science fiction then is, in a way, about the current failures of science and technology in the same way, to use one of Kreuziger’s examples, the Revelation of St. John was about the disparaged Christians awaiting the return of Christ. Kreuziger clarifies by saying, “What is being said in science fiction, therefore, is not that science and technology are evil and have irremediably failed, but rather that the order they have thus far created has failed to provide what has been promised through them.”²⁸ However, the Revelation of St. John, was equally a message of hope, and so too are the narratives of science fiction.

The promise of science fiction, the hope, is the arrival of what Darko Suvin defines as the science fiction novum, the thing that is different about the world within the narrative.²⁹ While not using the term, Kreuziger still makes the point clear when he says, “...the reign of science and technology is just around the corner. It awaits only the sudden discovery of new sources of power, a cure for crippling and fatal diseases, a development of mental, psychic and telepathic powers, the invention of new modes of transportation, whatever.”³⁰

In his book, *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*, Csicsery-Ronay Jr. lays out what he believes to be the core elements of a science fiction narrative. These seven elements of

²⁸ Ibid 1

²⁹ See Csicsery-Ronay Jr.’s *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*

³⁰ Kreuziger 6

science fiction, the “beauties” of the title, do not all have to be present within a single work, but are the kinds of narrative devices that make science fiction what it is. The seven beauties chosen are: *fictive neology*, the language, slang and jargon of the science fiction world; *fictive novums*, the new thing, the thing that is different in this world than in ours; *future history*, the historic events that differ from our own, be they past, present, or future; *imaginary science*, the abstracted, skewed, or sometimes comic versions or additions to scientific knowledge present in a science fiction world; *science-fictional sublime*, the emotion brought on by something perceived to be incredibly great in scale or power, to the point of brief, often terrifying incomprehension, followed by satisfying realization or, potentially limited but still to a degree, understanding; *science fictional grotesque*, the often uncanny, sometimes sublime, horrors presented in a science fiction narrative, such as monsters, aliens, or other inversions of biology, or a blending of the biological with the non-biological, such as cyborgs, robots, and other forms of artificial life; *the technologiade*, which is the science fiction specific use of pre-existing narrative tropes or archetypes.

In addition to this deconstruction of the genre, Csicsery-Ronay Jr. adds to the discussion of the further implications of science fiction. The author posits that science fiction has become so ingrained into our lives, our politics, our views on the world, and our language that we, mostly unknowingly, live in a state that he calls “science fictionality.” He begins saying, “This widespread normalization of what is essentially a style of estrangement and dislocation has stimulated the development of science-fictional habits of mind, so that we no longer treat science fiction as purely a genre-engine producing formulaic effects, but rather as a kind of awareness we might call science-fictionality, a mode of response that frames and tests experiences as if they were aspects of a work of science fiction.”³¹ This goes beyond the

³¹ Csicsery-Ronay Jr. 2

normalization or inclusion of science fiction jargon into the world. The author clarifies by adding that science fictionality is “neither a belief nor a model, but rather a mood or attitude.”³² This attitude, to use his word, is based on how easily and readily we now view concepts once based in science fiction as realities, or potential realities. It is as he says, “...certain ideas and images of technoscientific transformations of the world can be entertained, and the rational recognition that they may be **realized**, with ramifications for social life.”³³

What beyond the fantastical narrative tropes involved could propel a genre to act as a so called mythology or “religion”? With the newfound interest in the ways that science fiction functions in our postmodern spectacle culture, so too have come inquiries as to what the emotional effects science fiction operate on.

The first published recognition of the sublime within science fiction was in 1973, in the early science fiction studies journal *Riverside Quarterly*. In it, Wayne Connelly mentions a conversation between authors Joanna Russ and William Tenn at a conference, as they describe the way they feel when reading science fiction narratives. They describe themselves as becoming emotionally moved by the stories, and agree on two terms for this emotion: “intellectual” and “excitement”³⁴. Connelly identifies their feeling of mind to be sublime. Both Bart Thurber's *Toward a Technological Sublime* from 1983 and Frances Ferguson's *The Nuclear Sublime* from 1984, while not necessarily being about science fiction, include references Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and can easily be viewed as important precursors to the conversation. Bart Thurber uses the sublime to describe science's confrontation with the

³² Ibid 3

³³ Ibid 4 emphasis from the author

³⁴ Connelly, Wayne. "Science Fiction and the Mundane Egg." *Riverside Quarterly* 5.4 (April 1973): 261

unknown as a revelation of "some of our greatest and most powerful aspirations"³⁵. Ferguson adds less to the conversation, but importantly draws upon the sublime aspects of Shelley's novel as a metaphor for his conception of the "nuclear sublime", a form of the sublime focused on the dissolving of the self, based on the invention of the atomic bomb and the "sublime" threat of human extinction. Cornel Robu's *A Key to Science Fiction: The Sublime* 1988, is the first true work to detail the potential ways in which science fiction could, as a genre, be sublime. His claim is that science, the backbone of the genre, enables representations of the infinite that lead in turn to the Kantian idea of the sublime, or freedom of mind to feel, at first terror, and then pleasure in this infinite.

One of the things that sets *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* apart from some of the other books mentioned is the author's focus on the sublime as one of the key elements of science fiction. He writes: "Of all contemporary genres, science fiction is the one most expected to evoke the experience of the sublime. The subject matter of science fiction necessarily involves the elements of the classical kantian sublime; the sense of temporal and spiritual infinitude of the mathematical, and the sense of overwhelming physical power of the dynamic sublime."³⁶ The author devotes an entire chapter to locating the different forms of the sublime,³⁷ the mathematical, the dynamic, the technological, and the feminine sublimes, within science fiction narratives. He uses many of the same examples others often have such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Kubrick's *2001*, and The Wachowski's *The Matrix*.

While none of the works mentioned draw any explicit connections between the elevated status of science fiction and the fact that it, as a genre of literature, film, television,

³⁵ Thurber, Bart. "Toward a Technological Sublime." *The Intersection of Science Fiction and Philosophy*. Ed. Robert E. Myers. Westport: Greenwood, 1983. 222.

³⁶ Csiery-Ronay Jr. 4

³⁷ These are the four most popular categories of the sublime often discussed. There are now, however, a large number of categorizations of the sublime experience.

and other forms of entertainment, contains, as its emotional grounding, the historically holy, transcendent, and numinous quality of the sublime, I find it to be no great stretch to link the two. Science fiction rose to prominence with modernism, with science itself, and along with modernism and science came an increasingly secular view of the world. Like all previous mythologies, science fiction, offers narratives that dramatize the things we understand and the things we do not and offers possible explanations for them, and, most importantly, that feature within them the emotional elements to inspire, to stir feelings of the sacred, and to offer up the path and the potential for transcendence.

The Sublime in Science Fiction Films

2001: A Space Odyssey marks a pinnacle of cinematic achievement. It is one of the most written about and celebrated films in history. Its non traditional narrative and numerous ambiguities have led to countless interpretations. Its visual effects were, at the time, the most impressive ever seen and required the invention of new technologies and techniques. While many have argued that most or all of Kubrick's films achieve a quality of sublimity, I would argue against the idea that *2001* is his deepest exploration into the sublime. I would go a step further even, and posit that the film marks the epitome of modernist notions of the sublime.

