

'WHITE NOISE' AND 'THE END': DON DELILO, KARL OVE KNAUSGAARD AND KANT'S LANGUAGE OF THE SUBLIME

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„БЯЛ ШУМ“: ДОН ДЕЛИЛО И ЛИТЕРАТУРНИЯТ
ЕЗИК НА ВЪЗВИШЕНОТО

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Резюме: Докладът разглежда възвишеното като философска и естетическа категория чрез анализа на два съвременни романа – „Бял шум“ на Дон ДеЛило и „Вълците на вечността“ на Карл Уве Кнаусгор. Възвишеното при Кант се свързва с моралната сила на човека да надмogne страха от природната мощ, а при Лиотар – с границата на представимото и бягството от културния конформизъм. Романът на ДеЛило иронизира философската идея за възвишеното чрез сатира и тревожност относно смъртта. В контраст, Кнаусгор създава постсекуларна атмосфера на философски ужас. Сравнението между двамата автори показва как понятието за възвишеното се променя в различни културни контексти – от постмодерния хумор до екзистенциалната сериозност.

Ключови думи: възвишено, Кант, Лиотар, постмодернизъм, философски роман, ирония, екзистенциален ужас, Дон ДеЛило, Карл Уве Кнаусгор, смърт, постсекуларизъм, културен контекст

Abstract: The paper examines the concept of the sublime as a philosophical and aesthetic category through the analysis of two contemporary novels – White Noise by Don DeLillo and The Wolves of Eternity by Karl Ove Knausgård. Kant's notion of the sublime relates to the moral strength of humans to overcome fear in the face of nature's overwhelming power, while Lyotard associates it with the limits of representation and an escape from cultural conformity. DeLillo's novel satirizes the philosophical sublime through media-driven anxiety and fear of death. In contrast, Knausgård creates a post-secular atmosphere of philosophical horror. The comparison between the two authors demonstrates how the idea of the sublime transforms across cultural contexts – from postmodern satire to existential seriousness.

Keywords: sublime, Kant, Lyotard, postmodernism, philosophical novel, irony, existential horror, Don DeLillo, Karl Ove Knausgård, death, postsecularism, cultural context.

To Paul

"Death is not modern".

"In all the efforts of our mind to extricate ourselves from the fact of death, our yearning towards heaven and a life beyond our own, which finds expression so variously depending on the age and culture in which we live, death is ever present".

Karl Ove Knausgaard, 'The End'

"All plots tend to move deathwards. This is the nature of plots. Political plots, terrorist plots, lovers' plots, narrative plots, plots that are part of children's games. We edge nearer death every time we plot".

Don DeLillo, 'White Noise'

Death and the sublime: between philosophy and fiction

The aesthetic concept of the sublime dwells in numerous philosophical and literary contexts and has many theoretical and fictional guises. One of the most structured, thought-provoking and influential philosophical expositions on the sublime

is that of Immanuel Kant. The sublime appears in both Kant's critical systematic philosophy and in his earlier essayistic writings.¹ In his early pre-critical work, Kant establishes a close link between the terror of death and the sublime.² The sublime in Kant's systematic transcendental philosophy, among other things, points out our ability to overcome our fear of nature's power and to discover the inherent human predestination to moral goals. It also reveals aspects of human awareness of the limits of sensible external and internal physical reality. Overall, the Kantian sublime opens a passage towards another unknown realm, which could be associated with morality, ideas and even death. This article looks into the connection between the sublime and the images of death related to this innate mind-shattering feeling.

The stylistic diversity of Kant's works on the sublime is noteworthy, especially when keeping in mind the philosopher's reputation as a bad writer. This unflattering shortcoming is highlighted in numerous statements by various philosophers and thinkers of different backgrounds and periods.³ For instance, in his 1836 text *German Studies and Kant in Particular*, Thomas De Quincey describes Kant's typical sentences as being rather overbearing and chaotic⁴. Accordingly, De Quincey proceeds to compare Kant's style of writing to the acts of "packing" and

¹ In the *Critique of the Power of Judgement* (1790), Kant writes about the aesthetic power judgments on the beautiful and the sublime. In the part "Analytic of the Sublime", Kant exhaustively describes the different aspects of the judgment and feeling of the sublime, while placing the concept within the system of the functioning of pure reason, i.e. of human rationality.

² The connection between the experience of the sublime and death is made in Kant's work *Observations on the feeling of the beautiful and the sublime* (1764).

³ Among the most memorable contemporary criticisms on Kant's skills as a writer are those of D. Parfit, T. O'Keefe and E. Thacker.

⁴ On De Quincey's criticism of Kant's style of writing see J. Luftig's article *Style: De Quincey on Kant* in "Creoles, Diasporas, Cosmopolitanisms: ACLA Conference 2010 New Orleans LA", 2010.

“stuffing” (De Quincey 1896: 83, 84) one’s luggage for a long trip. The final outcome of such careless use of language, according to De Quincey is that:

[e]verything that could ever be needed in the way of explanation, illustration, restraint, inference, by-clause, or indirect comment, was to be crammed, according to this German philosopher's taste, into the front pockets, side pockets, or rear pockets, of the one original sentence (De Quincey 1896: 84).

One of the most systematic, elaborate and exhaustive criticisms of the Kantian use of language, however, appears approximately a century before De Quincey’s and almost immediately after the publication of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). In 1784, Johann Georg Hamann published a short essay, *Metacritique on the Purism of Reason*, in which he severely questions the efficacy of the language used by Kant in order to word and communicate his revolutionary transcendental turn in thinking. Hamann’s criticism is later joined by Salomon Maimon and Johann Gottfried Herder, consequently the circle of the Metacritics is born.⁵

One of the consequences of Kant’s often hindering and rather obscure writing style, and of his linguistic shortcomings, especially in his three *Critiques*, is that the philosopher’s own struggle to find the most suitable linguistic expression for his ideas is often ignored. Surprisingly enough, Kant frequently uses descriptive and even literary examples in order to illustrate and communicate his thoughts. The evolution of Kant’s aesthetics as a whole and of his views on the sublime, in particular, could be perceived also as a result of the philosopher’s linguistic quest.

⁵ In his *Metacritique: The Linguistic Assault on German Idealism* (2001), the American academic and philosopher J. P. Serber gives a detailed and in-depth description of the writings and ideas of the so called Metacritics. The book contains translations from the original German texts of the Metacritics – of J.G. Hamann, S. Maimon, J.G. Herder, A.F. Bernhardi and A.F. Schlegel, into English.

In his early text, *Observations on the feeling of the beautiful and the sublime* (1764), Kant's aesthetic concept of the sublime is predominantly descriptive and functions mostly as a classification category that lists natural objects and emotional states under the heading of "sublime". In the text, Kant associates the feelings that are sublime not only with the intense dread and fear of death, but also with the lingering treats coming from powers, natural and divine, that lie beyond the limits of the visible familiar human universe. Anticipating and overcoming the threat that the sublime inherently contains receives its philosophical transcendental placing and wording in Kant's third *Critique*, where the intricate interplay and tension between the theoretical and practical rationality is in play.

That is to say that, within the Kantian body of writing, the sublime functions as both a philosophical concept and an interplay of images and even short narratives. In this sense, an investigation into Kant's search for wording could prove very productive, especially when the links between the languages of fiction and that of philosophy are sought and established. The rather inconsistent early Kantian attempts to give literary voice to the feeling and the drama of the sublime can be traced in the plots of modern and contemporary novels as well.

In *White Noise* (1984), Don DeLillo describes the increasing anxiety of Professor Jack Gladney and his obsessive fear of death. In fact, the title of the novel "White Noise" in the text is revealed as a synonym of "death" (DeLillo 2011: 228). In DeLillo's novel, the spectators' emotions that come very close to the Kantian classical description of the feeling of the sublime are triggered by their anxious observation of an approaching dark toxic cloud, which is described as the "black billowing cloud, the airborne toxic event" (DeLillo 2011: 148).

In turn, in *The End* (2011), Knausgaard uses both the language of fiction and the style of the philosophical essay in order to describe not only his daily struggle with life's circumstances, but also those of early and mid-20th century Europe. Knausgaard narrates the struggle between emotions and rationality and

links “the sublime in human nature” (Knausgaard 2018: 682) to the overwhelming collective feelings of fear of death and enthusiasm (Knausgaard 2018: 745). That is to say, Knausgaard addresses the violent social and cultural re-enactment of the human realisation that there is a possibility for “overcoming death by not allowing it to be the ultimate end” (Knausgaard 2018: 707).

Both novels outline the connection between the extreme anxiety caused by the realisation of death’s constant presence and inevitability, on one hand, and the figure of Hitler, Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* and Nazism. Finally, in both novels, the sublime fear of death awakens not so much the transcendence of the physical self and dormant ideas of universal justice and morality, but the atavistic despair, superstition, the need for survival and the toxic belief in the ritualistic power of violence. In Knausgaard’s own words, the sublime summons to life “the allure of death, the allure of destruction, the allure of total annihilation” (Knausgaard 2018: 480).

Consequently, this article investigates how the literary texts of DeLillo’s and Knausgaard’s novels rework, ironies, retell and reinvent the Kantian concept and narratives of the sublime. In addition, the differences and similarities between the specific languages of philosophy and fiction, which recount the sublime experiences, are brought to light.

In the article, the sublime is regarded not so much as a purely aesthetic category, but rather as an intricate dynamic human interaction with the inner and outer world that reveals the hidden workings of emotions and thinking in moments of transgression of the known limits of reality. Ultimately, it is not a pure coincidence that traces of the sublime can be sensed in theoretical, philosophical and fictional narratives. In both fictional and academic texts, the aspiration to reveal and, if possible, to conquer and explain the boundless and the unknown remains; the wording and narrative strategies, however, differ.

Kant and the language of philosophy: A.F. Bernhardi vs. the Metacritics

The argument of the Metacritics proves a point.⁶ Namely, that while wording his transcendental turn, Kant makes very specific use of the German language and therefore, the overall linguistic aspects of Kantian philosophy should not be overlooked. In other words, while aiming to disclose the foundations of the possibility of experience as clearly and as precisely as possible, Kant actually created abstract linguistic constructions that went against the rules of natural language.

Consequently, the language of transcendental philosophy obscured even further our understanding of the foundations of both experience and rationality. Overall, it seems that for supporters of the *Metakritik*, the shaping and comprehension of everyday experience is almost entirely dependent on the language structures we use. Moreover, our theoretical judgements, which Kant defines as determined by pure rational categories, are nothing but grammatical configurations. In a certain sense, for the Metacritics, there is no pure thought that exists independently and beyond the scope of natural language.

In my attempt to establish the relatedness of the languages of literature and philosophy, however, A.F. Bernhardi's response

⁶ The core of the criticism of the Metacritics is well summarised in J. Serber's book (2001) on *Metakritik* as follows: "For *Metakritik*, in the most general sense, was nothing less than an attack, not just on the specific philosophical doctrines of Kantian Transcendental Idealism, but on the implicit linguistic assumptions operative in their very articulation. That is, the basic point of the *Metakritik* was that, whatever else Kantian transcendental philosophy might be, it must at least be a set of specific linguistic practices and constructions, a sort of "language-game" one might say today, concerning the "grounds of the possibility" of which it should be, in a way completely paralleling Kant's own argument, fully appropriate to inquire. Of course, the critical point was not that the "transcendental game" could not be played; rather, it was that it could not have the significance which it claimed for itself – that is, to constitute a final and complete presentation and analysis of the "the grounds of the possibility of experience". (Serber 2001: 11)

to the criticism of the circle around the *Metakritik* is something especially important. An early Romantic, Bernhardi is one of the biggest defenders of Kant's transcendental philosophy and its attitudes to language. A. F. Bernhardi's major work on the connection between language, grammar and philosophy is *Sprachlere* (1801-03). In his book, Bernhardi, inspired by both Kant and the Metacritics, sets himself the ambitious goal of creating a transcendental linguistics, while also including some key aesthetic and literary concepts. For Bernhardi the final aim of his text "is none other than to present language as a necessary structured whole" (Serber 2001: 159).

Part of Bernhardi's defence strategy is to put the complex Kantian conceptual apparatus, with its impressive architectonics, to the service of language and the use of language in both philosophical and literary texts. One can trace the analogies between Kant's transcendental philosophy and Bernhardi's transcendental linguistics simply by observing the apparent affinity between the terms used by each thinker. Bernhardi's work can be viewed as a peculiar translation of Kantian transcendental concepts into linguistic categories. Consequently, as Serber points out in his book, in Bernhardi's *Sprachlere*, the Kantian "concepts" become "words", "judgements" – "sentences", and so on (Serber 2001: 35).

In his transcendental analysis of language, another important observation made by Bernhardi concerns the nature of "linguistic signs" (Serber 2001: 162). Generally speaking, a linguistic sign is a linguistic presentation (*Darstellung*) of a representation (*Vorstellung*) that appears in our consciousness based on the workings of our cognitive faculties (2001: 34). The linguistic signs aim to communicate the representations to other members of the community. The problem, according to Bernhardi, is that:

great difficulty arises in practically distinguishing the already established division of representations into images and concepts, since images and concepts themselves exist in an absolute unity

from which arises the indifference of the sign, which in this case is the linguistic sign. For the linguistic sign may be employed in two different directions, and thus appears on the one hand as image, on the other as concept [...] (Serber 2001: 163).