In the third chapter of his famous book from 1970, *Expanded Cinema*, Gene Youngblood analyzes *2001: A Space Odyssey* and compares it to the avante garde and video art that had been gaining popularity during the previous decade. Notable focus is placed on the work of painter and video artist Jordan Belson. While the writer doesn't feel as strongly about the film as others (partially because of its dehumanization of the characters and

partially because of the stargate sequence's overt similarities to Belson's videos) , he does position it as a kind of an illustration of his ideas of a new era in the world. Youngblood posits that that moment in history, the 60's and 70's (and perhaps the time since then as well) was a marker of a new era of mankind, one in which a, "...transformation from the sacred to the secular..."³⁸ was occurring, in which, "...history has ended,"³⁹ and was effectively now "...outside of time."⁴⁰ These ideas were popular sentiments of the time and share noticeable similarities to the words of Barnett Newman, from twenty years earlier. In his essay, *The Sublime is Now*, Newman writes, "The question that now arises is how, if we are living in a time without a legend or mythos that can be called sublime, if we refuse to admit any exaltation in pure relations, if we refuse to live in the abstract, how can we be creating a sublime art?"⁴¹

The monotonous and cold nature of technologies and of the characters routines within them are a primary focus of the film. Long sequences are dedicated solely to depicting these vessels slowly moving through space, or of the mundane, almost machine like, daily activities of the astronauts navigating or working within the spaces. The film has been said to encompass ideas of the technological sublime because of this focus on the all encompassing nature of the technological environment and lifestyle the characters adapt to live within it.

Kubrick focuses on this aspect even further with the way he filmed the movie. The focus on symmetry has often been a focus of the filmmaker, but arguably none of his other films showcase it better than 2001. The symmetrical sets of the film are featured in perfectly symmetrical shots.⁴² Shots featuring both astronauts, Bowman and Poole, will often have

³⁸ Youngblood, Gene. "Towards a Cosmic Consciousness." In *Expanded cinema*. [1st ed. New York: Dutton, 1970. 139.

³⁹ Ibid 146

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Newman

⁴² See Figure 6

them mirrored in posture and actions to keep with the symmetry of a shot. This technological sublime is not only a thematic element of the film, but because of its overwhelming nature, it becomes a phenomenological experience the viewer begins to feel along with the characters.

Douglas Trumbull's detailed work on a film called *To the Moon and Beyond* about spaceflight for the 1964 New York World's Fair attracted the attention of Kubrick and Clarke. His contributions are a huge part of what makes *2001* the spectacle and technological masterpiece it still is. Trumbull's Stargate sequence, the climax of the film, was the result of an experimental technology created just for the film. Although it does look reminiscent of avante garde new media art such as Jordan Belson's video work (as pointed out by Youngblood) and of the light shows that were gaining popularity at the time, it is unique in its process and outcome. This psychedelic sequence, perhaps the film's most popular, is arguably what attracted a vast majority of the film's early supporters, the youth hippie culture. The film initially did poorly with critics but slowly gained popularity among hippies and artists who, again, would have been fans of either avante garde video art and/or light shows.

In this way, the the film embodies the two main trends of modernism almost perfectly. The technological and the psychological ventures of man meet in this film in one sublime psychedelic culmination. The film illustrates an overwhelming optimism about mankind's place in the universe and our potential to be on the brink of a new transcendent step in evolution, all through the glorification of our technological accomplishments. The film shows mankind finally reaching the end goal of modernism's journey's for ultimate truth, for the sublime, and for "the now." Though it is a narrative about mankind's future it is absolutely a personification of the time period. It seems to echo Barnett Newman's proclamations that the search for truth was over, that "the sublime is now," or was at that time.

Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Solaris* (1972) has often been referred to as a kind of response to *2001* even though it was already well into production before Tarkovsky had an opportunity to see Kubrick's film. It is far less reliant on special effects and more invested in its characters than its set pieces. Still however, it could be argued to hold characteristics of the sublime.

One way to directly contrast *Solaris* with *2001* is through its adaptation. The novel by Stanisław Lem shares many more similarities to Kubrick's film and Clarke's novel. Like *2001*, it is about the ultimate inadequacy of communication between humans and other species and about imagining an alien species as something more than just "little green men." Tarkovsky's adaptation is a "drama of grief and partial recovery" concentrated on the thoughts and the lives of the cosmonaut scientists studying Solaris' mysterious ocean. With the complex and slow-paced narrative of *Solaris*, Tarkovsky wanted to bring a new emotional and intellectual depth to the genre, since he viewed western science fiction as shallow.⁴³

Much of the characters' dialogue can be seen to be directly addressing the idealized, modern aspirations of *2001*. At one point, in the final library scene, the character Snaut says, "We don't know what to do with other worlds. We don't need other worlds. We need a mirror. We struggle for contact, but we'll never find it. We're in the foolish human predicament of striving for a goal that he fears, that he has no need for. Man needs man."⁴⁴ Though it is from the novel, this dialogue could very easily be taken as a summary of Tarkovsky's own thoughts about *2001*'s idealized depictions of modernist concepts. That is to say, that Tarkovsky seemed to view the sublime as being located much more within man and his compassionate nature than in his tendencies toward the technological.

⁴³ Tarkovsky, Andrey. Arsen'evich. *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*, translated by kitty Hunter-Blari, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987.

⁴⁴ *Solaris*. Blu-Ray. Directed by Andrei Arsenevich Tarkovsky. Artificial Eye, 2001.

In his essay, *The Thing from Inner Space*, Slavoj Zizek takes the Lacanian notion that the sublime void as described by Kant is most appropriately an inner void of the human psyche and applies it to Tarkovsky's *Solaris* and *Stalker*. Zizek finds that this idea of the Kantian void may best be illustrated in science fiction films, specifically in the way it often deals with the relationship between the physical, ultimate Void that is space and the mental conditions of man as he encounters it. He writes, "I want to focus on the specific version of this Thing: the Thing as the Space (the sacred/forbidden Zone) in which the gap between the Symbolic and the Real is closed, i.e. in which, to put it somewhat bluntly, our desires are directly materialized (or, to put it in the precise terms of Kant's transcendental idealism, the Zone in which our intuition becomes directly productive - the state of things which, according to Kant, characterizes only infinite divine Reason)."⁴⁵

Solaris, Zizek believes, may be the most appropriate illustration of Lacan's ideas. He writes, "The ultimate variation of this motif of the Id-Machine is arguably Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris*, based on Stanislaw Lem's novel, in which this Thing is also related to the deadlocks of sexual relationship."⁴⁶ The "Thing," as Zizek describes it is the protagonist's wife who had died previously but now, through the "wish granting" like power of the planet *Solaris* has materialized on the space station with him. The planet, it is suggested, has made his inner most desire, the resurrection of his dead wife, a reality. This plot element, central to the narrative, leads the protagonist into a downward psychological spiral of confusion and grief.