Respectively, the “linguistic presentations” of our imagination Bernhardt defines as “images”, while those of the understanding are referred to as “concepts” (2001: 163, 164). The imagination keeps us informed of the intuition and sensible nature, hence the language expressions of the imagination are sensory oriented. By contrast, the understanding is inclined to present our internal “spiritual nature” (2001: 164). Poets and poetry deal with images, while philosophical prose creates and employs concepts. However, for Bernhardt, language is “the material of the presentation shared in common by the understanding and imagination” (2001: 167). Overall, the difficulty of creating a clean and continuous divergence between the use of linguistic signs as images and as concepts persists. The probability of overlapping is high due to the inherent ambiguity of language and to the common origin of the concepts and images, which is the linguistic sign.

Bernhardt writes that, frequently, “the same sign must serve for imaginative and philosophical linguistic presentations”, as a result “a predicate might have to be admitted to characterize the same thing as either a presentation of images or of concepts” (2001: 167). What can help us distinguish between the different uses of the linguistic signs is the overall bigger context within which the signs function (Serber 2001: 167).

Contrarily, both philosophical and poetic presentations are easily distinguished from the ordinary everyday application of linguistic signs. The philosopher and the poet have the freedom to reveal new and unexpected meanings in already familiar linguistic signs. At times, the use of the language within philosophical and poetic content is “completely and thoroughly opposed to that of ordinary life” (Serber 2001: 167). That is to say, boldness, innovation and unfamiliarity, typical in philo-

sophical and poetic language, continuously enrich and extend the content of everyday language. Overall, the philosopher and the poet create new relationships between presentations and, hence, between words (Serber 2001: 167).

While moulding the word for a new intuition, or restructuring the links between already existing linguistic signs, the philosopher might be tempted to deviate from the strict language requirements that define the domain of *philosophemes* and use a “term of art” (Serber 2001: 167).⁷ Bernhardi defines the “term of art” as a “coined word”, “neologism” or even “technical term: *Kunstwort*” (Serber 2001: 167). The philosophers, like the poets, struggle with language and their quest for meaning could lead to “local and individual use of language” (Serber 2001: 167). According to Bernhardi, the “terms of art” have interesting poetic qualities as well (Serber 2001: 168). Furthermore, “every authentic philosopher has thus adorned his philosophy with “terms of art” (Serber 2001: 168). It can be argued that philosophy needs the adoration of poetic and narrative elements. Traces of a very similar linguistic struggle can be found in Kant’s transition to the language of his later transcendental philosophy from more descriptive image-like language, which is much closer to the natural wording.

Bernhardi underlines even further the inherent connection between poetry and philosophy by discussing the possibility of creating hybrid texts in prose that intertwines philosophical and poetic linguistic signs and creates, as Serber puts it, “a sort of ‘synthesis’ between poetry and philosophy” (Serber 2001: 168). According to Bernhardi, the novel is one of the literary genres that are most suitable for these hybrid texts. The modern novel, the epic and mythology manage to combine the conceptual generality of philosophy with the immediate concreteness of the intuitive images of poetry. As a result, those

⁷ In Serber’s book (2001), the “Philosophemen”, i.e. the “philosophemes” are generally defined as “philosophical terms” (Serber 2001: 165) and as “philosophical concepts” (Serber 2001: 38).

genres manage to accomplish a synthesis between the “real” and the “ideal” (Serber 2001: 40) and to place the textual outcome in a very tangible historical discourse. Those genres, insists Bernhardt, are able to positively influence the development of the natural language (Serber 2001: 40). The modern novel, one could then reason, continues to deliver innovative philosophical and poetic language constructions into the stream of everyday communication and popular culture.

In this respect, the novels by DeLillo and Knausgaard can be read as intriguing illustrations of Bernhardt’s forecast about bringing the language of philosophy and poetry together into one complete narrative whole. Kant’s own early experiments with diverse language uses are further reflected in the two novels. In other words, DeLillo and Knausgaard develop the language of the sublime in unexpected and memorable ways. The two authors, each in his distinctive manner, rewrite the sublime and, in doing so, dismiss the weight of time and cultural changes that could have otherwise deemed obsolete the concept of the sublime.

In search of the language of the sublime

Kant’s exploration into the wording of the sublime begins with images and short plots and ends, as already mentioned, with the impressive philosophical terminology of his critical project. In this article, the investigation into Kant’s language choices is based on Bernhardt’s assumption that language signs share a common origin, namely a representation that is indifferent to later contextual distinctions between concepts and images. Overall, Kant’s writings on the sublime prove Bernhardt’s point. In his *Observations*, as well as in the third *Critique*, Kant presents one and the same cognitive representation, that of the human ability to conceive moral ideas and to be free from nature. The images from the *Observations* both anticipate and evoke the conceptual serenity of the transcendental wording in

the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*. The Kantian concepts and images mirror and enrich each other in an ongoing interplay of meanings and nuances.

In his *Observations on the feeling of the beautiful and the sublime* (1764), Kant illustrates and narrates the sublime through a rich collection of poetically inspired descriptions of different sublime objects, human character types and emotional states. In the *Observations*, the sublime serves as a criterion to distinguish between the typical features of the two sexes, men display mostly sublime trends, while women are beautiful (Kant 2007: 40), and between the different national characters (Kant 2007: 52). One of the examples that testifies to Kant's own use of literary language is, however especially significant. While distinguishing between the terrifying, the noble and the magnificent sublime emotions, Kant declares that: "Deep solitude is sublime, but in a terrifying way" (Kant 2007: 25).

In order to illustrate his statement, Kant attaches a footnote to the text, which contains a passage from a magazine publication. The footnote tells the story of Carazan.⁸ In it, Kant describes his intentions as follows: "I will only provide an example of the noble dread which the description of a total solitude can inspire, and to this end I will extract several passages from **Carazan's dream...**" (Kant 2007: 25, bold mine, M. D.).

Carazan's dream gives the sublime a literary narrative. This drama of sublime emotion is played by the main character and his experience of extreme fear followed by redemption. In other words, the sublime's dynamics are woven into the fabric of the dream's plot.

At times, it is striking how the storyline of Carazan's dream anticipates almost to the letter the core of the drama of the judgement of the sublime as depicted in Kant's third *Cri-*

⁸ The short text about Carazan's dream is from the *Bremisches Magazin zur Ausbreitung der Wissenschaften und Kunst und Tugend. Von einigen Liebbebern derselben aus den englischen Monatschriften gesammelt und herausgegeben*, vol. 4 (1761), p. 539.

tique. Even though Kant was not the author of Carazan's narrative, the fact that he includes it in his *Observations* reveals his need to exhaustively search for the exact and most eloquent linguistic expression of his philosophical findings. The question then is: what parallels could be drawn between the images and the philosophical concepts when it comes to the genesis of the Kantian language of the sublime?

In Kant's footnote, Carazan's story begins with an exegesis on how lengthy solitude, which is caused by the loss of one's love for other humans, can have dear consequences. The reader is informed that the wealthier Carazan got, "the more did this miserly rich man bar his heart to compassion and the love of others. Meanwhile, as the love of humankind grew cold in him, the diligence of his prayers and religious devotions increased". (Kant 2007: 25). Religious steadfastness alone, however, could not save Carazan from what was about to happen. One night, while busy with his accounts and calculating his daily profit, Carazan falls asleep. Most notably, the image of death enters the overall context of the Kantian sublime exactly through the short story of Carazan.

In the dream, the Angel of Death comes to Carazan "like a whirlwind" (Kant 2007: 25) and the rich man suffers a horribly painful blow. Carazan is extremely scared, as he realises that this is the ultimate end of his life. In Carazan's own words: "I was petrified as I became aware that my faith has been cast for eternity, and that to all the good I have done, nothing could be added, and from all the evil that I had done, nothing could be subtracted." (Kant 2007: 25). Carazan's realisation associates the finality of effective moral action with death and dying.

The Angel of Death proceeds to bring Carazan before God, that is to say, before "the throne of he who dwells in the third heaven" (Kant 2007: 25), and God gives his judgment. Carazan had lived a selfish life, devoted only to himself and holding on to his possessions too veraciously, while ignoring the needs and suffering of his fellow men. Carazan has closed his heart "to the love of humankind" (Kant 2007: 25), therefore in the future

Carazan “shall also live alone and excluded from all communion with the eternity of creation for all eternity” (Kant 2007: 25). The double meaning of the word “eternity” in Carazan’s narrative, as both everything (multitude) and forever (duration), is also illustrated by the movement of Carazan through both space and time.⁹

Upon hearing the verdict, Carazan is lifted “by an invisible force and driven through the shining edifice of creation” (Kant 2007: 25). Carazan’s impressive flight through the entirety of creation, in which, namely, he leaves “numerable worlds behind”, takes him to “the most extreme limit of nature” (Kant 2007: 25). At the very edge of the inhabited visible world, Carazan notices, “the shadows of the boundless void sank into the abyss” (Kant 2007: 25) in front of him. The abyss is a gateway to a “fearful realm of eternal silence, solitude and darkness” (Kant 2007: 25). At the sight of the void, Carazan’s heart is filled with dread. As he begins to fall through the darkness of the abyss, he loses sight of the last visible objects, the stars, and realizes that he will travel through this emptiness forever. In Carazan’s words:

I reflected with unbearable anguish in my heart that if ten thousand thousand years were to carry me further beyond the boundaries of everything created, I would still see forward into the immeasurable abyss of darkness without help or hope of return (Kant 2007: 25).

⁹ The concept of the sublime, as presented in the third *Critique*, contains a relation to a very similar double form of infinity and limitlessness. In the text, Kant describes the sublime objects as “absolutely great” or “great beyond all comparisons” (2000: 132, 133). In order to form a presentation of such object, human imagination is engaged in two operations – apprehension and comprehension (2000: 135). Generally speaking, the apprehension happens in time, as the mind continues to add new elements of the object to the already collected sensible data. This process could carry on indefinitely. However, the comprehension, whose role is to deliver a form to the object, works with finitude in space. When certain limit is reached the operation of comprehension comes to a halt. As a result, the special infinity is not presented in the object. See Kant (2000: 135, 136).

Overwhelmed by terror, Carazan reaches out for any actual object and wakes up. He realises the worth of men and the need to live for others. Carazan undergoes a moral transformation triggered by his dream. That is to say, as a result of the terrifying experience of his own virtual death.

The end stage of the comparison between Kantian literary and philosophical accounts of the sublime can lead to a number of corresponding images and concepts and some productive observations on the place and significance of death within the judgement about the sublime.¹⁰ The Angel of Death in Carazan's dream relates to the workings of speculative/ theoretical reason in Kant's transcendental philosophy. The abyss that appears before Carazan's eyes is the gap that separates the workings of the speculative and practical reason, in other words, between the domains of the sensible (nature) and the supersensible (ideas/ freedom). In both cases, the fear of death is related to the discovery of the finitude, that is to say, of the limits of the physical world.

Carazan dreams that he is dying. In similar fashion, the spectator of nature in the third *Critique* feels an inhibition of his life flow.¹¹ At the end of the dream, Carazan reaches out and wakes up. Within the judgment of the sublime, the spectator becomes aware of the existence of human ideas and morality, which place us above the demands of nature. As a result, the spectator's dread and fear is replaced by the feeling of intellectual pleasure. The warning against any direct exposure to danger from the third *Critique* corresponds to the fact that Carazan is not actually dying, but dreaming of his own death.¹²

¹⁰ In the third *Critique*, the concept of the sublime is introduced through the workings of the aesthetic reflective judgement about the sublime. See the chapter "Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgement" (2000: 89 – 230).

¹¹ In the third *Critique*, Kant writes that the pleasure of the sublime: "arises only indirectly, being generated, namely, by the feeling of a momentary inhibition of the vital powers" (2000: 128, 129).

¹² In the third *Critique*, Kant demands that the observers of sublime phenomenon should have their physical safety guaranteed. The view of these objects:

The discovery of the idea of the good, which one associates with both Carazan's redemption and the discovery of human moral vocation in the third *Critique*, could however have some unpredictable side effects, warns Kant. As early as his *Observations*, Kant cautions the reader about the passionate state of enthusiasm. Kant writes that enthusiasm "signifies the state of the mind which is inflamed beyond the appropriate degree by some principle" (Kant 2007: 58). In the third *Critique*, the enthusiasm is defined as: "The idea of the good with affects" (Kant 2007: 154). Kant also points out that "every affect is blind, either in the choice of its end, or, even if this is given by reason, in its implementation" (2007: 154). That is to say, the actual historical embodiment of the idea of the good is a difficult endeavour that could easily stray into unexpected and not entirely righteous actions. These fears of the deviations of the enthusiastic mind are confirmed in Kant's late book, *The Conflict of the Faculties* (1798). In the text, enthusiasm for "the cause of goodness" is directly related to the exaltation of participants in, and observers of, the French revolution (Kant 1970: 183).

Kant strongly suggests that the idea of the good could lead to political violence due to the passions of enthusiasm. In other words, the contribution of enthusiasm to the already intricate plot of the sublime is that the positive morally elated closing becomes uncertain. The likelihood becomes a tangible prospect that the observer will not reach moral elucidation, but will grow ethically disconcerted and opt for immediate violent actions.

"becomes all the more attractive the more fearful it is, as long as we find ourselves at safety, and we gladly call these objects sublime because they elevate the strength of our soul above its usual level, and allow us to discover within ourselves a capacity for resistance of quite another kind, which gives us the courage to measure ourselves against the apparent all-powerfulness of nature" (2000: 144, 145).