With his adaptation of *Stalker*, Tarkovsky again subverts many of the themes of the novel from a conjecture on the way man may one day interact with alien life to an exploration of the human condition. The novel was far more steeped in adventure science fiction tropes. Zizek writes about the difference, "In *Stalker* as well as in *Solaris*, Tarkovsky's "idealist

⁴⁵ Zizek, Slavoj. "The Thing from Inner Space." <http://www.lacan.com/zizekthing.htm>

⁴⁶ Ibid

mystification" is that he shrinks from confronting this radical Otherness of the meaningless Thing, reducing/retranslating the encounter with the Thing to the "inner journey" towards one's Truth."⁴⁷ This is to say that, for the second time, Tarkovsky chose not to focus on the more pulpy spectacles inherent in science fiction and chose, instead, to use the genre as a tool to truly reach "the stuff of the sublime." Tarkovsky's films, *Stalker* in particular, seem to illustrate a society still searching for the unknown, navigating various Zones for answers, and disregarding their potential for inner explorations, their potential to find the unknown or the sublime within.

Using these science fiction films as examples help illustrate two key points. The first is the distinction between the way the sublime is attributed to a narrative and the way it is attributed to an image or series of images. The narrative and the images presented in *2001* are easily described as embodying the sublime. It serves as a particularly strong depiction of the technological sublime, and it begins to suggest some of the angst associated with it. Tarkovsky's films, while cinematically beautiful, are not as interested in sublime spectacle. However, they more directly point to the psychological challenges present in a modernised and technological life. They suggest a need for an exploration of our inner Void over the outer Void, and they complicate the relationship between the two.

The Sublime and The Grotesque

Ideas of the sublime and the grotesque have often been linked in some way. In some cases they have been theorized to be opposites and, in others, it is suggested that they often work in similar ways or operate in tandem. Within the genre of science fiction, the relationship

⁴⁷ Ibid

between ideas of the sublime and the grotesque becomes illustrated and the boundaries separating the two become blurred.

In *La Préface de Cromwell* (1827), Victor Hugo sees the grotesque as somehow both contrary and essentially complementary to the sublime. Though he does not go into detail about their differences or what the relationship between the two may be, he obviously saw them as linked: "...it is out of the fruitful marriage of the grotesque type and the sublime type that modern genius is born."⁴⁸

Several years earlier, Burke privileged the sublime over the beautiful, terror over pleasure. Burke, in the *Enquiry*, does momentarily write of the grotesque when building the borders between obscurity and clearness, sublimity and beauty, pleasantness of pain and pleasantness of pleasure. For Burke, obscurity, a counterpart of infinity, is much more effective than clearness in affecting the imagination: "in nature dark, confused, uncertain images have a greater power on the fancy to form the grander passions than those have which are more clear and determinate. Hardly any thing can strike the mind with its greatness, which does not make some sort of approach towards infinity; which nothing can do whilst we are able to perceive its bounds; but to see an object distinctly, and to perceive its bounds, is one and the same thing. A clear idea is therefore another name for a little idea".⁴⁹

Kant too focused on the idea of the boundless: "The sublime can also be found in a formless object, insofar as we present unboundedness, either [as] in the object or because the object prompts us to present it, while yet we add to this unboundedness the thought of its totality"⁵⁰. Kant's idea of the "Unform" could easily be understood as a grotesque body or

⁴⁸ 70

⁴⁹ Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Ed. Adam Phillips. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990.

⁵⁰ Pillow, Kirk. *Sublime Understanding: Aesthetic Reflection in Kant and Hegel*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000. 69

object that constantly and perpetually “outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits,”⁵¹. While not mentioning the grotesque, Kants delineation between the mathematical sublime and the dynamic sublime creates areas for interpretation that could be applied to the grotesque. Kant’s idea of the mathematical sublime extends the mind into the universe and evokes the ordered, underlying laws of nature while the dynamic sublime is more akin to Burke’s terror inducing products of nature.

As previously stated, Burke and Kant were two of the most popular writers among artists of their time. As with the sublime, one could attribute the entrance of the grotesque into the mainstream of modern expression during the Romantic period to them. One of the first ways these ideas begin to become expressed is through stories and depictions of exploration of the unknown regions of the world, of the boundaries of what was geographically known. Many of the examples Burke lists as potential scenes of the sublime, such as the ocean, the desert, and the arctic tundra became popular tropes for Romantic painters and for fantastic literature. These external locations hold many of the qualities of the external voids of Romantic art and of Chinese landscape paintings

The fascination with these vast expanses of nature brought with it tales of the potential inhabitants of these exotic landscapes. Early representations and stories involving the ocean often include fantastical creatures that inhabited the unknown depths, often times giant versions of known animals such as jellyfish, squid, sea serpents and turtles.⁵² The landscape (the mathematical sublime or the sublime Void) and the monster (the dynamic sublime or the grotesque) shared a correlation or causal relationship in terms of scale, and it was often the case that the sheer distance from land too played a role in determining the size of the creature.

⁵¹ Ibid

⁵² See figure 7

Throughout the years, the seas were exhaustively navigated and thus lost part of their mystique. By the nineteenth century, the last remaining ends of the world became the poles. Just as sailing before it, voyages to arctic regions became increasingly popular and were written about more and more within fiction. The discover of inuit tribes surviving in the cold desolate regions of the world prompted the belief of many that somewhere within the frozen deserts had to kinds of oases; often these were thought to be tropical or primitive, Edenesque.⁵³ These tales of lost worlds became, and to this day remain, a prominent sub genre within spectacular fiction.

In the same way the imagined creatures of the ocean represented the formless qualities of the water themselves, with their shifting biologies, their glistening, sometimes transparent skin, and their sheer magnitude, so too did the creatures of the arctic. The relationship between the mathematical sublime and the dynamic sublime are ever more linked. Monsters living in the cold terrains of the arctic were often themselves made of snow or ice, and almost always white, obscured into the landscape. The first scene of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, for example, features the monster, appearing as a giant, being spotted by a group of men exploring the North Pole:

About two o'clock the mist cleared away, and we beheld, stretched out in every direction, vast and irregular plains of ice, which seemed to have no end. Some of my comrades groaned, and my own mind began to grow watchful with anxious thoughts, when a strange sight suddenly attracted our attention, and diverted our solicitude from our own situation. We perceived a low carriage, fixed on a sledge and drawn by dogs, pass on towards the north, at the distance of half a mile: a being which had the shape

⁵³ See Eiss, Harry Edwin. *Electric Sheep Slouching towards Bethlehem: Speculative Fiction in a Post Modern World*. Newcastle Upon Tyne : Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014.

of a man, but apparently of gigantic stature, sat in the sledge, and guided the dogs. We watched the rapid progress of the traveller with our telescopes, until he was lost among the distant inequalities of the ice.⁵⁴

More recent writers have largely expounded upon the ideas of Burke and Kant. In *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*, Csicsery-Ronay Jr. lays out what he believes to be the core elements of a science fiction narrative. Among those are what he calls the technoscientific sublime and the technoscientific grotesque. He sees the two as linked, stating: “ the technoscientific grotesque is the inversion, and sometimes frequent concomitant, of the techno sublime.”⁵⁵

As described in the earlier section, the author is not the first to present the idea that the sublime is integral to the genre of science fiction, he is notable for attempting to illustrate the relationship between the sublime and the grotesque. Though he never seems to fully grasp just exactly the relationship is, and maybe the relationship differs between examples, he lays out clear ways in which they are linked. In contrasting the two he says:

Where the techno sublime is extensive, inducing sentiments of awe and dread in response to phenomena either created or revealed by human techniques, the grotesque is implosive, accompanied by fascination and horror at the prospect of intimate category-violating phenomena discovered by human science... The sublime has to do with the mind reflecting on its power, or lack of it, to understand the totality of the world, which of course includes the mind itself. The grotesque has to do with the struggle to accommodate mutable, unstable objects and beings in the world.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Maurice Hindle. *Frankenstein, Or, The Modern Prometheus*. London: Penguin Books, 2003. 4

⁵⁵ Csicsery-Ronay, Istvan. *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2008. Print. 7

⁵⁶ *Ibid* 7 and 182

After spending much effort expressing how the two characteristics are opposites in their affects and their characteristics, he suggests that, in fact their relationship is more complicated, describing a relationship that coincides more with the relationship between monster and landscape:

The grotesque brings the sublime to earth, making it material and on our level, forcing attention back to the body. It traps the sublime in the body, partly to subvert it, but also because science fiction's fictive ontology requires this duality, manifest as oxymoron at the level of ideas, metamorphosis at the level of bodies, and surprising incongruities in storytelling.⁵⁷

This relationship is closer tied to the way relationship between the mathematical and the dynamic sublimes were thought to operate. It is also familiar to the way Bart Thurber, in his essay, *Towards a Technological Sublime* (1983), says of Frankenstein, that, "The monster is the sublime personified."⁵⁸ Often in the case of science fiction the grotesque animates the inanimate Void, as in the way Frankenstein's necromancy brings his monster from nothingness; the grotesque is of the sublime. True science fiction, which is debated to begin with either Shelley's work or with those of H.G. Welles and Jules Verne, has given us another version of the monster, one that perhaps more than the sea serpent or the ice giant, illustrates the relationship between monster and landscape, dynamic and mathematical, sublime void and grotesque embodiment. This relationship between the Void and the monster recalls the way in which Zizek described Tarkovsky's films, as bringing "The Thing" from out of inner space, the inner Void, out into the real, the outer Void.

⁵⁷ Ibid 182

⁵⁸ In Myers, Robert E. *The Intersection of Science Fiction and Philosophy: Critical Studies*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1983. Print. 216

The alien is a paradoxical being whose appearance is understood by the laws of cognition (mathematical, sublime) but whose actual existence is not so easily assimilated (dynamical, grotesque). Just as the sea monster appeared to travelers of the ocean and Frankenstein's monster or a yeti was said to have been seen by those exploring frozen wastelands, in the twentieth century the UFO appeared increasingly in the sky.⁵⁹ With the invention of air travel, the UFO sighting came to the forefront of popular myth within myth and fiction. Soon after, the explorer of the ocean and the icecaps was replaced by the astronaut. Where Frankenstein's monster was the uncanny inversion of the human figure, the UFO became the reflection of spacecraft.

While the inhabitants of the UFOs, aliens first appeared as both uncanny and grotesque, often taking the guise of "little green men" or men of metal, almost always humanoid, they became, and continue to become, increasingly grotesque in their portrayal. Recent portrayals of alien beings emphasise the grotesque: the boundless, interstitial, and often metamorphic qualities of their biology; popular examples of which include *The Blob* (1958), *The Thing* (1982), and *Alien* (1979), along with their various source materials, sequels, remakes, and other spawned media. In many cases these creatures take several forms throughout a narrative, often blurring the boundary between plant, animal, human, and alien.⁶⁰

In *Modern Art and the Grotesque* (2003), Frances S. Connelly emphasizes the necessity of this state of flux, describing the grotesque as:

⁵⁹ Interestingly, a large trope in science fiction shows a link between alien life and the antarctic. Aliens are often shown to inhabit the icy tundra, often explained by the cold being more suitable to their biology. See Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness*, versions of *The Thing*, or *The Blob* films.

⁶⁰ See Figure 8 In the case of the xenomorphs from Ridley Scott's *Alien*, the creatures alter their landscape, terraforming it into a terrain that mimics their own physiology, aiding their ability to camouflage themselves.

...a body in the act of becoming ... never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body. The grotesque is defined by what it does to boundaries, transgressing, merging, overflowing, destabilizing them. Put more bluntly, the grotesque is a boundary creature and does not exist except in relation to a boundary, convention, or expectation.⁶¹

Connelly's words plainly restate those of Csicsery-Ronay Jr., showing that his ideas apply to the larger conversation of the grotesque, and not purely to the "technoscientific grotesque." Connelly too, adds his own brief ideas on the contrasting and correlating nature of the sublime and the grotesque: "The boundlessness of the sublime, dynamical or numerical, overwhelms reason and exceeds its powers to contain and define. The grotesque, by contrast, is in constant struggle with boundaries of the known, the conventional, the understood."⁶²

The Artificial Infinite

Through the narratives that fiction provide us, we learn that man, in addition to nature, abhors a vacuum. When presented with a true Void, be it the darkness or our bedroom closet or with the ultimate void of the empty cosmos, we fill it with ghouls from our inner Void, our psyche. This idea applies to our concepts of mortality. We have historically filled the Void created by our lack understanding and our fear of the unknown that follows death with

⁶¹ Connelly, Frances S. *Modern Art and the Grotesque*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2003. Print.6

⁶² Ibid

mythical ideas of an afterlife, one often populated with deities and devils. We externalize our demons in the Void, suggesting a link between the two.

My early graduate work featured pieces that are illustrative of kinds of exterior space, external Voids. This space is, at times, cosmic, depicting what appears to be nebula, stars, and black holes, and, at other times, microcosmic, depicting small scale chemical reactions, potential microbiology, or organic chemistry. This oscillation between micro and macro is one of the oldest and prevalent aspects of my work. This blurring the boundaries between the infinite and the infinitesimal prevents the paintings from falling solely in the realm of representation. They do not illustrate a particular thing or scene; they point to representations while remaining abstract, something still in the act of becoming, boundless and and void.

A new kind of painting has become a dominant part of my work. These paintings grew out of the Void paintings, both conceptually and physically. These pieces began in response to similar ideas as the Void paintings. I was exploring the concept of nothingness being not at all what philosophers throughout time believed it to be, being a kind of seedbed of creation, fitting with the Judeo Christian concept of *ex nihilo*, creation from nothing.

My idea was to illustrate this idea with texture, to play with the current unknowns of science, such as dark matter, dark energy, and black holes, to explore their potential for metaphor. This lead to experiments with spray foam and plaster. I was attempting to imbue a monochrome black painting with energy, portray a color field bubbling with potential. Soon the paintings became thicker and more bodily. This sculptural quality of the work added to the idea of boundlessness. The imagery within the paintings had now come to burst out of the picture plane, out of illusionistic space, and into the realm of the viewer.

The sometimes static, other times dynamic compositions within these paintings point to a substance not limited to a single characteristic. It is always in flux, always in the act of

becoming. At times there are violent shifts, storms, explosions, and implosions, and, at other times there are representations of a brief still, a calm of the storm, with the explosive act of creation still building towards the surface.