“White noise”: the Death within

The concise storyline of Carazan’s dream, I would argue, could be viewed as a literary archetypal paradigm for the plot of any novel that narrates the (Kantian) sublime. This prototypical plot could be summarised as follows: there is a fear of death, the character struggles, but overcomes the threat by discovering morality, freedom and ideas. Nevertheless, the mentioning of enthusiasm and political violence in Kant’s own philosophical accounts on the sublime could call for a very different literary scenario altogether. The general outlines of such a plot could be: the character fears death, attempts to overcome the dread, but fails to do so. Consequently, the character turns to violence in order to relieve the mounting fear and anxiety that the realisation of one’s physical finitude brings upon us.

While Kant, through Carazan’s dream, introduced death into the living core of our existence, DeLillo places death in the middle of our living rooms, where our television sets unassumingly and calmly spread the message about the unknown.¹³ Babette, the wife of Professor Jack Gladney, teaches a class in posture to elderly citizens in the basement of the local church. One evening, by sheer chance, Jack, who is the novel’s main character, sees one of Babette’s classes on the TV at their home. Babette had not told anybody that her teaching was going to be televised and so Gladney’s total surprise and shock are deeply sincere. Jack experiences a moment of total disorientation, while watching Babette’s black-and-white double, showing posture exercises on the television screen. DeLillo describes Jack’s astonishment:

A strangeness gripped me, a sense of physical disorientation. It was her all right, the face, the hair, the way she blinks in rapid

¹³ On the topics of technological disasters and mortality in DeLillo’s novels see Maffey R. & Teo Y. (2018) “Changing Channels of Technology: Disaster and (Im)mortality in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*, *Cosmopolis* and *Zero K*”, *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-Century Writings*. 6(2).

twos and threes. I'd seen her just an hour ago, eating eggs, but her appearance on the screen make me think of her as some distant figure from the past, some ex-wife and absent mother, a walker in the mists of death. If she was not dead, was I? (DeLillo 2011: 123)

The television set has the uncanny ability to open a portal between realities, to confuse, to dissolve solid bodies into black-and-white pixels and to bring forth troubling thoughts of death. In other words, the TV set is the Kantian abyss all over again. Only this time around, there is no Angel of Death, but merely a humming electronic device. Jack voices his distrust in the inscrutable power of the TV by sharing that while watching their mom and step-mom, the children "were flushed with excitement but I felt a certain disquiet. I tried to tell myself it was only television – whatever that was, however it worked – and not some journey out of life and death, not some mysterious separation" (DeLillo 2011: 124).

The puzzling abyssal qualities of the TV set are described earlier in the text. While talking about the contents of his classes, Murray Jay Siskind, a visiting professor and Jack's friend, talks about his profound and somewhat disquieting findings on American mass culture and the hidden powers of television. As Murray reveals to Jack:

I've come to understand that the medium is a primal force in the American home. Sealed-off, timeless, self-contained, self-referring. It's like a myth being born right there in our living room, like something we know in a dreamlike and preconscious way; I am very enthused, Jack (2011: 60).

DeLillo's abyss is no longer spectacular and grand, but is ironically postmodern,¹⁴ it creeps in among ordinary objects that are ingrained in our everyday existence and which we no longer even notice. The changed and less dramatic nature of

¹⁴ On the concept of the "postmodern sublime" and DeLillo's *White Noise*, see J. Tabbi's book "Postmodern Sublime: Technology and American Writing from Mailer to Cyberpunk", CUP, 1995.

the abyss also points up the qualities of the sublime in DeLillo's novel. In her article on *White Noise* and its intertextuality, L. Barret (2001/02) writes:

Postmodernism uses form to demonstrate the ineffability of the sublime. In *White Noise* that ineffability is located in the generic hybrid itself, but, even more importantly, it is found in the lists of brand names ("MasterCard, Visa, American Express", "Toyota Corolla, Toyota Celica, Toyota Cressida"), which may or may not hold mystical significance. Those names, part of novel's white noise, remain ambiguous – gestures toward irony and mysticism (Barret 2001/02: 111).

DeLillo's sublime makes familiar objects – appliances, supermarkets, credit cards, cars and their names – appear odd and ambivalent. That unsettling oscillation in the innards of trivial culture is where the abyss is to be found. The significant scaling down of the settings of the sublime, from Kant's troubled heavens in Carazan's dream to Gladney's TV set in his son's bedroom, invites the ironic to the ridiculous.¹⁵ That being so, DeLillo's sublime does not trigger a spiritual and ethical elevation as much as it awakens our atavistic fear of death and the drive for survival. In Kant's third *Critique*, culture comes to the aid of the sublime, while quieting the voice of dread and clearing the path to moral elevation.¹⁶ By contrast, in *White*

¹⁵ On the ridiculous sublime in *White Noise* see also the articles of N. Behrooz and H. Pirnajmudin "The ridiculous sublime in don DeLillo's *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis*" (2016). DeLillo's sublime in *White Noise* is also defined as "technological", "nostalgic" and "American". See respectively the articles of J. Hanneberg "Something Extraordinary Hovering Just Outside Our Touch": The Technological Sublime in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*" (2011) and of N. Behrooz and H. Pirnajmudin "The Nostalgic Sublime in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis*" (2018). See also the PhD thesis of J. Collins "Reconfigurations of the American Sublime in the Fiction of Joan Didion, Don DeLillo and Paul Auster" (2012) [06.10.2019] at: <http://hdl.handle.net/11375/12352>.

¹⁶ In the third *Critique*, Kant points out the need of a well-developed cultural background, in order to successfully complete the judgement about the sublime. He writes that: "In fact, without the development of moral ideas,

Noise, cultural progress accommodates death by proliferating the ways in which one can die. The postmodern death is not a seldom, final and exceptionally sublime event; it is, amusingly enough, a tangible presence lurking in the daily grind. The struggle with death becomes an ongoing daily chore for Jack Gladney and most of his family members.

White Noise opens with a fairly harmless and reassuring cultural cliché of the beginning of the academic year and new students' arrival at the university where Jack Gladney teaches Hitler studies. The scene should bring forth a feeling of prosperity and status security, with wealthy parents driving shiny station wagons, while helping their offspring to move into the dormitories. Nevertheless, death is already mentioned shortly after the description of Gladney's routine annual observation of the glamorous procession of newcomers and in the middle of Jack and Babette's conversation about the income level of the "self-absorbed" and "high-strung" bunch of parents (DeLillo 2011: 7). A few pages later, Jack asks himself who is going to die first, he or his wife (DeLillo 2011: 17). Throughout the text, the question keeps reappearing, over and over again.