The sculptural qualities of these paintings and the way they are painted begin to emulate or evoke special effects from science fiction films. This quality is increasingly being emphasized through the incorporation of objects such as wire, computer parts, and electronics into the spray foam. The wire and computer parts add a cyborg like quality to the fleshy texture of the painting. The sometimes neon colored wire or motherboards point to typical depictions of future technology. Additionally, the wire functions like thin drawn marks in the painting's composition.

This relationship between body and landscape helps illustrate relationship between the sublime and the grotesque described in my research on science fiction. As I have detailed, the two concepts, the sublime, specifically the dynamic sublime first described by Edmund Burke, examples of which included views of waves crashing upon massive rocks or a giant volcano, views that travelers sought out at his time, and the second, the grotesque, an image of something bodily in origin but exaggerated to disturbing degrees, have been proven by theorists to be linked.

In addition to the history of speculative fiction showing that the grotesque monster often spawns from the sublime landscape of adventurers, the two phenomenon work on the same emotional principals. Their affects are strikingly similar to one who studies them. Both phenomena are aesthetic experiences. They both induce terror within the viewer, and they both operate on a kind of boundlessness.

It is my intention to try and isolate this boundlessness with these pieces. To push the notion to new extremes, and even attempt to separate the idea of boundlessness from the

body, to blur the line between body and landscape, flesh and geography. This blurring of the body and the landscape also points to a conflation between two kinds of Voids, one external and one internal. The paintings of Caspar David Friedrich were said to do the same. He said once that, "A painter should not merely paint what he sees in front of him, he ought to paint what he sees in himself"⁶³. To be sure, the externalized and the internalized infinite come together in Friedrich's vast, relatively empty landscapes.

In some works the two Voids, the inner Void of the mind and its unknown recesses and the outer Void of empty space and cosmic processes, are joined by a third void, one of the digital. In a recent lecture Anish Kapoor alluded to this new digital void:

If the Modernist adventure is, a la Brancusi, a kind of phallic form, the rocket, onward and upward, it seems to me the modern adventure, the one that is now and present, that acknowledges a post Freudian reality, that deals somehow or attempts to deal somehow with the back of the cave, the internet. Its form that's involuted. Its form that's inside out. Or it's in the process of turning itself inside out. They say the universe is that shape. I hope they're right.⁶⁴

Kapoor's quote identifies both the outer and the inner voids, but (briefly) mentions this new void, the internet. This third Void points to the concept of the Technological Sublime.

In many of the pieces, such as *The Colour Out of Space* and *Novum*, computer parts have been imbedded into the spray foam and paint.⁶⁵ These components serve as a reference to this third Void. The other two Voids point to unknowns or potential unknowables. The first void, the external Void, is the unknown of the cosmos. It contains physical phenomenon or properties of our universe that we do not or cannot understand. It may or may

⁶³ Levy, Mark. *Void -- in Art*. North Bergen, NJ: Bramble Books, 2006. 15

⁶⁴ From his 2012 Ann Lewis AO Contemporary Visual Arts International Address at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Mt3fGklf4A>

⁶⁵ See Figures 9-11

not have boundaries that we can see or penetrate. The second Void, the inner Void, is the unknown of the mind. It describes our current lack of understanding of the physical processes of the brain and the sensation of consciousness. The third Void is that of the digital. Its unknowns include the unknowable ways in which technological advancements will alter what it means to be human in the near and far futures. It also includes the “inside out” form of the seemingly infinite digital internet landscape and its countless networks.

In a piece such as *The Colour Out of Space* the thick, black fleshy material of the spray foam is joined by small pieces of computer motherboards and other computer components. These machine made parts are embedded into the foam, and appear as if they are either becoming overtaken by the living material of the foam or that perhaps the foam sections are tearing apart, revealing the artificial interior held within. The components of the computer here reference, in part, this third Void, and in other ways, reference the potential of transhumanism, the future meshing of biology and technology, the science fiction cyborg.

The Color Out of Space borrows its title from a H.P. Lovecraft short story in which a meteorite lands in a small farm and by some form of magic or biology, begins terraforming the farmland into a grotesque alien landscape. The story is a perfect representation of Lovecraft’s work, equally a horror tale as much as it is a science fiction story. It is far more existential than sublime. Perhaps no other author’s work is a better representation of the link between the sublime and the grotesque than Lovecraft. Take for example, the opening of the story:

It was just a colour out of space—a frightful messenger from unformed realms of infinity beyond all Nature as we know it; from realms whose mere existence stuns the brain and numbs us with the black extra-cosmic gulfs it throws open before our frenzied eyes.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Lovecraft, H. P. *The Colour out of Space*. New York: Lancer Books, 1969. 7

Because of its scale, the spray foam in this piece is equally bodily as it is a kind of topographical landscape. When the reading of this texture is shifted from body to landscape, and it does oscillate, then the motherboards and computer components become architecture, a kind of man made industrial playground battling against the oozing landscape bound to consume it. As in the story the piece takes its title from, there is a representation of a kind of change occurring. However, it is unclear if the change is a kind the terraforming of a landscape or the metamorphosis of a body. This push and pull between the sublime and the grotesque fully achieved within *The Colour out of Space*.

In my piece *Becoming Nothing*, I explored this concept further. The installation was composed of a small room where the floor, ceiling, and walls were covered in black plastic tarp. Projected into the room was a video of my own creation. The video was of altered television static. I have found the image of television static to be an amazing visual metaphor for both the infinite and the infinitesimal. The tiny black and white dot mosaic is very reminiscent a scientific illustration of the universe on the largest scale, with each dot representing a galaxy, and at the same time, illustrates, in some ways, the way atoms and subatomic particles are depicted. It is of little coincidence then, that part of the static being displayed on televisions is actually created by cosmic background radiation, the result of the big bang. As Jim Holt remarks, "What greater proof of the reality of the Big Bang-- you can watch it on TV."⁶⁷

This interest in the digital Void began early in my graduate experience. While creating paintings on plexi glass and trying to backlight them, I decided to paint directly on television screens. Using broken television screens that still emitted light as found lightboxes led to a fascination with the screen itself. I found myself more interested in the aesthetic moments

⁶⁷ Holt, Jim. *Why Does the World Exist?: An Existential Detective Story*. New York: Liveright Pub., 2012. 26

created through the fracturing and puncturing of a plasma screen or through the corruption of an led screen, creating dead pixels and neon lines down a screen. These randomly created eruptions of color and complexity were reminiscent of my own work, which is no surprise after reading Harold Rosenberg's famous comparison of early abstract art and television test patterns.

Becoming Nothing was my first true installation work and my first video piece. It was also the first piece I created that contains content directly from a work of science fiction. Other pieces allude to certain stories through titling, but *Becoming Nothing*, contained actual audio from the film, *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1958). The audio, though altered, is still recognizable as the closing monologue of the film. In the film the protagonist, Scott, has shrunk down to the size of an insect, and, while contemplating his surroundings and his present state of being, he comes to powerful and complex conclusions about the physical universe and man's potential role within it. It is as follows:

I was continuing to shrink, to become... what? The infinitesimal? What was I? Still a human being? Or was I the man of the future? If there were other bursts of radiation, other clouds drifting across seas and continents, would other beings follow me into this vast new world? So close - the infinitesimal and the infinite. But suddenly, I knew they were really the two ends of the same concept. The unbelievably small and the unbelievably vast eventually meet - like the closing of a gigantic circle. I looked up, as if somehow I would grasp the heavens. The universe, worlds beyond number, God's silver tapestry spread across the night. And in that moment, I knew the answer to the riddle of the infinite. I had thought in terms of man's own limited dimension. I had presumed upon nature. That existence begins and ends in man's conception, not nature's.

And I felt my body dwindling, melting, becoming nothing. My fears melted away. And in their place came acceptance. All this vast majesty of creation, it had to mean something. And then I meant something, too. Yes, smaller than the smallest, I meant something, too. To God, there is no zero. I still exist!

This scene is famous as it stands as a uncharacteristically melancholy ending for a science fiction film of that period. Its existence as the film's ending is credited to the screenwriter, Richard Matheson, who also wrote the novel the film adapts.

The monologue, taken out of its original context, has been elevated. While its original form, it still held powerful emotional resonance, but now, removed from the narrative of the film, disembodied in the space of an installation, it becomes more ambiguous, drawing upon exterior references. The idea of “becoming nothing” calls to mind the ego death that was the goal of many of the early abstract painters interested in the Void. I am reminded of Kazimir Malevich's statement in which he said he accomplish, “breaking away from the earthly sphere” (Douglas 1994, 276) by “transforming himself into a zero” (Malevich 1969, 119). In this monologue, and now in this piece, it is suggested that zero “does not exist” and that existence, with its extremes in scale, acts like a kind of loop. This proposed link between the microcosm and the macrocosm, the finite and the infinite are vital to this body of work, so the monologue seems an obviously seamless and beneficial addition. The fact that the audio is lifted from a recognisable science fiction film serves to further tie the body of work as a whole to the genre.

Unified Field is the newest piece in the *Artificial Infinite* series and serves in many ways as a distillation of that series. To begin with, the piece is 8'x12', the largest piece of its kind to date. Because of its size, it is the most qualified to evoke notions of the sublime. Its

size however, is not the only qualifier for the sublime; its scale too, is worthy of the affect. The sheer amount of detail contained within the frame of the work causes a mind numbing effect.

The composition of the piece implies a kind of one point perspective, a tunneling inward, a kind of black hole. However, as much as the piece is tunneling in, it too is boiling and bursting out into the space of the viewer. This push and pull adds to the difficulty in classifying the object. The size of the piece along with its complexity render it less an object and more a visual field, when viewed at short distance. The composition takes up the entirety of the viewers periphery, enveloping them in the experience.

While the piece remains black, it is now less composed by variations in chroma and more composed with variations in finish. The center, most “inward” area, of the piece is starkly matt black, and moving out towards the edges it gradiates to increasingly radiant, slick gloss. This adds to the bubbling aliveness of the areas coming “outward” towards the viewer. Replacing the computer parts and multicolored wires of previous pieces in the series is a coating of iridescent spray paint. This paint, uses primarily for painting cars, gives the piece an artificial quality that even the actual embedding of machined parts could not. The sometimes purple-black, sometimes greenish black oilspill finish of the protrusions give them more than a fresh, newly formed quality; it adds to the ambiguity of the kind of representation the form is. Added to the ambiguity of body and landscape, flesh and terrain, external void and creature, is this evocation of the digital, of the computer rendered. This simple painting technique gives the forms an uncanny resemblance to the forms scene in a computer game or an early science fiction film. They point, in a way, to the the third Void discussed earlier, a kind of digital or virtual void.

If it is mankind's inclination to project into external Voids machinations of his psyche, is it a stretch that he would not do the same when presented with a new Void, wrapped in the

unknowns of the technological sublime? By bringing into the real a form that mimics and embodies the qualities of forms normally found within a digital environment, it blurs the supposed boundaries between the two. This additional “category violation” helps the work further embody Csicsery-Ronay’s concept of the “technoscientific grotesque.”

Conclusion

One of my primary investigations with this body of work is with the concept of the infinite. Paintings and installations I have created have attempted to conceptually identify with the concept of the infinite through various manipulations of the space the viewer encounters. The term “Artificial Infinite” has been attributed to the way special effects have been used in science fiction films to create, through small models and computer generated effects, illusions of large scale phenomena. This concept has helped me conceptualize the way in which such artificial forms can lead a viewer to contemplate such an unimaginable concept.

This thesis has examined a link between the Void of the external world, be it the awe inspiring landscapes of the Romantics and early explorers, the modern metropolis, or the non terrestrial cosmos, and the internal Void, the unknown recesses of consciousness. It has shown that this link has become embodied in the genre of science fiction, and has been complicated by the way forms are represented in cinema.



Figure 1. Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer*, 1818. Oil on Canvas 3' 1" x 2' 5"