This is how, from the very beginning of the novel, Jack Gladney's confrontation with his fear of death commences. With a similarity to Carazan's demeanour, Jack falls into moments of deep despair. While, however, Carazan seeks moral salvation, Gladney is more concerned with simply surviving and cheating death for as long as possible. Carazan's struggle is truly sublime, while Gladney's panic-stricken manoeuvring is naïve and at times, as already mentioned, downright ridiculous. Some facts in the novel's text attain unexpected significance, having discovered and keeping in mind Jack's deep angst, which for

that which we, prepared by culture, call sublime will appear merely repellent to the unrefined person. He will see in the proofs of the dominion of nature given by its destructiveness and in the enormous measure of its power, against which his own vanishes away to nothing, only the distress, danger, and need that would surround the person who has banished thereto" (Kant 2000: 148).

the most part defines his behavioural patterns. Although Jack Gladney is a professor of Hitler studies and Nazism, he does not speak German. As Gladney confesses, "As the most prominent figure in Hitler studies in North America, I had long tried to conceal the fact that I did not know German. I could not speak or read it, could not understand the spoken word or begin to put the simplest sentence on paper." (DeLillo 2011: 36).

One vaguely, but persistently, begins to wonder about Gladney's choice to build an academic career in a domain that he could not completely master. Due to his lack of language skills, one can imagine hostile academic undercurrents and an unfortunate turn of events that could seriously threaten and damage his professional future. One possible rational answer is the fact that Hitler is a very prominent historical figure and consequently, Hitler studies have the potential to draw massive numbers of students. However, what lurks below the surface of Jack Gladney's laboured rationality?

DeLillo reveals the answer gradually and in an entertaining and darkly ironic manner. In this respect, a joint lecture is especially revealing, during which Gladney talks about Hitler, while Murray talks about Elvis' struggles with popularity. As the simultaneously told stories of Hitler's and Elvis' lives gather momentum, certain notable parallels begin to emerge. It becomes clear that the crowds rallying at Hitler's speeches and Elvis's concerts came together because of their collective fear of death. People gather to seek shared protection from death, and in doing so, a special ritualistic group behaviour takes centre stage.

The idea is simple; the more people one kills, the further death is kept from the perpetrator and his community. Those crowds have different motives from the people gathered by the Kantian enthusiasm for the good. However, the final outcome is one and the same, violence. As professor Gladney puts it:

Crowds came to form a shield against their own dying: To become a crowd is to keep out death. To break off from the crowd is to

risk death as an individual, to face dying alone. Crowds came for this reason above all others. They were there to become a crowd. (DeLillo 2011: 87).

This striking-in-its-simplicity atavistic way of making history, while providing a group protection from death, is repeated in a memorable episode from Gladney's private life. Early one morning, Jack awakens only to see a strange white-haired old man sitting in his garden. Jack endures long agonising moments of fear, thinking that the old man in the garden is Death and has come to collect him. Jack talks about his ordeal, "He was there in the wicker armchair on the wet grass. I opened the inner door and then the storm door. I went outside, the copy of *Mein Kampf* clutched to my stomach" (DeLillo 2011: 280 – 81). After a few dreadful moments, Jack realises that not Death, but his father-in-law, is sitting in the armchair.

Significantly enough, Jack uses Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, as a shielding talisman against Death. This book, by one of the most dreadful and successful mass murderers in human history, is an object that, by some ritualistic logic, should have had the reverse effect on Death and exorcise it from Jack's life and garden. Killing as a method for shielding the killer from death is listed by Murray as one plausible death aversion technique. In Murray's words, using Hitler as a shield is an understandable choice, because "Some people are larger than life. Hitler is larger than death" (DeLillo 2011: 330). Jack, however, clings onto Hitler in a twofold and somewhat ineffective way. Murray clarifies Jack's mistake: "On one level you wanted to conceal yourself in Hitler and his works. On another level you wanted to use him to grow in significance and strength. I sense a confusion of means. Not that I am criticizing. It was a daring thing you did, a daring thrust. To *use him*" (DeLillo 2011: 331).

As Murray puts it, there "are numerous ways to get around death" (DeLillo 2011: 331). To stand out and to hide are two reasonably good techniques for death aversion. However, one of the most effective methods for death evasion, is murder. In Murray's words:

I believe, Jack, there are two kinds of people in the world. Killers and diers. Most of us are diers. We don't have the disposition, the rage or whatever it takes to be a killer. We let death happen. We lie down and die. But think what it's like to be a killer. Think how exciting it is, in theory, to kill a person in direct confrontation. If he dies, you cannot. To kill him is to gain life-credit. The more people you kill, the more credit you store up. It explains any number of massacres, wars, executions. (2001: 333 – 334)

Jack reaches the astonishing-in-its-simplicity revelation that “men have tried throughout history to cure themselves of death by killing others” (DeLillo 2011: 334). Murray confirms the gruesome conclusion by spelling out the stunning plainness of the bargaining power of murder. Murray encourages Jack to be bolder: “Be the killer for a change. Let someone else be the dier. Let him replace you, theoretically, in that role. You can't die if he does. He dies, you live. See how marvellously simple” (DeLillo 2011: 334).

Death is omnipresent in *White Noise*, which could explain the efforts that the characters invest to escape it. Even scientific discoveries multiply the possibility of a lethal accident. Jack Gladney experiences one of the newly developed forms of death first-hand. In the second part of the novel, DeLillo describes the occurrence of a major chemical incident and its consequences for Jack and his family. The local radio announces that a toxic cloud has been released near Jack's hometown (DeLillo 2011: 134). Initially nobody panics, but when the enormous dark airborne mass begins to draw near, the neighbourhood is advised to evacuate (DeLillo 2011: 135 – 36). The spectacle of the approaching cloud, its size, speed and dynamics evoke in Jack and other observers a feeling that closely resembles that of the Kantian sublime. Jack and his family are in awe. At the same time, they feel a growing admiration for the approaching toxic bulk. The night has fallen:

The enormous dark mass moved like some death ship in a Norse legend, escorted across the night by armoured creatures

with spiral wings. We weren't sure how to react. It was a terrible thing to see, so close, so low, packed with chlorides, benzines, phenols, hydrocarbons, or whatever the precise toxic content. But it was also spectacular, part of the grandness of a sweeping event, like the vivid scene in the switching yard or the people trudging across the snowy overpass with children, food, belongings, a tragic army of the dispossessed. Our fear was accompanied by a sense of awe that bordered on the religious. [...] This was death made in a laboratory, defined and measurable, but we thought of it at the time in a simple and primitive way, as some seasonal perversity of the earth like a flood or tornado, something not subject of control. Our helplessness did not seem compatible with the idea of man-made event. (DeLillo 2011: 148, 149)

The sublime threat becomes very real to Jack when he has to get out of the car and refuel (DeLillo 2011: 148). The cloud is too close to the gas station and Jack inhales a life-threatening amount of the toxic element Nyodene Derivative (Nyodene D.). This is how Jack begins to die for real.