Figure 2. Sesshu, *Landscape*, c, 1500 Japan



Figure 3. Mark Rothko - Chapel 1965 - 1967

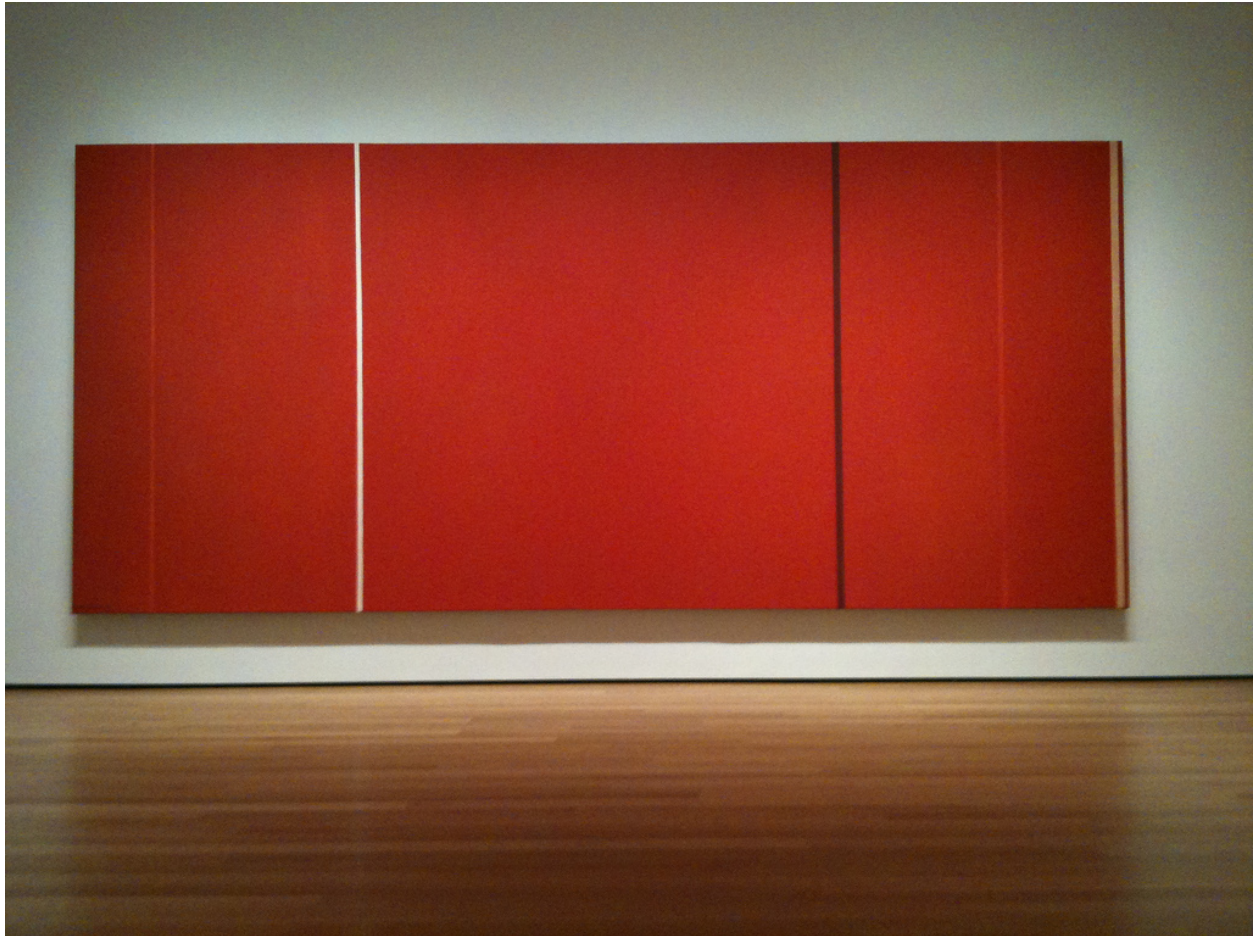


Figure 4. Barnett Newman, *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*. Oil on Canvas 7' 11" x 17' 9"



Figure 5. Scene from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. Director: Steven Spielberg 1977

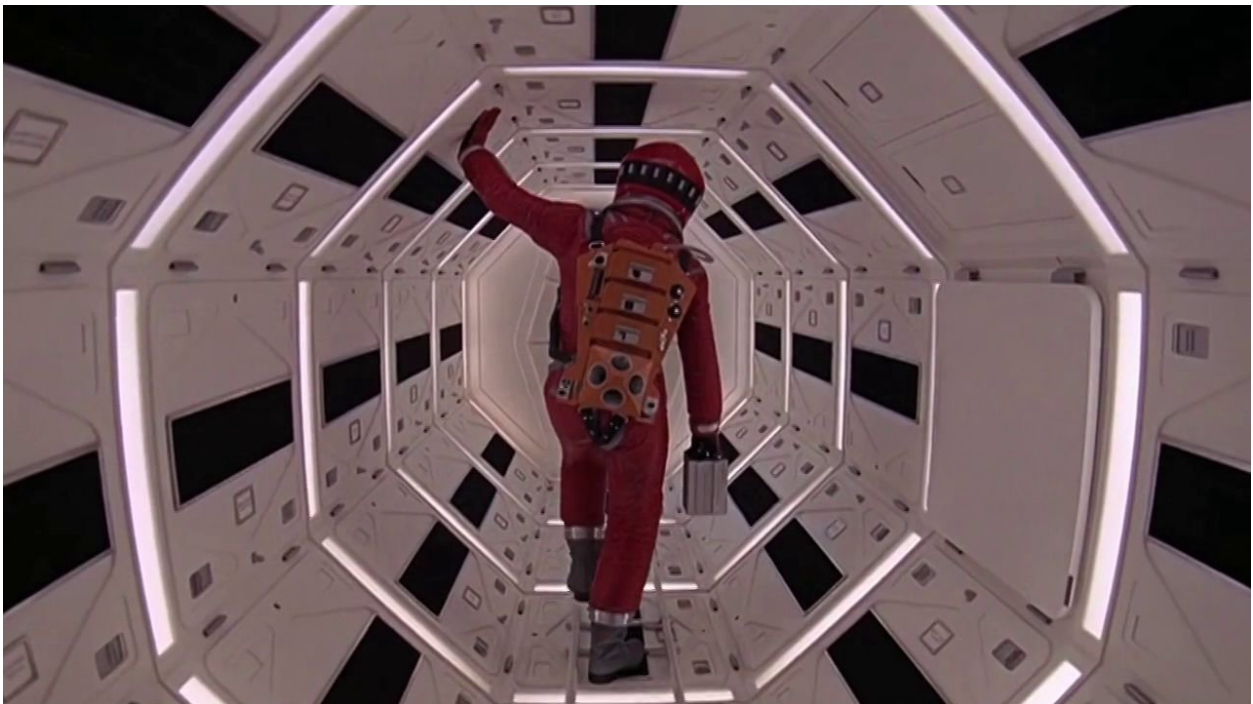


Figure 6. Scene from *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Director: Stanley Kubrick 1968



Figure 7. Gustave Dore, *Leviathan*. 1865. Engraving

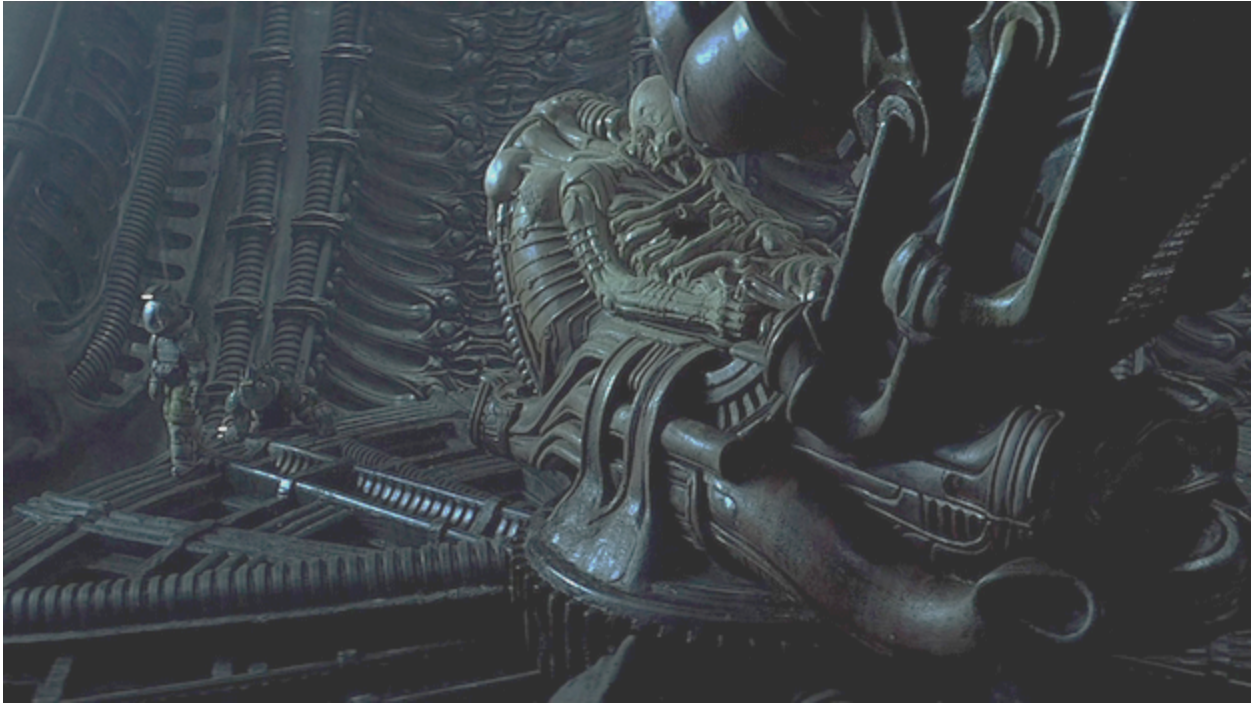


Figure 8. Scene from *Aliens*. Director: James Cameron. 1986



Figure 9. Brandon Daniels *The Colour Out of Space*. 2014. Mixed Media on Board 6'x6'x4"

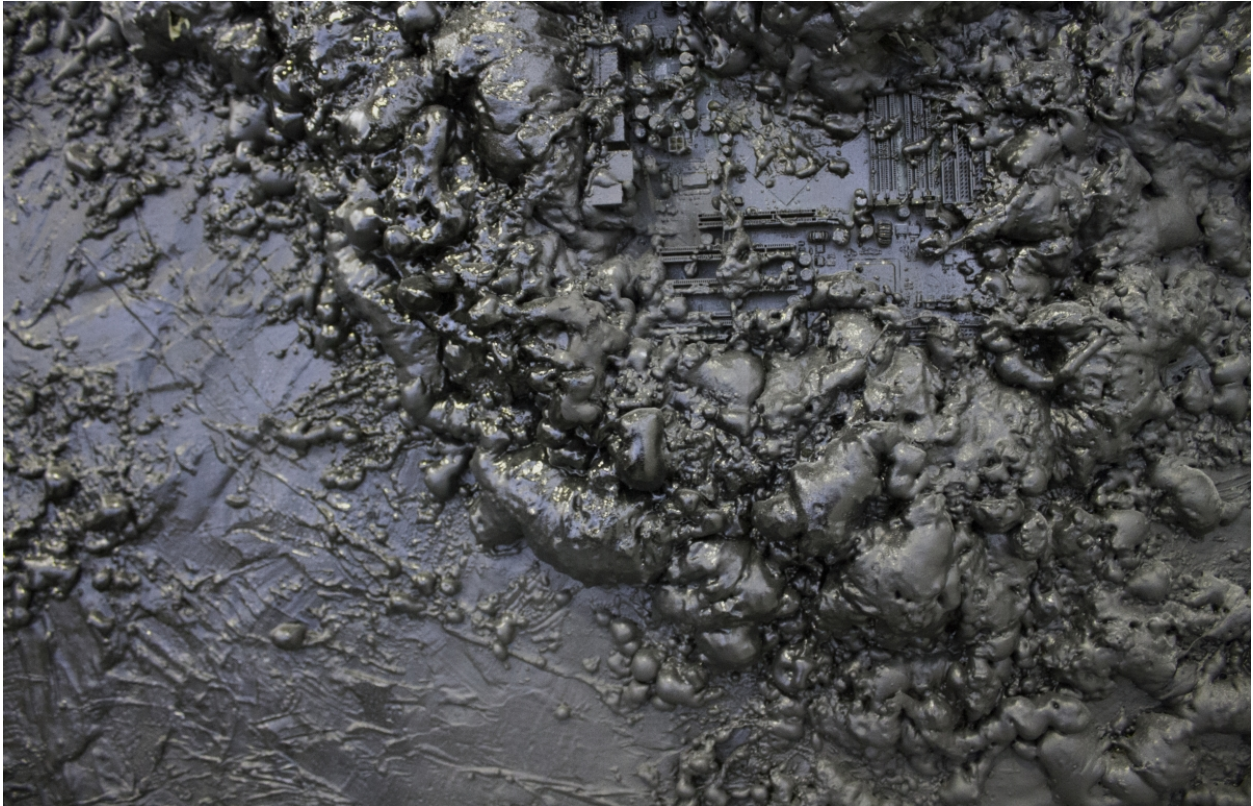


Figure 10. Detail of *The Colour Out of Space*

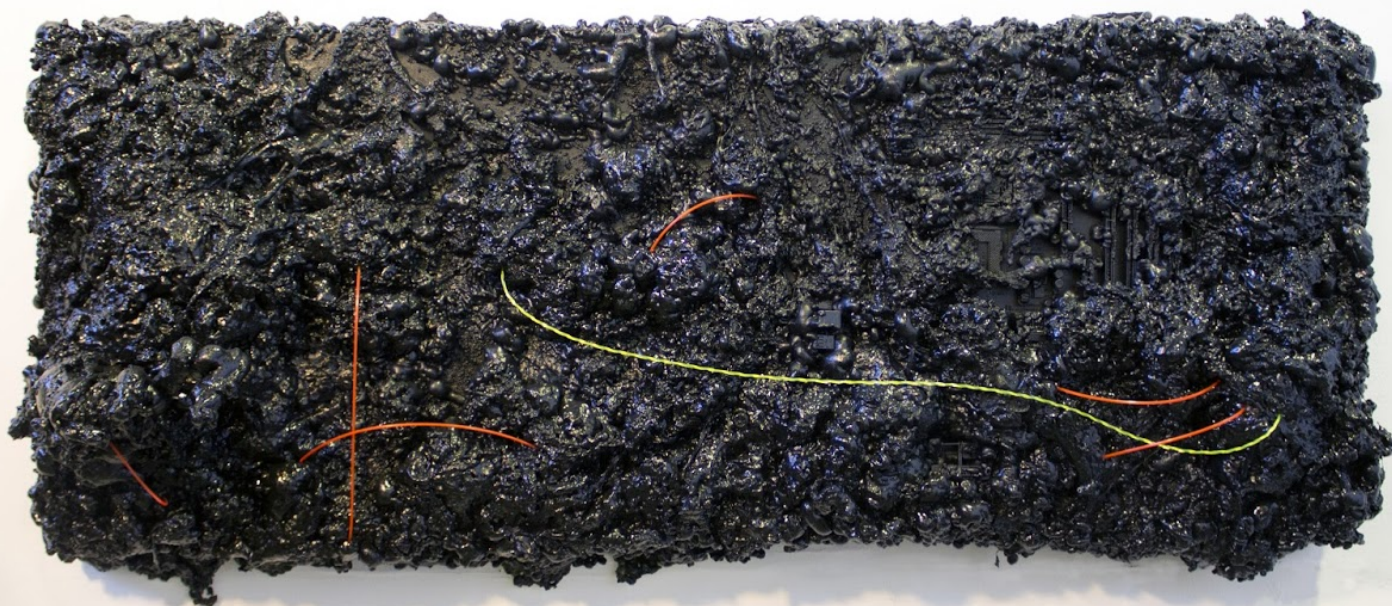


Figure 11. Brandon Daniels, *Novum*. 2014. Mixed Media on Board 2'x4'x4"



Figure 12. Brandon Daniels, *Unified Field*. 2014. Mixed Media on Board 8"x12"x10"

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