Jack decides to take Murray's advice about killing to heart and ventures into murdering Babette's alleged lover. Babette is cheating on Jack with a supplier of the experimental drug Skyler, which she badly needs in order to suppress her own unbearable fear of death. Jack decides that he can postpone his own death by simply killing the lover, Willie Mink. Jack is able to trace Mink, who lives in a motel in Germantown (DeLillo 2011: 344, 345). Jack shoots at him twice, Mink is wounded but survives the assault (DeLillo 2011: 359, 360). In turn, the badly wounded Mink manages to shoot Jack in the wrist (DeLillo 2011: 360). Jack begins to feel remorse for his outrageous behaviour and compassion for Mink (DeLillo 2011: 360). Finally, while bleeding himself, Jack succeeds in getting Mink into a car. Gladney finds medical help in a small clinic, which is a part of a strange rundown German-speaking convent (DeLillo 2011: 362 – 63). An old doctor and several grumpy nuns who, as it turns

out, do not believe in God (DeLillo 2011: 366), take care of the wounded.

The novel ends with Jack looking at the spectacular sunsets from a hilltop near his house (DeLillo 2011: 372 – 74). He has learned to bear his fate.

The plot of the sublime in *White Noise* both deviates from, and follows, Kant's original story. Finally, Jack Gladney abandons his inclination to use violence in favour of the much less proactive contemplation of nature. Kant's morally better scenario seems to have won.

“The End”: the inner Sublime

The language use and plot structure of Knausgaard's *The End* come very close to Bernhardt's 18th century expectations about the evolved novel, which should be a mixture of historical, philosophical and literary narratives. *The End* contains chapters written in different styles that vary from autobiographical fiction to essayistic.¹⁷ Overall, the novel reads as an attempt to explain and tame the destructive forces set free by the regular awakenings of the inner sublime. For Knausgaard, the abyss is within us.

In this last, sixth part of his autobiographical series *My Struggle*, Knausgaard narrates different aspects of the sublime, while relating them to the fear of death and to historical and political violence.¹⁸ The novel's autobiographical chapters take turns to relate Knausgaard's personal life story and reveal his

¹⁷ At the end of his novel, Knausgaard includes a bibliography of the used and quoted philosophical and critical texts. The listed books include works of H. Arendt, J. Derrida, E. Levinas, J. Joyce, P. Celan and many others.

¹⁸ *My Struggle* (*Min Kamp*), is an autobiographical series of six novels written by the Norwegian author Karl Ove Knausgaard and published in the original language between 2009 and 2011. The last sixth part, *The End*, is published in English in 2018. The novels are translated into more than 20 languages and have received many Norwegian and international book awards.

own inner struggles with feelings of loneliness, rejection, doubt and isolation. However, he seeks and finds solace in writing and within the protective private circle of his family life. In contrast, the impressively long chapter "The Name and the Number"¹⁹ is an analysis of the tragic European history between the two world wars and of Hitler's early hardships and rise to power in an impoverished and divided Germany. The chapter contains an in-between styles narrative with direct and concealed references to philosophical and critical texts, to biographies and autobiographies.

In the novel, Knausgaard seems to insist that when confronted with the fear and the irresistible call of death, one has the freedom to choose a course of action. Art and violence are the two most common escape routes. Hitler fails to make art his permanent vocation and in the trenches of WWI a monstrous European future is shaped. Knausgaard chooses writing with all its insecurity, setbacks and personal adversities. Each personal choice echoes the fate of millions.

One of Knausgaard's descriptions particularly evokes the feeling of the sublime, almost as depicted in Kant's third *Critique*. Knausgaard is on holiday with his family in Venice, when he witnesses something remarkably out of ordinary: an enormous cruise ship glides by.²⁰ Shortly before seeing the boat, the author comes to an interesting realisation about the hidden essence of beauty, which one could observe in the 17th and 19th century paintings hanging on the walls of the *Accademia Gallery of Venice*. Knausgaard concludes that "The beauty of the paintings was the beauty of death, the insight

¹⁹ The chapter begins on p. 395 and ends at p. 849. The chapter's length is exactly 454 pages. Knausgaard's impressive writing skills and his direct style make it an intriguing and thought-provoking read.

²⁰ A possible intertextual link, between DeLillo's comparison of the toxic cloud to "some death ship in a Norse legend" (DeLillo 2011: 148) and Knausgaard's own experience of the sublime after his encounter with the cruise ship in Venice, could be established.

that they awoke in us was in what was dead and nothing else” (Knausgaard 2018: 631). The day’s encounters with the realm of the unknown continued with his coming across the grandeur of the tourist ship. In Knausgaard’s words:

The same day I saw something utterly sublime and quite different to anything else on that trip. [...] The ship was indeed gigantic, towering above the city, passengers milling on all its decks. A loudspeaker voice blared out tourist information, and the air was a glitter of flashing cameras. Something welled inside me. A shiver ran down my spine. (Knausgaard 2018: 631).

Knausgaard continues his story, while changing his style to essayistic and looking for an answer that could explain why the ship made him think of the sublime. He refers to what he calls “the classical aesthetics”, the definitions of which comes close to the Kantian definition of sublime emotion. Traditionally, writes Knausgaard, the sublime is associated with, and provoked by, the sudden awareness of the “magnificent or unfamiliar nature” (Knausgaard 2018: 632) of an object or an event. The author also evokes the familiar from the third *Critique*, grandeur of the sublime phenomenon, which make the spectator feel “small or inconsequential” (Knausgaard 2018: 632). The sensation of one’s own insignificance is what calls forwards the ideas of the inhuman and of the divine.

For Knausgaard however, the sublime and the divine are two very different notions. The divine, and only the divine, states the author, opens the doors to the possibility of the “we”. That is to say, to the collective human community which in its turn gives “a promise for cohesion and belonging” (Knausgaard 2018: 632). Through increasing disregard for religion, “we closed the door on something inside ourselves too” (Knausgaard 2018: 632). In this respect, while compared to the mysticism of the holy, the sublime “is only a faint echo” of it (Knausgaard 2018: 633). What remains of the holy is the melancholy for its loss, which the Romantic art expresses.

After the loss of the holy and the divine, what is left is the feeling of “the sudden swell of joy and grief” when we

come into contact with “something unexpected or something commonplace in an unexpected way” (Knausgaard 2018: 632). Among such objects, whose strangeness allows us to see the hidden reality are, Knausgaard insists, a “cruise ship thick with people, an industrial landscape mantled by snow, the red sun that illuminates it through a curtain of mist” (Knausgaard 2018: 263). Those unexpected images make us rethink the familiar in ourselves and the world around us. They open a passage to another hidden dimension, exactly as within the Kantian sublime.

Knausgaard writes:

When I see the image in my mind's eye I am transported there, and with all my being I become aware not only of my own existence, but of my own self, for a brief moment it floods my consciousness, and in those few moments I am quite oblivious to my own problems, the things I have done or need to do, the people I know, have known or will know in the future, and everything that connects me to the social world is gone. (Knausgaard 2018: 634)

Those brief moments of disconnectedness bring a sensation of the presence of another hidden realm and inaccessible knowledge. Those moments remind us of Kant's account of Carazan's feeling of sublime solitude.

These experiences, however, continues Knausgaard, are insignificant compared to the mystical adoration of the divine (Knausgaard 2018: 634). What remains, after those brief raptures, is the daily struggle for meaning and the hope for a glimpse at what lies underneath, at what could be “out there” (Knausgaard 2018: 635). The search for meaning brings, in Knausgaard's case, a realisation of the presence of “a kind of a shadow that blanketed my existence, the logical conclusion of which was what might be described as a passive yearning for death” (Knausgaard 2018: 635). The only remaining place where one can sense the fullness of life is art (Knausgaard 2018: 635), concludes Knausgaard. In art, the sublime's revelation of the presence of the hidden layer of the real, could still be sensed and admired.

After the loss of the divine, which could tame the ferocity of human character, one other aspect of the sublime persists throughout European history. This sublime, as Knausgaard describes it, is the dangerously fierce in us:

This is the sublime in human nature, the wild and uncontrolled, the destructive aspect of our make-up that can be bridled neither by the individual nor by the structures of our social world, arisen in that one (Cain – my remark) human, who is all of us. The sublime in the one. But the sublime is also in the all, when we are one together, congregated in teeming numbers. The roar of a football crowd, the flow of mass protest on the streets. Common to these two instances of the sublime in human nature is that both edge towards the place where what is individual and peculiar to the one ceases to exist. The place where our humanity dissolves into other forces of nature and loses itself. This is the boundary of the “I”, and it is the boundary of our culture, and as such it is justifiably feared. (Knausgaard 2018: 683)

Culture exists in order to protect us from the “mute” and the “blind” (Knausgaard 2018: 683) that lie beneath the edges of our contemporary visible world. Death is a portal to the unknown from which we came and where we will return. In this respect, according to Knausgaard, this land to which we are led by death, “lies beyond language, beyond thought, beyond culture, and cannot be grasped but merely glimpsed” (Knausgaard 2018: 683). Very much like DeLillo in *White Noise*, for Knausgaard the presence of death and the awareness of the land beyond are an inherent part of our everyday lives. Death is “there always, even when we are having breakfast on a normal Tuesday morning and the coffee is rather too strong, the rain is running down the windowpanes, the radio is sending out the seven o’clock news, and the living-room floor inside is littered with toys” (Knausgaard 2018: 683).

This is why we need protection from revelations of the constant presence of death and the unknown. We need ways to avoid the sublime, one could argue. For Knausgaard, the

joining of the “we”, of a community with a shared purpose is one way to escape the fear and awareness of the beyond.

Yet even the longing for community cannot prevent fear and violence from entering our lives. In Knausgaard’s account, Hitler manipulated exactly this inherent yearning for the “we” and to belong. Hitler abused the enthusiasm of the masses and used its power (2018: 745) to summon political cruelty and perpetuate death. Hitler electrified the gathered crowds. Knausgaard writes about Hitler’s success as a public orator:

His charisma as a speaker lay very much in the sense he gave that here was a man who said things the way they were, and the trust he thereby gained from his audiences, who in expressing their enthusiasm for him were also expressing their enthusiasm for themselves; the unity he thereby created, was an unprecedented force he discovered himself able, like a magician, to direct wherever he wanted. (Knausgaard 2018: 745).

The audiences also assembled around Hitler in the name of the dead German soldiers of WWI, looking for ways to restore the honour of their defeated country (Knausgaard 2018: 712). This is why Knausgaard, in a manner very similar to DeLillo, defines Nazism as a macabre “death cult” and “warrior cult” (Knausgaard 2018: 712). For Knausgaard, as well as for Kant and DeLillo, the enthusiasm of the crowds is a dangerous ally when it comes to quieting the deep human impulse to mislead and escape death.

The muted and unknown realm of death is where the utter human desire for the absolute leads us as well. The enthusiastic longing of the crowds is also an urge for the absolute. As Knausgaard puts it:

The absolute may be reached only by the emotions. The absolute belongs to religion, mythology and the irrational. The absolute is what is what propels someone to die for a cause greater than himself, faith in the absolute was once the foundation of the law. The absolute is death, emptiness, nothingness,

darkness. The absolute is the background against which life is lived. (Knausgaard 2018: 838)

Knausgaard, like Kant and DeLillo, is fully aware of the treacherous abyss that lies open below our reality and of the precarious balance that keeps this reality intact. This is why embedded in our culture chain of “heroism, violence, death” (Knausgaard 2018: 839) propels the damaging effects of the sublime in us, Knausgaard argues.²¹

Art however, as Knausgaard keeps pointing out, is one of the few safe and authentic ways to seek knowledge while venturing into the unknown territory of death and the absolute. Fiction could relatively safely “draw the unknown into the known” (Knausgaard 2018: 655) and “investigate how ideas and the immaterial manifest themselves in the material [...] in the bodies and objects that exist here at this moment” (Knausgaard 2018: 410). In his turn, Hitler misused the crowds’ need for authenticity, and being himself familiar with the powerful potential of art, “inserted fiction into material reality and made reality a play, binding the individual human to a mask” (Knausgaard 2018: 844). Hitler mixed the reality of history with fiction. That is to say, Nazism placed a yearning for the absolute in the public communal realm of the “we”, while it should have stayed in the realm of the artistic singular “I”. Consequently, in Knausgaard’s words: “Nazi Germany was the absolute state” (Knausgaard 2018: 842).

Knausgaard’s story of the sublime is related in images and concepts and, while following the general outlines of the Kantian paradigm, displays some significant alterations. For Kant, the utmost final goal of the experience of the sublime is the discovery of one’s ability for moral ideas and morally guided actions. In Knausgaard’s story of the sublime, art takes over morality, when it comes to the concrete image- and object-

²¹ In *The End*, Knausgaard relates the longing for the absolute and the detachment from reality it creates to the Utøya massacre, which took place on July 22 2011 on the island of Utøya, Norway. See p. 839.

bound expression of ideas and the unknown. Still, in explicitly internalizing the sublime emotion, Knausgaard reconfirms Kant's own topology of the sublime, which operates within the interiors of pure reason.

Finally, while Carazan's dream is told entirely in the tradition of Christian religious imagery where the divine takes a central stage, Kant's later transcendental philosophy places God somewhat second to pure human rationality. In this respect, it is significant to observe that in both DeLillo's and Knausgaard's narratives on the sublime, one can sense certain nostalgia for the lost cultural significance of the holy and the divine that kept the balance within the human community intact.

Carazan's dream and the two contemporary novels prove that the search for the language of the sublime is an ever ongoing quest for the right expression of the unknown. As far as death is not modern, nor it is extinguished, the search for the language that could silence, or adequately convey, the voices of dread will continue. After all, the sublime is not modern either.

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